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## ANTIPAGAN SENTIMENT IN THE SAGAS OF ICELANDERS

DURING the four centuries that elapsed between the settlement of Ingólfr Arnarson at Reykjavík and the submission of the national leaders of Iceland to the authority of the Norwegian crown Icelandic civilization underwent three major periods of transition, all of which are reflected in various ways in saga literature. The first of these cultural changes resulted from the fact of colonization, during which perforce the rapacious culture of the marauding Viking was gradually transformed into a less brutal and more orderly form of society, into a community of landholders. The raider gave way to the trader, the freebooter was replaced by the farmer and dairy husbandman—a transition that is strikingly depicted in several sagas by means of the generation-gap theme. One need think only of the contrastive description of Egill Skalla-Grímsson and his son Þorsteinn; or of Þór-ólfr bægifótr and Arnkell goði in *Eyrbyggja saga*; or of the superannuated Viking Þórarinn in *Þorsteins þáttur stangarhöggs*, who had small means but a large selection of weapons, and his son Þorsteinn, who supported his destitute father by doing the work of three men on their farm.

The second major cultural change resulted from the advent of Christianity, which brought with it literacy and a closer contact with European culture and led to the founding of schools and monasteries, where learning and literary activity flourished. For whatever reasons, saga writers were keenly conscious of what is sometimes called the discrepancy between cultural milieu and cultural reference, of the vast distance in time and essence between their own age and the dim world of the pagan past which they sought to recreate in their stories.

The third cultural change was the disintegration of the Icelandic Commonwealth during the Sturlung Age under the disruptive forces of internal discord and the constant, relentless menace of external

encroachment. The dramatic events of this age of savagery and artistic creativity provided both tragic material as well as compelling motives for saga writing.

As already mentioned, not a few saga writers reveal a keen awareness of the discrepancy between the nominally Christian cultural milieu in which they lived and worked and the pagan cultural reference, their largely imaginary re-creation of the dim and distant world of their pagan ancestors. Much of the irony and paradox and ambiguity that make the sagas so intriguing stems from the ambivalent attitude that saga writers so often seem to have had toward their own creations. On the one hand they endowed their characters with almost superhuman dimensions and with a degree of *drengskapr* such as few of the figures in *Sturlunga saga*, their own contemporaries, possessed. On the other hand they rather consistently portrayed pagan heroes as inferior to Christian ones, and frequently attributed the misfortune and tragedy of their characters to pagan beliefs and practices. Thus the golden age of Icelandic history that saga writers conjured up was both a model and a warning to their contemporaries, whose own personal and political disasters derived in no small measure from a resurgence of the truculent Viking spirit that had been held somewhat in check during the heyday of the Commonwealth. Snorri tells us that Skalla-Grím's descendants were diverse in nature. Some, like Þorsteinn Egilsson, who was strong in the faith and well-mannered, and Kjartan Ólafsson, who was the first Icelander to observe the fast during Lent and who chose to be killed rather than to kill, were among the most handsome men ever to live in Iceland. 'But the greater number of the Mýramenn were very ugly.' This quotation from the conclusion of *Egla* is meaningful only within the context of the moral and social disintegration of Snorri's own day.

In this paper I should like to discuss with you a representative selection of saga passages in which the authors directly or indirectly express their opinions about paganism and/or Christianity. I wish neither to question nor to defend any of the prevailing theories regarding religious bias in the sagas, nor shall I attempt to develop a thesis of my own. Rather, I propose to consider with you the testimony of the sagas themselves, and in so doing, to ignore (to the

extent that this is possible) the voluminous published polemics on the subject.

Let us begin our discussion with a glance at three saga portraits, in all of which the authors directly express their own opinions.

The first is the eulogy of Arnkell goði in *Eyrbyggja saga* (ch. 37):

... ok var hann öllum mönnum harmdauði, því at hann hefir verit allra manna best at sér um alla hluti í fornum sið ok manna vitrastr, vel skapi farinn, hjartaprúðr ok hverjum manni djarfari, einarör ok allvel stilltr; hafði hann ok jafnan inn hæra hlut í málaferlum, við hverja sem skipta var; fekk hann af því ófundsamt, sem nú kom fram.

... His death was lamented by all, for he was in every respect one of the best and wisest men in the ancient faith. He was composed, stouthearted, and as daring as anyone; determined, yet with a good hold on himself. He was generally successful in litigation with whomsoever he contended. It was for this reason that he provoked much jealousy, as was shown in this case.

The second is the necrology of Þorkell krafla at the end of *Vatnsdæla saga*:

Eptir þat andaðisk hann ok var mjök harmdauði þingmönnum sínum ok öllum heraðsmönnum, því at hann þótti, sem var, inn mesti heraðshöfðingi ok mikill giptumaðr ok inn líkasti inum fyrrum Vatnsdælum, svá sem Þorsteini ok Ingimundi, ok bar Þorkell þat fyrir, at hann var rétttrúaðr maðr ok elskaði guð ok bjósk mjök kristiliga við dauða sínum.

After that he died, and his death was mourned by all his thingmen and by all the people of the district, for he was considered to be (as, indeed, he was) the greatest chieftain in those parts and a man of surpassing good fortune and the one most like the Vatnsdælir of old, such as Þorsteinn and Ingimundr. But Þorkell surpassed them in that he embraced the true faith and loved God and made ready for his death in the proper Christian manner.

The third is a brief character description of Þorkell Þorsteinsson, grandson of Ingólfr Arnarson, in *Landnámabók* (S, ch. 9):

Son Þorsteins var Þorkell máni lögsögumaðr, er einn heiðinna manna hefir best verit siðaðr, at því er menn vitu dæmi til. Hann lét sik bera í sólar-geisla í banasótt sinni ok fal sik á bendi þeim guði, er sólina hafði skapat. Hafði hann ok lifat svá hreinliga sem þeir kristnir menn, er best eru siðaðir. Son hans var Þormóðr, er þá var allsherjargoði, er kristni kom á Ísland.

Þorstein's son was Þorkell máni, one of the best of heathen men in regard to good conduct, as far as is known. During the illness that led to his death he had himself carried out into the sunshine and commended himself to the care of that god who had created the sun. He had lived as pure a life as the most decorous Christians. His son was Þormóðr, who was the supreme goði at the *Alþingi* when Christianity came to Iceland.

These three character descriptions have one fact in common: they were written from the Christian point of view. When Arnkell goði is described as 'one of the best and wisest men in the ancient faith', the implication is clear. The author of *Vatnsdæla* is more explicit: Þorkell krafla owes his superiority over such great heroes as Þorsteinn and Ingimundr to the fact that he has embraced the true faith and loves the true God. *Landnámabók* goes one step further: Þorkell máni is declared to have been the equal of the best of Christians. But we must not forget that Þorkell máni was an exceptional person: he was the grandson of Ingólfr and the father of Þormóðr, the *allsherjargoði* who presided at the *Alþingi* when Christianity was adopted as the law of the land. The author of this statement could think of no higher praise for one of the great national leaders of pagan times than to declare that he was equal in moral and social conduct to the best and finest of Christians.

Throughout saga literature there are numerous allusions to the advent of Christianity and the abandonment of paganism, both as factual reports and as prophecies and forebodings. The latter are especially interesting because of the variety of ways in which the conversion of the country or of an individual is foretold.

In *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* (ch. 1) Bárðr has a dream in which he sees a tree grow out of his fosterfather Dofri's hearth and spread over all of Norway. Various parts of the tree (a beautiful blossom, a golden bough, etc.) signify three individuals: Haraldr hárfagri, a kinsman of his who will bring a faith different from the current one, and St. Óláfr. This dream is clearly derived from the prophetic dreams that are attributed to Queen Ragnhildr and King Hálfðan in *Hálfðanar saga svarta* (chs. 6 and 7). Just how the dream came to be interpreted is not clear, but the author comments wryly that the predicted change of faith was not exactly to the liking of the pagan Bárðr. Variants of the tree dream occur in *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja* (chs. 6 and 7)

and in *Flóamanna saga* (ch. 24). In *Harðar saga* Signý Valbrandsdóttir twice dreams that a great tree grows from her bed. The first dream foretells the birth of her son Hörðr, and the second the birth of her daughter Þorbjörg, whose descendants will embrace the new and better faith. In *Flóamanna saga* the botanical symbol is a *hjálm-laukr*, which has a golden shoot that signifies the future birth of Þorlákr biskup inn helgi, a descendant of Þorgils Þorgímsson.

