

TORFI H. TULINIUS

THE SELF AS OTHER

Iceland and Christian Europe in the Middle Ages

THE SOCIETY and culture of medieval Iceland have two characteristics that make them a very interesting and stimulating object of study for the historian or literary scholar. On the one hand, the society was original, especially in the way it was organized. On the other, its culture was very rich, at least when we consider the amount of texts that remain and were composed in this comparatively small society that evolved in a land far away from any other European country, literally at the periphery of Christian Europe.¹ However, for a long time scholars did not usually think about the culture of medieval Iceland in terms of its relationship to the rest of Christian Europe. On the contrary, for the country was considered to be a sort of repository. Up there in the far North, the original culture of the Germanic peoples – or at least of the Scandinavian or northern Germanic peoples – was cultivated and preserved in the isolation of the North Atlantic. Interestingly enough, this point of view on Iceland's medieval culture is not the Icelandic one originally. Even though some Icelanders have adopted it, it is more correct to say that it is the point of view of the continental European, that is, of someone at the centre who is looking at the periphery.

It is not necessary to view medieval Iceland in this way. And in fact, over the last half a century at least, a considerable number of scholars have established new ways of considering the country's relationship to the rest of Christian Europe in the medieval period. Progressively over the years, a

¹ An attempt at comparative quantification has been made by Gunnar Karlsson in his *Goðamening. Staða og hlutverk hinna fornu goðorðsmanna* (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 2004), 423–434. When compared to what is left of medieval texts from all other Scandinavian countries, the difference is staggering. For a description of the large Icelandic corpus, see for example Kurt Schier, *Sagaliteratur* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1970).

new and better understanding has been emerging of the connections between the exceptional wealth of Iceland's medieval literature and its participation in the culture of the Medieval West. These connections can be expressed in terms of otherness and integration as well as in terms of identity formation. The Icelanders were aware that their pagan heritage was different. However, they integrated this otherness into an image of themselves as a Christian people that they constructed through their literary production.

Before elaborating on this, let us look at how the older conception may have originated.² Many factors of the history of Europe explain how we have perceived the mystery of Iceland's cultural 'miracle' over the last two hundred years or so. One of them may be that we do not measure sufficiently the length of time and the degree of historical change that has occurred since this Icelandic miracle took place. Eight centuries ago, Europe was an area where states were weak but the Church was both unified and comparatively strong as an organisation. Though it might be said that there is a parallel in the direction in which Europe is evolving today, with the weakening of states and the strengthening of a common institution, the European Union, the period in between was quite different. Indeed, in the period separating the Middle Ages and our era, states grew stronger, as did the idea of nationhood. In addition, the Reformation created a cultural divide across Europe. We have every reason to believe that both these factors have distorted our perceptions of Northern Europe and its medieval culture, as we will see in greater detail shortly.

Another explanation is that when scholars started to think about Medieval Iceland in the 18th and 19th centuries, they perceived it in the following terms: Iceland was the repository of a culture common to all the Nordic – or even Germanic – peoples. It was maintained and preserved in Iceland, unadulterated by influence from southern Europe. We have here a

² For a recent overview of the history of the reception of medieval Icelandic culture and literature over the last centuries, see Andrew Wawn's and Jón Karl Helgason's contributions to the *Companion to Old-Norse Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 64–81 and 320–337. See also Margaret Clunies Ross's cogent remarks in her "Medieval Iceland and the European Middle Ages," *International Scandinavian and Medieval Studies in Memory of Gerd Wolfgang Weber*, ed. by M. Dallapiazza, O. Hansen, P. Meulengracht-Sørensen and Y. S. Bonnetain (Trieste: Edizioni Parnaso, 2000), 111–120; *The Manuscripts of Iceland*, ed. by Gisli Sigurðsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík: Árni Magnússon Institute, 2004), 101–169.

certain way of thinking which is very outdated but is, however, still quite persistent among the general public, if not among scholars. It is characterised by the use of the concepts of purity and influence. They can be expressed by the following propositions: “the culture of medieval Iceland is the purest conserved manifestation of Germanic culture” and “it is not yet under the influence of Christian European culture with its basis in Latinity.”

