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ST MICHAEL AND THE SONS OF SÍÐU-HALLUR

THE PAPER CONCERNS the affiliation of the Icelander Síðu-Hallur to the archangel St Michael, acquired prior to the formal adoption of Christianity in Iceland in the year 1000 AD (*kristnitaka*). The paper will consider this link specifically in relation to the death of Síðu-Hallur's son Þiðrandi but also with reference to the death of another son, Ljótur. Hallur's conversion took place between the deaths of these two sons. There are close similarities as well as significant differences between the stories about Þiðrandi and Ljótur: whereas that concerning Þiðrandi's death contains aspects that strongly recall the archangel Michael, the story about Ljótur's death also contributes to the portrayal of Hallur's close affiliation to Michael.

St Michael

That Michael was a popular saint in early Christian Scandinavia is evidenced in several ways. Not only are there literary sources that mention or describe him there are also many church dedications,¹ and the wide distribution of runic inscriptions that refer to St Michael further underline his prominence in Scandinavia. Viking Age inscriptions are found in southern Scandinavia; later medieval inscriptions come predominantly from Norway, from the Norse settlements in Greenland, and also from the Danish and Swedish regions.² These inscriptions typically focus on Michael's role as guardian and guide for souls and call on him to help the soul of a named person; moreover, there are several inscriptions that

1 See Gad 1966, 618. For a list of Icelandic churches dedicated to Michael, see Cormack 1994, 132–133; for Norwegian churches, see Dietrichson 1888, 132.

2 Runic inscriptions are dated according to which version of the *futhark* they use. Inscriptions employing the sixteen-rune *futhark* are dated to the Viking Age, c. 800–1100; those employing dotted runes are considered medieval and are dated c. 1100–1350 (Moltke 1976, 23–25).

simply mention Michael alongside Christ, God or other angels.³ It seems remarkable that only one runic inscription refers to Michael as a dragon-slayer since this is the role in which he seems to have been best known and, indeed, he is portrayed thus in five wooden sculptures from Norwegian churches and at least one painted altar frontal, also from Norway (Hohler et al. 2004, 58 and 106).⁴

The earliest literary mention of St Michael comes from a skaldic stanza composed around 1050 by the Icelander Arnór jarlaskáld. Here, the focus is on how the archangel weighs souls in order to determine whether the good a person has done outweighs the bad that he or she has also done:⁵

*Mikáll vegr þats misgört þykkir, / manvitsfróðr ok alt et góða; / tyggi
skíptir síðan seggjum / sólar hjálms á dæmistóli.*⁶
(skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au/db.php)

Michael weighs what seems wrongly done, / ripe with wisdom, and
all that is good; / then the sovereign of the sun's helmet / separates
out men at his judgement-seat.
(Edwards 1982, 40)

- 3 A typical example is U 478 (Ängby, Knivsta parish in Sweden): *estriþ let reisa stein þensa eftir iuar bota sin auk ikuar auk ikifastr eftir faþur sin mibel kati at hans* ("Æstrid let this stone be raised after Ivar, her husband, and Ingvarr and Ingifastr after their father. Michael guard his spirit") (Wessén and Jansson 1943–1946, 297; my translation). Other inscriptions include N A284; N B13; Vg 202; GR 11; DR EM85, 4381; GR 43; N 262; N 266; N 404; N 636; Sö AA29, 8; Ög SvK200, 109; DR 212; DR 380; DR 398; DR 399; DR 404; G 203; U 478. Many inscriptions highlight Michael's role as guardian of souls; others mention him in the company of Christ, God or other angels. I am grateful to Tarrin Wills for helping me to identify these inscriptions.
- 4 The inscription is Swedish, Vg 202 (Fredberg parish, inscription found in the church): *sær magal trab ormin : suen antras* ("[One] sees Michael killed the serpent. Sven. Andreas.") (Jungner and Svärðström 1958–1970, 358; my translation). The five Norwegian sculptures are found in Hov (Nord-Trøndelag), c. 1275–1300; Melhus (Sør-Trøndelag), c. 1250; Näskott (Jämtland), c. 1250; Mosvik (Nord-Trøndelag), c. 1250–1260, and Røldal (Hordaland) (Hohler et al. 2004, 58); the altar panel is from Kaupager (Hohler et al. 2004, 106).
- 5 Although there is no canonical biblical basis for this, weighing souls is a motif commonly attached to Michael in iconography, too (Gad 1966, 617). There is a good example in Århus Cathedral.
- 6 *Sólar hjálmr*, "the sun's helmet", is a kenning for the skies or heavens; *tyggi solar hjálms*, "sovereign of the heavens", is a kenning for Christ.

Arnór's stanza sees Michael partaking in the process of divine judgment alongside Christ.⁷ The wider poetic context of the stanza remains unknown. It is, however, probable that it was inspired by some visual representation of Michael, since the only biblical references to him show him disputing with and overcoming the Devil (*Jude* 9 and *Revelation* 12, respectively). If Arnór's source of inspiration were iconographic, this would moreover place his stanza within the Norse skaldic tradition of picture-describing poems (Edwards 1982, 40–41), and it could also serve as an indication that much of what was known about Michael in early Christian Iceland (and Scandinavia generally) was based as much on extra-biblical traditions as on the canonical texts.

