Representations of the Pagan Afterlife in Medieval Scandinavian Literature

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Summary

The corpus of texts surviving from medieval Scandinavia which contain, or purport to contain, pre-Christian myths, vestiges of a pagan belief-system, is quite large. As in all religions, the fate of the 'soul' after death is shown to be of primary concern to pagan Scandinavians. My dissertation is concerned with the way in which the afterlife, in its various forms, is presented in extant literary texts: not as an exercise in religious history, but in an attempt to find out what literary use was made by authors of different periods and genres of the two main Scandinavian realms of the dead, Valhǫll and Hel.

I first address the question of the nature of Hel which, according to Snorri Sturluson's thirteenth-century mythography, was the name both of an underworld home of the dead, and a goddess who presided over that realm. Snorri's sources diverge in this matter, however: I show how skaldic poets only ever refer to Hel the goddess, while the poems of the *Poetic Edda*, although ambivalent in a few instances, regard Hel as a place within the mythological cosmos. Both poetic genres use references to Hel primarily as circumlocutions for death or the act of dying. Snorri's description of Hel is shown to be a conscious harmonization of the attitudes evinced by the two poetic genres.

Snorri's conception of the mythological cosmos is very structural, and based upon paired oppositions; the dichotomy of Hel and Valhǫll is one of the most important of these structures. I show how modern structuralist interpretations of Norse mythology are only supported by *Snorra Edda*, before examining how eddic and skaldic poets' attitudes towards the Hel/Valhǫll complex vary, and suggest that in many cases this apparent inconsistency is a result of changing literary taste and social attitudes, and that no single religious belief about the afterlife may be discerned behind the extant texts.

As well as fitting Hel and Valhǫll into his model of the mythology's structure, Snorri also situates an important narrative – Hermóðr's ride in search of Baldr – in Hel. The motifs present in this narrative, are, I argue, more closely related to Christian vision literature than to any 'native' sources; I compare Snorri's approach in this regard to that of Saxo Grammaticus, the Danish historian whose Latin work often overlaps with Snorri's mythography.

Preface

It is a pleasant duty to thank first of all the Arts and Humanities Research Board, who funded this PhD. I am also grateful to the Isaac Newton Trust, the H. M. Chadwick Fund, and to Robinson College, all of whom provided additional financial support. For over seven years (not all of them during the writing of this PhD!), Robinson has been my home, as well as my workplace, and I thank the fellows, staff, and students of the College for providing such a supportive and stimulating environment for my studies.

My principal academic debt is to my supervisors, Rosalind Love and Andy Orchard. Tom Hall, Richard North, and Judy Quinn were also generous with their help. Jonathan Grove's assistance with proofreading was invaluable.

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My profoundest debt, now as always, is to my parents, to whom this work is dedicated with love.

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated in the text.

This dissertation does not exceed the regulation length, including footnotes, references and appendices but excluding the bibliography.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Act. Phil. Scand.	Acta Philologica Scandinavica
AM	Copenhagen, Arnamagnaean Institute
ANF	*Arkiv för nordisk filologi*
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina
EETS	Early English Text Society
o.s.	original series
ERGA	Erzählungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde
FNS	*Guðni Jónsson, ed.,* Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda *(4 vols.)*
FS	*Frühmittelalterliche Studien*
Gest. Dan.	Olrik and Ræder, ed., *Saxonis Gesta Danorum* (2 vols.)
Heimskringla	Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, ed., *Heimskringla*
ÍF	Íslenzk Fornrit
KLNM	Jakob Benediktsson and Magnús Már Lárusson, ed., *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder fra vikingetid til reformationstid*, 22 vols.
MÆ	*Medium Ævum*
Med. Scan.	*Mediaeval Scandinavia*
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
Epist.	Epistolae
Poet. Lat.	Poetae Latini medii aevi
SRM	Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum
Neckel-Kuhn	Neckel, ed., *Edda*
NM	*Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*
Pulsiano	Pulsiano, et al., ed., *Medieval Scandinavia: an Encyclopedia*
SA	Skandinavistische Arbeiten
SBVS	*Saga-Book of the Viking Society*
Skjald	Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Den norsk-islensk skjaldedigtning*
A I and II	tekst efter håndskrifterne

B I and II	rettet tekst
SnE I	Faulkes, ed., *Snorri Sturluson, Edda: Gylfaginning*
SnE II	Faulkes, ed., *Snorri Sturluson, Edda: Skáldskaparmál*
SnE III	Faulkes, ed., *Snorri Sturluson, Edda: Háttatal*
SS	*Scandinavian Studies*
ZdA	*Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum*

Note on texts and translations

In this dissertation, all quotations from Old Norse preserve the orthography of the edition from which they are cited: no attempt has been made to normalize them. Unless stated otherwise, skaldic poetry is quoted from the B texts of Finnur Jónsson's *Den norsk-islensk skjaldedigtning*. All quotations from the *Poetic Edda* come from Neckel-Kuhn's edition, although titles of poems are given in their most familiar form, following the practice of Pulsiano's *Medieval Scandinavia: an Encyclopedia*, and not in Neckel-Kuhn's spellings. *Snorra Edda* is quoted from Anthony Faulkes's edition. The Bible is cited from the Latin Vulgate text (*Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatem versionem*, ed. R. Weber, 2 vols., 2nd ed., Stuttgart, 1975), and translations come from the Authorised King James version. Old Norse personal names have not been anglicised, and are given the appropriate nominative ending. Unless stated otherwise, translations are my own, with the following exceptions: translations of *Snorra Edda* are from Faulkes's Everyman translation, and translations of Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* are by Peter Fisher. I have made extensive use of La Farge and Tucker's *Glossary to the Poetic Edda* in translating eddic poems.

1

Introduction

The Flaw in Paganism

Drink and dance and laugh and lie
Laugh, the reeling midnight through,
For tomorrow we shall die!
(But, alas, we never do.)[1]

Ósniallr maðr hyggz muno ey lifa,
ef hann víg varaz;
enn elli gefr hánom engi frið,
þótt hánom geirar gefi.[2]

> The great mystery of death found interpretation in all of the religions of the Nordic world, not least in Christianity.[3]

The American writer and wit Dorothy Parker was not thinking specifically of the religion of pre-Christian Scandinavia when she identified the 'flaw in paganism', and yet in the attitude of mind she humorously evokes in her short poem she reveals a spiritual affinity with the pagan Viking. The pagan Viking might have preferred fighting over dancing, looting over laughing, in a list of activities to be pursued recklessly, heedless of the consequences, in the knowledge that death could come at any moment, but he would have recognised something of his own outlook in Parker's words. Vikings looked death in the eye and laughed in its face: the fearless acceptance of mortality is an established part of the Viking's character as it is conceived in the popular imagination.[4] The image of the Norse hero laughing cavalierly at the hour of his demise is an

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[1] Quoted from Dorothy Parker, *Not so deep as a well: Collected Poems* (New York, 1936).

[2] *Hávamál*, stanza 16: 'The foolish man thinks he will live for ever, if he keeps from fighting; but old age won't grant him a truce even if spears do.'

[3] DuBois, *Nordic Religions*, p. 70.

[4] On the developing importance of this facet of the Norseman's character during the formative era of medieval Scandinavian scholarship (the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), see Wawn, *Vikings and the Victorians*, pp. 18-23.

ancient one: we need only consider the last words of Ragnarr loðbrók, a Viking if ever there was one, as they are reported in *Krákumál*.

Krákumál 25

Hjoggum vér með hjǫrvi.
Hitt lœgir mik, jafnan
at Baldrs fǫður bekki
búna veitk at sumblum;
drekkum bjór af bragði
ór bjúgviðum hausa;
sýtira drengr við dauða
dýrs at Fjǫlnis húsum;
eigi kømk með æðru
orð til Viðris hallar.

Krákumál 29

Fýsumk hins at hætta,
heim bjóða mér dísir,
þær's frá Herjans hǫllu
hefr Óðinn mér sendar;
glaðr skalk ǫl með ǫsum
í ǫndvegi drekka;
lífs eru liðnar vánir,
læjandi skalk deyja.[5]

Tradition (as represented both by *Krákumál* and by *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*) has it that Ragnarr was bitten to death by poisonous snakes at the behest of the Northumbrian king Ælla.[6] Anybody

[5] *Skjald* B I, 655-6. Stanza 25: 'We struck with a sword. It gladdens me always that I know [there to be] benches for banquets prepared at Baldr's father's; let us at once drink beer out of the curved branches of skulls; a champion does not wail against death at dear Fjǫlnir's dwellings; I do not come to Viðrir's hall with words of fear.' Stanza 29: 'I am eager to venture there, the dísir bid me home, those whom Óðinn has sent to me from the Lord of Hosts' hall; I will drink ale with the Æsir gladly in the high-seat; life's expectations are passed, I'll die laughing.' Stanza 25, line 1 *Hjoggum vér með hjǫrvi* is a refrain that occurs at the start of every stanza of *Krákumál* apart from the very last one (stanza 29).

who can say *læjandi skalk deyja* under such circumstances is clearly not afraid of the hereafter. In Ragnarr's case, a confident and joyous expectation of an afterlife with Óðinn and the other Norse gods appears to be the main reason why death is so warmly welcomed, and the serpents stoically embraced. His religion provides him with myths to die by.

The afterlife for which Ragnarr yearns seems to consist in his imagination mainly of drinking in the Æsir's beer hall.[7] This vision of Valhǫll ('Valhalla') as divine symposium for a warrior elite has become one of the most potent symbols of Viking-age Scandinavian culture. It is as quintessentially Viking as that other most evocative piece of Old Norse iconography: the horned helmet. That there is no evidence to suggest that any Viking, anywhere, ever wore a helmet with cow horns protruding from it has never diminished its symbolic resonance.[8] The identity of 'the Viking' is, and arguably always has been, a retrospective construct of the popular imagination, strongly influenced by authors, artists, and scholars both medieval and modern. Ragnarr's conception of Valhǫll is a case in point. To a very large extent, *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* and *Krákumál* shaped modern conceptions of the myth of 'Valhalla', since Ragnarr's story became, through the medium of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century translations and poetic retellings, part of 'the canon of old northern texts that guided paraphrasers and imitators for most of the nineteenth century', the period in which the modern Old North was largely invented.[9] Ragnarr loðbrók himself, the infamous Viking, is impossible to locate in the historical record. Gwyn Jones despaired of attempts to identify the 'real' Ragnarr:

> It is difficult to prove a negative, but there is little evidence of the existence of a historical Ragnar Lodbrok. True he suffers more than most from the numbing disadvantages of a mythical saga and use as a heroic symbol, but even when these are set aside he is hard to locate in place or time. On a cautious estimate he must

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[6] *Krákumál*, stanza 27 (*Skjald* B I, 655); *FNS* I, 268.

[7] Although not, it should be noted, the quaffing of ale from the skulls of slain enemies. Stanza 25, line 6 of *Krákumál* is the ultimate source for this common misapprehension about life in Valhǫll: in the seventeenth century, Magnús Ólafsson erroneously translated this line as 'ex craniis eorum quos ceciderunt' ('out of the skulls of those whom they killed'). Skulls used as drinking vessels were an important part of 'Valhalla's' popular iconography until well into the nineteenth century. See Wawn, *Vikings and the Victorians*, pp. 22-3.

[8] See Frank, 'Invention of the Viking Horned Helmet'.

[9] Wawn, *Vikings and the Victorians*, p. 24; see also Clunies Ross, *The Norse Muse*, pp. 86-8. On the early modern reception of *Krákumál*, see Heinrichs, 'Von Ole Worm zu Lambert ten Kate'.

> have been at least 150 years old when he died in his snake-pit and prime at York in the 860s.[10]

The 'mythical saga' from which our information about Ragnarr derives was probably not composed until after 1230;[11] *Krákumál*, the poem which is either incorporated or appended to *Ragnars saga*, is an anonymous skaldic poem composed in the twelfth century as part of what Anne Heinrichs has called 'an antiquarian revival'.[12] Both these sources are thus separated by at least three centuries from the period in which the events they describe are purported to have taken place. They are both part of identifiably antiquarian genres: *Ragnars saga* is a *fornaldarsaga*, a late form of prose saga which tells stories set in the dim and distant past of Germanic legend. Highly conventional, fantastical and folkloristic, the *fornaldarsögur* make few claims to historical authenticity. If the effect of Ragnarr's immortalisation through these literary works is to turn him into nothing more than a 'heroic symbol', divorced forever from whatever historical existence he may have had, it is surely incumbent upon us to question whether the beliefs and values encoded in Ragnarr's 'death song' had any more basis in the realities of pre-Christian Scandinavian culture. Or is the 'Valhalla'-bound Viking, laughing in the face of death, as much of an antiquarian fabrication as the horned helmet that he wears?

THE AIMS AND METHODS OF THIS STUDY

In this dissertation, my subject is Old Norse mythology as it is manifested in extant medieval texts. The myths in which I am interested are those which deal with death and the afterlife, and in particular the two Norse realms of the dead, Hel and Valhǫll. My aim is not, however, to unearth the truth about pre-Christian religious belief in Scandinavia; I agree with Margaret Clunies Ross that 'myth is connected with the phenomenon of religious belief, though myth is not the same as religion'.[13] Religion is the foundation upon which myths are built; in this work, I

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[10] Jones, *History of the Vikings*, p. 212, n. 1.

[11] McTurk, '*Ragnars saga loðbrókar*', p. 519.

[12] Heinrichs, '*Krákumál*', p. 368.

[13] Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes* I, 18.

am concerned with the visible architecture of the mythology, and not its hidden archaeology, lest too much digging cause the whole splendid edifice to collapse.

My approach is therefore that of a literary critic: I aim to identify neither the origins of the myths nor their ultimate meaning, but to explicate the use made of them by poets and authors of literary texts. As such, I do not make use of the anthropological methodologies that dominated the study of mythology for much of the twentieth century,[14] although I do discuss structuralist approaches to Old Norse mythology in chapter 2, since this school of thought has encompassed literary criticism as well as social anthropology. Nor, in the main, do I admit evidence from archaeology, post-medieval folkloric survivals, place-names, Indo-European comparanda and similar non-literary or non-Scandinavian sources: that is not to suggest that such matters are irrelevant to the study of myth, merely that *this* study of *these* myths is concerned only with their literary manifestations in medieval Scandinavian texts.

In the writing of this dissertation, I have been strongly influenced by the methodological orientation provided by Margaret Clunies Ross, whose recent two-volume work on Old Norse myths and their position in the social and intellectual life of medieval Iceland has effectively redefined this field of study. Clunies Ross's most salient suggestion, to my mind, is that we should always aim to contextualise mythological material within the milieu in which we may observe its use:

> Another implication of the consideration of myth's pragmatic dimension is that one wants to ask questions that relate to its context of use at the time of its recording in the forms we have it, whether as written text or as picture or as some other material object, rather than about its prior existence and original form and genesis, if such things can be established as more than speculative. There has been a strong and persistent tendency in the study of Old Norse myth, which is still by no means dead, to value the supposedly 'original' form and meaning of a myth more highly than what the text and medieval context tell us was its likely meaning or meanings in the Middle Ages.[15]

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[14] Space does not permit a detailed *Forschungsgeschichte* of research into Old Norse mythology here: the most comprehensive discussion of trends and developments in this field of research remains Lindow, 'Mythology and Mythography', which may be supplemented by two articles by Schjødt, 'Forskningsoversigt', and 'Recent Scholarship'.

[15] Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes* I, 16.

My chief concern throughout this work has been to analyse the myths associated with Hel and Valhǫll within the larger textual and contextual frame that Clunies Ross advocates, to investigate what myths authors utilised in the composition of their texts, but also what use they made of them, and to what ends. But first, in order to assess the literary manipulation of myths concerning Hel and Valhǫll according to authorial design or generic convention, it is necessary to attempt to isolate the standard form of the myths, the mythological features which all texts dealing with this subject have in common: to see if we can get behind the written manifestations of the myths, and back into what Preben Meulengracht Sørensen called 'the mytholgical universe, which lies behind the known written manifestations'.[16] In chapters 2 and 3, my approach has been to take the modern reconstructed form of the mythology (what I call a 'meta-mythology') against which to compare the evidence of the Old Norse sources. By doing this, I subject to scrutiny some of the casual assumptions about the nature of Hel and Valhǫll made by modern scholars, which tend to give insufficient emphasis to the variance of forms of the myths preserved in different texts; I also, however, try to look at why one text differs from another in its representation of the afterlife: what factors – literary, social, religious – may have contributed to each unique literary formulation of the myths. Chapters 3 and 4 assess the ways in which attitudes towards Óðinn and Valhǫll change over time and, in particular, according to genre. Thus, while it is necessary to bear in mind the likelihood of the separate existence of the lost mythical world out of which all these texts ultimately spring, it is specifically in its written manifestations that I am interested.

One of the cultural impulses which undoubtedly has shaped the Old Norse myths as they are accessible to us today is Christianity: as John Lindow wrote, 'The mythic process, concerned with explaining the origin and form of the world, did not stop with the conversion to Christianity. Rather, Christianity became one of the impulses combining in such thought'.[17] In chapters 5 and 6 of this dissertation, I attempt to show the ways in which ideas and literary motifs drawn directly from Christian textual traditions were blended with native material in the works of Snorri Sturluson and Saxo Grammaticus, scholarly writers, themselves Christians, who yet found much of interest and lasting value in the culture of their forebears. The dominant methodology of this section of my work is source criticism of a fairly traditional type: I try to

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[16] Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Om eddadigtenes alder', p. 224.

[17] Lindow, 'Mythology and Mythography', p. 53.

establish which texts (whether 'pagan' or Christian) provide the closest parallels to Snorri and Saxo's treatment of the theme, and where possible to identify in what form they may have been available to them. All of this will, I hope, show the significance of cultural context in shaping 'fictional mythologies': distinct mythologies which depend on textual and cultural, but not primarily religious, determinants. The mythology of a tenth-century skaldic poem is not the same as a fourteenth-century *fornaldarsaga*, for example, even if the information they give is superficially identical (which it usually is not); each is different because it originates in an irreproducible cultural context unique to itself.

Context is crucial in this study; but the text itself is also of great importance. Every effort has been made to acknowledge the problematic nature of Old Norse textuality, particularly with regard to poetry which was originally orally transmitted, but which is now preserved in manuscripts which reflect the agendas of their learned post-Conversion compilers. The interpretation of many poems on mythological subjects depends on reading them alongside *Snorra Edda*, which is also, in many cases, the only textual context in which the verse has survived. There is thus a high degree of hermeneutic reflexivity. Poems were not only composed in a unique and determinative cultural context, they were also preserved under similar conditions, and that needs to be borne in mind in their interpretation. Although to engage fully with textual issues arising from every stanza analysed in this work would have made this dissertation twice as long and perhaps twice as late, I have attempted to consider the poetic text as a material artefact whenever it has had a bearing on the meaning of the verse.

This dissertation, as most discussions of Old Norse mythology have to be, is centred on the work of Snorri Sturluson; my admiration for him as an author, mythographer and cultural commentator has grown enormously over the course of its preparation. I have therefore felt it appropriate to borrow from Snorri the following methodological dictum, an apparent afterthought with which he ends the Prologue to *Heimskringla*, and which I think is still about the most sensible piece of advice ever offered to students of Old Norse pagan culture: 'En kvæðin þykkja mér sízt ór stað færð, ef þau eru rétt kveðin ok skynsamliga upp tekin.'[18]

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[18] *Heimskringla* I, 7: 'But it seems to me that poems will reveal more if they are recited correctly and interpreted sensibly.'

2

The Dualistic Nature of Hel

The word Hel has always been connected with death: its etymological roots are in the grave.[1] But in mythological terms, Hel acquired a good deal of extra significance: Hel is the name given to the realm of the dead and to the goddess who rules over that realm in Norse mythology. Such a bald statement of mythological fact is a typical primary definition of the Old Norse word *hel* as found in modern reference works. Two of the most recent such books are the dictionaries of Norse (or Germanic, or Scandinavian, or 'Northern' – the terminology seems interchangeable) mythology compiled by Rudolf Simek and Andy Orchard, who define the headword Hel thus:

> Rudolf Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*:
> **Hel**: The realm of the dead in Germanic mythology. It is the realm of the goddess Hel who is a literary personification of the realm of the dead.
>
> Andy Orchard, *Dictionary of Norse Myth and Legend*:
> **Hel**: Both the place of the dead, specifically of those who perish of sickness or old age, and the goddess who presides over the Underworld.[2]

The dictionary format carries with it a reassuring authority, particularly among the non-specialist audience that this type of general guide attracts. If a *dictionary* says that Hel is first the realm of the dead, secondly the goddess of the realm of the dead, then surely this statement of Hel's mythic signification must be correct. But this certainty of meaning can be problematic; the very act of defining the myth has a worrying tendency to fossilize it. The myth takes on a fixed, final form in the mind of the reader: in a sense, when we speak of a 'Norse myth' what we refer to is

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[1] De Vries, *Altnordisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, s.v. *hel*. De Vries hypothesised a proto-Germanic verb **helan* meaning 'to cover' or 'to hide', cognate with Latin *occulo*, to be the ultimate root of Old Norse *hel* and its many cognates in the Germanic languages.

[2] Simek, *Dictionary*, p. 137; Orchard, *Dictionary*, p. 79. See also Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, p. 172.

the modern conception of the myth, a conception which, as can be seen from Simek and Orchard's careful presentation of the evidence which underlies their definitions, is almost always a conflation of ideas from an array of sources of differing date, genre and degree of reliability. Acceptance of modern (or medieval) reconstructions of Norse mythology as being true representations of a pre-Christian Scandinavian belief-system is as unwise as it is convenient. As we will see, it is a pitfall avoided by few.

Mythography produces meta-myths, mythologies of and about myths. When the mythographer, be it Rudolf Simek or Snorri Sturluson, goes beyond relating the narrative of individual myths and into the business of collating and systematizing his mythological knowledge to reconstruct a belief-system which he does not share, and presents his reconstruction as fact, then he creates a whole new myth: the myth of one recoverable universal mythological truth, fixed and stable over time.[3] The dictionary definitions of Hel are meta-myths, part of the larger meta-mythology which we call Norse mythology. To say that Hel is the Germanic realm of the dead and the personification of that realm and that it/she has a certain set of ancillary characteristics, is to make a statement of faith: we *believe* pre-Christian Norse belief about Hel to have been like that. Of course, reconstructing belief-systems is the very aim of the student of mythology, who wishes to provide a framework into which to place the extant myths, the better to understand and appreciate them and the people whose religion they represent. I have no quarrel with such an aim. This study, however, will be concerned less with pagan Scandinavian beliefs about the afterlife than with the use of Hel as a literary topos; as such it concentrates on Hel primarily within its textual contexts, and deals with religion only in so far as to acknowledge that belief necessarily informs an author's outlook. A corollary of this approach is that it calls into question the validity of the modern meta-myth of Hel which, I will show, is founded on what is often very weak evidence. This chapter will examine the evidence of those texts which are generally considered to be the best (most authentically pagan) literary sources for our knowledge of Norse religion, against which it will test the validity of the reconstructed model of Hel's place in the mythological system.

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[3] On the inadvisability of such credulousness, see McKinnell, *Both One and Many*, pp. 20-7, esp. pp. 25-6.

THE META-MYTH OF HEL

As well as the basic definition of the headword Hel, mythological dictionaries provide information about the characteristics of Hel which constitute the meta-mythological reconstruction of its place in pre-Christian thought. These characteristics may be summarised as follows:

1. Hel is both the realm of the dead, and a female personification of that realm.
2. Hel receives those people who die (on land) of old age or sickness.
3. Hel lies somewhere to the north, and the road to Hel goes downward. Hel is damp, cold and gloomy. Other features of its topography include a river, either icy or filled with weapons, a bridge and a gate. The goddess Hel dwells there in a hall.
4. Once someone is in Hel, they cannot leave.
5. The entrance may be guarded by a dog or a giantess.
6. Mythological figures may journey to Hel for a specific purpose as part of a narrative.

The Hel-complex is therefore relatively simple in its reconstructed form. The two most significant factors of the meta-myth are items one and two, the dualistic nature of Hel and Hel's function as the destination for the souls of people who die of old age or sickness. It is these which imply religious belief. The other features may be seen as more purely literary elaborations based around the basic superstition, in much the same way as medieval Christian vision literature elaborates a basic piece of doctrine – that the wicked go to hell – with an ever-changing array of motifs and imagery in order to illustrate its horrors. As this chapter is concerned above all with the literary manifestations of the meta-myth of Hel, these ephemeral characteristics will be regarded in due course, but first we turn to the most basic question: do Old Norse texts indicate that pre-Christian Scandinavian religions incorporated a belief in a dualistic realm/goddess of the dead, and do the texts support the assertion of the fact that this realm was reserved for those who died, on land, of sickness and old age?

THE DUALISTIC NATURE OF HEL

In Snorri Sturluson's own meta-mythology, that preserved in the part of his *Edda* called *Gylfaginning*, the name Hel is given to one of Loki's offspring; the naming of the goddess takes priority over the naming of the realm of the dead:

> Enn átti Loki fleiri bǫrn. Angrboða hét gýgr í Jǫtunheimum. Við henni gat Loki þrjú bǫrn. Eitt var Fenrisúlfr, annat Jǫrmungandr (þat er Miðgarðsormr), þriðja er Hel.[4]

The goddess-figure and her family relationships come first, and it is clear from the outset that she has a troubled background: a close association with the monstrous forces which will eventually destroy the Æsir and precipitate Ragnarǫk. So Hel's strongly negative connotations are established from the outset in Snorri's description of the goddess, who apparently carries some of these associations with her when Óðinn throws her into the realm which bears her name:

> Hel kastaði hann í Niflheim ok gaf henni vald yfir níu heimum at hon skipti ǫllum vistum með þeim er til hennar váru sendir, en þat eru sóttdauðir menn ok ellidauðir. Hon á þar mikla bólstaði ok eru garðar hennar forkunnar hávir ok grindr stórar. Eljúðnir heitir salr hennar, Hungr diskr hennar, Sultr knífr hennar, Ganglati þrællinn, Ganglǫt ambátt, Fallanda Forað þreskǫldr hennar er inn gengr, Kǫr sæing, Blíkjanda Bǫl ársali hennar. Hon er blá hálf en hálf með hǫrundar lit – því er hon auðkend – ok heldr gnúpleit ok grimlig.[5]

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[4] *SnE* I, 27: 'And Loki had other offspring too. There was a giantess Angrboða in Giantland. With her Loki had three children. One was Fenrisúlfr, the second Jǫrmungandr (i.e. the Miðgarð-serpent), the third is Hel.'

[5] *SnE* I, 27: 'Hel he threw down into Niflheim and he gave her dominion over nine worlds, such that she has to administer board and lodging to those who are sent to her, and that is those who die of sickness or old age. She has great mansions there and her walls are exceptionally high and the gates great. Her hall is called Eljúðnir, her dish Hunger, her knife Famine, the servant Ganglati, serving-maid Ganglot, her threshold where you enter Stumbling-block, her bed Sick-bed, her curtains Gleaming-bale. She is half black and half flesh-covered – thus she is easily recognizable – and rather downcast and fierce-looking.'

Just one edited page of *Gylfaginning* provides all the information necessary to support our initial reconstruction of the most important features of Hel. However, because of the frequently voiced reservations about Snorri's limitations as a source for genuine pre-Christian belief (he was born almost two centuries after Iceland was converted to Christianity, he was an educated literary author pursuing his own aesthetic agenda, and so on), we are automatically suspicious of this passage.[6] The perceived allegorical intent behind the naming of Hel's dish as 'hunger', her knife as 'famine' and the like, smacks of Christian contamination to many scholars.[7] Hilda Ellis Davidson stated in *The Road to Hel* that 'Snorri's account of the queen of the Underworld is chiefly his own work … he is in another realm from that of eschatology and mythology, one of literary personification; and it is to this realm that Hel as a goddess in the literature we possess seems to belong'. Simek adds that 'nothing speaks in favour of there being a belief in a goddess Hel in pre-Christian times'.[8] We have progressed quickly from a reconstruction of Hel's place in the mythology which places its dualistic nature at the centre to one in which the secondary aspect of Hel is considered to be a late literary invention with no real basis in pre-Christian belief. The goddess Hel and her realm are only clearly differentiated and their relationship to one another codified in *Gylfaginning*, that much is certain. But that does not necessarily mean that the personification cannot be rooted in pre-existing myth. As we might expect to do for any Norse myth, we may check older sources to see if they support Snorri's meta-myth; in this case they generally do not, although it is hard to be so certain of the goddess's absence from the poems as to safely permit her excision from the mythology entirely.

A problem which arises, even before we leave the clear and concise prose of *Gylfaginning* for the much less transparent testimony of pre-Christian poetry, is the fact that Hel (the realm) and Hel (the goddess) have the same name, and the distinction between them is often blurred:

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[6] Much has been written about Snorri's approach to his mythological sources, and his overall purpose in putting together his *Edda* and *Ynglinga saga*. For a historical overview of the scholarship, see Lindow, 'Mythology and Mythography', pp. 34-42. In the present discussion, my approach follows in the broad tradition of critics who have been prepared to see 'learned' or Christian influence in Snorri's work: probably the most important publications of this loosely defined 'school' have been Baetke, *Die Götterlehre der Snorra-Edda*; Beyschlag, 'Die Betörung Gylfis', and Holtsmark, *Studier i Snorres mytologi*. See also Clunies Ross, '„Quellen zur germanischen Religionsgeschichte"', Faulkes, 'Pagan Sympathy', and Schier, 'Zur Mythologie der *Snorra Edda*'.

[7] See e.g. Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes* I, 251, where she specifically suggests that Snorri may have been influenced by Christian homiletic tradition.

[8] Ellis, *Road to Hel*, p. 84; Simek, *Dictionary*, p. 138.

Faulkes draws attention in particular to the ambiguity of phrases in *Snorra Edda* like 'haldi Hel því er hefir' (*SnE* I, 48: 'let Hel hold what she/it has'), and 'en Loka fylgja allir Heljar sinnar' (*SnE* I, 50: 'but with Loki will be all Hel's people').[9] The situation in poetic sources is even less clear. The entry in Finnur Jónsson's update of Sveinbjörn Egilsson's *Lexicon Poeticum antiquæ linguæ septentrionalis* attempts to divide poetic usages of the name Hel into distinct categories depending on whether they refer to the place or its personification, as does Robert Kellogg's *Concordance to the Poetic Edda*.[10] This approach is clearly problematic, as in no case does the name Hel unambiguously refer to a goddess in eddic sources.[11] Even a cursory glance at the references deemed by Finnur or Kellogg to indicate the presence of the goddess reveals how illusory her presence in the eddic poems is.

Hel occurs as a proper noun eight times in the *Poetic Edda*, according to Kellogg's concordance, as opposed to the twenty-nine occurrences of the appellative which he does not capitalize.[12] In this division Kellogg follows exactly the practice of his base text, Guðni Jónsson's modern Icelandic edition.[13] Of these eight references, three come from the thirteenth-century Christian poem *Sólarljóð*, presumably included in Guðni's text (and therefore Kellogg's sampling) on the grounds that it is metrically 'eddic';[14] it is not part of what is usually understood by the title *Poetic Edda*, and these references are excluded from the present investigation. These three verses discounted, there are therefore only five instances of Hel as a proper noun in eddic poetry: two from *Grímnismál*, and one each from *Vǫluspá*, *Atlamál* and *Baldrs draumar*. *Grímnismál* and *Vǫluspá* both fall into the 'mythological' section of the Codex Regius, and *Baldrs draumar* also

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[9] Faulkes, *SnE* I, 168. In his translation (*Snorri Sturluson. Edda*, p. 51), Faulkes opts for 'she' when glossing the former, but retains the ambiguity in translating the latter. The first of these two citations is taken from an otherwise unknown poetic stanza, which may or may not be Snorri's own work, and may (or may not) derive from a longer eddic poem, now lost, treating the narrative of Baldr's death.

[10] In her recent translation of the *Poetic Edda*, Carolyne Larrington distinguishes the goddess from the realm by capitalizing the former but not the latter. Unfortunately, at no point does she explain the rationale behind her choices, and nor does she admit the ambiguity latent in these references.

[11] Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes* I, 251, n. 15.

[12] Kellogg, *Concordance*, p. 187 (hel), p. 566 (Hel).

[13] *Eddukvæði*, ed. Guðni Jónsson.

[14] *Sólarljóð*, which was composed perhaps as late as the mid-fourteenth century, is in the *ljóðaháttr* metre, and appears specifically designed to imitate traditional eddic form: *Hávamál* is its most important eddic model.

takes place in the world of the gods:[15] this group of texts, being directly concerned with mythological matters, might reasonably be expected to carry more evidentiary weight than the so-called heroic or legendary poems.

Vǫluspá and *Grímnismál* are the most comprehensive poetic accounts of the Norse mythological worldview, even though considerable Christian influence has been seen in *Vǫluspá*;[16] in *Vǫluspá* it is nowhere made explicit that this worldview incorporated belief in a goddess called Hel, but it is impossible to rule out her existence somewhere in the mythological background to the references which seem primarily to indicate that the realm was foremost in the poet's mind, as is the case, for example, in stanza 43:

> Gól um ásom Gullinkambi
> sá vecr hǫlða at Heriafǫðrs;
> enn annarr gelr fyr iorð neðan,
> sótrauðr hani, at sǫlom Heliar.[17]

The second half-stanza refers to the underworld realm using the genitive construction *at sǫlom Heliar* (consistently capitalized by editors and translators, including Neckel-Kuhn); it is perfectly possible that Hel is here understood to refer to the goddess – such an interpretation could be suggested by the parallelism with the genitive *Heriafǫðrs* as a *heiti* for Valhǫll in line 2 – but the 'halls of Hel' could just as easily mean the halls of the realm of the dead. However, this stanza is the only instance in the Codex Regius of the phrase 'the halls of Hel': that the contrast between the two cocks crowing over the opposing realms of the dead is expressed by referring to Valhǫll as the property of Óðinn suggests that the author of *Vǫluspá* may have had some conception of a mythical figure attached to the place Hel. At the very least we must admit that this verse does not disprove the notion of such a belief. There are two further references to Hel in *Vǫluspá*, both of

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[15] On the relationship between *Baldrs draumar* and *Vǫluspá* see Dronke, ed., *Poetic Edda* II, 136; the best recent discussion of *Baldrs draumar* is found in Pàroli, '*Baldr's Dreams*'.

[16] Dronke, ed., *Poetic Edda* II, 93-104, discusses in some detail the Christian context of *Vǫluspá*; see also Dronke, '*Vǫluspá* and Sibylline Traditions', and below, pp. 180-5.

[17] Stanza 42 in Dronke's edition: 'Golden-comb crowed for the Æsir, he wakens the warriors at the Father of Hosts'; and another crows down below the earth, a sooty-red cock in the halls of Hel.' This stanza is discussed further below, p. 139.

which include the word *Helvegr* ('the way to Hel', found in stanzas 47 and 52), which clearly indicates that Hel was conceived of as a place.[18]

In *Grímnismál*, there is a much clearer conception of Hel as a mythological figure, although it is her spatial location that is of the greatest significance in the poet's mythological schema.

Grímnismál 28 and 31

Vína heitir enn, ǫnnor Vegsvinn,
þriðia Þióðnuma,
Nyt oc Nǫt, Nǫnn oc Hrǫnn,
Slíð oc Hríð, Sylgr oc Ylgr,
Víð oc Ván, Vǫnd oc Strǫnd,
Giǫll oc Leiptr, þær falla gumnom nær,
enn falla heliar heðan.

Þriár rœtr standa á þriá vega
undan asci Yggdrasils;
Hel býr undir einni, annari hrímþursar,
þriðio mennzcir menn.[19]

Kellogg's grouping these two occurrences together is entirely misleading, as it implies that the two instances of the word in this poem encode the same piece of mythological information. In stanza 28, Hel is undoubtedly a place: rivers do not flow into goddesses. As such, it is not clear why Hel is here regarded as a proper noun while elsewhere the realm of the dead is not so regarded. Stanza 31, on the other hand, probably does refer to the goddess. The phrase *Hel býr undir einni* would support this interpretation: the verb *búa* 'to dwell' is generally applied to people occupying a place of residence, rather than expressing the position in space of a given

[18] These stanzas are discussed in more detail below, p. 179.

[19] Stanza 28: 'Vína is one's name, another Vegsvinn, a third Þiðdnuma, Nyt and Nǫt, Nǫnn and Hrǫnn, Slíð and Hrið, Sylgr and Ylgr, Víð and Ván, Vǫnd and Strǫnd, Giǫll and Leiptr, they fall close to men, and flow from here to Hel.' Stanza 31: 'Three roots grow in three directions, under the ash of Yggdrasill; Hel lives under one, the frost-giants under the second, the third, humankind.'

geographical feature.[20] Because the *hrímþursar* and the *mennzkir menn* are beings, not places, and Hel completes this tripartite group, the structure of the stanza seems to require a mythological figure. As in *Vǫluspá* 43, however, it is the realm of Hel in particular, and its position in the cosmos, that interests the poet, and not the goddess Hel in and of herself. But to refer to the place in this way, by allusion to an associated mythological figure, immediately contradicts the idea that the personified Hel was Snorri Sturluson's invention.

Stanzas 2 and 3 of *Baldrs draumar* exhibit exactly the same tendency as the previous examples; Hel's primary significance is as a place: Óðinn rides *to* Hel, the dog comes *out of* Hel. But in stanza 3, line 4, *hávo Heliar ranni* ('high hall of Hel'), the name of the location may carry an implicit reference to the goddess figure, just as it may in *Vǫluspá*.

Baldrs draumar 2 and 3

Upp reis Óðinn, alda gautr,
oc hann á Sleipni sǫðul um lagði;
reið hann niðr þaðan Niflheliar til,
mœtti hann hvelpi, þeim er ór helio kom.

Sá var blóðugr um brióst framan,
oc galdrs fǫður gó um lengi;
fram reið Óðinn, foldvegr dunði,
hann kom at hávo Heliar ranni.[21]

There are relatively few references of any kind to Hel in the mythological poems of the *Poetic Edda*, and fewer still in the legendary-heroic texts. In *Atlamál* we move out of the realm of the gods, and into the world of men. When Hel's mythological associations appear in this text applied to the affairs of mortals, they acquire more specific connotations to do with death than we find in *Vǫluspá*, *Grímnismál*, or *Baldrs draumar*.

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[20] See Fritzner, *Ordbog*, s.v. *búa*.

[21] Stanza 2: 'Up rose Óðinn, the sacrifice for men, and on Sleipnir he laid a saddle; down he rode from there to Mist-Hel; he met a dog which came from Hel.' Stanza 3: 'Bloody it was on the front of its chest and long it barked at the father of magic; on rode Óðinn, the road resounded, he approached the high hall of Hel.'

Atlamál 55

Brœðr várom fiórir, er Buðla mistom,
hefir nú Hel hálfa, hǫggnir tveir liggia.[22]

In context, the phrase *hefir nú Hel hálfa* is here simply a conventional way of saying that the brothers are dead: expressions of this type are so common in Old Norse as almost to make the primary meaning of the word *hel* a basic synonym for death.[23] Although mythological belief underlies this commonplace at some level, it is certainly impossible to discern whether a belief in a place or in a goddess-figure is implied here: more usually, turns of phrase that treat Hel as a synonym for death use a verb of motion or a preposition (*í*, *til*, *ór*) indicating movement or position in space. In the *Poetic Edda* alone, the vast majority of occurrences of the word *hel* (26 out of 29 occurrences)[24] indicate movement into or out of, towards or away from, or a static position in what must have been conceived of as a place. It is perhaps the lack of any such movement that leads readers of *Atlamál* to suspect that stanza 55 refers to the personification: 'Hel (the goddess) possesses half of us'. For an audience aware of Snorri's account of how Loki's daughter was given control over a portion of the souls of the dead, such a reading makes good sense; there is nothing in this stanza that insists that the poet had the goddess in mind when he wrote it, however. The verb *hafa* does not require an animate subject. Elsewhere in *Atlamál*, Hel is always used in the normal way, with 'to go to Hel' quite clearly signifying 'to die'.[25] Comparable to *Atlamál* 55 is *Fáfnismál* 21, where Sigurðr taunts the dragon Fáfnir by predicting that he will win the gold after Hel has Fáfnir:

Fáfnismál 21

'Ráð er þér ráðit enn ec ríða mun til þess gullz,
er í lyngvi liggr;
enn þú, Fáfnir, ligg í fiǫrbrotom,
þar er þic Hel hafi!'[26]

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[22] 'There were four of us brothers when we lost Buðli, now Hel has half of us, two lie cut down.'

[23] Ellis, *Road to Hel*, p. 84.

[24] *Atlamál* 56 expresses motion through use of the dative in the phrase *senduð systr helju* '[you] sent my sister to Hel'.

[25] As in stanzas 41, 43, 51, 56 and 97.

[26] 'You've given your advice, but I shall ride to where the gold lies in the heather, and you, Fáfnir, lie in mortal fragments, there where Hel will have you!'

Neither in this stanza does the use of the verb *hafa* necessitate the reading of Hel as a goddess. We may choose to read it here as referring to a personification of death acting as a psychopomp and taking Fáfnir away, or it may simply mean that the dragon will be held in Hel, that is to say, 'dead'. The name remains open to dual interpretations, neither one of which may entirely satisfactorily be proven to represent the poet's mythological frame of reference.

None of these eddic poems' use of the word *hel*, then, unambiguously identifies the female ruler of the underworld whom Snorri thrusts into the limelight in *Gylfaginning*. While the solitary reference to such a figure in *Grímnismál* 31 proves that she was not entirely unknown to eddic poets, Hel remains very much in the shadows in eddic mythology as it is represented by the Codex Regius.

THE EVIDENCE OF PRE-CHRISTIAN SKALDIC VERSE

In attempting to validate some Old Norse poetry as a genuine witness to pre-Christian mythology, Richard North writes that 'the more semantic obscurity or corruption there is in a poem, the less likely is its composition in the Christian period'.[27] If this statement reflects the truth of the matter, then we can see that, so far as Hel is concerned, there is a certain degree of 'semantic obscurity' in the *Poetic Edda*, but that it is an obscurity which suggests an absence from the mythology: the absence of Snorri's goddess of death. In pre-Christian skaldic verse, notorious above almost all else for its extreme and deliberate semantic obfuscation, saying nothing simply that may be said by means of poetic circumlocution, we might expect to find an even more reliably pagan worldview. Not only does the difficulty of comprehending these texts fulfil North's somewhat dubious criterion for authenticity, but we are also able in many cases to ascribe a skaldic stanza to a named poet, and it is sometimes possible to situate its composition in time and space with some precision, particularly when court poets are associated with known kings or other noblemen.[28] If Hel is referred to in skaldic verse, then the attitudes towards it displayed by the heathen poets are likely to be of primary importance.

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[27] North, *Heathen Gods*, p. 9. On the value of skaldic poetry as a source for pre-Christian belief, see also Fidjestøl, 'Pagan Beliefs and Christian Impact', and Marold, 'Die Skaldendichtung als Quelle der Religiongeschichte'.

[28] See Fidjestøl, *Dating of Eddic Poetry*, p. 287.

Bragi Boddason, the 'father of Old Norse poetry', is the earliest named skald whose work is extant: there is an allusion to Hel in stanza 9 of his poem *Ragnarsdrápa* which, if accepted as genuine, is conventionally dated to before 900. *Ragnarsdrápa* is preserved only in Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál*, however, and modern scholarly opinion is generally quite sceptical about the poem's claims to ninth-century authenticity. [29]

Bragi Boddason inn gamli, *Ragnarsdrápa* 9

Bauða sú til bleyði
bœti-Þrúðr at móti
malma mætum hilmi
men dreyrugra benja.
Svá lét ey, þótt etti
sem orrostu letti
jǫfrum úlfs at sinna
með algífris lifru.[30]

Although Hel is not mentioned by name in this stanza, the kenning in lines 7-8 – *ulfs lifra* 'wolf's sister' – must surely be an allusion to the same figure named by Snorri as the sibling of Fenrisúlfr. This type of mythological allusion is a common device in skaldic poetics: the use of periphrasis to name one mythological figure by allusion to other aspects of the whole myth-complex associated with it. The interpretation of these kennings, which are themselves the key to the audience's comprehension of the entire verses, often requires considerable mythological knowledge beyond that contained within the stanza in hand which, in Frederick Amory's term,

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[29] On the dating and authenticity of Bragi's *Ragnarsdrápa*, see Frank, *Old Norse Court Poetry*, p. 22, and Clunies Ross, 'Bragi Boddason', p. 54, who rightly questions the authority of the text of *Ragnarsdrápa* as it survives: 'the *Ragnarsdrápa* we read in the standard editions is a scholarly reconstruction for which there is only partial authority in the work in which its component verse are to be found, Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*'.

[30] *SnE* II, 73: 'This bloody-wound-curing Þrúðr did not offer the worthy prince the neck-ring to give him an excuse for cowardice in the meeting of metals. She always pretended to be against battle, though she was inciting the princes to join the company of the quite monstrous wolf's sister.'

provides the 'narrative precipitate' for the wider myth.[31] In this instance we are able to recover the meaning of the kenning through the knowledge of Loki's family tree which we have gained from *Gylfaginning*. It is reasonably certain that Bragi did not mean to refer to the sister of any other wolf: the context makes it quite clear that the 'company of the quite monstrous sister of the wolf' means 'the dead'. But here, as opposed to the eddic poems, death is clearly linked to a mythological figure rather than a location within pre-Christian cosmology. At face value, therefore, Bragi's inclusion of such a reference seems to indicate that his putative audience shared the knowledge accessible to us via *Snorra Edda*, and that the belief in a goddess named Hel was an ancient one.

The circumstances of *Ragnarsdrápa*'s preservation must give us pause, however, at least for a moment. This poem, supposedly composed in the ninth century by a rather hazy figure, after whom the Norse god of poetry may well have been named, is preserved only in manuscripts of *Snorra Edda*, a text which probably originated in the period 1220x40 but which survives in no copy earlier than the Codex Upsaliensis (probably first quarter of the fourteenth century).[32] The enormous gap between the notional date of composition and the first extant text gives cause for concern; by its very nature the oral transmission we must hypothesise militates against fixity, and even when a poem entered a state of textuality, scribal interference (whether in the form of a corrupt textual tradition, simple miscopying or deliberate intervention by a scribe) was always possible.[33] There is thus a degree of likelihood that the verses which now make up *Ragnarsdrápa* are not precisely those which Bragi (probably) composed in Norway in honour of Ragnarr Loðbrók, perhaps four centuries before the earliest surviving manuscript version was written down. But more worrying is our reliance upon Snorri Sturluson both for the preservation of this verse and for the solution to its kenning necessary for the stanza's overall comprehension: in effect, a hermeneutic circle is created whereby the evidence for the mythological information contained in *Gylfaginning* is evidenced by material preserved only in *Snorra Edda*, which itself can only be interpreted by recourse to *Gylfaginning*'s mythography! The difficulty for the modern student of Old Norse mythology to progress much beyond what Snorri chooses to tell us about it is of course often frustrating; we should not, however, become so sceptical as to disregard all

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[31] The term is taken from Amory, 'Kennings', p. 351; see also Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes* I, 27-8. On the mythological content of skaldic diction more generally, see also e.g. Finnur Jónsson, 'Mytiske forestillinger'; Kristensen, 'Skjaldenes mytologi'.

[32] Faulkes, *SnE* I, xxix. This verse is only quoted in *Skáldskaparmál* (*SnE* II, 73).

[33] See Abram, 'Scribal Authority in Skaldic Verse'.

the verses he quotes. Although we cannot be certain of *Snorra Edda*'s texts of *Ragnarsdrápa* representing Bragi's original composition (after all, *Snorra Edda*'s texts of *Ragnarsdrápa* do not even prove the existence of a historical Bragi), there is no reason to view the mythological worldview expressed within this poem as necessarily corrupt or tainted by transmission by Christian intermediaries. And, if it is genuine, this stanza of Bragi's provides the first real evidence that from an early period a female figure, identifiable with Hel through her relationship to the mythical wolf, was closely associated with death.

The work of the second poet to make use of mythological kennings with Hel as a referent is similarly closely bound to the textual traditions of Snorri's learned writings. Þjóðólfr of Hvin's *Ynglingatal* is preserved only in Snorri's *Ynglinga saga*, the first section of his great historical work *Heimskringla*. Þjóðólfr (*fl. c.* 885 – *c.* 920), was a Norwegian skald about whom the historical record is largely silent, and of whose work probably only two poems survive: *Ynglingatal* and *Haustlǫng*.[34] Although little is known about their author, the authenticity of these poems as dating from the ninth century has, by and large, been accepted, although of the two, *Ynglingatal*'s dating is the less certain:[35] Claus Krag argues that *Ynglingatal* was abstracted from prose accounts of the events it describes, now lost, in the twelfth century, but, according to North, 'the high number of semantic difficulties relative to that of overtly Christian poems' makes the more usual dating and attribution probably correct.[36] This semantic obscurity is of course what North also regards as one of the key tests of a text's reliability and usefulness as a source of knowledge for pre-Christian religious belief. Þjóðólfr may not have been a particularly religious person but in Finnur Jónsson's opinion at least, he was a man who believed in the old gods.[37] In neither of his extant poems does Þjóðólfr use the world Hel, yet it seems that a figure equivalent to the goddess referred to elsewhere by that name formed part of his mythological background: a small

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[34] For an overview of the evidence concerning Þjóðólfr's life and works, see North, ed., *Haustlǫng*, pp. xxxi-xli. Fidjestøl did not count Þjóðólfr among the skalds whose composition of praise poetry in honour of identifiable historical figures satisfied him of their poems' authenticity and datablility (*Dating of Eddic Poetry*, p. 288; *Det norrøne fyrstediktet*, pp. 179-82).

[35] Åkerlund, *Studier över Ynglingatal*, pp. 45-79.

[36] Krag, *Ynglingatal og Ynglingasaga*, pp. 47-59 and 182-200; North, ed., *Haustlǫng*, p. xxxiii. Work by Marold (*Kenningkunst*, pp. 153-210) has shown that there are distinctive similarities in poetic technique between the two poems that are suggestive of common authorship.

[37] Finnur Jónsson, *Den oldnorske og oldislandske Litteraturs Historie* I, 432-42, esp. p. 439.

slew of kennings in *Ynglingatal* were identified by Meissner as referring to Hel.[38] Some of them are so obscure in their references, however, as to make any interpretation extremely tentative.

Þjóðólfr of Hvin, *Ynglingatal* 7

Kveðkat dul,
nema Dyggva hrør
Glitnis gnǫ́
at gamni hefr,
þvít jódís
Ulfs ok Narfa
konungmann
kjósa skyldi;
ok allvald
Yngva þjóðar
Loka mær
of leikinn hefr.[39]

There are three kennings in this stanza that may refer to Hel. Of these, *Loka mær* ('girl/daughter of Loki', line 11) is the most straightforward; *mær* is quite commonly used as a word for daughter in poetry, and, to the best of our knowledge, Loki was never thought to have had any female offspring other than Hel. In lines 5-6, Hel's other family relationship is again referred to in the kenning *jódis Ulfs ok Narfa* (the sister of the wolf and 'Narfi'). The wolf must be Fenrisúlfr once again, but Narfi (otherwise called Nari) refers to a son of Loki's marriage to Sigyn, as *Gylfaginning* confirms: so properly Narfi is Hel's half-brother.[40] Egill Skallagrímsson uses an identical type of

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[38] Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden*, p. 396. One of Meissner's references, *Ynglingatal* 10, line 7 *Loga dís*, which he indicates as doubtful, may not refer to Hel; the surrounding prose of *Ynglinga saga* states that the sister of Logi is Skjálf (named in line 3 of the same stanza), daughter of Frosti, leader of the Finns. This interpretation may reflect Snorri's (mis)reading of the poem: *dís* normally means 'goddess', but he cites this word as a poeticism for 'sister' in *Skáldskaparmál* (*SnE* II, 108).

[39] *Skjald* B I, 8: 'I do not doubt but that Glitnir's goddess has Dyggvi's corpse for pleasure; the sister of the wolf and Narfi had to choose a king-man. Loki's daughter has taken the ruler of Yngvi's people.'

[40] *SnE* I, 27: 'Kona hans heitir Sigyn, sonr þeira Nari eða Narfi'. ('His wife is called Sigyn, their son Nari or Narfi.') It is this son from whose guts the Æsir fashion Loki's bonds: *SnE* I, 49. The same story is told in the prose at the

kenning in one of his long poems, *Hǫfuðlausn.*[41] *Glitnis gnǫ́* (line 3) is less clear: *gnǫ́* (manuscript *gná*) is a poetic term for a goddess, and hence for a woman. *Glitnir* has two possible significations: in the interpretation which leads to the kenning being solved as 'Hel', as explicated by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, for example, *Glitnir* is a *heiti* for a horse. According to Bjarni, citing Schück, there was an ancient belief that the goddess of death rode a horse; hence 'goddess of the horse' equals Hel.[42] Although this interpretation is reflected in Finnur Jónsson's Danish translation of the stanza, as well as in Bjarni's edition of *Heimskringla*, it is hardly supported by external evidence. In the written sources, there is no indication of this belief that Hel rode a horse; there is moreover only one occurrence of Glitnir as a by-name for a horse in Old Norse poetry.[43] In contrast, there is a well-attested tradition in which Glitnir is the name of a mythical hall, quite unlike Hel's dominion. It is described in *Grímnismál* 15:

Glitnir er inn tíundi, hann er gulli studdr
oc silfri þacþr iþ sama;
enn þar Forseti byggir flestan dag
oc svæfir allar sakir.[44]

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end of *Lokasenna* as found in the Codex Regius manuscript of the *Poetic Edda*, except that in this account Nari and Narfi are clearly two distinct entities, brothers. Neckel-Kuhn, p. 109: 'Enn eptir þetta falz Loki í Fránangarsforsi í lax líki. Þar tóco æsir hann. Hann var bundinn með þǫrmom sonar Nara. Enn Narfi, sonr hans, varð at vargi.' ('But after that Loki fell into Fránangarfors in the likeness of a salmon. The Æsir took him there. He was bound with the guts of his son Nari. But Narfi, his son, became a wolf.') In *Gylfaginning* it is Váli, whom the Hauksbók version of *Vǫluspá* 34 possibly names as an otherwise unattested son of Loki, who becomes a wolf at this point. Elsewhere, Váli is the name of Óðinn's son. See *SnE* I, 175.

[41] In Egill's stanza, the alternative spelling for the name of Loki's son is preserved: in this stanza he calls Hel *nipt Nara* ('sister of Nari') *Skjald* B I, 32, stanza 10, lines 7-8: *trað nipt Nara / náttverð Nari* ('Nari's sister trod on the eagle's evening meal [i.e. "corpses"]. Perhaps the variant spelling of Nara is due to *Hǫfuðlausn*'s end-rhymed metre: Egill needed the name to rhyme with *ari* in the succeeding line of the stanza.

[42] *Heimskringla* I, 34: 'Það er forn hugmynd, að dánargyðjan ferðist á hesti'; see also Schück, *Studier i nordisk litteratur och religionshistorie* II, 178-81.

[43] The one occurrence of Glitnir as a *heiti* for 'horse' is in a *þula* of such names, found only in two manuscripts (AM 748 and 757) of *Snorra Edda*: see *Skjald* A II, 685.

[44] 'Glitnir is the tenth, it is propped up with gold, and it is roofed with silver in the same way; and there Forseti lives nearly every day and puts to sleep all quarrels.'

Snorri mentions Glitnir twice in *Gylfaginning*; his description of the hall is clearly based on *Grímnismál*:

> Þar er ok sá er Glitnir heitir, ok eru veggir hans ok steðr ok stólpar af rauðu gulli, en þak hans af silfri.[45]

> Forseti heitir sonr Baldrs ok Nǫnnu Nepsdóttur. Hann á þann sal á himni er Glitnir heitir, en allir er til hans koma með sakarvandræði, þá fara allar sáttir á braut. Sá er dómstaðr beztr með guðum ok mǫnnum.[46]

Gylfaginning is little help here in unlocking the meaning of Þjóðólfr's kenning. Neither Snorri nor *Grímnismál* offers up any plausible alternative to Hel as the referent of *Glitnis gnó*; the only figure associated with Glitnir is male: Forseti, Baldr's (otherwise unknown) son. Thus, if Glitnir in *Ynglingatal* refers to the same hall as these other texts, it provides no hope of a solution: no analogous female figure shows up in the tradition as it is preserved.

Although the reliance on Glitnir's being a horse-*heiti* and thus a reference to barely-attested folk-belief leaves the usual interpretation of this kenning open to doubt, it seems wise on literary grounds to assume that Þjóðólfr does mean to refer to Hel in this stanza. The context demands a figure associated with death (the other Glitnir might make sense if the stanza was concerned with the settlement of a dispute); retaining Hel as the meaning of this kenning also ensures that each syntactic unit – the three four-line sections which repeat, but with varying imagery, the basic information that Dyggvi died – contains a different kenning for Hel.[47] Þjóðólfr is showing off here, displaying a full range of mythological knowledge and his ability to use an array of different kennings, each describing a different facet of the myth-complex surrounding the same figure, to name Hel. It is important for the present discussion, however, that when he chooses to use kennings for Hel, they are all unambiguously based around the idea

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[45] *SnE* I, 19-20: 'Also there is one called Glitnir, and its walls and columns and pillars are of red gold, and its roof of silver.'

[46] *SnE* I, 26: 'Forseti is the name of the son of Baldr and Nanna Nep's daughter. He has a hall in heaven called Glitnir, and whoever comes to him with difficult legal disputes, they all leave with their differences settled. It is the best place of judgment among gods and men.'

[47] Lönnroth, 'Dómaldi's Death', p. 88, identified this tripartite structure as a recurring pattern in what he termed 'A-type' stanzas in *Ynglingatal*, those verses which, in general, occur in the first half of the poem, and deal with the deaths of legendary 'pre-historic' Swedish rulers.

of a mythological figure, and a feminine one at that: she is a goddess, a sister, a daughter. She takes to herself the souls of the deceased; there is no mention of where she takes them. Indeed, nothing in this stanza indicates that Þjóðólfr conceived of Hel as a place at all.

Ynglingatal 30

Þat frá hverr
at Halfdanar
sǫkmiðlendr
sakna skyldu,
ok hallvarps
hlífi-nauma
þjóðkonung
á Þótni tók;
ok Skereið
í Skíringssal
of brynjalfs
beinum drúpir.[48]

The kenning for Hel in this stanza is *hallvarps hlífi-nauma* in lines 6-7. *Hallvarp* is probably a compound of *hallr* 'stone' and a noun deriving from *verpa* 'to throw'. *Nauma* is a woman-*heiti*, and *hlífa* is a verb meaning 'to cover' or 'to shelter'.[49] So 'the covering-goddess of the throwing of the stone/stone-heap' is an approximation of the literal meaning of the kenning. This kenning reinforces Hel's links with the grave; *hallvarps* presumably refers to inhumation under a cairn or in a barrow, and *hlífi-nauma* could plausibly be suggested to be a play on words based around the etymology of the word *hel* itself. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson suggests that Þjóðólfr's conception of Hel was as the goddess who held dominion over grave-mounds.[50]

Ynglingatal 31

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[48] *Skjald* B I, 12: 'Everyone heard that the participants in the offence had to feel the loss of Halfdan, when the covering-goddess of the stone-heap took the king of the people at Þótni; and the bones of the armoured prince droop in Skíringsal in Skereið.'

[49] Bjarni Aðalsteinsson, ed., *Heimskringla* I, 76.

[50] *Ibid.*, p. 34.

En Eysteinn
fyr ási fór
til Býleists
bróður meyjar,
ok nú liggr
und lagar beinum
rekks lǫðuðr
á raðar broddi,
þars élkaldr
hjá jǫfur gauzkum
Vǫðlu straumr
at vági kømr.[51]

Lines 3-4, *Býleists bróður meyjar* returns to the pattern of referring to Hel by her relationship to other mythological figures; she is once again *mær* 'daughter', and her father is himself named indirectly, although *Býleists bróður* is easily identified as Loki by recourse to *Gylfaginning*: 'Brœðr hans eru þeir Býleistr ok Helblindi' (*SnE* I, 26: 'His brothers are Býleistr and Helblindi').

It is hardly surprising that we find so many references to death in *Ynglingatal*. In this poem, as Ellis Davidson put it, the poet's chief interest 'is apparently the manner of death and the place of burial of the kings'.[52] Lars Lönnroth went further, writing that *Ynglingatal*'s basic form is 'a series of terse, riddling statements about mythical Swedish kings who died in various strange and ignoble ways'.[53] Joan Turville-Petre identified a grave-cult as the 'social correlative' of *Ynglingatal*'s genre.[54] When we regard it as a thirty-seven-stanza catalogue of significant deaths, there is no wonder that Þjóðólfr uses such a wide array of poetic terms for death and burial in *Ynglingatal*. One of his strategies is to use mythological kennings, and several of these kennings denote Hel who is, in this poem, unambiguously a goddess-figure, and a goddess who fits into the mythological schema in the same relationships as the goddess Hel does in *Gylfaginning*. Hel is

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[51] *Skjald* B I, 12-13: 'But Eysteinn went because of the boom to the daughter of Býleistr's brother, and now the leader of men lies under the bones of the sea [i.e. rocks] at the end of the ridge; there where the ice-cold Vaðla stream comes to the sea close by the Gautish boar [warrior/king].'

[52] Ellis, *Road to Hel*, p. 31.

[53] Lönnroth, 'Dómaldi's Death', p. 92.

[54] Turville-Petre, 'On Ynglingatal', p. 51.

not a personification of the realm of the dead, however: such a realm is nowhere mentioned. On the other hand, it may well be that Þjóðólfr really did regard Loki's daughter as a personification of death or the grave.

Egill Skallagrímsson (*c.* 910-90) seemingly makes similar use of Hel in his poetry. As he is presented in the thirteenth-century *Egils saga*, Egill exhibits, of the Viking-age poets, one of the most complex sets of religious sensibilities. In the saga, he is presented as conforming to an Óðinnic paradigm, engaging in acts of *seiðr* and combining in his behaviour, particularly in his younger years, the two activities most closely associated with the *Alfǫður*: warfare and poetry.[55] At one point in the saga, it has been suggested, Egill even performs a sort of ritualised impersonation of his patron god, when he raises and lowers his eyebrows at King Aðalsteinn's feast, in a supposed attempt to look suitably one-eyed.[56] How much of Egill's Óðinnic characterization is the invention of the saga author is hard to tell,[57] but much of his poetry – if the attribution to the historical Egill can be made secure – is steeped in pre-Christian religious feeling. His two greatest poems, *Sonatorrek* and *Arinbjarnarkvíða*, are both deeply concerned with fate and death – in each case they mourn the passing of members of the poet's family – and

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[55] See Haraldur Bessason, 'Mythological Overlays', p. 283.

[56] This rather strained interpretation of the episode from ch. 55 of *Egils saga* (p. 143 in Sigurður's ÍF edition) was made by de Vries, *Heroic Song and Heroic Legend*, p. 84. The saga account makes it quite clear what the hero means by this peculiar action, as he explains in a verse that his facial expression was a result of 'sorrow' over being given insufficient thanks – and booty – for his part in Aðalsteinn's victory (*Egils saga*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 145):

Knóttu hvarms af harmi	[For sorrow my beetling brows
hnúgnípur mér drúpa,	drooped over my eyelids.
nú fann ek þanns ennis	Now I have found one who smoothed
ósléttur þær rétti;	the wrinkles on my forehead:
gramr hefr gerðihǫmrum	the king has pushed the cliffs
grundar upp of hrundit,	that gird my mask's ground
sá's til ýgr, af augum,	back above my eyes.
armsíma, mér grímu.	He grants bracelets no quarter.

[57] The current state of opinion regarding the historicity of *Egils saga* is summed up by Bjarni Einarsson, '*Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*', p. 156: '*Egils saga*'s descriptions of events in the history of Norway have parallels, even verbatim, in *Heimskringla* … there is some literary relation between *Egils saga* and *Heimskringla*, but it does not follow that *Egils saga* is a historical work on a par with *Heimskringla*. It is obvious that the author of *Egils saga* has arbitrarily connected Egill … with well-known events of Norwegian history. It does not seem likely that Egill's connections with persons and events in English history are better founded.'

Sonatorrek, in particular, is a fruitful, if obscure, source for tenth-century attitudes towards the afterlife of the soul.