The reason for this persistence is linked to a very strong desire in several countries of Northern Europe at certain times in their respective histories for an identity which was distinct from the rest of European culture. That is why medieval Icelandic studies flourished in Germany, England and Scandinavia – and finally in Iceland itself, each of these scholarly traditions giving the study of medieval Icelandic culture its special twist, linked to the ideological purposes it was meant to serve.³

Let us take one example, that of the so-called “Icelandic school” in saga studies. This school evolved among Icelandic scholars in the first half of the 20th century, a period in which the country was progressively gaining its independence from Denmark. Scholars such as Björn M. Ólsen, Sigurður Nordal and Einar Ól. Sveinsson were eminent representatives of this approach to the sagas. They emphasized the originality of Icelandic culture, i.e. the fact that – though Germanic and Scandinavian in its origins – it was also the original creation of the people living in Iceland at the time.⁴

The rise of the Icelandic school was of great cultural significance for the people of Iceland while they were taking their last steps on the road to independence. It also opened the way for a re-examination of the relationship between its medieval culture and what was going on in the rest of Europe at the same time. By viewing the society of 13th-century Iceland as the centre of production of this culture, it opened up the possibility of

³ For Germany and Britain, see among others Klaus von See, *Barbar, Germane, Arier : Die Suche nach der Identität der Deutschen* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1994) and Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000). For the Scandinavian countries, see *The Waking of Angantyr: the Scandinavian past in European culture*, ed. E. Roesdahl and P. Meulengracht-Sørensen (Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 1996).

⁴ Jesse L. Byock, „Þjóðernishygga nútímans og Íslendingasögurnar,“ *Tímarit Máls og menningar* (1993:1): 36–50. The best recent representative of the Icelandic school’s view of Icelandic literary history can be seen in Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas. Iceland’s Medieval Literature*, tr. P. Foote (Reykjavik: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1988).

looking at how its actors had access to material from other cultures. Indeed, many things have been uncovered by the last two or three generations of scholars that indicate that the image of Iceland as the repository of an ancient Germanic culture, unadulterated by influence from the South, does not hold up to scrutiny. It is quite sufficient merely to read through the great amount of texts which have been left to us from the period in order to discover evidence of the very close links between Iceland and the rest of Christian Europe in every field.

The Christianization of Iceland

If we begin by considering the field of religion, it is an inescapable fact that Iceland became part of the Catholic Church when the leaders of the country decided to convert to Christianity at the Alþing, or Parliament, of the year 1000. It stayed Catholic until the Reformation in 1550. Throughout the period in which all the literature was created, therefore, Iceland was a Christian country.

The Conversion had an enormous impact on Iceland. This impact was not only immediate but shaped the development of the society for years to come. An important factor in this development was the need to educate clerics. Though the first priests came from abroad, this could not be a permanent situation. It was necessary to train young Icelanders for the priesthood. Many of those chosen appear to have belonged to the upper echelons of society and within two generations, there seems to have developed quite a large group of educated Icelanders from the dominant classes who were ready to take control of and administer the new Church of Iceland. There is no reason to believe that these local clerics were any less educated than their counterparts elsewhere in Europe, though usually members of the higher clergy in Iceland had to travel abroad to study. What is important is that their training involved studying Latin and therefore gaining access to the world of clerical learning. There is overwhelming evidence that this knowledge was quite widespread in Iceland, at least from the late 11th century onwards.⁵ It is safe to assume that access to a body of knowledge com-

⁵ For an overview of this see for example Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar íslenskra sagnaritara á miðöldum* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1988), 15–43.

mon to all of Christian Europe did not remain the sole possession of Icelandic clerics but was disseminated to other social groups, especially to the lay chieftain class.⁶

One of the reasons for this is that many of the clerics belonged to this latter class. Indeed, the Icelandic Church of the 11th and 12th centuries has been called a “goðakirkja” by scholars wishing to highlight the fact that the most powerful members of the clergy belonged to families of lay chieftains (sing. *goði*, plur. *goðar*).⁷ Many clerics continued to exercise their secular powers despite their ordination until the late 12th century when this was forbidden by the archbishop of Trondheim, whose province encompassed Norway, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, the Orkneys, the Hebrides and the Isle of Man. During the first two centuries of Christianity in Iceland, one could say that the Church and the lay chieftains formed a joint dominant class which did not begin to separate until the late 12th century or even the middle of the 13th century. The consequence was an unwillingness on the part of the Icelandic Church to implement some of the policies of Rome, especially if they went against the interests of the lay chieftains. Even though the lay chieftains showed, in their culture, an interest for pre-Christian times and the pagan religion, this does not mean that they did not also use what they needed from clerical culture.

Another reason is that the lay chieftains were themselves in need of access to at least some aspects of the learning of the Church. One example is the practice of law. Though Icelandic law from the Free State period (i.e. before 1262) has roots in an important and probably ancient Germanic legal tradition, it also shows evidence of learning from continental Europe. Moreover, during both the 12th and 13th centuries, it is known to have incorporated important changes stemming directly from changes in canon law.⁸ These changes were implemented by lay chieftains since they had control over the legislative assembly or *Alþingi*.