In *Laxdæla* (ch. 33) the third of Guðrún's four prophetic dreams is interpreted to signify her third husband. The sage Gestr Oddleifsson explains that by that time a change of faith will have occurred, 'and your husband will have embraced the new faith which we believe will be the more exalted one'. Whereas it seemed somewhat incongruous that pagans and even preternatural beings should be able to interpret dreams prophetic of the advent of Christianity or the birth of outstanding Christians in the preceding sagas, it seems quite acceptable in *Laxdæla* to have Guðrún's dreams interpreted by the benevolent sage Gestr, for Gestr is a sort of precursor of Christianity not unlike Njáll.

Njáll's foreknowledge of the advent of Christianity is too interesting not to be given in entirety. Chapter 100 of *Njála* begins with a report of the change of faith in Norway following the death of Hákon jarl and the accession of Óláfr Tryggvason to the throne:

Höfðu þeir kastat inum forna átrúnaði, en konungr hafði kristnat Vestrlönd: Hjaltland ok Orkneyjar ok Færeyjar.

Þá mæltu margir, svá at Njáll heyrði, at slíkt væri mikil firn at hafna fornum átrúnaði. Njáll sagði þá: 'Svá lízk mér sem inn nýi átrúnaðr mun vera miklu betri, ok sá mun sæll, er þann fær heldr. Ok ef þeir menn koma út hingat, er þann sið bjóða, þá skal ek þat vel flytja.'

Hann mælti þat opt. Hann fór opt frá öðrum mönnum ok þuldi, einn saman.

They had cast off the heathen belief and the king had converted the western lands—Shetland, the Orkneys and the Faroes—to Christianity.

Many people said in Njáll's hearing that it was monstrous to forsake the ancient faith. But Njáll replied, 'It seems to me that the new faith will be much better, and he who embraces it will be fortunate. And if the men who proclaim this faith come to Iceland, I shall promote it strongly.'

He often said this, and he often left the company of others to meditate aloud by himself.

In *Þiðranda þáttur ok Þórhalls*, as in *Njála* and *Laxdæla saga* it is a benevolent sage who interprets the vision that appears to Þiðrandi as a foreboding of a change of faith:

Get ek, at hér komi siðaskipti, ok mun þessu næst koma siðr betri hingat til lands. Ætla ek þær dísir yðrar, er fylgt hafa þessum átrúnaði, nú hafa vitat fyrir siðaskipti ok þat, at þær munu verða afhendar þeim frændum. Nú munu þær eigi una því at hafa engan skatt af yðr, áðr þær skiljask við, ok munu þær hafa þetta í sinn hlut, en inar betri dísir mundu vilja hjálpa honum ok kómusk eigi við at svá búnu.

I think that there will be a change of faith here, and presently a better faith will come to Iceland. I believe these spirits of you (and your kinsmen) who held the old faith probably knew beforehand about the change of faith and that they would be rejected by you. They must have disliked receiving no toll from you before departing and exacted this (i.e., the death of Þiðrandi) as their due. The better spirits will have wanted to help him, but arrived too late to do so.

The struggle between the nine women in black raiment and the nine women in bright raiment in *Þiðranda þáttur* will be discussed later. Suffice it to say that this *þáttur* constitutes one of the most vivid condemnations of paganism in saga literature. The imagery is reminiscent both of the sight (*atburður*) witnessed by Dörruðr in *Njála* (ch. 157) and of the good and evil dream women who appeared to Gísli.

In *Geirmundar þáttur heljarskinns* there is an unusual description of forebodings of the coming of Christianity:

En sá var einn hvammr í landi Geirmundar, at hann kvaðsk vildu kjósa á brott ór landinu, ef hann mætti ráða, ok mest fyrir því—'at sá er einn staðr í hvamminum, at ávallt, er ek lit þangat, þá skrámir þat ljós fyrir augu mér, at mér verðr ekki at skapi. Ok þat ljós er ávallt yfir reynilundi þeim, er þar er vaxinn einn samt undir brekkunni.' Ok þat fylgði, ef nökkuru sinni varð búfé hans statt í hvamminum, þá lét hann ónfta nyt undan því á því dægri.

There was a hollow in Geirmund's land that he said he would gladly be rid of, if the decision were his, especially because: 'There is a particular place in that hollow, and whenever I look towards it I see a light in front of my eyes that I dislike, and this light is always above the rowan bush that stands on its own at the bottom of the hillside.' And as a result, if any of his livestock happened to graze in the hollow, he would throw away their milk that day.

The church of Skarð was later built on the place where the rowan bush grew: 'according to what we have heard wise men say', says the author of the *þáttur*. This passage reflects superstitions connected with the rowan bush, which was sacred to Þórr in pagan belief.

In *Gisla saga* (ch. 22) it is the better dream woman who foretells the coming of Christianity in the first of a series of dreams. She admonishes Gísli to renounce the pagan faith and to abjure all magic and witchcraft. She urges him to deal kindly with the blind and the lame and the poor and the helpless. As the admonition of the good dream woman shows, the renunciation of paganism implied much more than the abandonment of sacrifice to heathen gods. (Gísli had already given up blood sacrifice following a visit to Denmark, where he presumably first came in contact with Christianity.) The renunciation of paganism also implied the rejection of witchcraft and magic and all forms of demoniac behavior. In *Eyrbyggja* (ch. 61) we are told that Þrándr stígandi had been a shape changer as long as he was a pagan 'but most witchcraft ceased when people were baptized'. Under Christian law the *berserksgangr* was punishable by heavy penalties, and even the *hólmganga*, which is referred to several times in saga literature as a pagan practise, was abolished by the *Alþingi* shortly after the advent of Christianity. We shall return to the matter of witchcraft and sorcery presently.

Since *Hávarðar saga* exhibits many traits of travesty or caricature, it is not surprising that Hávarðr should receive his revelation of the advent of Christianity under somewhat farcical circumstances. Actually, it is less a revelation than a recollection. During the crucial fight to avenge the slaying of his son, the rejuvenated hero is swimming in hot pursuit of his archenemy, Þorbjörn. Þorbjörn comes to land first, and as Hávarðr approaches, he sees his adversary waiting with a huge rock poised above his head. At that moment Hávarðr recalls having heard abroad about a religion different from the one in the North. He promises to accept this as the better and loftier faith if he succeeds in overcoming his enemy. No sooner has he made this decision than Þorbjörn slips and falls over backward, the huge stone striking him on the chest. Thirteen chapters later Hávarðr learns that King Óláfr is proclaiming the true faith in Norway. With his wife and a kinsman named Þórhallr he hastens abroad to receive baptism.

A similar case of conversion through recollection occurs in *Þorsteins saga uxafóts* (ch. 10), where the hero is on the point of having his throat bitten asunder by the troll woman Skjaldvör:

Þorsteini kemr þá í hug, at sá mun mikill vera, er skapat hefir himin ok jörð. Hafði hann ok heyrð margar sögur ok merkiligar frá Óláfi konungi ok þeiri trú, er hann boðaði, heitr nú af hreinu hjarta ok heilum huga at taka við þeiri trú ok þjóna Óláfi, meðan hann lifði, ef hann kæmisk heill ok lifs í brott, af allri kunnáttu.

Then it occurred to Þorsteinn that he who had created heaven and earth must be powerful. He had also heard many remarkable stories about King Óláfr and the religion he proclaimed. He promised with a pure heart and sincere mind to embrace that faith and to serve Óláfr to the best of his ability as long as he lived if he escaped alive and well.