It is in one of Egill's *lausavísur*, however, that the first datable occurrence of the word *hel* in an Old Norse verse occurs, in a verse which, were it genuine, should be ascribed a date of composition around 923.[58]

Egill Skallagrímsson, *Lausavísa* 5

Svá hefk leystsk ór Lista
láðvarðaðar garði,
né fágak dul drjúgan,
dáðmildr ok Gunnhildar,
at þrifreynis þjónar
þrír nakkvarir Hlakkar,
til hásalar Heljar
helgengnir, fǫr dvelja.[59]

Egill shares the eddic poems' tendency to refer to Hel as a proper noun without specifying what he thought that noun signified. Once again Hel's high halls are mentioned, suggesting that they were an important part of the imaginary topography of the realm. The second half-strophe, with its enjambment and attendant emphasis on *Heljar helgengnir*, suggests that for Egill the word was more than simply a way of referring to the grave; the halls of Hel were a place wherein departed souls – the *helgengnir*, a *heiti* for 'the dead' – dwelt (although we do not know what they did there),[60] and as such this reference, whether or not it implies knowledge of the goddess-figure, indicates that going to Hel was thought of by Egill primarily as a synonym for death, and sending someone to Hel synonymous with killing them. The use of the infinitive *dvelja* in line 8 implies a

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[58] The dating is Finnur Jónsson's, *Skjald* B I, 5.

[59] *Skjald* B I, 43: 'Bountiful in deeds, I've slipped away from the court of Norway's lord and Gunnhildr – I do not boast overly – such that three servants of the tester of prosperity, gone to Hel, tarry in Hel's high hall.'

[60] For Renauld-Kratz, this idea of Hel as a kind of limbo, where nothing in particular happened to the soul after death, was a neat antithesis to the conception of Valhǫll as a pagan paradise, with its constant activity of fighting and feasting as the fallen warriors await Ragnarǫk: 'il existe des véritables enfers, non pas certes des enfers où l'on expie à l'image de l'enfer chrétien, mais des enfers où l'on végète, où s'amasse comme dans une morne prison la foule de ceux qui quittent la vie' (*Structures de la Mythologie Nordique*, p. 62).

continued residence of the dead men's souls beyond this world, and the reference to the *hásalar Heljar* may or may not point to a goddess somewhere in the background of the myth-complex. But the likelihood of this stanza genuinely dating from the mid-tenth century is slim, together with most of the rest of the corpus of *lausavísur* attributed to Egill. Richard North does not accept any of the *lausavísur* attributed to Egill Skallagrímsson in his saga to be genuine, assuming them rather 'to be later creations which the writer of *Egils saga* (formally at least) accepted as Egill's'.[61] We must be careful to avoid the temptation to place too much credence in twelfth- or thirteenth-century sagas' reconstructions of the pagan past, and it is clear that skaldic verse could be manipulated, misattributed or even composed from scratch by saga-authors, according to the requirements of their prose. Luckily, however, the saga preserves two or three longer poems which have generally been accepted as the work of the historical Egill Skallagrímsson. For the student of mythology, the most important of these is *Sonatorrek*.

Egill Skallagrímsson, *Sonatorrek* 25

Nú erum torvelt,
Tveggja bága
njǫrva nipt
á nesi stendr,
skalk þó glaðr
góðum vilja
ok óhryggr
heljar bíða.[62]

Egill's lament for his sons in *Sonatorrek* is one of the most powerful and moving of the Germanic elegies. At the very end of this long poem, over which mortality casts such a long shadow, Egill looks forward to his own death: 'But I shall wait for Hel with a good will, gladly and without distress' (lines 5-8). The shattering grief he has experienced in losing both his sons in quick succession, combined with a traditional desire that a father should not outlive his children, has driven Egill – who composes this poem (if the saga-account is to be believed) while attempting

[61] North, 'Pagan Inheritance', p. 148.

[62] *Skjald* B I, 37: 'Now it goes hard with me: the full sister [Hel] of Tveggi's [Óðinn's] enemy [Fenrir] stands on the headland; but yet gladly, with a good will and without fear I shall await Hel.'

to starve himself to death – to welcome his own death, which he imagines to be imminent. In this stanza, the way he expresses his morbid desire is to say that he waits for Hel; here, a psychopomp-figure, actively seeking out the deceased, rather than a mythical location passively receiving their souls. Egill's passivity in the face of his own death, his acceptance of his fate as he perceives it, is heightened by this inversion. As such, Hel is not a personification of the Underworld, but rather of death itself, a personification which Ellis Davidson regarded as purely a literary conceit, and not indicative of religious belief.[63] Such a personification might well be associated with the preponderance of other female figures associated with fate and death in Old Norse literature, some of which perform a psychopomp function.[64]

The first half of *Sonatorrek* 25, however, which refers to Hel by the kenning *Nipt bága Tveggja* ('the sister of Óðinn's enemy', i.e. Fenrisúlfr, against whom Óðinn fights at the end of the world, according to *Vǫluspá* and *Gylfaginning*) suggests that Egill's reference to Hel does belong to a wider myth-complex. It is effectively the same kenning used by Bragi Boddason, but in this instance we have no doubt that it is to Hel that the kenning refers, as Egill himself provides its solution in the second half-strophe. Here, then, is an unambiguous reference to Hel as a female goddess, associated with death, who is identified by her relationship to Loki's monstrous offspring, just as in *Gylfaginning*. As we have evidence both from *Egils saga* and – more

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[63] Ellis, *Road to Hel*, p. 84. See also Jónas Kristjánsson, 'Heiðin trú', p. 107. This is also the interpretation adopted by the most recent translator of *Egils saga* into English, Bernard Scudder, in *Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, *et al.* I, 156.

[64] There are numerous examples of the appearance of *fylgjur* at the death of characters in the *Íslendingasögur*: see for example *Hallfreðar saga* (in *Vatnsdœla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson), p. 198, where Hallfreðr sees his *fylgjukona* (the –*kona* element reinforces the female aspect of these figures), immediately before his death. There is also a good example of a *fylgja* in the prose that accompanies *Helgakviða Hjǫrvarðssonar* in the *Poetic Edda*: Heðinn, the son of King Hjǫrvarðr, rejects the company of a troll-woman riding a wolf, who turns out to be the *fylgja* of his doomed brother Helgi (Neckel-Kuhn, pp. 147-8): 'Heðinn fór einn saman heim ór scógi iólaaptan ok fann trollkonu; sú reið vargi ok hafði orma at taumom ok bauð fylgð sína Heðni … Þat qvað Helgi, þvíat hann grunaði um feigð sína oc þat at fylgjor hans hǫfðo vitjat Heðins þá er hann sá konona ríða varginom.' ('Heðinn was going home alone from the woods on Yule eve and he met a troll-woman; she was riding a wolf and had serpents as reins … Then Helgi said that he suspected that he was doomed and it was his fetches who had visited Heðinn when he saw the woman riding the wolf.') The collocation here of a female harbinger of death with a wolf and serpents might just be a dim reflection of the unholy trinity of Hel, Fenrir and the Miðgarðsormr. For Ellis Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess,* pp. 176-8, all these female figures connected with death are reflexes of one of the most important functions of the 'northern goddess'. She notes (p. 176) that 'the power of the goddess seems to be limited to her liminal aspect', bridging the worlds rather than forming a central part of any one schema of the afterlife.

importantly – from his major poems that Egill was an adherent to a variety of Norse paganism, we can be fairly sure that his conception of Hel did incorporate a goddess-figure related to the one Snorri describes. Egill had contact with Christians and with Christianity, if *Egils saga* is to be believed,[65] but there is no evidence that Egill's reference to Hel reflects a belief in or awareness of the Christian schema of the afterlife: putative Christian influence certainly could not explain the reference to Hel as 'full sister of Óðinn's enemy'. If this verse is accepted as being the work of a poet whose mythological frame of reference was determined, at least primarily, by his belief in a pre-Christian religion, Snorri's account may be less fanciful than the dearth of other references to a goddess of death in Norse poetry might lead us to assume. The evidence of one or two stanzas in a corpus of thousands of lines' length is hardly overwhelming, but the kennings of Bragi, Þjóðólfr and Egill suggest that, within the heterodox and changeable belief-systems of Norse paganism there was at some level, among some poets, knowledge of a myth which linked the female personification of death with Fenrisúlfr and by this relationship incorporated Hel into their wider mythological schema.

Towards the end of the tenth century, the increasing influence of Christianity in Norway led to what Roberta Frank has called an 'instinctive, self-defensive "Christianization" of pagan narrative' in the circle of the poets of Hákon jarl Sigurðsson.[66] A major example of this tendency is Eilífr Goðrúnarson's *Þórsdrápa*, a composition dating from about 985-995: a period which it might be reasonable to call the final years of paganism as 'state religion' in Norway.[67] *Þórsdrápa* is the longest skaldic poem to include a continuous mythological narrative. It is also, notoriously, among the most difficult to interpret. The problematic nature of the text is apparent in the single stanza in which Eilífr (apparently) mentions Hel: by this point in the narrative Þórr, having survived the perils of his journey to the realm of Geirrøðr, is busily beating up the giants. In the manuscripts of *Snorra Edda* which preserve *Þórsdrápa*, Þórr is said to be *hel blotin* 'sacrificed to in Hel' in stanza 20, although editors have hardly ever allowed the manuscript reading to stand,

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[65] However, if the saga chronology is to be believed, *Sonatorrek* was composed *c.* 960; Egill received preliminary Christian baptism in England, *c.* 937 (see *Egils saga*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, pp. 128-9, where Egill and Þórólfr receive the *prima signatio* (ON *prímsigning*) at the behest of King Aðalsteinn).

[66] Frank, 'Hand Tools and Power Tools', p. 109.

[67] Davidson, 'Earl Hákon and his Poets', pp. 528-9; see also Ström, 'Poetry as an Instrument of Propaganda'.

preferring to emend *helblótinn* to *herblótinn* 'sacrificed to by an army' or *hælblótinn* 'sacrificed to by wooden supports', both of which alternatives are *hapax legomena*:[68]

Eilífr Goðrúnarson, *Þórsdrápa* 20

Herblótinn vá hneitir
hógbrotningi skógar
undirfjalfrs af afli
alfheims bliku kalfa;
né liðfǫstum Lista
– látr val – Rygir máttu
aldrminkanda aldar
Ellu steins of bella.[69]

Daphne Davidson, arguing for the traditional reading, read a political significance into *herblótinn*, relating it both to the apparently flourishing cult of Þórr in Norway (if *her* is interpreted neutrally as 'men'), and to Hákon jarl's achievements in restoring the temples of Þórr which had been destroyed by his enemies, the Eiríkssons (if *herblótinn* should be taken specifically to mean 'worshipped by army's sacrifice).[70] But *Helblótinn* is, I think, a defensible reading which has probably been too quickly discarded: Eilífr may well be trying to equate Geirrøðr's realm with

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[68] *Herblótinn* has been preferred by all modern editors of the poem except Kiil, who favoured *hællblótinn* ('Eilífr Goðrúnarson's *Þórsdrápa*', p. 164'.

[69] Ed. Davidson, 'Earl Hákon and his Poets', p. 660: 'The crusher of the calves of the shelter of the elf-realm's glint [giants; their crusher is Þórr], worshipped by army's sacrifice, fought powerfully with the handy broken-off piece of the forest [Þórr's weapon]; the Rogalanders of the falcon-lair's Lister [giants] could not muster resistance against the trusty life-shortener of the men of rock-Ella [Þórr].' The diplomatic transcription of this verse from manuscripts R, T, and W of *Snorra Edda* is:

Hel blotin va hneitir
hog brotningi skogar
vndir fialfrs af alfi
alfheims blikv kalfa
ne liðfá stm lista
latr valrvgar mattv
alldr minnkanda elldar
ellv steins of bella.

[70] Davidson, 'Earl Hákon and his Poets', p. 661.

Hel. The giants with whom Þórr battles in *Þórsdrápa* 20 are being sacrificed to Þórr in Hel, which is used here as a metonym for the place in which the action of this part of the poem takes place: they are not victims in a cultic *blót*, but they lay down their lives before the god's irresistible might.

The emendation of *helblótinn* to *herblótinn* does not make the meaning of the stanza radically more transparent, and Frank has stressed that the reference to Hel here is appropriate in context: Geirrøðr's domain is a gloomy, otherworldly place, particularly when Saxo Grammaticus describes it in Book VIII of his *Gesta Danorum*, reflecting, perhaps, a general conception that this location within the mythological cosmos was, or was akin to, the pagan underworld.[71] Saxo's presentation of Geirrøðr's courts as an otherworldly destination was undoubtedly influenced, to a greater or lesser extent, by Christian *uisiones* of Hel, however. It is therefore unlikely – although not impossible – that Eilífr imagined this location in precisely the same way as Saxo, who was a Christian Latin author writing two centuries after the composition of *Þórsdrápa*.[72] In any case, there is simply not enough information in Eilífr's poem for us to be able to form an opinion. The interpretation of *Þórsdrápa* 20 is clearly so insecure as to render its use as evidence about Hel rather problematic. If the manuscripts of *Snorra Edda* do indeed preserve the correct reading of *helblótinn* in this stanza, however, we can at least be sure that Eilífr did conceive of Hel as a place, and that it was connected in his mind with the giants: *helblótinn* cannot, to my mind, encode any information about the goddess Hel. Thus *Þórsdrápa* marks a shift away from normal skaldic attitudes about Hel. It is not clear, based on this fleeting allusion, whether Eilífr's attitude to Hel has been influenced by Christian ideas as part of the 'Christianization' of pagan narrative that Frank identified. We will see, however, that the court poets of Hákon jarl sometimes did manipulate basic mythological concepts in a manner that reflects the fraught religious atmosphere of late-tenth-century Norway, as pagan and Christian modes of thought vied for supremacy.

HEL IN THE VERSE OF CONVERSION-ERA POETS

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[71] Frank, 'Hand Tools and Power Tools', p. 99. The Geirrøðr-episode in Saxo is found at *Gest. Dan.* I, 262-7.

[72] See Malm, 'Otherworld Journeys', and chapter 6, below.

References to Hel in skaldic poetry become no more commonplace as their date of composition progresses into the Christian era, nor do they become much less ambiguous; during the Conversion period and beyond the waters are further muddied by the possibility that the skalds begin to refer to the Christian concept of hell. Although the skalds are rightly regarded as important, if unintentional, witnesses to pre-Christian belief, some of them did apparently take to the new religion with alacrity, and the conversion of the skalds to Christianity manifested itself quite quickly. This was probably a result of the symbiotic relationship of the court poet with his lord, which ensured that political expediency would often dictate religious affiliations in the poets of the conversion period.[73] At any rate, for two centuries between 1000 and 1200, the mythological content of the skaldic kenning was dramatically reduced, as de Vries and Fidjestøl have shown:[74] in datable stanzas, the proportion of mythological kennings diminishes from 28.64% in the period 975-999, to below three percent throughout the twelfth century. After 1200, the mythological kenning once again makes an appearance: indeed the kenning itself once again becomes an important part of poetic expression, having declined throughout the twelfth century. This has been described as a 'mythological renaissance', and attributed to the influence of Snorri Sturluson and his nephews. Such a process of change makes certainty as to the religious attitudes of the skalds, particularly during the conversion period, impossible. As Fidjestøl points out, there is little real syncretism displayed in the poems of the conversion period, but one area where the boundaries blur is in their references to the afterlife: 'To judge by the scaldic sources … the only trace of this great human revolution discernible in the first generations of Christian poetry is no more – and no less – than a concern about the dwelling place of the spirit in the

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[73] The case is best proved by the dramatic decrease in mythological allusions in the work of Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld when he becomes a retainer of the notably pious and anti-heathen Óláfr Tryggvason, who is called a *hǫrgbrjótr*, 'destroyer of heathen temples' in one of Hallfreðr's verses (*Skjald.* B I, 149): see Edwards, 'Christian and Pagan References', p. 34; on the use of mythological imagery for political purposes see also Ström, 'Poetry as an Instrument of Propaganda'.

[74] De Vries, *De skaldenkenningen*, pp. 50-74; Hans Kuhn, arguing in favour of continuing syncretism in the first two centuries after the Conversion, disputed de Vries's findings about the mythological content of skaldic kennings during that period ('Das nordgermanische Heidentum', *passim*.). De Vries responded to Kuhn's criticism in the article 'Kenningen und Christentum'. Over thirty years later, Bjarne Fidjestøl, 'Pagan Beliefs and Christian Impact', pp. 101-2 proved statistically that kennings with mythological content are indeed much less common in poetry of the eleventh and twelfth centuries (see now *idem.*, *Dating of Eddic Poetry*, pp. 270-93). Fidjestøl's results supersede those of de Vries, whose methodology was open to question, and whose conclusions were accepted only with reservations by Turville-Petre (*Myth and Religion*, p. 16).

afterworld.'[75] This concern is no longer reflected in kennings with mythological referents, but the word *hel* continues to appear, albeit infrequently. The Icelander Arnórr Þórðason jarlaskáld (*c.* 1011 – *c.* 1074), for example, who was one of the most prominent conversion-age skalds, only uses the word once, and in a way which sheds no light on the myth, even as it suggests that Arnórr may have intended to pun on the pre-Christian significance of the word.

Arnórr Þórðason jarlaskáld, *Magnússdrápa* 10

Óð með øxi breiða
ódæsin framm ræsir
– varð umb hilmi Hǫrða
hjǫrdynr – ok varp brynju,
þá's umb skapt – en skipti
skapvǫrðr himins jǫrðu;
Hel klauf hausa fǫlva –
hendr tvær jǫfurr spendi.[76]

The phrase *Hel klauf hausa fǫlva* (line 7, 'Hel clove pallid skulls') once again depicts violent death. Here, however, Hel is the name of Magnús Ólafsson's axe.[77] Whaley argues that the naming of Magnús's axe in this context 'does have a punning mythological reference to the realm of the dead and the goddess of that realm, and this is pointed up by the juxtaposition of the word with 'heaven' and 'earth' (*himins*, *jǫrðu*)',[78] but the pun works equally well if it refers to the Christian hell; in fact, the juxtaposition with 'heaven' and earth is more likely to be a reflex of the clearly distinguished tripartite division between the worlds (the sky, the earth, the underworld) in Christian mythology. The word *himinn* only acquires the meaning of 'heaven' as opposed to 'the heavens, i.e. the sky' in post-Conversion texts. Whether or not we choose to see a mythological

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[75] Fidjestøl, 'Pagan Beliefs and Christian Impact', p. 105.

[76] *Poetry of Arnórr jarlaskáld*, ed. Whaley, p. 121 (*Skjald* B I, 313): 'The strenuous ruler stormed forth with broad axe, and cast off his byrnie. A sword-clash arose around the Hordalanders' lord, as the hero clenched both hands round the shaft; and heaven's shaping guardian allotted earth. Hel clove pallid skulls.'

[77] Snorri reports that Magnús owned an axe named 'Hel' in ch. 28 of *Magnúss saga góða* (*Heimskringla* III, 43).

[78] Whaley, ed., *Poetry of Arnórr jarlaskáld*, p. 74. Whaley notes (n. 8) that Arnórr uses kennings for 'heaven/sky' to refer to (the Christian) God; there is no reason why this usage should be placed within a pre-Christian mythological frame of reference.

reference in this stanza, it is in general clear that (as Whaley so justly puts it) the pagan-derived diction in Arnórr's work belongs to the form of the poetry, not its content. Like the allusions to legend, it lends grandeur and variety, and reminds the skald's audience of his and their illustrious predecessors, but its use cannot be regarded as religious in intention or in effect.[79] From this point in the history of skaldic composition onwards, the purpose of mythological referents must be viewed in this same light; as it happens, references to the goddess Hel must not have been deemed to 'lend grandeur or variety' to the poetry, as she appears to merit no further mention in skaldic verse.

That is not to say, of course, that skalds were no longer interested in their fate after death. But with the great shift of religion (both official and personal) from paganism to Christianity, Norwegian poets started to conceive of the afterlife in different terms. The change in belief-systems is signalled quite clearly and simply by the switch from *hel* to *helvíti* in stanzas composed by Conversion-era skalds. We see this change first in Hallfreðr Óttarsson vandræðaskáld's 'last words'. In *Óláfs saga Trygvassonar en mesta*, the dying Hallfreðr summons up with his last breath the energy to compose one final *lausavísa*, in which he confesses to fear the prospect of damnation:

Hallfreðr Óttarsson vandræðaskáld, *lausavísa* 28

Ek munda nú andask,
ungr vask harðr í tungu,
senn, ef sǫ́lu minni,
sorglaust, vissak borgit;
veitk, at vetki of sýtik,
valdi goð hvar aldri,
(dauðr verðr hverr) nema hræðumk
helvíti, skal slíta.[80]

The Viking's renowned capacity to laugh in the face of death seems to have left poor Hallfreðr; whereas Egill was able to await the Hel of the old religion *góðum vilja ok óhryggr*, this poet, whose

[79] *Ibid.*, p. 75.

[80] *Skjald* B I, 163: 'I would die now straightaway and without sorrow – I was harsh of tongue in my youth – if I knew that my soul was saved; I know that I grieve over nothing except that I fear the punishment of hell; Let God choose the moment when there shall be an end to life; everybody must die.'

earlier work provides one of the most remarkable personal insights into the Scandinavian experience of conversion, has to confront at the end of his life the entirely novel idea that his sins may lead to his enduring *helvíti*. It is revealing that the misdeeds which spring to Hallfreðr's mind when he thinks back over his life are the times when he was *harðr í tungu* in his youth: indeed, many a pagan skald was guilty of the same sin (it often went with the territory), and it is a mark of how much being a poet defined Hallfreðr's conception of himself that he dwells on it at this moment.

It is possible that Hallfreðr's swansong is a forgery; its absence from manuscripts of *Hallfreðar saga* looks suspicious, although the presence of the expletive particle *of* in line 5 means that this verse meets Kari Ellen Gade's new criteria for authenticating tenth- and eleventh-century *dróttkvætt* stanzas.[81] Russell Poole proposes the neat solution that the authors of both the *Mǫðruvallabók* text of *Hallfreðar saga* and *Óláfs saga Trygvassonar en mesta* knew the full set of Hallfreðr's *lausavísur*, and 'selected differentially from a set of verses which all related to the skald's sickness, intimations of death, and memories of his beloved'.[82] Bjarni Einarsson suggested that the choice in either saga of the verse with which to mark Hallfreðr's death reflects an attitudinal dichotomy between the author of *Óláfs saga* – who wanted, according to Bjarni, to emphasise the poet's Christian faith at the moment of his exit from the narrative – and the author of *Hallfreðar saga*, who is happy for his hero to dwell on thoughts of his former lover.[83] Poole dismissed this argument as 'unsustainable', but this judgement, in my view, is harsh, since the idea of selectivity in the composition of both prosimetra is approved by Poole. The extent to which his final piece of poetry reveals Hallfreðr's worldview to have been so profoundly determined by his acceptance of the Christian faith might well have chimed better with the author of a text like *Óláfs saga*, which is more obviously concerned with religious matters.

Let us assume that this stanza is genuine, and that it was composed, therefore, soon after 1000. Hallfreðr we believe to have been converted to Christianity around 996, based upon the

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[81] Gade, 'Dating and Attribution', p. 73. In the ÍF edition of *Hallfreðar saga*, Einar Ól. Sveinsson prints the final *lausavísa* as part of the text, assuming that the omission was unintentional, and that this stanza was indeed part of a pre-existing group that circulated together (*Vatnsdœla saga*, p. 199, where the final stanza is numbered 34; manuscripts of the saga preserve only 33 verses).

[82] Poole, 'Relation between Verses and Prose', p. 160.

[83] Bjarni Einarsson, ed., *Hallfreðar saga*, p. cxlii; see also Paasche, *Møtet mellom hedendom og kristendom i Norden*, p. 99. The stanzas in which Hallfreðr looks back upon his love life are *lausavísur* 26 and 27.

internal chronology of *Hallfreðar saga*.[84] Up until that point in his life, whilst in the service of a pagan patron (Earl Hákon being the most likely recipient of his pre-conversion verses), Hallfreðr had been a steadfast adherent of the old beliefs, responsible for 'among the most pagan verses we have'.[85] After King Óláfr sponsored him in baptism, however, the tension between the traditional pagan forms of his poetry and the new modes of belief and behaviour expected of him by a Christian ruler soon reveals itself in verse. *Hallfreðar saga* has an exchange between poet and king in which Hallfreðr identifies the importance of poetry to him, and suggests that Christian doctrine cannot offer him the same aesthetic attraction:

> Nú var Hallfreðr með konungi um hríð ok orti um hann flokk ok bað sér hljóðs. Konungr kvazk eigi hlýða vilja. Hallfreðr segir: „Þú munt því ráða, en týna mun ek þá þeim frœðum, er þú lézt mér kenna, ef þú vill eigi hlýða kvæðinu, ok eru þau frœði ekki skáldligri, er þú lézt mik nema, en kvæðit er, þat er ek hefi um þik ort." Óláfr konungr mælti: „Sannliga máttu heita vandræðaskáld, ok skal heyra kvæðit." Hallfreðr flutti skǫruliga kvæðit, ok er lokit var, mælti konungr: „Þetta er gott kvæði."[86]

This conversation is fictional, of course, but it gives an insightful impression of Hallfreðr's mindset, one which is displayed also in the six famous 'conversion verses' found in the same

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[84] Whaley, 'Myth and Religion', p. 556.

[85] *Ibid.*, p. 567. The verses to which Whaley refers are the nine *helmingar* attributed to Hallfreðr in *Skáldskaparmál*, which contain the idea that a jarl enters a sacred marriage to Jǫrð (*Skjald* B I, 147-8). These stanzas may well have formed part of *Hákonardrápa*, a praise poem which ch. 5 of *Hallfreðar saga* states that Hallfreðr composed on his first arrival at the Norwegian court (*c.* 990), although the saga does not record any of it (see *Vatnsdœla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 151). As Faulkes points out (*SnE* II, 158), the extant verses do not specifically refer to Hákon, and could have been made applicable to any jarl.

[86] *Hallfreðar saga*, in *Vatnsdœla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 155: 'Now Hallfreðr was with the king for a time, and he composed a *flokkr* about him and asked for a hearing. The king said that he didn't want to hear it. Hallfreðr says: "You must decide that, but then I will lose the [Christian] doctrines which you had me know, if you won't listen to the poem; those doctrines which you had me learn are no more 'poetic' than the poem that I've composed about you.' King Óláfr said: 'Truly might you be called 'troublesome poet'; but I shall hear the poem.' Hallfreðr performed the poem splendidly: it was a *drápa*. When it was finished, the king said, "that was a good poem".' The glossing of *frœði* as 'doctrine', using its specifically Christian sense, rather than more general 'lore', follows Whaley's translation of *Hallfreðar saga* in *Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, *et al.* I, 234.

chapter of *Hallfreðar saga*.[87] Like Hallfreðr's final *lausavísa*, the authenticity of these stanzas is open to question, although I accept, along with Russell Poole, that Gade's dating of them to the late tenth century is probably correct.[88] Attribution is less easily proven on the basis of metrical criteria, but if we accept this dating, I see no reason not to continue to regard Hallfreðr as their author.

In Hallfreðr's *lausavísur* 6-10, the poet speaks for himself of the problems attendant upon his abandonment of the pagan gods for Christ; the saga-author puts the same sentiments in Hallfreðr's mouth in the later prose account, skilfully picking up the meaning of the verse and elaborating upon it. Hallfreðr's reluctance to turn to Christ is couched in the traditional language of pagan poetry: Óðinn, Freyr, Freyja, Þórr and Njǫrðr are all named. Emphasis is placed upon tradition, and upon traditional poetic composition in particular: Hallfreðr's consciousness of his own place in the skaldic tradition. He is acutely aware that by turning to Christ he turns his back not only on the old gods as objects of worship, but also on the mythical, sacral dimension of the skald's craft.

Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld, *lausavísa* 7

Qll hefr ætt til hylli
Óðins skipat ljóðum;
algildar mank aldar
iðjur várra niðja;
en trauðr, þvíat vel Viðris
vald hugnaðisk skaldi,
legg ek á frumver Friggjar

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[87] Space does not permit a thorough examination of all aspects of Hallfreðr's corpus here; for an overview of the other issues raised his conversion verses, see the recent articles by Poole, 'Conversion Verses', and Whaley, 'Myth and Religion'.

[88] Gade, 'Dating and Attribution', pp. 73-4; Poole, 'Conversion Verses', p. 16. Previously, scholars have tended towards scepticism on the question of the authenticity of these stanzas: see Dronke, 'The Poet's Persona', p. 26; Bjarni Einarsson famously declared *Hallfreðar saga*'s conversion verses 'too good to be true' ('Last Hour of Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld', p. 218). Mundal, 'Kristninga av Noreg og Island', p. 145, discusses the problems of the authenticity of conversion-era skaldic stanzas more generally.

fjón, þvít Kristi þjónum.[89]

As a pagan, Hallfreðr felt connected to his ancestors, part of a community (perhaps more artistic than necessarily religious) of fellow poets; he remembers his predecessor's works, but he has to reject them, it seems, along with his rejection of Óðinn. He does not apparently much lament the loss of a spiritual relationship with any of the Æsir; the Christian God will provide him with spiritual succour, as stanza 9 makes clear:

Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld, *lausavísa* 9

Mér skyli Freyr ok Freyja –
fjǫrð létk af dul Njarðar;
líknisk grǫm við Grímni –
gramr ok Þórr enn rammi.
Krist vilk allrar ástar –
erum leið sonar reiði;
vald á frægt und foldar
feðr einn – ok goð kveðja.[90]

Both the prose of *Hallfreðar saga* and the embedded verses give the strong impression that a major cause of Hallfreðr's reluctance to convert is dissatisfaction with the poet's lot within a

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[89] Ed. and trans. Poole, 'Conversion Verses', pp. 16-17 (*Skjald* B I, 158): 'All the family have composed songs for Óðinn's favour; I remember the enduring works of the generation of our ancestors. But reluctantly, since the rule of Viðrir suited the skald well, I bestow hatred upon the first husband of Frigg, because we serve Christ.' I follow Poole's edition for the sake of convenience; a new edition is in preparation by Whaley, a preliminary version of which is found in her 'Myth and Religion', p. 557.

[90] Ed. and trans. Poole, 'Conversion Verses', p. 17: 'Let Freyr, along with Freyja and Þórr the mighty, be angry with me. Last year I forsook the delusion of Njǫrðr; may the fiends have mercy on Grímnir. I will beseech Christ and God for all love: the son's anger is hateful to me; he alone in glory possesses power under the father of earth.' There are problems with the text of this stanza, with *af dul* in line 2 occurring only in AM 61 fol. All other manuscripts have *adul* (see *Skjald* A I, 168); on the possible interpretations of *adul* in this context, see Whaley, 'Myth and Religion', p. 561: Whaley prefers to read *ǫðul* 'offspring'. Poole's preference for *af dul* is supportable: the 'delusion of Njǫrðr' would seem highly appropriate in the context of this stanza, but it must be borne in mind that this reading is effectively an editorial emendation, since there is no reason to privilege AM 61 fol. above other manuscripts of *Hallfreðar saga*.

Christian society. The *fræði* of Christianity is no more *skáldligr* 'poetly' than the old ways, so the saga-author has Hallfreðr say. The poet in his own voice states his reluctance as stemming from the benefits that accrued to the *poet* from his relationship with Óðinn: 'þvíat vel Viðris vald hugnaðisk skaldi' ('because Viðrir's rule suited the skald well').[91] It is as a poet that Hallfreðr chooses to convert – he could not hope to gain or retain King Óláfr's patronage had he not – and it is primarily as a poet that he experiences the tensions between the two worlds he straddles:[92] when King Óláfr accuses Hallfreðr of backsliding during his time among the pagan Swedes, it is by means of a poem – the now lost *Uppreistardrápa* (either 'atonement poem' or 'creation poem': the meaning of the title is debatable, although in the context of *Hallfreðar saga*, 'atonement' seems more appropriate) – that Hallfreðr makes amends.[93]

The conversion verses feature a good deal of pagan diction; Hallfreðr's last *lausavísa* alludes only to Christian *fræði*, with its emphasis on the pains of *helvíti* that await him. Hel, whether goddess or chthonic realm of the dead, does not appear in Hallfreðr's corpus of pre-conversion verse. We do not know what idea of the afterlife the pagan Hallfreðr may have had, but it is clear that he has become thoroughly indoctrinated with the Christian conception, with its emphasis on sin, judgement, reward and punishment: especially punishment. Diana Whaley writes that the Christian content of Hallfreðr's conversion verses 'is altogether more transparent [than their references to pagan beliefs and practices], and there is no Christian doctrine of the kind that might be implausible in a composition by a recent convert: no sin or redemption,

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[91] Although I see the poet's creative act as being central to Hallfreðr's conception of traditional paganism, perhaps Ohlmarks goes too far in attempting to interpret line 4 of *lausavísa* 6 – *vel blóta* 'to sacrifice well' – as a reference to poetry (*Tors skalder och Vite-Krist*, pp. 490-1). One of the themes running through the conversion verses is a polemic against *blót* ('sacrifice'), which was clearly an obvious and early target for missionary teaching (see Poole, 'Conversion Verses', pp. 23-7). But Hallfreðr's distaste for *blót* does not necessarily rule out his having performed sacrificial rites in the past. We may compare Egill's statement in *Sonatorrek* 23 that 'Blœtka því / bróðr Vilis, / goðjaðar, /at gjarn séak ('I do not sacrifice willingly to the brother of Vilir, the guardian of gods, because I am eager to do so'). It has not been suggested that Egill's *blót* is a metaphor for versification; rather, it seems more likely that the gift of poetry is received from Óðinn as a tangible reward for his follower's sacrificial offerings. See below, pp. 118-20.

[92] Frank, *Old Norse Court Poetry*, p. 92.

[93] *Hallfreðar saga*, in *Vatnsdœla saga*, ed Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 178. Krijn, 'Halfred Vandrædaskald', p. 126, believed that *lausavísur* 6-10, the 'conversion verses', may originally have formed part of the *Uppreistardrápa*. On the meaning of this title, see Poole, 'Conversion Verses', p. 18. Alternatives, not widely adopted, have been offered to the two main suggested interpretations of *uppreist* by Lindow, 'Akkerisfrakki', p. 417 ('resistance'), and by Holtsmark, 'Uppreistarsaga', pp. 95-6 ('rebellion by Lucifer').

Crucifixion or Judgement'.[94] But after a few years of living as a Christian, Hallfreðr's knowledge of these elements of doctrine had developed to the extent that his final thoughts rested not on Christ's love, but on the prospect of damnation, which he connected to actions performed in the part of his life when he was still an unsaved pagan skald.

In the wake of his conversion, the religious thought displayed in Hallfreðr's poems seems to develop in a conventional way, mirroring the sort of progress a recent convert might make in his or her education, away from pagan ignorance and towards a proper knowledge of Christian doctrine. The question of damnation and salvation might well be left until late on in the process of personal Christianization, since anecdotal evidence drawn from accounts of missionary activity in Northern Europe suggests that the proposition that the convert's pagan ancestors were enduring eternal hellfire often met with hostility. Most famous, perhaps, is the reaction of the Frisian king Radbod, who had got as far as the baptismal font before the missionary St Wulframn told him – rather tactlessly, in the circumstances – that 'Nam praedecessores tui principes gentis Fresionum, qui sine baptismi sacramento recesserunt, certum est dampnationis suscepisse sententiam'.[95] Radbod withdrew his foot from the font, saying that he didn't want to be deprived of his ancestors' company in the afterlife, and Frisia remained unconverted. As Carole Cusack writes, 'some beliefs could not be reconciled with the new religion'.[96]

Hallfreðr's conversion verses suggest that his religious instruction began in a conventional manner: the *skipt á gumna giptu* ('change in the fortunes of men') which he identifies in *lausavísa* 6 manifests itself in two main ways.[97] First, Christ has replaced the pagan pantheon as the object of worship, the figure in whom all power is vested, and the world's creator. But Hallfreðr continues to regard the old gods as having some sort of existence of their own, and he even asks that the 'fiends' – *grǫm* – should have mercy upon Óðinn in stanza 9.[98] The Æsir are not themselves referred to as devils; but their cult is represented as a delusion, and not only by

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[94] Whaley, 'Myth and Religion', p. 563.

[95] *Vita Vulframni*, ed. Levison, in *Passiones vitaeque sanctorum aevi Merovingici*, ed. Krusch and Levison V, 668: 'It is certain that your predecessors, princes of the Frisian nation who died without the sacrament of baptism, received the sentence of damnation.'

[96] Cusack, *Conversion among the Germanic Peoples*, p. 122.

[97] On the meaning of *gipta* in this context, see Ström, 'Kung Domalde', pp. 63-6. The authenticity of *Lausavísa* 6 has been called into question: Bjarni Einarsson, *Skáldasögur*, p. 192, suggests that this stanza may have been influenced by Einarr Skúlason's poem *Geisli*, which was probably composed *c.* 1153.

[98] Or possibly 'ask mercy of': *líknisk* could bear either meaning.

the disputed reading *af dul Njarðar* in stanza 9. The eighth verse similarly links *heiðinn dómr* and its rites to deception:

Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld, *lausavísa* 8

Hǫfnum, hǫlða reifir,
hrafnblóts goða nafni,
þess es ól við lof lýða
lóm, ór heiðnum dómi.[99]

Heiðinn dómr is among the first recorded uses of this phrase in Old Norse, and seems to acknowledge the pagan religion as a discrete belief system in opposition to *kristindómr*, a loan from Old English which is also unrecorded before the early eleventh century.[100] The word *heiðinn* was current in Norway slightly earlier than Hallfreðr's time, however, at least among Hákon jarl Sigurðsson's poets: it was used by the 'impeccably heathen' author of *Hákonarmál*, Eyvindr Finnsson,[101] while another of the poets of Hákon jarl, Tindr Hallkelsson, made use of the phrase *mǫrk heiðins dóms* ('land of *heiðinn dómr*') in a *drápa* on Hákon composed around 987.[102] Hallfreðr, too, used the word *heiðinn* long before he has embarked on his path of personal Christianization, and while he was still part of the circle of Hákon's poets, in the first *lausavísa* attributed to him in *Hallfreðar saga*:

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[99] Ed. and trans. Poole, 'Conversion Verses', p. 17: 'Gratifier of men, we renounce the name of the priest of raven sacrifice from heathendom, who fomented deceit in exchange for people's praise.' The text of this verse is once again problematic, particularly in the first line of the stanza, which reads variously *hǫfnum*, *hæfum*, *haufum*, *hǫfum*, *hæfir* and *hafum* in different manuscripts: see *Hallfreðar saga*, ed. Bjarni Einarsson, p. 48. Compare Whaley's text and translation, 'Myth and Religion', p. 557. Whaley preserves the traditional interpretation of *hrafnblóts goða nafni* as 'name of the raven-sacrifice priest', and regards it as an Óðinn-kenning. Poole has now rejected this reading, preferring to read *nafn* here as 'namesake', leaving a reconstructed translation of 'Gratifier of men, the namesake of the priest of raven sacrifice, who fomented deceit in exchange for people's praise, raised me from heathendom' ('Conversion Verses', p. 26). The 'namesake of the raven-sacrifice priest' is King Óláfr.

[100] On *heiðinn dómr*, see Steinsland, 'Change of Religion', p. 133; Whaley, 'Myth and Religion', p. 560. The first occurrence of *kristindómr* on an early-eleventh-century runestone at Kuli in Norway is noted by Abrams, 'History and Archaeology', p. 111.

[101] Whaley, 'Myth and Religion', p. 560. On *Hákonarmál*, see below, pp. 74-90.

[102] *Skjald* B I, 137, stanza 7, lines 8-9.

Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld, *lausavísa* 1

Svá nøkkvi verðr søkkvis
sannargs troga margra
ægilig fyr augum
allheiðins mér reiði,
sem ólítill úti
alls mest við fǫr gesta
(stœrik brag) fyr búri
búrhundr gamall stúri.[103]

This poem is addressed to a character whom the saga names as Blót-Már, 'Már the sacrificer', who is the referent of *allheiðins* in line 4.[104] Presumably this nickname indicates that Már was known to be a regular participant in cultic rites, and Hallfreðr's use of it suggests that the 'heathen' was a term which had valence for pagans: it is unlikely that he meant it in this instance to be derogatory (as it would have been in the mouth of a Christian), since *heiðinn* appears not to carry negative force but to be a source of self-identification within the self-consciously pagan artistic milieu where Hallfreðr began his career.[105] Hallfreðr, if this verse is genuine, was certainly not a Christian when he composed it; without Christianity's encroachment into Norway in this period (under the aegis of some of Hákon's enemies), however, *heiðinn dómr* would have been meaningless.

The second major change that Hallfreðr's verses reveal is that pagan practices have been outlawed by King Óláfr, as the first half of *lausavísa* 10 tells us:

Sá's með Sygna ræsi
siðr, at blót eru kviðjuð;
verðum flest at forðask

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[103] *Skjald* B I, 157, trans. Whaley in *Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson I, 230: 'The anger of the busy bucket-sinker, a true pansy, all-heathen, is about as terrible to my eyes as if, fair-sized, outside, worst of all when guests arrive (I swell the poetry) at the pantry door an aged pantry-dog fretted.'

[104] *Vatnsdœla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 146.

[105] See Ström, 'Poetry as an Instrument of Propaganda', esp. p. 457.

fornhaldin skǫp norna;[106]

Although we know little about the substance of missionary teaching in Norway at this period, Carolingian authors wrote several texts which contain advice to missionaries in the field on how to win the hearts and minds of their pagan audiences. These reveal that the changes in attitude which underlie Hallfreðr's conversion verses are in line with established theories of pre-baptismal instruction for pagans. In one of the most famous statements of medieval 'conversion-theory', Daniel, bishop of Winchester, wrote to Boniface, the most illustrious of the Anglo-Saxon missionaries on the continent in the eighth century, to advise him that he would gain success with the pagans by comparing their superstitions to the teachings of Christianity:

> nostris, id est christianis, huiuscemodi comparandae sunt dogmatibus superstitiones et quasi e latere tangendae, quatenus magis confuse quam exasperate pagani erubescant pro tam absurdis opinionibus et ne nos latere ipsorum nefarios ritus ac fabulas estimant.[107]

Richard Sullivan summed up Daniel's attitude thus:

> The crucial step for a missionary was to undermine the confidence of the pagans in their gods. Daniel counseled the avoidance of a positive statement of Christian teaching, except as a means of comparison with the absurdities of pagan belief; to present a case for Christianity would only antagonize the pagan mentality.[108]

Other writers differed from Daniel's methods. Alcuin, for one, thought that soteriological doctrines should be at the heart of the missionary's discourse with the pagan from the very start:

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[106] Ed. and trans. Poole, 'Conversion Verses', pp. 17-18: 'This is the custom with the impeller of the people of Sogn that sacrifices are forbidden. We shall escape [/renounce?] most time-honoured destinies of the Norns.'

[107] *Die Briefe des heligen Bonifatius*, ed. Tangl, p. 40: 'Their superstitions should be compared in this way to our, that is to Christian, teachings and touched upon as if indirectly, so that the pagans, thrown into confusion rather than angered, may be ashamed of their absurd ideas and may understand that their infamous ceremonies and fables are well known to us'.

[108] Sullivan, 'Carolingian Missionary Theories', p. 276; see also Skre, 'Missionary Activity', p. 5.

> Primo instruendus est homo de animae immortalitate et de vita futura et de retributione bonorum malorumque et de aeternitate utriusque sortis. Postea: pro quibus peccatis et sceleribus cum diabolo patiatur aeternas, et pro quibus bonis vel benefactis gloria cum Christo fruatur sempiterna.[109]

I would argue that Hallfreðr had received pre-baptismal instruction in the manner suggested by Daniel. His 'conversion verses' show that he makes no typological distinction at this point in his spiritual development between pagan gods and their Christian replacements, but he knows Christ to be better than his old deities, more powerful and more loving, and he has been told, it seems to me, that his former beliefs were a deception. The worldly representative of the new order, King Óláfr, has banned pagan rites, a step which missionaries, deeply concerned with the prospect of continued idolatry among the notionally Christian population, would wish to promote as soon as possible.[110] None of his information makes Hallfreðr out to be particularly sophisticated in his awareness of theological issues,[111] but over the course of these *lausavísur* he does demonstrate that he has undergone a basic Christian education appropriate to a very recently converted Norwegian pagan, just as *Hallfreðar saga* describes it: 'Eptir þetta heldir konungr Hallfreði til skírnar ok fær hann síðan í hendr Þórkatli nefju, bróður sínum, ok Jósteini og lét þá kenna honum heilǫg frœði.'[112]

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[109] Letter of Alcuin to Charlemagne (796), in *Epistolae Karolini Aevi*, ed. Dümmler I, 158-9: 'First a man ought to be instructed concerning the immortality of the soul and concerning future life and concerning the retribution of good and evil men and the eternal reward for each kind. After that each ought to be taught for what sins and crimes he will suffer eternal punishment with the devil and for what good deeds and works he will enjoy eternal glory with Christ.'

[110] See Sullivan, 'Carolingian Missionary Theories', pp. 289-91. In the Norwegian older Gulaþing laws, traditionally ascribed to Óláfr Haraldsson's reign (1015-28), although preserved in no manuscript earlier than the second half of the thirteenth century, there is a specific injunction against sacrificing to heathen gods, with exile from the country the prescribed punishment for those who persisted in such practices (*Norges Gamle Love*, ed. Keyser, *et al.* I, 18).

[111] Opinion has diverged about the extent of Hallfreðr's Christian learning. In 1908, Hjelmqvist, troubled by the reference in *lausavísa* 9 to Christ holding power under the father (*vald á frægt und foldar feðr*) suspected Arianism in these verses ('Var Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld arian?'). This interpretation has not attracted much support, and was criticised by Lange, *Studien zur christlichen Dichtung*, p. 36, n. 1. I agree with Whaley, 'Myth and Religion', p. 563, when she denies that 'the motifs of an angry God and of Christ holding power under God require a specific source, or are so sophisticated as to be unlikely in a missionary environment'.

[112] *Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 154: 'After that the king sponsors Hallfreðr in baptism and afterwards he puts him in the hands of Þórkell beak, his brother, and Jóstein, and had them teach him holy doctrine.'

In the four or so years that Hallfreðr lived following his conversion, he would have continued to receive instruction, and quite soon the subject of teaching would have turned to matters of eschatology and soteriology: perhaps he would have heard hellfire-preaching of the type found in the Norwegian Homily Book, which was written about two centuries after Hallfreðr's death, but which undoubtedly contains older texts:[113]

> En himin-riki er sva got at engi maðr kan þat hyggia eða oðrum sægia. þar er lif æi-lift ok æi ok æi lios. þar er gaman ok gleði ok hversconar pryði. ok dyrð ok fagnaðr enda-laus. þar værðr maðr æigi siucr. ok engi of-gamal. þar er hvarke hungr ne þorste. þar er æigi sut ne sorg. þar ann hvær maðr oðrum iamt sem siolfum sér. Þar sculu aller goðer menn guð sia æi ok æi ok með honum lifa ok hans ænglum fyrir utan enda. Sæler ero þæir menn er við slict scula vera. en hinir ero vesler er til hælvitis sculu rapa. þar sculu þæir vera með dioflum. þar er ei ok ei myrcr ok mæin ok sut ok sorg. hungr ok þorste. firna frost ok ofhiti ok hinar mæsto piningar. ok allar endi lausar.[114]

Perhaps exposure to this type of sermon was responsible for Hallfreðr's final thoughts being of *helvíti*, and not of the love of his life.

Hallfreðr's verse changes over time, concomitant with the development of his worldview. In his later *lausavísur*, mythological content is limited to the occasional use of a god-name in a kenning for 'man', or the conventional phrase 'Óðinn's weather' or 'blizzard' for 'battle'.[115] Beyond these most commonplace and innocuous pieces of traditional phraseology, Hallfreðr's later verses contain no kennings which require wider knowledge of pre-Christian myth to interpret. The contestation between the traditional pagan *frœði* and the incoming

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[113] The Norwegian Homily Book, AM 619 4to, was written about 1200, but contains texts which may date back to as early as 1100: see McDougall, 'Homilies', p. 290.

[114] *Gamal Norsk Homiliebok*, ed. Indrebø, pp. 88-9: 'But the kingdom of heaven is so good that no man may think or else speak of it. There is eternal life everlasting, and eternal light. There is joy and gladness and adornment of every kind, and endless glory and rejoicing. A man never becomes sick there, and never too old. There is neither hunger nor thirst; there is no grief or sorrow. Each man there takes care of the others just as he does himself. There all good men see God forever and ever and live with him and his angels forever without end. Happier are those men who shall be with suchlike. But they are more wretched who shall go to hell. They shall be there with devils. There is forever and ever darkness and pain and grief and sorrow, an awful frost and excessive heat and the greatest sufferings, and all without end.' I discuss this homily in my forthcoming 'Anglo-Saxon Influence'.

[115] As in *lausavísa* 14 (Skjald B I, 160, line 7: *bál rauðk Yggjar éla*).

Christian *fræði* which Poole identifies as being at the conceptual heart of the *Hallfreðar saga* prosimetrum (especially in the *Mǫðruvallabók* version of the saga),[116] is in the end no contest. The last chapter of the saga has Hallfreðr rejecting his *fylgjukona*, his 'fetch', dressed in the valkyries' usual mail coat (surely the symbol, in the mind of the saga-author, of his hero's final rejection of paganism), while *Óláfs saga Trygvassonar en mesta* has him think upon the fate of his soul in Christian terms.

Hallfreðr's attributed *lausavísur* and their prose contexts are frustrating sources: they are textually problematic, and conserved within a narrative of religious conversion composed centuries after the fact, a story, as Ruth Mazo Karras describes all conversion-sagas, 'of the replacement of paganism by Christianity, written by men who were Christians all their lives and who never knew paganism at first hand'.[117] I think it highly likely, however, that there was a poet called Hallfreðr Óttarsson who composed some verses dealing with his experiences as a religious convert, and that the success of their integration into *Hallfreðar saga* is a tribute to that text's author's skill as a compiler of prosimetrum and an author of prose, and not as a forger of eleventh-century skaldic poetry. And as such, Hallfreðr's verse is of crucial importance to the study of medieval Scandinavian conceptions of the afterlife. Belief in Hel as a mythological manifestation of death did not persist: its replacement by *helvíti* accompanies the transference of loyalty from Óðinn to Christ as among the earliest shifts in belief discernible in skaldic poetry.[118] A quarter of a century or so after Hallfreðr's death, Sighvatr Þórðason – of whose work before his acceptance of Christianity nothing survives, and who almost totally eschewed mythological allusions in his verse, making him perhaps the first skald to have worked only in a Christian milieu – also used *helvíti*, proving its currency in Norway in the first part of the eleventh century:[119]

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[116] Poole, 'Relation between Verses and Prose', p. 160.

[117] Karras, 'God and Man', p. 100; see also Pizarro, 'Conversion Narratives'.

[118] Fidjestøl, 'Pagan Beliefs and Christian Impact', pp. 105 and 115.

[119] In stanza 1, lines 4-8, of Sighvatr's *Erfidrápa Óláfs helga* (*Skjald* B I, 239), which dates from about 1040, Hel appears as a simplex in the phrase *Svía tyggja leitk seggi sóknstríðs ríða til Heljar Sigars hesti* ('I saw the battle-afflicted man of the Swedes' leader ride Sigarr's horse [the gallows] to Hel.') There is no reason, I think, to assume that Sighvatr meant to refer to anything but the Christian idea of hell in this verse: the traditional poetic use of 'to go to Hel' as a way of saying 'to die' was still possible in the eleventh century, but the word would have gained different connotations for the Christian poet.

Sighvatr Þórðarson, *lausavísa* 16

Fjandr ganga þar þengils,
þjóð býðr opt, með sjóða,
hǫfgan malm fyr hilmis
haus ófalan, lausa;
sitt veit hverr, ef harra
hollan selr við golli
(vert es slíks) í svǫrtu,
sinn, helvíti innan.[120]

A new mythology of the afterlife, much more potent and formalized than the old beliefs associated with Hel as either goddess or realm of the dead had been, had captured the imagination of Scandinavian poets. It was not until antiquarian interest in pre-Christian mythology began to manifest itself in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries that authors returned to retrace their ancestors' steps along the *Helvegr*.

CONCLUSION

In pre-Christian poetic sources, there appears to be a simple dichotomy between two variant but compatible conceptions, eddic and skaldic, arising from the same primary meaning of *hel*, its etymological roots in 'the grave', but developing different mythological associations. In the *Poetic Edda*, Hel is primarily thought of as a location within the schematisation of the mythological worlds. The most frequent use of the word is as a part of phrases synonymous with 'dying'; but in these phrases death is usually presented as a journey, a question of movement from the world of men into Hel, although the poems are largely silent about how the Hel-realm was conceived. It is impossible entirely to discount the possibility that the poems of the *Edda* sometimes allude to a goddess-figure, but by and large it seems unlikely that they do. The evidence of the earliest skaldic verse presents a rather different picture: the poets also use Hel as an element in their

[120] *Skjald* B I, 250: 'The enemies of the prince go there with loose purses; people often offer heavy gold for the king's unfallen head. Each one knows his path to be in black hell, if he gives his gracious lord up in exchange for gold: it is deserving of such.'

vocabulary of death, although she is frequently only referred to obliquely via mythological kennings that have to be solved by recourse to external referents. These kennings indicate that the skalds' conception of Hel was different to that of the authors of the eddic poems, in that they primarily refer to a female mythological figure, although they do not name her. With respect to her status within the world of the gods, these skaldic references support Snorri's description of her relationship to Loki and his other children, and are thus presumably the source for it. Thus we cannot agree with Simek that 'the first kennings using the goddess Hel are found at the end of the 10th and in the 11th centuries', nor that the goddess is 'probably a very late poetic personification of the underworld Hel'.[121] The works of Þjóðólfr and Egill and Bragi (if they are accepted as genuine, and their dating is accurate) are among the earliest Norse poems to survive, and among the most authentically 'pagan'. And, when their poems touch upon death, as they do quite frequently, this goddess figure sometimes appears as part of their figurative diction. She is a personification of death, but not necessarily of the realm of death, and the implication of these verses is that Hel herself may come to collect the souls of the departed; she is active, whereas the realm of the eddic poems is passive.

As the case of Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld shows, Hel was not one of the mythological referents which persisted as an element of traditional skaldic vocabulary during and beyond the Conversion. Christianity brought with it the concept of *helvíti*, the realm of eternal torment for sinners, which had a place at the very heart of Christian teachings, and a well-established iconography of its own. *Helvíti*, understandably enough, captured the imagination of Christianized Scandinavians, and the native myth-complex connected with death was displaced by it. Only with the burgeoning interest in the mytho-poetic heritage of Iceland towards the end of the twelfth century did Hel once again enter poetic currency after Snorri Sturluson reconstructed in his own meta-myth of Hel in *Gylfaginning*. Snorri used both eddic and skaldic verse as sources for his mythography, and it is probable that from the one he drew his idea that Hel was the underworld realm of the dead, while from the other he extracted information about Hel, Loki's daughter. As we might expect from such a skilled mythographer, Snorri weaves together the two strands into a harmonious and consistent meta-myth that reconciles them both.

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[121] Simek, *Dictionary*, p. 138; Lindow, 'Norse Mythology', p. 172, agrees that older poetry deals with a place rather than a person, and that this is assumed to be the older conception.

3

The Hel/Valhǫll Dichotomy I: Valhǫll as Óðinnic Warrior Paradise

Yes, 'tis decreed my Sword no more
Shall smoke and blush with hostile gore
To my great Father's Feasts I go,
Where luscious wines for ever flow.
Which from the hollow skulls we drain,
Of kings in furious combat slain.

Death, to the Brave a blest Resort,
Brings us to awful Odin's court.
Where with old Warriors mix'd we dwell,
Recount our wounds, our Triumphs tell;
Me, will they own as bold a guest,
As e'er in battle bar'd my Breast.[1]

SNORRI STURLUSON AND THE STRUCTURALISTS

In *Gylfaginning*, Snorri Sturluson is perfectly clear about who goes to Hel: 'hon skipti ǫllum vistum með þeim er til hennar váru sendir, en þat eru sóttdauðir menn ok ellidauðir' (*SnE* I, 27: 'she has to administer board and lodging to those sent to her, and that is those who die of sickness or old age'). He is equally specific about who is received by Óðinn in Valhǫll:

> Óðinn heitir Alfǫðr, þvíat hann er faðir allra goða. Hann heitir ok Valfǫðr, þvíat hans óskasynir eru allir þeir er í val falla. Þeim skipar hann Valhǫll ok Vingólf, ok heita þeir þá einherjar.[2]

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[1] Thomas Warton the Elder, 'Runic Ode' (1748), quoted by Wawn, *Vikings and the Victorians*, p. 22.

[2] *SnE* I, 21: 'Óðinn is called All-father, for he is father of all the gods. He is also called Father of the slain, since all those who fall in battle are his adopted sons. He assigns them places in Valhǫll and Vingolf, and they are then known as the *einherjar* [the 'lone warriors'].'

For critics influenced by structuralism, this bipartite division between the dead who go to Óðinn and the dead who sink down to Hel is a crucial one. One of the chief products of structurally-informed theories of Old Norse myth is the 'binary-spatial' model of pre-Christian cosmogony. This model works around two axes – the vertical and horizontal – that are mediated in the world tree Yggdrasill. Hel, unambiguously placed under the earth through its etymological links with the grave, is an integral part of the tripartite vertical axis that has the realm of the gods at the top, human beings occupying the middle earth, and Hel, the realm of the dead, at the bottom (see fig. 1).[3] Valhǫll is usually placed in the same sphere as the world of the gods. *Grímnismál* 8, lines 1-2, states that 'Glaðsheimr heitir inn fimti, þars en gullbiarta / Valhǫll víð of þrumir' ('The fifth is called Glaðsheimr, where gold-bright Valhǫll spreads broad'). Snorri identifies Glaðsheimr as the site of the Æsir's thrones (*SnE* I, 15). Óðinn is closely connected with both realms, being both chief of the gods and lord of the dead.

The horizontal axis of the binary-spatial model, as illustrated by Klaus von See, is a series of concentric circles, each occupied by one category of beings, starting with the gods at the centre in Ásgarðr, with men living 'underneath' Miðgarðr, and the giants living outside the *heimr*, what von See calls the 'bewohnte Welt' (see fig. 2).[4] The evidence for this schema of the horizontal spatial dimension is taken mainly from Snorri's description of the creation of the world:

> Hét karlmaðrinn Askr, en konan Embla, ok ólusk þaðan af mannkindin þeim er bygðin var gefin undir Miðgarði. Þar næst gerðu þeir sér borg í miðjum heimi er kallaðr er Ásgarðr. Þat kǫllum vér Trója. Þar bygðu guðin ok ættir þeira.[5]

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[3] The binary-spatial theory was formulated by Meletinskij, 'Scandinavian Mythology as a System'; significant developments of the theory were made by Molenaar, 'Concentric Dualism', and Hastrup, *Culture and History*, p. 149. The idea that Yggdrasill mediated structurally between the living and the dead was offered by Haugen, 'Mythical Structure of the Ancient Scandinavians', p. 182. Strutynski, 'History and Structure', criticised Haugen's methodology as precluding an empirical approach to the data; more general doubts as to the validity of the binary-spatial model have been expressed, particularly by Schjødt, 'Horizontale und vertikale Achsen'; see also Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes* I, 252-3.

[4] Von See, *Mythos und Theologie*, p. 42.

[5] *SnE* I, 13: 'The man was called Askr, the woman Embla, and from them was produced the mankind to whom the dwelling-place under Miðgarðr was given. After that they made themselves a city in the middle of the world which is known as Ásgarðr. We call it Troy. There the gods and their descendants lived.'

The worlds of men and gods are separated from that of the giants by a fortification, and the sea circumscribes the whole:

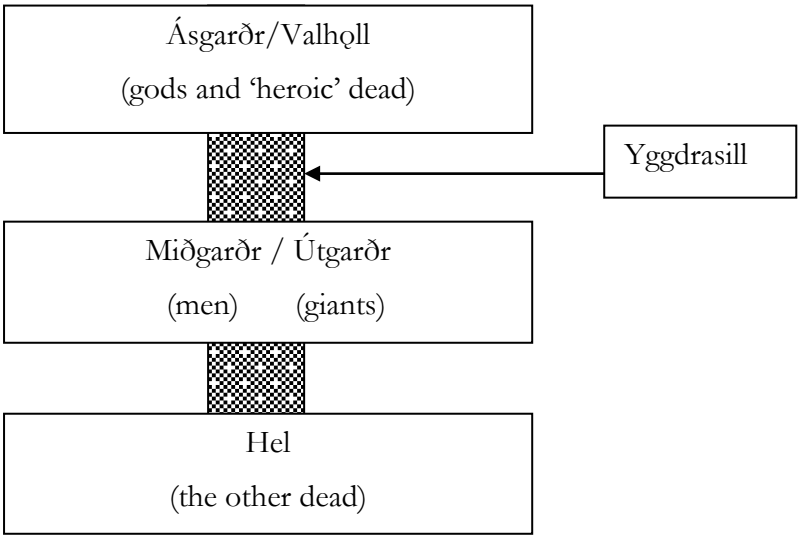

Figure 1. The vertical axis of the binary-spatial model of Norse cosmogony

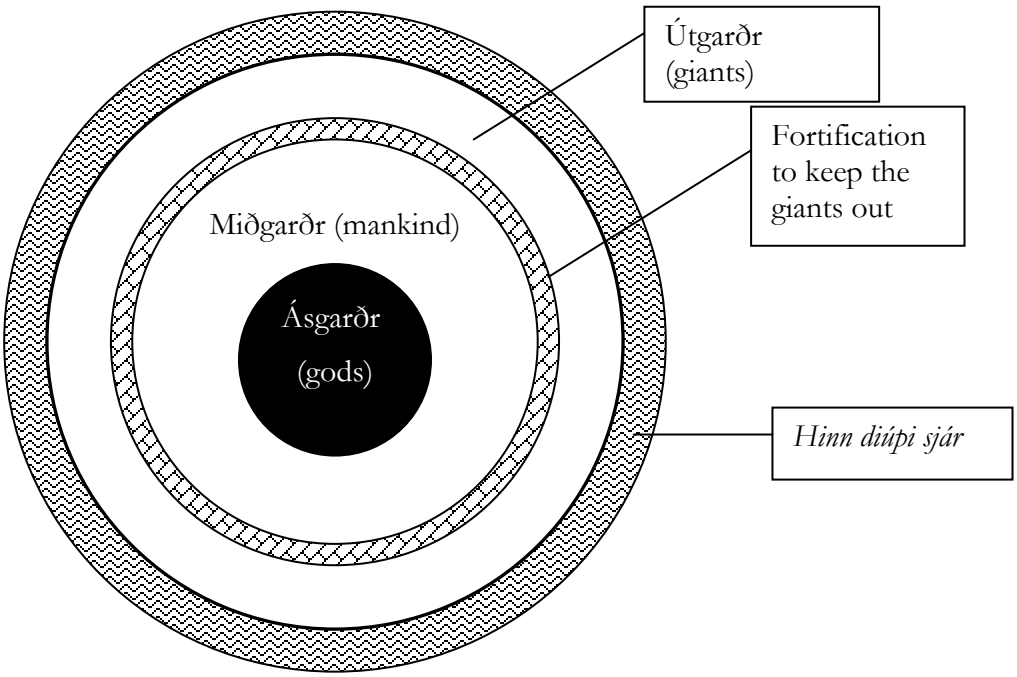

Figure 2. The horizontal axis of the binary-spatial model of Norse cosmogony

> Hon er kringlótt útan, ok þar útan um liggr hinn djúpi sjár, ok með þeiri sjávar strǫndu gáfu þeir lǫnd til bygðar jǫtna ættum. En fyrir innan á jǫrðunni gerðu þeir borg umhverfis heim fyrir ófriði jǫtna.[6]

According to the account of the creation given in chapter 8 of *Gylfaginning*, Hel does not have a spatial position in the horizontal dimension, yet it has also been argued that Hel has a place on the horizontal axis, as a facet of Útgarðr, the hostile 'outside' which is opposed by Miðgarðr, the inner world of men.[7] This theory might be supported by one reference in *Gylfaginning*, which places the road to Hel in both a downward and a northerly direction:

> 'Hann svarar at "ek skal ríða til Heljar at leita Baldrs. Eða hvárt hefir þú nakkvat sét Baldr á Helvegi?"
>
> 'En hon sagði at Baldr hafði þar riðit um Gjallar brú, "en niðr ok norðr liggr Helvegr."[8]

The neat equivalence between horizontal and vertical dimensions within the cosmogony may appeal to the structuralist's desire for 'general patterns and structural recurrences',[9] but there are considerable problems with such an approach. Any attempt to fit Hel into the horizontal axis founders due to lack of evidence: as Schjødt points out, the giants that are the conventional inhabitants of Útgarðr do not dwell in Hel, but are subject to death like mortal men, as can be seen when Þórr strikes the giant-builder so hard that he sends him down beneath Niflhel (*SnE* I, 35: 'ok sendi hann niðr undir Niflhel'). So, even for the giants, who are located on the 'outside' in the horizontal axis, death brings about a shift to the vertical, made explicit in the giant-builder's exit downwards. Schjødt's conjecture about the reasoning behind Snorri's placing Hel in the North – the direction of the coldest weather, differentiating it from the traditionally hot

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[6] *SnE* I, 12: 'It is circular around the edge, and around it lies the deep sea, and along the shore of this sea they gave lands to live in to the races of giants. But on the earth on the inner side they made a fortification round the world against the hostility of giants.'