Biblical tradition portrays Michael as defeating the Anti-Christ at the Apocalypse and this aspect of his character would have been well known in medieval Iceland. The fourteenth-century religious narrative *Michaels saga*, written by Bergur Sökkason c. 1340–1350, contains a number of different elements that may be taken as representative of what Icelanders at the time associated with the archangel.⁸ It contains the Monte Gargano legend about the famous Italian shrine dedicated to the archangel and a version of *Visio Pauli* in which Michael leads one man to Heaven while devils bring another to Hell.⁹ It also emphasizes how angels attend to the well-being or salvation of the souls of Christians.¹⁰ Moreover, the saga (in ch. 29) refers to Michael as leader of the heavenly army and of the angels and states that Michael is above all known as the slayer of the Anti-Christ,

7 There are no other early skaldic references to Michael. Oddur kíkínaskáld mentions *Mikáls-messa*, which is Michaelmass (poem about Magnús góði 1, c. 1046); angels are mentioned in a general sense by some early medieval skalds, for example Arnór jarlaskáld (*Hrynhenda Magnússdrápa* 18, c. 1046), Þrándur í Götu (*Kredda*) and Sighvatur Þórðarson (*Erfidrápa Óláfs helga* 28, c. 1040) (skaldic.arts.usyd.ed.au/db.php). From the twelfth century onwards, references to angels become commonplace in skaldic poetry (Paasche 1914, 45).

8 It survives in AM 657a-b 4°, c. 1350, AM 657c 4°, c. 1340–1390 (the end only), and Holm perg. 10 8°, c. 1400 (fragments) (ONP, 336).

9 The version of *Visio Pauli* occurs in *Michaels saga* ch. 11 (Unger 1877, 690–693) and involves characters from *Chanson de Roland* with Michael bringing Roland to Heaven while devils take Roland's enemy Marsirius to Hell (see also Tveitane 1963). The Monte Gargano legend follows in chs. 13–28 (Unger 1877, 693–711).

10 For example *Michaels saga* chs. 8 and 9, where a man falls into a deep sleep during which an angel appears to him, shows him all the evil he has done and helps him to change his ways for the better (Unger 1877, 686–689).

who has the shape of a dragon, at the end of the world — a feat he accomplishes by thrusting a spear into the dragon's mouth (Unger 1877, 711).¹¹ In addition to these aspects which are directly linked to Michael, ch. 4 of *Michaels saga* contains the motif of weighing a person's good deeds against their bad ones, though here the motif is attached to an unnamed collective of angels who perform the task in direct opposition to a collective of devils (Unger 1877, 681).

Furthermore, ch. 3 of *Michaels saga* tells the story of a man who has a vision in which he sees two groups of supernatural beings, one after the other. First, he sees to the north a group of devils ready for battle; then, to the east, large groups of bright shining angels in possession of divine power. Although this narrative does not mention the archangel by name, Bergur nonetheless saw it fit to include it in his collection of important legends attached to Michael and, since it bears resemblances to *Þiðrandi þáttr* which will be discussed below, it merits a mention here.

The literary references to Michael thus tend to cluster particularly around three aspects of the archangel's characteristic portrayal — Michael as guide and helper of souls, Michael as weighing souls to measure their good and evil, and Michael as the one who defeats the Devil, the Anti-Christ, the dragon. In addition, there are the two references to Michael's leading position among the angels; together, these four elements may be taken as representative of how medieval Icelanders perceived St Michael. With the potential, too, for word play on his name — the Old Norse version of the name is *Mikjáll*, which is phonetically close to the adjective *mikill*,¹² meaning "great, prominent, outstanding" — the archangel cannot but have seemed impressive to early medieval Scandinavians.

11 *Michaels saga* ch. 28 describes him as: *haleita höfðingia himneskkrar herferðar*, "glorious lord of heavenly armies" (Unger 1877, 710; my translation); in ch. 23 he is: *herra höfuðenglanna*, "lord of archangels" (Unger 1877, 703; my translation). In the Hebrew Apocrypha (in the so-called War Scroll [1QM] of the Dead Sea Scrolls), Michael leads the forces of God against the evil Belial in the War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness.

12 There is however, no etymological or semantic overlap: it is a purely phonetic similarity. I am grateful to Marteinn Sigurðsson for reminding me of this. For different meanings of *mikill*, see Fritzner 1886–1896 2, 693–694.

Hallur

St Michael certainly seemed impressive to Síðu-Hallur. Four different literary sources describe the Icelandic *kristnitaka* and all four describe Hallur's role in the process; two of them, furthermore, tell directly of his affiliation to St Michael.

The story of how Christianity was accepted as the “state religion” in Iceland is told by the medieval historian Ari fróði Þorgilsson in his *Íslendingabók*, written c. 1122–1133.¹³ *Íslendingabók* ch. 7 gives a description of how this momentous decision was made at the Alþingi and certain details are particularly relevant in the present context. Ari refers a number of times to a man called Hallur Þorsteinsson, known as Síðu-Hallur, who came to play an important role in the *kristnitaka*.¹⁴ It may be noteworthy that Ari himself claims to be descended from Hallur on his mother's side, which means both that he may have known of genuine traditions about Hallur and that he may have had specific interests in how his ancestor was remembered (Grønlie 2006, xv).¹⁵ According to Ari, Hallur was baptized early on by the missionary priest Þangbrandur, who had been sent by King Ólafur of Norway to convert the Icelanders. He further tells us that when things came to a crisis at the Alþingi, with Christians and heathens falling out and being on the verge of fighting each other, Hallur was asked to recite the law for the Christians but he diplomatically freed himself of this responsibility (ÍF 1, 16–17; Grønlie 2006, 8–9; Cochrane 2010, 213–216). Had he responded favourably to this request, Hallur would have put himself in a highly controversial position; instead, the responsibility fell on the existing law-speaker, Þorgeir Ljósvetningagoði, who decided in favour

13 It now survives only in two paper manuscripts from the seventeenth century: AM 113 a fol., c. 1650, and AM 113 b fol., c. 1650 (ONP, 282). The paper copies, although late, are generally accepted as accurately reflecting the twelfth-century document from which they were probably copied (Grønlie 2006, xiii–xiv).

14 Cochrane 2010 discusses Síðu-Hallur's role in *kristnitaka* extensively; see also Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999.