Þorsteinn does escape, of course, but not quite so easily as Hávarðr. A simplified repetition of the motif occurs in the following chapter, where Þorstein's companion Styrkár promises the creator of heaven and earth to accept the faith proclaimed by King Óláfr if he finds Þorsteinn alive and well. The same phraseology is used in a similar situation in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*: 'Þá hét Gestr á hann, er skapat hafði himin ok jörð, at taka við trú þeiri, er Óláfr konungr boðaði, ef hann kæmisk í burtu lifs ór hauginum.'

The close association here and elsewhere in saga literature of the religion proclaimed by Óláfr Tryggvason with the creator of heaven and earth (and/or of the sun) suggests that in the minds of these saga writers, at least, this creator is identical with the Christian God. Indeed, Bishop Friðrekr in *Vatnsdæla saga* (ch. 46) makes this identification to Þorkell krafla, who thereupon hurriedly has his kinsman Óláfr baptized before he dies even though Þorkell himself, perhaps for political reasons, prefers to postpone his own baptism until Christianity is officially adopted by the *Alþingi*.

Þorstein's recollection of remarkable stories about King Óláfr is foreshadowed by the initial sentence of the preceding chapter: 'It is clearly stated that there was a change of rulers in Norway that summer. Hákon the Heathen Jarl was killed and was succeeded by Óláfr Tryggvason, who proclaimed the true faith to all people.' (Glöggliga er þat sagt, at þetta sumar yrði höfðingjaskipti í Nóregi, felli frá Hákon blótjarl, en í staðinn kom Óláfr Tryggvason. Hann boðaði öllum mönnum rétta trú.)

Oddly enough, however, there seems to be no connection between these references to Christianity and an earlier prophecy made to Þorsteinn under very strange circumstances. In a dream he becomes involved in a fight in a burial mound between twelve red-clad men and twelve men dressed in black (or blue) garments. After the black-clad men have been defeated with Þorstein's help, the leader of the red-clad men thanks and rewards him and declares that this is the beginning of a series of courageous deeds he will perform abroad. He concludes with these interesting words:

'Þú munt ok taka siðaskipti, ok er sá siðr miklu betri, þeir sem hann mega hljóta, en hinum er erfiðara um, sem eigi eru til þess skapaðir ok slíkir eru sem ek, því at vit bræðr várum jarðbúar. Nú þætti mér miklu máli skipta, at þú kæmir nafni mínu undir skírn, ef þér yrði þat auðit at eiga son.'

'You will also be converted, and the new faith will be much better for those who may be granted it. But it will be more difficult for those who are not destined for it and for those like me, for my brother and I were tumulus dwellers. Now it would be of great importance to me if you were to have a child christened with my name if you should be fated to have a son.'

As a final example of Christian prophecy in the Sagas of Icelanders let us review the words of Þorsteinn Eiríksson in *Grænlandinga saga* (ch. 6), spoken from his 'good place of repose' in the world beyond:

'Mér er annt til þess, at segja Guðriði forlög sín, til þess at hon kunnir þá betr andláti mínu, því at ek em kominn til góðra hvíldastaða. En þat er þér at segja, Guðriðr, at þú munt gípt vera íslenzkum manni, ok munu langar vera samfarar ykkar, ok mart manna mun frá ykkir koma, þroskasamt, bjart ok ágætt, sætt ok ilmat vel. Munu þit fara af Grænlandi til Nóregs ok þaðan til Íslands ok gera bú á Íslandi; þar munu þit lengi búa, ok muntu honum lengr lifa. Þú munt útan fara ok ganga suðr ok koma út aprt til Íslands til bús þíns, ok þá mun þar kirkja reist vera, ok muntu þar vera ok taka nunnu-vígslu, ok þar muntu andask.'

'I am eager to tell Guðriðr her fate so that she will be able better to bear my death, for I have come to a good place of repose. But you must be told, Guðriðr, that you will be married to an Icelander, and your wedded life will last long, and you will have many descendants—vigorous, bright and splendid, sweet and of good fragrance. You will sail from Greenland to Norway and from there to Iceland, where you will establish your home. You will stay there for a long time and you will outlive your husband. You will go abroad on a pilgrimage to Rome, and return to your farm in Iceland, and by then a church will have been erected there. You will remain there and take the veil, and there you will die.'

The prophecy is completely fulfilled, and among Guðríð's 'bright and splendid' descendants are the bishops Brandr (d. 1201), Þorlákr (d. 1133), and Björn (d. 1162).

Since we have reviewed such a wide variety of forebodings of the advent of Christianity or the conversion or elevation of individuals, it will suffice to refer to a few typical statements regarding the superiority of the Christian faith over paganism. In *Grænlendinga saga* (ch. 6) Þorsteinn Eiríksson brings his ship to land after an unsuccessful attempt to sail to Vinland. He and his wife Guðríðr are invited to spend the winter at the home of a farmer named Þorsteinn. The farmer concludes his invitation with the comment that he has a faith different from theirs, but that he regards their faith as the better one. There seems to be little point to this statement at this point in the story, yet it is scarcely surprising in view of the fact that both the Vinland sagas abound in comments about paganism and Christianity, which may or may not be significant in the contexts in which they occur. Sometimes the significance is not immediately apparent, as when the author of *Grænlendinga saga* (ch. 2) concludes his introductory character sketch of Freyðis Eiríksdóttir with the remark that at that time Greenland was still pagan. It is only when we read about her monstrous crimes late in the story that we recall the sentence: 'Heiðit var fólk á Grænlandi í þann tíma.'

In *Gunnlaugs saga* (ch. 5), following the introduction of several characters including Gunnlaug's adversary Hrafn and Skapti the Law-speaker, the author states:

Ok þessu nær urðu þau tíðendi, er best hafa orðit hér á Íslandi, at landit varð allt kristit ok allt fólk hafnaði fornum átrúnaði.

At about this time the best event in the history of Iceland occurred, in that the whole country became Christian and all the people abandoned the heathen belief.

There seems to be no reason for placing this statement at this point in the story unless the author thereby wished to anticipate the abolition of the *hólmganga* later on in the story, since this form of legal duel was associated by some writers with paganism.

Another striking announcement of the conversion occurs in the surviving summary of the lost section of *Heiðarvíga saga* (ch. 8):

Í þann tíma gerðusk þau góð tíðendi á landi hér, at forn trúa var niðr lögð, en réttir siðir upp teknir. Létu þá margir ríkir bændr byggja kirkju á bæ sínum. Þeira einn var Styrr, ok lét hann kirkju reisa undir Hrauni. Sú var trúa á þeim tímum, at sá, er kirkju lét gera, ætti ráð á svá mörgum mönnum at kjósa til himnaríkis sem margir gæti staðit innan kirkju hans.

At that time a good event occurred in this country: the pagan belief was abandoned and the true faith was accepted. Many wealthy farmers had churches built on their farms. One of them was Styrr, who had a church erected on his place below Hraun. It was believed in those days that whoever had a church built could select as many men for the kingdom of heaven as could find standing room in his church.

This statement regarding the advent of Christianity and the building of churches anticipates both the episode about Styrr's burial (ch. 9) as well as the confrontation of Snorri goði and his devout son Guðlaugr, who later entered a monastery in England (ch. 12). It is interesting to note how the author of *Eyrbyggja* (ch. 49) modified this report (which must certainly have been his source). He asserts that Snorri goði was most influential in having Christianity accepted in the West Quarter, but refrains from making a value judgment about paganism and Christianity. He also adds that it was the priests who encouraged the building of more and larger churches by promising the farmers that they would have as many followers at their disposal in the kingdom of heaven as could find standing room in their churches.

It was noted above that the two *Vínland* sagas contain various allusions to pagan customs and to the less than perfect observation of Christian practices during the infancy of that religion in Greenland. Similar references are found in other sagas, especially in those in which the authors stress the great difference between *then* and *now*, between the cultural reference and the cultural milieu in which the sagas were created. In *Eyrbyggja* (ch. 53) certain events occur during Advent (*jólafasti*), and the author comments that 'in those days the fasts were not observed in Iceland'. In the following chapter he informs us that people believed in those days that men who perished at sea and then came to attend their funeral feast had been well received by Rán. 'For at that time much heathendom still prevailed even though all the people had been baptized and were nominally Christians.' (En þá var enn lítt af numin forneskjan, þó at menn væri

skírðir ok kristnir at kalla.) Very similar to this is the observation in *Fóstbræðra saga* (ch. 2):

En þó at þá væri menn kristnir kallaðir, þá var þó í þann tíð ung kristni ok mjök vanger, svá at margir gneistar heiðninnar váru þó þá eptir ok í óvenju lagðir.