[7] See Meletinskij, 'Scandinavian Mythology as a System of Oppositions', pp. 251-2.

[8] *SnE* I, 47: 'He replied: "I am to ride to Hel to seek Baldr. But have you seen anything of Baldr on the road to Hel?" And she said that Baldr had ridden there over Gjǫll bridge, "but downwards and northwards lies the road to Hel".' On this passage see below, pp. 178-86.

[9] Hastrup, *Culture and History*, p. 147.

Christian inferno – is dubious,[10] but his insistence that Hel was first and foremost 'below', and that it did not perform a function analogous to Útgarðr, seems a necessary one.[11] Hel may have no place on the horizontal axis of the binary-spatial schema, but it does seem to fulfil an important requirement in the vertical dimension. There is, on the other hand, very little evidence to suggest that Valhǫll (or Ásgarðr) merits its position on top of the worlds. There is a single eddic reference to a figure ascending into the sky on her journey into the otherworld in *Helgakviða hundingsbana II* 49, although the realm is not specifically named as Valhǫll:

> Mál er mér at ríða roðnar brautir,
> láta fǫlvan ió flugstíg troða;
> scal ec fyr vestan vindhiálms brúar,
> áðr Salgofnir sigrþióð veki.[12]

This stanza does appear to refer to Valhǫll in its last line, with *sigrþioð* 'victory-people' referring to the *einherjar*, and Salgofnir 'hall-cock' presumably identifiable with the cockerel Gullinkambi who is said to crow *at Heriafǫðrs* ('at Óðinn's place') in *Vǫluspá* 43, line 2. Helgi, who speaks this verse, is a fallen warrior and a member of the *einherjar*, which explains why he must hurry back to Valhǫll before the *sigrþióð* wakes. The strong implication here is that his route back to Valhǫll will take him through the sky, but nowhere else in the *Poetic Edda* is this idea mentioned. Skaldic poets hardly ever refer to Valhǫll, but in stanza 21 of Egill Skallagrímsson's *Sonatorrek*, the poet's son is said to have gone *upp í Goðheim* ('up into the world of the gods').[13] If *Goðheimr* was equivalent to Valhǫll in Egill's mind, then his verse would seem to support the view that the twin realms of the gods and the dead were believed to lie 'above'. The paucity of references to this idea in the poetry, however, leads me to think that the case for this facet of the vertical axis has been overstated, although perhaps Gurevich went too far in writing that 'there is no reason to suppose that the Scandinavians imagined their gods to be inhabitants of some heavenly spheres'.[14] The single phrase *upp í Goðheim* in Egill's *Sonatorrek* suggests otherwise, and gives

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[10] See below, pp. 179-80.

[11] Schjødt, 'Horizontale und vertikale Achsen', pp. 47-9.

[12] 'It is time for me to ride the reddened paths, to have the pale horse tread the flight-path; I must go west of windhelm's bridge, before Salgofnir wakes the victory-people.'

[13] This verse is discussed in detail in the next chapter: see below, pp. 113-14.

[14] Gurevich, 'Space and Time', p. 46. See also Grundy, 'Cult of Óðinn', pp. 110-13; Neckel, *Walhall*, p. 25.

room for doubt. *Gylfaginning*, too, places the gods in the heavens, although the description Snorri gives of the place he calls *Himinbjǫrg* is strongly suggestive of Christian influence:

> Þar er enn sá staðr er Himinbjǫrg heita. Sá stendr á himins enda við brúar sporð, þar er Bifrǫst kemr til himins. Þar er enn mikill staðr er Valaskjálf heitir. Þann stað á Óðinn. Þann gerðu guðin ok þǫkðu skíru silfri, ok þar er Hliðskjálfin í þessum sal, þat hásæti er svá heitir. Ok þá er Alfǫðr sitr í því sæti þá sér hann of allan heim. Á sunnanverðum himins enda er sá salr er allra er fegrstr ok bjartari en sólin, er Gimlé heitir. Hann skal standa þá er bæði himinn ok jǫrð hefir farizk, ok byggja þann stað góðir menn ok réttlátir of allar aldir.[15]

The correspondences found in this passage with the Christian heaven, particularly in the description of the shining, eternal hall Gimlé, populated by the good and righteous *of allar aldir*, are obvious. The names of the gods' dwellings derive from poetic sources (including *Himinbjǫrg*, which is the name of Heimdallr's home according to *Grímnismál* 13), but they are placed within a schema, unique to Snorri, which implicitly equates them with features derived from Christian lore.[16] The vertical axis of the structuralists' binary-spatial model is altogether more appropriate to a Christian worldview, in which heaven was always thought to be celestial. It is safe to say that Hel's place on a vertical axis of the Norse mythological cosmos is secure, but that only in *Snorra Edda* is the conception of a connected realm of the gods and the dead located in the sky fully developed.

Whether the binary-spatial model as a whole really does reflect the 'reality' of Old Norse mythology is therefore extremely doubtful, because of its absolute reliance on the evidence of *Snorra Edda*. Even the proponents of structural analysis admit the limitations of Snorri as a source for pre-Christian belief:

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[15] *SnE* I, 20: 'There is also a place called Himinbjǫrg. It stands at the edge of heaven at the bridge's end where Bifrǫst reaches heaven. There is also a great palace called Valaskjálf. This place is Óðinn's. The gods built it and roofed it with pure silver, and it is there in this hall that Hliðskjálf is, the throne of that name. And when All-father sits on that throne he can see over all the world. At the southernmost end of heaven is the hall which is fairest of all and brighter than the sun, called Gimlé. It shall stand when both heaven and earth have passed away, and in that place shall live good and righteous people for ever and ever.'

[16] See Holtsmark, *Studier i Snorres Mytologi*, pp. 35-8.

> Our knowledge of pre-Christian Scandinavian mythology stems from the writings of a Christian scholar, living in Iceland two centuries after Christianity had been accepted as the national faith … obviously this makes it very doubtful whether what Snorri depicts as the heathen worldview was actually 'heathen' at all.[17]

It seems unquestionable that the substance of Snorri's description of Norse cosmogony owes something to his Christian background and upbringing as well as to his knowledge of mythological poetry, and that the form of his description is determined by his desire to reconcile the two worlds in a literary form.[18] *Gylfaginning*, and to an extent *Grímnismál*, are the only texts that offer anything like a comprehensive description of pagan Norse cosmogony. As the binary-spatial model rests primarily on *Gylfaginning,* its validity as the structural underpinning of Norse myth depends on an acceptance of *Gylfaginning* as a reliable source. It will be seen that the neat equivalences and oppositions established by proponents of the binary-spatial model are not validated by sources outside of *Snorra Edda*, and that accordingly the whole theory can only safely be applied to *Gylfaginning*. Structuralism has provided a further meta-myth of a pagan Norse belief system; unlike Snorri, modern structuralists have failed to consult sufficiently widely in the source texts, and their meta-myth is implausible as a result.

Hel looms large in the binary-spatial conception of Norse myth: larger, perhaps, than it does in the texts. As well as its function in the spatial schematisation, Hel is a crucial part of the hypothesised bi-polar structure of pre-Christian beliefs about the afterlife, because it stands in clear and direct opposition to Valhǫll, the heroic warrior-paradise ruled by Óðinn. For the

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[17] Hastrup, *Culture and History*, p. 146. Her anthropological methodology, however, allows her to effectively overlook the weaknesses in her source material: 'Once we allow ourselves to read his work anthropologically … its validity 'stretches out' and comes to encompass the entire generalized world-view of the Icelanders, whether heathen or Christian. Structural recurrences point to a conceptual continuity which exists before and outside particular literary products. These in their turn, may influence popular representations of the structural patterns, which may in consequence become gradually 'twisted' or changed … [these structures are not unchangeable, but] they seem to outlive the events through which the analyst gets access to them' (p. 147). Hastrup's attitude is unsurprisingly influenced by the father of structural anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss, who wrote that structuralism 'eliminates a problem which has been so far one of the main obstacles to the progress of mythological studies, namely, the quest for the *true* version, or the *earlier* one. On the contrary, we define the myth as consisting of all its versions; to put it otherwise: a myth remains the same as long as it is felt as such'. ('Structural Study of Myth', p. 435.)

[18] Holtsmark, *Norrøn mytologi*, p. 14.

structuralists, the separating out of the dead who go to Óðinn from the dead who sink down to Hel is vital. It enables more opposing pairs to be added to the structural framework relating to death in Scandinavian myth. In particular, Hastrup establishes a suggestive set of oppositions that characterises, for her, the structure of *Snorra Edda*'s description of the afterlife (see table 1).[19]

ÓÐINN	HEL
Ásgarðr/Valhǫll	Hel
'above/up'	'below/down'
male	female
warrior function / high status	non-warrior function / low status
death in battle	death by 'natural causes'

Table 1: Oppositions between the two rival conceptions of the afterlife in Scandinavian mythology.

As table 1 shows, the categories correspond exactly. Each conception of the afterlife has a mythical figure to represent it, a place in the spatial system, a gender signification and a socio-economic resonance.[20] Entry to Valhǫll is exclusive: the very name, with the ambivalence of its first element – does it derive from *valr*, 'the slain', or *val*, 'choice/selection'? – indicates as much.[21] The word *valkyrie* means 'chooser of the slain', and Snorri emphasises the choosiness of Óðinn's handmaidens: 'Þessar heita valkyrjur. Þær sendir Óðinn til hverrar orrustu. Þær kjósa feigð á menn ok ráða sigri. Guðr ok Rota ok norn in yngsta er Skuld heitir ríða jafnan at kjósa val ok ráða vígum.'[22] Valhǫll is not a place for peasants; rather, it is the warrior nobility who are required, and this social class by and large excludes women. If the door policy were not stringent

[19] Hastrup, *Culture and History*, p. 149.

[20] Molenaar adds a further opposition to the system: he contrasts the abundance of food and drink in Valhǫll with the hunger and thirst associated with Hel in *Gylfaginning* ('Concentric Dualism', p. 32).

[21] In stanzas 2 and 14 of *Atlakviða*, Valhǫll is the name given to a human dwelling, which would perhaps be inappropriate to gloss as 'hall of the slain': scholars have generally interpreted the name in this instance as 'foreign hall', with the *val-* element here meaning 'Welsh', and thus 'foreign' by extension. On the possible range of interpretations of Valhǫll's occurrence in *Atlakviða*, see Dronke, ed., *Poetic Edda* I, 47.

[22] *SnE* I, 30: 'These are called valkyries. Óðinn sends them to every battle. They allot death to men and govern victory. Guðr and Rota and the youngest norn, Skuld, always ride to choose who shall be slain and to govern the killings.'

enough, one's suitability has to be proved beyond doubt by dying in battle. Such is the impression that Hastrup's structural analysis leaves, and it is one that is supported by *Gylfaginning*. The rest of the sources of our knowledge about who went where in the pagan Scandinavian afterlife present a more confusing picture. As the polarity of Hel and Valhǫll has become fundamental to modern reconstructions of Old Norse belief, this chapter examines attitudes towards Valhǫll in Snorri's source texts in order to test the structuralists' hypothesis of a simple binary division between the two realms of the dead.

We might propose a further paired opposition, were we concerned with promulgating the binary-spatial model: Valhǫll was valorised, and even glamorised, and as such we would logically expect Hel to be stigmatised. This opposition might well be supported by the description of the realm in *Gylfaginning*. Snorri's description of the hall is truly that of a pagan paradise, and it is his account which forms the basis of the popular modern conception of 'Valhalla'. There is a meta-myth of 'Valhalla' which is just as pervasive as Hel's. Simek summarises the myth-complex in this manner:

> Valhall or Valhalla (ON Valhǫll, 'hall of the slain') is the name of Odin's home in Asgard where he gathers the warriors slain in battle around him … Valhall is situated in the part of Asgard called Glaðsheimr; the hall is thatched with spears and shields, and armour lies on the benches. The valkyries lead the slain heroes (the *einherjar*) to this hall, to Odin, and they serve them with meat from the boar Sæhrímnir (which the cook Audhrímnir prepares in the cauldron Eldhrímnir).

Simek goes on to describe the endless drink which accompanies the everlasting pork supper, the mead which flows from the udders of the goat Heiðrun. The *einherjar* fight all day, but are resurrected each evening to return to the feast. 'This', writes Simek, 'seems to give an impression of how Viking Age warriors imagined paradise'.[23] The word 'paradise' is loaded with meaning by dint of its primary association with the Christian heaven. It connotes a perfect, blissful state of existence, beyond that which is attainable by men while they are on earth, and reserved for the select bands of the blessed. Simek's description of Valhǫll therefore implicitly equates the Norse realm of the dead with the Christian heaven. By logical extension, Hel would exist in the same relation to Valhǫll, as does the Christian inferno to heaven. But while the meta-myth insists that

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[23] Simek, *Dictionary*, p. 347.

Valhǫll was conceived as a paradisiacal state of existence for the soul of the elect, the literary evidence, once again, presents a less coherent picture.

VALHǪLL IN EDDIC SOURCES

There are surprisingly few occurrences of the name Valhǫll in pre-Christian poetry: it appears only six times in the Codex Regius,[24] and twice in all skaldic poetry (although, as we will see, the two skaldic products which name Valhǫll are decidedly anomalous). In *Gylfaginning*, Snorri's description of Valhǫll derives from *Grímnismál*. Stanzas 8-10 of this poem, part of a formalized *þula* of mythical places, provide some of the major iconographical elements: the hall's golden colouring, the spears on the wall, shields on the roof, and mail-coats on the benches, and the presence of a wolf and an eagle at the doors:

Grímnismál 8-10.

Glaðsheimr heitir inn fimmti, þars en gullbiarta
Valhǫll víð of þrumir;
enn þar Hroptr kýss hverian dag
vápndauða vera.

Mioc er auðkent, þeim er til Óðins koma,
salkynni at siá;
scǫptom er rann rept, scioldom er salr þakiðr,
bryniom um becci strát.[25]

Mioc er auðkent, þeim er til Óðins koma,
salkynni at siá;
vargr hangir fyr vestan dyrr,

[24] See Kellogg, *Concordance*, pp. 472 and 597.

[25] Stanza 8: 'A fifth is called Glaðsheimr, there gold-bright Valhǫll spreads broad; there Hroptr [Óðinn] chooses every day those who are to be dead in combat.' Stanza 9: 'It's very easy to recognize for those who come to Óðinn to see how his hall's arranged; the hall has spears for rafters, it is thatched with shields; mail-coats are strewn on the benches.'

oc drúpir ǫrn yfir.[26]

For our purposes, the most important piece of mythological information in these verses is that Óðinn, here called Hroptr ('the one who cries' or, perhaps, 'the prophet'),[27] himself chooses weapon-dead men. The sentence *enn þar Hroptr kýss hverian dag / vápndauða vera* (stanza 8, lines 3-4) does not necessarily mean, however, that Óðinn chooses men who die in combat to come and join him in Valhǫll; rather, it should be translated 'and there Hroptr selects every day [those who are] to be weapon-dead'. To put it another way, the correct interpretation of this stanza is that Óðinn, god of war, has victory in battle within his gift. Óðinn's jurisdiction over the fate of combatants is another of the god's traditional attributes. In *Gylfaginning* the valkyries act as Óðinn's agents in this business, choosing the slain and determining victories: *at kjósa val ok ráða vígum* (*SnE* I, 30). Those 'who come to Óðinn' (*þeim er til Óðins koma*) in stanzas 9 and 10 may be inferred to be the same warriors who are selected for death by Óðinn as he sits in Valhǫll, but there is room for doubt: at this stage *Grímnismál* does not categorically support Snorri's assertion that *all* those who fall in battle automatically go to Óðinn.

The next reference to dead warriors in *Grímnismál* comes in stanza 14, but this frequently overlooked verse offers an unexpected (and almost unparalleled) mythological association for death in battle, since it endows the goddess Freyja with a role in the dispersal of the fallen:

Fólcvangr er inn níundi, enn þar Freyia ræðr
sessa kostom í sal;
hálfan val hon kýss hverian dag,
enn hálfan Óðinn á.[28]

The name given here to Freyja's hall – 'Fólkvangr' – means 'battlefield'. Of those who die on the battlefield, *Grímnismál* 14 states that Freyja chooses half: it is a reasonable inference that these

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[26] Stanza 10: 'It's very easy to recognize for those who come to Óðinn to see how his hall's arranged; a wolf hangs in to the west of the doorway and an eagle hovers above.'

[27] The well-attested Óðinn-*heiti* Hroptr may also have signified Óðinn's magical powers: Vogt, 'Hroptr rǫgna', read the name as 'conjurer/magician'. See also the discussion by Lie, 'Sonatorrek str. 1-4', pp. 205-6, and Olsen, 'En iakttagelse vedkommende Balder-diktningen', pp. 152-6.

[28] 'Folcvangr is the ninth, and there Freyja decides the qualities [or 'arrangements' or 'allocations'] of seats in the hall. Half the slain she chooses every day, and half has Óðinn.'

slain warriors are to dwell in Fólkvangr with Freyja in the same way that the *einherjar* form Óðinn's company in Valhǫll. It certainly contradicts the idea that all dead warriors automatically go to Valhǫll. The repetition of the formula *kýss hverian dag* from stanza 8 creates a strong parallel between the figures of Óðinn and Freyja, but it is difficult to interpret the significance of this parallel. It seems to support the suggestion that Hroptr in *Grímnismál* 8 chooses who is to live and die in battle, but did not automatically receive them in Valhǫll. Freyja chooses from among those who have already been slain. The basis on which she makes this choice, and the reason for which the goddess might need these people, is not stated.

There is virtually no evidence beyond this single eddic stanza to associate Freyja with death in battle or even with death more generally. In *Gylfaginning*, Snorri quotes *Grímnismál* 14, but he hardly elaborates the information contained in the verse: 'En Freyja er ágætust af Ásynjum. Hon á þann bœ á himni er Fólkvangr heita, ok hvar sem hon ríðr til vígs þá á hon hálfan val, en hálfan Óðinn, svá sem hér segir.'[29] Snorri has Frejya choosing half the slain whenever she rides out to a battle, which makes her sound more like one of the valkyries and subtly subverts the inference from *Grímnismál* that she automatically receives half of all the slain.[30] It is possible that this change is Snorri's own intervention, intended to prevent an inconsistency with the structural opposition of Hel and Óðinn already established. There is little evidence elsewhere to suggest that Freyja participates in battles in this way.[31] Once, in *Egils saga*, the phrase 'going to Freyja' is used as a metaphor for dying of a conventional type, when Egill's daughter Þorgerðr refuses any food before that which she will receive 'with Freyja': 'Engan hefi ek náttverð haft, ok engan mun ek, fyrr en at Freyju'.[32] Although this metaphor does suggest that Freyja had some mythic connection with death, in the mind of the *Egils saga*-author at least, it

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[29] *SnE* I, 24: 'And Freyja is the most glorious of the Ásynjur. She has a dwelling in the sky which is called Fólkvangar, and wherever she rides to battle she gets half the slain, and the other half Óðinn, as it says here.'

[30] In the most recent comprehensive treatment of the goddess Freyja, Motz makes a couple of regrettable errors, stating that Freyja 'rides to strife to receive half of those who died', but citing *Grímnismál* 14 as the source for this information, which it is not. She also cites *Egils saga* incorrectly: Þorgerðr's mention of Freyja occurs in chapter 78 of the saga as edited in Íslensk fornrit, and not in chapter 4 as Motz states ('The Goddess Freyja', p. 164).

[31] The name of Feyja's steed as given in *Hyndluljóð* 7 as Hildisvíni, 'battle-boar'. Motz, 'The Goddess Freyja', p. 164, states that in the mythological introductory episode of *Sǫrla þáttr*, a narrative inserted into *Óláfs saga en mesta* in the late-fourteenth-century Flateyarbók, Freyja 'creates unceasing warfare among men'. A cursory reading of chapter 2 of this text (*FNS* I, 368-70) reveals that, although it is the theft of Freyja's necklace that causes strife, it is in fact Óðinn who instigates the everlasting battle.

[32] *Egils saga*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 244: 'I have had no supper, and nor will I, before Freyja's'.

does not much resemble the unusual presentation of Freyja as a goddess of the slain that we find in *Grímnismál* 14.

It is not clear what we should make of Freyja's supposed role in choosing the afterlife-destination of those killed in battle. The fragment of mythological lore that *Gríminsmál* 14 preserves is discrepant with the evidence of other sources, and although it is included in *Gylfaginning*, Snorri hardly expands upon the information contained in the stanza. It is also notable that the context in which *Gríminsmál* 14 is quoted in *Gylfaginning* is the section which introduces the Æsir in turn, and not that which deals with the dead, the places of the dead, and the mythological features associated with the dead. *Grímnismál* was clearly one of Snorri's most important mythological sources, and could not be overlooked, but it does not necessarily always agree with his own conception of the totality of the mythology. Freyja's involvement in choosing the slain was present in Snorri's source but did not, it seems, become assimilated into Snorri's meta-myth of the pre-Christian afterlife.

The next reference to dead warriors in *Grímnismál* comes in stanza 18, which, together with stanza 25, is the source for Snorri's account of the feasting in Valhǫll.

Grímnismál 18

Andhrímnir lætr í Eldhrímni
Sæhrímni soðinn,
flesca bezt, enn þat fáir vito,
við hvat einheriar alaz.

Grímnismál 25

Heiðrún heitir geit, er stendr hǫllo á Heriafǫðrs
oc bítr af Læraðs limom;
scapker fylla hon scal ins scíra miaðar,
knáat sú veig vanaz.[33]

[33] Stanza 18: 'Andhrímnir has Sæhrímnir, the best of meat, boiled in Eldhrímnir; but few know by what the *einherjar* are nourished.' Stanza 25: 'Heiðrún is the name of the goat who stands on the hall of the Father of Hosts and grazes from Læraðr's branches. She will fill a vat of shining mead. That liquor cannot ever diminish.'

Snorri remains reasonably faithful to *Grímnismál* (and quotes both these stanzas) in his description of the activities in Valhǫll. He has a tendency, however, to elaborate slightly, and especially to add references to the former social status of the *einherjar*: He also adds that all men who have ever fallen in battle go to Óðinn, which is never explicitly stated in the eddic poem:

> Þar mælir Gangleri: 'Þat segir þú at allir þeir menn er í orrostu hafa fallit frá upphafi heims eru nú komnir til Óðins í Valhǫll. Hvat hefir hann at fá þeim at vistum? Ek hugða at þar skyldi vera allmikit fjǫlmenni.'
>
> Þá svarar Hár: 'Satt er þat er þú segir, allmikit fjǫlmenni er þar, en myklu fleira skal enn verða, ok mun þó oflítit þykkja þá er úlfrinn kemr. En aldri er svá mikill mannfjǫlði í Valhǫll at eigi má þeim endask flesk galtar þess er Sæhrímnir heitir. Hann er soðinn hvern dag ok heill at aptni. En þessi spurning er nú spyrr þú þykki mér líkara at fáir muni svá vísir vera at hér kunni satt af at segja. Andhrímnir heitir steikarinn en Eldhrímnir ketillinn.[34]

Gangleri goes on to ask about the drink on offer in Valhǫll: do the fallen warriors have water to drink? (*SnE* I, 33: 'Hvat hafa einherjar at drykk þat er þeim endisk jafngnógliga sem vistin, eða er þar vatn drukkit?') In *Gylfaginning*, Hár's response foregrounds the social status of the *einherjar* by its mock-incredulity at Gangleri's naïve question:

> Þá segir Hár: 'Undarliga spyrðu nú at Alfǫðr mun bjóða til sín konungum eða jǫrlum eða ǫðrum ríkismǫnnum ok muni gefa þeim vatn at drekka, ok þat veit

[34] *SnE* I, 32: 'Then spoke Gangleri: "You say that all those men that have fallen in battle since the beginning of the world have now come to Óðinn in Valhǫll. What has he got to offer them as food? I should have thought that there must be a pretty large number there." Then Hár replied: "It is true what you say, there is a pretty large number there, and many more have yet to arrive, and yet there will seem too few when the wolf comes. But there will never be such a large number in Valhǫll that the meat of the boar called Sæhrímnir will not be sufficient for them. It is cooked each day and whole again by evening. But this question that you are now asking, it seems to me very likely that there can be few so wise as to be able to give the correct answer to it. The cook is called Andhrímnir and the pot Eldhrímnir."'

> trúa mín at margr kemr sá til Valhallar er dýrt mundi þykkjask kaupa vazdrykkin ef eigi væri betra fagnaðar þangat at vitja, sá er áðr þolir sár ok sviða til banans.[35]

This Óðinnic social contract – a warrior must earn his place in paradise through his suffering on earth, must buy it with the shedding of his blood – is clearly an addition to *Grímnismál*'s description of the goat Heiðrún and her udders of perpetual mead. *Grímnismál* is silent about the origin of the *einherjar*, and how they achieved their immortal status. It provides only two pieces of information about the inhabitants of Valhǫll (as opposed to its topography): in stanza 36, the valkyries are named, and we are told that they 'carry ale to the *einherjar*' (36/6 *þær bera einheriom ǫl*). Stanza 23 of *Grímnismál* provides an idea of the mythological function of the *einherjar*:

Grímnismál 23

Fimm hundrað dura oc um fíorom togom
svá hygg ec at Valhǫllo vera;
átta hundruð einheria ganga ór einom durum,
þá er þeir fara at vitni at vega.[36]

The *einherjar* will fight on the side of Óðinn and the gods at Ragnarǫk. *Grímnismál* is not the only poetic source to state this fact; the tenth-century *Eiríksmál* includes a similar reference to the wolf Fenrir, one of the gods' chief opponents and eventual slayer of Óðinn, in explaining why the Norwegian warrior-king Eiríkr blóðøx has been called to Valhǫll:

Eiríksmál 7

Hví namt hann sigri þá
es þér þótti snjallr vesa?
Óvíst 's at vita,
sér ulfr enn hǫsvi

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[35] *SnE* I, 33: 'Then said Hár: "This is a strange question you are asking, whether Alfǫðr would invite kings and earls and other men of rank and would give them water to drink, and I swear by my faith that there comes many a one to Valhǫll who would think he had paid a high price for his drink of water if there were no better cheer to be got there, when he had previously endured wounds and agony leading to his death."'

[36] 'Five hundred doors and forty I think there are in Valhǫll; eight hundred warriors will go together from one door when they go to fight the wolf.'

[greypr] á sjǫt goða.[37]

The *einherjar*'s presence on the side of the gods in the final battle against the monstrous forces under Loki's command explains the military criterion for entry into their ranks. Eiríkr blóðøx, along with Snorri's kings, earls, and other powerful men, those who would expect better than water in the afterlife, are those who form the top echelons of a warrior aristocracy. Another of Snorri's poetic sources, stanza 41 of *Vafþrúðnismál* – which is quoted in *Gylfaginning* – shows the *einherjar* engaged in their famous never-ending battle, from which the slain are resurrected each evening. This carnage could be regarded as a dry run for Ragnarǫk, a sort of ethereal boot camp designed to keep the warriors on their mettle, although Snorri presents it as their entertainment for the daylight hours:

> Þá mælir Gangleri: 'Allmikill mannfjǫlði er í Valhǫll. Svá njóta trú minnar at allmikill hǫfðingi er Óðinn er hann stýrir svá miklum her. Eða hvat er skemtun einherjanna þá er þeir drekka eigi?'
>
> Hár segir: 'Hvern dag þá er þeir hafa klæzk þá hervæða þeir sik ok ganga út í garðinn ok berjask ok fellr hverr á annan. Þat er leikr þeira. Ok er líðr at dǫgurðarmáli þá ríða þeir heim til Valhallar ok setjask til drykkju, svá sem hér segir:
>
> [*Vafþrúðnismál* 41]
>
> Allir einherjar
> Óðins túnum í
> hǫggvask hverjan dag.
> Val þeir kjósa
> ok ríða vígi frá,
> sitja meir um sáttir saman.[38]

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[37] *Skjald* B I, 165: 'Why then did you take victory from him, he who seems so brave to you?' 'It is impossible to know, when the fierce grey wolf will look at the home of the gods.'

[38] *SnE* I, 34: 'Then spoke Gangleri: "There is a very large number of people in Valhǫll. I declare by my faith that Óðinn is a very great lord when he commands such a great troop. But what entertainment do the *einherjar* have when they're not drinking?" Hár said: "Each day after they have got dressed they put on war-gear and go out into the courtyard and fight each other and they fall each upon the other. This is their sport. And when dinner-time

Gangleri believes there to be 'a very large troop' in Valhǫll. The size of the *einherjar*'s company is specified in *Grímnismál*: there will be eight hundred warriors who leave each of Valhǫll's five hundred and forty doors at Ragnarǫk. This amounts to 432,000 *einherjar*, unless the ancient Germanic value of the 'long hundred' is assumed, in which case Óðinn's retinue will number a maximum of 614,400. Various theories – none of them particularly convincing – have been put forward to explain the significance of these figures.[39] If Óðinn takes all those who die in battle to himself in Valhǫll, the multitude inside the hall of the slain – including as it does *allir þeir menn er í orrostu hafa fallit frá upphafi heims* – would exceed presumably either of these figures almost immeasurably. In which case the question is raised: do all those who go to Óðinn after death join the *einherjar*? Will the 432,000 (or 614,400) chosen warriors who throng through Valhǫll's 540 (or 640) exits leave an even vaster number of the fallen behind them? Or does *Grímnismál* simply mean that an unspecified total number of *einherjar* will pass though each of Valhǫll's doors in groups of eight hundred? There are no real answers to these questions in *Gylfaginning*, although, when the battle finally commences, Snorri says that all Hel's people will be on Loki's side (*SnE* I, 50: *en Loka fylgja allir Heljar sinnar*). A structuralist desire for balance would then require 'all the *einherjar*' (*SnE* I, 50: *Æsir hervæða sik ok allar einherjar ok sækja fram á vǫlluna*) to counterbalance *allir Heljar sinnar*. As such we may infer that all of the inhabitants of the opposing afterlives are set against each other in Snorri's telling of the mythical narrative, just as the gods and monsters are paired up and set against each other in a counterbalancing structure. The idea that Hel will provide a troop equivalent to the *einherjar* (although, we may safely assume, one much less handy in battle; it will consist of the sub-heroic majority, if the meta-myth is true) seems to be original to Snorri. His main source for the events around Ragnarǫk is *Vǫluspá*, which has in stanza 51 a reference to Muspelli's troop, but which lacks *Gylfaginning*'s reference to Hel.

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approaches they ride back to Valhǫll and sit down to drink, as it says here: All *einherjar* in Óðinn's courts fight one another each day. They select their victims and from battle ride, sit the more at peace together.'"

[39] Schröder, *Germanentum und Hellenismus*, pp. 15-19, who preferred the 'short hundred', argued that 432,000 was a number of great mystical significance for ancient Europeans, and for the Babylonians in particular. On the long hundred, see Helm, 'Die Zahl der Einherjar', p. 316. Helm did not dispute the possible numerological significance of the number of *einherjar* and doors in Valhǫll, but he thought (pp. 317-18) that it was the individual numbers, and not their product, which had meanings connected to ancient astronomical theories. Meyer arrived at a different (and, unless his intentions were ironical, completely erroneous) interpretation of the stanza when he wrote '540 Tore in Walhall; 800 Einherjer – etwas viel Tore für etwas wenig Krieger' (*Altergermanische Religionsgeschichte*, p. 531). See also de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* II, 378, n. 3.

Vǫluspá 51

Kióll ferr austan, koma muno Muspellz
um lǫg lýðir, enn Loki stýrir;
fara fífls megir með freca allir,
þeim er bróðir Býleiptz í for.[40]

There is no mention of Hel or her (/its) people in this part of the poem. Muspelli is, according to Dronke, 'the ancient German term for the dissolution of the earth on Judgement Day … translated into a demonic personality in ON'.[41] This demonic personality is linked in *Vǫluspá* to the prime agent of malice, Loki, who is in turn closely associated with Hel in Snorri's mythography (although, as we have seen, the relationship is less apparent in eddic poetry). For want of evidence to the contrary, it seems that the participation of Hel's inhabitants in the battle at the end of the world is restricted to *Gylfaginning*'s version of these events.

Snorri's inclusion of a force in direct opposition to the *einherjar* may be read as part of his general attitude towards the Valhǫll myth-complex. In *Gylfaginning*, the relatively bare bones of *Grímnismál* and *Vafþrúðnismál* are fleshed out with details derived from non-eddic sources, and Snorri presents Valhǫll in much the same way as the modern meta-myth. He emphasises the martial aspect of life in Valhǫll, and the role of the *einherjar*, about whose status he is apparently inconsistent: although he categorically states that all those men who have died in battle go to Óðinn, he also indicates that membership of the *einherjar* was meant for (if not reserved for) those who had formed part of a social elite in life. Perhaps Snorri thought of *Hárbarðsljóð* when formulating his version of the Valhǫll-myth. In stanza 24 of that poem, Hárbarðr says

'Var ec á Vallandi oc vígom fylgðag,
atta ec iǫfrom, enn aldri sættac;
Óðinn á iarla, þa er í val falla,
enn Þórr á þræla kyn.'[42]

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[40] 'A bark sails from the east, across the see will come Muspelli's troops with Loki at the helm. All that monstrous brood are there with the wolf. In company with them is Býleiptr's brother.'

[41] Dronke, ed., *Poetic Edda* II, 146.

[42] 'I was in Valland, and I waged war, I incited the princes, and never made peace; Óðinn has the nobles who fall in battle and Þórr has the breed of serfs.'

This verse could therefore introduce a further complication into the simple bipartite schema Snorri attempts to establish. This differentiation is based not upon mode of death, but rather upon mode of life: Þórr has the *þræla kyn*, while the *iarla* belong to Óðinn. It is a matter of interpretation, however, whether this verse refers to what happens to the social classes after their deaths; it seems more likely that Hárbarðr's statement reflects the social norms associated in the mind of the poet with the respective cults of the gods: Óðinn was the patron of the aristocracy, those who were likely to fall in battle – warfare generally being the primary function of the nobility in medieval societies – while Þórr's cult, it seems, was less exclusive, and widespread among the humbler sections of the pagan Scandinavian communities.[43] It is not necessary to read into the *Hárbarðsljóð* verse any sort of belief in an afterlife ruled over by Þórr.[44]

THE AFTERLIFE OF THE HERO IN *EIRÍKSMÁL* AND *HÁKONARMÁL*

Whereas the mythological poems of the *Edda* are by and large quite neutral in their descriptions of Valhǫll, Snorri's treatment of the heroic afterlife seems to borrow at least something from an ethical system most coherently expressed by *Eiríksmál*, wherein the hero's entry into Valhǫll indicates that, in the Viking age, the myth-complex could carry a considerable social cachet for a warrior-aristocratic audience.

The anonymous *Eiríksmál* is generically rather anomalous. Together with Eyvindr Finnsson skáldaspillir's *Hákonarmál*, which is often treated as its companion piece, and the reconstructed remains of a poem known as *Haraldskvæði* or *Hrafnsmál*, composed *c.* 900 and attributed to Þórbjǫrn hornklofi,[45] *Eiríksmál* constitutes a rare type of 'eddic' praise-poetry, standing apart from most skaldic eulogies in its eschewal of *dróttkvætt* and limited use of kennings, and, most particularly, in its locating the action of the poem in the world of the gods.[46] It is clearly distinguished from the mythological poems of the Codex Regius, on the other hand,

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[43] See Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion*, pp. 85-94.

[44] Schullerus, 'Zur Kritik des Valhǫllglaubens', p. 232, suggested that the *Hárbarðsljóð*-poet, 'undoubtedly' a worshipper of Óðinn, may have simply been engaged in scoring points off Þórr (and the peasants) by asserting his god's superiority, and that of his social class.

[45] There is a tradition of misattributing *Haraldskvæði* to Þjóðólfr of Hvin, following *Snorra Edda*'s precedent: see Jón Helgason, ed., *Skjaldervers*, pp. 105-15.

[46] See Lindow, 'Mythology and Mythography', p. 29; Marold, 'Das Walhallbild', p. 21, is quite correct to link *Eiríksmál* first and foremost to the legendary poems of the *Poetic Edda*.

by its relationship to historical events, and transposition of an actual historical figure into Óðinn's realm.

Eiríksmál is the only Old Norse poem set entirely in Valhǫll; it presents the heroic realm of the dead in terms which will be familiar at once to readers of *Gylfaginning*.

Eiríksmál 1

Hvat's þat drauma [?qvað Óðinn],
hugðumk fyr dag rísa
Vallhǫll at ryðja
fyr vegnu folki;
vakðak Einherja,
baðk upp rísa
bekki at stráa,
bjórker at leyðra,
valkyrjur vín bera
sem vísi kœmi.[47]

Eiríksmál is a panegyric for Eiríkr blóðøx, sometime king of Norway and ruler of the Scandinavians in Northumbria. In *Fagrskinna*, the only context in which this poem is preserved entire,[48] we are told that Eiríkr's queen Gunnhildr commissioned the writing of a panegyric for her late husband following his death at the battle of Stainmore, which suggests that the poem was composed soon after 954: 'Eptir fall Eiríks lét Gunnhildr yrkja kvæði um hann, svá sem Óðinn fagnaði hónum í Valhǫll.'[49] *Eiríksmál* takes the form of a conversation among the gods and legendary heroes who are already in Valhǫll as they anticipate Eiríkr's arrival: stanza 1 sets the scene. Óðinn (or conceivably the poet) describes a dream he has had in which he prepares

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[47] *Skjald* B I, 164: 'What sort of dream is that? I thought I rose up before dawn to clear Valhǫll for slain people. I roused the *einherjar*, bade them get up to strew the benches with straw, clean the beer-cups, the valkyries to serve wine as a prince was coming.'

[48] The first stanza of *Eiríksmál* is also quoted in *Skáldskaparmál*.

[49] *Fagrskinna*, ed. Bjarni Einarsson, p. 77: ('After Eiríkr's death Gunnhildr had a poem composed about him, just as Óðinn welcomed him into Valhǫll.')

Valhǫll for the arrival of an unknown prince.[50] Óðinn then states (stanza 2) that his heart is glad at the news of this prince's coming out of the *heimr*. A great noise is heard, off-stage as it were, and Óðinn asks the mythical poet-god, Bragi, if he is knows what the cause of it is (stanza 3). Bragi suggests that it might be the return of Óðinn's son, Baldr, to Valhǫll, for which remark he earns a terse rebuke:

Eiríksmál 4

Heimsku mæla
skalat enn horski Bragi,
þvít þú vel hvat vitir;
fyr Eiríki glymr,
es hér mun inn koma
jǫfurr í Óðins sali.[51]

Eiríkr's renown is obviously such that it should be self-evident among the gods that it is he who stands at the doors of Valhǫll. As well as being known among the Æsir, Eiríkr is linked to the world of Germanic legend when in stanza 5 Sigmundr and Sinfjǫtli, the two prime heroes of the Vǫlsung-cycle of legends, are sent out to greet him. While they do so, Bragi asks Óðinn two questions pertaining to the contradiction central to the Valhǫll-complex: first, why is Eiríkr's arrival so keenly anticipated? (stanza 6, lines 1-2: *Hví's þér Eríks vǫn / heldr an annarra?* 'Why is Eiríkr's arrival more expected than another's?') Óðinn's answer makes clear the basis of his selection criteria: it is success in battle that has brought Eiríkr to his attention. The Norwegian prince has reddened many lands while carrying a bloody sword (stanza 6, lines 3-5: *Þvít mǫrgu landi / hann hefr mæki roðit / ok blóðugt sverð borit*). That being the case, Bragi then asks *Hví namt*

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[50] In one manuscript only (the AM 757 copy of *Snorra Edda*) does the first line of this stanza contain the parenthetic, hypermetric addition of *qvað oden*; the other manuscripts of *Skáldskaparmál* have *qvað*, but omit *oden*. See *Skjald* A I, 174. If read as per the *Fagrskinna* texts, this stanza could equally well be regarded as describing a dream that the poet (and not Óðinn) had had: thus also the interpretation of Faulkes in his translation of *Snorra Edda*, p. 69. Most other commentators agree that the god speaks the opening stanzas in the first person: see e.g. Marold, 'Das Walhallbild', p. 19. This reading seems to make the best contextual sense: Óðinn would normally be expected to control the actions of the *einherjar* and valkyries, both of which groups serve the god according to *Gylfaginning*.

[51] *Skjald* B I, 165: 'You mustn't talk foolishly, Bragi the wise, since you know full well what; the din accompanies Eiríkr, who will enter here, a prince into Óðinn's hall.'

hann sigri þá, / es þér þótti snjallr vesa? (stanza 7, lines 1-2: 'why then did you deprive him of victory, when he seems brave to you?) The reasoning behind Óðinn's decision to allow the finest warriors to be cut down in their prime is that they are needed for a higher purpose: Ragnarǫk, symbolised by the great grey wolf, is perceived to be close at hand, and the best of the earthly fighters are now needed to swell the ranks of the *einherjar* for the coming battle (stanza 7, lines 3-5, and stanza 8). All of which ties in neatly with Snorri's conception of the role of Valhǫll's fallen warriors within the eschatological time frame he describes.

Unlike conventional skaldic praise poetry, where detail of the subject's actions on earth, and his victories and conquests in particular, take primacy, there is little concern in *Eiríksmál* for what the historical Eiríkr did, beyond the simple statement that he bathed many lands in blood; rather, the king's entry into Valhǫll mythologizes him, shifting him out of the *heimr* and into the realm of the supernatural, the *Goðheimr*. It is apparent that, whether or not Queen Gunnhildr did indeed commission this eulogy soon after Eiríkr's death, the unknown poet thought that the most glory could be achieved for his subject by transposing Eiríkr into the realm of myth; as such we may adduce the importance attached to Valhǫll by a warrior-aristocratic audience. Indeed, Joseph Harris argues that one of the chief functions of the *erfikvæði* is to secure a place in the afterlife for the deceased by 'the simple verbal magic of saying it is so'.[52] By reporting the death of Eiríkr in this manner, the *Eiríksmál*-poet asserts (for posterity just as much as for the grieving widow) that Eiríkr has found his reward in the Viking 'heaven'. In so doing, he confirms that Eiríkr is of high social standing: he will be welcomed as a prince in Valhǫll, just as he was a prince on the earth; and he is part of a warrior tradition: the rest of the *einherjar* prepare for his coming. These chosen few may include Eiríkr's ancestors, but there is no indication that ancestor-worship forms part of the Valhǫll-complex; it is merit as warriors on earth which fits men for membership of Óðinn's companies in the afterlife, and not family connections. Again, this is an appropriate reflection of the king's violent death. The valkyries, the executive agents of Óðinn's will, prepare to serve Eiríkr with the plentiful strong drink which he expects and deserves. By placing the poem in the mouth of Óðinn (or by addressing Óðinn directly: either interpretation is possible), the poet further establishes the links between his subject, the warrior-king, and the warrior-god. As such, *Eiríksmál* does nothing to contradict Snorri's description of Valhǫll, and it fits neatly into the system proposed by Hastrup: Eiríkr, a high-status warrior male, dies in battle and is chosen to go to Valhǫll, where Óðinn and his (female) servants prepare for

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[52] Harris, 'Sacrifice and Guilt', p. 194.

him an afterlife of feasting and fighting. The only aspect of Hastrup's model lacking from *Eiríksmál* is an indication that Valhǫll occupies a position in the upper compartment of the spatial schema. The iconography of Valhǫll is not as developed in *Eiríksmál* as it is in *Gylfaginning*, but nothing in the poem contradicts the established meta-myth of the hall of the slain.

At first glance, then, *Eiríksmál* fits the Valhǫll paradigm established by Snorri and the structuralists perfectly. It does not mention Hel, but then again, Hel is not for heroes. If the traditional dating of this poem is secure, it is an extremely important witness, not necessarily to pagan beliefs about the fate of the soul after death, but to the role of the presentation of the afterlife in the composition of mytho-poetical encomia in the tenth century. Whether or not Eiríkr himself believed that Valhǫll would be his fate after death is moot – he was, after all, baptized as a Christian at Aðalsteinn's instruction in England *c.* 948, immediately after the English king had granted him the rule of Northumbria, according to *Hákonar saga góða*:

> Aðalsteinn Englakonungr sendi orð Eiríki ok bauð honum at taka af sér ríki í Englandi, sagði svá, at Haraldr konungr, faðir hans, var mikill vinr Aðalsteins konungs, svá at hann vill þat virða við son hans. Fóru þa menn í milli konunganna, ok semsk þat með einkamálum, at Eiríkr konungr tók Norðimbraland at halda af Aðalsteini konungi ok verja þar land fyrir Dǫnum ok ǫðrum víkingum. Eiríkr skyldi láta skírask ok kona hans ok bǫrn þeira ok allt lið hans, þat er honum hafði fylgt þangat. Tók Eiríkr þenna kost. Var hann þá skírðr ok tók rétta trú. [53]

There is no evidence that Eiríkr's baptism was anything more than a political gesture, nor that his followers became Christianised to any great extent. In any case, Eiríkr's personal faith is largely irrelevant for the purposes of the panegyric. For the unknown poet of *Eiríksmál* and – we may be sure – his audience, participation in a mythological scene such as this one asserts most powerfully that Eiríkr had been, and continues to be, a hero among kings and a king among

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[53] *Heimskringla* I, 152: 'King Aðalsteinn of England sent word to Eiríkr and told him to take a kingdom for himself in England, saying that his father, King Haraldr, had been a great friend of King Aðalsteinn, such that he wished to take account of that with regard to his son. Men went between the kings then, and it was settled with agreements, that King Eiríkr took Northumbria, to hold it in fief from Aðalsteinn, and to defend the land there from the Danes and other Vikings. Eiríkr had to let himself be baptised with his wife and children and all of his retinue that had followed him there. Eiríkr accepted these terms. He was baptised and accepted the true faith.'

heroes. It is possible that the connection made between Eiríkr and the gods, and particularly Óðinn, also manifests an aspect of sacral kingship in its broadest sense, as Rory McTurk defines it: 'a sacral king is one who is marked off from his fellow men by an aura of specialness which has its origins in more or less direct associations with the supernatural.'[54] Eiríkr may not have fulfilled any of the other criteria variously claimed to prove or disprove the existence of sacral kingship, but his panegyric, with the exclusivity of its portrayal of Valhǫll and its inhabitants, certainly imbues the king with an aura of specialness by dint of his association with supernatural elements.[55] From this we can discern that Eiríkr's place at the heart of this paradigmatic nexus is important to the poem's audience: it is this positioning that attracts the posthumous glory which is the function of the panegyric memorial lay.

It is far from clear, however, to what extent it is valid to regard *Eiríksmál* as being indicative of wider beliefs about the afterlife in tenth-century Scandinavian paganism. The date and location of its composition is open to doubt: we do not know how long after Eiríkr's death Gunnhildr commissioned the poem. Unlike the majority of skaldic poetry, there is no named author whose existence may be situated within a specific period of time. Some scholars have argued that *Eiríksmál* must have been written in England, on both linguistic and textual/contextual grounds. Others have suggested that its connections are with Norway.[56] If composed in Northumbria, it is arguable that the mythological content of the poem derives in part from English culture, and that it is not, therefore, a 'true' reflection of Norse belief. I agree

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[54] McTurk, 'Scandinavian Sacral Kingship', p. 31.

[55] It would not be appropriate to discuss here the extremely contentious question of the nature of Scandinavian sacral kingship, or whether it existed at all. McTurk has identified the issues in question, and provided an extremely useful overview of previous scholarship in two articles, 'Sacral Kingship' and 'Scandinavian Sacral Kingship'. The most influential monographs on this subject have been Baetke, *Yngvi und die Ynglinger*; Picard, *Germanisches Sakralkönigtum?*, and Steinsland, *Det hellige bryllup*.

[56] Hofmann, *Nordisch-englische Lehnbeziehungen*, pp. 42-52, argues that the vocabulary of *Eiríksmál* is so clearly influence by English that the poem must have been composed in the Danelaw; Kuhn, 'Rund um die *Vǫluspá*', pp. 7-11, suggests that *Eiríksmál*'s innovations in religious language (including its naming of Valhǫll and conception of the impending end of the world) are indicative of composition in a milieu in which a high degree of syncretism between paganism and Christianity obtained: Kuhn thought that this must have been the same milieu in which *Vǫluspá* originated, and that Viking Northumbria was the most likely place of composition. This view has been refuted by Lindow, 'Norse Mythology and Northumbria', pp. 25-9.

with Lindow, however, that *Eiríksmál*'s textual connections are primarily Norwegian,[57] and that there are no English parallels with which to compare it. Nor does *Fagrskinna*'s account of its composition, in itself of doubtful historical value, necessarily indicate that tradition placed *Eiríksmál* in a Northumbrian context.[58]

Eiríksmál is an innovatory poem: Kuhn was right to observe that it is the first datable poem not only to attest to belief in Valhǫll, but also to allude to the Norse conception of the end of the world and to the myth of Baldr's death.[59] If it follows Þórbjǫrn's *Haraldskvæði* in its use of eddic metre, it breaks entirely new ground by placing its hero in the world of the gods, and by having the gods engage a mortal in dialogue. In this respect it treads an almost unique path. By describing the hero's participation in the Óðinnic afterlife, the poet is able to add a compelling new dimension to his praise of Eiríkr. The choice of *ljóðaháttr*, appropriate to a poem set in the world of the gods, is a stylistic masterstroke, a perfect match of form and content. We cannot know how accurately *Eiríksmál*'s depiction of Valhǫll reflects contemporary religious beliefs, since we cannot adequately date or localize its production. Whether it describes an afterlife that was already imagined in the same terms, is unclear. But there is no doubt that the *Eiríksmál*-poet's desire to imagine a valorised, aristocratic, warrior afterlife, contributed a great deal to what later generations thought of as Valhǫll, since it is the first text to combine many of the key iconographic elements – the hall, the valkyries serving beer, the role of the *einherjar* as warriors at the end of the world, and so on – that Snorri would include in *Gylfaginning*. We know, too, that *Eiríksmál* was more immediately influential, although the poem with which it is most closely connected in fact subverts *Eiríksmál*'s glamorised representation of Valhǫll.

Eyvindr Finnsson skáldaspillir's *Hákonarmál* is inextricably linked to *Eiríksmál*. Eyvindr, forever tainted with the accusation of plagiarism, is usually believed to have based his account of his hero's entry into Valhǫll on that found in *Eiríksmál*.[60] The nickname *skáldaspillir* – literally,

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[57] The only possible model for *Eiríksmál* which is extant is the Norwegian skald Þórbjǫrn's *Haraldskvæði*, which is the earliest datable poem to be composed in the eddic style. See Lindow, 'Norse Mythology and Northumbria', p. 28.

[58] Von See, 'Zwei eddische Preislieder', p. 117, dismisses *Fagrskinna*'s account of the poem's composition as having 'wenig Wert'.

[59] Kuhn, 'Rund um die *Vǫluspá*', p. 11.

[60] See e.g. Sahlgren's extensive treatment of the poem in his *Eddica et Scaldica* I, esp. p. 23. Von See, typically controversial, suggested that *Eiríksmál* is a later composition than *Hákonarmál*, partly on the basis that it presents a more refined, and presumably therefore younger, version of the Valhǫll myth-complex ('Zwei Eddische Preislieder').

'poet-spoiler' (Cleasby-Vigfússon) or perhaps better 'destroyer of poets' – is unquestionably ancient, although it is not entirely clear what meaning attached to it in the Middle Ages: Snorri consistently uses it in both *Skáldskaparmál* (e.g. *SnE* II, 7) and *Heimskringla* (e.g. *Heimskringla* I, 181), but he does not explain its origins. In large measure, the interpretation of Eyvindr's nickname as 'plagiarist' has determined his subsequent reputation, and continues to inform many readings of his works.[61]

The idea that Eyvindr could not come up with an original line of his own seems rather hard on this poor poet, but his reputation is not without foundation. His poem *Háleygjatal* certainly alludes to *Ynglingatal* (and 'alludes to' puts it mildly).[62] So when Eyvindr came to write his own eddic *Preislied* in honour of Hákon góði Haraldsson (who was killed by the sons of Eiríkr blóðøx in 961) we are wont to believe that he would turn at once to a well known model for (what we might tactfully call) inspiration.[63] Owing to a reference in *Fagrskinna* to the composition of *Hákonarmál* it is this opinion that has held sway for as long, it seems, as the poem has been written down.

> …sem Eyvindr segir í kvæði því, er hann orti eptir fall Hákonar, ok setti hann þat eptir því sem Gunnhildr hafði látit yrkja um Eirík sem Óðinn byði honum heim til Valhallar, ok segir hann marga atburði í kvæðinu frá orrostunni.[64]

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[61] It appears that among modern scholars Wadstein, 'Bidrag till tolkning ock belysning', p. 90, was first to suggest that the nickname *skáldaspillir* should be interpreted as 'plagiarist'. Olsen, perhaps Eyvindr's staunchest supporter, argued that he was given his pejorative nickname by the Eiríkssons' party, led by Gunnhildr ('Fortjener "Hákonarmáls" digter tilnavnet "skáldaspillir"?', pp. 8-9). Although there is no hard evidence for such an assertion, it ties in with Alois Wolf's political reading of *Hákonarmál*, in which the differences between *Eiríksmál* and *Eyvindr*'s poem are regarded as reflecting the dynastic and nationalistic concerns of the Danish Eiríkssons on the one hand and the Norwegian followers of Hákon on the other ('Zitat und Polemik', pp. 13-14).

[62] See Faulkes, *SnE* II, 156-7. Faulkes agrees with the conventional wisdom that *Hákonarmál*, 'one of the skaldic poems composed in eddic style and/or using mythological and legendary motifs that seem to have been in vogue in Norway in the tenth century', is 'evidently an imitation' of *Eiríksmál*.

[63] In the words of Hollander, 'Eyvindr certainly did pattern his poem after *Eiríksmál* … any consideration of the chronological and aesthetic relations of the two poems will corroborate this statement'. Hollander's considered opinion, however, was that this 'patterning' did not extend so far as 'execution and detail', in which the two poems are 'radically unalike' ('Is the Lay of Eric a Fragment?', pp. 251-2).

[64] *Fagrskinna*, ed. Bjarni Einarsson, p. 86: '…as Eyvindr says in this poem, which he composed after Hákon's death, and he modelled it after the one which Gunnhildr had caused to be made about Eiríkr, in which Óðinn invited him home to Valhǫll, and he has much to say in the poem about the battle.'

This passage, its phraseology parallel to *Fagrskinna*'s prose frame to *Eiríksmál*, may be interpreted in two ways. It may be that *setti hann þat eptir því sem Gunnhildr hafði látit yrkja um Eirík* means that Eyvindr plundered the earlier poem for his diction as well as his theme; such imitation might properly be called plagiarism, if he did not acknowledge his source. On the other hand, it could be that merely the impulse to compose this eulogy was inspired by Gunnhildr's example. A good court poet would not want his patron to pass unremembered and, if there was a passing fad among skalds for praise-poetry in eddic metres and with mythological settings in the mid tenth-century, there is no doubt that Eyvindr would have wanted to commemorate Hákon in a finer example of the genre than the one composed in honour of his old enemy Eiríkr. *Hákonarmál* is, by this reading, an attempt at literary one-upmanship; imitation is not always the sincerest form of flattery, and *Hákonarmál* successfully surpasses its supposed model in both the honour it gives its subject, and, I would argue, in its quality as poetry. While it is likely, if the conventional relative chronology for the composition of these poems is accepted, that parts of *Hákonarmál* were based, formally at least, upon *Eiríksmál*, to regard the later poem as a mere imitation does not do Eyvindr justice. It is also now quite clear, thanks to the work of Edith Marold in particular, that the differences between *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál* are probably more significant than their similarities, and that in their representation of the warrior afterlife they in fact differ quite radically. This leads me to suspect that whence ever Eyvindr the plagiarist took his depiction of the pagan afterlife, it was not from *Eiríksmál* or, at least, not only from *Eiríksmál*.

In modern critical parlance, *Hákonarmál* displays signs of intertextuality. It alludes primarily to eddic poetry, repeating verbatim perhaps the most famous gnomic couplet in Old Norse: *Hávamál*'s *deyr fé / deyja frændr* ('cattle die, kinsmen die) in its final stanza. Stanza 17, too, is quite similar in tone to *Hávamál*, as Hákon tells his companions that it is important to keep their weapons to hand as they enter a stranger's hall:

Hákonarmál 17

Gerðar órar,
kvað enn góði konungr,
viljum vér sjálfir hafa;
hjalm ok brynju
skal hirða vel,

gótt's til gǫrs at taka.[65]

This cautious injunction may be compared, for example, with *Hávamál* 38:

Vápnom sínom scala maðr velli á
feti ganga framarr;
þvíat óvíst er at vita, nær verðr á vegom úti
geirs um þǫrf guma.[66]

There is, furthermore, a less obvious parallel between *Hákonarmál* 13, lines 5-6 (*Skjald* B I, 59) *at nú mun allvaldr koma / á hann sjalfan at séa* ('now the all-ruler [Hákon, in this instance] will come to see [Óðinn] himself') and *Vafþrúðnismál* 6, lines 1-2 *Heill þú nú, Vafþrúðnir! Nú em ec í hǫll kominn, / á þic sialfan siá* ('Greetings to you now, Vafþrúðnir! Now I've come into the hall to see you yourself'). Eyvindr's use of the term *regin* for the gods (in the alliterating phrase *rǫð ǫll ok regin*, stanza 18, line 6) is also highly reminiscent of the poems of the Codex Regius; this word appears as a simplex only in eddic verse.[67] Table 2 shows the extent of verbal borrowing in *Hákonarmál*: there is only one significant lexical parallel between this poem and *Eiríksmál*, as compared to five lines which are found in eddic verse.

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[65] *Skjald* B I, 59: 'The good king said: "We wish to keep our war-gear to ourselves; we must tend well to our helmet and mail-coat; it is good to have things ready"'.

[66] 'From his weapons on the open road no man should step one pace away; you don't know for certain when you're out on the road when you might have need of your spear.' The phrase *þvíat óvíst at vita* also occurs in *Hávamál* 1, line 5 and in *Fáfnismál* 24, as well as in *Eiríksmál* 17.

[67] *Regin* ('powers') occurs 9 times in *Vǫluspá*, 14 times in *Vafþrúðnismál*, 4 times in *Grímnismál*, 3 times in *Lokasenna*, twice in *Vǫluspá in skamma* and once each in *Hávamál*, *Atlamál*, *Baldrs draumar*, *Sigrdrífumál* and *Fjǫlsvinnsmál*. *Regin*, as a simplex, is 'peculiar to the ancient poems' (Cleasby-Vigfússon). Eyvindr also calls the gods *bǫnd* ('those who bind'), *rǫð* ('powers') and *heiðin goð* ('heathen gods'). For Marold, this religious terminology is 'characteristic of the late pagan religion of the environment of the earls of Hlaðir' ('Eyvindr Finnson Skáldaspillir', p. 175). See also *eadem*., 'Das Walhallbild', p. 32; Heinrichs, '"Hákonarmál" im literarischen Kontext', p. 437, and especially de Boor's seminal study of the religious attitudes of the poets who served the earls of Hlaðir, 'Die religiöse Sprache'.

Hákonarmál	*Eiríksmál*	Other poems
11/3 mærar af mars baki		*Hamðismál* 12 (14)/2 mærr um léc á mars baki[68]
13/1-3 Ríða vit skulum, kvað en ríkja Skǫgul, grœnna heima goða.		*Hyndluljóð* 1 Vaki, mær meyia, vaki mín vina, Hyndla systir, er í helli býr, nú er rǫcr rǫcra, ríða vit scolom til Valhallar oc til vés heilags.
13/5-6 at nú mun allvaldr koma á hann sjálfan at séa		*Vafðrúdnismál* 6/1-2 Heill þú nú, Vafþrúðnir! Nú em ec í hǫll kominn, á þic siálfan siá
14/3 gangið í gǫgn grami	5/3 ok gangið í gǫgn grami	
18/6 rǫð ǫll ok regin		*Vǫluspá* 6, 9, 23, 25 þá gengu regin ǫll á rǫkstola
21/1-2 Deyr fé deyja frændr		*Hávamál* 76/1 & 77/1 Deyr fé, deyia frœndr

Table 2: Significant verbal parallels between *Hákonarmál* and other poems

The part of *Hákonarmál* which takes place within Valhǫll (stanzas 1 and 10-21) is in *ljóðaháttr*, the metre of both *Hávamál* and *Eiríksmál*. Eyvindr may of course have chosen this metre in imitation of *Eiríksmál*, but this imitation cannot be insisted upon; the use of *ljóðaháttr* in both panegyrics is a mythologizing device, designed to help situate their heroes more firmly within the world of the gods. Audiences attuned to the rhythms of eddic verse would have recognised the *ljóðaháttr*, which in the poems of the Codex Regius signals either that a text contains 'wisdom' – either mythological information or gnomic proverbs – or that it is dialogic in form, and attended to both poems within a primarily mythological, as opposed to a historical, frame of reference.[69] *Hákonarmál* differs from *Eiríksmál* in that the first part of the poem, which describes the battle in which Hákon lost his life, is in *málaháttr*, a variant of *fornyrðislag* more suited, perhaps, to narrative.

In this way Eyvindr locates Hákon in both the historical record and in the mythological worldview, in both the world of men and the world of the gods. The shift between metres is a remarkably effective device: stanza 1, in *ljóðaháttr*, describes the flight of the valkyries Gǫndul and Skǫgul on their way to select which of the rival kings would be welcomed in Valhǫll.

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[68] This stanza of *Hamðismál* is numbered 14 in Neckel-Kuhn, but it is the twelfth stanza according to the ordering found in the manuscript.

[69] *Ljóðaháttr* ('song-metre') is also the metre of *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál*, *For Scírnis*, *Lokasenna*, *Alvíssmál*, part of *Fáfnismál* (stanzas 1-31, which constitute the dialogue between Sigurðr and the dragon) and *Sigrdrífumál*.

Hákonarmál 1

Gǫndul ok Skǫgul
sendi Gauta-týr
at kjósa of konunga
hverr Yngva ættar
skyldi með Óðni fara
ok í Valhǫll vesa.[70]

The poem's first stanza takes place in the world of the gods, and its mythological content is by now familiar: Valhǫll is closely associated with Óðinn, and the valkyries once again act as the god's agent in choosing high status males – the references to kings in line 3 and to Yngvi's descendents in line 4 serve at once to emphasise the candidates' social standing – to join him.

In stanza 2, the metre changes as the poem's scene shifts to the battlefield. At this point, rather than being self-consciously eddic, the *málaháttr* verse sounds more akin to stereotyped battle-descriptions more usually found in skaldic *dróttkvætt.*[71] Gods and other mythical beings play no part in this section of *Hákonarmál* other than providing determinants in kennings for battle, of which there are several, in marked contrast to the practice of eddic poets and the author of *Eiríksmál.*[72] Hákon and his men, on the other hand, are presented as god-like; in stanza 6 the king is called *Bauga-Týr Norðmanna* ('ring-Týr of the Norsemen').[73] This kenning recalls

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[70] *Skjald* B I, 57: 'Gauta-Týr sent Gǫndul and Skǫgul to choose which king of the line of Yngvi was to go with Óðinn and dwell in Valhǫll.'

[71] As Sahlgren put it (*Eddica et Scaldica* I, 42), *málaháttr* is simply more suited to battle-scenes or epic themes than *ljóðaháttr* is.

[72] Mythological kennings in *Hákonarmál* are 5/3 *váðir Váfaðar* ('the waverer's [i.e. Óðinn's] clothing > armour'); 8/3 *veðr Skǫglar* ('Skǫgul's weather > battle') and 8/6 *veðr Óðins* ('Óðinn's weather > battle'). The alliterative patterning of Eyvindr's *málaháttr* – with its two regularly alliterating stressed syllables in odd lines also alliterating with the first stressed syllable in the following even line – is also more reminiscent of *dróttkvætt* than of the common eddic metres.

[73] Stanza 6, lines 1-4: *Trǫddusk tǫrgur / fyr Týs ok bauga / hjalta harðfótum / hausar Norðmanna* ('shields and skulls were trodden before hard feet of the swords of the Norsemen's ring-Týr). The interpretation of this stanza is open to doubt: this translation is based on Finnur Jónsson's corrected text, and reflects the traditional reading. Alternatives, dependent on significant emendation, were suggested by Kock, *Notationes norræna*, § 1053 and Sahlgren, *Eddica et Scaldica* I, 51-55. Kock and Sahlgren would emend the reading of 6/2 (*fyr tyss ok bauga* in most manuscripts) to *und Týs of eldi* (based on the witness of the two *Fagrskinna* manuscripts: see *Skjald* A I, 65): in this reading *Týr eldi* is regarded as a kenning for battle. Otherwise, *baugr-Týr Norðmanna* we must take to refer to Hákon. As using a god-

Óðinn's by-name in the first stanza: Gauta-Týr. In a poem in which the human subject ends up being placed alongside Óðinn in the afterlife, the switch to a narrative mode and skaldic conventions emphasises the implied equivalence between the hero and the god. Much more than in *Eiríksmál,* the subject of the panegyric is shown engaged in the action which brings him to the attention of Óðinn and the valkyries. This first distinction between the two poems is fundamental: whereas *Eiríksmál* only mythologizes its hero, Eyvindr combines and reconciles two different encomiastic impulses. From skaldic tradition, he takes his battle-scenes, which provide an air of historical verisimilitude. From the purely mythological tradition of eddic poetry, he takes up (beginning properly at stanza 10) the motifs of the warrior's entry into Valhǫ ll and the debate among the gods. If *Hákonarmál* is dependent on *Eiríksmál* for anything, it is for its purely 'eddic' section as, assuming both poems are complete in their extant form, there is no equivalent description of events on earth for Eyvindr to have plagiarised from. A comparison of the two poems' treatment of the entry into Valhǫll type-scene shows, however, that they do not adhere to a single homogenous version of the myth even in their most analogous parts.