15 In the written sources that discuss *kristnitaka*, Gissur hvíti and Hjalti Skeggjason are by far the most active promoters of Christianity in the political landscape at the time; Hallur is only mentioned as the man whom the Christians turn to when they want someone to be their Christian law-speaker.

of Christianity in spite of being heathen himself.¹⁶ Later, in *Íslendingabók* ch. 9, we are told some of Ari's personal history, namely that at the age of seven he went to stay with Hallur (by then almost eighty years old; Grønlie 2006, 28), *es bæði var minnigr ok ólyginn* (ÍF 1, 21), "who both had a reliable memory and was truthful" (Grønlie 2006, 11). Ari gives no further details about Hallur but his description does serve to underline Hallur's position as an authority regarding the historical events surrounding the *kristnitaka*.

There are three other medieval sources which describe the formal conversion of Iceland. All three are from the fourteenth century, all three clearly draw on Ari and use his twelfth-century account as their main source, and all three supply additional information regarding Hallur and the circumstances of his personal conversion.

Ch. 7 of *Kristni saga* (dated to c. 1310¹⁷) elaborates on Hallur's conversion. Þangbrandur, the saga says, was shunned by the Icelanders once they realized he was a Christian and had been sent out to Iceland by King Ólafur; Hallur, however allowed him to stay on his farm. The day before Michaelmas,¹⁸ Þangbrandur and his men begin to observe this feast by stopping work. Hallur asks why they were doing this, and Þangbrandur tells him about the archangel Michael and how he receives the souls of Christians. Hallur is impressed by what he hears. The next day, he and his household go to watch the Christian rites. Hallur asks his household how they like what they see; they say that they like it well and everyone is baptized the following Easter (ÍF 15, 17–19; Grønlie 2006, 41).¹⁹ In this version of the event, Hallur hears about Michael but does not actually acquire any special attachment to him.

16 The way in which Þorgeir Ljósvetningagoði came to the conclusion that Iceland should become Christian has been much discussed (see for example Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999; Cochrane 2010, 214–215).

17 *Kristni saga* is preserved in *Hauksbók* (AM 371 4^o), c. 1302–1310 where it follows the text of *Landnámabók*. The manuscript is fragmentary but does contain ch. 7 of *Kristni saga*; the beginning and ending of *Kristni saga* are found in the seventeenth-century manuscript AM 105 fol. (Grønlie 2006, xxxii; Kålund 1888–1894 1, 589–590).

18 Michaelmas falls on September 29.

19 Easter and Pentecost were, at least in Rome, the proper seasons for baptism since these festivals carry are strongly associated with the transition from death to life. The Easter-Pentecost ruling about baptism remained in force until the twelfth century and beyond (Cramer 1993, 137–138, 155–156).

Ch. 100 of *Brennu-Njáls saga* (dated to c. 1280²⁰) gives a similar story: Þangbrandur tells Hallur that St Michael weighs everything one does, good and evil, and that he is so merciful that he allows the good to weigh more heavily. Hallur is impressed and says that he would like this Michael as his “friend”²¹; he is baptized when Þangbrandur promises him Michael as his guardian angel (ÍF 12, 256–257). In this narrative, it is thus very clear that Michael takes on special significance for Hallur.

Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta (from c. 1390²²) expands extensively in ch. 216 on the conversation between Þangbrandur and Hallur, with the priest giving a long speech on how Michael leads the angels and guides souls to Paradise, thus convincing Hallur to convert (Ólafur Halldórsson 1958–2000 2, 150–156). Here, too, Michael becomes a highly significant figure for Hallur.

As mentioned, Michael’s prominence and popularity as a saint in early Christian Scandinavia is suggested by the runic inscriptions, Arnór’s stanza and Síðu-Hallur’s conversion as described in the saga narratives. All three saga episodes mention Michael, and two emphasize Hallur’s affiliation to him. The narratives follow a similar pattern: Hallur shows that he is open to, and curious about, Christianity by allowing Þangbrandur to stay, he hears impressive things about St Michael and is then baptized with a special attachment to him.

Historically, it is perfectly plausible that something of the sort may have taken place since Michael was a popular saint during the conversion period. However, it is not only Hallur who is of interest here: Michael also appears to play an important, albeit understated, role in the stories about Hallur’s sons, Þiðrandi and Ljótur, both of whom are tragically killed.²³

20 There are numerous manuscripts of *Njáls saga*: the main ones are *Kálfaþekjabók* (AM 133 fol.) c. 1300, *Möðruvallabók* (AM 132 fol.) c. 1330–1370, *Reykjabók* (AM 468 4^o) c. 1300–1325 and *Gráskinna* (Gks 2870 4^o) c. 1300. All of these manuscripts contain chs. 100–105, which section is sometimes referred to as *Kristni þáttur*.

21 The term used is *vinr*, “friend”; in the following sentence, Hallur employs the term *fylgju-engill*, “guardian angel” (ÍF 12, 257) about St Michael, recalling the use of the term *fylgjur* (alongside *disir*) in the Þiðrandi episode; see below (cf. Mundal 1974, 124–128).

22 *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* is preserved in, among other mss, *Flateyjarbók* (Gks 1005 fol.) c. 1387–1395. Ch. 216, which tells the story of Hallur’s conversion, follows immediately after *Þiðranda þáttur ok Þórhalls* in ch. 215.

23 Cochrane produces an interesting discussion of the descendants of Hallur (Cochrane 2010, 216–224). His considerations, however, take a rather different focus from the present ones.

Þiðrandi

One story, told in ch. 215 of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* (Ólafur Halldórsson 1958–2000 2, 145–150), is known as *Þiðranda þáttur ok Þórhalls*.²⁴ The fact that the saga in which this *þáttur* appears also contains the long account of Síðu-Hallur's conversion is hardly a coincidence (Björn M. Ólsen 1893, 301; Kaplan 2000).

The story concerns a specific pre-Christian autumnal feast known as *vetrnætr* or Winter Nights; certain heathen supernatural beings figure prominently in the plot and the general setting is (at least superficially) entirely heathen in nature.²⁵ Significantly, however, the tale overlaps as far as the Christian imagery surrounding St Michael is concerned, especially the vision described in *Michaels saga* ch. 3 (see above) and the late-recorded Norwegian *Draumkvædet* (see below). In fact, the story of Þiðrandi might be said to present the indisputably heathen traditions that underpin this narrative in such a way that they come to convey very Christian ideas.