Even though people were called Christian, still Christianity was young and very imperfect, for many sparks of heathendom remained and had become evil customs.

Although the author himself takes a dim view of the remnants of paganism and the attendant vices, many persons in those days thought it advantageous, he tells us, to be skilled in magic *því at kristni var ung ok vanger* (ch. 9). And even though Christianity was young (ch. 18), it was not customary to plunder the slain. In other words, even though paganism was evil and many Christians were not yet firm in the faith, people did not stoop so low as to plunder the bodies of those they had slain. Could this, perhaps, be an ironic allusion to contemporary practices as described in *Sturlunga saga*?

The author of this saga (ch. 23) also indulges in a bit of ironic humor in the episode dealing with Gríma, who sheltered and nursed Þormóðr in Greenland. Þormóð's enemies search for him in Gríma's house, where they find a chair with the likeness of Þórr carved on the chairposts. When chided by her rival witch Þórdís about this witchcraft (*fyrnska*), Gríma explains with a feigned ingenuousness that delights the modern reader no less than it must have amused the author's contemporaries:

'Ek kem sjaldan til kirkju at heyra kenningar lærðra manna, því at ek á langt at fara, en fámennt heima. Nú kemr mér þá heldr í hug, er ek sé líkneski Þórs af tré gert, þat er ek má brjóta ok brenna, þegar ek vil, hversu miklu sá er meiri, er skapat hefir himin ok jörð ok alla hluti sýnliga ok ósýnliga ok öllum hlutum gefr líf ok engi maðr má yfir stiga.'

'I seldom get to church to hear the sermons of priests, for I have a great distance to travel and few men at home to accompany me. But whenever I see the wooden likeness of Þórr, that I can break or burn at will, I think of how much greater he is who has created heaven and earth and all things visible and invisible, and who gives life to all things and cannot be surpassed by anyone.'

The irony in this bit of skulduggery, it seems to me, is no less sophisticated than that which informs *Hreiðars þáttur* or the Björn-Kári episode in *Njála*.

One of the pagan practices frowned upon by saga writers is that of the exposure of unwanted infants. Ari tells us that when Christianity was adopted by the *Alþingi* as the law of the land, three concessions were made to the pagans: they were to be permitted to continue the practice of the exposure of children at birth, the eating of horse flesh, and private pagan sacrifice. *Kristni saga* (ch. 11) repeats the passage from *Íslendingabók* almost verbatim, including the statement that this paganism was abandoned several years later. The author of *Njála*, however, 'corrected' his historical sources (as he occasionally did for artistic and/or tendentious reasons) by declaring that the worship of false idols (*skurðgoðavilla*), the eating of horseflesh, and the exposure of infants were abolished from the very beginning. To emphasize his abhorrence of these pagan practices, he adds in modified form Ari's statement that they were completely abandoned within a few years.

Probably the best known instance of infant exposure in saga literature is found in *Gunnlaugs saga*. Disturbed by an ominous dream, Þorsteinn Egilsson instructs his wife Jófríðr, who is pregnant, to put out their child to die in case it is a girl. The author interrupts the conversation between husband and wife to inform us that 'when the country was completely pagan, it was the custom for men of small means and many dependents to let their children die of exposure. Even so, it was considered an evil thing to do.' Following this comment by the author, Jófríðr retorts that it is unseemly for her husband to demand such a thing, especially in view of his great wealth. The episode, to which there are many parallels in ancient and medieval literature, is too well known to need detailed repetition here. Of primary importance for our present purpose is the author's apparent ambivalence. (I say 'apparent' because the entire episode is replete with irony.) He doubly underscored Þorstein's culpability by stressing his wealth and by asserting that child exposure was regarded as evil even when practiced by the indigent. On the other hand, Þorstein's decision clearly resulted from his conviction that, if permitted to live, his daughter would be the cause of great misfortune including the death of two suitors.

Interesting variants of the theme of infant exposure are found in several sagas. Although the motivation in *Finnboga saga* (ch. 2) is different, several details in this episode are similar or identical with the one in *Gunnlaugs saga*. The order to have the yet unborn child exposed to die is issued as the father is about to leave for the *Alþingi*, and the mother's protest that such a deed would be unthinkable even among destitute people recalls the condemnation of the author and of Jófríðr in *Gunnlaugs saga*. In *Þorsteins saga uxafóts* (ch. 4) there is a reference to and a condemnation of the pagan law: 'It was legal in those days for poor people to let their children die of exposure, if they wished, but it was not regarded as a good thing to do.' (En þat var þá lög í þann tíma, at út skyldi bera óríkra manna börn, ef vildi, ok þótti þó eigi vel gert.) In *Harðar saga*, as in *Gunnlaugs saga*, it is a girl child who is exposed to die, while in *Vatnsdæla saga* it is Þorkell krafla, mentioned above as a hero whose superiority over his kinsmen was based on the fact that he was a Christian whereas they were pagans. However the various episodes dealing with the theme of infant exposure may differ in motivation and detail, they are similar in two respects: the theme is essential or at least important to the action of the story, and the practice itself is identified with paganism and directly or indirectly condemned by the author. In other words, the theme of infant exposure is a function both of plot and of meaning much as the generation-gap theme is. In one case we find implicit or explicit condemnation of the marauding Viking and praise for the peaceful farmer, and in the other, condemnation of a cruel pagan practice tempered by the suggestion that even during the time of heathendom it was not a widely practiced or approved custom.

By far the most feared and powerful pagan practice was that of sorcery. Saga characters have much to say about fate and fortune, for both of which there are several names in Icelandic, but it is remarkable how frequently saga authors explain the fate or fortune of their characters on the basis of magic or sorcery or enchantment, for which there are also many designations. Several attractive and ingenious explanations of Kormák's puzzling failure to marry his sweetheart have been advanced by modern scholars, but contemporaries of the author must have found his explanation satisfactory: the sorceress Þorveig put a curse on his love for Steingerðr because he slew her

two sons. In *Njáls saga* (ch. 6) Queen Gunnhildr puts a spell on Hrútr so that he cannot enjoy the love of his bride Unnr. This sorcery sets in motion a chain of events that leads inevitably to the death of Njáll and his sons. After divorcing Hrútr, Unnr marries Valgarðr grái, the most heathen of all the heathens in *Njála*, and it is he who devises the schemes, carried out by his son Mörðr, that bring about the slaying of Höskuldr and eventually the burning of Bergþórshváll. In *Eyrbyggja* (ch. 20) the witch Katla works a spell on her executioner Arnkell goði 'that worse ill may befall you from your father than has come to Oddr from me'. Arnkel's father is Þórólfr bægifótr, a thoroughly evil and truculent superannuated Viking whose crimes and aggressions involve his son in a series of confrontations with Snorri goði that finally bring about his death. But the evil that emanates from Þórólfr, a paragon of pagan truculence and viciousness, continues long after the death of father and son.

The situation in *Gísli saga* cannot be discussed in detail here, for the configurations of opposing forces, good and bad, Christian and pagan, are exceedingly complex. Among the powers of pagan darkness, however, the author gives prominence to the black magic of a warlock named Þorgrímr nef. This evil creature is introduced into the story (ch. 11) just after the author has informed us that Gísli, unlike most of his countrymen, has abandoned the practice of blood sacrifice. Þorgrímr is described as 'full of sorcery and witchcraft, and he was as much a wizard (*seiðskratti*) as could be'. For his friends Þorgrímr and Þorkell (Gísli's adversary and brother, respectively), Þorgrímr nef forges the spear *Grásíða*, with which Gísli's friend Vésteinn and his enemy Þorgrímr are slain. Later on in the story (ch. 18) Þorgrímr's brother Börkr pays Þorgrímr nef to put an evil spell on his brother's killer so that he will not be able to find asylum anywhere in Iceland. Still later in the story the author confirms the fact that it was this black magic that prevented Gísli from finding shelter and support: 'But because of the witchcraft that Þorgrímr nef had put into his sorcery and cursing, it was not destined for him to be granted the help of chieftains.' (*En sakar þess trollskepar, er Þorgrímr nef hafði haft í seiðinum ok atkvæða, þá verður þess eigi auðit, at höfðingjar tæki við honum.*) Even if we disregard all the other sinister forces that bedeviled and tormented Gísli, we cannot avoid the conclusion—

unless we deliberately disregard the author's own explicit words—that in this story, as in *Njáls saga*, fate or destiny is closely associated with pagan sorcery and witchcraft.