A fine example of a lay chieftain who manifestly acquired knowledge

⁶ See Margaret Clunies Ross's contribution to this volume.

⁷ See Gunnar Karlsson, *Goðamemning*, 411–428.

⁸ See Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, „Grágás og Digesta Iustiniani,“ *Sjöttiu ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni*, 2 vols. (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1977), 720–732, Torfi H. Tulinius, „Guðs lög í ævi og verkum Snorra Sturlusonar,“ *Ný Saga. Tímarit Sögufélags* 8 (1996): 31–40, and Sigurður Lindal, „Um þekkingu Íslendinga á rómverskum og kanónískum rétti frá 12. öld til miðrar 16. aldar,“ *Úlflyótur* 50:1 (1997): 247–273.

from southern Europe is the magnate from the Westfjords, Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson. The saga which tells his biography emphasises his travels to France and Spain. It also dwells at length on his abilities as a physician, describing in detail some of his methods of curing ailing individuals. *Hrafn's saga* even describes how its protagonist removes a kidney stone which had been obstructing the urethra of one of his neighbours. Scholars have shown that the medical acts that Hrafn is said to have accomplished are quite in keeping with what was being taught in the new schools of medicine in 12th-century Europe.⁹ As for the law, this type of knowledge would have been very useful to the lay chieftain, enabling him to gain support from his underlings who would be indebted to him for medical services rendered, in the same way that they depended on his ability to uphold their rights in lawsuits.

If clerical learning was useful, the ethics and morals of the Church were also exercising their sway over the hearts and minds of medieval Icelanders and by the time the sagas were written, they had been Christian for four to six generations. Even though some traces of paganism probably survived marginally, it is not likely that the Christian ethic was just a superficial veneer. In fact, the sources show evidence of deeply Christian behaviour among the people of Iceland in the 12th and 13th centuries, both clerics and laymen. There is no reason to believe that by the year 1200 the behaviour or minds of Icelanders were any less (or more) shaped by Christianity than in other parts of Europe.¹⁰

What may interfere with our perception of this deeply Christian mentality is that the best known Icelandic texts from the period are the sagas of Icelanders. Written in the 13th century (at least most of the important ones), they tell of the ancestors who settled the country at the end of the ninth century and their descendants until the country was converted to Christianity in the year 1000. Each and every one is a sort of history of the establishment of the society, not only as a Christian one, but also about how political power was acquired through settlement and noble ancestry. One could say that one of the roles of these sagas was to establish through

⁹ See Guðrún P. Helgadóttir, ed, *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), xciii–cviii and 4–6.

¹⁰ For an exhaustive study of what the sources tell us about religious life in Iceland during this period, see Régis Boyer, *La vie religieuse en Islande 1116–1264. D'après la Sturlunga saga et les sagas des évêques* (Paris: Fondation Singer-Polignac, 1979).

the writing of history an identity for 13th-century Icelanders.¹¹ Though they have been shown to be shaped by Christian ethics, the world they portray is not only a pagan one; it is also one which celebrates a heroic ethos that seems to us in contradiction with a Christian world-view. However, I believe that this is an anachronistic misinterpretation and that one must conceive of these sagas as written by and for the lay chieftains and the people surrounding them. These people were Christian but also had to defend themselves or attack others in the recurrent power struggles of the period. Therefore, they had to strike a balance between their Christian morals and a more aggressive aristocratic ethic. Indeed, quite a few of these sagas can be read as working through the contradictions and conundrums of these two types of ethical standards that compete for the souls and minds of the lay chieftain class. The opposition between paganism and Christianity has nothing to do with this. Recently, Margaret Clunies Ross has proposed the term of 'Christian secularity', to characterize the culture of the social group which gave us the sagas.¹²

In an important book, Orri Vésteinsson gives us a careful study of "The Christianization of Iceland".¹³ What is perhaps the most interesting result of his work is that he shows how the history of the Icelandic Church and the evolution of society in the first two centuries of Christianity in the country were inextricably related. The Church shaped the society and evolved with it, as the society evolved either to accommodate or to react to the Church's new demands upon society. Moreover, this evolution can be shown to follow more or less the same lines as those by which Church and society evolved elsewhere in Europe during the same period.¹⁴

¹¹ For a more elaborate presentation of these ideas see my "The Matter of the North. Fiction and uncertain identities in 13th century Iceland," *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. M. Clunies Ross. Cambridge studies in medieval literature 42 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 242–265.

¹² Margaret Clunies Ross, "Medieval Iceland and the European Middle Ages," p. 113.