The *þáttur* tells firstly of Þórhallur who was a very wise man and known as Þórhallur spámaðr, “the prophet”. He lived in the East Fjords and was a great friend of Síðu-Hallur who, at the time these events took place, had not yet been converted to Christianity. One autumn, Þórhallur is invited to Síðu-Hallur's home for the Winter Nights feast. Þórhallur accepts the invitation but expresses some concern because he has foreseen that a prophet will be killed during the celebrations — the implication is that he is worried about his own well-being. Síðu-Hallur says that he owns an ox called *spámaðr* which he intends to sacrifice, and that this must be the *spámaðr* concerned so there is no need for Þórhallur to worry.²⁶

24 The tale survives in several manuscripts of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*; see Kaplan 2000, 379. Bergdís Þrastardóttir points out that many *þættir* are not actually called *þættir* in the manuscripts; this is a scholarly term employed from the seventeenth century onwards.

25 The Winter Nights were celebrated in late autumn to mark the end of summer and the beginning of winter. The celebrations spanned three nights and two days that constituted a distinctly liminal period of transition since they were considered to be neither summer nor winter. See Gunnell 2004 for a more detailed analysis of the Winter Nights.

26 Kaplan (Kaplan 2000, 385–387) argues that the name is most likely a kind of pun based on Hallur's description of his ox as *spakari* than most other oxen. Since this comparative adjective can mean both “wiser” and “tamer”, Kaplan holds it to be more likely that it is used in the latter sense here. Furthermore, she points out that the description also fits Þiðrandi well, which would strengthen the link drawn between him and the ox suggested here.

The story then focuses on Þiðrandi, Síðu-Hallur's favourite and most promising son, who is described as possessing qualities not only different from what is normally admired in pre-Christian Icelandic society but also conspicuously akin to Christian virtues. Among other things, Þiðrandi is said to be *litillatr ok bliðr við hvert barn* (Ólafur Halldórsson 1958–2000 2, 145), “unassuming and kind to every child”, which recalls Hallur's description of himself as *lítilmenni*, “no great hero”, in *Njáls saga* ch. 145 (ÍF 12, 408; CSI 3, 194) (see below).²⁷ Þiðrandi is eighteen years of age when the events described in the *þáttr* happen.

During the Winter Nights, people are told not to go outside of the house no matter what happens, and the evening proceeds as expected. Once everyone has gone to bed, however, there is a knock on the door and at the third knock, Þiðrandi gets up to answer and breaks the prohibition by going outside. There, he sees nine black women riding towards him from the north, all carrying drawn swords. He also sees nine white women on white horses riding towards him from the south. The black women get to him first and attack him; he defends himself bravely but is left almost dead at the end. People later come out of the house and find him; he tells them what has happened and then dies, after which he is buried according to heathen traditions.

Afterwards, Síðu-Hallur asks Þórhallur what he thinks this means and Þórhallur answers by saying that there will be a *siðaskipti*, a change to the way of life, and the new way will be “better” (*siðr betri*).²⁸ The black horse-riding females are referred to as *disir* and as *fylgjur*, the heathen guardian spirits of Síðu-Hallur's family who, according to Þórhallur's interpretation, have come to claim Þiðrandi as their share before being ousted by the new faith. But the white ones are “better *disir*” (*betri*) who would have helped him, though *komuz eigi við at svá bunv* (Ólafur Halldórsson 1958–2000 2,

27 The description of Kjartan, another early Christian Icelander, in *Laxdæla saga* ch. 28, is similar: *hverjum manni var hann litillátari ok vinsæll, svá at hvert barn unni honum* (ÍF 5, 77), “he was the humblest of men, and so popular that every child loved him” (CSI 5, 38).

28 Similar predictions regarding the coming of Christianity to Iceland occur in other sagas, for example in *Laxdæla saga* ch. 33, where Gestur Oddleifsson interprets Guðrún's third dream as indicating a change of faith: *í þat mund muni orðit siðaskipti, ok muni sá þinn bóndi hafa tekit við þeim sið, er vér hyggjum, at miklu sé háleitari* (ÍF 5, 90), “there will be a change in religion around that time and this husband of your will have adopted the new religion, which seems to be much nobler” (CSI 5, 45).

149), “but with things as they are they were incapable of doing so” (CSI 2, 461).²⁹

This story is interesting for its portrayal of Þiðrandi as a “noble heathen”, a Christian before the conversion to Christianity, and a favourite son who is claimed by the heathen deities on the brink of losing their grip on the community.³⁰ But the ox and the *dísir* likewise merit some attention since they too play significant parts.

The sacrifice of an animal during the Winter Nights is not surprising in any way; it fits with what is known about the heathen traditions connected to this feast. The sacrifice of an ox called *spámaðr* in conjunction with Þórhallur’s predictions about Christianity approaching, as well as with the death of the favourite son Þiðrandi (who is said to be “unassuming and kind to every child”), however, looks a little suspicious when presented as part of a heathen feast.³¹

The “prophet” who is killed at the Winter Nights is, of course, the ox called *spámaðr*. But it is also possible to regard Þiðrandi as the “prophet” in the sense that he is a visionary whose vision and death are interpreted as heralding the coming of Christianity.³² Moreover, it may even be possible to see Þórhallur as the “prophet” since he is clearly a *spámaðr* and since the heathen beliefs that he represents are about to be “sacrificed” in the sense of being supplanted by Christianity. In their fourteenth-century context, all three candidates may be said to function as disguised manifestations of Christian symbols: the ox represents Christian sacrifice; Þiðrandi is the Christ-like “noble heathen”, the promising young man who is a Christian before Christianity and who dies a tragic death; Þórhallur is the wise heathen who foresees that the old ways of his ancestors will die out as a new and better way is imminent.