As a final example of a saga hero whose lifelong misfortune and eventual tragic death seem to derive less from his conflict with society or from a combination of personal *ógæfa* and impersonal fate than from the baleful influence of witchcraft and black magic let us review briefly three of Grettir's encounters with various kinds of supernatural powers. At a haunted farm a thoroughly un-Christian shepherd named Glámr is slain mysteriously during the Christmas season. He returns as a revenant and wreaks such havoc that no one dare dwell in those parts until Grettir overcomes him (*Grettis saga*, ch. 35). But the revenant puts a double curse on Grettir, so that he will henceforth dread the darkness and all of his deeds will turn to great personal misfortune (*snúask þér til ógæfu ok hamingjuleysis*). The farmer thanks Grettir for ridding him of this unclean spirit (*þenna óhreina anda*), and this juxtaposition of pagan concepts and Christian terminology is not without significance.

The outlawry and killings predicted for Grettir by Glámr become a reality, and Grettir seeks to establish his innocence of having deliberately burned the sons of Þórir to death by submitting to an ordeal in Norway. King Óláfr gives his permission, but before Grettir can undergo the test, a boy in the church baits him into striking him. King Óláfr thereupon withdraws the right to undergo the ordeal, declaring that it is not possible for Grettir to overcome his innate misfortune (*ógæfa*). Most of those present, however, think the mysterious lad must have been an unclean spirit sent to enchant or bring misfortune to Grettir (*en þat ætla menn helzt, at þat hafi verit óhreinn andi, sendr til óheilla Gretti*). Again we find this significant juxtaposition or near-identification of Christian and pagan concepts: *óhreinn andi* and *ógæfa*, *óheill*.

And finally, Grettir's death is brought about through the black magic of an old witch named Þuríðr, who cuts runes on a tree root, reddens them with her blood, and chants magic incantations over them (*tók hon knif sinn ok reist rúnar á rótinni ok rauð í blóði sínu ok kvað yfir galdra*). When Grettir tries to chop up this *óheillatré* for kindling, the axe skids off and wounds him, and this wound so

weakens him that he is finally overborne by his enemies. But when they boast of having laid low a great champion, Grettir's brother refutes them: it was not they who slew Grettir but their witchcraft and pagan lore (*galdrar ykkir ok forneskja*).

Whereas these characters suffered because of pagan spells and curses inflicted from without, other characters bring misfortune on themselves and on others through their own pagan beliefs and practices. Hrafnkel's devotion to Freyr leads him to commit a brutal killing that eventually leads to his downfall; his renunciation of the pagan gods marks the beginning of his rapid rehabilitation. When informed of the destruction of his horse Freyfaxi and his *goðahús* and idols (ch. 7) Hrafnkell declares:

'Ek hygg þat hégóma at trúa á goð.' Ok sagðisk hann þaðan af aldri skyldu á goð trúa, ok þat efndi hann síðan, at hann blótaði aldri.

'I think it foolish to believe in gods.' And he declared that he would never worship gods from that time on, and he kept this vow and never again engaged in blood sacrifice.

The following paragraph relates Hrafnkel's rapid rise to power, wealth, and popularity. The connection between Hrafnkel's renunciation of pagan worship and his rehabilitation is clear.

In *Víga-Glúms saga*, however, the situation is more complex in regard to the interrelationship of worth of character, personal and family fortune, impersonal fate, and the pagan gods. Suffice it to say that in contrast to the friendship that existed between Freyr and Hrafnkell, the relationship between this god and Glúmr is one of enmity and hostility. Early in the story (ch. 8) Glúmr slays Sigmundur Þorkelsson while he is illegally harvesting on the field *Vitazgjafi* and then forces Þorkell to sell him his properties for half their real value. Before surrendering his lands (ch. 9) Þorkell reminds the god Freyr of his many previous gifts and sacrifices an ox to him with the supplication that Glúmr too be forced to leave his lands in due time ('at Glúmr fari eigi ónauðgari af Þverárlandi en ek fer nú'). Attendant circumstances strongly suggest that Þorkel's request will be granted.

Shortly before Glúmr is banished from his estate as a consequence of losing a lawsuit to Einarr Þveræingr (ch. 26), he has this encounter with Freyr:

En áðr Glúmr ríði heiman, dreymsi hann, at margir menn væri komnir þar til Þverár at hitta Frey, ok þóttisk hann sjá mart manna á eyrunum við ána, en Freyr sat á stóli. Hann þóttisk spyrja, hverir þar væri komnir. Þeir segja: 'Þetta eru frændr þínir framliðnir, ok biðjum vér nú Frey, at þú sér eigi á brott færðr af Þverárlandi, ok tjóar ekki, ok svarar Freyr stutt ok reiðuliga ok minnsk nú á uxagjöf Þorkels ins háva.' Hann vaknaði, ok lézk Glúmr verr vera við Frey alla tíma síðan.

Before Glúmr left home (to go to the Alþingi, where he was to be banished from his estate) he dreamed that many men had come there to Þverá to consult Freyr, and he thought he could see many men on the gravel banks along the creek, and Freyr sat on a chair. It seemed to him that he asked who these people were who had come there. They replied, 'These are your departed kinsmen, and we are now beseeching Freyr that you should not be banished from Þverárland, but it is of no avail, for Freyr is answering curtly and angrily, and now he recalls that Þorkell inn hávi made him a gift of an ox.' Glúmr awakened, and he declared that his relations with Freyr were worse ever since.

This quotation supplies only a partial explanation for Frey's hostility toward Glúmr. The location of the field Vitazgjafi adjacent to the temple of Freyr, its almost miraculous nature, and the meaning of the name Vitazgjafi ('the certain giver') suggest that this field was sacred to Freyr much as the hill Helgafell was sacred to Þórr in *Eyrbyggja*. Thus Glúmr's slaying of Sigmundur at that place could have been offensive to Freyr. Furthermore, there are also indications that Glúmr abandoned Freyr in favor of Óðinn during his sojourn in Norway, whereas Þorkell could remind Freyr that he had been his *fulltrúi* for a long time and had received many gifts from him.

In *Gísla saga* (ch. 15) Þorgrímur celebrates the advent of winter by making a blood sacrifice to Freyr, whereupon he murders Vésteinn and is promptly slain by Gísli in revenge. Freyr shows his appreciation for Þorgrím's sacrificial gifts (*blótin*) by preventing snow and ice from accumulating on the south side of Þorgrím's burial mound. This ironic comment on the efficacy of sacrifice to pagan gods follows immediately after the description of Þorgrímur nef's *seiðr* that contributes to Gísli's death by preventing him from receiving any effective help during his outlawry.

The author of *Ögmundar þáttur dytts ok Gunnars helmings* also employs irony in his exposure of the *hégómi* of worshipping pagan gods. The gradual revelation on the part of Frey's spouse of her af-

fection for Gunnarr helmingr, Gunnar's life-and-death struggle with the wooden statue, his vow to renew his allegiance to Christianity and King Óláfr Tryggvason in return for aid against his adversary, his impressive enactment of the role of Freyr, the delight of his followers at his prowess and especially at the pregnancy of his spouse, the substitution of gifts of gold and silver for blood sacrifice—all this is related with poker-faced sobriety, and yet the reader can almost hear the author chuckling as he spins out his ironic tale.