¹³ Orri Vésteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland. Priests, Power and Social Change 1000–1300* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁴ Richard W. Southern, *Western society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (London: Penguin, 1970).

Skaldic poetry, sagas and continental literature

By the 13th century, Christianity had therefore shaped the lives of medieval Icelanders in a very deep way on all levels. In this, they were participants in the common “civilisation of the medieval West”.¹⁵ The consequences for their cultural production were wide-ranging. Mention has already been made of the subtle dialectic between religious morals and warrior ethics in the sagas of Icelanders. In what follows, I will present the results of recent studies which show how the contact with Europe was decisive in fostering and shaping the development of Icelandic literature in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

In her 2001 book, *Tools of Literacy*, Guðrún Nordal undertakes to show that what can be conceived of as the most ancient and least Christian of Icelandic cultural practices in the 13th century is actually heavily influenced by Latin learning.¹⁶ I am referring here to skaldic poetry, probably the most hermetic type of ancient Germanic poetry, characterized by complex metrics and an elaborate system of poetic speech based on the “kenning”.¹⁷ The “kenningar” very often refer to the ancient pagan myths and are a good example of intertextuality, since the skaldic poets used their audience’s knowledge of myth to convey their message. Skaldic poetry was practised in pagan times but seems to have been adapted to Christian purposes by court poets of the missionary kings of Norway. These poems are believed to have been memorized and transmitted more or less unchanged from one generation to another until they were written down in the late 12th or 13th century.¹⁸

¹⁵ I have, of course, Jacques Le Goff’s great book in mind here, *La Civilisation de l’Occident médiéval* (Paris: Arthaud, 1964). English translation: *Medieval civilization, 400–1500*, transl. by Julia Barrow (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

¹⁶ Guðrún Nordal, *Tools of Literacy. The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

¹⁷ A useful presentation of skaldic poetry is Roberta Frank’s *Old Norse Court Poetry: the Dróttkvætt Stanza* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, *Islandica* 42, 1978).

¹⁸ This is actually a debated subject within the field of medieval Icelandic studies. See Bjarni Einarsson’s *Skáldasögur. Um uppruna og eðli ástarskáldsagnanna fornu* (Reykjavík: Menningarsjóður, 1961). See also Theodore M. Andersson’s response “Skalds and Troubadours,” *Mediaeval Scandinavia* (1969): 7–41. The debate has gone on since then, see for example Alison Finlay, “Skald Sagas in their literary context 3: the love triangle theme,” *Skaldsagas. text, vocation and desire in the Icelandic Sagas of poets*, ed. Russell Poole (Berlin: Gruyter, 2000), 232–271.

But original skaldic poetry continued to be composed by poets of the 12th and 13th centuries and the significant contribution to be found in Nordal's book is a meticulous study of how the practice, transmission and study of this poetry was shaped and transformed by an intimate knowledge of grammar, versification and rhetoric, as these disciplines were taught in cathedral schools and universities all over Christian Europe. In this, she brings to light an interesting dynamic that one also sees evidence for in other aspects of Icelandic medieval culture: structures, ideas, and practices current elsewhere in Western Christendom being borrowed and put to use by the dominant groups within Icelandic society (laymen and clerics) for specific cultural practices and for the creation of a distinct local culture on which this society based its identity.

Another Icelandic scholar, Ármann Jakobsson, has written two books in recent years in which he considers another cultural product of medieval Iceland, the sagas of kings or royal biographies, in the context of the common culture of Europe in the High Middle Ages.¹⁹ Indeed, the earliest prose narratives that we call sagas are biographies of kings of Norway and Denmark which date from the second half of the 12th century. The interaction between oral story-telling and learned models of history writing is particularly interesting to study within this genre. A series of texts have been preserved which can be used to show how a form which in its beginning adhered to clerical conventions for writing history evolved into lively and complex biographical narratives of the lives and times of past kings. The kings' sagas or *konungasögur* bloomed fully as a genre in the first half of the 13th century, notably in Snorri Sturluson's famous *Heimskringla*, a history of the kings of Norway from mythological times to the second third of the 12th century. Ármann Jakobsson also contends that a slightly earlier kings' saga, called *Morkinskinna*, is equally sophisticated. He has written a doctoral dissertation devoted to the saga in which he shows that in many ways, its aesthetics betray knowledge and appreciation of developments in the art of narrative in southern Europe.²⁰ By so doing, he deep-

¹⁹ Ármann Jakobsson, *Í leit að konungi. Konungsmynd íslenskra konungasagna* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1997) and *Staður í nýjum heimi. Konungasagan Morkinskinna* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2002). A briefer presentation of his position can be found in "Royal biography," his contribution to the already cited Blackwell *Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, 388–402.