29 This brings to mind *Laxdala saga* ch. 31, where Ólafur pái, having had his precious ox Harri slain, is visited in his dreams by a furious woman who accuses him of having killed her son. This woman foretells that Ólafur, too, will see his beloved son slain (ÍF 5, 84–85), thereby predicting the killing of Kjartan (cf. Ström 1952, 92).

30 In fact, all three men (Þórhallur, Síðu-Hallur and Þiðrandi) may be classified as “noble heathens”. Lönnroth says about the “noble heathen” that: “it is primarily his natural nobility, in combination with his good sense, and a half-mystical insight into the workings of nature, that makes him act as if he were already on the verge of conversion” (Lönnroth 1969, 2).

31 I am grateful to Marteinn Sigurðsson for drawing my attention to this.

32 See also Lindow 1997, 41 and Kaplan 2000, 386, who both use the term “prophet” to describe Þiðrandi.

In addition to this, it is noteworthy that the story about Þiðrandi and the *dísir* is followed closely by the passage describing how Hallur converts after hearing about St Michael. The story of Þiðrandi's death comes in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* ch. 215; in ch. 216, Þangbrandur tells Hallur how Michael leads the angels and brings souls to Paradise, how beautiful, bright and strong the angels are, even how sweet they smell, and how there are nine groups of angels serving God (Ólafur Halldórsson 1958–2000 2, 152–153).³³ Part of the intention that lies behind this description must be to remind the reader (or listener) of the nine white *dísir* who arrive from the south in shining garments and bring a new and better faith. The white *dísir* would have saved Þiðrandi's life if only they had arrived in time. A comparison between them and Michael's angels is certainly not out of the question, nor is a comparison between Þiðrandi's vision of black and white *dísir* and the vision of war-like devils to the north and divine angels to the east from *Michaels saga* ch. 3.³⁴

The *dísir* undoubtedly originate in the pre-Christian heathen faith; the many mentions of them in prose as well as poetry (eddic and skaldic) leave no reason to question that belief in them genuinely existed. Their religious role and significance has been explored in depth by several scholars (Gunnell 2000; Strömbäck 1949; Ström 1954; McKinnell 2005, 197–200), and the present discussion will focus only on certain aspects of their function.

In the story of Þiðrandi, the *dísir* are portrayed in the clearly heathen context of the Winter Nights and in heathen tradition generally, they act as powerful supernatural women whose protection and assistance people sought. The *dísir* possess both benign and destructive powers: they lend or withdraw their assistance, they can give life but they can also take it away. These things are clear enough in the story. What is so unusual about it is the very sharp distinction it draws between the nine black, ferocious, heathen otherworldly women coming from the north, and the nine white,

33 See also Strömbäck 1949, 37–38.

34 The change of compass direction associated with Michael or the angels, from east in the explicitly religious *Michaels saga* to south in the more secular *Þiðranda þáttr* (and also *Draumkvædet*; see below), warrants consideration. East is traditionally associated with Paradise but it may be that folk tradition has, at least in some contexts, placed the heavenly forces in the south so as to create a clear directional opposition to the evil forces lurking in the north.

redeeming, Christian otherworldly women who come from the south. Elsewhere in Norse tradition, *disir* are seen as having innately benign and destructive powers but these powers are not separated out between one group of benign *disir* and another group of cruel ones (Bek-Pedersen 2011, 41–48). By making this separation in the story of Þiðrandi, the nature of the *disir* is radically changed and parallels appear that are strongly reminiscent of the Christian portrayal of Michael as leader of the angels against the Devil and his evil host.³⁵

The black and white *disir* most likely constitute an attempt at merging heathen and Christian beliefs or traditions though not necessarily an attempt that is consciously articulated as such. It may simply be the result of a tendency to think in typological terms that dominated much medieval treatment of pre-Christian traditions, that is, seeing these pre-Christian traditions as a “natural religion” or imperfect, obscured and misunderstood forerunners of the “true” Christian tradition.³⁶ Other similar instances exist: in *Gylfaginning* ch. 15, a clear distinction is drawn between “good norns” (*goðar nornir*) who create pleasant fates for people and “evil norns” (*illar nornir*) who create grim ones but no such distinction is found anywhere else in references to the norns (Bek-Pedersen 2011, 75–76; Finnur Jónsson 1931, 24).³⁷ Likewise, in *Gylfaginning* ch. 17, *álfar* are sub-grouped into dark ones “as black as tar”, and light ones “fairer than the sun”, with the two kinds being “very unlike” each other.³⁸ Although there are many references to *álfar* scattered throughout the corpus of Old Norse literature,

35 They have been compared to the two *draumkonur* or “dream-women” in *Gísla saga Súrssonar* ch. 22 (ÍF 6, 70), of which one is evil (and possibly heathen) while the other is good (and possibly Christian); see Mundal 1974, 113–128; Björn M. Ólsen 1900, 63; Ström 1952, 89–91.

36 Discussions of such medieval Christian attitudes towards heathen religion can be found in, among many others, McCone 1990, especially 54–83; Abram 2009; Lönnroth 1969.

37 *Goðar nornir ok vel ættapar skapa goðan alldr, en þeir menn, er fyrir vskaupvm verða, þa valda því illar nornir* (Finnur Jónsson 1931, 24), “Good norns, ones of noble parentage, shape good lives, but as for those people that become the victims of misfortune, it is evil norns that are responsible” (Faulkes 1987, 18).