Eiríksmál centres itself on Óðinn while *Hákonarmál* focuses on Hákon's experiences, not merely in his battle but also following his death. Stanza 2 of *Eiríksmál* is in the first person, spoken by Óðinn. In it, he describes how the thought of Eiríkr's arrival in Valhǫll makes his heart glad:

Eiríksmál 2

Es mér ór heimi
hǫlða vánir
gǫfugra nǫkkura,
svá's mér glatt hjarta.[74]

The battle-sequence of *Hákonarmál* ends in stanza 9, lines 6-8 with the phrase *sá herr … átti til Valhallar vega* ('the army had to go to Valhǫll'). As soon as the name of Valhǫll recurs the metre changes back to *ljóðaháttr* as the poet returns to the world of myth, and the valkyries who were introduced in stanza 1 reappear. The aural echo of *Hákonarmál* 1, line 6 *í Valhǫll vesa*, in stanza 9,

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name as part of a kenning for a man or warrior is commonplace in skaldic verse, the conventional reading should be preferred. See the extensive list of such kennings provided by Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden*, pp. 259-63.

[74] *Skjald* B I, 165: 'Certain noble men out of the world are expected by me, for which my heart is glad.'

line 8 *til Valhallar vega* creates an envelope pattern, a structural device that serves, together with the change in metre, to frame the battle and to highlight the definite transition from one realm – of poetry as well as existence – into the other; in so doing, it also provides internal evidence in support of the theory that *Hákonarmál* is an entire poem, unified in its conception.

Eiríksmál 2 may be regarded as structurally analogous to *Hákonarmál* 10, in that they both feature the mythological figures responsible for choosing the slain – in the one Óðinn's servants, in the other the god himself – speaking directly of their anticipation of the welcome arrival of a new hero.

Hákonarmál 10

Gǫndul þat mælti,
studdisk geirskapti:
vex nú gengi goða,
es Hǫkoni hafa
með her mikinn
heim bǫnd of boðit.[75]

Both these verses contain the word *heimr*, although it refers to different concepts in each. In *Eiríksmál* Eiríkr is to come *ór heimi*, out of the world of men. Hákon's *heimr*, on the other hand, is his home in the world of the gods. The shared vocabulary is probably coincidental; if it is not, it cannot be seen as the direct influence of *Eiríksmál* upon Eyvindr's work, as it has subtly different implications. Hákon's natural home, Eyvindr seems to be suggesting, is among the Æsir: he is the gods' equal. Throughout *Hákonarmál*, this tendency to place Hákon in a position of status equal to the gods is apparent. It may be the case, although I do not insist upon it, that Eyvindr's use of *heimr* here is a deliberate inversion of *Eiríksmál*'s. Eiríkr was taken *out* of his home in his translation from Miðgarðr into Valhǫll, Eyvindr may be saying, but Hákon *belongs* there: Valhǫll *is* his home. Although I may be guilty of over-interpretation of these two stanzas, the similarities, and differences, between the representations of the warrior-king's entry into the afterlife in *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál* can in many cases best be explained by regarding *Hákonarmál* as a self-conscious attempt to situate the poem's hero in a more glorious position in the afterlife than his

[75] 'Gǫndul spoke, supporting herself on a spear-shaft: "the gods' troop grows now that the gods have invited Hákon home with a great army."'

predecessor's. In *Hákonarmál* glory is not in the gift of the gods, but depends rather on the hero's situation relative to them within the mythic hierarchy. Óðinn describes Eiríkr's worth; his special status is Óðinn's gift. Hákon's worth is conversely demonstrated both by the extended description of his feats of arms and by his comportment upon his arrival into Valhǫll.

Hákon is presented as being cautious, even reluctant, about joining Óðinn's company. While still on the battlefield he and his men heard the valkyries' talk of the voyage to Valhǫll: they do not seem pleased, as stanzas 11 and 12 show.

Hákonarmál 11-12

Vísi þat heyrði,
hvat valkyrjur mæltu
mærar of mars baki;
hyggiliga létu
ok hjalmaðar sǫtu
ok hǫfðusk hlífar fyrir.

Hví þú svá gunni
skiptir, Geir-Skǫgul,
órum þó verðir gagns frá goðom?
Vér því vǫldum,
es velli helt
en þínir fíandr flugu.[76]

The adverb *hyggiliga* in stanza 11, line 4 does not suggest that Hákon and his company were exactly enthusiastic about the valkyries' arrival: they were getting the better of the battle, as the *málaháttr* narrative, as well as Hákon's question in stanza 12, lines 1-3, indicates. There is no sign that the warriors are excited, or even pleased, that they are about to join Óðinn. Instead they sit 'circumspectly', their helmets upon their heads, and their shields remaining upright in a gesture that suggests suspicion and wariness of further trouble. In *Eiríksmál*, because Eiríkr only enters

[76] Stanza 11: 'The captain heard what the valkyries said, glorious on horseback. With circumspection they behaved, and sat helmeted, and held their shields up before them.' Stanza 12: "'Why did you divide the battle this way, Geir-Skǫgul, when we merited victory from the gods?" "We caused it to be thus, that you held the field, but your enemies fled.'"

at the very end of the poem, we can hardly gauge his reaction, although his noisy arrival and hubristic description of the five kings he has brought with him (as described in stanzas 3-4 and 9 respectively) suggests that he has few qualms about accepting Óðinn's offer of an eternity in the corps of the *einherjar*.

The question in *Hákonarmál* 12, 'why did you decide the battle in this manner?' reasserts the traditional role of the valkyries in determining the outcome of such conflicts, whether on their own initiative or under instructions from Óðinn.[77] It also echoes the question asked by Bragi in *Eiríksmál* 7: *Hví namt hann sigri þá / es þér þotti snjallar vesa?* While both questions address a contradiction at the heart of the Valhǫll meta-myth – if the *einherjar* are to comprise the finest earthly warriors, isn't it strange that it should be the ones who are killed (the losers, in fact) from which they are chosen? – the answers they receive are rather different. Eiríkr's future role is emphasised: he is part of Óðinn's insurance against the unknown day when Fenrisúlfr's release will initiate the end of the world. The valkyrie who answers Hákon's version of the same question simply says *vér því vǫldum*, asserting her rights to choose whomever she pleases. At once she adds, however, that Hákon's enemies have fled. Hákon thereby gets the best of both worlds. He receives whatever posthumous glory is to be found by a place in Valhǫll, without being tainted with the stigma of having lost a battle. And, although Gǫndul says that the gods' support is growing with Hákon's addition to it, she does not state for what purpose his support is needed. Nowhere in *Hákonarmál* is Ragnarǫk alluded to, unless we count stanza 20, where Eyvindr states that

> Mun óbundinn
> á ýta sjǫt
> fenrisulfr fara,

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[77] Schullerus, 'Zur Kritik des altnordischen Valhǫllglaubens', p. 225, interprets the valkyries as mythical female warriors, rather along the lines of the Amazons, who fight 'aus Lust am Kampf, töten die Helden, nicht um sie nach Valhǫll zu führen, sondern weil diese die Gegner ihre Schützlinge sind'. In *Hákonarmál* there is no indication that the two valkyries fight on either side of the battle: Gǫndul is shown leaning on a spear, but this attitude is not necessarily that of a resting warrior. The spear, being an Óðinnic symbol, is part of the iconography of his cult, such as it was, as were the valkyries. Gǫndul and Skǫgul do not actually lead Hákon into Valhǫll, it is true; they ride ahead to inform Óðinn of his coming. The gods Hermóðr and Bragi are sent out to greet the warriors. In *Eiríksmál* the legendary heroes Sigmundr and Sinfjǫtli perform this function, while the valkyries are mentioned only in the opening stanza, and are presented purely as Óðinn's servants, who will serve the wine to Eiríkr.

áðr jafngóðr
á auða trǫð
konungmaðr komi.[78]

This stanza does not, I think, suggest that the last battle loomed large in Eyvindr's mind as a result of contemporary apocalyptic jitters, as Grundy opines.[79] Although the approach of the year 1000 did provoke fears among Christians about the imminent Second Coming,[80] there is nothing in Eyvindr's verse to suggest that he had been influenced by millenarian angst: in fact, the further away the end of the world, the more effective his hyperbole, by which he means to say that there will *never* be a ruler as great as Hákon. He does not assert that Hákon will play a part in Ragnarǫk, whether it was believed to be imminent or not. This combination of apocalyptic imagery with praise for a ruler at the end of an *erfidrápa* is not restricted to *Hákonarmál*: it is also found in the final stanza of Hallfreðr's *Óláfsdrápa*, and in Arnórr jarlaskáld's *Þorfinnsdrápa*, stanza 22, both of which use exactly the same form of expression to suggest that their patron will never be surpassed by future lords. Arnórr and Hallfreðr, being (by the time they composed these *drápur*) Christians, and writing in honour of Christian lords, use apocalyptic imagery which is less specifically linked to Ragnarǫk than Eyvindr's is:

Hallfreðr Óttarsson vandræðaskáld, *Óláfsdrápa* 29

Fyrr mun heimr ok himnar,
hugreifum Áleifi,
(hann vas menskra manna
mest gótt) í tvau bresta,
áðr an, glíkr at góðu,
gœðingr myni fœðask;
kœns hafi Kristr enn hreini
konungs ǫnd ofar lǫndum.[81]

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[78] 'Unbound, Fenrisúlfr will come upon the places of men before such a good kingly man may come to the desolate land.'

[79] Grundy, 'Cult of Óðinn', p. 29.

[80] See Sigurður Nordal, 'Three Essays', pp. 113-18, and Bethurum, ed., *Homilies of Wulfstan*, pp. 278-82.

[81] *Skjald* B I, 156-7: 'First will heaven and earth break in two, before a chieftain equal in goodness to cheerful Óláfr – he was best of all human people – will be born: let the pure Christ have the soul of the wise king above the lands.'

Arnórr Þórðarson jarlaskáld, *Þorfinnsdrápa* 22

Bjǫrt verðr sól at svartri,
søkkr fold í mar døkkvan,
brestr erfiði Austra,
allr glymr sær á fjǫllum,
áðr at Eyjum fríðri
– inndróttar – Þorfinni
– þeim hjalpi goð geymi –
– gœðingr myni fœðask.[82]

Although the later poets eschew specifically pagan referents in these verses (with the exception of Arnórr's harmless kenning for 'sky' as 'toil of Austri'), their *drápur* conclude with a rhetorical trope effectively identical to stanza 20 of *Hákonarmál*. Viewed in this context, Eyvindr's verse thus does not have any bearing on the connection between the *einherjar* and the end of the world.

The closest correspondence between *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál* is found in the analogous stanzas in which a welcoming party is sent out to meet the kings. Both include the line *gangið í gǫgn grami*, which verbal identity is the only indication of direct borrowing from *Eiríksmál* in the later text. The two verses obviously occupy the same position in the structure of both poems: they are, in fact, the only verses which have this directly analogous structural function:

Eiríksmál 5

Sigmundr ok Sinfjǫtli,
rísið snarliga
ok gangið í gǫgn grami,
inn þú bjóð
ef Eiríkr séi;
hans es mér nú vǫn vituð.[83]

Hákonarmál 14

Hermóðr ok Bragi,
kvað Hroptatýr,
gangið í gǫgn grami,
þvít konungr ferr,
sás kappi þykkir,
til hallar hinig.[84]

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[82] *Poetry of Arnórr jarlaskáld*, ed. Whaley, p. 128: 'The bright sun will become black, earth will sink into dark sea, Austri's toil [sky] will burst; all the sea will roar over the mountains before in the Isles a finer chieftain than Þorfinnr – God help that guardian of a retinue – will be born.' As Whaley points out, *ibid.*, pp. 265-6, lines 1-2 of Arnórr's stanza were probably influenced by *Vǫluspá* 57 *Sól tér sortna / sígr fold í már*, while the stanza as a whole deliberately echoes Hallfreðr's *drápa*. See also McKinnell, *Both One and Many*, p. 108.

A difference between the two stanzas is that Eiríkr is met by two legendary heroes from the Vǫlsung-cycle whereas two gods, Hermóðr and Bragi, go to greet Hákon. Eyvindr's naming of two of the Æsir in this stanza should be read, I think, as a further attempt at aggrandizement, part of *Hákonarmál*'s poetics of outdoing: gods trump heroes in this game, and Hákon's entry into Valhǫll is the more impressive for it. In passing it should be noted that Sigmundr and Sinfjǫtli, though they carry perhaps the greatest cachet of any Germanic heroes, should not, by rights, both be in Valhǫll. In *Vǫlsunga saga* Sinfjǫtli dies of poison:[85] he is certainly not a *vápndauðr maðr*, although, as a murder victim neither does he fit properly into Snorri's categories of the *sóttdauðir* or *ellidauðir*, by which token he would not have been automatically accepted as one of Hel's people.[86]

It is somewhat strange that it should be Bragi, rather than Óðinn, who utters a speech of welcome when Hákon arrives in Valhǫll, although Hákon has already taken something of a dislike to the Valfǫðr's visage, as *Hákonarmál* 15 makes clear:

> Ræsir þat mælti,
> vas frá rómu kominn,
> stóð allr í dreyra drifinn:
> illúðigr mjǫk
> þykkjumk Óðinn vesa,
> séumk vér hans of hugi.[87]

There is little glamour in Eyvindr's description of Hákon dripping blood onto the floor of Óðinn's hall, and the hero is wary of Valhǫll's lord. This presentation of Óðinn as taciturn and foreboding is in keeping with his depiction in many other literary sources, but it clashes rather

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[83] '"Sigmundr and Sinfjǫtli, rise quickly, and go to meet the warrior. If it should be Eiríkr, invite him in; his arrival is now expected by me."'

[84] 'Hroptatýr said: "Hermóðr and Bragi, go to meet the warrior, since a king is coming hither into the hall, one who seems to be a champion."'

[85] *The Saga of the Volsungs*, ed Finch, p. 18. The saga does not mention Sinfǫtli's destination in the afterlife.

[86] See Schullerus, 'Zur Kritik des Valhǫllglaubens', p. 231, for a short list of other significant figures – historical as well as legendary – whom poets placed in Valhǫll despite their having died non-violent deaths.

[87] 'The chieftain spoke, he who was come from the battle; he stood all splattered with blood: "Óðinn seems to me to be very ill-boding. We must beware of his mood."'

with the god as he appears in *Eiríksmál*, voluble and welcoming and, one might almost say, cheerful. For Bragi to act as the gods' spokesman in this instance is an exercise in public relations.

In the following stanza, it seems that Bragi offers Hákon membership of the *einherjar* and, implicitly, participation in their conventional activities of feasting, fighting and preparing to serve in the gods' army at the end of the world, but whether Hákon accepts this honour or not is questionable. In *Hákonarmál* 16/1-2, Bragi says *Einherja grið / skalt þú allra hafa* ('you must have the truce of all the *einherjar*'). It is unclear precisely what *einherja grið* must mean in this context. The primary meaning of *grið* is 'home' or 'place of abode', qualified according to Cleasby-Vigfússon by 'the notion of service'. So, Hákon and his men may simply be invited to make their home among the *einherjar*, with the implication that they too will be bounden to the service of the gods. It could, however, mean 'truce, peace, pardon, immunity, or promise of safe conduct', in which case we must decide whether membership of the *einherjar* required the adherence to some such truce (not, if Snorri is to believed, a truce which prevents them fighting – and killing – one another on a daily basis), or whether warriors were guaranteed safe passage and pardon for any misdeeds by the gods upon their entry into the cohort, or whether instead Hákon needed to be granted a truce or pardon by the *einherjar* themselves. Although *þú skalt hafa* may express the future tense, it could also have the force of an imperative, leaving the impression that Hákon has no choice in the matter, with possibly threatening overtones. In any case, Hákon is not at once keen to accept the offer. Bragi tries to sweeten the deal by offering the 'beer of the gods' and by telling Hákon that he already has eight brothers in the hall):

Hákonarmál 16

Einherja grið
skalt þú allra hafa,
þigg þú at ǫ́sum ǫl;
jarla bági
þú átt inni hér
átta brœðr – kvað Bragi.[88]

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[88] '"You shall all have the truce of all the *einherjar*: accept beer from the gods; enemy of earls, in here you have eight brothers," said Bragi.'

Even so, this cajoling hardly convinces the Norwegian, who answers by telling his men to keep their weapons close to hand in stanza 17.

There is an apparent standoff between the king and Óðinn; Bragi attempts to act as an intermediary, to bring Hákon into the community of Valhǫll, but Hákon is in no hurry to accept the *allra einherja grið* or the *ǫl at ásum*, the symbols of his inclusion. He is suspicious of these offers. Perhaps he does not wish to become a member of Óðinn's army. Even if Hákon's reticence upon his arrival in Valhǫll is no more than common sense for a warrior in a strange hall, it suggests a different attitude towards the whole myth-complex. Hákon does not wish to rush in, and his weapons remain for his own protection, not for Óðinn's service. The contrast with Eiríkr's demeanour in the earlier poem is marked. The hero of *Eiríksmál* is defined by his new function as one of the *einherjar*; he talks excitedly of the five kings who he has brought with him, more great warriors for the eternal army. Hákon keeps his own counsel, and never speaks to Óðinn or Bragi directly.

The impasse on the floor of Valhǫll is broken in *Hákonarmál* 18. The gods recall what a servant Hákon had been to them, not in his battles, but in his respectful observance of their cults.

> Þá þat kyndisk,
> hvé sá konungr hafði
> vel of þyrmt véum,
> es Hǫ́kon bǫ́ðu
> heilan koma
> rǫ́ð ǫll ok regin.[89]

The recollection of this service is presumably enough to dispel the tension in the scene, because the remaining stanzas abandon the confrontation between Hákon and the gods, and the poem closes with three more generally encomiastic verses in praise of the earthly king. The final stanza (which begins with the quotation of the opening lines of *Hávamál* 76/77) concludes with the statement that *siz Hǫ́kon / fór með heiðin goð / mǫrg es þjóð of þéuð* ('since Hákon went among the heathen gods, many a people has been subdued'). Although *fór með heiðin goð* is probably nothing

[89] 'It was then recognised, how the king had respected the altars well, and that all the gods and powers bade Hákon welcome.'

more than a circumlocution for 'he died', it could be inferred from this line that by going 'with' or 'among' the heathen gods Hákon himself attains the status of a divinity. Not content with being one of Óðinn's hand-picked warriors, Hákon's refusal to conform to the expected paradigm of a hero's behaviour in Valhǫll (in so far as it can be discerned from *Eiríksmál*) forces the gods to reassess his worth: finally he enters the gods' own circle, and is perhaps accepted as their equal. The use of the name *allvaldr* (13/5 'all-powerful') for Hákon recalls one of Óðinn's eddic *heiti*, Alfǫðr ('all-father'),[90] suggesting an equivalence between the two figures in the extent of their power. Thus, when Eyvindr has the valkyrie say *vex nú gengi goða* in stanza 10, it could be that she means that the number of the gods themselves is to be enlarged with Hákon's arrival,[91] although it seems more likely to me that Hákon, like Eiríkr, initially was chosen for his prowess as a warrior. It is his uncompromising refusal to let down his guard and accept the *allra einherja grið* that forces the gods to reassess their opinion of him.

Edith Marold has written that it is 'because of his Christian faith or his fear [that] the king does not want to go to Óðinn'. She also argues that Valhǫll and Óðinn are presented 'very unfavourably' in *Hákonarmál*.[92] I cannot discern any trace of fear in Eyvindr's portrayal of Hákon in Valhǫll. Hákon's wariness must not be equated with cowardice: he is annoyed that life has been denied to him and his men when they were on the path to victory, and wary of the god who engineered their defeat. His apparent reluctance to join the *einherjar* is better interpreted as a symptom of pride than fear: Eyvindr would have had no reason to, and did not, represent Hákon as cowardly. Facing up to Óðinn and the other gods in this way actually requires a high degree of bravery, even if it is rather different from the gung-ho, self-disregarding courage we expect to see the warriors of Valhǫll display.

Traces of Christian attitudes are similarly hard to find. The phrase *heiðin goð* is the only possible evidence of Christian mores in a poem otherwise imbued with pagan sentiment and

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[90] Óðinn is called Alfǫðr in *Grímnismál* 48 and *Alfaðir* in *Helgakviða hundingsbana I* 38; see Grundy, *Miscellaneous Studies*, p. 67.

[91] Both Neckel, *Walhall*, p. 69, and Marold, 'Das Walhallbild', p. 25, who quotes a passage from Rimbert's *Vita Anskarii* as evidence that earthly heroes could attain divine status after their death, have suggested this possibility.

[92] Marold, 'Eyvindr Finnson Skáldaspillir', p. 175. Heinrichs, ' "Hákonarmál" im literarischen Kontext', p. 436, also asks 'warum Hakon Odin fürchtet?'

crammed full of eddic referents and phraseology.[93] And yet, the attitudes towards death, Óðinn, and Valhǫll, and the very mood of the poem all do stand in contrast to *Eiríksmál*, in comparison with which the Valhǫll myth-complex is presented in a much more ambiguous light.[94] The main effect of the disparity between the presentation of the afterlife in *Hákonarmál* and its (partial) exemplar is an undercutting of Valhǫll's image as a glorious warrior paradise. By engaging more fully than any other source with the unappealing and otherwise disregarded fact that death, even a glorious death in battle, was unwelcome to some warriors, and by emphasising Óðinn and his agents' capriciousness in deciding the fate of men's lives, Eyvindr's poem removes some of the gloss from the shining hall. Whether because of Hákon or Eyvindr's adherence to a new faith or not, the Lord of Valhǫll is presented in *Hákonarmál* in his familiarly terrifying, taciturn aspect, and resembles nothing like the loquacious host of *Eiríksmál*, fussing over domestic arrangements, solicitous for his guest's well-being. (It might well be argued that in its depiction of Óðinn, *Hákonarmál* conforms the more closely to expected norms, precisely because of this characterisation.)

So the reputations of Valhǫll and its owner are somewhat tarnished by Eyvindr's equivocation; but it is not his aim to do down pagan notions of the afterlife. Rather, his aim in muting the triumphal aspects of Valhǫll is to stand his hero, his departed lord and patron, in the position of most glory, as was ever the encomiast's job. His purpose in this endeavour is still served by placing him in a conventional mythological scene, even though Hákon died a Christian. The cachet of Valhǫll must have remained strong. But mere membership of the *einherjar* is, for Eyvindr, not sufficient to guarantee his subject adequate fame in perpetuity. Whereas *Eiríksmál*, then, is theocentric, *Hákonarmál* is hero-centric. Eiríkr's glory accrues from his conformity to the paradigm of the Viking warrior, whose function within the mythological scheme of things was to fight and die and to fight some more, explicitly in the service of Óðinn. Hákon, however, transcends this paradigm; he effectively refuses the Óðinnic contract. Although he has served the gods in life by allowing their cults to flourish, he is no longer their

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[93] Before the arrival of Christianity the word *heiðinn* had no currency, and the word appears for the first time in *Hákonarmál* (but see above, pp. 42-4). Heinrichs, ' "Hákonarmál" im literarischen Kontext', p. 437, emphasises what she calls the 'vertieften heidnischen Religiosität' of *Hákonarmál*.

[94] For von See, this ambiguity was a primary reason for reversing the conventional model of transmission for these poems and regarding *Eiríksmál* as a partial imitation of *Hákonarmál*, because of its more highly developed and coherent version of the myth ('Zwei eddische Preislieder', pp. 116-17). Which is to say, I infer, that it more closely resembles the meta-myth preserved in *Snorra Edda*.

servant; he is something approaching their equal. This attitudinal shift may be due to squeamishness about using the relationship of man to heathen god as the main panegyric device. It may reflect, as Marold and Heinrichs would have it, the religious attitudes of the pagan earls of Hlaðir, who were perhaps Eyvindr's intended audience, and with whom the Christian Hákon had interacted during his life. It is more likely, however, to be a necessary component of Eyvindr's desire to upstage *Eiríksmál*. The allusions we find in *Hákonarmál* draw our attention to superficial similarities with *Eiríksmál*; but these correspondences serve primarily to accentuate the differences between the poems, which are many and obvious. Bearing in mind the purpose of the *erfikvæði*, it is unsurprising that these differences create a clear differentiation between the men immortalised in them. Eyvindr's so-called plagiarism invites his audience to draw a direct comparison between *Hákonarmál* and *Eiríksmál*, and thereby to judge Hákon against Eiríkr. According to my reading, Eyvindr's deviation from the standard Valhǫll myth-complex is a deliberate literary manipulation. *Eiríksmál*'s representation of the afterlife fits in happily with the model provided by Snorri's meta-myth; *Hákonarmál* deliberately subverts that model, not primarily on the basis of religious belief, but according to its author's eulogizing strategy. I have no particular quarrel with Stephan Grundy when he writes that 'Eyvindr was apparently a man of considerable religious conviction', but I cannot agree with his statement that 'Eyvindr's poem is thus more likely [than *Eiríksmál*] to present Norse belief about Óðinn and Valhǫll accurately'.[95] What *Hákonarmál* says about Óðinn and Valhǫll is always subordinate to what it wants to say about Hákon.

THE ÓDINNIC MODE OF DEATH IN THE *FORNALDARSÖGUR* AND *YNGLINGA SAGA*

The vogue for eddic praise-poetry, as exemplified by *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*, did not last long. It is hardly surprising that, from the Conversion period onwards, Christianised skalds made no further use of Valhǫll type-scenes in their memorial lays: a Christian poet would have no cause to imagine a truly Christian king in Óðinn's company. Only after Christianity had been established for some time did authors choose to revisit the Valhǫll myth-complex in their work. By the time interest in pagan myths resurfaced in literary products of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland, belief in Valhǫll would presumably no longer have been current. *Snorra Edda*'s

[95] Grundy, 'Cult of Óðinn', p. 94.

treatment of Valhǫll, in line with Snorri's attitude throughout this work, is scholarly, and his purpose is mainly historical.[96] Not all late treatments of the myth-complex are so academic, however. In the so-called *fornaldarsögur*, 'sagas of the ancient time', pre-Christian religion and its associated myths and legends form an important part of authors' subject matter. As part of this, the Valhǫll myth-complex is presented in terms often very similar to the standard heroic model.

Hákonarmál introduced us to the idea that a king could gain favour with Óðinn in the afterlife not only by dying in battle, but also by serving the god on earth. In the legendary *fornaldarsögur*, the connection between Óðinn's cult, warrior activity and Valhǫll is made even more apparent. One of Germanic legend's most significant heroes is Sigmundr, who dies as a result of wounds sustained in battle (and thus is technically *vápndauðr*, although he is not at once killed outright). As we see in *Vǫlsunga saga*, his deathbed thoughts are of his relationship with Óðinn:

> En hann svarar, 'Margr lifnar ór litlum vánum, en horfin eru mér heill, svá at ek vil eigi láta grœða mik. Vill Óðinn ekki at vér bregðum sverði, síðan er nú brotnaði. Hefi ek haft orrustur meðan honum líkaði.[97]

Sigmundr reasserts that Óðinn is responsible for deciding the fates of those men who serve him: in his case, as in so many others, this service has consisted mainly of fighting for as long as it pleased the god. For Sigmundr, though, Óðinn's determination of his fate takes on an unusually personal character. A figure bearing all Óðinn's characteristic features breaks Sigmundr's sword,

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[96] Faulkes, 'Sources of *Skáldskaparmál*', p. 76. Other scholars have dissented from Faulkes's view that Snorri was primarily a historian: Schier, 'Zur Mythologie der *Snorra Edda*', p. 406, thought that the purpose of *Snorra Edda* as a whole was primarily poetological; Clunies Ross, „Quellen zur germanischen Religionsgeschichte", on the other hand, thought that Snorri's intention was first and foremost to provide an overview of pre-Christian Scandinavian myth. To my mind, Weber's integrative approach to Snorri's work, in which he sought to relate the purpose of *Ynglinga saga* to that of *Snorra Edda*, arguing that the two works are both part of one overarching project by which Snorri hoped to make sense of pre-Christian culture in its widest sense within the context of contemporary thought, is the most satisfactory interpretation of Snorri's overall approach to pagan subjects. See Weber, 'Siðaskipti', esp. pp. 311-12.

[97] *The Saga of the Volsungs*, ed. Finch, p. 21: 'Many have recovered when there was little hope,' he answered, 'but my good luck has turned and so I do not wish to be made well. Óðinn does not want me to wield the sword, for now it lies broken. I have fought battles while it was his pleasure.'

and turns his luck.[98] The author of *Vǫlsunga saga* does not mention whether Sigmundr believed he was destined for Valhǫll, but we would expect no less for a hero of this magnitude, and an avowed Óðinn-worshipper to boot. And of course he was seen, as large as life, welcoming Eiríkr blóðøx to the god's realm in *Eiríksmál*.

According to historians of Norse religion, Óðinn's special literary associations with those killed in battle could have grown out of the fact that his cult at one time practised human sacrifice. Renauld-Kratz, for example, dedicates a chapter of his book on the structures of Old Norse mythology to 'Odin: dieu des morts'. He views each and every battle in which a pagan Norseman took part as potentially a ritual offering to Óðinn: the vanquished warrior is automatically sacrificed to the god:

> On pourrait même voir dans cette offrande rituelle – qui fait de l'adversaire abbatu la victime d'un sacrifice dédié à Odin – l'origine de la croyance suivant laquelle l'homme tué par les armes va automatiquement chez Odin. Elle est en tout cas en parfait accord avec l'usage des sacrifices humains (dont elle n'est quelque sort qu'une extension) et confirme le goût du dieu pour les victims humaines.[99]

In this analysis, war becomes a religious operation which Óðinn inspires and of which he receives the fruits. The archetypal instance of this 'religious operation' is, according to Renauld-Kratz, the duel between Hjálmarr and Angantýr in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*. The two warriors, in the words of the saga, *vísaði hvárr øðrum til Valhallar*.[100] Puhvel, too, cited this instance of the 'custom' of wishing a warrior a journey to the next world as illustrating the 'popular prevalence of belief in Valhǫll'.[101] Whether or not this custom has any basis in the realities of pagan belief is

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[98] *The Saga of the Volsungs*, ed. Finch, p. 20: 'Ok er orrosta hafði staðit um hríð, þá kom maðr í bardagann með síðan hǫtt ok heklu blá. Hann hafði eitt auga ok geir í hendi. Þessi máðr kom á mót Sigmundi konungi ok brá upp geirinum fyrir hann. Ok er Sigmundr konungr hjó fast, kom sverðit í geirinn ok brast í sundr í tvá hlúti.' ('Now when the battle had gone on for some time, a man who had on a hat coming down over his face and a black cloak entered the fray. He had one eye and a spear in his hand. The man advanced towards King Sigmundr, raising the spear to before him, and when King Sigmundr struck fiercely, his sword hit against the spear and snapped in two.')

[99] Renauld-Kratz, *Structures de la Mythologie Nordique*, p. 64; see also de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* II, 74.

[100] *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, ed. Tolkien, p. 7: 'they showed each other the way to Valhǫll.'

[101] Puhvel, 'Heroism in the Anglo-Saxon Epic', p. 61.

unclear: nowhere else in the literary record do two warriors utter precisely these supposedly ritual words, although there is a close analogue in Snorri's prose frame to *Hákonarmál* in *Hákonar saga góða*: 'Mæltu þeir svá fyrir grepti hans sem heiðinna manna siðr var til, vísuðu til Valhallar'.[102] In *Hákonar saga* the practice is slightly different, in that the send-off to Valhǫll takes place as part of a funeral oration; the overall conception, that – among *heiðnir menn* – Valhǫll was a destination in the afterlife to which a man could be directed or dedicated, is the same.

Hervarar saga's conception of the afterlife does centre on Óðinn: Oddr and Hjálmarr, as they discuss the likelihood of their violent death at the hands of a dozen berserkers, repeatedly refer to dying by the euphemism 'to be Óðinn's guest'. First Hjálmarr says 'sýnisk mér nú líkast, at vér munum allir Óðin gista í kveld í Vallhǫllu' ('I think it is most likely that we shall all be Óðinn's guests in Valhǫll this evening'). Oddr replies 'en ek nenni eigi at gista Óðinn í kveld' ('I have no mind to visit Óðinn this evening'), and the warriors then each declaim a stanza in which the phrase *Óðin gista* means 'to die', with the implication that death will occur in battle.[103] The problematic nature of *Hervarar saga* as a source, however, means that these references have little relevance to a study of pre-Christian religious belief. This text, in common with the other *fornaldarsögur*, cannot be dated with any certainty: perhaps composed *c.* 1250, its earliest manuscript witness is *Hauksbók*, written some time between 1290 and 1334.[104] Although the term *fornaldarsaga* is modern, having been applied to sagas that deal with legendary (or, perhaps better, 'non-historical') subjects only since Rafn's *Fornaldar sögur Nordrlanda* was published in 1829, 'sagas of ancient times' seems an entirely appropriate nomenclature for the genre.

The *fornaldarsögur* are an antiquarian genre: but while they are unarguably nostalgic, they are yet not nostalgic for any historical period in particular. The ancient time they describe never was. Written in what Stephen Mitchell calls 'a period of national distress and cultural retrogression due to geological, meteorological, political and demographic factors', the *fornaldarsögur* 'represented a conduit to a glorious heroic past. As an antiquarian literature that developed in the postclassical-saga period, the *fornaldarsögur* fulfilled an important cultural and psychological function in addition to their robustly entertaining value'.[105] The performance of this function entailed the creation (or re-creation) of a heroic identity for the Icelanders'

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[102] *Heimskringla* I, 193: 'They said this before his grave, as was the custom of heathen men: they showed him the way to Valhǫll.'

[103] *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, ed. Tolkien, p. 6. See also Tolkien's note, *ibid.*, p. 87.

[104] See Pritsak, '*Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*', p. 283.

[105] Mitchell, '*Fornaldarsögur*', p. 207.

legendary ancestors. One aspect in which the valorised past could easily be differentiated from the problematic present was religion: notions of their forebears' belief in the old gods was central to post-Conversion concepts of the past, as it was one of the most obvious and resonant disjunctions between 'then' and 'now'.[106] Also, of course, the legendary narratives inherited by Christian Icelanders and woven into the *fornaldarsögur* centred on pagan heroes and, often, their interaction with the pagan gods.

The retrospective nature of the *fornaldarsögur* must be borne in mind when considering the significance of references to pagan belief found in them. The authors of these texts were Christians, who were attempting to create a literary world in which legendary heroes, figures from a pre-Christian past, could flourish. But no more did they themselves believe in Óðinn than in the dragons, dwarves, and giants that people their sagas. In many cases, the *fornaldarsögur* make explicit the gulf between the sensibilities of Icelanders in the postclassical period and those of the heroic society they purport to describe: with the exceptions of *Vǫlsunga saga*, *Sǫgubrot* and *Hervarar saga*, attitudes towards pagan cults in these texts are, in the main, resoundingly negative.[107] In *Gautreks saga*, to cite just one example, Valhǫll is mentioned several times in connection with an unusual, and frankly rather ridiculous, form of voluntary euthanasia, which is, I think, sardonically mocked as an example of pagan folly by the saga author, albeit implicitly:

> 'Hér er sá hamarr við bæ várn, er heitir Gillingshamarr, ok þar í hjá er stapi sá, er vér köllum Ætternisstapa. Hann er svá hár ok þat flug fyrir ofan, at þat kvikendi hefir ekki líf, er þar gengr fyrir niðr. Því heitir þat Ætternisstapi, at þar með fækkum vér várt ætterni, þegar oss þykkir stór kynsl við bera, ok deyja þar allir várir foreldrar fyrir utan alla sótt ok fara þá til Óðins, ok þurfum vér af engu váru forellri þyngsl at hafa né þrjózku, því at þessi sældarstaðr hefir öllum verit jafnfrjáls várum ættmönnum, ok þurfum eigi at lifa við fjártjón eða fæðsluleysi né engi önnur kynsl eða býsn, þótt hér beri til handa. Nú skaltu þat vita, at föður

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[106] See Torfi H. Tulinius, 'The Matter of the North', p. 253.

[107] Hallberg, 'Some Aspects of the *Fornaldarsögur* as a Corpus', p. 33. While considering references to Óðinn in the *fornaldarsögur*, however, Mitchell shows that the revisionist Christian view of the pagan gods is less universal than Hallberg suggests: 'in these sagas we are more likely to meet with an Odin who strikes us being very much in keeping with the deity who might have appeared in some pre-Conversion prose version of the eddic poems ("'Nú gef ek þik Óðni'", p. 777); see also Schlauch, *Romance in Iceland*, pp. 18-41.

> mínum þykkja þetta vera in mestu undr, er þu hafir komit til húsa várra … því at til þessa munu engi dæmi finnast, ok því ætlar faðir minn ok móðir á morgin at skipta arfi með oss systkinum, en þau vilja síðan ok þrællinn með þeim ganga fyrir Ætternisstapa ok fara svá til Valhallar. Vill faðir minn eigi tæpiligar launa þrælnum þann góðvilja, at hann ætlaði at reka þik ór dyrum, en nú njóti hann sælu með honum. Þykkist hann ok víst vita, at Óðinn mun eigi ganga í mót þrælnum, nema hann sé í hans föruneyti.'[108]

Several distinguished historians of religion have taken the blackly comic image of a family taking turns to jump off a cliff to get to Valhǫll as evidence for a cultic rite of airborne suicide.[109] However, as James Milroy – a rather more discriminating literary critic – has shown, this part of *Gautreks saga* has little to do with pre-Christian ritual, and potentially much to do with the saga-author's artistic design.[110] Milroy provides ample literary and textual evidence to show that the link between cliff-suicides (which are rather shadily attested by survivals of folk tradition in Sweden) and Óðinn/Valhǫll are interpolations into the original story of Gautrekr made only as the saga neared its final, longest, form (i.e. *c.* 1300).[111] Moreover, *Gautreks saga*, in its full version, is self-consciously an exercise in entertainment: the saga begins with the introduction 'Þar hefjum

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[108] *FNS* IV, 5: 'There is a crag called Gillingshamarr here, beside our farm, and close by is that pinnacle which we call it Ætternisstapa ["family-pinnacle"]. It is so high, and the drop down from it, that no living thing survives that falls off down there. It's called the Ætternisstapa because with it we reduce the size of our family whenever it seems to us that some extraordinary event is happening, and there all of our elders die without any illness, and then they go to Óðinn, and we do not need to have the burden or obstinacy of our elders, because this place of bliss has been equally freely available to all our family members. And we don't need to live with poverty or want of food nor any other extraordinary or portentous event that might befall us here. Now you must know, that my father thinks this to be a great wonder, that you have come to our house … because no precedent for this is to be found and so my father and mother intend to divide the inheritance between us siblings in the morning, and then they wish to fall over the Ætternisstapa and thus to go to Valhǫll, and the slave with them. My father does not wish to reward the slave sparingly for the goodwill that he showed when he intended to drive you away from the doors, but now he will enjoy bliss with him. It also seems certain to him, that Óðinn will not welcome the slave, unless he be in his company.'

[109] See Götlind, 'Valhall och ättestupa'; Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion*, p. 254. Olsen, 'Røis og Rysseberg', linked this passage to a cult of ritual horse sacrifice associated with a particular group of cliffs in Norway.

[110] Milroy, '*Ætternisstapi*', pp. 222-3. Vermeyden writes that 'as a historical source, *Gautreks saga* has no importance' ('*Gautreks saga*', p. 224).

[111] Milroy, '*Ætternisstapi*', pp. 208-12.

vér eina kátliga frásögun' (*FNS* IV, 1 'Here we have a cheerful/comic tale'). In a saga designed to amuse, the cliff-jumping scene operates on the level of parody, sending up the naïve beliefs of the audience's pagan forebears;[112] part of that amusement surely comes from some inherited knowledge of pre-Christian myths about death, as when Snotra alludes to the difficulty faced by persons not of the upper classes to get into Valhǫll: if the audience has no concept of the social status attached by their ancestors to Valhǫll, the joke – the poor servant flung to his death, and supposed to be grateful! – is not as successful. From a vantage point of literary sophistication, amusement at the folly of the ignorant and the customs of the uncouth is a natural reaction: as are horror, disgust, pity, condescension or bewilderment, or any combination thereof. *Gautreks saga*, and other late texts like it, gives an insight into the perception of pagan antiquity in its own time, but does not and cannot provide us, as anthropologists would wish, with a window through which to observe pre-Christian belief in its natural habitat. Milroy neatly summarised the issue thus:

> In stories of this kind appearing in medieval literature we have to reckon with the antiquarian notions of the writers … Christian writers may have introduced into their work spurious accounts of heathen customs, based on unreliable literary and antiquarian knowledge, the purpose being to give a ring of authenticity to the story's *milieu*, or to draw attention to the strange, amusing and disgusting practices of the heathen.[113]

Even in *Vǫlsunga saga*, in which Óðinn's role is so significant, the antiquarian nature of the saga's interest in the god and his cult is apparent: when King Rerir dies (of sickness, it should be noted), the saga says 'at Rerir tók sótt ok því næst bana ok ætlaði at sœkja heim Óðin, ok þótti þat mǫrgum fýsiligt í þann tíma'.[114] If the saga's account of King Rerir were accepted as true, it would suggest, *pace* Snorri, that even those who became *sóttdauðr* still believed they could attain a place with Óðinn. The attitudes of the characters in the *fornaldarsögur* do not stem, however, from a living religion, but from an imaginative reconstruction of what their authors

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[112] Ellis, *Road to Hel*, p. 74, suggests that this episode is either parodic, or else 'a misunderstood echo of the tradition of dying by fire'.

[113] Milroy, '*Ætternisstapi*', p. 219.

[114] *The Saga of the Volsungs*, ed. Finch, p. 3: 'Rerir became ill, and this soon killed him, and he intended to seek a home with Óðinn, and that seemed agreeable to many at that time.'

thought them to have been like. As Margaret Schlauch pointed out, there is considerable interest in the way in which the presentation of the old gods and heroes altered under the influence of scholarly and literary antiquarianism,[115] and Stephen Mitchell has discussed how the authors of the *fornaldarsögur* were 'skilled antiquarians who were capable of accepting, selecting and editing the material they had to hand, elements of this broken, or displaced, myth'.[116] Indeed, these texts must rely, to a greater or a lesser extent, on an inherited tradition, be it oral or literary. But whatever kernels of pre-Christian religious belief the *fornaldarsögur* may preserve have been distorted by the requirements of the literary form, the antiquarian nature of the genre, or obscured by a patina of romantic nostalgia for the past. As the saga explicitly states, it was considered a good thing to visit Óðinn *at that time*: but for the author of *Vǫlsunga saga*, that time had passed.

In the *Fornaldarsögur*, Óðinn is referred to quite frequently as the recipient of sacrificial victims, if we wish to read the phrase *nú gef ek þik Óðni* as having some sort of ritual signification:[117] perhaps the most famous instance of Óðinnic sacrifice is Starkaðr's hanging of King Víkarr, which also occurs in *Gautreks saga*. Hanging is another typically Óðinnic mode of death, once again in imitation of the god's self-sacrifice, as described in *Hávamál*. In the Víkarr-episode, the victim is not explicitly marked with a spear, although it is quite clear that the king is on his way to Óðinn: 'Þá stakk Starkaðr sprotanum á konungi ok mælti: „nú gef ek þik Óðni"' (*FNS* IV, 31: 'Then Starkaðr pushed the stick at the king and said: "Now I give you to Óðinn"'). In this example, there is a clear association between human sacrifice and Óðinn. Once again, however, it is just as possible to see the emphasis on the practice of human sacrifice (utterly taboo in a Christian society) as an example of morbid antiquarian speculation as to see in these late sagas survivals of actual pagan rituals.

The *fornaldarsögur* do not describe their heroes' experience in the next life, and so they cannot add much to our knowledge of the perceived nature of Valhǫll itself. They do, however,

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[115] Schlauch, *Romance in Iceland*, pp. 18-19.

[116] Mitchell, "'Nú gef ek þik Óðni'", p. 789.

[117] See e.g. *Sǫgubrot* (*FNS* I, 355); *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, ed. Tolkien, p. 26; *Egils saga einhenda* (*FNS* III, 339), all of which references refer to the dedication of slain warriors to Óðinn, expressed in phrases built around *gefa Óðni*, rather than to a discrete religious ceremony. In *Hervarar saga*, p. 32, Óðinn appears to Gestumblindi (itself probably an Óðinn-*heiti*) after he sacrifices (*blótar*) to the god. Gestumblindi's sacrifice is, presumably, a cultic ritual, but it is not described: there is no indication that it is a human sacrifice that attracts Óðinn's attention. Hanging as a method of sacrifice to Óðinn is also mentioned in a verse in *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* (*FNS* II, 96).

make considerable use of 'going to Valhǫll' as a metaphor for dying. Characters, who die in this manner, with Óðinn's name on their lips and the hope of the warrior paradise in their hearts, do conform to a recognisable paradigm. They are generally high status males, warriors even if not slain in battle. They often are connected, by personal devotion or ritual action, to Óðinn. All of these features support the spirit, if not quite the letter, of Snorri's analysis of the Valhǫll meta-myth and the social values that underlie the eddic praise-poems' treatment of the same subject.

Generically more authoritative than these late confections are the *konungasögur*, the historical sagas of which Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* is the pre-eminent example. But when Snorri deals with the legendary past, as he does primarily in *Ynglinga saga*, he hardly takes us closer to authentic pre-Christian belief, for all that his cool, detached style suggests impartial scholarly observation. Chapter 10 of *Ynglinga saga*, a portion of the text for which Snorri does not cite his usual poetic source, Þjóðólfr's *Ynglingatal*, as authority, includes a passage on Óðinn's relationship with the dead that must be read alongside *Gylfaginning* to provide an overview of Snorri's design which, in this case, is not merely mythographic, but which is explicitly euhemeristic. Whereas the tally of the Ynglingar in the poetic source begins with a king named Fróði, Snorri takes the genealogy back to Óðinn, interpolating an incongruous verse from Eyvindr's *Háleygjatal*.[118] Óðinn is here presented as a legendary king of Sweden who became worshipped as a god after his death, in much the same way as Snorri describes the Æsir's progress from human survivors of the fall of Troy into deities in the *Prologue* to his *Edda*.[119] The origins of belief in Óðinn as god, and particularly as god of death, are in a passage in which his funeral rites are described.

> Óðinn varð sóttdauðr í Svíþjóð. Ok er hann var at kominn dauða, lét hann marka sik geirsoddi ok eignaði sér alla vápnadáuða menn. Sagði hann sik mundu fara í Goðheim ok fagna þar vinum sínum. Nú hugðu Svíar, at hann væri kominn í inn forna Ásgarð ok myndi þar lifa at eilífu. Hófsk þá at nýju átrúnaðr við Óðin ok áheit. Opt þótti Svíum hann vitrask sér, áðr stórar orrostur verði. Gaf hann þá sumum sigr, en sumum bauð hann til sín. Þótti hvárrtveggi kostr góði.[120]

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[118] The verse in question is stanza 3 of *Háleygjatal* (*Skjald* B I, 60).

[119] See Faulkes, 'Descent from the Gods', pp. 107-10.

[120] *Heimskringla* I, 22: 'Óðinn died of illness in Sweden. And when he approached death, he had himself marked with the point of a spear and claimed for himself all those men who were killed by weapons. He said that he would go into the Goðheimr, and welcome his friends there. Now the Swedes thought that he would arrive in old Ásgarðr

Here the euhemerised god's death helps to iron out a few of the inconsistencies which we find elsewhere in texts which deal with the Hel/Valhǫll myth-system. He holds out hope, lacking in *Gylfaginning*, for those unlucky enough to die in bed: if marked with a spear – Óðinn's traditional weapon, and one of his most potent symbols – the dead man will go to Valhǫll (although it is not named as such, being equated here with Ásgarðr). This reference in *Ynglinga saga* has led to some rather lurid speculation about the possibilities that marking with a spear was a ritual cultic act. Georges Dumézil was adamant about the historical validity of this belief:

> During the time that Snorri reported, hope of going to Valhalla gave rise to ritual usage that assured this at least cost, for it could at the last minute make the most sedentary man the equal of heroes. In order to 'go to Odin', it was sufficient to mark oneself with the sign of Odin, that is, to receive a cut from the point of a spear.[121]

But what time is it that Snorri reports in this part of *Ynglinga saga*? It is a legendary, and not a historical period: the usually meticulous historian does not have any contemporary verses to cite as evidence for his narrative. Although the first sections of *Ynglinga saga* treat legendary or mythical subjects, neither does Snorri cite any eddic poetry in support of his assertion.[122] We

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and would live there forever. Belief in and invocation of Óðinn rose anew. He often seemed to the Swedes to reveal himself in dreams before great battles happened. Then he gave victory to some, but some he invited to join him. Either way, it was considered a good choice.'

[121] Dumézil, *Gods and Myths of the Ancient Northmen*, p. 30. See also Chadwick, *Cult of Othin*, pp. 13-15.

[122] As Clunies Ross has shown („Quellen zur germanischen Religionsgeschichte", pp. 645-7), Snorri clearly and consistently differentiated between his poetic sources depending on whether he was writing about mythology, poetics, or history, as here. He makes quite clear in his famous preface to *Heimskringla* that skaldic verse held the most evidentiary value for his historical work: 'tókum vér þar mest dœmi af, þat er sagt er í þeim kvæðum, er kveðin váru fyrir sjálfum hǫfðingjunum eða sonum þeira. Tǫkum vér þat allt fyrir satt er í þeim kvæðum finnsk um ferðir þeira eða orrostur.' (*Heimskringla* I, 5: 'We take the most heed of what is said in those poems, which were composed for the chieftains themselves, or for their sons. We accept as the truth everything that is found in those poems about their journeys and battles.') Snorri restricts himself to eddic citations when authenticating the myths written down in *Gylfaginning*. The two genres do not overlap, even when, as here, the prose deals with a subject that might be expected to find support in the other type of verse. A possible exception to this rule is the citation of the 'eddic' *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál* in *Heimskringla*. As we have seen, however, these two poems form a separate sub-genre

cannot therefore compare Snorri's account of Óðinn's death with his source, for we know of no such text. It is probable that the connection between Óðinn and human sacrifice finds its original poetic expression in *Hávamál* 138, in which the god hangs himself on the world tree:

> Veit ec, at ec hecc vindgameiði
> nætr allar nío,
> geiri undaðr oc gefinn Óðni,
> siálfr siálfom mér,
> á þeim meiði, er mangi veit,
> hvers hann af rótom renn.[123]

But whatever the origins of Óðinn's self-sacrifice, *Hávamál* is the only eddic poem to mention it directly.[124] There are, furthermore, no references in the *Poetic Edda* to the transformation of this mythic act into ritual: we cannot rule out the possibility that pagan Scandinavians sacrificed to Óðinn in imitation of the mythic narrative of the god's own hanging, but the literary references to this practice are – once again – too late safely to be admitted as evidence of cult. Snorri's euhemeristic account of Óðinn the king's mutation into Óðinn the god is a literary fabrication, possibly in imitation of *Hávamál*: the king decides that he wishes to become a god, and lets his intention be known (*Sagði hann sik mundu fara í Goðheim*). Although he dies of sickness, he has

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which straddles the worlds of historical and mythological thought, and Quinn argues that the treatment of *Hákonarmál* within *Hákonar saga góða* indicates that its generic strangeness was recognised during the compilation of the prosimetrum: rather than interspersing the stanzas into the prose as he did when using skaldic verse as historical evidence, the poem is quoted entire. According to Quinn, this presentation means that 'the narrator can both distance himself from the beliefs implicit in the poem and enjoy the artistic effect of the panegyric sounding a celebratory note at the end of his history' ("'Ok er þetta upphaf'", p. 77).

[123] 'I know that I hung on a windy tree for nine long nights, wounded with a spear, dedicated to Óðinn, myself to myself, on that tree of which no man knows from where its roots run.'

[124] Approaches to Óðinn's self-sacrifice have tended to fall into two groups, both with primarily anthropological methodologies: the 'myth and ritual' school sees Óðinn's hanging in *Hávamál* as a reflection of cultic ritual, either an initiation (e.g. Fleck, 'Óðinn's Self-Sacrifice, I', in which Óðinn's acquisition of rune magic occurs within the framework of a 'ritual kingship' (p. 142); van Hamel, 'Óðinn Hanging on the Tree'), or a fertility rite (e.g. Talley, 'Runes, Mandrakes and Gallows'). The other main school of thought to do with this myth has been the comparative one, in which cognate myths from other cultures are used in order to propose a shared Indo-European origin: Sauvé, 'The Divine Victim' offered Vedic Indian comparanda, while de Vries, 'Odin am Baume', used ancient Greek examples to argue in favour of an Indo-European original.

himself marked with a spear, and thereby dedicates himself, the man, to himself, the god. Snorri links this 'self-sacrifice' to the idea that Óðinn will receive, at his own volition, all those who die of weapons: *eignaði sér alla vápnadáuða menn*. In the same chapter of *Ynglinga saga*, Óðinn's successor Njǫrðr dies (once again the phrase *varð sóttdauðr* is used) and dedicates himself to Óðinn by marking himself, presumably with a spear.[125] By explaining the origins of this supposed ritual, Snorri removes from his religious-historical model the contradiction implicit in *Gylfaginning*'s description of Valhǫll: that some Óðinnic heroes – among them warriors who might be considered most suitable to join the *einherjar* – might, through no fault of their own, die in bed, and could thereby be condemned to Hel. By introducing the idea that entry into Valhǫll could be achieved by a simple religious act (which Snorri models on an authentic piece of eddic lore), suddenly the way is clear for all those characters whom he wished to situate within the pagan-heroic world to conform, even after their death, to the paradigm of what Snorri, along with the authors of the *fornaldarsögur*, seemingly considered to have been a real pagan hero. None of the foregoing, it must be emphasised, denies the possibility that Óðinnic human sacrifices took place before the Conversion of Scandinavia to Christianity. But Snorri's presentation of this information owes its form to his own conception of, and attitudes towards, the pagan culture of the Norse lands. *Ynglinga saga* is not an anthropologist's field report.

CONCLUSION

Gerd Wolfgang Weber's reconstruction of Snorri's *religionsgeschichtliche Modell* is germane to the discussion of the Valhǫll meta-myth. For Weber, the approaches to the period before the *siðaskipti* ('change of religions') found in Snorri's various works are all facets of a basically unified system of thought: *Ynglinga saga* does for cult what *Gylfaginning* does for mythology and *Skáldskaparmál* for pagan poetry. Each text fulfils the same function, but applied to a different body of material: to establish the origins of pre-Christian beliefs and practices, to situate them within a framework of universal human history, and to endow them with historical, artistic, and theological significance for a post-Conversion Icelandic audience.[126] In the case of the Valhǫll

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[125] *Heimskringla* I, 23: 'Njǫrðr varð sóttdauðr. Lét hann ok marka sik Óðni, áðr hann dó.' ('Njǫrðr died of illness. He had himself marked for Óðinn, before he died.')

[126] Weber, '*Siðaskipti*', pp. 311-12 and 321.

myth-complex, I believe that we can discern Snorri's overarching conception of his work operating precisely in accord with the model which Weber identified. *Gylfaginning* treats Valhǫll within its mythological context; its antecedents are found in the *Poetic Edda*, and in *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*, although Snorri adapts his inherited material according to his structural conception of the mythology as a whole. In *Ynglinga saga*, which functions, according to Weber, as Snorri's explanation of cult-practices, the Valhǫll complex (tied to the conception of Óðinn as god of death) is approached, as it were, from the other side. The two texts work in harmony to provide a unified conception of pre-Christian attitudes towards death: the myths of *Gylfaginning* provide the religious background against which *Ynglinga saga*'s rituals take place, while the cultic activity described in the saga gives an indication of how people on earth applied myths to their lives, or their lives to myths. In this respect, Snorri's work could be said to support Sir James Frazer's famous dictum that 'often, myths stood to magic in the relation of theory to practice'.[127] Snorri Sturluson was not merely an early, if unwitting, pioneer of Lévi-Strauss's methodology of anthropological structuralism, it seems:[128] he was also a precursor of the 'myth and ritual' school. The idea that there was a binary opposition between those who died in battle (and went to Valhǫll) and those who died in their beds (and went to Hel), as found in *Gylfaginning*, reveals his structuralist tendencies. The descriptions of human sacrifice and 'marking' for Óðinn in *Ynglinga saga* are the product of a different methodology, and reveal that, according to Snorri's antiquarian conception of pagan religion (a conception shared by the authors of the *fornaldarsögur*), entry into Valhǫll could be secured by participation in ritual, and that it was not the inalienable right only of *vapndauðir menn*.

Many of the individual elements which comprise Snorri's meta-myth of Valhǫll are readily traceable in earlier poetic traditions: *Gylfaginning*'s general presentation of the realm and its functions certainly finds parallels in eddic verse (in which category *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál* must certainly be placed). Whatever its ultimate origins, Valhǫll was, on the literary evidence hitherto presented, a privileged conception of the afterlife. It was the home of privileged, high-status, warrior males after their death: it encodes social privilege into the mythological cosmology. A range of literary motifs developed around this central premise: feasting, fighting, and a lasting relationship with Óðinn, all located firmly within the familiar environment of a traditionally Germanic lordly hall, evoked for an aristocratic audience the sort of afterlife it

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[127] Frazer, *Balder the Beautiful* II, 88.

[128] Clunies Ross, *Skáldskaparmál*, p. 174.

thought it deserved. But that is not to say that the whole meta-myth as Snorri has it reflects the reality of Old Norse belief: it is the product of an interventionist methodology, in which rigid structural principles are applied to different aspects of pre-Christian Scandinavian culture. Part of this methodology, I would suggest, was sometimes deliberately to harmonize sources which contained discrepant mythological information.

4

The Hel/Valhǫll Dichotomy II: Who Goes Where?

Ubi tantus ille infernus esset, qui tantam multitudinem caesorum posset?[1]

L'enfer, c'est les autres – Jean-Paul Sartre

As we saw in the previous chapter, one factor which could expedite a hero's progress to Valhǫll was adherence to Óðinn's cult. In *Hákonarmál*, the king does die in battle, but it is his service to the heathen gods during his life that seems finally to ensure his acceptance among the gods and *einherjar*. Elsewhere in the literary record, there are further signs that the relationship between Óðinn and his worshippers could extend beyond the grave, if the proper rituals were observed, even if they were not killed in swordplay. Hilda Ellis Davidson characterised the nature of the relationship, placing emphasis on reward for service rendered, as well as on the high social status of most adherents to the cult:

> [Valhǫll] was peopled by the chosen ones, the aristocratic warriors who had worshipped the god on earth. Those who joined Óðinn in Valhǫll were princely warriors, kings and heroes, who had followed the god in life and pledged him their loyal service in return for his help.[2]

Ellis Davidson's conclusions are supported by the testimony of *Hákonarmál*, although, as I have argued, the presentation of the hero in his relationship to Óðinn and Valhǫll in that poem – and *Eiríksmál*, for that matter – is largely a reflection of the text's panegyric function: it is a literary motif, which is much more than a simple expression of the poet's (or subject's) religious beliefs. Beyond the restricted scope of the eddic praise-poetry genre, attitudes towards Óðinn in his aspect as recipient and ruler of the dead vary, and the dichotomy between Óðinn and Hel, and Valhǫll and Hel, is not always observed. In those skaldic poems that are likely to come closest to

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[1] *Widukindi res gestae Saxonicae*, ed. Bauer and Rau, p. 54.

[2] Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, p. 48.

displaying the world-view of contemporary adherents to the Óðinnic cult, matters are much more ambiguous: Valhǫll is not mentioned by name by the earliest pagan skalds (Eyvindr and the *Eiríksmál*-poet excepted), and although allusions to Óðinn's mythological function as a god of death are found, the afterlife is presented in terms which are often at variance with the mythic-heroic conventions previously described. This chapter is concerned with conceptions of the afterlife which do not conform to the valorised Valhǫll-Óðinn paradigm.

THE THREE DEATHS OF *SONATORREK*

Egill Skallagrímsson's poem *Sonatorrek* was probably composed around 960, if the chronology of his saga is to be believed, and as such it is roughly contemporary with the accepted date of composition of *Hákonarmál*, and just a little later than *Eiríksmál*.[3] The atmosphere conjured up by Egill's poem could hardly be more different, however, to the encomiastic bombast of *Eiríksmál*. *Sonatorrek* is entirely bound up with ideas of mortality, and, as we have seen, the goddess Hel figures as part of the poet's mythological vocabulary of death. *Sonatorrek*, however, also bespeaks a pagan religiosity unique in the depth and subtlety of its feeling: it is Óðinn who is central to Egill's faith, and who dominates the language of the poem. And yet, even Egill, the self-confessed Óðinn-worshipper, does not talk of death within the primarily Óðinnic frame of reference that we see in *Eiríksmál* or *Hákonarmál*. Rather, his poem includes a variety of mythological associations for death and the act of dying. Unfortunately, the complexity of Egill's verse and the corrupt textual state of some of the most significant stanzas makes *Sonatorrek* a sometimes ambiguous and frustrating source.[4]

There are three deaths in *Sonatorrek*. The drowning of Egill's son Bǫðvarr is (according to *Egils saga*) the spur to the composition of the elegy, but his other son, Gunnarr, had not long since died of a fever. The third death is Egill's own, still in the future, but perhaps not far away: in his grief he looks forward happily to Hel's arrival (stanza 25). If Egill was conscious of the clear distinction between Valhǫll and Hel made by Snorri, we could read the end of *Sonatorrek*,

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[3] Niedner, 'Egils Sonatorrek', provided an alternative dating of about 970 for the composition of *Sonatorrek*; Niedner was inclined to dismiss *Egils Saga's* anecdote about the composition of the poem as a literary fabrication.

[4] The most recent study of *Sonatorrek* is Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, 'Religious Ideas in *Sonatorrek*', in which he provides a particularly valuable textual analysis of the most significant stanzas. Although, as will be seen below, I do not agree with all of Jón Hnefill's conclusions, I have adopted some of his readings.

where he awaits Hel, when throughout his life he has been on good terms with the lord of the spear (Óðinn) (*Sonatorrek* 22, line 1: *áttak gótt við geirs dróttin*), as a pathetic irony. He is resigned to the fact that he will not spend the afterlife in the company of his patron and his fellow warrior poets, recognising, perhaps, that he will end up joining the *sóttdauðir ok ellidauðir*. In the saga, that is precisely what happens: after a cantankerous and rather undignified old age, Egill dies of natural causes.

The anguish that motivates Egill's composition of *Sonatorrek* is precipitated by the death of his son Bǫðvarr, whose drowning in a shipwreck off the coast of Iceland is described in chapter 78 of *Egils saga*:

> Ok er þeir skyldu út fara, þá var flœðrin síð dags, ok er þeir urðu hennar at bíða, þá fóru þeir um kveldit síð. Þá hljóp á útsynningr steinóði, en þar gekk í móti útfallsstraumar; gerði þá stórt á firðinum, sem þar kann opt verða; lauk þar svá, at skipit kafði undir þeim, ok týndusk þeir allir. En eptir um daginn skaut upp líkunum; kom lík Bǫðvars inn í Einarsnes ... Þann dag spurði Egill þessi tíðendi, ok þegar reið hann at leita líkanna; hann fann rétt lík Bǫðvars; tók hann þat upp ok setti í kné sér ok reið með út í Digranes til haugs Skalla-Gríms.[5]

Whether or not the saga is a record of events that actually happened, its description of a parent's discovery and burial of his child's corpse invokes a sense of grief that also permeates *Sonatorrek*. In his eulogy for his sons, Bǫðvarr's death by drowning haunts the poet's mind, as reflected by the constant use of sea-imagery in the stanzas relating to this tragic event: the poem ends, movingly, with Egill envisioning Hel, the symbol of his own death foreseen, standing on a headland (25/4 *á nesi stendr*), presumably the same ness on which he had buried his father and his son.

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[5] *Egils saga*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 243: 'When they were ready to put out, high tide was late in the day, and since they had to wait for it they put out late in the evening. Then a wild south-westerly gale got up, against the current of the tide, and the sea grew very rough in the fjord, as often happens there. In the end their ship sank beneath them, and they all perished. The following day the bodies were washed up. Bǫðvarr's body came ashore at Einarsnes … Egill heard the news that day and rode off at once to search for the bodies. He found Bǫðvarr's body directly, picked it up and put it across his knee, then rode with it out to Digranes to Skallagrím's burial mound.'