²⁰ See Ármann Jakobsson, *Staður í nýjum heimi*, 61–107.

ens and makes more complex the evolutionary history of the genre. As has already been said, *Morkinskinna* is believed to have been composed earlier than *Heimskringla* and to have influenced it considerably. If this is true it means not only that clerical techniques and traditional story-telling, but also literary fashions from the other European countries, formed the crucible in which the kings' sagas were shaped.

This is not surprising in a period when the Norwegian kingship was being strengthened and endeavoured to model itself on the more established monarchies in France and England. Indeed, at the same time as the composition of *konungasögur* was flourishing in Iceland and to a lesser degree in Norway, there seems to have been great interest in the literature of these same countries at the Norwegian court. From the 1220s (and maybe earlier), a considerable number of literary works seem to have been translated from French to Norse.²¹ The translations travelled to Iceland and quite a few autochthonous sagas can be shown to have borrowed motifs, situations, even themes from the *riddarasögur*.

It is tempting to consider the totality of the literary and cultural production of medieval Iceland as participating more or less directly in the courtly culture that was evolving in Norway and which seems to have fascinated Icelanders, especially the chieftains, many of whom were, by the 13th century, members of the Norwegian court. Not only did these chieftains spend time at the court of the king of Norway, but they seem also to have endeavoured to import courtly practices to Iceland, an indication that they viewed themselves as aristocrats in the same way as the nobility of Europe.²²

The amazing development of literature in Iceland during the same period is in many ways linked to the rise of a courtly culture in the area. It has been argued that kings' sagas such as *Heimskringla* and *Morkinskinna* were written for the court, not only to honour the ancestors of the rulers but also as narratives of how to behave at court and on the risks and bene-

²¹ The most recent presentation of this translated literature is by Jürg Glauser, "Romance (Translated *riddarasögur*)," *Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, 371–387.

²² That this is not a new observation can be seen from Einar Ól. Sveinsson's remarks on courtly influence on Icelandic chieftains in the thirteenth century, see *The Age of the Sturlungs*, p. 35–42.

fits of serving kings.²³ Other saga forms also participate in this. In my 1995 book *La « Matière du Nord »* I write about legendary sagas, which are prose narratives often based on older eddic lays that sing the adventures of heroes of the very distant Nordic past. The thesis I defend there is that in the retelling (and often re-invention) of these tales, the authors were working through contradictions and constraints that were all related to the evolution of Icelandic society towards models which were dominant in southern Europe.²⁴ In order to create an identity for themselves as members of the Icelandic chieftain class – the social group that was in a position to produce literature – they exploited material they perceived as belonging to their past much in the way French and English *trouvères* had used the three “matières”, that of Rome (*romans antiques*), France (*chansons de geste*) and Bretagne (*romans courtois*).

Historical events, social change and cultural production all show that Icelandic society and culture were evolving along the same lines as other societies and cultures during the same period. Once this is established, we are in a position to ask why the literature of medieval Iceland is, despite this, so intensely original.

Integrating the Other

In a recent monograph on one of the most important of the sagas of Icelanders, *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, I attempt to interpret the saga by putting it into the context of the first half of the 13th century when it is believed to have been composed.²⁵ The saga tells us of several generations of the same family. Originally from Norway, they flee to Iceland at the end of the 9th century because King Harald Finehair’s unification of the country leads to a conflict in which he takes the life of Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson, the most valiant member of his generation of the family. Þórólfr’s younger brother, Skalla-Grímr, settles the area of Borgarfjörður in western Iceland

²³ Ármann Jakobsson, *Staður í nýjum heimi*, 285–287.

²⁴ Torfi H. Tulinius, *La « Matière du Nord ». Sagas légendaires et fiction dans la littérature islandaise en prose du XIIIe siècle* (Paris: Presses de l’Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1995). English translation: *The Matter of the North. The Rise of Literary Fiction in 13th century Iceland*, transl. Randi C. Eldevik (Odense: Odense University Press, 2002).

²⁵ Torfi H. Tulinius, *Skáldið í skrifinni* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2004).

and one of his sons, Egill, is the main protagonist of the saga. Born a pagan, Egill is not only a fierce warrior, avid for wealth and jealous of his power, he is also one of the greatest practitioners ever of skaldic poetry. He will kill a man in a most savage way and shortly afterwards, declaim a poetic strophe that is remarkably complex and finely wrought.