38 *þar bygvir folk þat, er Liosalfar b(eita), en Dauckalfar bva niðri iiorþv, ok erv þeir vlikir synum ok myklv vlikari reyndvm. Liosalfar erv fegri en sol synvm, en Davckalfar erv svartari en bik* (Finnur Jónsson 1931, 25), “There live the folk called light-elves, but dark-elves live down in the ground, and they are unlike them in appearance, and even more unlike them in nature. Light-elves are fairer than the sun to look at, but dark elves are blacker than pitch” (Faulkes 1987, 19–20).

this clearly-drawn line between light and dark ones is unparalleled and therefore suspicious in terms of it being a genuine trait in heathen traditions (Hall 2007, 24–25). In fact, this sort of categorisation might be seen to be what Hall has called “a paganisation of Christian angels” (Hall 2007, 25) and is probably best taken as reflecting a Christian mind-set making sense of ancient heathen traditions.³⁹

It is exactly such a “paganisation of Christian angels” that the *dísir* in *Þiðranda þáttur ok Þórhalls* are subjected to, originating as they do in heathen belief, yet employed in this context to convey a strongly Christian message. This is only part of the point, however. By taking up Christianity in the next chapter of the saga, Hallur shows that he has understood the message: there is a relationship resembling cause-and-effect between Þiðrandi’s tragic death in one chapter and his father’s conversion in the next.

There are strong Christian parallels to *Þiðranda þáttur*. Parallels to the vision of demonic and angelic forces described in *Michaels saga* ch. 3 are clear; the black and white *dísir* opposing each other over Þiðrandi also recalls the biblical reference in *Jude* 9 where the archangel Michael and the Devil himself fight over the body of Moses.⁴⁰ The two narratives involving Moses and Þiðrandi, although they portray different outcomes of the struggle, convey the same notion of the white, angelic forces representing what is good against dark and evil forces.

Furthermore, the Norwegian *Draumkvæde* tradition is particularly relevant here, too, since it portrays St Michael in ways that are reminiscent of the black and white *dísir*. Although this poem was only recorded very late (many versions were collected from Telemark in Norway during the mid-nineteenth century) it has much in common with medieval visionary poetry in that it concerns a person’s journey to the underworld during a deep, long-lasting sleep. The poem tells of Olav Åstesson and how he fell asleep on Christmas Eve and did not wake up again until the Twelfth

39 Mundal speaks of *kristen þáverknad på fylgjetrua*, “Christian influence on the belief in fylgiur” (Mundal 1974, 124).

40 See also Edwards 1982, 41. The visionary in *Michaels saga* ch. 3 is, incidentally, named Moses (Unger 1877, 679). The motif *Angels and devils contest for a man’s soul* (E756.3) commonly occurs in tales about *The Devil’s Contract* (ATU 756b). It is widespread and is found in many folklore traditions documented in recent centuries. One version of it portrays black and white birds instead of devils and angels; this looks like a special variant of ATU 756b with a narrower distribution, seemingly limited to the Scandinavian area (see Bek-Pedersen forthcoming).

Night; during this period, he was transported to the Otherworld and saw both the torments of Hell and the bliss of Paradise, although there is rather more of Hell and Purgatory than there is of Paradise in the story. The dating of *Draumkvæde* has proved difficult but the tradition is likely to have come together in the form in which it was collected in the 1840s at some point during the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries (Strömbäck 1957, 204–205).⁴¹

Some versions of the poem refer to St Michael explicitly as the helper of souls and leader of angels in direct opposition to the leader of the evil forces, Grutte Greybeard.⁴² The following quotation is from the version known as L4, 14–15 (Barnes 1974, 170):⁴³

Her Kjæm i fær her sonnate	There came a flock from the south
Aa den Rei naa so tvist	and it rode so quietly
fyrri Rei St. saale Mikjel	foremost rode St Michael of the souls
Ete kom Jesom Christ	after him Jesus Christ

He Kjæm ei Fær her Norate	There came a flock from the north
den Rei naa so Qvast	and it rode so hard
Fyri Rei Grutte graasiæje	foremost rode Grutte greybeard
alt mæ sin svarte Hat	in his black hat

Draumkvæde thus presents a scene that is very similar to the one in *Þið-randa þáttr* but involves no heathen *dísir* and no specifically heathen beliefs, celebrations or other features. Instead, the context is entirely Christian, likely inspired by the biblical apocalyptic imagery from *Revelation* 7–9 (where Michael and the angels fight and overcome the dragon and his angels), and *Revelation* 19 (where Christ arrives, dressed in white, riding a white horse and leading the heavenly army to defeat the beast). Indeed, Strömbäck (Strömbäck 1949, 31–32) argues that the *þáttr* is influenced by medieval visionary literature.⁴⁴ Arguably, the context of *Revelations*,

41 Paasche draws comparisons between *Draumkvæde* and the twelfth-century *Sólarljóð*, arguing that *Sólarljóð* also portrays Michael, although not by name (Paasche 1914, 51–74).

42 Grutte Greybeard bears some resemblance to Óðinn but also to the Christian conception of the Devil (Paasche 1914, 47–48).

43 Version K1, stanzas 23–24, also contains the motif (Barnes 1974, 177).

44 Cf. Mundal 1974, 123. The motif itself is ancient, as the reference to Michael in the Hebrew Apocrypha proves (see n. 11 above).

namely the final battle between good and evil, is comparable to that of *Þiðrandi þáttr*, which is concerned with Christianity overcoming heathendom, and in this sense the *þáttr* may present a forerunner to the motif employed in *Draumkvæde*.

Draumkvæde refers overtly to St Michael and *Michaels saga* ch. 3 implies a connection between the archangel and the vision of demonic and angelic forces by including it in the saga about him. *Þiðrandi þáttr* makes no direct link to Michael but the resemblances are so strong, and the archangel enters the stage so soon after Þiðrandi's death, that it only seems reasonable to consider him a very important, although understated, part of the backdrop to the *þáttr*.

Þiðrandi þáttr is the only version of the story where the black forces kill the protagonist; in all other cases, the white forces are victorious.⁴⁵ This is no coincidence since the tale serves as a piece of Christian propaganda, a cautionary tale about the tragic loss of a "noble heathen" which could easily have been avoided had he been Christian in name and not merely in spirit (cf. Kaplan 2000, 385). The strongly moralistic overtones cannot be disregarded.