The worship of Þórr fares no better at the hand of saga writers than that of Freyr. According to one version of the story about Örylgr Hrapppsson in *Landnámabók* (S, ch. 15), Örylgr calls upon his patron Patrekr byskup as he approaches Iceland, lands safely, and names the fjord Patreksfjörðr. His companion Kollr, however, calls upon Þórr during a storm, and his ship is driven aground and smashed to pieces. Hallsteinn Þórólfsson (*Landnámabók*, S, ch. 123) was somewhat luckier. After he has made a blood sacrifice to Þórr, a tree provides enough wood for high-seat pillars for almost all the farms in the area. But this 'blessing' is an exception. In general, the worship of Þórr is depicted as no less foolish or baleful than that of Freyr.

The story of Helgi hinn magri (*Landnámabók*, S, ch. 218), who 'believed in Christ but called upon Þórr on sea voyages and in difficult situations' (trúði á Krist en hét á Þór til sjófara ok harðræða), is often referred to but usually for the wrong reasons. As his ship approaches Iceland, Helgi asks Þórr for advice, and he is advised to proceed northward. His son Hrólfr asks sarcastically if he would sail into the Arctic Ocean if Þórr so directed. And indeed, the first choice of land is a poor one. Eventually Helgi settles on Kristnes, where he remains for the rest of his life. The story in *Landnámabók* ends with this sentence: 'Helgi believed in Christ and for that reason he named his farm for Him.' (Helgi trúði á Krist ok kenndi því við hann bústað sinn.) Þórr has completely dropped out of the picture. Apparently Helgi's enthusiasm for him was cooled by his son's sarcasm and by the first severe winter spent in Iceland.

In *Eyrbyggja saga* it is the excessive devotion to Þórr on the part of the Þórsnesingar that precipitates the first major conflict between the descendants of Þórólftr Mostrarskegg and the Kjalleklingar, the descendants of Ketill flatnefr. It is remarkable, as we shall see pre-

sently, to what extent the action and meaning of *Eyrbyggja* are connected with pagan beliefs and customs.

In *Eiríks saga rauða* two individuals suffer because of their stubborn adherence to paganism. When Leifr proclaims Christianity in Greenland as the emissary of Óláfr Tryggvason, his mother Þjóðhildr hastens to accept the new religion, but Eiríkr is unwilling to abandon the belief of his ancestors. As a result, he loses his conjugal rights. Before making ready to sail for Vinland, he buries a chest of gold and silver. When thrown from his horse, breaking some ribs and dislocating a shoulder, Eiríkr himself interprets this mishap as a punishment—a common type of anachronism in saga literature, this one based upon a later law making the burying of money illegal in Christian Iceland.

In this story, which is clearly a re-working of the much older *Grœnlendinga saga*, Þórhallr veiðimaðr replaces Tyrkir and also functions as a sort of surrogate for Eiríkr as a foil to the Christians. His initial character portrayal (ch. 8), which is the most interesting and detailed of any in the story, reveals his affinity to Eiríkr:

Þórhallr . . . veiðimaðr . . . hafði lengi verit með Eiríki, veiðimaðr hans um sumrum, en bryti um vetrum. Hann var mikill maðr ok sterkr ok svartr ok þursligr, hljóðlyndr ok illorðr, þat er hann mælti, ok eggjaði jafnan Eirík ins verra. Hann var illa kristinn. Honum var víða kunnigt í óbyggðum.

Þórhallr the Hunter had been with Eiríkr for a long time. He was his hunter during the summer and his steward during the winter. He was a tall, strong man, swarthy and ogre-like. He was taciturn, but abusive when he did speak. He always exerted an evil influence on Eiríkr, and would have nothing to do with Christianity. He had widely explored the wild regions.

Þórhall's only contribution to Karlsefni's expedition is a whale that he produces through magic incantations and the help of his friend Þórr, but all who eat of the whale become ill. Finally Þórhallr grows disenchanting because they find no wine and parts company with Karlsefni. He is driven ashore by storms in Ireland, where he and his small band of companions are beaten and enslaved.

The most obviously 'churchy' denunciation of Þórr worship is found in *Flóamanna saga* (chs. 20–21), when Þórr appears in a series of dreams to Þorgils following his conversion and threatens him with

all sorts of harm 'unless you return to faith in me' (nema þú hverfir aprt til míns átrúnaðar). But although Þórr proves to be a formidable adversary, Þorgils remains firm in the faith. One of his dreams is modeled in part on Satan's temptation of Christ:

Síðan þótti honum Þórr leiða sik á hamra nökkura, þar sem sjóvarstraumur brast í björgum. 'Í slíkum bylgjum skaltu vera ok aldri ór komask, utan þú hverfir til mín.'

'Nei,' sagði Þorgils, 'far á burt, inn leiði fjándi. Sá mun mér hjálpa, sem alla leysti með sínum dreyra.'

Thereupon it seemed to him that Þórr led him onto a certain precipice, where the ocean tide roared upon the crags. 'You will be cast into such billows and never escape unless you turn to me.'

'No,' replied Þorgils, 'go away, you loathsome devil. He will help me who has redeemed all mankind with his blood.'

Even from this brief survey it is clear that saga writers employed an even greater variety of techniques in their denunciation of witchcraft and pagan worship than they did in heralding the advent of Christianity. Ridicule was a favorite means of attacking pagan worship, and it assumed various forms, ranging from the most discreet form of irony to heavy-handed sarcasm. But antipaganism could also be quite humorless, especially when the baleful rather than the foolish aspect of belief in pagan gods was attacked.

Although the transition from paganism to Christianity seems to have proceeded rather smoothly in Iceland, *Íslendingabók*, *Kristni saga*, and other historical sources report various instances of conflict between pagans and Christians. Ari tells us that Þangbrandr, King Óláfr Tryggvason's personal emissary to the Icelanders, slew *tvá menn eða þrjá* before he returned to Norway, convinced that Christianity would never be adopted in Iceland. This brief and bare report was developed by later saga writers into detailed and dramatic accounts, the most vivid and artistic of which is found in *Njáls saga* (chs. 100-105). In a previous missionary expedition it was not the foreign missionary, Bishop Friðrekr, but the Icelandic convert, Þorvaldr Koðráns-son, whose religious zeal led him to commit homicide against his own countrymen. Still a third Icelander, Stefnir Þorgilsson, was so frustrated at the resistance against the new faith, especially on the part of his own kinsmen, that he went on a furious rampage, destroy-

ing pagan temples and holy places and idols. As related in *Kristni saga*, the conflict between pagans and Christians rose in a crescendo until it reached its climax at the *Alþingi* in the year 1000. For a time it seemed as though the impasse between the pagan and Christian parties could be resolved only by armed conflict. But in the end reason and moderation prevailed over fanaticism, and the pagan Law-speaker, Þorgeirr Ljósvetningagoði Þorkelsson, resolved the conflict in favor of the Christians. Before proceeding to a discussion of some of the ways in which saga writers three centuries later reflected and developed the pagan-Christian conflicts reported here, let us pause for a moment to recall three examples of comic relief with which the author of *Kristni saga* (ch. 11) interspersed his terse account of the conversion.

During the deliberations news came to the *Alþingi* that a lava flow was threatening the farm belonging to Þóroddr goði. Immediately one of the pagans declared the volcanic outburst to be divine punishment, since the wrath of the gods had been incited by talk of Christianity. To this Snorri goði retorted with the question: 'What were the gods angry about when the lava burned that we are now standing on?' After coming to the momentous decision to abandon the religion of their forefathers in favor of the faith proclaimed by Óláfr Tryggvason, the national leaders of Iceland refused baptism at the *Alþingi* because the water was too cold. They insisted on being baptized in warm springs on their way homeward. And finally, when Rúnólfr Úlfsson, one of the most obstinate and aggressive pagans, was undergoing baptism, Hjalti Skeggjason could not refrain from the un-Christian gibe: 'Now we are teaching the old *goði* to mumble the salt.'

