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PAGANISM AND LITERATURE:  
THE SO-CALLED 'PAGAN SURVIVALS' IN THE  
SAMTÍÐARSÖGUR

SINCE the general theme of this Conference deals with 'The Sagas and Medieval Icelandic Society', the precise subject I have chosen to develop here may seem puzzling at first view: one is not obliged to see immediately the link between Medieval Icelandic Society, its reflection or embodiment or direct translation into the saga world, and the pagan survivals such as they appear in the *samtíðarsögur*.

Before investigating the matter more accurately, and elucidating the puzzle, I have to explain why I chose, and limited my researches to the *samtíðarsögur*, here below understood as the whole *Sturlunga Saga* and most of the *Biskupa Sögur*.<sup>1</sup> According to the classification proposed by Sigurður Nordal in *Nordisk Kultur VIII B* (1953), the difference between the *samtíðarsögur* and all other sorts of sagas comes from the distance in time which separates the presumed author of the work and the facts, more or less historical, that he relates. In the case of the *Íslendingasögur* or family sagas, this distance is usually three or more centuries (two and a half at the very least). In the *samtíðarsögur*, this distance is often much less significant, and in some cases, such as Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga Saga*, it is non-existent since here the author is also one of the personalities in the saga. On the other hand, the purpose of the authors of the *samtíðarsögur* is visibly to write history, in the meaning the word had in the Middle Ages, that is a kind of chronicle of the events they had themselves experienced or learnt about from reliable witnesses. It follows that the image of society given by the *samtíðarsögur* has every chance of being far closer to reality than that which we find in all other kinds of sagas. Also, it seems highly probable that a

<sup>1</sup> The references will be to: *Biskupa Sögur*. Guðni Jónsson bjó til prentunar. Reykjavík, 1953. 4 vol.; *Sturlunga Saga*. Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason, Kristján Eldjárn. Reykjavík, 1946. 2 vol. All the sagas will be quoted by their titles and number of chapter in these editions.

good number of *samtíðarsögur* must have been written earlier than other sorts of sagas. These later sagas, if we consider the nature of the saga itself—a subject I shall not touch here—are more likely to be submitted to a kind of literary convention which, so to speak, controls the way the texts were written, but one may presume that this literacy is not so great or deep in the *samtíðarsögur* as elsewhere. I mean that they could be more faithful to reality; also they may well have been used as models for many *Íslendingasögur*, which then probably refined the devices and techniques used in the former. Finally, it is more difficult to accuse them of trying to project present situations into the past, a reproach which may be brought upon many an *Íslendingasaga*, not to speak of *fornaldarsögur* and the like.

In fact, this paper would like to make an attempt at studying one important feature of Icelandic medieval society, that is to say, its religious attitudes such as expressed in the *samtíðarsögur* and, more precisely, to raise the problem of the 'Pagan Revival' (la Renaissance païenne) in XIIIth century Iceland, since many a scholar—for instance F. Paasche<sup>2</sup>—has used this expression. In the XIIIth century, Iceland has been christianized for more than two centuries. Has the victory of the Church over old Northern paganism been complete? And in that case, why and how has this pagan revival been possible, or more exactly, how genuine is this revival?

Before studying the pagan survivals in the *samtíðarsögur*, however, two things are necessary: we have first to make certain obvious reservations about the way a new type of culture and civilization can both reinstate and eradicate an older one: and then, to define the principles according to which the study of the phenomenon will be conducted.

1) As for the reservations to be made it should be born in mind that there are a certain number of immemorial structures (dealing in general with the fundamental organization of the society, the 'Weltanschauung' and ethics) which can survive for centuries or more, independently of the superficial culture adopted by a country. As Mircea Eliade points out:

<sup>2</sup> F. Paasche: *Norges og Islands Litteratur*, 2nd ed., 1957, pp. 398 ssqq.

It is true that most of the rural populations of Europe have been christianized for more than a millenary. But they have succeeded in integrating into their christianity a great part of their pre-christian heritage of an immemorial antiquity. It would be inaccurate to believe that, for this reason, the peasants of Europe are not Christians. / . . . / When they accepted Christianity, the European peasants integrated into their new faith the cosmic religion they had preserved since Prehistory.<sup>3</sup>

If these basic structures are either inoffensive or neutral, or may easily be adopted (adapted) by the new religion, they are obviously of minimum significance or interest to us. The present study will, accordingly, deal only with the 'offensive' apparatus of Northern paganism.