Ljótur

A different story about Hallur losing a son occurs in *Njáls saga* ch. 145 where it is intertwined with descriptions of attempts to reach a settlement following the burning of Njáll and his sons, and the fighting that breaks out at the Alþingi in connection with this (ÍF 12, 402–415). Here, Hallur also loses his favourite son — not Þiðrandi but Ljótur, and in a rather different context — not before but after his (and Iceland's) conversion. It is noteworthy that this story, as found in *Njáls saga*, betrays no knowledge of Þiðrandi and does not mention him at all, just as the story about Þiðrandi in *Óláfs saga* does not mention Ljótur at all.⁴⁶ The battle at the Alþingi took place in 1012 (Cochrane 2010, 218), some thirteen or fourteen years after the death of Þiðrandi.

⁴⁵ It is at least the only version known to me at present that features such a victory.

⁴⁶ *Njáls saga* ch. 96 lists the sons of Síðu-Hallur and mentions both Ljótur and Þiðrandi, adding about the latter: *þann er sagt er, at disir vægi* (ÍF 12, 239), "whom, it is said, the *disir* killed" (CSI 3, 115), so the story involving Þiðrandi and the *disir* was known, although it is not recounted in *Njáls saga* itself.

At the Alþingi, Kári Sölmundarson seeks to avenge the burning of Njáll and his sons. Kári has two well-known and very prominent Christians on his side, Gissur hvíti and Hjalti Skeggjason — the two men who fought so vigorously for Christianity during the Icelandic *kristnitaka*. On the opposing side is Flosi Þórðarson and the sons of Sigfús with Hallur and his son Ljótur, who is said to be fifteen years old at this point. The situation is therefore not one of Christians against heathens; it is a more complex issue of men who are seen to be in the right against men who are seen to be in the wrong. Earlier in the saga, in ch. 115, it has been prophesied that Ljótur, who is Hallur's favourite son, will become the greatest and longest living chieftain in his family if he survives three visits to the Alþingi (normally a very peaceful event) (ÍF 12, 287).⁴⁷ But during this particular assembly, which is Ljótur's second, fighting breaks out between Kári and Flosi. Hallur and Ljótur intervene in the melee at which point a spear strikes and kills Ljótur but no one knows who threw it. Hallur helps separate the fighting forces and a truce is arranged for the duration of the Alþingi. It is never revealed who threw the spear. In the present discussion, this episode is noteworthy for two reasons: firstly, the rather mysterious manner of Ljótur's death and secondly, Hallur's reaction to his son's death.⁴⁸

The story of Ljótur's death appears to have been fairly well known.⁴⁹ Even so, it remains very much a marginal episode in *Njáls saga*, which makes little use of it in terms of drawing morals from or attaching symbolism to it, despite the fact that it is an episode that readily lends itself to symbolic interpretation, especially in a Christian context.⁵⁰ The intention

47 *Ljótur þotti bezt höfðinga efni austr þar; honum var þat spát, ef hann riði þrjú sumur til þings ok kæmi heill heim, at þá mundi hann verða mestr höfðingi sinna frænda ok ellstr; hann hafði þá riðið eitt sumar til þings, en nú atlaði hann annat* (ÍF 12, 287), "Ljótur was thought to be the most promising man in the east to be a chieftain, and it had been foretold that if he rode to the Thing for three summers and came home safe and sound, he would become the greatest chieftain in his family, as well as the longest lived. He had already ridden once to the Althing and now he was going for the second time" (CSI 3, 115).

48 I am grateful to Haki Antonsson for inspiration regarding a number of issues discussed below.

49 Ljótur is also mentioned in *Sturlunga saga*; in *Geirmundar þáttur Heljarskinns* ch. 7 (Jón Jóhannesson et al. 1946 1, 10), where he is said to have a daughter named Guðrún; and in *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar* (ÍF 11, 305), where the mention of him appears to depend on *Njáls saga*.

50 Had *Njáls saga* had an overtly hagiographical agenda or a greater focus on Ljótur or Hallur, this incident might well have been exploited more immediately.

here is, nonetheless, to present a symbolic interpretation of Ljótur's death that focuses as much on Hallur as it does on Ljótur himself.

As Cochrane (Cochrane 2010, 217) points out, there are potential parallels both between Ljótur and Christ (both are pierced by spears) and between Ljótur and Baldur (both are favourite sons and innocent victims killed in a place of sanctity) but neither of these is exploited in *Njáls saga*.⁵¹ More striking, however, are the parallels that emerge when the death of Ljótur is compared to that of Þiðrandi.

The battle at the Alþingi took place a mere dozen years after *kristnitaka*; it is therefore not at all unreasonable to interpret Ljótur's death against the background of heathen traditions which would still have been known by all Icelanders, and possibly still adhered to by some. If one recognises that heathendom still had a strong presence although supplanted by Christianity, one might be more sensitive to the heathen-Christian contrasts in the portrayal of Ljótur's death. In the context of the recently converted Iceland, the spear might very well have recalled the prominent heathen deity Óðinn, whose weapon was the spear and who was closely associated with warfare, fortune or misfortune in battle and also with human sacrifice. With this in mind, Ljótur's death could have been interpreted in such a way that Óðinn was making his powers felt by claiming a would-be Christian chieftain for himself — not unlike the way in which the black *dísir* claim Þiðrandi — thereby showing that Óðinn remained a force to be reckoned with and was capable of taking what he regarded as his share.⁵² Considering that Hallur loses his first favourite son, Þiðrandi, in such a way that, had he been Christian, he might well have become a saint, Ljótur deserves attention since he is the second favourite son of Hallur to die in circumstances that provide the potential for sanctity, albeit unexploited in both cases. Indeed, with reference to Þiðrandi, Kaplan (2000, 385) says: "Such persons are saints when they have heard about Christianity"

51 Cochrane furthermore draws a parallel between the blindness of Baldur's killer, Höður, in the mythological narrative and the anonymity of Ljótur's killer in the saga narrative (2010, 217).