Of course, the Egill of the saga is a fictional character, even though a real person may have existed with this name. It might therefore be interesting, in light of the subject of this paper, to examine how the author goes about telling his story and to try to understand the meaning he gives it. When studied carefully, it becomes clear that the saga is very elaborately composed. It is divided into two parts where one is exactly twice as long as the other. In addition, episodes and themes tend to repeat themselves with variations in a very regular way. Finally, the plot is both intricate and complex, doubling a surface conflict with the Norwegian royal family with a more subterranean one, involving Egill, his father and brother.

To this structural refinement, the author also brings a highly sophisticated use of intertextuality. As we have already seen, the skaldic kenning is partly based on intertextual play, since it is necessary to know the pagan myths in order to understand some of them. In his narrative, the author of *Egils saga* also refers covertly to pagan myths in different ways, for example through nicknames of his characters or by transposing mythic situations into the reality he is creating with his story. In this way he suggests a meaning to his narrative: by naming a character Hǫðr, for example, i.e. the blind god who killed his brother Baldr, the author thereby sounds the theme of fratricide, which is one of the undercurrents in the saga.²⁶

One of the ways in which skaldic poetry was adapted after the Conversion was by using references to Christian learning in the poems composed for religious purposes. An example of this can also be found in one of the poems ascribed to Egill in the saga, though it does not present itself as a religious poem. In the fifth strophe of *Sonatorrek* ("On the difficulty of avenging one's sons"), Egill develops an extended metaphor for praise poetry: *þat berk úr orðhofi mǫrðar timbr máli laufgat* ("I carry out of the word-temple the timber of praise which has been made to sprout leaves by the action of language"). This *nýgerving*, i.e., an extended congruent metaphor based on a series of periphrases or kennings, also echoes the follow-

²⁶ Torfi H. Tulinius, *Skáldið í skriftinni*, 53–116.

ing tale from the Bible. The twelve tribes of Israel are in the desert squabbling about who should become high priest. Moses asks Yahweh what to do, and Yahweh tells Moses to make a wooden rod for each of the tribes:

And Moses laid up the rods before the Lord in the tabernacle of witness, and, behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded, and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds. And Moses brought out all the rods from before the Lord unto all the children of Israel: and they looked, and took every man his rod (Numbers 17: 8–9).

Egill's extended metaphor has in common with the biblical tale that cut wood is brought out of a temple and has blossomed. In the Bible it is by the action of the Holy Spirit, in the poem it is through the inspiration of the poet. The allusion to the Bible suggests a spiritual dimension to the art of the poet. It is in a way divinely inspired.²⁷

This adds one more religious aspect to the portrait of Egill, which is also, as most representations of the past in Icelandic medieval literature, informed by an Augustinian vision of history as a story of fall and redemption. God establishes covenants with humanity at different times: with Abraham, Moses and then in the Incarnation of God as man in Jesus Christ. When this Christian historical schema is transposed to Nordic history, it is seen to parallel Biblical history. The pagan past of the North is part of mankind's march towards redemption, the Conversion being parallel to the Incarnation. This was very important for the evolution of Icelandic culture since it allowed the construction of a positive image of pagan ancestors. Despite the fact that they had not had access to the Revelation, they were nevertheless noble heathens and even eligible for being saved at the end of time.²⁸ One consequence of this was the possibil-

²⁷ For a more detailed exposition of the implications of this biblical material in *Sonatorrek* for our understanding of the poem, see my „The Conversion of *Sonatorrek*,” *Analecta Septentrionalia. Beiträge zur nordgermanischen Kultur- und Literaturgeschichte*, Ed. W. Heizmann, K. Bödl and H. Beck (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde, Ergänzungsbände 65, 2009), 698–711.

²⁸ For a more detailed presentation of the impact of Augustinian history on the construction of a pagan past in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, see Gerd W. Weber, „Intellegere historiam. Typological perspectives of Nordic prehistory (in Snorri, Saxo, Widukind and

ity of integrating aspects of the pagan culture, for example skaldic poetry, into the contemporary Christian secular culture.

Conversion is one of the important though hidden themes of *Egils saga*. It is possible to understand the history of the saga's main character as one of conversion in the widest sense of that term in medieval times.²⁹ Egill receives the "prima signatio" when serving the Christian king of England, i.e. he submits to a rite that is equivalent to the shorter baptism that a layperson can give to newborns in the absence of a priest. This does not mean that he converts; he is, however, brought into the orbit of Christianity and becomes eligible for salvation.³⁰