We noted above that Þorkell krafla was eager to have his kinsman Óláfr baptized before he died, but that he himself put off conversion until Christianity had been adopted by the *Alþingi*. It was suggested that political considerations might have motivated this delay. It is also possible that Þorkell was not yet inwardly ready to become a Christian. Not a few saga heroes were converted to Christianity over a period of time—in stages, as it were. Some, like Egill Skalla-Grímsson, did not go beyond the *prima signatio*. In the case of others, such as the titular hero of *Orms þáttur Stórolfssonar* (ch. 8), the *prima*

*signatio* preceded baptism: 'Þat segja menn, at Ormr væri þrimsigndr í Danmörku, en hafi kristnast á Íslandi.'

The inner conflict resulting from the abandonment of the belief of one's kinsmen and ancestors for a faith proclaimed by a foreign king is depicted in various ways. Sometimes the conversion is described as a general growth, as in *Laxdæla saga*. Kjartan at first angrily rejects the king's proffer and even threatens to burn him to death in his house. Gradually, however, the king's kindness and patience mollify Kjartan to the point where he declares he will no longer worship Þórr. Before long his admiration for the king induces him to seek baptism as eagerly as Óláfr desires him to accept it. After returning to Iceland, Kjartan continues to grow in the faith. He is the first person to observe a strict fast throughout Lent, and people come from miles around to observe and admire him. Finally he makes the supreme sacrifice, letting Bolli cut him down because he prefers to receive death from his fosterbrother rather than to inflict it on him. The only comparable demonstrations of the spirit of Christianity in the Sagas of Icelanders are the death of Höskuldr in *Njáls saga* and Njál's sacrifice of his family in atonement for the sins committed by his sons.

A similar development is undergone by Gísli Súrsson. Early in his saga we learn that he has abandoned blood sacrifice to the pagan gods following a visit to Christian Denmark. When his brother Þorkell is slain by Véstein's sons, he cannot bring himself to harbor his brother's killers, but he does forego wreaking vengeance on them. Ironically the former paragon of heroic paganism now places loyalty to his spouse above loyalty to kinsmen—a virtue from the Christian point of view, but the very failing from the pagan standpoint for which he formerly found fault with his sister Þórdís. Gísli's inner conflict is symbolically depicted through the ominous dreams in which a good and an evil dream woman appear to console and to harass him. Finally, as he retreats to the cliffs for his courageous last stand, he deliberately marks the trail so that his enemies cannot fail to find him. He dies bravely, as did Roland and many another Christian warrior. It is perhaps not insignificant that his death remains unavenged, and it is certainly significant that his wife Auðr goes to

Denmark to be baptized and then makes a pilgrimage to Rome, never to return to Iceland. Auð's motive seems quite clear when we recall the pilgrimage of Sturla Sighvatsson to receive absolution from the Pope for his and his father's transgressions, or the several instances in saga literature of pagans seeking to gain vicarious benefits through the baptism of namesakes.

As already mentioned, the vision that appears to Þiðrandi Síðu-Hallsson is one of the most vivid symbolic manifestations of religious conflict in the Sagas of Icelanders. Þiðrandi sees nine women in black raiment and with drawn swords riding toward him from the north, and nine women in bright raiment riding toward him on white horses from the south. The black-clad women arrive first and attack him, and despite his stout defense they cut him down. He lives long enough to relate his experience, the interpretation of which has already been discussed. It seems likely that Þiðrandi, whose behavior and attitude are almost too obviously those of a Christian, has undergone conversion abroad, and it is a well-known fact that his father was converted by Þangbrandr before Christianity was officially adopted in Iceland.

The only one of the *Íslendingasögur* that centers around the spiritual conflict of an individual is *Hallfreðar saga*. On the surface this saga is a love story, somewhat like *Gunnlaugs saga*, but the confrontation between Hallfreðr and King Óláfr (ch. 5) marks the beginning of a spiritual struggle that ends only with the poet's death. On his arrival in Norway Hallfreðr is admonished by the king 'to reject witchcraft and the evil faith and to believe in the true God, the Creator of heaven and earth' (*kasta forneskju ok illum átrúnaði, en trúa á sannan guð, skapara himins ok jarðar*). Hallfreðr agrees to be baptized—but only on the condition that the king himself be his sponsor. Unlike more zealous converts (ch. 6), Hallfreðr does not speak ill of the pagan gods:

Hallfreðr lastaði ekki goðin, þó at aðrir menn hallmælti þeim, kvað eigi þurfa at ámæla þeim, þó at menn vildi eigi trúa á þau.

Hallfreðr did not decry the gods even though other men deprecated them. He said it was not necessary to disparage the gods even if one did not wish to believe in them.

A verse in which Hallfreðr admits that he formerly enjoyed the worship of Óðinn brings on a second debate with the king, in which Hallfreðr speaks only in verse. Gradually the verses become less pagan and more Christian until the king's displeasure with his 'difficult skald' (vandráðaskáld) is mollified. The king's ire is aroused again when Hallfreðr slays one of his courtiers and is accused by the slain man's brother of secretly engaging in pagan sacrifice and carrying with him an image of Þórr. To regain the king's good graces, Hallfreðr is to kill or blind a certain pagan as punishment for his refusal to accept Christianity.

After putting out one of the pagan's eyes, Hallfreðr proceeds to Gautland (ch. 7), where he is set upon by a highwayman. In dire straits he calls upon the White Christ for help, and succeeds in overcoming his adversary 'with the help of God and the good luck of King Óláfr' (með fulltingi guðs ok giptu Óláfs konungs). In Gautland (ch. 8) Hallfreðr marries a pagan woman, and is so highly esteemed and so well treated by her kinsmen that his observance of Christianity gradually diminishes to blowing over his drinking horn in the form of a cross and perhaps singing an occasional psalm: 'Þat hafði hann helzt til trúar, at hann blés í kross yfir drykk sínum, áðr hann drakk, en fátt söng hann.'

In the third year of Hallfreð's sojourn among the heathen (ch. 9), King Óláfr appears to him looking very angry. He reproaches him for having cast off his faith and commands him to return to the court. Here a priest hears Hallfreð's confession and baptizes his wife Ingi-björg and their two sons. To atone for his weakness in the faith and for having lived so long among pagans, Hallfreðr at the behest of the king composes a poem on the creation.

During a brief interlude in Iceland following the death of his wife, Hallfreðr challenges his old rival Gríss to a duel, but King Óláfr, as so often, appears in a dream and warns against it. News of the death of his royal patron shocks Hallfreðr so deeply that he plans vengeance against Jarl Eiríkr. Again Óláfr appears in a dream and urges Hallfreðr to commemorate the Jarl in a *drápa* instead.

In the description of Hallfreð's death and burial the author masterfully depicts and resolves the conflicting forces in the life of the

troublesome poet. Fatally injured when struck by a sailyard during a storm, Hallfreðr sees his guardian spirit in the form of a large woman wearing a mail coat and walking on the waves. He takes leave of her, and she then becomes the *fylgjukona* of his son Hallfreðr. Thereupon he recites his last poem, declaring that he could die peacefully if he knew his soul were saved. He fears nothing except hell, yet he is willing to let God decide where he will live in the next world. His coffin, containing three gifts from King Óláfr, drifts ashore in the Hebrides, where it is plundered and the body sunk in a bog. Apprised in a vision by King Óláfr of the desecration, the abbot of a nearby monastery has the body properly buried:

Lík Hallfreðar var flutt til kirkju ok var grafit virðuliga. Kalekr var gerr af hringinum, en altarisklæði af skikkjunni, en kertastikur ór hjálminum.

Hallfreð's body was brought to the church, where it was buried in a worthy manner. A chalice was made from the ring, an altar cloth from the cloak, and candle sticks from the helmet.

I have dwelt at some length on *Hallfreðar saga* because of the fact that this story is usually interpreted as a conventional *skáldasaga*, i.e., a love story with a poet as hero. Yet not even the most cursory reading of the saga permits such an interpretation. Hallfreð's introductory description occurs in chapter 2 and his affection for Kolfinna is briefly reported at the end of chapter 3. His first confrontation with King Óláfr occurs in chapter 5, and from that point on, except for a brief interlude following his wife's death, Hallfreð's thoughts and actions result from or are closely bound up with the struggle between paganism (which, among other things, supplied the metaphors for his poetry!), and Christianity, embodied in the stern, dominating, inescapable figure of the missionary king. Spiritually Hallfreðr is caught between these opposing forces just as he was fettered physically on three occasions. Although King Óláfr gradually dominates and directs his life more and more, Hallfreðr is not completely freed of traces of paganism until he takes leave of his *fylgjukona* (walking on the waves as if on land!) and, despite his understandable fear of hell, confidently commends his soul to God's mercy. The completion of the transition from paganism to Christianity is symbolized by the transformation of the king's three gifts into objects associated with Christian worship.