52 The mysterious spear apparently hurled by nobody also recalls a number of Christian martyrs, again opening up possible symbolic perspectives on Ljótur. One parallel, for example, is the death of St Canute who, according to Saxo in *Gesta Danorum* 11,14,15 (Friis-Jensen 2005, 58–59), was killed in 1086 by a spear flung through a window into St Alban's Church in Odense.

— which Ljótur definitely has. It is, at any rate, somewhat hard to believe that this otherwise little-mentioned son of Síðu-Hallur comes to such a martyr-like end entirely by coincidence.

The second interesting aspect of Ljótur's story is Hallur's reaction to his son's death. The day after, Hallur pleads eloquently and persuasively for settlement, saying that he is prepared to claim no compensation for Ljótur and yet give pledges of peace in order to find a peaceful solution. The emotional cost of the unhappy situation in which Hallur suddenly finds himself, although it is not described explicitly, should not be underestimated; it is a remarkable trait of his that he is able to react with such calm when subjected to so distressing a turn of events. Arguably, this reaction is comparable to his decision to convert which followed relatively soon after Þiðrandi's death. This kind of level-headed and restrained conduct was admired by heathens and Christians alike and cannot be considered a "Christian reaction" as such but Hallur's emphasis on maintaining peace as well as his description of himself as *litilmenni*, "no great hero" (ÍF 12, 408; CSI 3, 194) nonetheless highlights his Christian allegiances.⁵³ After Hallur has forgone his claim to compensation in this way, everyone at the Alþingi contributes something to compensate him anyway. What he eventually receives amounts to quadruple compensation (ÍF 12, 414).

In *Njáls saga*, Hallur is held up as a good example of someone who seeks peace and is willing to give up his personal claims for something for the sake of the greater community. It is not necessarily his Christian beliefs that inspire him to do this but it is certainly behaviour that is in accordance with Christian morals. The reward he receives speaks for itself: because he was willing to forgo compensation, he was compensated four times as much as anyone else. In a very practical sense then, the story emphasizes how much one can gain by "weighing good more heavily than evil", or, in this case, peace more than revenge; in that sense, Hallur may be said to act in a manner similar to St Michael.

⁵³ See n. 27 above.

Conclusions

The stories about Þiðrandi and Ljótur are rather similar in nature although they serve different functions. In *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, Þiðrandi's death in ch. 215 immediately precedes his father's conversion in ch. 216; the fact that both these narratives involve St Michael so closely — *Þiðranda þáttr* by subtly exploiting imagery from legendary material pertaining to Michael; Hallur's conversion by overtly bringing in detailed descriptions of St Michael — serves to underline the very close links between these two events. Furthermore, the resemblance between the biblical reference to Michael disputing with the Devil over the body of Moses in *Jude* 9 and the black *disir* claiming a "noble heathen" because the white *disir* are "not yet strong enough" is intriguing. The symbolic dimensions here are unlikely to have been lost on a fourteenth-century audience and, despite its superficially heathen guise, *Þiðranda þáttr* is probably best regarded as a thoroughly Christian tale whose version of heathendom must be treated with some caution.

In *Njáls saga*, the equally tragic death of Ljótur also involves heathen references: the mysterious spear that kills the favourite son in a place of sanctity recalls Óðinn, whose weapon was the spear, and whose son Baldur was killed in arguably parallel circumstances. This perspective on the death of Ljótur brings out a close correspondence between this tale and that of Þiðrandi: both of their lives are claimed by heathen beings on the verge of retreat on account of Christianity, or having been marginalised by the new religion.

Given the very strong links to Michael both in *Þiðranda þáttr* and in three of the four narratives that describe Hallur's conversion, it is not improbable that there should be yet another such link to the archangel in Hallur's reaction to Ljótur's death. Whereas the death of Þiðrandi may be said to open Hallur's eyes to the merits of Christian ways (by spelling out that, if nothing else, his favourite son would still have been alive had he only been a Christian), the death of Ljótur can be seen to function as a confirmation of Hallur's already strong Christian faith (by presenting him as following the example of his *fylgjuengill* Michael, who allows good to weigh more heavily than evil). In both cases, Hallur has, or acquires, close connections to St Michael: after Þiðrandi's death he realizes what a strong

force Michael represents and is convinced to take up Christianity; after Ljótur's death he may be said to act in a Michael-like manner by being such a perfect example of Christian virtues.

The fourteenth-century portrayals of Síðu-Hallur discussed here all emphasize details that may have their origins in Hallur's semi-heathen and semi-Christian contemporary reality but whose strong symbolic value, lurking just below the surface, should not be underestimated. The archangel Michael is never very far away.

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EFNISÁGRIP

Heilagur Mikael og Síðu-Hallssynir

Lykilorð: Þiðrandi Hallsson, Ljótur Hallsson, heilagur Mikael, Síðu-Hallur Þorsteinsson, dísir, *Draumkvædet*.

Í greininni er sjónum beint að sambandi Síðu-Halls Þorsteinssonar við Mikael erkiengil eins og tilurð þess er lýst í tveimur heimildum sem greina frá persónulegum trúskiptum hans. Mikael var vinsæll dýrðlingur í árdaga kristni á Norðurlöndum og því í sjálfu sér ekki óvænt að hann léki hlutverk í trúskiptum Halls. Þó er það sérstaklega eftirtektarvert að Mikael kemur einnig við dauðalýsingar tveggja sona Halls, Þiðranda og Ljóts, þótt óbeint sé. Frásögnin af dauða Þiðranda af völdum dísar í heiðni líkist mjög helgisögn í *Mikaels sögu*, biblíusögum tengdum honum og myndmáli í hinu síðskráða *Draumkvæde*, en frásögnin af dauða Ljóts í bardaga á alþingi 1012 á sér hliðstæðu í *Þiðranda þætti* sem kallar á samanburð. Í viðbrögðum Síðu-Halls við dauða sona sinna sést auk þess glögglega að honum hefur verið ætluð bæði skýr vitund um sérkenni heilaleika erkiengilsins og farsæld til að fylgja dæmum hans.

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