A number of references to mythological figures associated with the sea occur in the poem, most notably to the maritime goddess Rán, wife of Ægir, whom Egill blames for the young man's death.

Sonatorrek 7

Mjǫk hefir Rǫ́n
of rysktan mik;
emk ofsnauðr
at ástvinum;
sleit marr bǫnd
minnar ættar,
snaran þǫ́tt
af sjǫlfum mér.[6]

Although she is a rather marginal member of the pantheon, there is some evidence to suggest that, as a sea-deity, Rán was believed to take as her share of the dead all those who died at sea. Snorri describes her thus in *Skáldskaparmál*, as an explanation for the mythological background of gold-kennings of the type of 'fire of Ægir/Rán'; 'Rán er nefnd kona Ægis, en níu dœtr þeira, svá sem fyrr er ritat ... Þá urðu Æsir þess varir at Rán átti net þat er hon veiddi í menn alla þá er á sæ kómu.'[7] Rán is also listed as one of the Ásynjur in Snorri's versified list of god- and goddess-*heitir* (*SnE* II, 115), although she is not mentioned in *Gylfaginning*: Snorri may not have been able to accommodate her within his mythographic structures, but he needed nonetheless to include her in *Skáldskaparmál*, specifically to explain a number of kennings.

It is doubtful that this passage means that Rán was believed to have rights to the souls of men who died at sea; the phrase 'hon veiddi í menn alla þá er á sæ kómu' does not actually state that the sailors whom she nets have drowned. Elsewhere in the corpus, there is no mention of

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[6] *Skjald* B I, 35: 'Rán has handled me very roughly, I am deprived of loving friends; the sea has cut the bonds of my race, a strong strand from myself.'

[7] *SnE* II, 41: 'Rán is the name of Ægir's wife, and the names of their nine daughters are as written above … then the Æsir discovered that Rán had a net in which she caught everyone that went to sea.' Snorri's account of the mythical underpinning of 'Ægir's fire' as a kenning for gold ends rather incoherently: Ægir and Rán, we are told, lit their hall with glowing gold, but the story of Loki's killing of one of Ægir's slaves, and the mention of Rán's net, does not seem integral to the narrative.

Rán's net. There are but two references to Rán in the *Poetic Edda*, both in heroic poems. In stanza 18 of *Helgakviða Hjǫrvarðssonar*, Rán might seem to fulfil a purpose analogous to that of Hel or Óðinn in their functional aspects as the recipients of the souls of dead men:

> Þú vart, hála, fyr hildings scipom
> oc látt í fiarðar mynni fyrir;
> ræsis recca er þú vildir Rán gefa,
> ef þér kœmið í þverst þvari.[8]

The phraseology of *vildir Rán gefa* recalls the similar constructions using Óðinn as the recipient of the intended victim: it is a circumlocution for 'to kill', but specifically 'to kill at sea'. But this is the only occurrence of the idea that 'sending someone to Rán' means deliberately to commit them to a watery grave.

In stanzas 29 and 30 of *Helgakviða hundingsbana* I, Rán is presented as an active force, personally bent on wreaking havoc on shipping:

> Draga bað Helgi há segl ofarr,
> varðat hrǫnnom hǫfn þingloga,
> þá er ógorlig Ægis dóttir
> stagstiórnmǫrom steypa vildi.
>
> Enn þeim siálfom Sigrún ofan,
> fólcdiorf, um barg oc fari þeira;
> snøriz ramliga Rán ór hendi
> giálfrdýr konungs at Gnipalundi.[9]

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[8] 'Ogress, you stood before the prince's ships and blocked the fjord mouth; the king's men you wished to give to Rán, if you hadn't been thwarted.'

[9] Stanza 29: 'Helgi ordered the high sail be raised higher, the crew did not fail at the meeting of the waves, when Ægir's terrible daughter wanted to capsize the stay-bridled wave-horses.' ('Ægir's terrible daughter' must refer to Rán, even though such a reading contradicts the relationships within Ægir's family as Snorri describes them.) Stanza 30: 'And Sigrún above, brave in battle, protected them and their vessel; the king's sea-beasts twisted powerfully out of Rán's hand towards Gnipalund.'

It is in precisely this way that Egill uses the figure of Rán in *Sonatorrek*: she is a personification of the ocean's destructive power. The poet rages impotently; if he had the strength, he says, he would fight against the very sea itself:

Sonatorrek 8

Veiztu um þá sǫk
sverði of rækak
var 'ǫlsmið'
allra tíma;
'roða vags' brœðr
'um voga' mættak,
fœra ek andvígr
Ægis mani.[10]

While Egill's emotions are starkly revealed by his outburst against Rán, his reaction probably does not reveal too much *religious* feeling. It is more likely that, as in *Helgakviða hundingsbana*, he uses the goddess as a poetic device, a personification of the sea against whose almost infinite power he may contrast his own human frailty, as shown by his incapacity to avenge his son.[11] Rán stands for the sea in this stanza; in stanza 10, Egill says *Mik hefir marr / miklu rántan* 'the sea has robbed me of much', punning, it would seem, on *rán* 'unlawful seizure of property' – the nominal form of the verb *ræna* – and Rán, the goddess whom he blames for his loss. Stanza 6 contains the same the sentiment:

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[10] *The Sonatorrek*, ed. Turville-Petre, pp. 46-7: 'You (daughter) know that if I could avenge that injury with the sword, the brewer's days would be over; if I could fight, I would go against the brother of the storm and the wife of Ægir.' This stanza is cited from Turville-Petre's edition as in its extant manuscript form it is corrupt and very inscrutable: see *Skjald* A I, 41, for the manuscript reading. Turville-Petre discussed the emendations proposed by previous commentators (Kock, Olsen and Sigurður Nordal), and adopted those readings he thought most sensible. Although a matter of judgement, Turville-Petre's text makes more sense than Finnur Jónsson's *rettet text* (*Skjald* B I, 35), and is to be preferred on this occasion.

[11] In other skaldic stanzas, Rán also serves primarily as an alternative appellation for the sea, particularly in its destructive aspects. See, e.g., the two stanzas by the eleventh-century Icelandic skald Hofgarða-Refr Gestsson quoted in *SnE* II, 37 (*Skjald* B I, 296), and one of Snorri Sturluson's own stanzas in *Háttatal* (stanza 19, *SnE* III, 13). As a simple noun, *rán* means 'plundering', suggesting that the idea of the sea's capacity to despoil and disrupt human activities upon it was central to the goddess's signification. See *SnE* II, 499.

Grimt vǫrum hlið
þat 's hrǫnn of braut
fǫður míns
á frændgarði;
veitk ófult
ok opit standa
sonar skarð,
es mér sær of vann. [12]

The sea, by whatever name he calls it, is blamed for the ending of Bǫðvarr's physical existence. And within the narrative framework provided by the saga, we understand why Egill rails against the ocean with such vehemence: he finds his son's corpse on the shoreline and buries him on a headland. The references to Rán in *Sonatorrek* do not necessarily indicate that Egill believed in the goddess, or believed that such a figure received the souls of all drowned sailors, any more than modern navigators believe in the literal existence of 'Davey Jones's Locker'. There is no compelling evidence for Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson's dogmatic assertion that 'the general Scandinavian belief [was] that those who drown will go to Rán'; but she clearly formed part of Egill's mythological knowledge, and was used by him, just as Snorri later said she could be, as a mytho-poetical personification of 'the sea'.

Stanzas 10 and 11 of *Sonatorrek* complete the sequence of Rán-verses. Stanza 10, however, has caused some confusion about Egill's conception of the afterlife, because, although it begins by repeating the idea that 'the sea has robbed me of much', it may also imply that Bǫðvarr has gone to Valhǫll:

Sonatorrek 10

Mik hefr marr
miklu ræntan;
grimt es fall
frænda at telja.
síðan 's minn

[12] *Skjald* B I, 34: 'Cruel to me was the gap which the wave broke in the family house of my father; I see unfilled and gaping stand the breach left by my son, which the sea has caused me.'

á munvega
ættar skjǫldr
af lífi hvarf.[13]

The key word in this stanza is *munvega*. *Munvegar* has traditionally been interpreted as 'the paths of love/joy', and that it is meant to refer to way to Valhǫll, by analogy with *munarheimr* 'the world of joy' in *Helgakviða Hjǫrvarðssonar* 42.[14] Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson has recently offered an alternative interpretation, by which to avoid what he considers a damaging inconsistency in the poem: by reading *munr* as 'mind' Bǫðvarr is not anachronistically envisioned on the road to Valhǫll, but rather on the less clearly defined 'paths of thought'.[15] Jón Hnefill's argument is plausible, without being compelling: explaining *munvegar* as referring 'in an unspecific sense' to 'the field of spiritual experience to which all people go when they die' is rather vague, and this idea is not found elsewhere. There is no doubt, however, that if we believe in the tripartite division of the dead into Rán's, Hel's and Óðinn's people, as Jón Hnefill suggests we should,[16] then a reference to Bǫðvarr on his way to Valhǫll is indeed out of place. Valhǫll, rather, is where Bǫðvarr would have gone, so the poet implies in stanza 11, if he had lived long enough to grow up into a warrior:

Veitk þat sjalfr,
at í syni mínum
vasa ills þegns
efni vaxit,
ef randviðr
røskvask næði,
uns hergauts
hendr of tœki.[17]

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[13] *Skjald* B I, 35: 'The sea has robbed me of much; it is cruel to tell of the fall of kinsmen; since the protector of my race departed life onto the paths of joy.'

[14] *Egils saga*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 250, n. 10; Turville-Petre, 'The *Sonatorrek*', p. 34.

[15] Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, 'Religious Ideas', p. 164.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 175.

[17] *Skjald* B I, 35: 'I know myself that the stuff of an evil man had not grown in my son, if that shield-tree had been able to ripen until the hands of Óðinn took him.'

This stanza has proved typically controversial: the crucial word here is *hergauts* (l. 7). I take 'army-Gautr' to refer to Óðinn, along with Turville-Petre, and take the sense of the last two lines to be 'until Óðinn's hands took him'. Opinions to the contrary fall into two groups: some scholars (exemplified by Sigurður Nordal) have wished to read 'army-Gautr' as a warrior kenning, meaning that Bǫðvarr's hands had not yet grown into those of a warrior.[18] This reading fits contextually: Bǫðvarr had not yet reached maturity, but as Gautr is a well-attested by-name for Óðinn, which is alluded to in 21/4 *Gauta spjalli*, and is common elsewhere in Old Norse, there is no reason to adopt this interpretation.[19] Nor do the emendations proposed by Olsen and Kock, in which *her-Gauts hendr* is emended to *her-Gauts hurð* ('Óðinn's door') or *hauðr* ('land'), both kennings for shield, seem more persuasive.[20] In his commentary to this stanza, Turville-Petre wrote that the lines might mean 'until Óðinn took him, until he fell in battle', and this is the most plausible interpretation.[21] In any case, the message of Egill's verse is clear: Rán's gain is not only Egill's, but also ultimately Óðinn's loss. This reading does, however, depend on acceptance of *munvegar* in stanza 10 as religiously neutral, referring to no conception of the afterlife in particular. If the older interpretation is preferred, and we decide that Egill did mean to refer to Valhǫll in this stanza, then Bǫðvarr's fate after his death is, and must remain, inconsistent with the bipartite (or tripartite, if we include Rán in it) schema. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson's statement, that 'from the words of st. 10 alone it is impossible to draw any further conclusions about exactly where he believes his son to have gone after death', is justifiably equivocal.[22]

If, as seems probable, Egill believed that his eldest son's entry into Valhǫll had been prevented by his untimely drowning, it is strange indeed that his second son, Gunnarr, should be envisioned in Óðinn's company after he had died of an illness. The brief testimony of *Egils saga*, where Gunnarr's obit is tacked on to the end of the account of Bǫðvarr's death and burial –

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[18] *Egils Saga*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 250.

[19] See *SnE* II, 496-7, for a list of the Óðinn-*heiti* given in *Skáldskaparmál*. Hergautr also occurs (as part of a kenning for 'stone'), in Bragi inn gamli's *Ragnarsdrápa* 5/8 (*Skjald* B I, 2).

[20] Olsen, 'Commentarii scaldici, I', pp. 230-1. The reading *her-Gauts hauðr* is also preferred by Kock, *Notationes Norrœnæ*, § 3007.

[21] Turville-Petre, ed., 'The Sonatorrek', p. 48.

[22] Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, 'Religious Ideas', p. 165.

'Egill hafði þá átt son, er Gunnarr hét, ok hafði sá ok andazk litlu áðr'[23] – is here corroborated by the internal evidence of *Sonatorrek* 20:

> Síz son minn
> sóttar brími
> heiptugligr
> ór heimi nam,
> þanns ek veit
> at varnaði
> vamma vanr
> við námæli.[24]

Again, there is a force charged with the agency of the son's death: not, on this occasion, a mythological being, but rather the more prosaic 'fire of sickness', which takes Gunnarr *ór heimi*. Our initial expectation is that the other world to which the illness will take Gunnarr must be Hel: there are few more explicit references to disease as a mode of death than the first half of *Sonatorrek* 20. And yet, the next verse immediately contradicts this preconception. According to most readings of stanza 21, Egill states that his second son has in fact gone to join Óðinn:

> Þat mank enn,
> es upp of hóf
> í Goðheim
> Gauta spjalli
> ættar ask
> þanns óx af mér
> ok kynvið
> kvánar minnar.[25]

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[23] *Egils saga*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 245: 'Egill had had another son, who was called Gunnarr, and who had died a short while before.'

[24] *Skjald* B I, 36: 'Since the vicious fire of sickness seized my son from the world, the one whom I knew avoided evil speech, on his guard against faults.'

[25] *Skjald* B I, 37: 'This I remember yet, when the friend of the Gautar raised up the ash-tree of my race into the world of the gods, when also my wife's family branch grew apart from me.'

In this instance it is generally believed that *Goðheimr*, otherwise known as Ásgarðr, signifies the same realm of the heroic dead as the name Valhǫll: this position is supported by the evidence of *Snorra Edda*, where the two names at times seem equivalent to one another.[26] *Gauta spjalli* 'friend of the Gautar' in line 4 is a kenning for Óðinn, who seems here to act as a psychopomp, effecting the transposition of Gunnarr's soul out of this world and into the next. So, although Gunnarr has died of sickness, in Egill's imagination there is no bar to his accompanying Óðinn into the realm of the gods. It is difficult to resolve this discrepancy within Snorri's model of the pagan afterlife. Although Gunnarr is described in the saga as *inn efniligsti maðr* 'the most promising man',[27] there is no indication that he had done anything that might attract the attention of Óðinn. The meaning of stanza 21 is unusually transparent, offering no real textual problems. Its successful interpretation depends merely upon deciding to which of his sons Egill refers here.

Joseph Harris has argued that the poet alludes to both his dead sons in *Sonatorrek* 21: the one is called *ask ættar* 'the tree of my kindred', the other *kynvið kvánar minnar* 'the family branch of my wife'.[28] By this reading, both Bǫðvarr and Gunnarr go to the *Goðheimr*. I do not think, however, that such an interpretation is very secure. As Harris himself admits, 'sometimes two such objects joined, as here, with *ok* can have the same referent'; the parallelism of imagery between the two lines, between the tree of Egill's lineage, and the branch of his wife's, leads me to think that both epithets do indeed refer to Gunnarr, the subject of the preceding stanza. The

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[26] According to the glossary in Anthony Faulkes's edition of *Gylfaginning*, the palace of the 'historical' Æsir is called Valhǫll (*SnE* I, 7), where it is used in a sentence introducing a stanza attributed to Þjóðólfr of Hvin: 'Svá segir Þjóðólfr inn hvinverski at Valhǫll var skjǫldum þǫkð.' ('Þjóðólfr of Hvin says that Valhǫll was thatched with shields.') In fact, the stanza Snorri cites is probably an extract from Þórbjǫrn hornklofi's *Haraldskvæði* (composed c. 900), misattributed in the manuscripts of *Snorra Edda*: it does not use the word Valhǫll: the kenning for shields in this stanza (*Sváfnis salnæfrar*, 'Sváfnir's roof-tiles') refers to the home of Óðinn, but not necessarily to Valhǫll, the realm of the dead. The association of Valhǫll with the home of the Æsir that Gylfi visits, initially called Ásgarðr in *Gylfaginning* (*SnE* I, 7) owes to an architectural detail that the buildings share: they are both tiled with shields. Elsewhere in *Gylfaginning*, however, although Faulkes glosses the other occurrences of the name Valhǫll as 'the mythical palace of the gods', these references refer unambiguously to Valhǫll as the hall of the slain: the only god who is said to reside there is Óðinn himself.

[27] *Egils saga*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 242.

[28] Harris, 'Sacrifice and Guilt', p. 187. This interpretation is contrary to that given in the translations of Turville-Petre, 'The *Sonatorrek*', p. 39, and Hollander, *The Skalds*, p. 96, who both regard Gunnarr to be the sole referent of the stanza.

tone of this verse, and those that follow it, seems more detached and less emotional than those stanzas in which Egill specifically laments Bǫðvarr's death; perhaps the passage of time has brought him a new perspective: he states that he *still* remembers (*Þat mank enn*) the time when Óðinn took his son, suggesting that there is now some distance between that event and his current sorrow. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, discontent with the anomalous positioning of Gunnarr in Valhǫll suggested in stanza 21, hypothesises that Egill must have had a third son, otherwise unknown, and likewise deceased, but who had previously perished in some battle or other (as distinct from Egill's third son, Þorsteinn, who, so the saga tells us, outlived his father).[29] While the historicity of *Egils saga* is open to question, the omission of this third son would be a major lacuna in its biography of Egill; Jón Hnefill's invention of this character, by which he means to make *Sonatorrek* support his preconceived notions about Viking-age religion, is all his own work. Since, as we have seen, conceptions of who went to Valhǫll, and why, were by no means fixed, I do not think that such an interpretation is warrantable or even necessary. Our knowledge of pre-Christian Scandinavian religions is anything but perfect, but it should be clear that there existed no authoritative theological dogma associated with Óðinn, Valhǫll, or any other facet of Norse paganism. There is therefore no standard belief-system against which to compare textual evidence of the nature of *Sonatorrek*, excepting later reconstructions such as *Snorra Edda*.

If we continue to believe that *Sonatorrek* is an elegy for two young men, one drowned and the other dead of a fever (if that is the correct interpretation of *sóttar brimi* in stanza 20), then there seems no way of avoiding the conclusion that Egill's conception of his sons' fates in the afterlife does not match the structuralists' dichotomy between Óðinn and Hel. Gunnarr is unambiguously placed in the *Goðheimr* after his death by natural causes. It is arguable that Bǫðvarr has joined him there: although the sea-deity Rán is blamed for his drowning, there is no indication that Bǫðvarr's relationship with her will persist beyond the grave. The discrepancy between the overall impression of the afterlife given by *Snorra Edda* and that implied by *Sonatorrek* has led Jónas Kristjánsson to argue that in the tenth century the beliefs were current that a man went either to Hel or to Óðinn, but that there was effectively no difference between

[29] Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, 'Synpunkter på *Sonatorrek*', p. 16. According to *Egils saga*, Þorsteinn Egilsson 'grew to a great age, died of illness, and was buried at the church he had built at Borg' (ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 299: 'hann varð maðr gamall ok sóttdauðr, ok var jarðaðr at Borg at þeiri kirkju, er hann lét gera').

the two.[30] Jónas's explanation is plausible, but there are alternatives: *Sonatorrek* may indicate that death in battle was not an inevitable prerequisite for acceptance by Óðinn after death, but that there were other criteria that helped determine the dead man's location in the afterlife. In essence, the main criterion is simply that of the god's own choice; Valhǫll is for the chosen, and not merely for the slain. In the case of *Sonatorrek,* Óðinn's implied rejection of Egill has suggested to some scholars that their relationship had broken down: by the time of the composition of *Sonatorrek*, Egill has grown out of his killing and looting, his sorcery and to an extent his poetry (he has to be cajoled into creating the memorial lay for his sons by his daughter, Þorgerðr). It is generally agreed that *Sonatorrek* is a profoundly 'religious' work, in that it is 'anchored' in an explicitly Óðinnic religion,[31] but there is a strong suggestion that Egill is no longer such a devoted follower of his god: Egill has abandoned his Viking ways, and settled down into the rival paradigm for a saga-hero, that of the farmer-chieftain, a class which probably was more likely to cult Þórr, the god of weather and fertility, than the anti-social, aristocratic Óðinn. Sigurður Nordal alleged that it was in revenge for this abandonment that Óðinn took to himself Egill's son, in which case Bǫðvarr's death can be viewed as an involuntary sacrifice on Egill's part.[32] North argues against this point of view, suggesting that the religious views expressed in *Sonatorrek* are more traditional than personal, and that 'Egill has no religious crisis to face'.[33] Joseph Harris, however, has emphasised that many of the mythological allusions made in *Sonatorrek* deal with sacrifice, creating 'mythic paradigms [that] are the precedent for the guilt attaching to the sacrificer or simply to the survivor'.[34]

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[30] Jónas Kristjánsson, 'Heiðin trú', pp. 108-9. Jónas suggests that the belief that all the dead went to Hel is the oldest pre-Christian conception discernible to us; the growth of the cult of Óðinn during the Viking age presumably led to the growth in popular beliefs about Óðinn as a god of death.

[31] Ralph, 'Om tilkomsten av *Sonatorrek*', p. 154. On Egill's religious sensibilities, see Sigurður Nordal, 'Átrúnaður Egils Skallagrímssonar', and his *Íslensk menning* I, 171-4 and 214-15. Von See, 'Sonatorrek and Hávamál' offers an alternative view. Both von See (*ibid.*, p. 28) and de Vries, *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte* I, 166, agree that *Sonatorrek* demonstrates a worldview profoundly affected by pagan mythology, despite their reservations about Sigurður's interpretation of Egill's relationship with the gods.

[32] Sigurður Nordal, 'Átrúnaður Egils Skallagrímssonar', pp. 160-3.

[33] North, 'Pagan Inheritance', p. 161.

[34] Harris, 'Sacrifice and Guilt', p. 175. The stories from Norse legend that Harris cites in this connection are: King Aun's sacrifice of his sons in *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 25, Haraldr hilditǫnn's identification with Óðinn in *Sǫgubrot af fornkonungum* (*FNS* I, 355), and the story of Starkaðr found in chapter 6 of *Ynglinga saga*.

Sonatorrek itself, as Harris makes clear, refers explicitly to Egill's sacrifice of his sons in stanzas 22 and 23:

Áttak gótt
við geirs dróttin,
gerðumk tryggr
at trúa hǫnum,
áðr vinan
vagna rúni
sigrhǫfundr,
of sleit við mik.

Blœtka því
bróður Vílis,
goðjaðar,
at gjarn séak,
þó hefr Míms vinr
mér of fengnar
bǫlva bœtr,
es et betra telk.[35]

[35] *Skjald* B I, 37. Stanza 22: 'I was on good terms with the lord of the spear, I grew trustful, believing in him, until the friend of wagons, the lord of victory, broke friendship with me.' Stanza 23: 'I do not sacrifice to the brother of Vilir, the guardian of gods, because I am eager to do so; yet the friend of Mímr has given me recompense for my harms which I count the better'. The only point of difficulty in these two stanzas is the Óðinn-kenning *vagna rúni* in line 6 of stanza 22, which probably does mean 'friend of wagons', since Óðinn's connection with some sort of wheeled vehicle in which the dead are transported to the otherworld is well established. See Weber, 'Odins Wagen', wherein he collects a variety of references from eddic verse that should probably be interpreted as referring to this vehicle, which was presumably a recognised part of Óðinn's iconography, even if only a few scattered and oblique references to it have survived. Kock, *Notationes Norrœnæ*, §§ 136, 226, 1813, 2505, and Olsen, 'Commentarii scaldici, I', p. 246, preferred to read 22/6 *vagna* (genitive plural) as *vagna* or *vǫgn* (both singular), meaning 'killer-whale', which Kock thought may refer obliquely to a giant, while Olsen suggested that this killer-whale is a *heiti* for 'criminal', and alludes to Óðinn's relationship with hanged men.

Egill does not wish to make sacrifices to Óðinn in stanza 23, lines 1-4, and yet in the second half of the stanza he admits that 'the friend of Mímr has given me recompense for my harms which I count the better'. The *bœtr* in stanza 23 are plural, argues Harris, so that there is equivalence between Egill's twin sacrifices – both his sons – and the amount of recompense that the sacrificial act brings about. The first of these gifts is clearly the conventional Óðinnic gift of poetry: Óðinn stole the divine myth of poetry and thenceforth became the patron of human poets.[36] The second part of Óðinn's reward for Egill's sacrifices is probably the 'spirit to make open foes out of hostile plotters',[37] which Harris suggests is a genuine and significant gift within the 'suspicious Odinic world of (much of) the *Hávamál* philosophy'.[38] But the real recompense that Egill receives for these sacrifices is, as North justly suggests, catharsis through the act of the elegy's composition, when the option of avenging his sons' death was denied to him.[39]

The result of Harris's compelling discussion of *Sonatorrek*'s presentation of involuntary sacrifice to Óðinn is that we must add a new dimension to the bipartite division of the Old Norse afterlife. The Óðinn / Valhǫll complex is here far more complicated than the picture given in *Snorra Edda* suggests. Much of the determination of who goes to Valhǫll, for example, rests on Óðinn's capriciousness. His faithful follower, Egill, believes himself to have received important gifts from Óðinn, gifts that define both his relationship with the god and much of his own character, but Óðinn has extracted a high price in exchange. Egill loses both his sons, who are taken from him by his own god, and also, perhaps, his own chance to die a glorious death and end up in Valhǫll. As Harris points out, there is a verse in *Ketils saga hængs* that expresses much of the same frustration about the relationship between Óðinn and the adherents to his cult. Ketill predicts that he will receive the same (double-edged) gift that Egill, Aun and Starkaðr all get in exchange for their sacrifices – *langlífi*, a long life – even though he has never made sacrifices:

> Óðin blóta
> gerða ek aldrigi,
> hefk þó lengi lifat.
> Framar falla

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[36] Harris, 'Sacrifice and Guilt', pp. 188-9 and n. 41.

[37] Thus the interpretation of von See, 'Sonatorrek und Hávamál', p. 29.

[38] Harris, 'Sacrifice and Guilt', p. 190.

[39] North, 'Pagan Inheritance', p. 161.

veit ek fyrr munu
en þetta it háva hǫfuð.[40]

These verses give the distinct impression that a long life is an unwelcome burden for the Óðinnic hero, even if *Hávamál*, the most important repository of 'Óðinnic' wisdom, states is better for a man to be alive than otherwise:

Hávamál 70-1

Betra er lifðom enn sé ólifðom,
ey getr qvicr kú;
eld sá ec up brenna auðgom manni fyrir,
enn úti var dauðr fyr durom.

Haltr ríðr hrossi, hiǫrð recr handarvanr,
daufr vegr ok dugir,
blindr er betri en brendr sé,
nýtr mangi nás.[41]

There is a contradiction between the words put into the mouth of Óðinn by the *Hávamál*-poet and the impression given by *Sonatorrek* and the verse from *Ketils saga*: a long life is not necessarily a good thing, especially if, like Egill, the hero has outlived his sons; something that *Hávamál* 72 indicates to be most undesirable:

Sonr er betri, þótt sé síð of alinn
eftir genginn guma;

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[40] *FNS* II, 177: 'I never sacrificed to Óðinn, yet I have lived long. I know that Framarr will fall before this high head will.' This stanza may reflect influence from *Sonatorrek*, or a shared tradition. See Harris, 'Sacrifice and Guilt', p. 177, n. 14.

[41] Stanza 70: 'It is better to live than not to be alive, it's the living man that always gets the cow; I saw fire blaze up for the wealthy man, and he was dead outside the door.' Stanza 71: 'The lame man rides a horse, the handless man drives the herds, the deaf man fights and succeeds; to be blind is better than to be burnt: a corpse is of no use to anyone.' Line 1 of stanza 70, *enn sé ólifðom* is the reading found in the Codex Regius text. Neckel-Kuhn emends to *oc sællifðom*.

sialdan bautarsteinar standa brauto nær,
nema reisi niðr at nið.[42]

These ideas are particularly tested in the King Aun episode in *Ynglinga saga*, where the reward for Aun's sacrifices is an extended lifespan, but this is achieved only at the cost of his sons' lives:

> Aun eða Áni hét sonr Jǫrundar, er konungr var yfir Svíum eptir fǫður sinn. Hann var vitr maðr ok blótmaðr mikill … Hálfdan konungr varð sóttdauðr at Uppsǫlum, ok er hann þar heygðr. Eptir þat kom Aun konungr enn til Uppsala. Þá var hann sextøgr at aldri. Þá gerði hann blót mikit ok blét til langlífis sér ok gaf Óðni son sinn, ok var honum blótinn. Aun konungr fekk þau andsvǫr af Óðni, at hann skyldi enn lifa sex tigu vetra … [Aun rules for forty years more] Þá gerði hann blót mikit ok blótaði ǫðrum syni sínum. Þá sagði Óðinn honum, at hann skyldi æ lifa, meðan hann gæfi Óðni son sinn it tíunda hvert ár, ok þat með, at hann skyldi heiti gefa nǫkkuru heraði í landi sínu eptir tǫlu sona sinna, þeira er hann blótaði til Óðins. En þá er hann hafði blótat sjau sonum sínum, þá lifði hann tíu vetr svá, at hann mátti ekki ganga. Var hann þá á stóli borinn. Þá blótaði hann inum átta syni sínum, ok lifði hann þá enn tíu vetr ok lá þá í kǫr. Þá blótaði hann inum níunda syni sínum ok lifði þá enn tíu vetr. Þá drakk hann horn sem lébarn. Þá átti Aun einn son eptir, ok vildi hann þá blóta þeim, ok þá vildi hann gefa Óðni Uppsali ok þau heruð, er þar liggja til, ok láta kalla þat Tíundaland. Svíar bǫnnuðu honum þat, ok varð þá ekki blót. Síðan andaðisk Aun konungr, ok er hann heygðr at Uppsǫlum. Þat er síðan kǫlluð Ánasótt, ef maðr deyr verklauss af elli.[43]

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[42] 'A son is best, even if he is born late, when the man is gone; seldom do memorial stones stand by the wayside, unless one kinsman raises them for another.'

[43] *Heimskringla* I, 47-9: 'The son of Jǫrundr was called Aun or Áni, who was king over the Swedes after his father. He was a wise man and a great maker of sacrifices … King Hálfdan died of an illness at Uppsala, and he is buried there. After that, King Aun came back to Uppsala. He was then sixty years old. Then he prepared a great sacrifice, and sacrificed for a long life for himself, and gave Óðinn his son, and he was sacrificed to him. King Aun got the answer from Óðinn that he would live for another sixty years … Then he prepared a great sacrifice and sacrificed the second of his sons. Then Óðinn said to him, that he would live for ever, for as long as he gave Óðinn a son every tenth year, and so long as he named a district in his country after the number of his sons that he had sacrificed

Aun's vanity and folly lead to his willingness to sacrifice his sons (although one at least is left over, presumably to oversee his father's burial), but the Óðinnic contract brings him no lasting advantage. The same is true for Egill, even if he did not choose to live beyond his sons' lifespan. The tragicomic descriptions of Egill's old age in the final chapters of his saga show the once great Viking poet frail, blind and nearly deaf: he suffers, in fact, from *Ánasótt*. His cook makes it clear what has become of him when she says that 'þat var undr mikit, slíkr maðr sem Egill hafði verit, at hann skyldi liggja fyrir fótum þeim, svá at þeir mætti eigi vinna verk sín'.[44] In the same chapter Egill catches the illness that eventually led to his death. The saga does not speculate on what would happen to Egill's spirit in the next world, and neither may we, even if it is tempting to imagine that, as he predicted in *Sonatorrek*, Egill was taken away by Hel, and deprived of the warriors' paradise.

Sonatorrek is correctly regarded as an essential text for the understanding of tenth-century religious values: it is almost unique in being a long poem through which an authentically pagan voice speaks directly of its relationship with the gods. It is not, however, a devotional work; it is far from being a theological tract. Any desire to see Óðinnic dogma in *Sonatorrek* is misplaced, since the catharsis that Egill hopes to achieve through the composition of his poem (and which, according to *Egils saga*, he does achieve) is not a religious experience in the conventional sense. His gradual acceptance of his sons' fate, and his stoicism in the face of his own approaching death is attained as a function of the creative act, and not at all through the god's gift (or what, in a Christian context, might be called divine grace). Óðinn gives, just as he takes away. What he gives Egill, however, is not consolation, but rather – so the poem implies – the means by which he might obtain consolation for himself: the power of self-expression through verse. The author of *Egils saga*, too, recognised that the catharsis which Egill experiences was brought about by the

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to Óðinn. And when he had sacrificed his seventh son, then he lived for ten winters, but he wasn't able to walk. He was then carried around in a chair. When he sacrificed the eighth of his sons, he also lived a further ten winters, and then he lay in his bed. Then he sacrificed the ninth of his sons, and he lived a further ten winters. Then he drank from a horn like an infant. Aun then only had one son left, and he wished to sacrifice him, and to dedicate Uppsala and the surrounding area to Óðinn, and to have it called Tíundaland (the land of the tenth). The Swedes prevented him from doing that, and there was no sacrifice. Then King Aun died, and he is buried at Uppsala. Since then it has been called Áni's disease if a man dies incapable through old age.'

[44] *Egils saga*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 295: 'it was most astonishing that such a man as Egill had been, should lie under people's feet so that they couldn't do their work.'

creative act: 'Egill tók at hressask, svá sem fram leið at yrkja kvæðit.' ('Egill began to recover his spirits as he proceeded to compose the poem.')[45]

It should be clear from the foregoing analysis that the attitudes towards death and the afterlife evinced by Egill's elegy, though ultimately rooted in the same religion as that which underlies the visions of Valhǫll in *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*, resemble the ethos of the Norwegian eddic praise-poems not at all. Nor does *Sonatorrek* support Snorri's structural reconstruction of the mythological associations of the afterlife. Nobody in *Sonatorrek* is killed in battle; nobody dies a ritual death, and yet Óðinn is still seen as the instigator of the Egilssons' deaths, and Gunnarr still goes *í Goðheim*. Although Egill is a self-confessed adherent to Óðinn's cult, he expects for himself no special dispensation from his patron: he cannot look forward to an eternity among the *einherjar*. Whether the discrepancies between Egill's mythological allusions and the representation of Valhǫll in the eddic tradition represent a difference in religious belief is moot, however. I would suggest that the differences between this text and those which conform to the aristocratic paradigm of the warrior paradise are primarily due to the differing aims and techniques of two quite different genres. In the eddic *erfikvæði*, as I have shown, the representation of the Óðinnic afterlife was manipulated – within a traditional mythological framework – in order to endow Valhǫll with the maximum cachet for an aristocratic audience, by which the subjects of the poems gain the most glory in posterity. Egill's *Sonatorrek* memorialises his sons, it is true, but its function is not the same as that of the panegyrics: it is an intensely personal poem, a text centred in the poet's own experience, and it was not composed to conform to, or to surpass, the generic requirements of the eddic *Preislied* or the expectations of an audience. According to the tradition of *Sonatorrek*'s composition (as preserved by *Egils saga*), there was no audience for the poem's first performance. It certainly had no political purpose, as has been identified in the cases of *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*, poems which were shots fired in a dynastic propaganda war, and which reflect the ideologies of the ruling clans in whose service they were produced.

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[45] *Egils saga*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 256.

THE MANY WAYS OF DYING IN *YNGLINGATAL*

Þjóðólfr of Hvin, though he was required to come up with a poetic way of saying 'King *X* died' in all but one of the thirty-seven stanzas of *Ynglingatal*, never states that an Yngling went to Valhǫll: the closest we come to such a reference is in stanza 3, in which Vanlandi dies as a result of a witch's spell:

> En á vit
> Vilja bróður
> vitta véttr
> Vanlanda kom,
> þás trollkund
> of troða skyldi
> liðs grímhildr
> ljóna bága;
> ok sá brann
> á beði Skútu
> menglǫtuðr,
> es mara kvalði.[46]

Bróður Vilja (l. 3) is a straightforward kenning for Óðinn, whom Snorri names as brother of Vili and Vé in *Gylfaginning*.[47] So Þjóðólfr's conception of the afterlife had a place for Óðinn within it. Nowhere, however, does he indicate what form the Óðinnic afterlife took, or what differentiated it from Hel. There are no discernible criteria according to which Vanlandi earns the right to go to Óðinn: his death, suffocated by a nightmare, is hardly heroic, and there is no sign that going to Óðinn is considered praiseworthy or glorious.

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[46] *Skjald* B I, 7: 'A witch made Vanlandi come to meet Vili's brother [Óðinn], when the troll-woman would trample the adversary of the people's enemies; and the destroyer of necklaces, whom the nightmare killed, burned by the bank of the Skúta.'

[47] *SnE* I, 11: 'fengu þau þrjá sonu. Hét einn Óðinn, annar Vili, þriði Vé' ('they [Borr and Bestla] had three sons. The first was called Óðinn, the second Vili, and the third Vé'). Vili also appears in *Lokasenna* 26, and as the brother of the 'historical' Óðinn in *Ynglinga saga* (*Heimskringla* I, 12-14).

Elsewhere in *Ynglingatal*, Þjóðólfr stubbornly refuses to conform to our expectations of pre-Christian beliefs about the afterlife: there is no system, no structure. Members of the Yngling dynasty die in many different ways: some of them in what we might regard as an Óðinnic mode of death. And yet none of them go to Valhǫll. As we have already seen him do in the narrative of Aun and the sacrifice of his sons, however, Snorri occasionally infers a link between the dead Swede and Óðinn which is not present in *Ynglingatal*, if he considers his death to have been of a cultic nature. In stanza 29, for example, King Óláfr, a *lítill blótmaðr* ('one who sacrifices little'), according to *Ynglinga saga*, is burned by the Swedes. Snorri calls this act a sacrifice to Óðinn; *Ynglingatal* does not.[48]

> Óláfr konungr var lítill blótmaðr. Þat líkaði Svíum illa ok þótti þaðan mundu standa hallærit. Drógu Svíar þá her saman, gerðu fǫr at Óláfi konungi ok tóku hús á honum ok brenndu hann inni ok gáfu hann Óðni og blétu honum til árs sér. Þat var við Væni. Svá segir Þjóðólfr:
>
> Ok við vág,
> hinn 's við [arði],
> hræ Áleifs
> ǫlgylðir svalg,
> ok glóðfjalgr
> gǫrvar leysti
> sonr Fornjóts
> af Svía jǫfri;
> sá áttkonr
> frá Uppsǫlum
> Lofða kyns
> fyr lǫngu hvarf.[49]

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[48] In his description of King Aun's sacrifices to Óðinn (quoted above, p. 120), Snorri elaborates his source poem in exactly the same way. Stanzas 15-16 of *Ynglingatal* describe Aun's slide into senility, including his drinking from a horn like a baby, but there is no mention that his extreme decrepitude arose from a sacrificial pact with Óðinn.

[49] *Heimskringla* I, 74: 'King Óláfr was a man who made few sacrifices. The Swedes didn't like that much, and it seemed to them that they would have to endure famine because of that. The Swedes assembled a mob and made a rush upon King Óláfr, and ambushed him in his house and burned him inside it, giving him to Óðinn and sacrificing him for a fruitful year. That was by Lake Vænir. As Þjóðólfr says [*Ynglingatal* 29: *Skjald* B I, 12]: "By the

The detail that the Swedes offered Óláfr as a sacrifice to Óðinn, rather than simply burnt him alive, is probably Snorri's invention, or at least over-interpretation of the stanza. Although there seems to have been a tradition that this Óláfr ('trételgja') died by fire, neither the poem nor any other source supports Snorri's assertion that he met his end as part of an Óðinnic rite. The interest in pre-Christian religious practices, and in human sacrifice in particular, shown by Snorri in *Ynglinga saga*, has already been noted. Probably the most famous account of a sacrifice in this part of *Heimskringla* is the story of King Dómaldi, who, according to Snorri, was sacrificed by his people in an attempt to bring about an end to a famine in Sweden: this story has often been regarded as proving the existence of sacral kingship as a component of a fertility cult.

> Þá áttu hǫfðingjar ráðagørð sína, ok kom þat ásamt með þeim, at hallærit myndi standa af Dómalda, konungi þeira, ok þat með, at þeir skyldi honum blóta til árs sér ok veita honum atgǫngu ok drepa hann ok rjóða stalla með blóði hans, ok svá gerðu þeir.[50]

The source for this passage is *Ynglingatal* 5. Whereas Snorri makes explicit the sacral nature of the king's death, it is debatable whether Þjóðólfr conceived Dómaldi's death in the same way:

> Hitt vas fyrr
> at fold ruðu
> sverðberendr
> sínum dróttni,
> ok landherr
> af lífs vǫnum

---

sea, the alder-tree's wolf [fire] swallowed up Óláfr's body. The son of Fornjótr [fire], hidden in embers, loosened the Swedish king's armour. The ancestral ruler of the kindred of Lofði went away from Uppsala long ago.'" This stanza is corrupt, and line 2, in particular, makes little sense, either in the reading of the manuscripts (*viðar* or *viðiar*), or in Finnur Jónsson's conjectural emendation to *við arði* (?'with or against the plough'). See *Skjald* A I, 13, and *Heimskringla* I, 74, note to stanza 26.

[50] *Heimskringla* I, 31-2: 'Then the chieftains had their assembly and they agreed the famine was caused by their king, Dómaldi, and because of that, that they should sacrifice him for a good year, and attack him and kill him and redden the altars with his blood, and so they did.' There is a particularly valuable discussion of this episode in Lönnroth, 'Dómaldi's death', esp. pp. 81-92, in which he denies (p. 92) that *Ynglingatal*, read independently of *Ynglinga saga*, has any evidentiary value for theories of sacral kingship. See also Ström, 'Kung Domalde i Svitjod'.

dreyrug vǫ́pn
Dómalda bar,
þás árgjǫrn
Jóta dolgi
Svía kind
of sóa skyldi.[51]

The sword-carrying Swedes who have killed Dómaldi are desperate for a good harvest, that much is clear. But it is not quite the same as Snorri stating that they used him as the victim in a *blót*. Lönnroth suggested that the Swedes of *Ynglingatal* might have done away with Dómaldi because his foreign policies – and particular his war against the Jutes alluded to in line 10 of the stanza – had brought about their poverty, since there is no mention in the poem of why they were *árgjǫrn*.[52] If a chieftain's subjects were unhappy with their leader's performance, they lacked recourse to the ballot box. *Ynglingatal* 5 might well be a description of a bloody coup; there is nothing in the verse to suggest that the king either had magic powers that had failed him, or that his death was designed to win favour with a god. Perhaps getting rid of an unpopular ruler was reward enough for the Swedes.

It is important, although sometimes difficult, to maintain the distinction between what *Ynglingatal* says about the members of the dynasty and their deaths, and Snorri's treatment of the narrative in the prose of *Ynglinga saga*. Snorri's accounts of the lives and deaths of the Ynglingar follow the information found in the poem pretty closely (at least he does not contradict it): presumably, in this historical work, the main function of the source poem was evidentiary. Snorri does not quote *Ynglingatal* in his *Edda*, which led Joan Turville-Petre to state that he valued the poem 'for the sake of its information, not for its poetic language'.[53] What Snorri makes of the information he derives from *Ynglingatal*, however, reflects his own interpretation of the poem. In the case of Dómaldi, Snorri's inference is that the Swedes sacrificed the king to achieve better harvests. He does not, however, suggest that Óðinn is the beneficiary of the *blót*. Since the sacrifice was intended to achieve increased fertility, the warlike Óðinn may not have

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[51] *Skjald* B I, 8: 'It happened once, that sword-carrying men reddened the earth with their lord. The land-army bore bloodied weapons from Dómaldi, lacking of life, when the race of the Swedes, eager for crops, would sacrifice the enemy of the Jutes.'

[52] Lönnroth, 'Dómaldi's Death', p. 91.

[53] Turville-Petre, 'On Ynglingatal', p. 48.

been – in Snorri's conception of the links between pre-Christian myth and ritual – the deity to whom the Swedes were likely to make their offering. If Snorri's account in *Hákonar saga góða* of the Yuletide sacrifices at Trondheim bears any relation to actual pagan practices, men drank toasts to Óðinn for victory and power to the king, but drank to Njǫrðr and Frey for prosperity and peace (*Heimskringla* I, 167-8): 'Óðins full – skyldi þat drekka til sigrs ok ríkis konungi sínum – en síðan Njarðar full ok Freys full til árs ok friðar.' In the Latin *Historia Noruegiae*, which also relies upon *Ynglingatal* for information about the early Scandinavian dynasties, Dómaldi is said to have been 'Sweones suspendentes pro fertilitate frugum deae Cereri hostiam obtulerunt' ('the Swedes, hanging him, offered him as a sacrifice of fertility to the goddess Ceres').[54] Snorri was not therefore alone in drawing this conclusion about the nature of Dómaldi's death, although he does not include the detail, present in the *Historia Norvegiae*, that the king was hanged. Folke Ström did suggest, however, that Dómaldi might have been pierced with a spear before his hanging, reconciling his sacrifice with traditional Óðinnic ritual practices.[55] Since it is not stated in any of these sources that the sacrifice is in honour of Óðinn, I do not think such a conjecture is worthwhile. Among the other Ynglingar, Jǫrundr (stanza 14) dies a supposedly Óðinnic death: he is hanged, and yet, despite the supposedly important religious and ritual connection between the chief of the Æsir and the gallows, there is no suggestion – in either *Ynglingatal* or *Ynglinga saga* – that he goes to Óðinn.[56] It seems probable that Snorri did not automatically relate all human sacrifice with the cult of Óðinn, while it is clear that Þjóðólfr did not conceive the deaths of the Ynglingar primarily in religious terms: although it was composed well before the Conversion of Norway to Christianity, and although it is intimately concerned with death, Þjóðólfr's *Ynglingatal* places less emphasis on Óðinn than Snorri does, writing almost three centuries later.

As discussed in chapter 2, Hel – the goddess or personification of death – is the dominant mythological figure associated with dying in *Ynglingatal*.[57] Again, however, Þjóðólfr's use of the myth does not entirely support the conventional Hel/Valhǫll dichotomy. Dómarr (stanza 6) dies of sickness, as does his son Dyggvi (stanza 7), but only the former is summoned out of this life by Hel. Stanzas 30-2 all state that their subjects went to Hel: two of them

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[54] *Monumenta Historica Norvegiæ*, ed. Storm, p. 98. On the relationship between the different accounts of Dómaldi's death, see Krag, *Ynglingatal og Ynglingesaga*, pp. 105-6.

[55] Ström, 'Kung Domalde i Svitjod', p. 54.

[56] In stanza 10, Agni is also hanged, but since his enemies string him up *með gollmeni* ('with a golden necklace') while he sleeps, it does not seem to have any ritual aspect whatsoever.

[57] See above, pp. 21-6.

(Hálfdan hítbeinn (stanza 30) and Hálfdan inn mildi ok inn matarilli (stanza 32)) die of sickness in the approved manner, but Eysteinn (stanza 31) drowns, and yet still goes *til Býleists bróður meyjar* (and not to Rán).[58] It is true to say that none of the Ynglingar who die in swordplay (only four or five out of twenty-six deaths) goes to Hel, but it is hardly a significant point.[59]

Ynglingatal displays no coherent religious attitude to the afterlife: to go to, or be fetched by, Hel is one way of saying that a king died. Going to Óðinn is another, although Þjóðólfr uses it only once. But there is no real interest in the next world *per se*, and the poem certainly displays no knowledge of the Valhǫll myth-complex. The absence of Valhǫll from *Ynglingatal* is interesting because it shows that, although all the kings whose deaths are narrated in the poem are high-status inhabitants of the semi-legendary past, their location in any hypothetical afterlife schema is not regarded as sufficiently important to merit mention. We may explain this absence on primarily literary grounds. When Þjóðólfr recorded the deaths of the legendary ancestors of the Swedish kings, it was not his aim to valorise all of them in immortality. Very few of his subjects died in the approved heroic manner, and Þjóðólfr's tone is sometimes satirical, and not often very respectful, particularly when he deals with the earliest pre-Norwegian members of the dynasty. The absence of Valhǫll, valkyries, and the *einherjar* from the vocabulary of *Ynglingatal*, and the single reference to Óðinn, even though some of the Yngling kings do die in ways that post-Conversion sources might lead us to believe to be sacred to him, reveal a conception of the afterlife which is rather different to the conventional meta-myth of pagan Norse belief. For Þjóðólfr, Hel seems to have had more currency as a mythological kenning-component for death, but his use of this mythological referent does not adhere firmly to any pattern according to the mode of death he describes. He is more likely to use it if the king in a particular verse dies of sickness, and he does not use it if his subject dies in a fight. Too much must not be read into this distribution of Hel between *Ynglingatal*'s stanzas, however: it is a poetic technique, rather than an

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[58] Lönnroth, 'Dómaldi's Death', p. 91, points out that the later stanzas of *Ynglingatal* give less prominence to the kings' manners of death, and more emphasis on their burial-sites, suggesting that Þjóðólfr treated more recent figures as having some sort of historical existences, whereas the slightly ridiculous rulers of dim antiquity who are seen being swallowed by rocks, gored by bulls, eaten by birds, and drowning in mead barrels in the first half of the poem, are legendary precursors of the dynasty, whom Þjóðólfr feels at liberty to mock.

[59] The *vápndauðir menn* in *Ynglingatal* are Alfr (stanza 12), run through with a sword; Dagr (stanzas 8 and 9) is killed by a hurled pitchfork, which just about counts as a weapon; Alrekr and Eiríkr (stanza 11) batter each other to death using their horses' bridles, which probably shouldn't count; Óttar (stanza 19) is killed in battle against the Danes; Guðrøðr (stanza 33) is killed by a spear, but he was drunk at the time, and so it hardly constitutes a noble fall on the battlefield.

exposition of religious sentiment. But the absence of any Valhǫll-related imagery in this early pagan poem must give us pause, showing as it does that, at this period, the myths connected with Óðinn's happy hunting-ground had not universally taken a grip on the Norwegian poetic imagination, and that the Óðinnic model of death and the afterlife was not applicable to all subjects in all genres.

THE *SÓTTDAUÐIR* AND *ELLIDAUÐIR*

We have already seen that a relatively wide array of people are placed in Valhǫll, for all its social exclusivity; evidence already presented has shown *Gylfaginning*'s restriction of entry to *vápndauðir menn* to be a reflection not of the reality of pre-Christian religious belief but of Snorri's guiding organizational principles in this part of the *Edda*. Many figures end up in Valhǫll without dying in battle. Some get there as a result of the attachment to Óðinn and his cult, or the ritual nature of their death, while, on the other hand, lower-class Óðinn-worshippers were not guaranteed a place in their god's company, according to the status-conscious poetic imagination of the tenth century.

Snorri is no less dogmatic about the people who are to spend a dreary afterlife with Hel in the underworld: these are the *sóttdauðir ok ellidauðir* ('those who die of sickness and/or old age'). We have already seen Snorri's euhemeristic explanation of the relationship between *vápndauðir menn* and Óðinn, when he introduces the ritual spear-point marking in *Ynglinga saga*, and we have seen too how Snorri's attitude to cultic ritual in *Ynglinga saga* is related to his presentation of mythological structures in *Gylfaginning*.[60] It remains to be seen whether his dogmatic assertion of the association of the sick and the old with Hel reflects any more accurately attitudes expressed in other texts.

If Snorri was inspired to categorise the dead as he did on the basis of eddic precedent, then his most likely source is *Sigrdrífumál* 33, in which the words *sóttdauðir* and *vápndauðir* both appear.

> Þat ræð ec þér it níunda, at þú nám biargir,
> hvars þú á foldo finnr,
> hvárz ero sóttdauðir eða ero sædauðir

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[60] See above, pp. 101-3.

eðo ero vápndauðir verar.[61]

Sigrdrífumál 33 could be taken to support a tripartite division of the dead into Hel's, Rán's, and Óðinn's shares, since we have here the three distinct modes of death to which the mythological figures are conventionally related: sickness, drowning, and weapons.[62] This stanza, however, is not concerned with the afterlife, and the advice it gives about what to do with dead bodies removes any distinction between the categories of the dead: they should all be buried in just the same way. Christian influence upon this part of *Sigrdrífumál* is suspected: there is a reference in the following stanza to bodies going *í kisto* (stanza 34, line 3, 'into a coffin'), which scholars have taken to indicate familiarity with Christian burial practices.[63] Snorri does not allude to *Sigrdrífumál* in his *Edda*, and we cannot therefore be sure that he knew the poem, but it remains an important parallel to *Gylfaginning*'s categorisation of the dead. Nowhere else in the poetry is the division of the dead into groups according to the manner of their demise made so distinct. Whether this distinction has any religious significance at all is doubtful: it may simply be a logical distinction between the three main types of death commonly encountered by medieval Scandinavians (a modern version would probably have a category for the 'traffic-accident dead').

In *Vǫluspá*, there are two references to people going to Hel, but neither of them helps to explain why they are journeying to that realm: in stanza 47, all the people on the roads to Hel are said to tremble (line 3, *hræðaz allir á helvegom*), but we do not know what these people are doing there in the first place.[64] Five stanzas later, men are said once again to tread the path to Hel:

Surtr ferr sunnan　　með sviga lævi,

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[61] 'The ninth thing that I advise you is that you bury corpses, wherever you find them on the ground: whether they are men killed by illness, killed at sea, or killed by weapons.'

[62] This distinction would of course suit Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson's theory that, if Egill had had three sons who had died prior to the composition of *Sonatorrek*, and if each had died in a different way, and thereby attained a different fate in the afterlife, then the poem would be much more religiously coherent ('Religious Ideas'). But it does not make the theory any more plausible.

[63] Larrington, trans., *Poetic Edda*, p. 285; Harris, '*Sigrdrífumál*', p. 582.

[64] Lines 3 and 4 of this stanza (including the reference to the *helvegom*) are absent from the Codex Regius text of *Vǫluspá*, and are supplied from *Hauksbók*. According to Dronke, ed., *Poetic Edda* II, 87, the *Hauksbók* text is 'evidently corrupt' here, and she excises these lines from her edition (p. 19: in Dronke's reconstruction, the first part of Neckel-Kuhn's stanza 47 is attached to stanza 46; this six-line (or rather twelve-line: Dronke prints eddic verse in short lines) stanza is her stanza 45).

scínn af sverði sól valtíva;
griótbiǫrg gnata, enn gífr rata,
troða halir helveg, enn himinn klofnar.[65]

In this instance, *troða helveg* is presumably a simple circumlocution for 'to die'. I do not think that Dronke's interpretation of this phrase as 'warriors tread the path *from* hell' is justified: in her reading, these men are the 'warrior dead [who] march from Hel', the same people of Hel whom Snorri describes fighting on Loki's side in chapter 51 of *Gylfaginning*.[66] The idea that the inhabitants of Hel count as 'warrior dead' is a rather startling departure from convention. Although the noun *halr* may connote 'warrior' or 'hero' (it is cognate with Old English *hæleð* and modern German *Held*), it frequently appears in the *Poetic Edda* without this special meaning: it seems mainly to be used as a straightforward poetic term for 'a man'. The word *Helvegr*, when it appears in *Gylfaginning* or the prose introduction to *Helreið Brynhildar*, has to mean the way *to* Hel, since it is in that direction that Hermóðr and Brynhildr must travel on their journeys into the underworld.[67] And although one could presumably leave Hel along the same route by which one came in, Dronke's translation of *Helvegr* does not reflect the probable primary signification of the word: Hilda Ellis Davidson did not call her book on the subject *The Road* away *from Hel*, after all.

At the same time, it is likely that the men treading the *Helvegr* in *Vǫluspá* 52 are warriors, and if they are on their way to Hel because they are dead, then I assume that they have been killed by weapons. In this part of *Vǫluspá*, by which point the final battle is well underway, the inference that these figures have fallen in the apocalyptic struggle seems a reasonable one. That being the case, this stanza would seem to have warriors, the *vápndauðir*, going to Hel. If, on the other hand, Dronke's suggestion that they are warriors coming out of Hel to join in the fighting is correct, then it might well be inferred that some warriors had previously gone to Hel after their

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[65] 'Surtr goes from the south with a flaming sword. The slain-gods' sun shines from the sword. The rocky cliffs crack and the troll-women are abroad. Men tread the road to Hel, and the sky splits.'

[66] Dronke, ed., *Poetic Edda* II, 58.

[67] Prose introduction to *Helreið Brynhildar* (Neckel-Kuhn, p. 219): 'Eptir dauða Brynhildar vóro gor bál tvau, annat Sigurði, oc brann þat fyrr, enn Brynhildr var á ǫðro brend, oc var hon í reið, þeiri er guðvefiom var tiǫlduð. Svá er sagt, at Brynhildr óc með reiðinni á helveg oc fór um tún, þar er gýgr noccor bió.' ('After Brynhildr's death two pyres were built, one for Sigurðr, and that burned first; Brynhildr was burned on the other, and she was in a wagon, which was covered with valuable weavings. It is said that Brynhildr drove the wagon along the road to Hel, and went past a settlement, where a certain giantess dwelled.') On the use of *Helvegr* in Snorri's narrative of Hermóðr's descent to Hel, see below, pp. 178-9.

deaths. Either way, Snorri's categorical association of dead warriors with Valhǫll and of the old and the sick with Hel, is apparently undermined; unless, that is, we accept (as I think we should) that the phrase *tróða halir helveg* is simply a circumlocution for 'to die', just as similar constructions involving Hel are used elsewhere in the *Poetic Edda*.

Another link between *Vǫluspá* and Snorri's ideas about the inhabitants of Hel, although admittedly rather a tenuous one, is found in stanza 43, in which a clear contrastive dichotomy between Hel and Valhǫll is observed:

> Gól um ásom Gullinkambi,
> sá vecr hǫlða at Heriafǫðrs;
> enn annarr gelr fyr iorð neðan,
> sótrauðr hani, at sǫlom Heliar.[68]

The two realms of the dead are awakened in the same manner, presumably so that their inhabitants may go and play their part in Ragnarǫk.[69] The cock which crows *at Heriafǫðrs*, awakening the *einherjar*, is called Gullinkambi, 'golden-comb', reflecting the gilded brilliance which is a characteristic part of descriptions of Valhǫll. Gullinkambi's counterpart beneath the earth, who crows in Hel's halls, is not named, but it is described as a *sótrauðr hani*. *Sótrauðr* is a compound, unique to this stanza of *Vǫluspá*, which is conventionally broken down into the component parts *sót* ('soot'), and *rauðr* ('red'): the compound is thus glossed as 'sooty red', or – since soot is not red, and red is not particularly 'sooty' – 'dark red'.[70] The significance of this cock's colouring has not, to my knowledge, seriously been considered; it might well be assumed that it merely embodies the contrast between gold-bright Valhǫll and the murky underworld of Hel. I find the explanation that 'sooty red' is equal to 'dark red', however, rather unsatisfactory. The defining characteristic of soot is its blackness, as is shown by phrases such as *sóti svartari*, 'blacker than soot'. The word *sóti* is occasionally used as a poetic *heiti* for a horse: would such a

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[68] 'Gullinkambi crowed over the Æsir, that one who wakes the men at the father of hosts'; another cries in front below the earth, a soot-red cock at Hel's halls.'

[69] The cockcrow waking warriors for war is something of a minor literary trope, occurring also in *Helgakviða hundingsbana* II, 49 (see above, p. 55), and in *Bjarkamál in fornu*, which is preserved in *Heimskringla* II, 361-2.

[70] La Farge and Tucker, *Glossary*, s.v. *sótrauðr*; Cleasby-Vigfússon, s.v.

horse not be black?[71] Although it is impossible to prove it, I would like to suggest (but to suggest extremely tentatively) that here *sót-rauðr* might be a scribal error for *sótt-rauðr* ('sickness-red'). What redness precisely has to do with sickness, I do not speculate, although it is notable that there is another *hapax* compound which combines *sótt* with *rauðr*, and which has a medical meaning: *rauða-sótt* 'red illness', which refers to some sort of bleeding wound (/blood condition) in the younger Norwegian Gulaþings Law.[72] If there were a traditional association between Hel and dying from sickness, this bird, red with blood or other sign of illness, could help to express the distinction between the seediness of the underworld and the splendour of Valhǫll (as symbolised by Gullinkambi) rather neatly. The necessity to emend this stanza in order to establish such a dubious reading, however, only goes to show just how difficult it is to find an obvious and transparent link between Hel and the *sóttdauðir* in Snorri's mythological sources.

In Christian descriptions of the afterlife, sickness and old age are sometimes listed as among the pains of hell that sinners must endure; as part of a closely related topos, their absence from heaven is also sometimes mentioned. The popularity of this type of description reached its apogee in Insular homiletics, in which lists of pains of hell and joys of heaven developed into distinctive stereotypes.[73] An example of this motif is found in an twelfth-century Old English homily entitled *Be Heofonwarum and beo Helwarum*, in which hell is described in these terms: 'Þar syndan þa ytemestan þystro butan leohte, þar byþ yld butan geoguðe' ('There are the most extreme darknesses without light, there is old age without youth').[74] Old age is also given as one of the foretastes of hell which people may experience on earth in another Old English homily, Vercelli IX: 'Þonne is þære æfteran helle onlicnes genemned oferyldo, for þan him amolsniað þa eagan for ðære oferyldo ða þe wæron gleawe on gesyhðe' ('Then the second likeness of hell is called old age, because the eyes weaken because of old age, those which were keen of sight').[75] The homilist goes on to describe a number of other infirmities that accompany old age, all of which prefigure the sorts of discomforts that the sinner's soul will encounter after his death. Heaven, meanwhile, was often characterised by its lack of such negative qualities, one of which

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[71] *Sóti* occurs as a *heiti* for a horse in a twelfth- or thirteenth-century *þula* of such names (*Skjald* B I, 656); it is also used as an element in kennings for 'ship' or 'wolf' based on a construction involving 'horse': see Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Lexicon Poeticum*, s.v. *sóti*.

[72] *Regis Magni legum reformatoris leges Gula-thingenses*, ed. Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin, p. 498.

[73] See Tristram, 'Stock Descriptions'; Johnson, 'Five Horrors of Hell'.

[74] Quoted by Johnson, *ibid.*, p. 427.

[75] *The Vercelli Homilies*, ed. Scragg, p. 166.

was old age. Occurrences of these tropes were not restricted to homilies from the British Isles. Under direct and pervasive influence from Old English texts, the Old Norwegian Homily Book, too, features stylised lists of the joys of heaven and their antithetical pains of hell.[76] In the first *Sermo ad populum* in the Norwegian collection, heaven is characterised by the absence of sickness and old age, among other things:

> þar er æigi hungr ne þorste. ne ælli. ne myrcr. ne óp ne ræimr ne væinan. ne gratr. ne sorg. ne sarlæicr. Þar er lios fyri utan myrcr. ok líf fyrir utan dauða. æska fyrir utan ælli. Hæilsa fyrir utan sótt.[77]

If heaven lacked all these things, the conventions of the Insular-type 'stock descriptions' would lead audiences to infer that they would be present in hell:[78] in the Old Norse homily, the pains and wants present in hell are presented as a 'demonic parody of the joys of heaven':[79]

> þa hafa þæir ængi lut í himnum með guði. ok þæim er ætlat hælviti með dioflum. þar er óp. ok gratr. ok hungr. ok þorste. ok svælgiande ældr .vii. lutum hæitare en á veroldo mege hinn hæitasta gera. Oc þar er æi myrcr áon lios. ælli fyri utan æsko.[80]

Although sickness is not specifically mentioned here, it is clear that sickness and old age (among others) were believed to be part of a complex of features that could be used to express the

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[76] The sources and background of this homily are discussed in detail in my 'Anglo-Saxon Influence', forthcoming; see also Johnson, 'Five Horrors of Hell', p. 416.

[77] *Gamal Norsk Homiliebok*, ed. Indrebø, p. 32. 'There is neither hunger nor thirst, nor old age, nor darkness; neither weeping nor wailing, nor crying; neither sorrow nor pain. There is light without darkness, and life without death; youth without ageing, health without illness.'

[78] Tristram, 'Stock Descriptions', pp. 103-4.

[79] McDougall, 'Studies in the Prose Style', p. 33.