But Egill is also a sinner, as the saga suggests. By suggesting parallels between his story and those of Cain and Abel, Judas, and most significantly that of King David, especially David's affair with Bathsheba and its consequences, the saga offers itself to be read as the story of the conversion of Egill's soul, from savage Viking to a poet of pre-Christian times capable of expressing his inner life in terms close to Christianity. Though the saga probably makes many complex references to events and persons in 13th-century Iceland, as I have tried to show in my book, one can also read it as a story of the conversion of the old pagan poetry, as a pendant in many ways to *Heimskringla*, authorizing the kings' sagas' use of this poetry as a source of knowledge about the distant past. The account of what is done with Egill's bones after his death in the last chapter of the saga is symbolic of this. He dies before Iceland has been converted. Therefore, his remains are buried in a mound. Shortly after the advent of Christianity, Egill's niece has Egill's bones taken out of the mound and buried under the altar of a Church that her husband has built on their estate. When a learned priest finds these bones several generations later, he removes them from under the altar and has them buried on the outskirts of the cemetery, which is appropriate for those who are only prime-signed. The pagan poet's relationship to Christianity is thus being defined, as well as the proper

others)," *Tradition og historieskrivning. Kilderne til Nordens ældste historie*, ed. by Kirsten Hastrup and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen. Acta Jutlandica LXIII:2. Humanistisk Serie 61 (Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 1987), 95–141.

²⁹ For a wide-ranging discussion of this theme, see Jean-Claude Schmitt, *La Conversion d'Hermann le Juif. Autobiographie, histoire et fiction* (Paris: Seuil, Librairie du XXIe siècle, 2002).

³⁰ Torfi H. Tulinius, *Skáldið í skriftinni*, 97–105.

Christian attitude to his poetry: the pagan Other is accepted, albeit with necessary precautions.³¹

Integrating the Other is a major characteristic of European culture. One could even say that it is based upon this integration, since Christianity, which is the dominant ideology of the Medieval West, is founded on a fusion of Jewish religion and Greco-Roman culture. One could continue to say that the vibrant culture of laymen throughout the countries of Western Europe is a consequence of the integration of the Celtic and/or Germanic cultural heritages into the mainstream. The best example of this is the importance of the Celtic “*matière de Bretagne*” in the development of medieval literature. The way Icelanders integrated their pagan heritage while at the same time participating in producing a culture common to all Christian countries in the West is quite in line with this tendency; this is why the concepts of purity and influence are not useful to understanding Iceland’s relationship to Southern Europe in the Middle Ages. I would prefer a more dynamic concept, that of culture as something which is continually reinventing itself, both in its relationship to the cultures of others but also in relationship to itself as other. Medieval Icelanders constructed their own identity and culture by viewing their pagan past as other but also by integrating this particular otherness of their past into the Christian secular culture of their own time.

REFERENCES

- Andersson, Theodore M. “Skalds and Troubadours.” *Mediaeval Scandinavia* (1969): 7–41.
- Ármann Jakobsson. *Í leit að konungi. Konungsmynd íslenskra konungasagna*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1997.
- Ármann Jakobsson. “Royal biography.” *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rory McTurk. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, 388–402.
- Ármann Jakobsson. *Staður í nýjum heimi. Konungasagan Morkinskinna*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2002.

³¹ For a discussion of Egill’s theological status, see Torfi H. Tulinius, “Le statut théologique d’Egill Skalla-Grímsson,” *Hugr. Mélanges d’histoire, de littérature et de mythologie offerts à Régis Boyer pour son 65e anniversaire* (Paris: Presses de l’Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1997), 279–88.