At the outset we considered three ways in which saga writers stressed the superiority of Christians over pagans: through the qualified praise of pagan heroes, through the attribution of superiority of heroes to the fact that they were Christian rather than pagan, and through the declaration that the individual, although pagan, was the equal in morality and conduct of the very best Christians. Still another effective method is through the use of contrastive characterization. One of the best examples of this technique is found in *Vápnfirðinga saga* (chs. 4-5), where the avarice and truculence of two chieftains, Brodd-Helgi and Geitir, are made to seem all the more reprehensible when contrasted with the gentleness and generosity of the sea-faring trader Þorleifr hinn kristni.

Þorleif's partner, a Norwegian named Hrafn, is slain under circumstances that strongly implicate the two chieftains as the instigators of the crime. Brodd-Helgi and Geitir appropriate Hrafn's property, but Þorleifr retrieves it and returns it to his partner's kinsmen in Norway. The two chieftains suspect each other of having stolen a gold ring and a chest (thought to be full of gold and silver) that belonged to the slain Norwegian, and as this suspicion increases, their friendship decreases and eventually turns into hostility. Upon his return from Norway, Þorleifr is cited for nonpayment of the temple tax by a woman named Steinvör, the priestess of the chief temple. The case against Þorleifr is assumed by Brodd-Helgi, who manipulates a certain Digr-Ketill into summoning Þorleifr for this infraction of the law. After reluctantly carrying out this task, Digr-Ketill is forced by a fierce snowstorm to accept shelter from Þorleifr; and by the time the storm abates, the relationship between the two has become so cordial that Digr-Ketill refuses to prosecute Þorleifr, leaving Brodd-Helgi to suffer moral defeat and disgrace. Having served his purpose, Þorleifr hinn kristni quietly disappears from the story. Brodd-Helgi's disregard for the rights of others eventually becomes so gross that Geitir is compelled to kill him. Geitir in turn is killed by Bjarni Brodd-Helgason, and when Geitir's son Þorkell seeks to avenge the death of his father, it seems as though the curse (*ættgeigr*) put upon Helgi by the first victim of his axe will continue 'meðan landit er byggt'. But eventually Bjarni's good will and moderation prevail over Þorkel's stubborn demand for revenge, and tranquility is once more restored.

In *Porsteins þáttur stangarhöggs*, a pendant to *Vápnfirðinga saga* written some 50 years after the composition of this story, Bjarni becomes a *trúmaðr mikill* and, like so many saga heroes, makes a pilgrimage to Rome.

And finally we come to *Njála*, the mightiest of the Sagas of Icelanders, and about this literary masterpiece we could talk until doomsday. Almost all of the various means of expressing antipagan sentiment that we have already touched upon can be found in this remarkable work of art. We have seen that magic, witchcraft, and sorcery were said by the author to be the cause of much of the trouble and tragedy in this story; and, of course, destiny and fortune also have important functions. But what must be the supreme irony in the most ironic of all the *Íslendingasögur* is the strange rôle played by Njáll himself. The author states (ch. 20) that Njáll's 'advice was sound and benevolent, and always turned out well for those who followed it'. And yet a careful reading of the saga reveals that Njáll's nobility and benevolence contribute no less to the disaster and destruction of himself and his family than do the malevolent, baleful forces of pagan sorcery. All of Njáll's planning and scheming, his intellectual efforts to alter and fend off fate are of no avail. It is only through the transformation of the pagan concept of indifferent, immutable destiny into the Christian concept of benign providence that death and destruction are transvaluated into spiritual victory. What would have been total defeat according to the pagan view of life becomes penance and atonement for the heinous crime and sin committed by Njáll's flesh and blood against his spiritual son Höskuldr:

'Verðið vel við ok mælið eigi æðru, því at él eitt mun vera, en þó skyldi langt til annars slíks. Trúið þér ok því, at guð er miskunnsamr, ok mun hann oss eigi bæði láta brenna þessa heíms ok annars.'

'Take heart and speak no words of despair, for this will be only a brief storm, and it will be long before another one like it comes. Have faith in God's mercy, for he will not let us burn in this world and the next.'

At the beginning of this paper I stated that I intended neither to engage in controversy nor to develop a thesis regarding religious bias in the Sagas of Icelanders. Instead, I wished merely to review with you a selection of representative passages in which saga writers reveal their attitudes toward paganism and/or Christianity. In so doing we

concentrated on the texts themselves, quoting extensively and exclusively from the sagas and disregarding the polemic literature about them. For those of us who read and enjoy the sagas as serious fiction created in Iceland for the most part in the thirteenth century, there is nothing new or startling either in the quotations or in my comments about them. For others, however, who may be more intimately acquainted with romantic speculations about the sagas than with the texts themselves, some of the quotations (and my commentary) may have been just a bit annoying or disquieting, since they do not always say what sagas are supposed to say.

There seems, for instance, to be far too much praise of Christians and deprecation of pagans in these passages. Even if the adoption of Christianity was such an important event in the history of Iceland, was it really necessary for so many saga writers to make such a big thing of it in stories that are, according to romantic doctrine, predominantly pagan? Even more disquieting questions are raised by the statement in *Sturlunga saga* that Sturla Sighvatsson made a pilgrimage to Rome to receive absolution for his transgressions and those of his father, and by the various requests made by dying pagans that their Christian conquerors name sons for them. Perhaps the numerous accounts in saga literature of pilgrimages to Rome and the Holy Land are more than a casual concession to the Church? And why did so many writers of pagan sagas find it necessary to condemn so many pagan practices? And why, if the sagas were written from the pagan point of view, is the belief in pagan gods so consistently depicted as baleful or ludicrous or both?

According to romantic saga doctrine the Christian element in the sagas is slight and superficial, having little or nothing to do with their essence or substance. If this were so, we should have to regard more than half of *Hallfreðar saga* as a superfluous superimposition, and the haunting dream verses in *Gísla saga* would have to be eliminated as late emendations. And *Njáls saga* would no longer be the mightiest of the Sagas of Icelanders, for we would have to regard some of the most memorable and meaningful passages of this monumental repudiation of the old way of life as improper intrusions on the heathen viewpoint that must, according to romantic doctrine, inform the *Íslendingasögur*. Njáls adoption of Höskuldr, whose father was slain by

his own sons in an endeavor to assure peace between the two families; Höskuld's words of forgiveness when slain by his brothers: 'May God help me and forgive all of you!'; Flosi's inner conflict between the pagan duty of blood vengeance and the keen realization that burning Njáll and his family was a transgression against God; Njál's deliberate and premeditated sacrifice of himself and his family in expiation of the sins of his sons; Skarphéðin's symbolic burning of a cross on his back and chest; the saintly glow of Njál's body; Hallr af Síða's renunciation of compensation for his slain son in an effort to bring about a truce between the hostile parties; the reconciliation between Flosi and Kári after both have received absolution of their sins in Rome; and the marriage between Hildigunnr, who unleashed fearful vengeance for the slaying of Höskuldr, and Kári, who wreaked equally fearful countervengeance for the burning, as a symbolic pledge of the permanence of that reconciliation—all of this would have to be scrapped as superficial Christian additions to a pagan story. But this, of course, is patent nonsense, and speculation of this kind can only lead away from the meaning of *Njála* and, indeed, from the meaning of all the Sagas of Icelanders.

What conclusions can we reasonably draw from the saga passages quoted and discussed here? Without in any way generalizing about the *Íslendingasögur* as a genre, we can state that to the extent that these quotations represent the views of the authors and are integral parts of the sagas in which they occur, they do not seem to lend support to the romantic doctrine that these stories were written from a pro-pagan point of view.