[80] *Gamal Norsk Homiliebok*, ed. Indrebø, pp. 33-4: 'Then they have no share in the heavens with God, and to them is allotted hell-torment among the devils. There is weeping and wailing and hunger and thirst and consuming fire seven times hotter than the hottest in the world might make it. And there is always darkness without light and old age without youth.' There is another long passage contrasting the joys of heaven with the pains of hell, couched in identical formulaic rhetoric, in another of the Norwegian homilies (*Gamal Norsk Homiliebok*, ed. Indrebø, pp. 88-9; quoted above, pp. 46-7).

differences between heaven and hell in a homiletic context. Another commonplace element of the trope is hunger (present in hell, absent in heaven): *Hungr* is the name Snorri gives to Hel's dish; *sultr*, 'famine', is the name of her knife. *Kǫr*, given as the name of Hel's bed, means 'sick bed'; *Blíkjanda Bǫl* ('gleaming-bale'), her *ársali* ('curtains'), is obscure, but has an unpleasant ring to it. Apart from *hungr*, none of the features of Hel's property named by Snorri may be found in Old Norse homilies, but the overall impression his description gives certainly endows Hel with negative associations similar to those of the Christian underworld, as Insular and Scandinavian homilists were wont to describe it. Margaret Clunies Ross was thus correct to suspect 'the probable influence of Christian homiletic tradition on Snorri's presentation'.[81] Other scholars have tended to agree that this passage of *Gylfaginning* displays signs of Christian influence; yet this scepticism has not generally extended as far as Snorri's assertion that the *sóttdauðir* and *ellidauðir* are sent into Hel's dominion.[82] The association of Hel with sickness and old age is also, I would suggest, at least partly a result of Snorri's exposure to Christian homiletic tradition.

CONCLUSION

Whereas the exclusivity of Valhǫll, with entry restricted to high-status warrior males, according to an Óðinnic paradigm, is well established in genres like eddic praise-poetry and the *fornaldarsögur*, the other section of the afterlife has no fixed set of associations, whether social, ethical, or literary. In the works of early poets, Hel signified death, but not any particular cause of death. Nor was it connected to religious observance: Óðinn-worshippers could not automatically expect an eternity in Valhǫll in the same way that Christians look forward to eternal life with God in heaven as a result of their faith on earth. Snorri's account of who goes to Hel is thus less securely grounded in pre-Christian sources than Valhǫll is, because Hel was a less-clearly defined mythological concept in the tradition which he inherited. Snorri's representation of Hel in *Gylfaginning*, as a shadowy and unpleasant repository for the souls of the *sóttdauðir* and *ellidauðir* probably does result from an 'attempt to reconcile the tradition with the description he has given

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[81] Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes* I, 251-2.

[82] Simek, for example, dismisses Snorri's description of Hel's dwelling as 'having nothing to do with Scandinavian mythology', and yet he unconcernedly repeats Snorri's statement about the sort of people who went there (*Dictionary*, p. 137).

of Valhǫll', as Hilda Ellis Davidson put it:[83] Snorri's desire for structural balance in his mythography would lead him to expect Hel, in its position of direct opposition to Valhǫll, to encode social attitudes opposite to those associated with Valhǫll. This clear binary dichotomy between the Old Norse 'heaven' and 'hell' is Snorri's own invention in the form that *Gylfaginning* records it, and the Christian schema of the afterlife probably influenced its general formulation, as well as specific details of its execution. In the following chapter, I shall investigate further potential links between Christian literary culture and Snorri's description of Hel.

[83] Ellis, *The Road to Hel*, p. 84.

5

The Imaginary Landscape of Hel in *Snorra Edda* and Medieval Vision Literature

> And all that night he rode, and journeyed so,
> Nine days, nine nights, toward the northern ice,
> Through valleys deep-engulfed, by roaring streams.
> And on the tenth morn he beheld the bridge
> Which spans with golden arches Giall's stream,
> And on the bridge a damsel watching armed,
> In the strait passage, at the farther end,
> Where the road issues between wailing rocks.[1]

In the wake of the god Baldr's manslaughter, Hermóðr rides to Hel (the realm of the dead), so Snorri tells us, to plead with (the goddess) Hel for Baldr's release. This particular mythological fiction requires Hel to be the location of the action and one of the story's protagonists at the same time. Hermóðr's ride is the first of Snorri's narratives of the gods to take place within the underworld; it is thus the first occasion upon which Hel is envisioned as a place in *Gylfaginning*:

> En þat er at segja frá Hermóði at hann reið níu nætr døkkva dala ok djúpa svá at hann sá ekki fyrr en hann kom til árinnar Gjallar ok reið á Gjallar brúna. Hon er þǫkð lýsigulli. Móðguðr er nefnd mær sú er gætir brúarinnar. Hon spurði hann at nafni eða ætt ok sagði at hinn fyrra dag riðu um brúna fimm fylki dauðra manna,
>
> ' "En eigi dynr brúin minnr undir einum þér ok eigi hefir þú lit dauðra manna. Hví ríðr þú hér á Helveg?"
>
> 'Hann svarar at "ek skal ríða til Heljar at leita Baldrs. Eða hvárt hefir þú nakkvat sét Baldr á Helvegi?"
>
> 'En hon sagði at Baldr hafði þar riðit um Gjallar brú, "en niðr ok norðr liggr Helvegr."

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[1] Matthew Arnold, *Balder Dead*, Book II, lines 82-9. Quoted from *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. K. Allott (London, 1965).

> 'Þá reið Hermóðr þar til er hann kom at Helgrindum. Þá sté hann af hestinum ok gyrði hann fast, steig upp ok keyrði hann sporum. En hestrinn hljóp svá hart ok yfir grindina at hann kom hvergi nær. Þá reið Hermóðr heim til hallarinnar ok steip af hesti, gekk inn í hǫllina, sá þar sitja í ǫndugi Baldr bróður sinn, ok dvalðisk Hermóðr þar um nóttina.[2]

In this one episode we find something that resembles an iconography of Hel, albeit rather a sparse one. The journey Hermóðr makes along the *Helvegr* takes him through deep and dark valleys; after nine days' ride a river named Gjǫll has to be crossed en route, although it does not seem that it actually forms the border of Hel's lands: the female guardian of the golden bridge, Móðguðr, implies that there is some distance still to travel when she says *niðr ok norðr liggr Helvegr*. From this reply we also learn of the spatial location of Hel, downwards and to the north. When Hermóðr achieves his destination, Hel is presented as a settlement or stronghold, a series of halls, with a set of what are presumably extremely high gates: it is only because of the supernatural qualities of Hermóðr's borrowed mount – Óðinn's Sleipnir[3] – that he is able to enter Hel's dominion.

An iconography of this sort may belong to the 'myth' of Hel, information derived from a stable body of mythological lore, or it may be part of Snorri's 'fiction' of Hermóðr's ride. I

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[2] *SnE* I, 47: 'But there is this to tell of Hermóðr that he rode for nine nights through valleys dark and deep so that he saw nothing until he came to the river Gjǫll and rode onto the Gjǫll bridge. It is covered with glowing gold. There is a maiden guarding the bridge called Móðguðr. She asked him his name and lineage and said that the other day there had ridden over the bridge five battalions of dead men.

"But the bridge resounds no less under just you, and you do not have the colour of dead men. Why are you riding here on the road to Hel?"

He replied: "I am to ride to Hel to seek Baldr. But have you seen anything of Baldr on the road to Hel?"

And she said that Baldr had ridden there over Gjǫll bridge, "but downwards and northwards lies the road to Hel."

Then Hermóðr rode on until he came to Hel's gates. Then he dismounted from the horse and tightened its girth, mounted and spurred it on. The horse jumped so hard and over the gate that it came nowhere near. Then Hermóðr rode up to the hall and dismounted from his horse, went into the hall, saw sitting there in the seat of honour his brother Baldr; and Hermóðr stayed there the night.'

[3] Called the 'best of horses' (because he has eight legs) by Snorri at *SnE* I, 17: 'Sleipnir er baztr – hann á Óðinn, hann hefir átta foetr', and in *Grímnismál* 44: *Ascr Yggdrasils, hann er æztr viða / enn Scíðblaðnir scipa / Óðinn ása, enn ióa Sleipnir* ('The ash Yggdrasil, that is the best of trees, and Scíðblaðnir of ships; Óðinn of the Æsir and Sleipnir of horses.') Snorri quotes this stanza in *Gylfaginning* (*SnE* I, 34).

suspect on this occasion that there is reason to credit Snorri with a good deal of originality in the telling of this particular tale. Although the sequence of events leading up to, and following on from, Baldr's death is absolutely central to *Gylfaginning*'s eschatological progression, because it ultimately precipitates Ragnarǫk, there is no eddic text which narrates precisely the same story. There is only one verse cited in the sequence prior to the extensive quotation of *Vǫluspá* which accompanies the prose's account of the events at the end of the world: this stanza, in which Þǫkk refuses to weep Baldr out of Hel, is not part of any known eddic poem. In the Codex Regius, Hermóðr is nowhere even named: he appears, paired with the human hero Sigmundr, only in *Hyndluljóð* 2, which is found in *Flateyarbók*:

Biðiom Heriafǫðr í hugom sitia!
hann geldr og gefr gull verðugom;
gaf hann Hermóði hiálm oc brynio,
enn Sigmundi sverð at þiggia.[4]

Hermóðr, as we have seen, also welcomes Hákon into Valhǫll in stanza 14 of Eyvindr's *Hákonarmál*, in which he is paired with Bragi, the mythical poet-god, who, it might be argued, is not numbered among the 'official' total of the Æsir: Bragi and Sigmundr are 'elevated humans', in John Lindow's term, rather than gods in the true sense of the word.[5] Whatever the truth of the matter, Hermóðr barely features in pre-Christian poetry, despite the centrality of his role to the narrative of Baldr's death as told in *Gylfaginning*. In post-conversion skaldic verse, there is one text which mentions Hermóðr, and which associates him closely with Baldr's death. This is stanza 9 of the *Málsháttakvæði*, a poem which is usually dated to the early thirteenth century.[6]

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[4] 'Let us ask to sit in the lord of hosts' affection! He pays and gives out gold to the deserving; he gave Hermóðr a helmet and corselet as a gift, and to Sigmundr a sword.' *Hyndluljóð* is probably one of the later compositions in the Codex Regius collection: it is usually dated to the twelfth century, and Simek and Hermann Pálsson, *Lexikon*, p. 186, argue that it can hardly have originated before the so-called Icelandic renaissance of the latter half of that century. See also Gurevich, 'Hyndluljóð'.

[5] Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance*, pp. 103-5. Lindow emphasises that the relationship between Óðinn and Hermóðr alluded to in the Codex Regius version of *Snorra Edda* (*SnE* I, 46: 'En sá er nefndr Hermóðr inn hvati, sveinn Óðins, er til þeirar farar varð' ('Hermóðr the bold, Óðinn's boy, is the name of the one who undertook this journey')), is ambiguously described. *Sveinn* could mean 'son', or it could imply 'servant'.

[6] See Frank, 'Málshættakvæði', and Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance*, pp. 111-12.

Friggjar þótti svipr at syni
sá var taldr ór miklu kyni,
Hermóðr vildi auka aldr
Éljúðnir vann sólginn Baldr,
ǫll grétu þau eptir hann,
aukit var þeim hlátrar bann,
heyrinkunn er frá hǫnum saga,
hvat þarf ek of slíkt at jaga.[7]

All the principals of Snorri's story are included here: Eljúðnir is the name given to Hel's hall in *Gylfaginning* (*SnE* I, p. 27). Frigg initiates Hermóðr's quest to Hel, Baldr is the object of the quest, and Hermóðr the character that rises to the challenge. The phrase *ǫll grétu þau eptir hann* implies that Hel's conditions for the release of Baldr were the same as in Snorri's account; essentially, then, this stanza agrees in its outline with the events *Gylfaginning* describes in the aftermath of Baldr's death. It does not, however, contain any of the details of Hermóðr's hel-ride which make Snorri's narrative so richly atmospheric. The *Málshættakvæði*-poet seems to imply that his tale was sufficiently well known for him not to have to elaborate on this verse (lines 7-8). While there is no reason to doubt it, the evidence for knowledge of the myth is hardly widespread, and is only found in works by Christian Icelanders, working a full two centuries after the conversion.

The discrepancy between the paltry number of references to the mythological fiction of Hermóðr in Hel and its apparent importance to Snorri's conception of the mythology has led some scholars to postulate the existence of an eddic poem, now lost, on which Snorri drew in the composition of his narrative. The stanza which Þǫkk speaks has sometimes been regarded as the sole remnant of this poem, which Schröder – whose opinion was that the Codex Regius currently lacks two necessary and integral poems: one on Baldr's death, as well as one which described 'Hermods Helfahrt' – chose to call *fǫr Hermóðs*. By analogy with the Þǫkk-stanza, Schröder hypothesised a dialogic form of poem in *málaháttr*, which would have resembled *Skírnismál*.[8] Richard Dieterle, too, has argued that 'the myth belongs within the elder Eddic tradition, and is in fact a noninnovative and rather close prose translation of an earlier poem': he

[7] *Skjald* B II, 140: 'Frigg's son seemed a loss, he was said to come from a great family; Hermóðr wished to increase his life, Eljúðnir managed to swallow Baldr, all wept for him, the ban on laughter was increased for them, the story about him is often heard, why should I harp on about this?'

[8] Schröder, *Germanentum und Hellenismus*, pp. 96-102; see also Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance*, p. 117.

identifies a 'chiastic structure' within Snorri's narrative of the events surrounding Baldr's death that may best be explained by a single lost poetic source for this whole section of *Gylfaginning*.[9] Such a hypothesis can of course never entirely be dismissed, but the burden of proof must rest with those who argue in favour of a lost eddic original. In the absence of such a text, the question that suggests itself is this: if Snorri himself is responsible for the fiction of Hermóðr's hel-ride in its extant form, may we identify other sources for its mythological content and imagery, without taking the easier option of inventing a single poetic precursor? As we will see, there are enough significant parallels between Snorri's iconography of Hel and both pagan and Christian traditions associated with death and the underworld to suggest that no one source would likely have contained all the necessary elements, and that – once again – Snorri's strategy has been to synthesise disparate elements into a coherent whole.

THE VALLEY

The valleys through which Hermóðr rides for nine nights are hardly distinctive: they are deep, and they are dark – so dark, in fact, that Hermóðr rides blind for the duration of this part of his journey. Lindow points out that there are many examples in medieval Christian vision literature of travellers traversing dark spaces at the beginnings of their journeys. He also draws attention to the existence of a large dark valley in Dryhthelm's vision and the *Visio Tnugdali*, both of which popular Latin visions were translated into Old Norse.[10] In fact, the deep or dark valley is a standard part of the Christian visionary landscape, found in many of the most popular medieval descriptions of hell.[11] Sometimes the valley is understood to be hell, or to contain it, as in Bede's account of Dryhthelm's vision.

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[9] Dieterle, 'The Song of Baldr', p. 291; this view was shared by Olsen, 'Om Balder-digtning og Balder-kultus', p. 151. Bugge, *Studier over de nordiske gude- og heltesagns oprindelse*, p. 48, attempted to reconstruct a portion of Snorri's supposed lost source.

[10] Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance*, p. 117. The *Visio Tnugdali* is an Irish vision of heaven and hell dating from the mid-twelfth century that achieved great popularity during a period in which interest in this genre reached its zenith. Dryhthelm's vision, which is supposed to have occurred in 731, is recorded by Bede in *Historia Ecclesiastica* V.12.

[11] For plentiful examples of the appearance of valleys in visions of hell see Patch, *Other World*, pp. 87, 95, and 100-33.

> Incedebamus autem tacentes, ut uidebatur mihi, contra ortum solis solstitialem; cumque ambularemus, deuenimus ad uallem multae latitudinis ac profunditatis, infinitae autem longitudinis, quae ad leuam nobis sita unum latus flammis feruentibus nimium terribile, alterum furenti grandine ac frigore niuium omnia perflante atque uerrente non minus intolerabile praeferebat.[12]

The valley Dryhthelm sees has more than its impressive dimensions in common with that through which Hermóðr rides; later on in the description of his vision, it is the complete darkness that confronts him that causes Dryhthelm to panic:

> At cum me hoc spectaculo tam horrendo perterritum paulatim in ulteriora produceret, uidi subito ante nos obscurari incipere loca, et tenebris omnia repleri. Quas cum intraremus, in tantum paulisper condensatae sunt, ut nihil praeter ipsas aspicerem, excepta dumtaxat specie et ueste eius, qui me ducebat. Et cum progrederemur "sola sub nocte per umbras", ecce subito apparent ante nos crebri flammarum tetrarum globi ascendentes quasi de puteo magno rursumque decidentes in eundem.[13]

Sola sub nocte per umbras is a quotation from Vergil's *Aeneid* VI, line 268. Aeneas's journey into the world of the shades became one of the most important archetypes for medieval underworld-descent narratives. Whether because of textual influence from Vergil or a simple shared conception of the infernal realm as a dark place (which is a perfectly straightforward extrapolation of the belief that hell was somewhere under the earth), many journeys of this nature begin with the visionary in a state of total darkness. Elsewhere in the *Historia* (III. 19)

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[12] *Bede's Ecclesiastical History* V.12, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, p. 488: 'We went in silence in what appeared to be the direction of the rising of the sun at the summer solstice. As we walked we came to a very deep and broad valley of infinite length. It lay on our left and one side of it was exceedingly terrible with raging fire, while the other was no less intolerable on account of the violent hail and icy snow which was drifting and blowing everywhere.'

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 490: 'When he had gradually led me further on, utterly terrified by this awful spectacle, I suddenly saw that the places in front of us began to grow dimmer until darkness covered everything. As we entered this darkness, it quickly grew so thick that I could see nothing else except the shape and the garment of my guide. As we went on "through the shades in the lone night", there suddenly appeared before us masses of noisome flame, constantly rising up as if from a great pit and falling into it again.'

Bede records the vision of an Irishman named Fursa, whose trip to the otherworld includes an aerial view of 'some sort of dark valley': *uidit quasi uallem tenebrosam subtus.*[14] Bede's works did circulate in medieval Iceland in some form, although it has been shown that the Old Norse version of Dryhthelm's vision, translated in the fourteenth century, was known in Iceland through its inclusion in Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum historiale.*[15] A few scholars have regarded this sort of anecdotal material drawn from standard Latin authors – Gregory the Great is another whose works contain accounts of otherworld-visions that probably circulated in medieval Iceland – as potentially an important model for Snorri's narratives in *Gylfaginning.*[16] As Margaret Clunies Ross has put it, 'only, perhaps, in the Latin and translated vernacular *exempla* or illustrative anecdotes from hagiography, sermon literature, compendia of universal history and other learned genres, do we find a potential model for the kind of illustratory mythic narrative that Snorri uses so skilfully throughout the *Edda*'.[17] In this case, however, the shared topographical feature of a valley is not nearly sufficient to prove direct borrowing from Bede.

The phrase that narrates the initial phase of Hermóðr's journey – *hann reið níu nætr døkkva dala ok djúpa* – has been regarded as supporting the thesis of a pre-existing poetic source on

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[14] *Ibid.*, p. 272.

[15] *Islendsk æyventyri*, ed. Gering, p. 331. Bede was best known in Scandinavia for his chronological work, although homilies attributed (both accurately and spuriously) to him were also influential. There is no firm evidence to prove that the *Historia Ecclesiastica* was known in Iceland or Norway, although Benedikz, 'Bede in the Uttermost North', p. 340, speculates that Ari inn fróði and other early Icelandic historians might have had some knowledge of that text. Fry, 'Bede', p. 37, concluded that 'medieval Scandinavians revered Bede for his reputation but had limited direct contact with his works'.

[16] It is Gregory's *Dialogues* which provide some of the most influential early examples of infernal visions. They were very popular throughout Europe, and Iceland was no exception to this trend. The *Dialogues* were certainly translated into Old Norse before 1190: their influence on 'native' Old Norse literature has often been suspected, and occasionally proven: see Wolf, 'Gregory and Old Norse Religious Literature', pp. 266-9; also Boyer, 'Influence of Pope Gregory's *Dialogues*'. Although no complete manuscript copy survives, there is plentiful evidence from book-lists and extant fragments that Gregory's *Dialogues* circulated widely in Iceland. The remnants of eight fragments of an Old Norse translation have been edited by Unger, *HMS* I, 188-93, 207-11 and 250-5: these scraps, now found in the Norwegian State Archives (Norges Riksarkiv 77), are all part of a single Icelandic codex, dating to around 1300. *The Life of St. Gregory and his Dialogues*, ed. Hreinn Benediktsson, prints a further eight fragments from the same collection (Norges Riksarkiv 71, 72, 72b and 76), and eight fragments from AM 921 4to, all of which he argues (pp. 8-9) are constituent parts of another manuscript of Gregorian translations.

[17] Clunies Ross, 'Mythological Fictions', p. 213. See also Bekker-Nielsen *et al.*, *Norrøn Fortællekunst*, pp. 12-13 and 24-5 and Holtsmark, 'Eksempel i vn. litteratur'.

stylistic grounds: the alliteration of *døkkva dala djúpa* 'suggest (sic) an underlying and presumably older eddic lay'.[18] This alliteration, though suggestive, cannot be taken as proof of this poem's existence: it may be a recollection, conscious or subconscious, of similar phrases in other extant eddic poems. Although none of the Codex Regius texts reproduces precisely this line, the semantic consonance of *djúpa* 'deep' and *dala* 'valleys' make the alliterating pair an intuitive choice within the eddic verse aesthetic: it is found in *Hárbarðsljóð* 18/4 (*ok ór dali djúpum grund of grófu*) and in *Helgakviða Hjǫrvarðssonar* 28/4 (*dǫgg í diúpa dali*), as well as in *Heiðreks gátur* 7 (*Hverr byggir há fjǫll, hverr fellr í djúpa dali*), which was probably composed after *Snorra Edda*.[19] Perhaps Snorri's occasional use of alliteration in his prose narrative indicates not quotation of a particular verse, but rather his immersion in the language of eddic poetry in general. Hardly anyone can ever have been so familiar with Old Norse poetic traditions as he, and if he had no single source from which to work his tale of Hermóðr's Hel-ride, he might well have been concerned to create an air of verisimilitude, situating himself within the mythological world he was concerned with mapping, a world which included the poems of the *Poetic Edda*, but which extended beyond them. Such an interpretation is of course conjectural, but it is no more conjectural than the hypothesised existence of an otherwise completely unattested poem (or two).

Another possibility must be mentioned, however: it was not only poetry that featured alliteration. In the Hiberno-Latin *Visio Tnugdali*, the analogous passage in which the narrative's subject begins his journey into hell by entering a vale of darkness makes use of alliteration to heighten the affective impact of this important passage, the first in the text where the otherworld is described.

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[18] Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance*, p. 117; see also Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion*, p. 110. Dieterle, 'Song of Baldr', p. 293, notes that the phrase 'Vex viðar-teinungr einn fyrir vestan Valhǫll' (*SnE* I, 45: 'There grows a tree-shoot to the west of Valhǫll') which Frigg utters to Loki, referring to the mistletoe that will bring about Baldr's death, features alliteration 'so pronounced that we may suspect Snorri of lifting a line out of his source almost verbatim'.

[19] *Heiðreks gátur* is the name given to a sequence of riddles found in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs* (*The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, ed. Tolkien, pp. 32-44), which was probably composed around 1250. The riddle-contest takes place between Heiðrekr and the disguised Óðinn, who eventually prevails. Although there are clear correspondences between this text and eddic wisdom-contests like *Vafþrúðnismál*, riddles (Icelandic *gátur*) are not particularly well represented in the extant corpus of early Old Norse verse: for an overview of the genre, see Alver, 'Gåter' and Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, 'Riddles'. The choice of this type of poem for an exchange featuring Óðinn is a good example of form being fitted to function, demonstrating as it does that in the thirteenth century Óðinn was still closely associated with wisdom, deception, and the art of concealment, all of which qualities are inherent to the idea of riddling.

> Cumque longius simul pergerent et nullum preter splendorem angeli lumen haberent, tandem **v**enerunt ad **v**allem **v**alde **t**erribilem ac **t**enebrosam et mortis **c**aligine **c**oopertam. Erit enim valde profunda et carbonibus ardentibus plena …[20]

When this passage was rendered into Old Norse prose, it appears that the translator attempted to ape some of the alliteration of his exemplar, although the imitation is in the spirit rather than the very letter of the Latin prose:

> En suo sem þau hofdu leingi geingit og hofdu ecki lios nema þat er stod af einglinum og um sider komu þau i dal einn **m**ikinn og **m**iog ogurligan **m**yrkan og allan huldan daudans blinnleik. Sa **d**alr uar miog **d**iupur og fullr **glo**andi **glo**da[21]

Both the Latin and Norse versions of the *Visio Tnugdali*, then, embellish their prose descriptions of the deep dark dales with modest alliteration. In a description of a second valley, the place of punishment for the proud, the soul – which, like Hermóðr, is descending into the underworld – is also said to be unable to see the depths of the valley because of the intense darkness in the putrid, shady, vale:

> Sem salin hafdi geingit sem næst einglinum fyrir hræzlu saker komu þau j dal diupan og fullan myrka og sarleika og illra dauna þessi dalr uar suo diupur at aungum kosti gat set grunin sa dalr uar skipadur af salum þar matti sia og heyra mikinn huellan þytt af straumi brenusteins er rann or fiallinu.[22]

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[20] *Visio Tnugdali*, ed. Wagner, pp. 12-13: 'Together they proceeded a distance, and they had no light except for the splendour of the angel. Finally they came to a very terrible and dark valley covered by the fog of death. The valley was very deep and full of burning coals.'

[21] *Duggals Leiðsla*, ed. Cahill, p. 25: 'And when they had gone for a long time and had no light except that which shone from the angel, eventually they came into a valley, large and very awful, dark and covered altogether by the blindness of death. This valley was very deep and full of glowing embers…' This passage, edited from AM 681 4to a, is slightly more accurate than AM 624 4to, the only other manuscript to preserve this particular part of the text. There is, however, no significant lexical or stylistic variance between the two versions.

[22] *Duggals Leiðsla*, ed. Cahill, p. 29: 'When the soul had gone as close as possible to the angel for fear's sake, they came into a deep valley full of darkness and pain and evil smells. This valley was so deep that by no means could the bottom be seen. This valley was filled with souls. There could be seen and heard a great and shrill wailing sound

Duggals Leiðsla may postdate *Snorra Edda*, if the usual attribution of the translation to the circle of Norway's King Hákon Hákonarson 'the old' (1217-63) is accepted; [23] the date of composition of *Gylfaginning* is also uncertain, but is almost certainly after 1220.[24] The Latin original has a *terminus post quem* of 1149, the year in which tradition placed the occurrence of Tundal's vision.[25] Although Lindow avers that it is unlikely that Snorri knew the Latin, it is not impossible that he did. [26] Nor is it impossible that he had been exposed to narrative in the vernacular, even if it had not found its way to Iceland by that point. Snorri, after all, made his first trip to the Norwegian court in the years 1218-20, a visit which lies within the period in which the Norwegian translation is thought to have been undertaken. This coincidence is tempting, but it provides

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from the stream of sulphur which ran from the mountain.' The Latin original runs thus (*Visio Tnugdali*, ed. Wagner, pp. 14-15): 'Set illis pre timore pedetemptim pergentibus venerunt ad vallem valde profundam, putridam nimis ac tenebrosam, cujus profunditatem ipsa quidem anima videre non poterat, sonitum autem sulphurei fluminis et ululatus multitudinis in imis patientis audire valebat.'

[23] See *Duggals Leiðsla*, ed. Cahill, pp. xlix-lviii; Wolf, '*Visio Tnugdali*', p. 705, offers the mid-thirteenth century as her closest guess at the text's date of origin. All the extant manuscripts of *Duggals Leiðsla* are Icelandic, and none is older than around 1350. The association with the court of Hákon derives from the Prologue in AM 681 4to a (Cahill's A) and AM 681 4to c (C), and has generally been accepted as fact, by analogy with the occurrence of similar phrases in other works translated in this milieu. See e.g. Finnur Jónsson, *Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie* II, 973; Fell, 'Bergr Sokkason's *Michaels saga*', p. 363 and Barnes, '*Riddarasögur*', pp. 407-15.

[24] Sturla Þórðarson records that another of Snorri's nephews, Sturla Sighvatsson, spent the winter of 1230-1 at Reykjaholt and had copies of Snorri's *sǫgubækr* ('saga-books') made; *Sturlunga saga*, ed. Kristján Eldjárn *et al.* I, 342: 'ok var Sturla löngum þá í Reykjaholti ok lagði mikinn hug á at láta rita sögubækr eftir bókum þeim, er Snorri setti saman'. Although it is unknown as to which books Sturla is referring to here (Kristján Eldjárn *et al.*, ed., *Sturlunga saga* I, 566, n. 4, laconically mention *Heimskringla* and *Egils saga* as possibilities), Whaley for one ('Snorri Sturluson', p. 603) regards the decade 1220-30 – a period of relative peace and stability in Iceland – as the period in which Snorri is most likely to have composed most of his literary works. See also *SnE* I, xv; Schier, 'Edda', p. 982.

[25] Cahill, ed., *Duggals Leiðsla*, p. lviii, counsels against paying too much heed to this tradition, questioning whether it is entirely wise to assign 'an event which is a literary fiction' to a particular year. See also Owen, *The Vision of Hell*, p. 33. Marshall, 'Three problems', pp. 16-18, argued that the *Visio Tnugdali* must postdate the Synod of Kells in 1152; Gardiner, 'A solution to the Problem of Dating', has reasserted the case for the traditional dating of 1149. The difference between these two dates is relatively small, and largely insignificant in relation to the date of the *Visio*'s transmission into Scandinavia.

[26] Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance*, p. 117. Faulkes, 'Sources of *Skáldskaparmál*', pp. 70-3, assembles evidence to suggest that Snorri never learned any Latin at all. For a contrasting view, see e.g. Clunies Ross, *Skáldskaparmál*, pp. 28-9; Foote, 'Latin Rhetoric and Icelandic Poetry', p. 257.

only circumstantial evidence of how Snorri might have come into contact with a version of the *Visio Tnugdali*; the correspondences between the two texts are not so close that a positive link can be made between them. However, the parallels between Hermóðr's ride through the shadows and the beginning of Tundal's infernal vision reveal the fallacy underlying Schomerus, Dieterle and Lindow's postulated lost poetic exemplar for Snorri's narrative: alliteration is not the same as poetry, and the impetus for its use could have come from an entirely different source, if not merely from Snorri's own authorial choice.

There would be no pressing reason to place the pitch-dark valley of Hermóðr's nine night's travel within a Christian context,[27] were it not for the fact that – in the absence of *Helreið Hermóðs*, or whatever it is called – there is no pre-Christian source which connects Hel to such a topographical feature. *Baldrs draumar*, the eddic poem that most closely resembles the Baldr-sequence from *Gylfaginning*, does not describe the landscape through which Óðinn rides on his quest for knowledge in the underworld:

Baldrs draumar 2

Upp reis Óðinn, alda gautr,
oc hann á Sleipni sǫðul um lagði;
reið hann niðr þaðan Niflheliar til,
mœtti hann hvelpi, þeim er ór helio kom.[28]

Beyond the repetition of the direction of Hel as 'down', this stanza has little to say about the imagined topography of the underworld, save that the name it uses, *Niflhel*, which means 'mist/dark-Hel', might imply that visibility is restricted in the realm itself: but this is not the same as the benighted landscape through which Hermóðr rides. And since, as we have seen, skaldic

[27] The *Visio Alberici*, the account of a revelation made to a monk of Monte Cassino, which was written down c. 1121-3 (Gardiner, *Sourcebook*, p. 31), coincidentally mentions that the vision takes place after the visionary had lain as if dead for nine days and nights. This vision, however, is the only Christian text in which the visionary's experience lasts precisely this long (Dinzelbacher, *Vision und Visionsliteratur*, pp. 141-2), and so we may assume that the duration of Hermóðr's ride reflects the ancient significance of the number nine in Scandinavian culture. The standard work on this subject remains Weinhold, *Die mystische Neunzahl*; see also the comments of Wagner, 'Zur Neunzahl', who argues against influence from Christian numerology, and in favour of genuine cultic significance, in the numbers recorded by Thietmar of Merseburg in his account of pagan sacrifices at Lejre.

[28] 'Up rose Óðinn, the sacrifice for men, and on Sleipnir he laid a saddle; down he rode from there to Niflhel, where he met a dog which came out of Hel.'

poets had little or no conception of Hel as a place before the arrival of Christianity, we are left bereft of 'native' sources for Snorri's deep and dark valleys, alliterate though they may. This landscape can more easily be paralleled in the Christian tradition, in which there was, by the twelfth century, a highly developed topography and iconography of the underworld, one part of which was frequently a dark valley, through which the visionary passed into the realm of the dead.

THE RIVER

The second landmark that Hermóðr meets on his way to Hel is the river Gjǫll. Once again, the only eddic poem to mention this feature is *Grímnismál*, which includes Gjǫll in a list of rivers which fall 'down from here to Hel' in stanza 28:

> Vína heitir enn, ǫnnor Vegsvinn,
> þriðia Þióðnuma,
> Nyt oc Nǫt, Nǫnn oc Hrǫnn,
> Slíð oc Hríð, Sylgr oc Ylgr,
> Víð oc Ván, Vǫnd oc Strǫnd,
> Gioll oc Leiptr, þær falla gumnom nær,
> enn falla til heliar heðan.[29]

The idea that all of these rivers run down out of Miðgarðr, close to mankind, and into Hel is contradicted by *Gylfaginning*'s account of the creation of the world, in which the spring Hvergelmir, which lies in Niflheimr – already at the bottom of the 'vertical axis' and interchangeable with Hel[30] – is the source *from* which they flow, but Gjǫll is still particularly closely associated with the realm of the dead:

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[29] 'Vína is the name of one, a second Vegsvinn, a third Þióðnuma, Nyt and Nǫt, Nǫnn and Hrǫnn, Slíð and Hríð, Sylgr and Ylgr, Víð and Ván, Vǫnd and Strǫnd, Giǫll and Leiptr, they fall near to men, and fall hence to Hel.'

[30] Strictly speaking, *Niflheimr* is what Hel is created out of when the goddess Hel is cast down into it (*SnE* I, 27): before that point in cosmic history, *Niflheimr*, 'the world of mists', seems initially to be a sort of primordial chaos out of which other cosmological features develop. Snorri places it underneath one of the roots of Yggdrasill, and its

> Þá mælir Jafnhár: 'Fyrr var þat mǫrgum ǫldum en jǫrð var skǫpuð er Niflheimr var gǫrr, ok í honum miðjum liggr bruðr sá er Hvergelmir heitir, ok þaðan af falla þær ár er svá heita: Svǫl, Gunnþrá, Fjǫrm, Fimbulþul, Slíðr ok Hríð, Sylgr ok Ylgr, Víð, Leiptr; Gjǫll er næst Helgrindum.[31]

In the narrative of Hermóðr's ride to Hel, the river Gjǫll is the penultimate obstacle that the hero must negotiate, although Móðguðr's statement that the road to Hel is downwards and to the north suggests that he has some distance to travel, and that Gjǫll does not actually form the physical boundary of Hel's domain. Because there is a bridge with an unthreatening guardian, Hermóðr has no trouble in crossing the river.

Beyond *Grímnismál*'s brief mention of Gjǫll running down into Hel along with many other watercourses, this river does not appear in poetic sources, and it is only in *Gylfaginning* that it forms part of Hel's landscape. In Christian visionary literature, on the other hand, the river is one of the most widespread topographical features found in the underworld. Its wellspring is found in the Bible – Daniel's vision of the Day of Judgment includes a river of fire flowing from the Ancient of Days and engulfing the wicked[32] – and this stream commingled with the four rivers of hell found in the classical tradition to form a river, or rather a divergent set of motifs based on the idea of an infernal river, that remained an important part of the imagined landscape of hell throughout the Middle Ages and which found its way into Dante's *Inferno*.[33] The conduit through which this river flowed was most probably the highly influential *Visio Sancti Pauli*, which

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position beneath the earth probably leads to its identification with Hel (*SnE* I, 17). *Niflheimr* does not appear in any poem, although *Niflhel* is found in *Vafþrúðnismál* 43 and *Baldrs draumar* 2.

[31] *SnE* I, 9: 'Then Jafnhár says: "It was many ages before the earth was created that Niflheimr was made, and in its midst lies a spring called Hvergelmir, and from it flow the rivers called Svǫl, Gunnþrá, Fjǫrm, Fimbulþul, Slíðr and Hríð, Sylgr and Ylgr, Víð, Leiptr; Gjǫll is next to Hel-gates".'

[32] Daniel 7.10: *fluuius igneus rapidusque egrediebatur a facie eius* 'A river of fire issued and flowed out from his presence.' This river of fire may be compared with that which flows to the western end of the earth, near the mountains of darkness in the apocryphal apocalypse of I Enoch 17.5 (*Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha*, trans. Charles): 'And they took me to the living waters, and to the fire of the west, which receives every setting of the sun. And I came to a river of fire in which the fire flows like water and discharges itself into the great sea towards the west. I saw the great rivers and then came to the great river and to the great darkness, and went to the place where no flesh walks.' On the background to this passage, see Milik, *Books of Enoch*, pp. 38-40.

[33] See Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell*, pp. 110-12.

in its various redactions disseminated the motif of the infernal rivers across Western Europe.[34] The *Visio*'s debt to classical ideas of hell is readily apparent. In its earliest versions, and in medieval redactions II and VIII, one of the three rivers is named as Oceanus, which derives originally from Homer, while redactions I, III and VII of the apocryphon seem more closely dependent on the *Aeneid* for their treatment of the infernal rivers, among much else.[35]

The *Visio Sancti Pauli* was certainly known in medieval Scandinavia: an Old Norse translation of the apocryphon was undertaken, perhaps in the late twelfth century, although the only extant manuscript of the vernacular text, AM 624 4to, appears to be a product of fifteenth-century Iceland.[36] But there is nothing in Snorri's account of the river Gjǫll to link it to the torrents of torments found in the *Visio*. In the mainstream variants of the motif, the river acquires painful or unpleasant features through which it contributes to the punishments of the souls in hell: the river is usually fiery, or contains pitch or sulphur, and the immersion of sinners in the boiling liquid is often described.[37] Later elaborations of the motif gave the river further torturous characteristics: the river which all souls must cross on their eternal journey in both versions of the twelfth-century *Visio Godeschalci* is filled with knives,[38] while the *Purgatorium*

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[34] See Morgan, *Dante and the Medieval Other World*, pp. 27-9.

[35] *Visio Sancti Pauli*, ed. Silverstein, pp. 65-6. On the complex interrelation of the discrepant surviving versions of the *Visio Sancti Pauli*, see *ibid.*, p. 61, and the supplementary information provided in his later article, 'New Links and Patterns'. Morgan, *Dante and the Medieval Other World*, p. 48, n. 28, conveniently provides a *stemma codicum* of the extant manuscripts of the *Visio*.

[36] *En norrøn versjon av Visio Pauli*, ed. Tveitane, p. 5. The translation may have been made in Norway: Tveitane states that the *Visio Pauli* was known 'in some form' in twelfth-century Norway, as its influence may be perceived in the Old Norwegian Homily Book (AM 619 4to), which has been dated to around 1200 (McDougall, 'Homilies (West Norse)', p. 290). The Old Norse text is based upon redaction IV of the *Visio Sancti Pauli*, although it omits large sections found in the Latin. Redaction IV was not edited by Silverstein, and must be consulted in Brandes, *Visio S. Pauli*, pp. 75-80.

[37] This motif of 'gradated immersion', as Morgan calls it (*Dante and the Medieval Other World*, pp. 29-30) is found in all the redactions of the *Visio Sancti Pauli* except redactions VI and VIII, and in many medieval visions deriving from it. These are listed by Morgan, *ibid.*, p. 49, n. 33, and include the visions of Sunniulf, the Monk of Wenlock, Charles the Fat, Alberic and Thurkill, together with the *Purgatorium Patricii* and the vision of a woman recorded by the bishop of Lull in the eighth century.

[38] *Godeschalcus*, ed. Assmann, p. 62 (*Godeschalcus*) and p. 170 (*Visio Godeschalci*). The vision of Gottschalk, a peasant from Holstein, is said to have occurred over Christmas of 1188. The Latin account of this vision was written down in about 1189-90, and survives in two versions. To save confusion, Assmann gives different names to each: the longer text (his Schrift A), which is found in two manuscripts, Wolffenbüttel, Herzog-August-Bibliothek, Codex.

Patricii inverts the river's traditional characteristics in order to plunge sinners into an icy deluge.[39] There is no indication that Gjǫll shares any of these qualities: indeed, Snorri does not describe the river that Baldr crosses at all.

If it forms the border to Hel's domain, then Gjǫll might be said to belong to a Vergilian conception of the underworld, as it is in *Aeneid* VI that a river – the Phlegethon – is first said to encircle the walled city of Tartarus:

> Respicit Aeneas subito et sub rupe sinistra
> moenia lata uidet triplici circumdata muro,
> quae rapidus flammis ambit torrentibus amnis,
> Tartareus Phlegethon, torquetque sonantia saxa.[40]

Gjǫll, of course, is not fiery, and Aeneas's path to the city of the damned takes him to the left, rather than to the north. The name Phlegethon (or Pyriphlegthon in Hellenistic sources: it appears first in book 10 of the *Odyssey*) derives from Greek *Φλεγέθων* – 'blazing, burning', emphasising its long-held fiery associations, whereas Gjǫll is related to the Old Norse verb *gjalla*

Guelf. 558 Helmst (W) and Hannover, Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, XIII 163 (H) is called *Godeschalcus*, following the example of a rubric in W. The title *Visio Godeschalci* is reserved for Assmann's Schrift B, a slightly abbreviated redaction than survives in a single manuscript, Cologne, Historisches Archiv, GB fol. 75. See *Godeschalcus*, ed. Assmann, pp. 23-5 and 35-8.

[39] *St Patrick's Purgatory*, ed. Easting, p. 134. The Latin *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*, composed by an Englishman, Henry of Sawtry, tells of the visionary experience of an Irish knight named Owein, which was believed to have taken place some forty years earlier. This vision proved to be extremely popular and influential, existing in hundreds of manuscripts: it was also translated into several vernacular versions. The text edited by Easting is the 'longest version' of the *Tractatus*, designated *β*, which ultimately formed the basis for the Middle English *Vision of Owayne Miles*. On the textual history of this work, see *St Patrick's Purgatory*, ed. Easting, pp. lxxxiv-xc; the date of its composition is open to question, and has been subject of a vigorous debate. Easting, 'The Date and Dedication', argues for the period 1173-86 as most likely, with de Pontfarcy, 'Le *Tractatus Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*', pp. 461-5 focussing her attention on the year 1184. Previously, a much later date of between 1208 and 1215 had been proposed by Locke, 'A New Date for the Composition of the *Tractatus*'.

[40] *Aeneid* VI, in *P. Vergilii Maronis Opera*, ed. Mynors, lines 548-51: 'Aeneas looked back suddenly and saw under a cliff on his left a broad city encircled by a triple wall and washed all around by Phlegethon, one of the rivers of Tartarus, a torrent of fire and flame, rolling and grinding great boulders in its current.' All citations from the *Aeneid* are from Mynors's edition.

– 'to resound, make a loud noise'.[41] It seems reasonable to assume that both river names reflect a characteristic feature of the watercourse they denote, but the significance of Gjǫll has never satisfactorily been explained. Perhaps the river itself is noisy, running in spate. Alternatively, it is possible that the noise is made by the clashing of solid objects in the waters, just like Vergil's spinning boulders. There is no internal evidence to support the latter suggestion, but in *Vǫluspá* 36 we find a description of the river Slíðr – another of the rivers which *Grímnismál* has running down into the underworld – which flows with 'swords and saxes'. The near-homophony of Vergil's *saxa* and *Vǫluspá*'s *sǫxom* is, I presume, nothing more than a peculiar coincidence:[42]

Vǫluspá 36

Á fellr austan um eitrdala,
sǫxom oc sverðom, Slíðr heitir sú.[43]

A better model for a noisy river is found in Eilífr Goðrúnarson's *Þórsdrápa*. In the mythical narrative of Þórr's journey to Geirrøðargarðar as told by Eilífr,[44] an extremely perilous river is the main obstacle which the god must overcome in the first half of the poem: Þórr and Þjálfi spend stanzas 4-10 wading the turbid stream.[45] In stanza 6 the noise of the river is made extremely explicit:

Þar í mǫrk fyr –markar
málhvettan byr settu

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[41] De Vries, *Altnordisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, s.v. *gjǫll*; Hale, 'River Names', pp. 181-2.

[42] There have been many attempts made to discern influence from classical tradition on eddic poetry in general and *Vǫluspá* in particular: see the references provided by Dronke, 'Classical Influence', p. 145, n. 1. The correlations between *Vǫluspá* and the Latin *Sibylline Oracles* continue to be explored, with some interesting results: see Dronke, '*Vǫluspá* and Sibylline Traditions', pp. 19-20, where she argues that the poet of *Vǫluspá* may have been aware of Christian oracular genres, but decided deliberately to recast the tradition in the light of his own mytho-poetic heritage.

[43] 'A river of swords and knives falls from the east around the poison-valleys; it is called Slíðr.' On the river of swords, see further below, pp. 205-9.

[44] This narrative was apparently well known and quite popular in medieval Scandinavia: for a list of analogues to *Þórsdrápa*, see Clunies Ross, 'An interpretation of the myth of Þórr's encounter', pp. 370-1, n. 2.

[45] Ed. Davidson, 'Earl Hákon and his Poets', pp. 521-3. On the origin of the river in *Þórsdrápa*, see Clunies Ross, 'An interpretation of the myth of Þórr's encounter', pp. 272-8.

(né hvélvǫlur Hallar)
háf- skotnaðra (sváfu)
knátti, hreggi hǫggvin,
hlymþél við mǫl glymja
en fellihryn fjalla
Feðju þaut með steðja.[46]

As Davidson describes it, the river here is, amid a 'bruising assault of noise' a 'chameleon-like torrent is one moment a clattering fish-trap, next a maelstrom with clanking stones, then a giant noise-file – *hlymþel* – hewed by the wind, and finally a hammering force clashing against an anvil'.[47] Clearly, if Snorri's Gjǫll is so named because of the noise with which it resounds, then we could hardly find a better model for it than Eilífr's river. In *Skáldskaparmál*'s prose retelling of the same narrative, however, Snorri calls the river which Þórr crosses Vimur, and adds that it is *allra á mest* (*SnE* II, 25, 'greatest of all rivers').[48] Snorri does not mention that this river Vimur is noisy, or that it flows with stones or any other objects. And so it seems unlikely that Snorri regarded Vimur and Gjǫll as being mutually identifiable, or even structurally analogous; nonetheless it is of course possible that the description of the river in *Þórsdrápa* is the sole surviving description of a noisy mythological river connected with the otherworld, to which the name Gjǫll could be an indistinct allusion.

It is possible that Snorri (or his source) was thinking of more than one underworld river, and combining their features, but that is hardly a conclusive argument. While *Grímnismál* provided the name, there is little evidence to suggest that the river Gjǫll formed a barrier or border to the land of Hel in pre-Christian thought in the way that it does in *Gylfaginning*. Snorri provides too little detail positively to identify the features of this watercourse as part of the Christian tradition but, once again, it is just as closely paralleled in Latin *uisiones* as in Old Norse mythological texts.

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[46] Ed. Davidson, 'Earl Hákon and his Poets', p. 522: 'There they drove shooting snakes [?spears] into the ground against the storm, whipped to utterance, of the fish-snare land [the river] – and the wheeling knuckle-bones of Hǫll [rocks] did not sleep – the tempest-cut noise file resounded against the gravel while the battering torrent of the hills roared with Feðja's anvil [the river bed].' See Davidson's commentary on this stanza, *ibid.*, pp. 590-3.

[47] *Ibid.*, p. 544.

[48] The most likely meaning of the name Vimur is 'gushing, whirling one'. See Clunies Ross, 'An interpretation of the myth of Þórr's encounter', p. 372, n. 9.

THE BRIDGE

Hermóðr does not find the river Gjǫll much of an obstacle, because there is a convenient bridge by which to cross it. Snorri names the bridge *Gjallar brú*, which must mean 'bridge over the river Gjǫll', as we know Gjǫll to belong to an older tradition, whereas Gjallarbrú does not occur in any text which predates *Snorra Edda*.[49] It does not appear in Eddic poetry, and its earliest occurrence in the skaldic corpus is a verse by Snorri's nephew Sturla Þórðarson, a Christian writing in the period of renewed interest in pagan mythology that Snorri's own work exemplifies. In stanza 27 of Sturla's *Hákonarkviða*, which was probably composed c. 1263, crossing the Gjallarbrú is a metaphor for dying, in much the same way that 'going to Hel' was used in the works of the earliest pagan skalds:

> Ok þar gekk
> á Gjallar-brú
> ræsis mágr
> fyr riðusóttum
> bauga bliks,
> er boðar fellu
> elda vers
> of afarmenni.[50]

Sturla presumably knew his uncle's work on mythology, and this metaphor may have been abstracted directly from *Gylfaginning*; it cannot, at any rate, be used as evidence for the presence of the Gjallarbrú in a pre-Christian topography of Hel.

The information that Snorri gives about the appearance of Gjallarbrú is meagre. It is, he writes, *þǫkð lýsigulli*, literally 'thatched or covered with bright gold'. The choice of the verb *þekja* to describe a bridge (which did not, presumably, have a roof), is curious, but this phrase recalls,

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[49] De Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* II, 376, suggested that Gjallarbrú may represent a development 'durch mehre Zwischenstufen' of the Persian Zinvat-bridge. No evidence in support of this theory was offered, and I do not think it merits discussion here.

[50] *Skjald* B II, 123: 'The kinsman of the chieftain went over Gjallarbrú in the fever of shield-gleam [battle], when the orders came to kindle a verse about the overbearing man.'

perhaps intentionally, the descriptions in *Gylfaginning* of Valhǫll as *skjǫldum þǫkð* (*SnE* I, 7: 'thatched with shields', introducing a stanza by Þjóðólfr) and of the palaces of the gods:

> Þar er ok sá er Glitnir heitir, ok eru veggir hans ok steðr ok stólpar af rauðu gulli, en þak hans af silfri. Þar er enn sá staðr er Himinbjǫrg heitir. Sá stendr á himins enda við brúar sporð, þar er Bifrǫst kemr til himins. Þar er enn mikill staðr er Valaskjálf heitir. Þann stað á Óðinn. Þann gerðu guðin ok þǫkðu skíru silfri, ok þar er Hliðskjálfin í þessum sal, þat hásæti er svá heitir.[51]

Snorri's phrasing links Gjallarbrú with other mythological constructions, and is perhaps intended to establish a parallel between the bridge into Hel, the lower compartment of his spatial schema, and Bifrǫst (or Bilrǫst), the bridge which performs an analogous function as the link between the uppermost realm of the gods and Miðgarðr.[52] Bifrǫst itself is not, of course, described as golden since it is understood (by Snorri, if not by all modern scholars) to be the rainbow,[53] but it leads to those dwellings which also are roofed with precious metals. The source for this passage is again *Grímnismál*, which mentions Valaskiálf as *silfri þǫcþo sali* in stanza 6, and speaks of Glitnir as *gulli studdr* and *silfri þacþr* in stanza 15. The gods' abodes also resemble in this way many a description of the Christian heaven, in which gold, gems, and silver are almost ubiquitous

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[51] *SnE* I, 19-20: 'Also there is one called Glitnir, and its walls and columns and pillars are of red gold, and its roof of silver. There is also a place called Himinbjǫrg. It stands at the edge of heaven at the bridge's end where Bifrǫst reaches heaven. There also is a great place called Valaskiálf. This place is Óðinn's. The gods built it and roofed it with pure silver, and it is in this hall that Hliðskjálf is, the throne of that name.'

[52] The bridge to Ásgarðr is named as Bilrǫst in the *Poetic Edda*, where it appears in *Grímnismál* 44 and *Fáfnismál* 15; only Snorri calls it Bifrǫst. Bilrǫst is probably related to Old Norse *bil*, 'moment, weak point'; Bifrǫst is linked to *bifa*, 'to shake or sway'. If the eddic Bilrǫst is the original name, Snorri's preference for Bifrǫst may be based on an etymological distinction: a shaking bridge creates a structural parallel with Gjallarbrú, whose name is linked to the verb *gjalla*, 'to resound', and which appears to shake when Hermóðr rides over it (see below, pp. 154-9). Simek, *Dictionary*, pp. 36-7, discusses the meaning of these two names.

[53] *SnE* I, 18: 'Þá mælir Gangleri: "Brenn eldr yfir Bifrǫst?" Hár segir: "Þat er þú sér rautt í boganum er eldr brennandi."' ('Then Gangleri says: "Does fire burn over Bifrǫst?" Hár says: "The red you see in the rainbow is burning fire."') The precedents for Snorri's identification of the rainbow with a bridge to heaven are discussed by Dinzelbacher, *Die Jenzeitsbrücke*, pp. 103-6; see also Ohlmarks, 'Stellt die mythische Bifrǫst den Regenbogen oder die Milchstrasse dar?' and Schröder, *Germanentum und Hellenismus*, p. 35. De Vries was of the party which prefers the Milky Way as the origin of a heavenly bridge or pathway: see *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* II, 379.

building materials, following the description of the new Jerusalem in Revelation 21:10-21. The *Visio Tnugdali* provides ample instances of this common iconographical detail, for example:

> Cum autem modicum procederent, viderunt domum mirabiliter ornatam, cujus parietes et omnis structura ex auro erant et argento et ex omnibus lapidum pretiosorum generibus, et tamen omnes, qui intrare voluerant, intrabant. Erat vero domus intus tam splendida, ac si non dico unus sol, set quasi multi ibi splenderent soles. Verum ipsa domus erat ampla nimis atque rotunda nullisque columpnis fulcita et cum auro et lapidibus pretiosis totum ejus vestibulum erat stratum.[54]

If *þekja* should be taken to mean 'paved/covered', when applied to the roofless Gjallarbrú, as Faulkes suggests,[55] this passage, with its talk of golden floors, is an interesting analogue, although it would be impossible to prove a direct link. But while the physical appearance of the Norse gods' halls fits into a paradisiacal commonplace, the golden bridge is nowhere to be found: in neither *Grímnismál* nor any other eddic poem is there any mention of a bridge leading into Hel. The idea of an otherworldly golden bridge is probably not Snorri's invention, since something similar is also found at a point of transition between the world of men and the otherworld (which is not quite Hel) in Book VIII of Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*, over which Thorkillus and his men have to cross to get to the court of Geruthus:

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[54] *Visio Tnugdali*, ed. Wagner, pp. 42-3: 'When they had gone a little farther, they saw a marvellously decorated house, whose walls and whole structure were made of gold and silver and of all kinds of precious stones. But there were neither windows nor doors, and all who wished to enter entered. The house was so splendid inside but not, I say, as if one sun shone, but as if many shone there. This house was very full and very round and was supported by no columns. The whole vestibule was paved with precious stones and with gold.' Further instances of buildings made of gold or silver are found at pp. 45, 47-8 and 50-3: none of the levels of Paradise that Tundal sees lacks a variation on the motif.

[55] *SnE* I, 159.

> Procedentibus amnis aureo ponte permeabilis cernitur. Cuius transeundi cupidos a proposito revocavit, docens eo alveo humana a monstruosis secrevisse naturam nec mortalibus ultra fas esse vestigiis.[56]

Although this part of Saxo's narrative derives from the tale of Þórr's visit to Geirrøðargarðar as we know it from *Þórsdrápa* and *Skáldskaparmál*, this bridge is no more securely identifiable with a feature from Norse mythology than Snorri's Gjallarbrú is: the river has a function as boundary between worlds in pre-Christian poetry (on the evidence of *Þórsdrápa*), but this golden bridge is nowhere to be found. There is certainly no bridge for Þórr to cross in Eilífr's tenth-century poem. Elsewhere in Latin literature, however, golden bridges appear not infrequently: there is one, for example, in Andreas Capellanus's *De arte amoris*, the great twelfth-century manifesto of romance values:

> Iuxta ripae tamen extrema diutius ambulando devenit ad pontem, qui tali erat forma compositus. Pons quidem erat aureus et in duabus utrinque ripis capita tenens; medium vero pontis residebat in aqua et saepius vacillando procellarum videbatur unda submersum.[57]

Neither of these bridges, however, is Snorri's model: they bear no particular resemblance to Gjallarbrú; there is, moreover, no evidence that Andreas's work circulated in medieval Scandinavia, not even at the romantically inclined court of Hákon Hákonarson, nor that Snorri was familiar with the writings of Saxo.

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[56] *Gest. Dan.* I, 240: 'While they were travelling along, they discerned a river spanned by a bridge of gold. When they wanted to cross it Guthmundus called them back, telling them that the bed of this stream formed a natural barrier between the human and the supernatural worlds.'

[57] *Andreas Capellanus on Love*, ed. Walsh, p. 272: 'However, by walking for quite a time along the bank's edge he reached a bridge, the appearance of which was as follows. Of itself it was gold, and its ends rested on each bank, but the middle of it lay underwater, appearing to have become submerged by the quite frequent buffeting of storms.' Patch, *Other World*, pp. 199 and 282, mentions further examples of the golden bridge found respectively in the *Roman de la Rose* and the *Roman d'Alexandre*.

Patch argued that Andreas's bridge, and the others like it that we find in French *romans courtois*, derives from the typical otherworldly river barrier:[58] the landscape in which Andreas's knight finds himself on the other side of the bridge is also reminiscent of descriptions of heaven. And if the allegorical otherworld of the romances it is not precisely heaven, the uncommon detail of a bridge made from gold is one that would seem much more appropriate to a description of paradise than to hell: more appropriate, equally, to the realm of the Norse gods rather than the shadowy land of the dead.

The other physical feature of Gjallarbrú that emerges from Hermóðr's crossing of it is that it resounds noisily underfoot.[59] Móðguðr states that the bridge rattles just as much under the eight hooves of Hermóðr's mount as it did the previous day when five battalions of dead men had ridden across.[60] The most probable explanation for this facet of Gjallarbrú is a literary, rather than a mythological one. Recognising the resonant etymology of the name Gjǫll – familiar to him also from Heimdallr's Gjallarhorn,[61] in which the din made is the object's defining feature – Snorri has transferred from river to bridge both the epithet and its implicit meaning. The arrival of Hermóðr allows Snorri to make this minor pun, at the same time emphasising the size and physical majesty of the god-hero on his famous mythical steed. Although this explanation is satisfactory, I think, on literary grounds, it should be noted that parallels have been found to a resounding bridge elsewhere in the corpus of Old Norse prose. In *Grettis saga*, a farmer named Þorsteinn sets up a cunning device whereby his bridge rings loudly whenever anybody should try to cross it on to his property:

> Þorsteinn hafði látit gera kirkju á bœ sínum. Hann lét brú gera heiman frá bœnum; hon var gǫr með hagleik miklum. En útan í brúnni undir ásunum, þeim

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[58] Patch, *Other World*, p. 199.

[59] I am unavoidably reminded of P. G. Wodehouse's immortal simile comparing Honoria Glossop's laugh to cavalry on a tin bridge.

[60] In the Codex Uppsaliensis (Uppsala, De la Gardie 11) version of *Snorra Edda* the number of men is specified as 500, and it is made explicit that they were in Baldr's company (in the other manuscripts the association of the troop of dead men is only implied). *Snorre Sturlassons Edda*, ed. Grape *et al.* II, 31: 'Fyrra dag reið Baldr hér með fimm hudrað mann, en eigi glymr miðr undir þér einum'. See Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance*, p. 120.

[61] Heimdallr's horn is named as such three times in *Gylfaginning*: Mímir uses the Gjallarhorn to drink from his well (*SnE* I, 17); it is named as one of Heimdallr's trappings (*SnE* I, 25), who blows it to awaken the gods at the onset of Ragnarǫk (*SnE* I, 50). It is used in the same way in *Vǫluspá* 46.

> er upp heldu brúnni, var gǫrt með hringum ok dynbjǫllur, svá at heyrði yfir til Skarfsstaða, hálfa viku sjárar, ef gengit var um brúna; svá hristusk hringarnir.[62]

Although this early warning system is a testimony to the ingenuity and handiness of the Icelanders, all that it has in common with Gjallarbrú, really, is that both make a noise when somebody steps on them. The same may also be said for similar constructions made by King Solomon in *Trójumanna saga* or by Erminrekr in *Þiðreks saga*, although the latter's *dynbjǫllur* ('noise-bells') are at least made of gold.[63]

Gylfaginning *and* Draumkvæde

Although a golden bridge leading to, or situated within hell is not a standard part of medieval iconography, in which gold is naturally associated with heaven, there is one text which shares with *Gylfaginning* this unusual feature. In the Norwegian ballad-complex known as *Draumkvæde*, there is a bridge which is identifiable with Snorri's Gjallarbrú, a correspondence that was noted early and often by scholars keen both to situate *Draumkvæde* within the high middle ages, and to corroborate *Gylfaginning*'s account of Hel.

Draumkvæde, however, is a notoriously unreliable witness to medieval ideas, as it is in fact a haphazard collection of orally preserved stanzas that were only collected by Norwegian antiquarians in the nineteenth century. Debate has raged as to whether there ever was a medieval poem of this title. The climate of opinion has fluctuated wildly over more than a century, from utter faith – early scholars, Moltke Moe foremost among them, believing absolutely in its authenticity, and attempting to reconstitute its 'original' form – to outright scepticism: Brynjolf Alver's theory that the material dates back only as far as the eighteenth century (writing that *Draumkvæde* may be a ballad, but certainly not a *medieval* ballad) being the most extreme example

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[62] *Grettis saga*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, p. 173: 'Þorsteinn had had a church built on his farm. He had a bridge built on the path away from the farm; it was made with great skill. And on the outside of the bridge, under those beams which held the bridge up, it was fitted with rings and noisy bells, so that it was heard over at Skarfsstaðir, half a league away, if the bridge was walked over, the bells rang so much.'

[63] *Trójumanna saga*, ed. Louis-Jensen, p. 5; *Þiðreks saga*, ed. Guðni Jónsson II, 447. These parallels were noted by Guðni in his edition of *Grettis saga*, p. 173, n. 2.

of the contrary view.[64] Although it is unlikely that anyone will ever formulate adequate criteria by which to date *Draumkvæde* – and perhaps the dearth of attempts in the last twenty years suggests that scholars have realised it to be a lost cause – the opinion of Barnes and Strömbäck, that the subject matter of these verses would have been unpalatable to Lutheran Christianity, and that they must therefore originate from before the Reformation, seems likely, on the balance of probabilities, to be correct.[65] The story of how Olaf Åsteson went into an ecstatic trance which lasted from Christmas to Epiphany, in which period he visited both heaven and hell, and witnessed a sort of preliminary Judgement and the punishments awaiting the guilty, has obvious and important affinities with Latin *uisiones*. Peter Dinzelbacher has gone so far as to argue, in fact, that the original *Draumkvæde* is likely to have been a verse rendering of a lost *Visio Olaui* in Latin prose, which, having been completed at some point in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, then found its way into the folksingers' repertoire, in which form it was preserved while the textual evidence disappeared.[66] Perhaps, if Dinzelbacher is correct, the clerics of the reformed church in Norway found *Draumkvæde*'s brand of popular superstition heterodox or distasteful and suppressed it, or at least discouraged its dissemination.

In general terms, the material preserved in the *Draumkvæde*-variants very much resembles a typical medieval vision of heaven and hell. Although it is probably not advisable to go so far as Moe and Liestøl and state that the putative original was modelled on any *uisiones* in particular,[67]

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[64] Moe, *Samelde Skrifter* III, 235-42, assigned the 'poem' to the thirteenth century, a dating which Liestøl, *Draumkvæde*, pp. 128-30, refined to the middle of that century: compare Alvers, *Draumkvæde*, esp. pp. 134-41; other proponents of the sceptical school include Hildeman, 'I marginalen till Draumkvædet' and Solheim, 'Svensk balladtradition'. The history of *Draumkvæde*-research is inseparable from the texts themselves, and has been treated in great detail by Barnes, ed., *Draumkvæde*, pp. 3-63 (with an excellent bibliography to 1974 at pp. 63-8); see also Blom, 'Fra restitusjon til kildekritikk', esp. pp. 97-8.

[65] *Draumkvæde*, ed. Barnes, pp. 102-3, which summarises the findings of his earlier article, '*Draumkvæde* – How Old Is It?'; Strömbäck, 'Resan til den andra världen', p. 29. According to Dinzelbacher, *Die Jenzeitsbrücke*, p. 95, it is the ballads' main motifs, and not their form, which places them within medieval traditions.

[66] Dinzelbacher, 'Zur Entstehung von *Draumkvæde*'. Dinzelbacher's argument is partly based on analogy with other texts which began life as Latin prose accounts but which also survive in verse: the twin Latin versions of the *Visio Wettini*, for example, and the German poem based on the *Visio Tnugdali*.