- Bjarni Einarsson. *Skáldasögur. Um uppruna og eðli ástaskáldsagnanna fornu*. Reykjavík: Menningarsjóður, 1961.
- Boyer, Régis. *La vie religieuse en Islande 1116–1264. D'après la Sturlunga saga et les sagas des évêques*. Paris: Fondation Singer-Polignac, 1979.
- Byock, Jesse L. „Þjóðernishygja nútímans og Íslendingasögurnar.“ *Tímarit Máls og menningar* (1993:1): 36–50.
- Clunies Ross, Margaret. “Medieval Iceland and the European Middle Ages.” *International Scandinavian and Medieval Studies in Memory of Gerd Wolfgang Weber*, ed. M. Dallapiazza, O. Hansen, P. Meulengracht-Sørensen and Y. S. Bonnetain. Trieste: Edizioni Parnaso, 2000, 111–120.
- Clunies Ross, Margaret. “Medieval Icelandic Textual Culture.” *Gripla XX* (2009): 163–181.
- Einar Ól. Sveinsson. *The Age of the Sturlungs. Icelandic Civilization in the Thirteenth Century*. Islandica 36. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1953.
- Finlay, Alison. “Skald Sagas in their literary context 3: the love triangle theme.” *Skaldsagas. text, vocation and desire in the Icelandic Sagas of poets*, ed. Russell Poole. Berlin: Gruyter, 2000, 232–271.
- Frank, Roberta. *Old Norse court poetry: the Dróttkvætt Stanza*. Islandica 42. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978.
- Glauser, Jürg. “Romance (Translated *riddarasögur*).” *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* ed. by Rory McTurk. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, 371–387.
- Guðrún Nordal. *Tools of Literacy. The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001.
- Gunnar Karlsson. *Goðamenning. Staða og blutverk hinna fornu goðordsmanna*. Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 2004.
- Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, ed. Guðrún P. Helgadóttir. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987.
- Jón Karl Helgason. “Continuity? The Icelandic Sagas in Post-Medieval Times.” *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rory McTurk. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, 320–337.
- Jónas Kristjánsson. *Eddas and Sagas. Iceland's Medieval Literature*, transl. P. Foote. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1992.
- Le Goff, Jacques. *La Civilisation de l'Occident médiéval*. Paris: Arthaud, 1964. English translation: *Medieval civilization, 400–1500*, transl. by Julia Barrow. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.
- The Manuscripts of Iceland*, ed. by Gísli Sigurdsson and Vésteinn Ólason. Reykjavík: Árni Magnússon Institute, 2004.
- Roesdahl, E. and P. Meulengracht Sørensen, eds. *The Waking of Angantyr: the Scandinavian past in European culture*. Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 1996.
- Schier, Kurt. *Sagaliteratur*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1970.

- Schmitt, Jean-Claude. *La Conversion d'Hermann le Juif. Autobiographie, histoire et fiction*. Paris: Seuil, Librairie du XXI^e siècle, 2002.
- Southern, Richard W. *Western society and the Church in the Middle Ages*. London: Penguin, 1970.
- Sverrir Tómasson. *Formálar íslenskra sagnaritara á miðöldum*. Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1988.
- Torfi H. Tulinius. *La « Matière du Nord ». Sagas légendaires et fiction dans la littérature islandaise en prose du XIII^e siècle*. Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1995. English translation: *The Matter of the North. The Rise of Literary Fiction in 13th century Iceland*, transl. Randi C. Eldevik. Odense: Odense University Press, 2002.
- Torfi H. Tulinius. "Le statut théologique d'Egill Skalla-Grímsson." *Hugr. Mélanges d'histoire, de littérature et de mythologie offerts à Régis Boyer pour son 65^e anniversaire*. Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1997, 279–288.
- Torfi H. Tulinius. *Skáldið í skriftinni*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2004.
- Torfi H. Tulinius. "The Matter of the North. Fiction and uncertain identities in 13th century Iceland." *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. M. Clunies Ross. Cambridge studies in medieval literature 42. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 242–265.
- Torfi H. Tulinius. "The Conversion of Sonatorrek." *Analecta Septentrionalia. Beiträge zur nordgermanischen Kultur- und Literaturgeschichte*, ed. by W. Heizmann, K. Bödl and H. Beck. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde, Ergänzungsbände 65, 2009, 698–711.
- Wawn, Andrew. "The Post-Medieval Reception of Old Norse and Old Icelandic Literature." *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rory McTurk. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, 64–81.
- Weber, Gerd W. "Intellegere historiam. Typological perspectives of Nordic pre-history (in Snorri, Saxo, Widukind and others)." *Tradition og historieskrivning. Kilderne til Nordens ældste historie*, ed. by Kirsten Hastrup and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen. Acta Jutlandica LXIII:2. Humanistisk Serie 61. Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 1987, 95–141.

SUMMARY

This article discusses links between medieval Iceland and contemporary medieval European culture. The notion that Icelandic medieval culture was, for the most part, free from European cultural influence still has some currency—at least amongst the general public. However, the central argument of the article is rather that Icelandic literary culture could not have emerged had not the Icelanders already begun to engage with European culture, and had not medieval Icelandic society—both clerical and lay—already adapted to it. In this context, reference is made to Margaret Clunies Ross’s concept of ‘Christian secularity’ in order to explain the specific characteristics of Christian Icelandic society during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and recent work by other scholars is reviewed to provide further support for this perspective. Finally, reference is made to *Egils saga* and to the present author’s recent book on the saga: the aim is to demonstrate how the concepts of ‘self’ and ‘other’ may be used to define the attitude of the authors of medieval Icelandic sagas (especially the *Íslendingasögur*) to their own heathen past. It was by integrating the heathen ‘otherness’ of the past with their own contemporary ‘self’ that the Icelanders created for themselves a national identity as inhabitants of the Christian cultural world.

Torfi H. Tulinius
University of Iceland
tht@hi.is