[67] Moe, *Samlede Skrifter* III, 235, thought that *Draumkvæde* was based upon the *Visio Godeschalci* and the *Visio Thurkilli*; Liestøl, *Draumkvæde*, pp. 114-17, argued in favour of influence from an Anglo-Irish vision tradition, stating (p. 117) that 'our poem is an offshoot of the group [of English visions from the period 1150-1206], and is based in the main on three visions: Tundal's, Gundelin's, and, last but not least, Thurkill's'; in a previous article, however, Liestøl

there are many points of overlap with the genre, even if the ballad metre gives the stanzas the air of a folksong. Liestøl listed these 'general and common' correspondences between the Norwegian ballads and mainstream European vision-literature in some detail:[68] they comprise the frame of the vision, describing Olaf's trance and ascent to the clouds (episodes 1-4, stanzas 1-38),[69] which is structurally equivalent to the openings of most Christian *uisiones*, although Liestøl does not offer any close parallels; the 'thorny moor' (part of episode 5, stanzas 39-45, although there is a very great deal of variation between versions),[70] which Liestøl identifies in the *Visio Godeschalci* and the *Visio Alberici*; the 'bridge to the other world' (episode 16, stanzas 91-109), as Liestøl calls it, is of course a familiar and widespread motif, to which I will return shortly. Other commonplaces include the three paths in the other world, a conventional description of paradise, the punishment of sinners and the reward of good deeds. For none of these does Liestøl offer direct verbal correspondences with the cognate texts he cites, but nor does he need to: it is these general affinities which place *Draumkvæde* in the tradition of medieval *uisiones*. Closer examination cannot be based on Liestøl's analysis, since he failed adequately to address the problems associated with the textuality of the ballads, and based his reading upon a hypothetical reconstitution of the original. As Ådel Blom has argued, only by addressing the variant texts as they stand can a valid literary analysis of *Draumkvæde* be undertaken.[71] In so doing, however, it must constantly be borne in mind that even if variant stanzas are judged on their own terms, they are still the products of both oral tradition – with all the fluidity that that implies – and of scholarly activity, in that they have been extracted from informants and written down by collectors who may have had preconceived ideas about the nature of the material they heard:[72] there is no telling whether they recorded the singers' performances accurately, or silently intervened in the text during the process of its inscription. The circumstances of the *Draumkvæde*-variants' preservation, then, render their use as comparanda to medieval texts

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suggested that the apparent similarities between *Draumkvæde* and the *uisiones* of Gottschalk and Thurkill could be due to mutual knowledge of other texts which are unknown to us ('Til Draumkvædet', esp. pp. 114-17).

[68] Liestøl, *Draumkvæde*, pp. 49-60.

[69] These episodes are those identified by *Draumkvæde*, ed. Barnes, pp. 84-5, who – despite his uneasiness about the search for an *ur-Draumkvæde* (*ibid.*, pp. 69-70) – identifies the logical structure underlying the extant variants.

[70] *Ibid.*, pp. 205-6, n. 10: the *tynnermo* is merely one of several obstacles in this part of Olaf's journey linked by their capacity to injure the traveller's hands and feet.

[71] Blom, *Ballader og legender*, pp. 252-4; see also *Draumkvæde*, ed. Barnes, p. 63.

[72] The process by which these variants came to be recorded in the nineteenth century is described by Barnes, *ibid.*, pp. 71-80.

extremely problematic. To compare them with *Gylfaginning* – a written text, whose history is to a large extant recoverable, with a known author – is not to compare like with like. But since *Draumkvæde* potentially offers the only corroboration of a distinctive aspect of Scandinavian mythology as Snorri represents it, mention of a bridge identifiable with Gjallarbrú in a very large number of the *Draumkvæde*-variants – albeit spelled in a number of different ways, according to the dialect in which they circulated – is undoubtedly intriguing. It is hard not to join the rush to speculate about the relationship between these folk songs and *Snorra Edda*.

Gjeddarbro, or some variant dialectal spelling thereof, is the name of bridge which the visionary crosses in what Barnes identifies as episode 16 of the poem (stanzas 91-109 in his edition). There are some 32 recorded stanzas within the ballad-complex that mention the bridge. Only in stanzas V8.2 and V9.7, both 'loose' fragments (which did not circulate as part of one of the main variants), is the name of the bridge spelled in a way more or less identical to Snorri's Old Icelandic form, respectively *Gjallarbrui* and *Gjalarbroì*. Elsewhere a stem with medial *d* – *Gjeddar-* or *Jedar- bro*, etc., or a closely related orthographic variant – is the norm.[73] The language of the *Draumkvæde* texts is, by and large, that of the informants from whom the ballads were recorded: early- to mid-nineteenth-century dialects of western Telemark. Some Danish spellings have crept into the texts as a symptom of the orthographical conventions used by scholars at a period when the concept of standard written Norwegian did not exist.[74] It is accordingly no surprise that the *Gjeddar/Jedar bro* forms have mutated away from Old Norse. Nobody, however, seems ever to have doubted that the original name of this bridge was Gjallarbrú, as it appears in the thirteenth-century Icelandic text. We might note, for example, that in modern Norwegian *gjedde* means 'pike' (*Esox lucius*). The identification of this bridge with Snorri's cannot be confirmed on linguistic grounds, even if it is suggested: the two fragments which do preserve the spelling *gjellar-* are both copies, and not the original transcription – of whatever accuracy – of the informant's orally delivered poetry.[75] They are thus more likely to have undergone 'correction' at the hands of scholars, who might conceivably have emended dialect forms of the name according to their own comprehension of its signification. Stronger evidence than the superficial correspondences between the names of these two bridges must be found if they are to be regarded as reflexes of the same Old Norse motif.

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[73] For a list of stanzas which contain references to the bridge, see *ibid.*, pp. 214-15. All references to *Draumkvæde* are to the variants printed by Barnes, *ibid.*, pp. 146-87.

[74] *Ibid.*, p. 189.

[75] *Ibid.*, p. 111.

The main characteristics of the bridge in *Draumkvæde* may be drawn out from the tangle of variants as follows: first, the bridge is very high:

> Gjeddarbro den liggæ so høgt
> mot Nora Veende.[76]

We could, I suppose, see the positioning of the bridge *mot Nora Veende* as reflecting Móðguðr's instruction to Hermóðr that Hel lies in a northerly direction, although we will see that the significance of the North as a source of evil was by no means confined to *Snorra Edda*.[77]

The *Draumkvæde*-bridge is frequently described as being covered in spikes, prongs, or hooks. Stanza 101 (in V1a, 24 and 25) concludes

> ho, æ, i Enda mæ Jønni slejæn,
> og Soum i qvorjum Teende.[78]

The nature of the *Draumkvæde*-bridge is utterly different to that of Snorri's Gjallarbrú: it is a trial, and a painful one at that, as stanza 100 (T3, 4) makes clear:

> Æg hev fare ivi G. B.
> der er sá farleg ein Gang
> den som einki dømer domane ret
> han kjæm der aldrig fram.[79]

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[76] Variant V1a, stanza 24, 'Gjædderbro lies so high in the North Wind'. This is stanza 101 of Barnes's schematic reconstruction of the contents of the ballads. Stanza 101 is the most widely distributed of the G.B. verses, appearing in variants V1a, 24, 25; L4, 12; K9, 6; T3, 2, all of which mention the bridge's height in virtually the same wording. Barnes's stanzas 104, 105 and 106 (as represented by M1, 2; L4, 16; L1, 16) have the bridge 'hanging under the sky/clouds': L4, 16, *Gjænje Hev eg Jedarbroi / ho Tose uponde Skyi hange*.

[77] See below, pp. 184-6.

[78] 'It's covered with iron at the ends, and everywhere with spikes.' Stanza 103 (V9, 7) has 'hooks' (*aa der va' krokane paa*), stanza 99 (V ?12, 1) 'many barbs' (*mange taggar*); the T3 variant of stanza 101 uses the word *spiker*.

[79] 'I have been over G. B. That is such a dangerous passage! Whoever has not made just judgements will never get across.'

It is clear from this stanza that we are dealing with a reflex of the conventional Christian motif of the infernal bridge as combined test and punishment for souls. This bridge does not always lead, as Liestøl claimed, from one world into another;[80] rather, it is one of the torments found within hell. It functions in slightly different ways in different visions: simply as an instrument of punishment, as a mechanism by which the dead souls are judged, as part of the process of purgation or, by the time of the *Visio Thurkilli*, as a facet of purgatory itself.[81] The spikes of *Draumkvæde*'s bridge show that it is an instrument of torture, while variant T3 – the only version to include stanza 100 – indicates that it also separates the just from the unjust.[82] There is, however, no suggestion that it has a purgative function.

Liestøl claimed the influence of *Duggals Leiðsla* on the representation of the bridge in *Draumkvæde* to have been direct.[83] The Old Norse translation of the *Visio Tnugdali* fits into putative milieu of thirteenth- or fourteenth-century Norway to which *Draumkvæde* has sometimes been assigned, and there are certainly some close thematic parallels between the two texts. Duggal is forced to cross a very narrow bridge, covered with steel spikes, as part of his punishment for stealing a cow from his godfather.

> En um breidd uazsins uar bru miog long og uar lofa breid En leingd bruarinar uar half rǫst og uar þessi bru bædi leingri og miori enn hin er uer gatum fyr Nu uar sia en miora bru er yfer la uatnit oll sett stalgoddum sua at eingi fotur mannz mati yfer komaz[84]

The waters beneath this bridge teem with monsters, and Duggal and the angel watch as sinful souls weigh up the alternatives of being consumed by the beasts if they fall off and the continued laceration of their feet: despite the unbearable agony of the bridge, they attempt to

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[80] Liestøl, *Draumkvæde*, p. 54.

[81] Morgan, *Dante and the Medieval Other World*, pp. 34-6.

[82] Dinzelbacher, *Die Jenzeitsbrücke*, p. 98, notes that *Draumkvæde* and the *Visio Thurkilli* are the only texts to combine in the bridge the function of separating the sheep from the goats and the passage out of hell.

[83] Liestøl, *Draumkvæde*, p. 86.

[84] *Duggals Leiðsla*, ed. Cahill, p. 40: 'And across the breadth of the water there was a very long bridge, and it was a hand-breadth's wide. But the length of the bridge was half a mile. And this bridge was both longer and narrower than the one we mentioned before. Now the narrow bridge which led over the water was all set with steel spikes, so that no human foot could get across.'

cling on to it. While the superficial similarities with the bridge which Olaf Åsteson crosses in *Draumkvæde* are readily apparent – primarily that it is covered with spikes – there are no close verbal echoes: if *Draumkvæde* belonged to this tradition, it might just as well derive from the Latin original, which has *erat etiam ista tabula inserta clauis ferreis acutissimis*.[85] But the detail that the bridge is covered with iron spikes is not unique to these two texts: it is found also in the *Visio Thurkilli*,[86] while the visionary who crosses the bridge in the *Purgatorium Patricii* has hooks thrown at him.[87] There is also an important difference: in *Duggals Leiðsla* (and of course the *Visio Tnugdali*), the narrowness of the bridge is emphasised, which makes it all the more difficult for Duggal/Tundal when, attempting to cross while leading his cow, he meets another poor soul carrying a sack of wheat. In *Draumkvæde*, on the other hand, Olaf says – once he has got to the other side, and been judged as one of the righteous – that the bridge is 'both wide and broad':

> No hæv æg gjænji Gjædderbro,
> dæn æ baadi vii, aa brey –

as stanza 107 has it.[88] The ease with which Olaf appears to make it to the other side links the *Draumkvæde*-bridge more closely to the 'instrument of judgement' function. In texts in which this motif is found, the width of the crossing correlates directly to the moral worth of the one who wishes to cross, and a single bridge may be as many different widths as there are souls to cross it, as for example in the *Visio Alberici*:

> vidi flumen magnum de inferno procedere, ardens, atque piceum, in cuius medio pons erat ferreus multam habens latitudinem, per quem pontem iustorum anime tam facilius tamque velocius transeunt, quam immunes inveniuntur a delictis.

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[85] *Visio Tnugdali*, ed. Wagner, p. 19: 'Its surface was also pierced with very sharp iron nails.'

[86] *Visio Thurkilli*, ed. Schmidt, p. 12: 'deinde restabat pons magnus aculeis et sudibus per totum affixus, quem pertransire quemlibet oportebat, antequam ad montem gaudii perveniret'. ('Then there was a great bridge planted all over with thorns and spikes. Everyone was obliged to pass over this bridge before he or she could arrive at the Mount of Joy'). The bridge is referred to again as *pons aculeus* at p. 29.

[87] *St Patrick's Purgatory*, ed. Easting, p. 136: 'Demones autem supra flumen discurrentes uncos suos ad iaciebant.' ('The other demons running around above the river threw their hooks at him'.)

[88] Found in variants V1a, 26; L6, 7; K9, 5. Stanza 108 from T3, 6 removes the tautology by replacing *vii aa brey* with *hág og breid* ('high and broad').

> Peccatorum autem ponderibus gravati cum ad medium eius venerint, tam efficitur subtilis, ut ad fili quantitatem eius latitudo videatur redigi. Quia illi difficultate prepediti, in eundem flumen corruunt.[89]

Although the bridge in the *Visio Tnugdali* is narrow, its narrowness is not a reflection of the soul's sinfulness; it is just one of its tortures. Therefore, *Draumkvæde* cannot have borrowed this aspect of *gjeddarbro* from the *Visio Tnugdali*, in which the bridge is never more than a hand's-breadth wide.

No single source may be identified for the bridge we find in *Draumkvæde*: these ballads clearly owe something to medieval vision literature, but the nature of their debt is obscure. It is worth noting that ideas about a bridge named *Gille-broe* (or suchlike) remained in circulation in Scandinavia throughout the middle ages and even into the post-Reformation period.[90] The number of intermediate stages through which this material may have gone to produce the extant *Draumkvæde*-variants is unknown and unknowable. I agree with Barnes, however, when he says that 'it is surely… as a symbol of Nordic-Roman Christianity that *Gjallarbru* survives'.[91] Although an attempt recently has been made to rehabilitate *Draumkvæde* to the status of 'Norwegian national epic' by comparing it formally to *Vǫluspá*,[92] the tradition to which Olaf Åsteson's vision belongs is without a shadow of a doubt a Christian one.

That being the case, it does not, however, necessarily follow that there is no trace of pre-Christian belief in *Draumkvæde*. Steinsland identifies 'the dog that barks and snaps by the bridge', *gaglemyr* ('goose-swamp' or 'boggy swamp'), and the use of the name Grutte graasiæje ('fierce-eyed greybeard' or 'squinter greybeard', recalling Óðinn) for the devil as mythological parallels, but it is Gjallarbrú that is foremost among them.[93] Setting Gjallarbrú aside, the grounds for

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[89] 'La visione di Alberico', ed. Inganuez, p. 93: 'I saw a great black burning river flowing out of hell, crossed by a very wide iron bridge, over which the souls of the just passed as easily and quickly, as they were found to be free of sins. But when the sinners, heavy with burdens, reached the middle, the bridge suddenly became very narrow, as narrow as a hair, and overcome by this difficulty they fell into the river.' The idea probably goes back to Book IV of Gregory's *Dialogues* (ed. Moricca, pp. 287-8).

[90] See Strömbäck, 'Om Draumkvædet och dess källor'.

[91] Barnes, ed., *Draumkvæde*, p. 43.

[92] Steinsland, '*Draumkvædet* og *Voluspå*'.

[93] *Ibid.*, p. 462; these ideas go all the way back to Bugge's article 'Mythologiske Oplysninger', published in 1854-5.

regarding any of these motifs as belonging to Scandinavian mythology are questionable to say the least. The biting dog in *Draumkvæde* appears in stanzas which also mention the bridge:

> Ormen stinge å Bikkja bite
> å Stuten stend å stangar
> dær kjeme ingjen ivi Gjæddarbrói
> fyr Dómanne fedde vrånge.[94]

The only parallels to this dog in mythological material are the hound that Óðinn meets on his way to Hel in *Baldrs draumar* 2-3 – an animal which does not guard a bridge (no bridge is mentioned); it does not bite (it only barks); it is not associated (as the dog in *Draumkvæde* always is) with a stinging serpent – and Garmr, the hound that barks in front of Gnipahellir in one of *Vǫluspá*'s refrains.[95] Although Garmr and the dog in *Baldrs draumar* are frequently equated, there are no grounds for doing so. Garmr should probably not be associated with Hel at all, as to place Gnipahellir – the meaning of which is obscure, but may be 'overhanging cave' – in Hel is pure speculation.[96] The 'dog and snake' stanzas of *Draumkvæde*, if they are to be related to any text, are more likely a recollection of *Duggals Leiðsla*, in which – just before mention is made of the iron-spiked bridge – dogs and snakes (among other beasts) torment Duggal's soul: 'þar þoldi su sal hunda bit og uarga barningar biarnar bit orma hogg og eitur og margra anara grimligra og ogurliga dyra'.[97] Tundal has also to lead a cow across the perilous bridge; this is not a close

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[94] Stanza 98, quoted from M6, 14 (also found in L4, 13; T3, 5; closely related variants in K9, 7; V8, 2; V?12,1): 'A snake stings and a dog bites, and a bull stands ready to gore; he does not come over Gjæddarbró who has pronounced false judgements.'

[95] It was of this particular animal that Bugge ('Mythologiske Oplysninger', p. 114) and Moe (*Samlede Skrifter* III, 267) were reminded by these *Draumkvæde*-stanzas.

[96] *Ibid.*, p. 100; see also Dronke, ed., *Poetic Edda* II, 144. Although Dronke does not associate Gnipahellir with Hel directly, she still calls Garmr 'the Hell Hound'.

[97] *Duggals Leiðsla*, ed. Cahill, pp. 36-7: 'There that soul suffered the biting of dogs and wolves, beatings, biting of bears, the striking of serpents and their poison and many other cruel and terrible animals.' In this instance *Duggals Leiðsla* is undoubtedly closer to *Draumkvæde* than the Latin, which has (*Visio Tnugdali*, ed. Wagner, p. 18) 'Passa est enim ibidem canum, ursorum, leonum, serpentium seu innumerabilem aliorum incognitorum monstruosorum animalium ferocitatem' ('For he endured dogs, bears, lions, serpents, the ferocity of other numberless unidentified monstrous animals'). This correspondence was noted by Liestøl, *Draumkvæde*, p. 86; see also Dinzelbacher, *Die Jenzeitsbrücke*, pp. 100-01.

parallel to the ox which stands ready to gore the unrighteous in *Draumkvæde*, but it is closer than the others that have been offered.[98] The likelihood that *gaglemyr* has its origins in pre-Christian mythology is even smaller.[99] And while the stanzas which contain the name *Grutte gráskeggi* certainly suggests some of Óðinn's familiar characteristics – the grey beard, the black hat, and possibly his one eye – this identification is not entirely secure;[100] if the chief god of pagan times and the Christian devil are identified with each other, this only confirms the Christian outlook evinced elsewhere in the ballads. In any case, only two variants (L4, 15; K1, 23) preserve stanzas that include this character, which is apparently peripheral to the tradition.

The only remaining correspondence which might provide positive identification between Snorri's *Gjallarbrú* and the bridge in *Draumkvæde* is their golden covering: in variant T3, 3 (Barnes's stanza 102), we are told that 'aa gulli er etter Straumo lagt' ('and gold lies along the streams'?), while in his edition Landstad offered *hon er fast með gullið slegin* ('it is firmly covered with gold') as a variant reading to Barnes's stanza 101 (Landstad's A 24), in which the bridge is said to be 'covered with iron' (*Jønni slejæn*, etc).[101] Liestøl questioned which of these conceptions was the original one: was the bridge originally paved with gold, or armoured with iron?[102] It is doubtful, in fact, whether this question would ever have arisen were it not for the appearance of a golden bridge in *Snorra Edda*, since the evidence for its existence within the *Draumkvæde*-tradition is slight indeed. It relies upon a reading of a single stanza, which is itself probably

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[98] See Barnes, ed., *Draumkvæde*, pp. 8-9. Further examples of the goring bull as a conventional beast of hell are noted by Dinzelbacher, *Die Jenzeitsbrücke*, p. 101.

[99] On the meaning of the name *gaglemyr*, see Liestøl, 'Gaglemyrene', and *idem.*, *Draumkvæde*, pp. 72-5. Steinsland does not mention where in the ballads' pre-Christian background she locates this swamp: no such feature is identifiable in Old Norse mythological writings. It may be a reflection of folkloric beliefs about the souls of the departed taking the form of wild geese (as per Bugge, 'Mythologiske Oplysninger', p. 116), although not if, as Liestøl suggests, the first name of the element derives from Old Norse *gogli*, meaning 'mud', 'mire'. Landstad's suggestion (*Norske Folkeviser*, p. 75) that *gaglemyr* is a corruption of *gjallarmýrann*, 'Gjoll marshes', has not found any support.

[100] See Moe, *Samelde Skrifter* III, 291; Liestøl, *Draumkvæde*, p. 71. Barnes, ed. *Draumkvæde*, p. 8, points out the inconsistencies between this figure in *Draumkvæde* and Óðinn as we know him from other sources: although we can identify *gráskeggi* with the well known Óðinn-heiti *Hárbarðr* 'grey-beard', the Norwegian ballads state that this figure has either a *svarte Hat* (L4, 15 'black hat') or a *svartan Hest* (K1, 23 'black horse'). Óðinn may conventionally wear a hat pulled down over his face – as reflected in the nickname *Síðhǫttr* in *Grímnismál* 48 – but its colour is never specified. According to *Gylfaginning*, Óðinn's horse, Sleipnir, is grey (*SnE* I, 35: 'Þat var grátt ok hafði átta fœtr, ok er sá hestr beztr með goðum ok mǫnnum').

[101] *Norske Folkeviser*, ed. Landstad, p. 75.

[102] Liestøl, *Draumkvæde*, p. 67.

corrupt and certainly meaningless: it does *not* say that the bridge was covered with gold. Probably the best interpretation of the stanza as it stands is that of Reidar Christiansen, 'gold laid as in streams',[103] although Barnes notes that this reading accords with no known usage of *etter*; in any case, it hardly helps to explain what the gold is doing here. Barnes suggests that *straumo* may be a corruption of *saum* ('nail'), which accords very well with the substance of the rest of the *gjeddarbro* stanzas.[104] This reading would have the bridge covered in gold nails, which is still anachronistic, but not impossibly so. Whether or not we accept the emendation, it quickly becomes clear that anything more than a most cursory glance at the *Draumkvæde*-variants reveals the absence of a bridge covered with gold.

There is, therefore, no firm evidence to suggest that the mythological *Gjallarbrú* over which Hermóðr rides forms any part of the inspiration for the bridge in *Draumkvæde*. The various variant versions of *Draumkvæde*, then, are not 'half heathen, half Christian', as Bugge claimed a century and a half ago.[105] Although some folkloric elements in these stanzas may derive ultimately from pre-Christian ideas, most do not: 'folklore' does not mean 'pagan folklore'. The bridge that Olaf Åsteson crosses was part of a Christian vision reflecting a Christian conception of hell. Its origins are to be found in the Latin vision-tradition; even though no direct literary source for it may be identified, specific features of its description are closely paralleled in medieval texts. That is not to revert to the outmoded argument that the *Draumkvæde*-stanzas as we know them are a product of the middle ages; rather, the texts which exist are a snapshot of one particular point in a long, fluid, popular tradition, a tradition which grew out of medieval vision literature and its conventions, many of which have been preserved. The question that we must address, however, is whether the name Gjallarbrú has really managed to survive from pre-Christian Norse mythology into the nineteenth century.

Snorri's bridge and that of *Draumkvæde* are, as has been discussed above, linked positively only by the detail shared by *Gylfaginning* and variant T3 that the bridge is made of gold, and, of course, by their name. In all other respects, *Draumkvæde*'s *gjeddarbro* resembles much more closely the commonplace of the infernal bridge as it is found in Christian texts. What, then, is the nature of the relationship between the two bridges? There are a number of alternative interpretations. The conventional view is that Snorri describes a bridge that formed part of the

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[103] *Norske Folkeviser*, ed. Christiansen, p. iv.

[104] Barnes, ed., *Draumkvæde*, p. 211, n. 42.

[105] 'Aktstykke til soga', ed. Liestøl, p. 109.

pre-Christian topography of Hel; the *Draumkvæde*-variants preserve the name, but have accreted a number of features drawn from Christian *uisiones*.[106] *Gjeddarbro* is, by this reckoning, a pagan survival, still just visible through the cultural palimpsest of conversion. And yet, the only evidence we have to corroborate Snorri's account of Gjallarbrú's place in pagan myth is *Draumkvæde*. The circularity of this argument is readily apparent, and I should like to propose an alternative.

A bridge called *Gjeddarbro* or something very similar exists in many versions of *Draumkvæde*, the end product of a long-standing popular tradition observable not just in the Norwegian ballads, but also in Danish and Swedish texts spanning quite a long period.[107] Let us suppose that this tradition – popular, folkloric, but undoubtedly *Christian* – stretches back to the Middle Ages. Perhaps, as Dinzelbacher has suggested, there was even a *Visio Olaui*, in Latin or the vernacular, at its beginning. It is not impossible that Snorri Sturluson, who spent time in Norway, and whose description of the approaches to Hel incorporates motifs that very strongly recall the Christian vision-tradition, should have been aware of this tradition. The direction of influence could therefore have been reversed: rather than positing a 'pagan' bridge, unattested by any reliable witness to pre-Christian myth, but surviving in a Christian context, we would then have a Christian bridge being absorbed into the 'pagan' meta-mythology that Snorri, a Christian author, was creating. Counter-arguments against this proposal are obvious: the name Gjallarbrú clearly derives from the river Gjǫll, a feature of pagan cosmogony mentioned in *Grímnismál*. As suggested above, however, it seems clear that a pun of sorts is intended by Snorri, as shown by the transference of the river's 'resounding' quality to the bridge and Móðguðr's subsequent quip that Hermóðr and Sleipnir make more noise on the bridge than a throng of ordinary men. If Snorri is prepared to play around with his mythological information in this way, who is to say that he would not be prepared to alter the name of a bridge, the inspiration for which he found elsewhere, for the sake of the joke?

But alter it from what? In his discussion of the name *haddanbrú*, 'a clear parallel to and possibly corruption of Gjallarbrú', Barnes identifies a waterfall in Telemark named *Halland(sfossen)* as the only watercourse-name that might plausibly have influenced the *Draumkvæde*-tradition at this point. He goes on to write, 'by normal phonetic process *Halland-*

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[106] Dinzelbacher, *Die Jenzeitsbrücke*, p. 99, calls it 'nur eine Reminiszenz an die heidnischen Mythologie'.

[107] Strömbäck, 'Om Draumkvædet och dess källor', pp. 22-31.

develops from Old Norwegian *Haldandi*'.[108] The most common spellings of the bridge's name have the same consonant cluster *dd*. In the Telemark dialects in which the nineteenth-century informants declaimed the recorded stanzas, *dd* appears for Nynorsk *ll*: thus *gjeddar-* would indeed be *gjellar-* in 'standard' Norwegian.[109] Old Norwegian *ld* became *ll* in modern Norwegian by a process of assimilation.[110] By analogy with Barnes's example of (Draumkvæde-dialects) *haddan* < (standard Norwegian) *hallan* < (Old Norwegian) *haldan*, we may hypothesise a derivation of *gjeddar* (etc.) from *gjellar* < Old Norwegian *gjeldar*. So, this 'normal phonetic process' suggests that the original form of the stem may have been *gjeldar*, which presumably derives from the Old West Norse verb *gjalda* or noun *gjald* (which has become *gjeld* 'debt' in modern Norwegian: the vowel-change is a result of progressive *j*-umlaut).[111] This verb has the primary meaning of 'to pay'; it can also mean 'to repay' or – most significantly – 'to pay for / to suffer on account of'. The bridge in *Draumkvæde* does not resound, or make any sort of noise at all. Nor is a river with those characteristics mentioned in connection with it. But, as part of the tradition of the bridge as instrument of judgement and punishment, *Gjeddarbro* certainly makes the guilty suffer on account of their sins; it certainly makes them pay for their worldly misdemeanours.

This reinterpretation appears rather radical, but it is both philologically sustainable and semantically congruous. It helps to explain the continued currency of the name in post-medieval sources. For example, Strömbäck prints a satirical anti-papist poem from sixteenth-century Sweden, which lampoons Catholics for their reliance on money to purchase indulgences; the passage over *gillebro* is used as a metaphor for the salvation they hope to buy:

> Lär ock din Församling tro
> om helfwetis förborg och gillebro,
> Där de om ens skulle öfwergånga
> Barfötter uppå de jerntänger många:
> Med mindre de låta dig ett par skor få
> Och penningar I dem så många som där kunde gå;
> Då skall deras fötter alsintet skada

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[108] Barnes, ed., *Draumkvæde*, p. 215.

[109] *Ibid.*, p. 194.

[110] Haugen, *Scandinavian Language Structures*, p. 74; *idem.*, *The Scandinavian Languages*, p. 267; Seip, *Norsk språkhistorie*, p. 283.

[111] Haugen, *Scandinavian Language Structures*, p. 47.

Ehuru taskan måste förbanda.[112]

For this poem to be successful as a satire, it is important that the beliefs it ridicules are well known and closely associated with the Catholic faith; as Barnes suggests, this text indicates that *gillebro*, along with such other popery as holy water and the intercession of saints, was regarded as an established belief.[113] How did a bridge found originally in Old Norse pagan myth come to be an emblem of Scandinavian Catholicism? It is possible, of course, that a pre-existing name was applied to a Christian concept; on the other hand, it is not unlikely that the concept of an infernal bridge of trial, which clearly became an important part of popular traditions regarding the fate of the soul, should have a name of its own. This name, I suggest, was **gjalda-brú*, 'the bridge of payment/reckoning'. The Swedish satire quoted above may support this reading by punning on the name: to get over the spiritual 'bridge of payment' in the next world, you simply need to make a fiscal contribution in this one.

So Snorri, whose narrative of Hermóðr's ride to Hel is rich in motifs that are not found elsewhere in mythological sources but which crop up time and again in Christian vision literature, appears to have been aware of an early form of the **gjalda-brú* tradition. By altering the name slightly to correspond with that of the mythical river Gjǫll, he is able to integrate a feature derived from European literary sources into the cosmogony of pre-Christian Scandinavian myth as he understood it, principally from *Grímnismál*. Simek is right, therefore, to state that 'it is rather doubtful if the bridge to the underworld really had a place in heathen-Germanic concepts'; just as he is right to state that 'the concept of a Gjallarbrú was widespread in medieval Scandinavia'.[114] It has not been recognised sufficiently, however, just how indebted Snorri was to the Christian traditions of medieval Scandinavia in the formation of his personal conception of the underworld.

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[112] Strömbäck, 'Om Draumkvædet och dess källor', p. 31: 'Also, teach your flock belief in the suburbs of hell and the *gillebro*, where they shall pass barefoot over many iron pincers. Unless, they give you a pair of shoes with as much money in them as they can hold; then nothing will harm their feet, though their purse must take a knock.'

[113] Barnes, ed., *Draumkvæde*, p. 42.

[114] Simek, *Dictionary*, p. 110.

MÓÐGUÐR

Closely associated with Gjallarbrú is the mythological figure Móðguðr, about whom Snorri tells us little, other than that she guards the bridge: 'Móðguðr er nefnd mær sú er gætir brúarinnar'. Even less is known about her from other sources: she does not appear in the *Poetic Edda*; the only skald to allude to this figure is, once again, Sturla Þórðason, who uses the kenning *gjallar man* 'servant of Gjǫll' in stanza 24 of his *Hákonarkviða*.[115] In *Gylfaginning*, Móðguðr serves a purpose in the Hermóðr-narrative that has never adequately been defined. Although Snorri states that she guards the bridge, she does not attempt to prevent Hermóðr crossing it. Lindow sees Móðguðr as a 'boundary figure', who challenges the hero at the entrance to the world of the dead, and the brief exchange of words between her and Hermóðr as an attenuated flyting or wisdom contest.[116] The sort of figure we might expect the hero to meet in these circumstances is exemplified by the giantess Brynhildr meets on her way to Hel in *Helreið Brynhildar*, who engages in an exchange of hostile speeches with the traveller, with the stated aim of preventing her passage, as the first stanza makes clear:

> 'Scaltu í gognom ganga eigi
> grióti studda garða mína;
> betr semði þer borða at rekia,
> heldr enn vitia vers annarrar.'[117]

Giantesses also take part in wisdom exchanges with gods in *Baldrs draumar* and *Hyndluljóð*, although the conversation between Freyja and Hyndla in the latter poem does not take place, as Hilda Ellis Davidson stated, in Hel or on the road to Hel.[118]

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[115] *Skjald* B II, 123. In Sturla's verse, the *gjallar man* is associated with *Fenris nipt*, indicating an association between a figure similar to Móðguðr and Hel. Móðguðr is not herself named as such, however.

[116] Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance*, p. 121.

[117] 'You shall not journey through my homestead buttressed with stone; it would befit you better to be at your weaving than to visit another woman's man.'

[118] Ellis Davidson, 'Insults and Riddles', pp. 27-8. Ellis Davidson seems to have mistranslated *Hyndluljóð* stanza 1, line 2 'Hyndla systir, er í helli býr'. *Helli* is the dative singular form of the simple noun *hellr*, 'cave', and there is no reason to place Hyndla's dwelling within the mythological realm of Hel. The connection between the eddic *vǫlur* and the giants is explored by Quinn, 'Dialogue with a *vǫlva*', pp. 249-50.

Difficulties arise with the identification of Móðguðr with these wisdom-exchanging or boundary-guarding giantesses. Although a river crossing is conventionally a good example of a liminal space, Gjǫll does not demarcate the land of the living from the land of the dead, as has been noted above. Hel is actually circumscribed by the high *helgrindr* over which Hermóðr's horse leaps. The river Gjǫll may be 'next' to these gates (although the phrase Snorri uses – *Gjǫll er næstr Helgrindum* – literally means 'Gjǫll is nearest to the *helgrindr*', i.e. closest to the gates of all the underworld rivers), but it is not itself the boundary, and so Móðguðr cannot, strictly speaking, be considered as Hel's gatekeeper. Snorri probably intended her to be a counterpart to Heimdallr – the watchman-guardian of Ásgarðr – in the lower section of his structural schema. We never see Heimdallr act in this role in *Gylfaginning*, even though Snorri makes it clear that his special responsibility is to guard the bridge against the giants: 'Hann er vǫrðr goða ok sitr þar við himins enda at gæta brúarinnar fyrir bergrisum'.[119] The identical phrasing of *gæta brúarinnar* suggests that the structural equivalence of the two figures was intentional.

If Heimdallr's job is to keep the giants from crossing Bifrǫst into the gods' homelands, we would expect Móðguðr, according to Snorri's organizing principles, to be a giantess, and presumably that she should guard Gjallarbrú against the gods. As it happens, the only two named figures who go to Hel in *Gylfaginning* are both gods, Baldr and Hermóðr; it is therefore curious, if her function is diametrically opposed to Heimdallr's, that she does not make more effort to bar Hermóðr's entry, or at least to make him prove his credentials in some form of debate. Móðguðr's status as a giantess is never confirmed; it is usually assumed, however, because of her close association with Hel, who is connected to the giants by birth and who, like the giants, is part of the 'anti-Æsir' component of the system.[120] Móðguðr is not specifically a giant-name; it more closely resembles, in fact, the sort of appellation commonly used for valkyries. Lindow states that the maiden's name 'transparently' means 'bold-battle'.[121] *Guðr* is an older form of the common poeticism *gunnr*, which is the name of one of the valkyries sent to every battlefield by Óðinn, according to Snorri.[122] The first element, *móðr*, is understood by Lindow to be the noun meaning 'anger/fierceness', or the associated adjective, which, he states,

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[119] *SnE* I, 25: 'He is the gods' watchman and sits there at the edge of heaven to guard the bridge against the mountain-giants'.

[120] Orchard, *Dictionary*, p. 114.

[121] Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance*, p. 119.

[122] *SnE* I, 30; Snorri's source for name of this valkyrie is probably *Vǫluspá* 30.

is 'a common [component] in the nomenclature of the mythology'.[123] Móði, 'the angry one', is the name of a son of Þórr in *Vafþrúðnismál* 51 and *Hymiskviða* 34; apart from this figure, names with a *móðr* element are in fact rare in the *Poetic Edda*. There is a prince of the Langobards named Eymóðr in *Guðrúnarqviða ǫnnor* 19, who, along with the solitary reference to Hermóðr in *Hyndluljóð*, is the only character with *móðr* as the second element of a compound. Proper names with *móðr* as the first element, as in Móðguðr, are limited to two occurrences in *Vǫluspá*'s problematic *þula* of dwarf names (stanzas 10 and 11): Móðsognir (spelled *Mótsognir* in two manuscripts) and Móðvitnir (which is in any case most probably a simple misspelling of *Mioðvitnir*, and which occurs only in the Codex Regius manuscript of *Snorra Edda*).[124] It is thus hard on the basis of her name to find Móðguðr's proper situation within eddic mythology.

For an extra-mythological parallel to the name Móðguðr, we might turn back to *Draumkvæde*. In two variants, L4 and K1, the Norwegian ballads mention a female figure called *Gudmoer*, who appears to Olaf near the end of his spiritual pilgrimage, in *Pilegrims Kjørkje* (the 'Pilgrims' Church') in L4, 20-1, and in paradise in K1, 19-20. This *Gudmoer* helps the visionary by carrying him into the church (in L4, 21), and by giving him some new shoes:

> Kiæm eg mæg at Pilegrims Kjørkje
> der va meg injn man go
> bare mi snille Gudmoer
> ho gav meg nye Sko[125]

The role of the Gudmoer is to assist the visionary on his way. The shoes she gives to Olaf are linked to the motif of the thorny moor, which L4, 19 states the generous – those who bought shoes for the poor in this world– will not have to cross barefoot:

> Sæl æ den i denne Heimen
> den Fatike giæve Sko

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[123] Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance*, p. 119.

[124] See Dronke, ed., *Poetic Edda* II, 90. For a discussion of the probable interpolation of the dwarf-stanzas into *Vǫluspá*, see *ibid.*, p. 67. On the meaning of these two names in particular, see Simek, *Dictionary*, p. 221; Guttenbrunner, 'Über die Zwerge in der Völuspá', p. 62; Motz, 'New Thoughts on Dwarf-Names'.

[125] 'I came myself to Pilgrim's church, where nothing but good happened to me: kind god-mother carried me, and gave me some new shoes.'

han tar inkje bærføte gange
i Qvase Tynermo[126]

The idea that the merciful will be given shoes to cross the thorny moor is found in a similar form in the *Godeschalcus* and *Visio Godeschalci*. Gottschalk begins to cross the terrain barefoot, but one of his angelic guides takes pity upon him and provides him with some shoes; it is, so the *Godeschalcus* tells us, the job of the *angelus affabilis* to give protecting footwear to those who had been generous to the poor and merciful during their earthly life, so that they should escape the agony of the *terra spinas et tribulos germinans*:[127]

> Illis igitur distributa sibi calciamenta in eodem loco concito induentibus et de corrigiis eis adherentibus stricte ligantibus, Godeschalcus ammirans sciscitatus, quibus meritis hoc dono digni essent habiti, ab angelo affabili responsum accepit: per opera misericordie talia eos promeruisse et quemlibet mereri posse.[128]

Although Olaf appears already to have arrived at the church before receiving his footwear, and does not actually state that he crosses Tynermo, Gudmoer, by implication, plays the same role as

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[126] 'Those souls who have given shoes to the poor in the world, they will not have to cross sharp Tynermo barefoot.'

[127] *Godeschalcus*, ed. Assmann, p. 56. The importance of shoes for the dead person on his or her journey into the next world has a famous parallel in *Gísla saga*, in which the tying of 'Hel-shoes' to the feet of the deceased is described as a funerary custom: *Vestfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, p. 45: 'En þá er þeir hǫfðu veitt Vésteini umbúnað sem siðr var til, gekk Þorgrímr at Gísla ok mælti: „Þat er tízka," segir hann, „at binda mǫnnum helskó, þá er þeir skulu ganga á til Valhallar, ok mun ek þat gera við Véstein."' ('When they had prepared Vésteinn as was then the custom, Þorgrímr went to Gísli and said: "It is a custom," he says, "to tie Hel-shoes to men, when they are to go to Vahǫll, and I will do that for Vésteinn".') Strömbäck, 'Att binda helskor', saw in the *Gísla saga*-episode a reflection of genuine tenth-century folk beliefs. The correspondences between this practice and *Draumkvede* and the *Godeschalcus*-texts suggests to me that this piece of folklore is more likely to be Christian in origin: the statement that Hel-shoes help a man on the way to Valhǫll would seem incongruous in an authentically pagan rite, and *Gísla saga* is the only text to mention it. For a wide-ranging – although not altogether convincing – discussion of *helskó* in a comparative context, see Rosén, *Om Dödsrike och Dödsbruk*, pp. 128-66.

[128] *Godeschalcus*, ed. Assmann, p. 58: 'And so the shoes were distributed to those people for their own, and in the same place they were immediately putting them on and tying them on tightly by the laces; Gottschalk, wondering, asked for what merits they had been deemed worthy of this gift, and from the affable angel received this answer: "By such same acts of mercy they merited them, and shall receive them without measure".'

the angel in the *Visio Godeschalci*, which puts her into the conventional category of the otherworld guide.

Móðguðr does not at once strike one as fulfilling the same function: she does not accompany Hermóðr into the underworld, and her advice to him is hardly crucial to his progress. On the other hand, she does not play the role of bridge keeper or guardian with any real conviction; where we expect a challenge from her, we get welcome. Expectations of confrontation are defeated in the brief exchange of information. Hermóðr gives Móðguðr his name; in return she gives him the knowledge of Baldr's whereabouts that he seeks. As Lindow states, the peculiar form of this conversation, and particularly the willingness of both parties to volunteer information, 'separates the story … from most other voyages of acquisition in the mythology and brings it closer to medieval vision literature'.[129] Although Lindow offers no evidence to corroborate this view, he is right to emphasise the exceptional nature of the episode; but if we accept that Hermóðr's encounter with Móðguðr is anomalous within a mythological context, can we be so sure that the figure of Móðguðr herself is genuinely part of the tradition?

The name of *Draumkvæde*'s Gudmoer derives, it has generally been agreed, from Old Norwegian *guðs móðir* ('mother of god'), and originally referred to the Virgin Mary; by the time the ballads came to be recorded, it is thought that this perhaps rather too Roman association had been lost, to be replaced by the more neutral meaning of 'godmother'.[130] It is not much of a transformation to reverse the elements of *guðs móðir*, elide them, and provide a nominative ending, and so to come up with Móðguðr.

That is not to say, of course, that Móðguðr is the Virgin, or even a reflection of her. It is interesting to note, however, that Snorri uses the word *mær* to refer to Móðguðr. *Mær*'s primary meaning is 'maiden, virgin', and the word is used frequently in Old Norse to refer to Mary,[131] although it usually connotes a young woman or girl in a more general sense.[132] It is, however,

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[129] Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance*, p. 119.

[130] Barnes, ed., *Draumkvæde*, p. 207. See also Moe, *Samelde Skrifter* III, 273-4; Liestøl, *Draumkvæde*, pp. 88-90. The only departure from this interpretation was Landstad's reading (*Norske Folkeviser*, p. 79) – soon discredited – of *gulle mor* (a dialectal variant, preserved only in S4 2b, a defective single stanza) as 'precious mother'.

[131] As in the alliterative couplet *mær ok móðir*, which neatly expresses the seemingly incompatible twin characteristics of Mary: it is found, for example in Eysteinn Ásgrímsson's fourteenth-century laudatory poem on the Virgin, *Lilja* (*Le Lis*, ed. Taillé, p. 6).

[132] The word *mær* is an extremely common term for 'girl' in the corpus of eddic poetry: for references, see Kellogg, *Concordance*, pp. 322-4.

unusual that it should be applied to a female figure who serves as a guardian of mythological lore: the seeress in *Baldrs draumar*, whose wisdom-exchange with Óðinn is what we might expect Hermóðr's encounter with Móðguðr most to resemble, or the *vǫlva* of *Vǫluspá*, has to be old in order to have acquired the knowledge of the ages.[133] The wise woman of *Baldrs draumar* is specifically implied to be sexually impure when, in stanza 13, Óðinn taunts her in that she is no prophetess, but rather mother to three giants:

> 'Ertattu vǫlva, né vís kona,
> heldr ertu þriggia þursa móðir.'

The word *kona* connotes a married woman. Móðguðr clearly stands apart from such figures.

As with the bridge that she guards, Móðguðr's appearance in mythological writings is confined to *Gylfaginning* and the (later and, we may assume, derivative) poetry of Sturla Þórðason. Although I cannot find a directly analogous figure in Christian traditions, if, as I suggest above, Snorri has taken Gjallarbrú from a text related to *Draumkvæde*, it is possible that Móðguðr is a reflection, distorted or, more likely, deliberately altered, of the Norwegian *gudmoer*. Snorri's intent is not parodic: I do not suggest that Móðguðr is the Virgin Mary in disguise. But as Gjallarbrú and Móðguðr are so closely bound together in *Gylfaginning*, and as the only text to provide an important analogue to Gjallarbrú, *Draumkvæde*, also includes a female figure whose name may consist of the same lexical elements as Móðguðr's, it is certainly a possibility that Snorri's inspiration for both motifs came from the same source.

THE ROAD TO THE NORTH

The orientation of the road to Hel, the *Helvegr*, downward and to the north, as revealed by Móðguðr, has attracted relatively little scholarly interest. As mentioned in chapter 2 above, structuralist critics have attempted to infer from it Hel's positioning on a horizontal plane, functionally identical with the upper compartment of the binary-spatial system's vertical axis.

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[133] The *vǫlva* who speaks the prophecy in *Vǫluspá* makes her venerability clear in stanzas 1 and 2 of the poem, in which she says that remembers 'all the old tales, the earliest that I remember' (*forn spioll fira, þau er fremst um man*) and that she 'remembers giants, being born early' (*Ec man iotna, ár um borna*).

Snorri is alone in mentioning Hel's location to the north. The *Helvegr* is mentioned in two stanzas of *Vǫluspá*: in what direction it leads is undisclosed.

Vǫluspá 47

Scelfr Yggdrasils ascr standandi,
ymr iþ aldna tré, enn iotunn losnar;
hræðaz allir á helvegom,
áðr Surtar þann sefi of gleypnir.

Vǫluspá 52

Surtr ferr sunnan með sviga lævi
scínn af sverði sól valtíva;
griótbiǫrg gnata, enn gífr rata,
troða halir helveg, enn himinn klofnar.[134]

If *Vǫluspá* provided Snorri with the word *Helvegr*, it certainly did not inform him that it ran north from the bridge over the river Gjǫll. Stanza 47 suggests that there are many ways to reach Hel, with its use of the plural *helvegom*. Perhaps all these roads led in the same direction, and just one of them happened to pass by Móðguðr's bridge. Stanza 52 has Surtr come from the south – in a northerly direction, therefore – but it is not Surtr who treads the *Helvegr* here, it is the *halir*, and *troða halir helveg* may simply mean that 'warriors died', in line with the standard use of references to Hel in the *Poetic Edda*.

The source for Snorri's reference to the *Helvegr's* northerly orientation is not identifiable in the corpus of Old Norse pagan poetry. Was it therefore the author's invention, or does it preserve a piece of mythological information otherwise unknown to us? Jens Peter Schjødt suggested that Snorri did indeed build up his conception of the location of the underworld on the basis of a pre-existing pagan world of the dead, even if this realm was not identical with what Snorri knew as Hel:

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[134] Stanza 47: 'Yggdrasill shudders, the standing ash; the old tree groans, and the giant breaks loose. All are terrified on the roads to Hel, before Surtr's kin swallows it up.' Stanza 52: 'Surtr goes from the south with brushwood's destruction. The slain-gods' sun shines from the sword. The rocky cliffs crack and the troll-women are abroad. Men tread the road to Hel, and the sky splits.'

> Hermóðr, um nach Hel zu kommen, nach unten und auch nach Norden gehen muss. Snorri baut hier augenscheinlich auf älteren Vorstellungen von einem Todesreich im Norden und von den Riesen als Leichenesser auf (Vm 37, HHj 16). Ob dies wirklich dazu berichtet, die Behauptung aufzustellen, dass dieses Totenreich und Hel in heidnischer Zeit identisch waren, möchte ich noch bezweifeln. Andererseits kann man sich ohne weiteres vorstellen, dass der Weg nach Hel in nördliche Richtung führte, da es wesentlich natürlicher erscheint, den Norden mit seiner Kälte mit der Unterwelt unten in der Erde zu parallelisieren als mit einem glühendheissen Ort, wie man es von den christlichen Vorstellungen her kennt.[135]

There are problems with Schjødt's interpretation. The eddic stanzas which he appears to cite as providing evidence for a 'realm of the dead in the north', and for 'giants as corpse-eaters', *Vafþrúðnismál* 37 and *Helgakviða Hjrvarðssonar* 16, only in fact refer to the giants. I do not see the relevance of this function of the giants (which is explicit only in the verses cited, in the first of which a giant is given the personal name Hræsvelgr; in *Helgakviða Hjǫrvarðssonar* 16, the *hála nágráðug*, 'corpse-greedy hag', is a *fála*, 'giantess') to Hermóðr's Hel-ride. Even if Móðguðr is a giantess, she is no corpse-eater, and Hel herself, while probably to be associated with the giants, is not, as Snorri presents her in this episode, a grizzly devourer of the dead. There is, in short, no eating of corpses in chapter 34 of *Gylfaginning*, and I cannot see the link between this concept and Hel's northerly location. Nor am I convinced by Schjødt's claim that there was some sort of chthonic realm of the dead, which was naturally associated with the north because of the association with coldness shared by that point of the compass and the underworld. While not an unreasonable suggestion, there is little evidence to support such a hypothesis. Only in *Vǫluspá* 38-9 is there a possible native parallel for a northerly realm of the dead, although its identification with Hel is suspect: these two stanzas also display some of the poem's more obvious affinities with Christian tradition.

Vǫluspá 38-9

Sal sá hon standa sólo fiarri,
Nástrǫndo á, norðr horfa dyrr;

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[135] Schjødt, 'Horizontale und vertikale Achsen', p. 47.

fello eitrdropar inn um lióra,
sá er undinn salr orma hryggiom.

Sá hon þar vaða þunga strauma
menn meinsvara oc morðvarga,
oc þannz annars glepr eyrarúno;
þar saug Níðhǫggr nái framgengna,
sleit vargr vera – vitoð er enn, eða hvat?[136]

The iconography of the hall at Nástrǫnd, 'corpse-shore', with its north-facing doors, poison dripping through the roof, and serpents' spines wound around it, hardly accords with other descriptions of Hel: it is clearly associated with cold, being 'far from the sun', although *Vǫluspá* does not state in so many words that it actually lies in the north, merely that its entrances face in that direction. The dripping poison suggests that Nástrǫnd may have a function as a place of punishment: according to *Gylfaginning*, Loki's sentence for preventing Baldr's return from Hel was to be bound in a cave and to have *eitrdropar* fall on him (*SnE* I, 49). There is, on the other hand, absolutely no suggestion in pre-Christian texts that Hel had a punitive aspect, and certainly nothing resembling the striking image of *meinsvara menn oc morðvarga*, 'perjured men and murderers', wading a fast-flowing river. It seems that these wicked people, together with those who seduce another's 'confidante' (*eyra-rúna* probably means 'wife' here) have been condemned to an existence of torment after their deaths: as well as the river, the dragon Níðhǫggr feasts on the bodies of the *framgengna*, the dead, and a wolf tears at them. Ursula Dronke has suggested that *þannz annars glepr eyrarúno* in stanza 39, line 3, is not part of the original poem, on the grounds that 'the intimate, domestic treachery is out of key with the broad evils of oath-breaking and evil'.[137] There are signs elsewhere in *Vǫluspá*, however, that sexual morality was of concern to the poet, as is made explicit in stanza 45, line 3, *hart er í heimi, hórdómr mikill* ('it is hard in the world, great lechery'), which is one of the signs of moral collapse that accompanies Ragnarǫk. *Hórdómr*

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[136] Stanza 38: 'She saw a hall stand far from the sun on "Corpse-shore"; its doors look north; poison-drops fall in through the roof-vents, the hall is woven with serpents' spines.' Stanza 39: 'There she saw wading in turbid streams perjured men and murderers, and those who seduced the close confidantes of another; there Níðhǫggr sucked the bodies of the departed – a wolf tore the corpses of men – do you know yet, or what?'

[137] Dronke, ed., *Poetic Edda* II, 142.

(whence comes English 'whoredom') formed part of Scandinavian preachers' vocabulary of sin, as in the Norwegian Homily Book's first *Sermo ad Populum*, dating from about 1200:

> Þat ero hofuð-syndir er nu sculo þer hæyra. Kirkiu-stuldr ok rán. man-dráp. lang-ræke. ofund. ofmetnaðr. mykillæte. hordómr. of-dryccia. stuldr. ok allar ranglæicr. lausung. mein-æiðar. mutu-fe. ok trua a lif qvenna eða gerningar. eða a spa-saogur. þat er allt diofuls craftr. [138]

The final injunction in this list, not to put faith in the occult power of women, witchcraft, and prophecies, might warn us against paying too much attention to the *vǫlva*'s words: it is said, after all, that *æ var hon angan illrar brúðar* (stanza 22, line 4: 'she was always the delight of a wicked woman'), which represents, according to Dronke, 'the popular moral disapproval of married women who were intimate with sorceresses and might themselves dabble in spells to pursue personal enemies or lovers'.[139] McKinnell explains the lack of explicit condemnation of the practice of *seiðr*, 'magic', in *Vǫluspá* as a result of the poet's desire not to create a 'strange' and 'artistically tactless' situation in which the seeress would have to disown her own craft, upon the successful performance of which the whole of the poem is predicated.[140]

The correspondences between *Vǫluspá* and this type of homiletic material have often been noted. Wolfgang Butt proposed that a direct analogue (and possible source) for this part of *Vǫluspá* could be found in the Old English *De regula canonicorum* of Wulfstan, archbishop of York, and that the poem's origins should therefore be placed in the Danelaw.[141] There is considerable superficial attraction in linking *Vǫluspá* to Wulfstan's works: the traditional dating of the poem to *c.* 1000, and the apocalyptic concerns of Wulfstan's eschatological sermons both might support such a connection. The textual correspondences between *Vǫluspá* and *De regula canonicorum*, however, are not so close as to prove direct influence. Butt cited Wulfstan's catalogue of sinners

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138 *Gamal Norsk Homiliebok*, ed. Indrebø, p. 35: 'These are the head-sins which now you must hear: sacrilege and rapine; murder; rancour; envy; pride; arrogance; whoredom; drunkenness; theft and all injustices; falsehood; perjury; bribery; and to put faith in the magical power of women or witchcraft, or in prophecies. That is entirely the devil's business.' This passage is one of several in the Norwegian Homily Book to have been strongly influenced by Old English homiletic style, on which see my forthcoming 'Anglo-Saxon Influence'.

139 Dronke, ed., *Poetic Edda* II, 133.

140 McKinnell, 'Norse Mythology and Northumbria', p. 44.

141 Butt, 'Zur Herkunft der Vǫluspá', esp. pp. 87-9 and 103.

to provide his parallels: 'Ne beon hi æfre manslagan ne manswican ne mansworan ne morðwyhrtan ne æwbrecan, ac healdan heora riht æwe, þæt is heora mynster.' ('Nor in the least are they manslaughterers not traitors nor perjurors nor adulterers, but they maintain their rule always; that is, their monastery.')[142] The characteristically alliterative Wulfstanian doublet of *mansworan* and *morðwyrhtan* Butt regarded as analogous to *menn meinsvara oc morðvarga*: although the two phrases do look similar on the page, John Lindow has demonstrated conclusively that the words *morðwyrhta* and *morðvargr* are not lexically equivalent.[143] But while Wulfstan may not have influenced the composition of this section of *Vǫluspá*, there is no denying the importance of Christian tradition, conceived more generally, on the imagery it contains: catalogues of sins and descriptions of the punishments they attracted in hell were a perennially attractive topic for medieval authors.[144] McKinnell offers Revelation 21:8 as the likely ultimate source for *Vǫluspá*'s 'sinners', although he stresses that it is likely to have been 'modulated through preaching'.[145]

> Timidis autem, et incredulis, exsecratis, et homicidis, et fornicatoribus, et veneficis, et idolotaris, et omnibus mendacibus, pars illorum erit in stagno ardenti igne et sulphure: quod est mors secunda.[146]

The apocalyptic tenor of *Vǫluspá* chimes with the eschatological concerns of Revelation, and the types of crimes mentioned in the poem are all also present in the biblical list of sinners. But the *Vǫluspá*-poet hardly imports wholesale ideas from scripture. Rather, he makes a selection of those crimes which are related to the theme of his work: oath-breaking and murder (on the part of the Æsir) play a crucial role in the events that lead up to Ragnarǫk.[147]

McKinnell concludes his extremely insightful investigation of possible Christian influence on this part of *Vǫluspá* by writing that it 'does employ genuine syncretism – that is, it uses individual Christian images and ideas as part of an overall view that is not the standard

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142 *Homilies of Wulfstan*, ed. Bethurum, p. 192.

143 Lindow, 'Norse Mythology and Northumbria', p. 32.

144 See Morgan, *Dante and the Medieval Otherworld*, pp. 108-29.

145 McKinnell, 'Norse Mythology and Northumbria', p. 43.

146 'But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.'

147 McKinnell, 'Norse Mythology and Northumbria', p. 44.

one'.[148] If Snorri did get his idea of a northern realm of the dead from *Vǫluspá*, then he may have unwittingly been borrowing from one of the Christian images that the poet had observed. I do not think, however, that the north-facing doors of the hall at Nástrǫnd are sufficient on their own to give Snorri the idea that the *Helvegr* ran to the north, and an alternative explanation should be attempted. Schjødt's idea that the association of cold with such a realm would have seemed 'more natural' (he means, presumably, more natural to pre-Christian Scandinavians) than the conventional Christian iconography of a blazing inferno is also no more than an educated guess. In fact, the hell was generally placed in the north within medieval Christian spatial schemata, and I feel that it is very likely that Snorri was directly influenced by Christian tradition in supplying this detail about the road to Hel.

The Christian association of the north with evil is an ancient one, and derives principally from two Old Testament verses. In Isaiah 14:13-14, it is said that Lucifer wished to set his throne as high as God's: it is in the northern regions that he intends to sit: 'qui dicebas in corde tuo: "in caelum conscendam super astra Dei exaltabo solium meum. Sedebo in monte testamenti in lateribus aquilonis. Ascendam super altitudinem nubium ero similis Altissimo"' ('you said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far north; I will ascend to the tops of the clouds, I will make myself like the most high"'). The following verse makes it clear, however, that the devil will not succeed in his plans, but that he will be sent to hell: 'Verumtamen ad infernum detraheris in profundum laci.' ('But you are brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the pit.') Thus was the connection between Satan, hell, and the north first established. The firmly negative connotations of the north are reinforced in Jeremiah 1:14, 'et dixit Dominus ad me: "ab aquilone pandetur malum super omnes habitatores terrae"' ('and the Lord said to me: "from the north evil will break forth over all the inhabitants of the land"'). Although the evil from the north to which Jeremiah refers (both here and again at 4:6 and 6:1) is an actual physical threat facing the Jews – the imminent God-ordained attack of the Babylonians – the north came to be closely associated with evil in a more general, symbolic sense. Augustine twice interprets the north in this way, writing in his *Adnotationes in Iob* that 'potest aquilo diabolum significare et terra peccatorem, quoniam et illi et illi inanis est spes' ('the north can signify the devil and the earth the sinner, since for both hope is vain').[149] In the same author's *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, he writes, quoting Isaiah, 'Quid ergo timeo

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[148] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[149] *Sancti Aurelii Augustini, Quaestionem in Heptateuchem*, ed. Zycha, p. 562.

aquilonem? Quid timeo maria? Est quidem in aquilone diabolus, qui dixit: 'Ponam sedem mean in aquilonem, et ero similis Altissimo' (CCSL 39, 1228: 'Why do I fear the north? Why do I fear the seas? The devil is in the north, who said "I shall put my dwelling in the north, and I shall be like to the Most High"'). Another of the most influential patristic authors, Jerome, also states in one of his *Commentarii in prophetas minores* (on Zachariah) that the devil's dominions were situated in the north:

> hoc quoque quod sequitur ecce qui egrideuntur in terram aquilonis requiescere fecerunt spiritum meum in terra aquilonis, sic explanauit, ut diceret requieuisse spiritum domini, siue angeli, quando in terra aquilonis, diaboli regna durissima apostolica praedicatione subuersa sunt et haec esse regna, quae domino saluatori in monte excelso diabolus ostendens, sibi tradita gloriatus sit.[150]

Although the dissemination of this idea has not thoroughly been investigated, there is no doubt that in the popular imagination of the Middle Ages 'as far as Christian Europe is concerned, the North is the devil's preferred residence'.[151] And as Satan was thought to exist in hell, the Christian inferno was placed in the north by association, even though the biblical authorities do not make that quite explicit: in medieval drama, hell is always represented as lying to the north.

Snorri would not have had to have read Augustine's commentary on Psalm 88 to obtain the idea that hell was in the north: the idea was, it seems, quite commonplace, and readily suggested by the Biblical passages cited above. Although the debate about whether or not Snorri knew Latin continues to rage, there is no doubt that he was exposed to Scripture, either directly or through the medium of preaching. In his account of Hermóðr's ride to Hel, Snorri either reflects an otherwise unattested belief about the spatial location of the underworld within the

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[150] CCSL 76A, 794: 'Also this which follows "Lo those who enter into the land of the north have made my spirit to rest in the land of the north" he thus explained as meaning that he said that the spirit of the lord, or the angel, had rested, when in the land of the north the very harsh kingdoms of the devil have been overturned by apostolic preaching, and that these kingdoms are those which the Devil boasted to have received into his power, showing them to the Lord Saviour on the high mountain.'

[151] Rudwin, *The Devil in Legend and Literature*, p. 63. See also Burton Russell, *Lucifer*, pp. 69-71, and Kellogg, 'Satan, Langland, and the North'.

pagan cosmos, or else he transfers this facet of the Christian *locus subterraneus* to his mythological scene. I find the latter suggestion to be the much more persuasive of the two.[152]

CONCLUSION

Hermóðr's ride to Hel occupies a position of great importance within Snorri's narrative of the events leading up to Ragnarǫk, but this importance is discrepant with the *Poetic Edda*'s silence on the matter. To assume that a lost eddic poem provides the explanation for the present form of the story is appealing, but smacks of laziness. Rather, a willingness to admit that Snorri was prepared to allow non-native ideas into his mythology reveals that this episode is an admixture of standard Christian motifs in the service of his own organizational principles. In *Vǫluspá*, the main source of our (and Snorri's) conception of the temporal sequence of the mythology, Baldr's death, funeral, and Loki's punishment take place over the course of the central stanzas, 31-5. Immediately following this pivotal moment, the portents of the coming end of the world begin to appear, and the rush towards Ragnarǫk cannot be averted. The gods do not make any attempt, in *Vǫluspá*, to turn the terrible tide: they are absent from the poem until stanza 46, when Heimdallr blows his Gjallarhorn to signal the start of the war to end all. In *Gylfaginning*, Hermóðr's mission to Hel can be read as an attempt to fill in the gaps left by the *Vǫluspá*-poet, by imagining what the gods' actions were between the chaining of Loki and the beginning of the battle with the giants. In the poetic *Baldrs draumar*, it is Óðinn who descends to Hel, but he searches only for knowledge; Baldr is not yet dead. Perhaps influenced by this text (although he does not quote from it), Snorri gives Hermóðr – who elsewhere is a peripheral figure, somewhere between the human and the divine, but who does have Óðinnic attachments – the starring role in another descent-narrative, one by which the steady advance of the narrative smoothes over any apparent cracks in the eddic timeframe.

The infernal descent-narrative was familiar to medieval authors owing to its occurrence in *The Aeneid* and in texts describing Christ's harrowing of hell. The similarities between these heroic journeys into the underworld and Hermóðr's probably do not go beyond the merely

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[152] Structuralists would, of course, see in the correspondences between Hel and the Christian hell further support for their methodology: not in the myths themselves, but in the structures underlying them do they find significance, and these structures, apparently common to Christian and pagan myth-systems, would undoubtedly be grist to their mill.

typological. However, the preponderance of apparently Romano-Christian literary motifs that may be identified within this episode from *Gylfaginning* suggests that wherever the idea for the narrative's outline came from, in the details of its presentation it should be linked to Christian Latin *uisiones* rather than to pagan myth. The possible links with *Draumkvæde* and the *Visio Tnugdali* tradition suggest, intriguingly, that Snorri's knowledge of this type of text may have been acquired in the context of his visits to Norway. In the integration of Christian motifs into a convincing and harmonious mythology, Snorri reveals his wide knowledge of both pre-Christian mythology and of contemporary currents in European literature. Once again, however, it is his assimilative, but not reductive, way of combining a variety of sources that is most apparent. That this synthesis appears so unsynthetic is testament to the author's considerable literary skill.

6

Saxo Grammaticus in the Underworld

Towards the end of the twelfth century, an obscure cleric in Denmark began work on what would become, alongside *Snorra Edda* and *Heimskringla*, arguably the most important scholarly work to be produced in medieval Scandinavia.[1] The *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus stands close comparison with the works of his Icelandic near-contemporary Snorri Sturluson. Both seem primarily to have been concerned to create an integrative cultural history of their respective societies; both make use of the prosimetrum form (both of them, indeed, are poets themselves);[2] and both of them intersperse their works with much legendary and mythological material. Saxo writes in the Preface to the *Gesta* of his indebtedness to vernacular poetic sources, which he states that he has translated in order to include them in his history:

> Nec ignotum volo, Danorum antiquiores conspicuis fortitudinis operibus editis gloriae aemulatione suffusos Romani stili imitatione non solum rerum a se magnifice gestarum titulos exquisito contextus genere veluti poetico quodam opere perstrinxisse, verum etiam maiorum acta patrii sermonis carminibus vulgata linguae suae litteris saxis ac rupibus insculpenda curasse. Quorum vestigiis ceu quibusdam antiquitatis voluminibus inhaerens tenoremque veris translationis passibus aemulatus metra metris reddenda curavi [3]

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[1] The *Gesta Danorum* was finished some time between 1208 and 1223, although Saxo may have been working on it since the 1180s: see Friis-Jensen, *Saxo Grammaticus as Latin Poet*, p. 11.

[2] On Saxo's knowledge and use of both Latin and Old Norse prosimetrical traditions, see Friis-Jensen, *Saxo Grammaticus as Latin Poet*, pp. 52-61.

[3] *Gest. Dan* I, 4: 'I should like it known that Danes of an older age, filled with a desire to echo the glory when notable braveries had been performed, alluded in the Roman manner to the splendour of their nobly-wrought achievements with choice compositions of a poetical nature; not only that, but they took care to engrave the letters of their own language on rocks and stones to retell those feats of their ancestors which had been made popular in the songs of their mother tongue. Adhering to these tracks, as if to some ancient volumes, and following the sense with the true steps of a translator, I have assiduously rendered one metre by another.' It seems ironic that Saxo should describe the vernacular poetic records of his people's achievements as being 'in the Roman manner', when he goes on to

It is not only Danish poets to whom Saxo has turned for his information: Icelanders are singled out for praise on account of their pedigree in cultivating the writing of history:

> Nec Tylensium industria silentio oblitteranda: qui cum ob nativam soli sterilitatem luxuriae nutrimentis carentes officia continuae sobrietatis exerceant omniaque vitae momenta ad excolendam alienorum operum notitiam conferre soleant, inopiam ingenio pensant. Cunctarum quippe nationum res gestas cognosse memoriaeque mandare voluptatis loco reputant, non minoris gloriae iudicantes alienas virtutes disserere quam proprias exhibere. Quorum thesauros historicarum rerum pignoribus refertos curiosius consulens, haud parvam praesentis operis partem ex eorum relationis imitatione contexui, nec arbitros habere contempsi, quos tanta vetustatis peritia callere cognovi.[4]

A few years later in Iceland, Snorri begins his preface to *Heimskringla* by discussing the sources of his own history in broadly similar terms:

> Á bók þessi lét ek rita fornar frásagnir um hǫfðingja þá, er ríki hafa haft á Norðrlǫndum ok á danska tungu hafa mælt, svá sem ek hefi heyrt fróða menn segja, svá ok nǫkkurar kynslóðir þeira eptir því, sem mér hefir kennt verit, sumt þat, er finnsk í langfeðgatali, þar er konungar eða aðrir stórættaðir menn hafa rakit kyn sitt, en sumt er ritat eptir fornum kvæðum eð sǫguljóðum, er menn hafa haft til skemmtanar sér. En þótt vér vitim eigi sannendi á því, þá vitum vér dœmi til, at gamlir frœðimenn hafi slíkt fyrir satt haft.[5]

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praise them for their efforts in committing their deeds onto stone for posterity, since rune-carving is usually conceived as being antithetical to Roman literary culture.

[4] *Gest. Dan.* I, 5: 'The diligence of the men of Iceland must not be shrouded in silence; since the barrenness of their soil offers no means of self-indulgence, they pursue a steady routine of temperance and devote all their time to improving our knowledge of others' deeds, compensating for their poverty by their intelligence. They regard it as a real pleasure to discover and commemorate the achievements of every nation; in their judgement it is as elevating to discourse on the prowess of others as to display their own. Thus I have scrutinised their store of historical treasures and composed a considerable part of this present work by copying their narratives, not scorning, where I recognised such skill in ancient lore, to take these men as witnesses.'

[5] *Heimskringla* I, 3-4: 'In this book I have had written old tales about those chieftains who have held power in the northern lands, and who have spoken the Danish tongue, just as I have heard wise men tell them; also genealogies

Saxo and Snorri, in their prefaces at least, are linked by their stated interest in using pre-existing narratives of a traditional type, some of which are preserved in the medium of verse (whether orally-transmitted or inscribed) as the basis for their histories of the Scandinavian *patria*.[6] Saxo's body of work is more limited than Snorri's, in that it lacks his mythography and his scholarly treatment of poetics, but the impetus behind the composition of both *grands projets* of medieval Scandinavian scholarship is arguably the same. Anthony Faulkes has gone so far as to write that 'Saxo Grammaticus gives an impression of what *Gylfaginning* would have been like if it had been written by an ecclesiastically trained scholar';[7] this statement, of course, foregrounds the most elementary and essential difference between Snorri and Saxo: the latter wrote in Latin. Regarding Saxo as a potential source of information about pre-Christian mythology inevitably forces the reader to confront the question of how far Saxo's Latinity (his knowledge of the language, its literature, and the Christian culture to which it marks him out as belonging) has informed or distorted his presentation of traditional native material. In this chapter, I will attempt to disentangle Saxo's mythological material from his learned ecclesiastical sources by examining an episode in Book I of the *Gesta Danorum* which has a number of interesting parallels both in Old Norse mythology generally, and in Snorri's representation of it in particular.[8]

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of some of them according to what has been made known to me; that are found in pedigrees, those in which kings or other great men have traced their family; some of it is written after poems or story-songs, which men have had for their entertainment. Although we do not know the truth of this, we do know the opinion of it that old learned men have accepted such material to be true.'

[6] It is not clear how much credence should be put in Saxo's preface as a genuine account of the nature of his sources: Bjarni Guðnason wrote that 'both in form and substance, Saxo's Preface is modelled on medieval conventions relating to such works and is therefore no reliable basis for an overall explanation of the origins of Gesta Danorum and Saxo's sources' ('Icelandic Sources', p. 82). If convention has determined the form of Saxo's Preface, then I think that it is safe to say that the same is true of Snorri's: the parallelism of the two passages cited show that the two authors shared a similar attitude to their work, even if they did express this attitude in conventional terms.

[7] Faulkes, 'Sources of *Skáldskaparmál*', p. 72.

[8] In this chapter, I restrict myself to Hadingus's journey to the underworld as recorded in Book I: it must be noted that there is a similar otherworldly journey in Book VIII of *Gest. Dan.* I, 241-3, in which Thorkillus visits the realm of Geruthus. This narrative has been discussed in detail by Malm 'Otherworld Journeys', who concludes that the otherworld as it is presented in Book VIII is inspired by Christian ideas of heaven and hell, and has only minor correspondences with Norse myth (arguing against Patch, *The Other World*, p. 68). Geruthus's realm is not actually a realm of the dead, resembling more the otherworld as it is presented in the *fornaldarsögur*, or perhaps the realm of

The episode begins when King Hadingus experiences a remarkable portent at the dinner table: a mysterious woman appears and leads him away beneath the earth:

> Apud quam deversante Hadingo, mirum dictu prodigium incidit. Siquidem cenante eo femina cicutarum gerula propter foculum humo caput extulisse conspecta porrectoque sinu percontari visa, qua mundi parte tam recentia gramina brumali tempore fuissent exorta. Cuius cognoscendi cupidum regem proprio obvolutum amiculo refuga secum sub terras abduxit, credo diis infernalibus ita destinantibus, ut in ea loca vivus adduceretur, quae morienti petenda fuerant. Primum igitur vapidae cuiusdam caliginis nubilum penetrantes perque callem diuturnis adesum meatibus incedentes quosdam praetextatos amictosque ostro proceres conspicantur; quibus praeteritis loca demum aprica subeunt, quae delata a femina gramina protulerunt. Progressique praecipitis lapsus ac liventis aquae fluvium diversi generis tela rapido volumine detorquentem eundemque ponte meabilem factum offendunt.[9]

This passage has attracted the attention of students of Norse mythology because of the high concentration of motifs found within it that have parallels in eddic poetry or *Snorra Edda*. Most striking of these is probably the river, which resembles both Snorri's Gjǫll and especially *Vǫluspá*'s Slíðr. The many sorts of weapons – *diuersi generis tela* – with which the water is laden are of course cognate to those found in the river in *Vǫluspá* 36 (*Á fellr austan um eitrdala, sǫxom oc*

Útgarðr in which Þórr's adventures with the giants occur: it is a place of marvels, but it is not Hel, in which the connection with the dead was always of primary importance.

[9] *Gest. Dan.* I, 30: 'While Hadingus was staying there as a guest, a remarkable portent occurred. As he was dining, a woman, bearing stalks of hemlock, was seen to raise her head from the ground beside a brazier and, extending the lap of her garment, seemed to be asking in what part of the world such fresh plants might have sprung up in the winter season. The king was eager to find out the answer and after she had muffled him in her cloak she vanished away with him beneath the earth. It was, I believe, by the design of the underworld gods that she took a living man to those parts which he must visit when he died. First they penetrated a smoky vale of darkness, then walked away along a path worn away by long ages of travellers, and glimpsed persons in rich robes and nobles dressed in purple; passing these by, they eventually came upon a sunny region which produced the vegetation the woman had brought away. Having advanced further, they stumbled on a river of blue-black water, swirling in headlong descent and spinning in its swift eddies weapons of various kinds.'

sverðom, Slíðr heitir sú.).[10] The correspondences between Saxo's river and Gjǫll are less obvious, although, as we have seen, it is possible that Snorri was reminded of the rattling river Slíðr when formulating his landscape of the underworld.[11] The river occupies an identical place in the structure of both Hadingus and Hermóðr's journeys into the other world: both mark the boundary, and are approached through shady regions. Like Hermóðr, Hadingus and his mysterious guide cross by a bridge. On the other side, they encounter warriors constantly fighting one another, and come to an enormously high wall, over which the woman cannot jump:

> Quo pertransito binas acies mutuis viribus concurrere contemplantur, quarum condicionem a femina percontante Hadingo: 'Ii sunt', inquit, 'qui ferro in necem acti cladis suae speciem continuo protestantur exemplo praesentique spectaculo praeteritae vitae facinus aemulantur.'[12]

The impassable wall may count as another motif shared between *Gylfaginning* and the *Gesta Danorum*, as Hermóðr is only able to traverse the high walls of Hel using Sleipnir's supernatural abilities. The old woman in the Hadingus story throws the head of a cock 'which she happened to have about her person … over the enclosing barrier' ('galli caput, quem secum forte deferebat, abruptum ultra moenium saepta iactavit, statimque redivivus ales resumpti fidem spiraculi claro testabatur occentu'), but this apparently ritualistic act does not gain her access to whatever the wall encloses: it is not made clear what the citadel is, or why the woman wishes to enter it. Rather, the cock is resurrected, and the vision ends abruptly.

Hadingus's trip into the underworld has clear parallels in Icelandic texts; that is not to say, however, that Saxo borrowed the characteristic motifs in this passage from *Vǫluspá* or any other extant mythological writing in Old Norse. Most of the features of Saxo's underworld – it would be misleading to call it Hel(l), although it is unambiguously under the earth – may also be

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[10] 'A river of swords and knives falls from the east around the poison-valleys; it is called Slíðr.'

[11] See above, p. 152.

[12] 'They crossed it by a bridge and saw two strongly-matched armies encountering one another. Hadingus asked the woman their identity; "They are men who met their death by the sword," she said, "and present an everlasting display of their destruction; in the exhibition before you they are trying to equal the activity of their past lives." Moving on, they found barring their way a wall, difficult to approach and surmount. The woman tried to leap over it, but to no avail, for even her slender, wrinkled body was no advantage.'

found in Christian literature, and it seems to me that the author is more indebted to this tradition than to pagan mythology. After all, in this episode no figures or features of the pagan past are actually named. The setting of the underworld journey is non-Christian: Saxo is concerned, in this part of the *Gesta Danorum*, with the legendary (and therefore unavoidably pagan) past of Denmark. It does not necessarily follow, though, that the information which this passage contains had any currency in pre-Christian belief, or even in pagan 'literature'.

We need look no further than the episode's introduction to see how profoundly indebted Saxo was to Christian vision literature in the composition of his own otherworldly excursion. The phrase *mirum dictu prodigium incidit* is a standard formulation of a type used exceptionally widely in medieval Christian literature to introduce a remarkable or, more specifically, miraculous occurrence, offered as an example of God's power to act in the world. Visions of heaven and hell could be said to fall into the category of the miraculous, because they afforded the visionary a revelation concerning the fate of the soul normally denied to mortal men. Thus Bede's account of Dryhthelm's vision begins:

> His temporibus miraculum memorabile et antiquorum simile in Brittania factum est. Namque ad excitationem uiuentium de morte animae quidam aliquandiu mortuus ad uitam resurrexit corporis, et multa memoratu digna quae uiderat narrauit.[13]

Like Bede, Saxo states the reason for Hadingus's journey into the underworld: the 'gods of the underworld' wish that a man should see what awaits him after death ('credo diis infernalibus ita destinantibus, ut in ea loca vivus adduceretur, quae morienti petenda fuerant'). Bede emphasises that Dryhthelm's vision has value as a Christian *exemplum*: by observing the soul's fate after the death of the body, he may be able to help others avoid spiritual death. Saxo's aim was not to offer a moral lesson, but in introducing this self-contained little trip into the realm of the dead he seems to have slipped into the type of language which would have been familiar to any audience familiar with Latin *reuelationes*. The indistinct *diis infernalibus* play the role that divine will (often manifested in the form of an angel or other guide) plays in showing the pains of hell or

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[13] *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors, p. 488: 'About this time a memorable miracle occurred in Britain like those of ancient times. In order to arouse the living from spiritual death, a certain man already dead came back to life and related many memorable things that he had seen, and I think that some of them ought to be briefly mentioned here.'

pleasures of heaven in Christian texts, but this transference of agency entails a change in the nature of the vision, which becomes in the *Gesta Danorum* a rather marginal digression, with no edificatory purpose. In a Latin vision of heaven and/or hell, the visionary's experience is normally of greater spiritual significance than simply 'to show him those parts which he must visit when he dies'. It often has a soteriological function, leading a sinner to repent and live his life more righteously once the vision is over, and it often ends with the visionary preaching God's word, and relating his experience to others as an example and a warning, as we also see, for example, at the conclusion of the *Visio Tnugdali*:

> Cuncta vero, que viderat, nobis postmodum rectavit, et bonam vitam nos ducere monuit, verbumque dei, quod ante nescierat, cum magna devotione et humilitate ac scientia predicabat. Set nos, quia vitam ejus imitari non possumus, hec saltem ad utilitatem legentium scribere studuimus.[14]

Although no proof has been found that Saxo alludes directly to Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* in the composition of his history, the Danish author admits an admiration for his English predecessor, whom he calls 'a major contributor to Christian literature':[15]

> Ex quibus Angul, a quo gentis Anglicae principia manasse memoriae proditum est, nomen suum provinciae, cui praeerat, aptandum curavit, levi monumenti genere perennem sui notitiam traditurus … Testis est Beda, non minima pars divini stili, qui in Anglia ortus sanctissimis suorum voluminum thesauris res

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[14] *Visio Tnugdali*, ed. Wagner, pp. 55-6: 'In truth, all that he saw he afterward told; and he warned us to lead a good life, and he preached the word of God, which he did not know before, with great devotion and humility and knowledge. But since we cannot imitate his life, at least we tried to write this for the benefit of our readers.'

[15] The Prologue to *Gest. Dan.*, in which Saxo mentions Bede's work, is very similar in tone to that of the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, which may have influenced its composition directly, although it is impossible to be sure, since so many other medieval historians introduced their works in near-identical manner. See Laugesen, 'Prologen til Gesta Danorum'.

> patrias sociare curae habuit, aeque ad religionem pertinere iudicans patriae facta litteris illustrare et res divinas conscribere.[16]

We may assume, therefore, that Saxo knew of Bede's work. I would not wish to claim that the 'Hadingus in the underworld' story was based upon, or even inspired by, Dryhthelm's vision as Bede records it, but the two passages are cognate in more than merely the description of the happenings as miraculous. Even though they differ greatly in detail, Bede's aim in inserting the homely story of Dryhthelm into the *Historia Ecclesiastica* is transparent, and seems close in spirit to that which Saxo displays in his work.[17] As well as viewing Dryhthelm's revealed wisdom as important for the spiritual edification of his readers, Bede has a nationalistic agenda to pursue. The 'memorable miracle' is particularly remarkable because it happened in Britain, and also because it was like the marvellous occurrences of ancient times ('His temporibus miraculum memorabile et antiquorum simile in Brittania factum est').[18] Bede is indeed interested in both the deeds of his motherland and in religion, and by placing Dryhthelm's vision in the context of the miracles of days gone by, he is able to assert that contemporary England belongs to the unbroken tradition of God's people, those who are sufficiently blessed as to receive direct revelations of his power and purpose. Reading the Preface to Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, a similar attitude may be discerned, whereby the author wishes his people, the Danes, to be viewed as part of a glorious tradition, although Saxo seems to place more importance on their inclusion in a glorious European *literary* tradition than on their spiritual worth.

Hadingus's brief sojourn in the underworld is structurally comparable to the *Visio Dryhthelmi*, and its presentation as a pagan miracle instigated by the 'infernal gods' should be

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[16] *Gest. Dan.* I, 10: 'Old reports maintained that the English race originated from Angul, who had his name given to the region he governed, resolving to pass an undying recognition of himself as an easy kind of memorial … This action was highly thought of by Bede, a major contributor to Christian literature, who, as an Englishman, took pains to bring his country's history into the sacred treasury of his books, considering it an equal piety both to pen the deeds of his motherland and to write about religion.'

[17] On Bede's treatment of miracle stories in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, see Ward, 'Miracles and History'; Rosenthal, 'Bede's Use of Miracles'; Lutterkort, 'Beda Hagiographicus', pp. 93-6. These authors have persuasively answered the question posed by Colgrave and Mynors in the introduction to their edition of *Bede's Ecclesiastical History* (p. xxxv): 'How is it that one who is supposed to be our greatest medieval historian spent so much time telling wonder stories?' This now outmoded attitude, which regards the miraculous episodes in the *Historia Ecclesiastica* as somehow unworthy of Bede as a scholar, was more fully expressed in an earlier article by Colgrave, 'Bede's Miracle Stories'.

[18] Ward, 'Miracles and History', p. 72.

viewed not as a reflection of the old beliefs, but as a conscious recasting of a conventional afterlife vision in terms which would not dispel the atmosphere of pre-Christian antiquity that Saxo creates in this part of his history. The reason for the story's inclusion in the *Gesta Danorum* is probably aesthetic: Latin vision-literature reached the peak of its popularity in the twelfth century, and Saxo, writing at the beginning of the thirteenth, could hardly have been unaware of the genre.[19]

Viewed in this light, it should be no surprise that the Hadingus-episode's description of the underworld finds more and closer parallels in the Latin tradition than in Old Norse mythology. According to Inge Skovgaard-Petersen, this episode offers the 'neatest combination of classical and Christian images' in the first three books of the *Gesta Danorum*.[20] Book VI of the *Aeneid* has, once again, been offered as the most likely source for the distinctive elements of Saxo's realm of the dead.[21] A close analysis of these features, however, reveals that the likelihood of direct imitation of the *Aeneid* is slim indeed.

Hadingus goes underground in the company of a woman: for Laugesen, this fact at once recalled Aeneas's journey, on which he was guided by the Sibyl.[22] While such a correspondence can hardly be denied, yet there is little of substance to lead us to make a direct connection between the two female figures. Hadingus's guide appears out of the ground, bearing a spray of hemlock, the significance of which is unclear. Hadingus goes with her out of curiosity, on the spur of the moment. Aeneas, conversely, sets out with the definite intention of visiting the world of the shades, so as to meet his dead father; he approaches the Sibyl at the temple of Apollo and persuades her to help him in his quest. Although Aeneas is responsible for finding the infamous golden bough (*ramus aureus*, *Aeneid* VI, 137, 204), which allows him passage among the shades, it

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[19] The beginning of the thirteenth century saw a radical shift in visionary literature, away from the then conventional dreams and revelations of heaven and hell and towards representations of a much more personal, mystical and allegorical type of visionary experience: see Dinzelbacher, *Vision und Visionsliteratur*, pp. 229-33.

[20] Skovgaard-Petersen, 'The Way to Byzantium', p. 129.

[21] See Laugesen's discussion of Skovgaard-Petersen, 'Gesta Danorums genremæssige placering', in Boserup, ed., *Saxostudier*, pp. 28-9. Friis-Jensen, *Saxo og Vergil*, has undertaken a thoroughgoing analysis of the correspondences between *Gest. Dan.* and the works of Vergil although, because she restricts her investigation to only those parallels noted by Olrik and Ræder in their 1931 edition, there is no mention of the story of Hadingus in the underworld.

[22] Laugesen, discussion of Skovgaard-Petersen, 'Gesta Danorums genremæssige placering', in Boserup, ed., *Saxostudier*, p. 29: 'Der er en kvinde, der dukker op af jorden med en frisk urtekost i hånden. Hun slår en kåbe om Hadding og fører ham med sig ned under jorden, altså til dødsriget, og op igen. Det svarer ganske nøje til Sibyllen og Æneas' færd.'

is the Sibyl who carries it once they are in the underworld, using it as a badge of authority over the boatman Charon.[23] I do not think, however, that this greenery indicates any textual relationship between the two female figures. The sudden appearance of a guide-figure to lead a character into another world is better paralleled in Christian visions, although specifically female guides are not a part of the tradition until Beatrice takes over from Vergil and leads Dante in the *Divine Comedy*. However, the role played by Hadingus's guide in his visionary experience does correspond rather closely to that of the angels, saints, or sometimes devils that conduct the souls of the Christian visionaries around the other world.

The role of the guide in Latin vision-narratives achieves its greatest importance in four main aspects of the vision: the guide may instigate the vision, either appearing to the visionary in a dream, or else raising him from a state of sin (often symbolised by illness or apparent death) in order to show him the possible outcome for his soul after death, typically with the aim of bringing about a change in behaviour following his return to earth.[24] For example, Julian the Hospitaller, who serves as the guide of Thurkill in his vision, appears and announces that he has come to show Thurkill 'certain secret things normally hidden from men': 'ego sum Iulianus hospitator, qui missus sum propter te, ut quedam secreta, que homines adhuc in carne degentes latent, tibi ostendantur'.[25] Hadingus's guide, too, is provider of privileged information not normally available to mortals.

At the end of the vision, the usual function of the guide-figure is to send the visionary back into the world, with an explicit lesson for him to learn: typically, that he should mend his ways. In the *Aeneid*, too, the Sibyl and Aeneas's father – who becomes a supplementary guide to the fields of the blessed – are present to direct him through the Gates of Ivory and back to the land of the living, although there is, of course, no conventionally moralistic message to be

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[23] *Aeneid* VI, 405-10: 'si te nulla mouet tantae pietatis imago,
at ramum hunc' (aperit ramum qui ueste latebat)
'agnoscas'. tumida ex ira tum corda residunt;
nec plura his. ille admirans uenerabile donum
fatalis uirgae longo post tempore uisum
caeruleam aduertit puppim ripaeque propinquat.

"'If the sight of such devotion does not move you, then look at this branch," she said, showing the branch that had been hidden in her robes, "and realize what it is". No more words were needed. Seeing it again after a long age, and marvelling at the fateful branch, he [Charon] turned his dark boat and steered towards the bank.'

[24] Morgan, *Dante and the Medieval Other World*, p. 95.

[25] *Visio Thurkilli*, ed. Schmidt, p. 6.

discerned from Aeneas's time in the underworld. Because Hadingus's experience ends so abruptly, with the crowing of the resuscitated cock, and then is never mentioned again – the narrative simply moves on to his journey home – there is no opportunity for the mysterious woman to reveal any purpose behind their visit to the realm of the dead. Perhaps the way in which Saxo cuts off the episode is structurally akin to the end of Aeneas's adventure, in the way in which the action shifts very suddenly from the underworld to the ships that will take the heroes on the way to the next phase in their narratives, but, once again, the correspondence is anything but pressing:

> Sunt geminae Somni portae, quarum altera fertur
> cornea, qua ueris facilis datur exitus umbris,
> altera candenti perfecta nitens elephanto,
> sed falsa ad caelum mittunt insomnia Manes.
> his ibi tum natum Anchises unaque Sibyllam
> prosequitur dictis portaque emittit eburna,
> ille uiam secat ad nauis sociosque reuisit.
> Tum se ad Caietae recto fert limite portum.
> ancora de prora iacitur; stant litore puppes. [26]

The third and fourth functions of the guide are shared by Aeneas's Sybil and many guides in Christian visions: in hell, they offer protection and comfort to the visionary, preventing them suffering too much physical pain from the torments which they are shown.[27] In the *Godeschalcus*, as we have seen, there are two angels who guide the visionary about Hel, with one of them, called an *angelus affabilis*, who is specifically designated the task of consoling Gottschalk.

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[26] *Aeneid* VI, 893-901: 'There are two gates of sleep: one is called the Gate of Horn and it is an easy exit for true shades; the other is made all in gleaming white ivory, but through it the powers of the underworld send false dreams up towards the heavens. There on that night did Anchises walk with his son and with the Sybil and spoke such words to them as he sent them on their journey through the gate of Ivory. Aeneas made his way back to the ships and his comrades, then steered a straight course to the harbour of Caieta. The anchors were thrown from the prows and the ships stood along the shore.'

[27] The unapologetically sadistic *Visio Tnugdali* is an exception to this rule, since Tundal's guide stands by and watches as the visionary is systematically subjected to all the punishments that his previous worldly sins have merited. This is the only vision in which a subject receives bodily punishment in the present, rather than previsions of future torment: see Morgan, *Dante and the Medieval Other World*, p. 97.

When he comes across the plain of thorns, over which sinners normally have to walk barefoot, his other angelic guide, the *angelus officiosus*, who is charged with facilitating the progress of Gottschalk's journey, provides him with a pair of shoes.[28] In Book VI of the *Aeneid*, the Sibyl is constantly concerned for Aeneas's well-being, drugging the dog Cerberus, intervening with Charon and advising the hero about what action he should take. But, although Aeneas witnesses some of the torments of the damned, there is never any real danger that he will experience them himself. Because Hadingus does not encounter any danger or suffering on his journey into the underworld, his guide is not called upon to intervene and spare him harm. She does, however, perform the final main task of the visionary's guide, by interpreting the sights that Hadingus does not understand: she explains that the armies they see engaged in perpetual combat are those men who died by the sword, recreating their past life.

The guide as interpreter is found in the *Aeneid*: Aeneas asks the Sibyl why the inhabitants of Tartarus are punished so cruelly:

> 'quae scelerum facies? o, uirgo, effare; quibusue
> urgentur poenis? quis tantus plangor ad auras?'
> tum uates sic orsa loqui: 'dux inclute Teucrum,
> nulli fas casto sceleratum insistere limen;
> sed me cum lucis Hecate praefecit Auernis,
> ipsa deum poenas docuit perque omnia duxit'.[29]

The Sybil goes on to list the types of punishment meted out to the different classes of wrongdoers. The idea of infernal punishment fitting the worldly misdeed was one with which Christian authors were understandably preoccupied in their accounts of hell, and as an extension of their desire to reveal the links between sin and punishment, the guide as interpreter entered the tradition in the *Vision of the Monk of Wenlock*, which was written down by Boniface in 716.[30] In this vision, as in that of Dryhthelm, the angels who guide the visionary provide for the first

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[28] See above, pp. 175-6.

[29] *Aeneid* VI, 560-5: ' "What kinds of criminal are here? Tell me, virgin priestess, what punishments are inflicted on them? What is this wild lamentation in the air?" The Sibyl replied: "Great leader of the Trojans, the chaste may not set foot upon the threshold of that evil place, but when Hecate put me in charge of the groves of Avernus, she herself explained the punishments the gods had imposed and showed me them all".'

[30] Gardiner, *Sourcebook*, p. 143.

time a running commentary, presented in the form of reported speech, which provides explicit explanation of the meaning of the vision: in previous examples of the genre, the guide's role had been restricted to pointing out external details.[31] In twelfth-century visions, the level of interpretation increased dramatically. Gottschalk's angel, for example, is said to have answered diligently all the questions that Gottschalk had about the reasons for the things he saw:

> Cum igitur Godeschalcus racionem diversitatis huius intente ab interprete suo querret, diligenter quidem de omnibus ab eo est instructus, sed propter multiplicitatem oblitus.[32]

Elsewhere in the *Godeschalcus*, the *angelus affabilis* is referred to as *angelus interpres*, reflecting the importance of the explicatory function.[33] The *Visio Tnugdali* formalises the interpretation provided by the guide further, using a rhetorically balanced progression of questions and answers, presented this time in direct speech. The questions which Tundal's soul asks the angel are often similar to Aeneas's and Hadingus's own enquiries; they ask the identity of those they meet in the underworld, with particular reference to why they are there, and what they have done to deserve it. When Tundal, for example, watches the souls of many fall off the narrow bridge into the sulphurous valley he asks

> Obsecro, domine, si placet, indica mihi, quarum animarum sunt ista, que vidimus modo, tormenta? Et angelus ad eam: Ista vallis valde horribilis locus est superborum, mons vero putridus atque sulphureus pena est insidiatorum.[34]

More explicit reference to the past deeds of the living is made elsewhere in the *Visio*. The place of punishment for thieves and robbers presents Tundal with the sight of a man trying to cross a

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[31] Morgan, *Dante and the Medieval Other World*, p. 90.

[32] *Godeschalcus*, ed. Assmann, p. 78: 'And so when Gottschalk attentively enquired of his interpreter the reason for this difference, he was on all matters instructed by him diligently indeed; but he forgot because of the great number.'

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 64.

[34] *Visio Tnugdali*, ed. Wagner, p. 15: ' "I beseech you, Lord, if it pleases you, tell me what souls are these that I see tormented in this way?" And the angel said to him, "This is the most horrible valley of the proud. The putrid and sulphurous mountain is the punishment of the flatterers".'

bridge carrying a heavy sack of grain, his feet perforated with iron nails all the while. The angel explains that this is an appropriate punishment for those who committed thefts in the world:

> Videbat quoque in ipso ponte unam animam valde plorantem et se multis criminibus accusantem. Erat enim magno pondere frumenti manipulorum onusta et hunc pontem transire cogebatur. Set licet plantas clavis ferreis perforatas nimis doluerat, cadere tamen in lacum ignitum, ubi bestiarum patentia ora videbat, magis timebat. Anima vero, videns immane periculum, dixit ad angelum: Heu domine, si placet, vellem, scire, cur cogitur ista anima sub tali pondere pertransire, quarum etiam specialiter ista pena sit animarum. At ille respondens dixit ad eam: Ista pena est specialiter tibi condigna et tuis consimilibus furtum perpertrantibus, licet multum fuerit vel modicum.[35]

Here, as in many Latin visions, the punishment of sinners matches their sin, their torment becoming an infernal parody of the behaviour by which they earned it. Thus Tundal's experience of the punishment of thieves and robbers consists in leading an unwilling cow across the perilous bridge: the visionary had previously stolen a cow from a neighbour, and only returned it from fear of being caught. The continually fighting armies which Hadingus and the woman see may not be undergoing torment, but their existence in the afterlife is also imitative of their activity in this world. These figures certainly do resemble the *einherjar* of Norse tradition, whose entertainment Snorri describes thus: 'Hvern dag þá er þeir hafa klæzk þá hervæða þeir sik ok ganga út í garðinn ok berjask ok fellr hverr á annan. Þat er leikr þeira. Ok er líðr at dǫgurðarmáli þá ríða þeir heim til Valhallar ok setjask til drykkju.'[36] And yet, can we be sure that Saxo's eternal warriors are identical to the *einherjar*? Hadingus's guide does not mention the

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[35] *Ibid.*, p. 20: 'On this bridge Tundal saw one soul bitterly crying and accusing himself of many crimes. He was burdened with a heavy weight of grain as he tried to cross this bridge. Although he mourned as the soles of his feet were perforated with iron nails, nevertheless, he feared very much falling into the fiery lake, where he now saw the determination of those beasts. Seeing the immanent danger, Tundal's soul said to the angel, "Alas lord, if you will, I wish to know why this soul tries to cross under such a great weight. Which souls in particular might this punishment be for?" He said to him, "This punishment is especially fitting for you and those like you who carried out robberies, whether they be great or small".'

[36] *SnE* I, 34: 'Each day after they have got dressed they put on war-gear and go out into the courtyard and fight each other and they fall each upon the other. This is their sport. And when dinner-time approaches they ride back to Valhǫll and sit down to drink.'

feasting and recuperation in Valhǫll which the *einherjar* enjoy every night; there is no indication that they are killed and resurrected over and over again in the same way as the *einherjar*. The otherworld in which they are seen fighting is explicitly beneath the ground, and in its topography resembles more closely the vision of Hel found in *Gylfaginning* than Valhǫll/Ásgarðr. If Saxo did mean to allude to the Norse myth of the *einherjar* here, then his conception of that myth, as it is revealed in this episode, is not the 'standard' one. Saxo's warriors, it is true, died by the sword, just as Snorri states that the inhabitants of Valhǫll do, but the form of their existence differs between the two authors: I think it likely that Saxo, if he were familiar with the idea of the *einherjar*, was also influence by the idea found in Christian Latin texts that the experience of sinners in hell would be a sort of demonic (and painful) parody of their actions on earth.

It will be seen that in its structure and spirit Hadingus's guided tour of the underworld does indeed seem to owe much to the classical or Christian tradition. The correspondences of the episode with the *Aeneid*, however, are never so close as to indicate direct influence, except possibly in the choice of a female guide. As Karsten Friis-Jensen has been at pains to point out, there are methodological problems inherent in the consideration of Vergil as a possible source for the *Gesta Danorum*: it is difficult, but important, to make the distinction between 'citations', 'borrowings' on a lexical or thematic level, 'unconscious reminiscences' and so on.[37] It is similarly problematic to separate the direct influence of those works of Vergil from those later works – including medieval Latin *uisiones* – that are part of a Vergilian tradition, and make use of motifs drawn from the *Aeneid*, but which are frequently altered over time according to the design of later authors. In this case, the introduction of the episode, which couches Hadingus's experience in the familiar language of the miraculous, suggests the primary influence of Christian visionary literature, and possibly Bede's account of Dryhthelm's vision in particular. More certainly, however, we may say that from whatever source Saxo got his idea for the story of Hadingus's descent, it was not from any extant mythological writing. The closest parallels in the mythology, Hermóðr's ride to Hel in *Gylfaginning* and Óðinn's in *Baldrs draumar*, are of an entirely different tone. Hadingus is a tourist, whereas both the mythological figures have a specific aim in mind when they undertake their journeys: Hermóðr has to attempt to recover Baldr, and Óðinn seeks knowledge. Both encounter female figures on their way, but neither resembles the woman who surprises Hadingus at his dinner. But while there is no precedent for the type of experience

[37] Friis-Jensen, *Saxo og Vergil*, pp. 15-23.

that Saxo represents in mythological sources, some of the individual details of the underworld's representation do find parallels in 'native' tradition.

The first feature of Saxo's underworld is the 'smoky vale of darkness' ('primum igitur vapidae cuiusdam caliginis nubilum penetrantes') through which Hadingus and his guide pass. As has already been discussed, Snorri's vision of Hel begins with a dark borderland, for which no source can be found in poetic material, but for which ample parallels exist in the Christian tradition. Darkness is of course a commonplace feature of an underground location, but the 'smoky vale of darkness' seems most likely, just like Snorri's 'deep and dark dales', to derive from the Latin vision-tradition.

The richly dressed people they then glimpse passing are, for Hilda Ellis Davidson, the most likely indication of classical influence:

> The men in rich robes and the nobles in purple suggest a classical source, which is in contrast to the other features in the story. They may possibly be imitated from Virgil's description of the Abode of the Blessed visited by Aeneas in Book VI of the *Aeneid*, but there is no detailed resemblance between the two passages.[38]

Ellis Davidson notes the apparent incongruity of the nobles' appearance in a Germanic otherworld, but her tentative association of these figures with the *Aeneid* does not stand up to scrutiny, as she herself admits. Saxo's description of these figures as *praetextatos amictosque ostro proceres* certainly smacks of classical antiquity: the *praetexta* was a garment worn by Roman freemen before they assumed the toga, and by holders of certain offices, and *ostrum* means 'purple', the colour most associated with the upper social echelons of the Empire. Vergil, however, does not describe any of the dwellers in the abode of the blessed as being dressed in purple. In fact, nowhere in *Aeneid* VI is the apparel of the blessed described, except for the white ribbon worn around the heads of the especially worthy (665 *omnibus his niuea cinguntur tempora uitta*). Direct textual influence from the *Aeneid* upon this element of Saxo's description therefore must be ruled out.

References to the clothes worn by the saved in visions of the Christian heaven are relatively common, although in these the dominant colour is, naturally enough, white, by which

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[38] Fisher and Ellis Davidson, *Saxo Grammaticus* II, 35.

the spiritual purity of the blessed may at once be established or, in one case, measured.[39] Only in the ninth-century vision of Wetti is a *purple* garment specified, however, and it is Wetti's guide, an angel, who wears it:

> Immensitate igitur tanti terroris sublata, venit angelus incredibili splendens pulchritudine, veste pupurea circumdatus, stans ad pedibus eius.[40]

Clearly, purple could still be considered a splendid, noteworthy colour in Christian times. In Walahfrid Strabo's verse retelling of Wetti's vision, however, the colour of the angel's cloak becomes red: *angelus ingreditur fulgens in veste rubenti*.[41] Traill suggests that 'something seems to have gone wrong with the dream here', as red is traditionally the devil's colour: in Revelation 17: 3-4, for example the great whore is arrayed in *purpura et coccino*. A glossator of one of the manuscripts of the *Visio Wettini*, too, noted the problem of the angel's lurid garb, and attempted to explain it, writing 'quod dicit in veste rubenti significat iratus fuerat, quia diabolus ibi invenerat' ('that he is said to be in a red cloak signifies that he was angry, because the devil had been in there').[42] Normality is resumed at line 295 of the poem, when the angel reappears, wearing white this time. The author of the prose vision is certainly conscious of the difference between the angel's first appearance and his second, although the significance of the switch from purple to white, and from a position at the feet of the visionary to one at his head is not explained.[43] White, it seems, is the natural colour for angels (and, elsewhere, for the dwellers in heaven); Wetti's angel in his purple robe is a clear exception, and may well – as the glossator suggests – have a symbolic meaning that the text does not make explicit.

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[39] In the Monk of Evesham (or Eynsham's) vision, as the visionary progresses out of hell and into the realms of the blessed, he notes that the people he meets have clothes the whiteness of which corresponds to the degree of purity which they achieved in life. Thus, the first people he meets – those who dwell on the edge of the plain, closest to hell and furthest away from the third (and final) place of glory – are said to have 'white garments, but they were not shining, and although there did not appear to be any blackness or stain on them, they shone with an inferior degree of whiteness' (Gardiner, *Visions of Heaven and Hell*, p. 213).

[40] *Poetae Latini*, ed. Dümmler II, 269: 'Once this enormous terror abated, a shining angel of incredible beauty enrobed in purple garments came and stood at his feet.'

[41] *Walahfrid Strabo's Visio Wettini*, ed. Traill, line 246.

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 119. The gloss occurs in Vatican, Reg. Lat., 356.

[43] *Poetae Latini*, ed. Dümmler II, 269: 'venit idem angelus, qui ei in priori visione ad pedes stans purpuratus apparuit, candidas amictus vestimentis ad caput stans splendore incredibili fulgidus'.

Saxo's nobles, dressed in the purple *praetexta*, can therefore be paralleled in both Classical and Christian sources, although the impression this mode of dress creates suggests well-to-do Romans, rather than the blessed inhabitants of the Christian heaven. While no direct textual source for these figures may be found, none is really necessary: they are, once again, part of Saxo's carefully wrought illusion of pagan antiquity. The pagans are, on this occasion, conceived as Romans, implicitly connecting the lineage of the Danes with the Classical world. There is certainly little connection with the world of the Norse gods and heroes as we know it from Snorri and mythological poetry.

The correspondence of the river of weapons which marks the boundary of the underworld in *Gesta Danorum* with *Vǫluspá*'s Slíðr is perhaps the most obvious link between this passage in Saxo and a mythological feature with an existence separate from *Snorra Edda*. There is another mythological river, however, which shares with Slíðr the distinctive characteristic of flowing with blades. Once again, it is found in Eilífr Goðrúnarson's *Þórsdrápa*.

Eilífr Goðrúnarson, *Þórsdrápa* 8

Óðu fast (en Fríðar
flaut) eiðsvara Gauta
setrs víkingar snotrir
(sverðrunnit fen) gunnar;
þurði hrǫnn at herði
hauðrs runkykva nauðar
jarðar skafls af afli
áss hretviðri blásin.[44]

In line 6 of the following stanza, the river is also called *stríðan stáli* 'savage with steel'. Most commentators have seen in this aspect of the river in *Þórsdrápa* – which Eilífr does not name –

[44] Ed. Davidson, 'Earl Hákon and his Poets', pp. 522-3: 'The oath-sworn Vikings of Gauti's homestead [Þórr and Þjálfi], wise in war, waded vigorously while the sword-streaming fen of Fríðr [river] ran on; the wave of the snow drift's earth [river] blown up by the sleet tempest rushed with its force against the one who stiffens hardship for the enliveners of the running stream of the mountain-ridge land [the giantesses; the one who stiffens hardship for them is Þórr].

an allusion to the analogous feature in *Vǫluspá*.[45] Not untypically for *Þórsdrápa*, however, the crucial reading *sverðrunnit* is debatable: it only occurs in one manuscript (T), and Finnur Jónsson preferred to emend to *svarðrunnit* 'streaming over the turf'.[46] I think we must accept *sverðrunnit* as it stands in T, in order to make sense of *stríðan stáli* in stanza 9. As such, Eilífr's verse provides a very close analogue to the rivers of swords found in *Vǫluspá* and Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*. The relationship between the three versions of the motif is unclear, however. The narrative of Þórr's journey to Geirrødargarðar does not, as Saxo retells it, have the hero cross a river of swords, although the border to the otherworld is marked by a different river. The weapon-laden river is found in an entirely unconnected episode. There is nothing to suggest that Saxo's direct source for this narrative was *Þórsdrápa*, although by the same token it is impossible to rule such a possibility out entirely. Nor can we justifiably regard *Vǫluspá*'s Slíðr as the inspiration for Saxo's river.

The parallels between *Vǫluspá* and *Þórsdrápa*, on the other hand, are striking. As well as the simple fact that the rivers in both poems flow with swords, there is a further correspondence between them in that both are associated with poison. In *Vǫluspá* 36, Slíðr runs *um eitrdala* 'through poison-dales'. Whether or not *eitrdala* connotes coldness as well as poison,[47] Eilífr also uses the word *eitr* in connection with the river:

Þórsdrápa 5

Ok vegþverrir varra
vann fetrunnar Nǫnnu
hjalts, af hagli oltnar,
hlaupáar, of ver gaupu;
mjǫk leið ór stað støkkvir
stikleiðar veg breiðan

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[45] See e.g. Kock, *Notationes Norrœnæ*, § 451, 2250; Reichardt, 'Die *Thórsdrápa*', p. 354; Kiil, 'Eilífr Goðrúnarson's *Þórsdrápa*', pp. 109 and 119.

[46] *Skjald* B I, 141. *Svarðrunnit* may have been the reading of W (there is currently a hole in the manuscript at this point). See Davidson, 'Earl Hákon and his Poets', p. 600.

[47] Dronke, ed., *Poetic Edda* II, 16, translates *eitrdala* as 'venom-cold', and states (p. 140) that this refers to 'valleys freezing from their deadly cold rivers'. McKinnell arrives at the same interpretation in his glossary to Sigurður Nordal's edition of *Vǫluspá*. See also Davidson, 'Earl Hákon and his Poets', p. 587. The primary meaning or *eitr* is undoubtedly 'poison', however, and I see no reason not to preserve that meaning in a translation of *Vǫluspá* 36.

urðar þrjóts, þar's eitri,
oestr, þjoðáar fnoestu.[48]

One further correspondence between the river which Þórr crosses and *Vǫluspá* must be noted. In *Vǫluspá* 39, we have already observed the *menn meinsvara* who *vaða þunga strauma*, the 'perjured men' who 'wade turbid streams' as some sort of punishment.[49] This stanza may be compared with the first half of *Þórsdrápa* 8, in which the *eiðsvara víkingar Gauta setrs … óðu fast* 'the oath-sworn vikings of Gauti's homestead … waded vigorously'. It is possible that this collocation of wading a perilous river with concepts of oath-keeping is a deliberate allusion to *Vǫluspá*, which may function ironically: Þórr's presentation in other mythological narratives does not at once mark him out as being particularly trustworthy; in fact, he is known to have *broken* pledges. In the story of the giant-builder in *Gylfaginning*, for example, Þórr is specifically called upon to break the Æsir's oaths:

> En er Æsirnir sá þat til víss at þar var bergrisi kominn, þá varð eigi þyrmt eiðunum, ok kǫlluðu þeir á Þór, ok jafnskjótt kom hann ok því næst fór á lopt hamarrinn Mjǫllnir, galt þá smíðarkaupit ok eigi sól ok tungl.[50]

The payment the giant receives instead of the sun and moon is a blow from Þórr's hammer, despite the many formal assurances of safe conduct that that the Æsir had given: '*SnE* I: En at kaupi þeira váru sterk vitni ok mǫrg sœri, fyrir því at jǫtnum þótti ekki trygt at vera með Ásum griðlaust ef Þórr kvæmi heim' ('But at their agreement there had been mighty witnesses invoked and many oaths, for the giants did not think it safe to be among the Æsir without a guarantee of safety if Þórr were to return home.') Snorri then quotes two stanzas from *Vǫluspá*, the second of

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[48] Ed. Davidson, 'Earl Hákon and his Poets', p. 521: 'And the path diminisher of the sea of Nanna's sword-guard Nanna [giantess; Þórr is her path-diminisher] succeeded in pacing over the rivers which bounded, pelted by hail, over the lynx's ocean [mountains]; vigorously incited, he travelled onwards, the flight-spurrer of the obstinate cave-dweller [giant; its flight-spurrer is Þórr], across the broad path of the stake-set way [river] where the mighty waters spewed out poison.'

[49] See above, p. 181.

[50] *SnE* I, 35: 'But when the Æsir saw for certain that it was a mountain-giant that they had there, then the oaths were disregarded and they called upon Þórr and he came in a trice and the next thing was that Mjǫllnir was raised aloft. Then he paid the builder's wages, and it wasn't the sun and moon.'

which further emphasises Þórr's culpability in oath-breaking, especially if the stanza arrangement of the *Snorra Edda* manuscripts – in which the *helmingar* are reversed compared to the Codex Regius text – is followed:

Vǫluspá 26 (*Snorra Edda* text)

Á gengusk eiðar,
orð ok sœri,
mál ǫll meginlig
er á meðal fóru.
Þórr einn þat vann,
þrunginn móði.
Hann sjaldan sitr,
er hann slíkt of fregn.[51]

By having the oath-breaking come before Þórr's undefined action, Snorri (or whoever it was that rearranged this stanza) certainly seems to suggest that it was the oath-breaking that the god performed, and not the striking of the giant-builder. This reading may not quite tally with the implied message of the poem, but it does indicate just how important Þórr's perjury might have been regarded. Þórr, therefore, might possibly be expected, according to *Vǫluspá*'s moralistic code, to count among the *meinsvara*, and not the *eiðsvara*, on the basis of his portrayal in other texts. In *Þórsdrápa*, however, it seems undeniable that, on a certain level, Þórr represents the figure of Hákon jarl; perhaps the earl, steadfast in his oaths, is implicitly (and favourably) contrasted with the god by means of this apparent inversion of *Vǫluspá*'s reference to perjurers wading through the *þunga strauma*.[52]

Þórsdrápa certainly provides an interesting analogue to at least one aspect of Saxo's conception of the pagan mythological landscape. But even the river of swords has a strong

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[51] *SnE* I, 36: 'Oaths were gone back on, pledged words and promises, all the solemn words that passed between them. Þórr achieved this alone, bursting with wrath. He seldom sits idle when he learns of such things.' Dronke, ed., *Poetic Edda* II, 80, implies that Snorri deliberately 'revised' this stanza to accord with his conception of the narrative.

[52] I am grateful to Jonathan Grove for making this suggestion to me. More work needs to be done on *Þórsdrápa*: exigencies of time and space have necessarily limited my discussion of it here only to those motifs most directly related to the otherworld as it appears in other texts.

parallel in a Christian vision. In *Godeschalcus*, one of the perils of the visionary's journey through hell is revealed to be an enormous river, full of iron blades:

> Fluvius enim infinite longitudinis et latitudinis tante, ut vix eum sonitus bucine transcolare posset, subito apparuit, minacem nimis et terribilem preferens faciem. Erat namque ferreis aciebus in longitudine et latitudine sua ita ubique repletus, ut nemini pedem in se figendi locum daret, quin aliquam acierum illarum multimodarum offenderet, quisbusdam ex eis ad instar gladii ad secandum, aliis ad illidendum quasi lanceis venabulis et id genus armorum preparatis.[53]

We do not know what was the ultimate origin of the motif of the weapon-bearing river in the underworld. Discounting the extremely unlikely possibility that the *Godeschalcus*-tradition has abstracted this feature from pagan topography, we may assume that it either developed collaterally in both pagan and Christian mythologies, or else that it is a motif which flows out of Christian *uisiones* and thence into 'pagan' mythological texts. It is worth noting again that *Vǫluspá* is the most conspicuously 'Christianized' of the eddic poems, while Eilífr's *Þórsdrápa* is the product of a poetic community which seems to have been deeply affected by Christianity and the poets' self-conscious positioning of themselves and their art in opposition to the new religion. It is impossible to prove at this point, but I feel that that the weapon-bearing river is likely to have been a loan from Christian tradition even at the relatively early date when *Vǫluspá* and *Þórsdrápa* were composed.

In another passage from Book I of *Gesta Danorum*, a clearer indication of Saxo's intentional positioning of himself within the Classical tradition is found. Hadingus and his lover Harthgrepa encounter a funeral, and the shape-shifting giantess decides to probe the will of the gods by a piece of runic necromancy. After carving a piece of wood which Hadingus slips under the corpse's tongue, the dead man wakes and curses, in verse, the one who has woken him:

> Inferis me qui retraxit, exsecrandus oppetat

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[53] *Godeschalcus*, ed. Assmann, p. 62: 'A river, truly, of such boundless length and breadth that the sound of a trumpet could barely filter across, suddenly appeared, showing an exceedingly threatening and terrible appearance. For throughout its length and breadth it was everywhere so full of sharp iron blades, that it would afford to no one's foot a place for stepping into it without striking against some one of those various blades: with some of them in the form of a sword for cutting, and others resembling lances, spears, and that kind of weapon, for striking.'

Tartaroque devocati spiritus poenas luat.
Quisquis ab inferna sede vocavit
me functum fatis exanimemque
ac rursum superas egit in auras,
sub Styge liventi tristibus umbris
persolvat proprio funere poenas.[54]

Ellis Davidson noted the correspondence between the opening formula (which is repeated in subsequent verses as a refrain) *inferis me qui retraxit, exsecrandus oppetat / Tartaroque devocati spiritus poenas luat*, and the speeches of the seeress of *Baldrs Draumar*.[55] The Old Norse poem does overlap with Saxo's tale in some respects. Óðinn raises the seeress from the dead by means of a corpse-reviving spell in stanza 4:

Þá reið Óðinn fyrr austan dyrr,
þar er hann vissi vǫlo leiði;
nam hann vittugri valgaldr qveða,
unz nauðig reis, nás orð um qvað.[56]

Both Óðinn and Harthgrepa wish to acquire wisdom from the dead, and they have magical powers by which to achieve their ends, although Óðinn makes use of spoken spells rather than inscriptions.[57] The reluctance of the corpse to enter into dialogue with the one who raises it from

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[54] *Gest. Dan.* I, 22: 'Let the one who summoned me, a spirit from the underworld, dragged me from the infernal depths, be cursed and perish miserably. Whoever called me from the lower regions, one discharged from life by destiny, whoever forced me again to the upper air, may she die and suffer beneath the dark lake of hell, among the gloomy shades'.

[55] Fisher and Ellis Davidson, *Saxo Grammaticus* II, 30.

[56] 'Then Óðinn rode by the eastern doors, where he knew the seeress's grave to be; he began to speak a corpse-reviving spell for the wise woman, until reluctantly she rose, spoke these corpse-words.'

[57] The reference to carving spells in wood – 'Ubi magicae speculationis officio superum mentem rimari cupiens, diris admodum carminibus ligno insculptis iisdemque linguae defuncti per Hadingum suppositis' – suggests runic magic, a characteristically Germanic practice: in *Hávamál* 157, for example, one of Óðinn's spells is a runic one by which he can make the dead talk to him:

Þat kann ec iþ tólpta, ef ec sé á tré uppi
vófa virgilná:

the dead is shared between the two texts, and is expressed again in the refrain with which the *vǫlva* ends her subsequent speeches: *Nauðug sagðac, nú mun ec þegia* ('reluctantly I've told you; now I'll be silent'). There is, however, no verbal correspondence between the corpses' speeches; their genders are different; and, most importantly, the vocabulary used by Saxo's corpse is full of explicit references to features of the Romano-Christian geography of the underworld: the names Tartarus (for the underworld) and Styx (for one of its rivers) both come from Vergil, but they often occurred in Latin accounts of the Christian hell, following the example of the *Visio Pauli*.[58] For all that Saxo tries to create an aura of eldritch paganism around his description of Hadingus and Harthgrepa's necromancy, the revived corpse still speaks in the Roman idiom; which is, perhaps, a fitting summation of Saxo's own relationship to pagan Norse culture.

Hadingus's trip to the underworld is a minor digression in Book I of *Gesta Danorum*, with apparently no relationship to the wider narrative. In it, Saxo introduces a number of motifs, the significance of which he utterly fails to explain. I have shown, I hope, that while these motifs create an atmosphere which superficially recalls the world of Old Norse myth, very little of the information presented here can be sourced directly in native mythology as we may observe it in Icelandic texts. Structurally, Hadingus and his guide's sojourn in the world of the dead distinctly resembles a brief Christian Latin vision of hell; some of the features of this underworld find parallels in the *Aeneid*, others in Christian tradition. None is securely identifiable with motifs drawn from the iconographical tradition of Hel or Valhǫll as we have seen it else where, although there are certainly some suggestive similarities. Whether the discrepancies between Saxo's writing and the rest of the Old Norse mythological tradition here is because he did not have any native sources to refer to for his description of his underworld is unknown. Perhaps it is more likely that, as with so much of the *Gesta Danorum*, the process of 'Latinizing' native material almost inevitably resulted in its partial obscuring, as Saxo did not merely translate texts, he translated cultures, expressing ideas about the ancient, legendary pre-history of his society in

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svá ec ríst oc í rúnom fác,
at sá gengr gumi
oc mælir við mic.

('I know a twelfth one if I see, up in a tree, a dangling corpse in a noose: I can so carve and colour the runes that the man walks and talks with me'.) On the significance of this stanza and Óðinn's relationship with the dead, see Klare, 'Die Toten in der altnordischen Literatur', pp. 15-17. The literature on Scandinavian runes and runic magic is vast, and much of it is regrettable.

[58] Morgan, 'Dante and the Medieval Otherworld', pp. 28-9.

terms appropriate to his membership of a Roman cultural tradition (although, as Skovgaard-Petersen pointed out, it must be remembered that for Saxo, 'Roman culture meant the culture of Catholic Europe').[59] Preben Meulengracht Sørensen was probably correct, on this evidence, to argue that Saxo cannot give us particularly close access to pre-Christian thought: certainly his testimony seems less reliable than Snorri's, who, although he was establishing a Christian framework in which to place native myths, was at least directly using, and quoting from, Icelandic poetic sources.[60]

But as Margaret Clunies Ross has argued, though Snorri's fidelity to pre-existing sources can be seen in his prosimetrical work, it does not necessarily mean that all of Snorri's work was based on native poetic exemplars.[61] In extended mythic narratives such as the story of Baldr's death, or of Hermóðr's ride to Hel, for which Snorri does not provide poetic substantiation, then there is no doubt that both Snorri and Saxo create something new out of whatever sources the had, both presenting 'a medieval fiction, the one mythological, the other historicized. Each gives us qualified access to a pre-Christian world view, but that access is strictly on Saxo's and Snorri's own terms'.[62] As the foregoing evidence has, I hope, demonstrated, both Saxo and Snorri were almost equally indebted to Christian texts and traditions in formulating their ideas of the pre-Christian underworld. We must look beyond Saxo's Latinity and Snorri's lack of it: Saxo was specifically concerned to associate Danish history and culture with the world of Rome, and his choice of medium reflects that concern; Snorri was determined to preserve and accentuate the value of his own native culture, but in a way which was acceptable and coherent to contemporary Christians. Saxo has been described as a 'medieval author between Norse and Latin culture';[63] I would argue that the same justifiably could be said of Snorri. Although the two authors are obviously not equidistant from these cultural poles, their respective fictional mythologies of the underworld both exist somewhere on the Norse-Latin cultural continuum: Saxo's is unsurprisingly closer to the Christian Latin end of this scale; it is not always recognised, however, just how far away from the Norse pole Snorri sometimes travels.

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[59] Skovgaard-Petersen, 'Historian of the Patria', p. 77.

[60] Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Moderen førlost', p. 269; see also Malm, 'Otherworld Journeys', esp. pp. 171-2.

[61] Clunies Ross, 'Mythic Narratives', p. 52.

[62] *Ibid.*, p. 59.

[63] Title of a 1979 conference and its published proceedings (ed. Friis-Jensen).

7

Conclusion

> Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change. Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change: Myths call for absolute, fiction for conditional assent. Myths make sense in terms of a lost order of time, *illud tempus* as Eliade calls it; fictions, if successful, make sense of the here and now, *hoc tempus*.[1]

MYTHOLOGICAL FICTIONS: FICTIONAL MYTHOLOGIES?

Margaret Clunies Ross coined the term 'mythological fictions' to describe the extended prose narratives in *Snorra Edda* which take place in 'a coherent fictional world, populated by named supernatural beings with clearly individualized properties, engaged in defined acts and events'.[2] A mythological fiction has a 'special epistemological status' between the worlds of mythical truth and fiction as defined by Kermode. Snorri's need to pitch his narratives somewhere between myth and fiction derives from his desire to establish a framework in which the semantic values of pre-Christian myths could be preserved and expressed without transgressing the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy, the new mythological truth accepted by Snorri and his contemporaries. It is the fictionalised nature of the extended narratives within the *Edda* that allows Snorri and his audience to enter for a while the world of pagan mythology, safe in the knowledge that they are not themselves becoming pagans, or participating in paganism. They can find cultural significance, semantic value, and aesthetic pleasure in the worldview of their ancestors, without being 'taken in' (as Gylfi is) by a religion which they know to be false. Snorri's mythological narratives, read in the context of the Prologue to the *Edda* and other self-reflexive elements of his framing superstructure, 'help to construct a Christian perspective on traditional Norse

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[1] Kermode, *Sense of an Ending*, p. 39.

[2] Clunies Ross, 'Mythological Fictions', p. 205.

concepts of cosmology, cosmogony and eschatology'.[3] As we have seen in the case of the story of Hermóðr's ride to Hel, a mythological fiction of this sort may construct this perspective partly out of ideas and motifs drawn from Christian literature, signalling on a textual level Snorri's participation in both pagan and Christian mythological traditions.

Useful as Clunies Ross's concept of the mythological fiction is, its application is limited to the embedded narratives of *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál*, whereas the question of the nature of Snorri's approach to mythology goes beyond these fictions, and encompasses both his descriptions of the pagan cosmos and the attitude towards pre-Christian religions evinced by his *Ynglinga saga*. Therefore, I propose that we augment the idea of the mythological fiction by introducing the concept of 'fictional mythologies'. By this term I mean the manipulation of mythological material to fit the author's literary design: it does not necessarily imply the invention of new myths.[4] An example of this that arises from the foregoing study is Snorri's descriptions of Valhǫll and Hel, which tacitly transfer facets of the Christian heaven and hell to traditional Norse cosmological features. There are no narratives attached to these descriptions in *Gylfaginning*; they are presented as mythological 'fact'. Similarly, Snorri's recreation of pagan Scandinavian religion and its rituals in the first part of *Heimskringla* is a fictional mythology, in so far as his source texts do not place the same emphasis on Óðinn and human sacrifice as he does. The narratives of *Ynglinga saga* take place in the world of men, which is populated by mortal men, and not supernatural beings – they cannot therefore be classified as mythological fictions – but they do not take place in what for Snorri was *hoc tempus*; they are not mythological texts, but for Snorri they exist in a lost, mythical, order of time, in *illud tempus*. Snorri does not invent the idea that Óðinn was a god associated with hanged men, for example, but the Óðinnic cult described in episodes like the story of King Aun's sacrifices is a unique, fictionalised, application of mythology to narrative. The authors of the *fornaldarsögur* take a very similar approach to the mythological background against which their stylised, fabulous, tales are set: it reflects the peculiar form of antiquarianism of this genre, in which the legendary past was simultaneously glorified and held up to ridicule.

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[3] Clunies Ross, 'Mythological Fictions', p. 211.

[4] In this regard I feel that Mogk went too far in effectively accusing Snorri of 'making up' myths in what he called a *Novellistische Darstellung* (in the monograph of that name, and in *Zur Bewertung der Snorra-Edda als religionsgeschichliche und mythologische Quelle*, esp. p. 18). Snorri was not an inventor of new myths, but a (very) 'creative compiler' of inherited narratives.

Fictionalised mythologies are not restricted to late literary reconstructions of the pagan world: the highly valorised representation of the Valhǫll myth-complex in the eddic praise-poems *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál* is determined, according to my reading, by the genre in which they were composed. They create mythologies by association with which they can achieve the maximum glory for their subjects as individuals. They wish to make artistic use both of myth in its stable and stabilizing form – it is important that their heroes are associated with the gods – and fiction, with its ability to deal with change, because they wish their characters to be seen as having a unique position in relation to the stability of the traditional mythical structures. A fictionalised mythology is one which is created bespoke according to the needs of a particular literary situation: the cloth from which they are cut (myth, standing for *illud tempus*, stability) always remains the same, but the pattern is determined by the requirements of the author in relation to the unique requirements of the fiction which he is in the process of creating.

A CULTURAL PALIMPSEST

When we attempt, as I have done in this dissertation, to read medieval Scandinavia as a cultural text, we run into difficulties. If you will excuse the metaphor, I suggest we view Scandinavian culture as a page of manuscript, upon which is inscribed a text. The page is not, currently, in pristine condition; there are here and there holes, erasures, and everywhere there is writing in hands other than the original. The script is of all periods, and what it says is sometimes incomprehensible, and the various scribes often contradict one another. Before the Conversion of Scandinavia to Christianity, we may assume that there was an autograph original, representing pagan culture, religion, and mythology as it was really experienced by Scandinavian communities. As well as the natural wear and tear that such an artefact will be exposed to in the course of its existence, it has suffered at the hands of later owners. During the change from the old religion to the new, a good part of the text was erased so as to clear enough vellum for the new culture of Christianity to be written down. And yet we can still discern a good deal of the original, which was not entirely destroyed. It seems that medieval Scandinavians found too much of value and too much of beauty in their original text to allow it to be erased completely, as happened to a much greater extent in other Germanic cultures. (The strength and cultural importance of the orally transmitted Norse poetic tradition was undoubtedly crucial to its survival.) In places, there are lacunae and scribal errors in the text of the palimpsest, and this explains the proliferation of

post-Conversion handwriting on our page. From an early period, Christians in Scandinavia (and in Iceland in particular) were interested in preserving and recovering the information about their cultural past which was still accessible to them, although it doubtless became more obscure as they became temporally more remote from the writing of the original text. They glossed, translated, reworked, underlined and emended the text with which they were confronted; they applied a reagent solution of scholarly conjecture to passages which were particularly faint. Successive generations of scribes have done this (and it is a process which continues to this day): some have tried to remove all traces of the Christian text; others have tried to reconcile the information inscribed by the two main hands. The writing of Snorri Sturluson utterly predominates on the page as it is visible to us now: his cultural glosses and commentaries are so voluminous as to threaten to obscure the original palimpsest text altogether, and yet without them we would have little idea of what it said, or what it meant.

It is impossible, in my view, that we will ever uncover entirely the original text; but we can see the process, taking place over a thousand years, by which successive generations have read medieval Scandinavian culture, interpreted it for themselves, related it to their own cultural experiences, and found meaning in it. I hope that these scribbles in a corner of the margin of the page will go some way to explaining how this process occurred.

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