Moreover, since all the Icelandic medieval texts which interest us now were composed some two or three centuries after the christianization of the country, and composed either by clerics or by authors who had received a partly clerical education, we must not expect to find pagan features directly or openly; these texts ask for a 'second reading', and it is on the so to speak 'unconscious' level that they may be interesting. To give an example, when, in *Íslendinga Saga*, chapter 55, Aron Hjörleifsson, having just killed Rögnvaldr, takes his weapons and clothes and throws his corpse into the sea far from the coast, we may suppose that there is here a survival of an ancient custom of burying in the wilderness, under stones (*kasa, færa í urð*) or of casting into the sea the bodies of ill-doers, sorcerers and the like. But in fact, the practice may just as well be Christian and represent a refusal to bury a villain in the soil of Christian Iceland!

Let us first observe that most of the 'pagan survivals' appear in the *kenningar* of the *vísur* included in the *samtíðarsögur*, or in artistic objects such as discovered by archaeologists.<sup>4</sup> As E. Ó. Sveinsson most rightly says, 'if Northern paganism seems to be still alive in the XIIIth century, it is in first place because of the scalds'.<sup>5</sup> In this respect, these traces must be relevant to a kind of literary convention and we should be right in suspecting them of being devoid of living meaning. Accordingly, they should be treated with caution.

It is also important to keep in mind the way the Church worked, in

<sup>3</sup> *Le Sacré et le Profane*, Paris, 1965, p. 138.

<sup>4</sup> See instances in K. Eldjárn: *Kuml og haugfé*, Reykjavík, 1956.

<sup>5</sup> *Um íslenskar þjóðsögur*, Reykjavík, 1940, p. 66.

the North as elsewhere, in fighting against paganism.<sup>6</sup> The Church acted in four different directions: a) it accepted such features or beliefs which did not in any way contradict its own teachings (for instance, belief in the existence of another world, a tenet common both to Northern paganism and to Christianity); b) it adapted those features which could easily be christianized, as for example some of the major festivals, *jól* becoming similar to Christmas, or such rites as *ausa barn vatni*, supposing this last one to be actually anterior to, and different from Christian baptism; c) it tried to devaluate features and beliefs which appeared to present a threat to Christian doctrine. Certain beliefs in the Nordic gods may be included in this category, and one is justified in seeing a Christian intention behind eddic poems such as *Lokasenna* and *Hárbarðsljóð*, where gods are more or less ridiculized; and d) it openly struggled against features and beliefs which it could not accept, human sacrifices for instance, or the exposure of new-born children, and apparently, it succeeded in this work of eradication. It is, for example, most surprising to discover that there is no mention at all in the *samtíðarsögur* either of these practices, or of those features known to us through the *Íslendingasögur*, such as *hólmganga*, *jóstbræðralag* (I mean here, the ceremony itself), and, what is still more surprising, *seiðr*.

Anyhow, it remains clear that in our present discussion only points c) and d) above are of importance to us.

2) Now for the principles: I should like to try to show that the so-called pagan revival in Iceland is the result of foreign and literary influences, which came to Iceland through the institution of the Church, which acted here either directly, or as an intermediary. I would also like to show that there is a kind of displacement of time (*décalage*) or deliberate attempt to fuse past and present by including archaic elements in the texts. And, finally, that the pagan features which may appear in the *samtíðarsögur* have, not unfrequently, an origin which is *not* local: they could have been borrowed from foreign sources and adapted to local taste.

This paper being a study in method, I shall not try directly, or at

<sup>6</sup> See H. Delehaye: *Les légendes hagiographiques*, Bruxelles, 3è éd. 1927, Chapitre VI.

least only in passing, to venture upon historical evidence. It goes without saying, for instance, that one cannot but be strongly impressed by the Irish example in the IXth century, particularly where, in somewhat similar circumstances, there had also been an attempt at recreating the distant past, and of committing the ancient traditions to writing. For the fact is that pagan resurgences appear more and more frequently in Icelandic literature as time elapses.

Thus, this little study will try to show that the so-called pagan survivals in the *samtíðarsögur* look like a patient and deliberate reconstruction. Our object of study is a number of literary texts, and they must be viewed in their entirety as literary artefacts if the significance of an apparently pagan revival, contained within them, is to be appreciated. For the sake of clarity I will first examine elements of possibly pagan cults, and the apparently pagan features of certain social institutions. I will then move on to the gods and related myths, then beliefs concerning life after death, and finally witchcraft and magic; all this in an attempt to present an overall view.

## I. CULT AND INSTITUTIONS

As a principle in this section, in order to be considered as genuine, a survival should still be of some living significance, and often they are. In most cases, however, they have been accepted without struggle or adapted (one could say: 'recuperated') and even here, numerous instances of reconstructions or importations are visible.

a) We shall first enumerate features which seem inalienable and genuine, but which may, nonetheless, be the result of deliberate reconstruction.

The importance of the family (*ætt*), according to the ancient Germanic and Nordic conception, understood as a sacred community in the bosom of which the peace (*friðr* or *gríð*) was warranted and the links of which are felt to be binding (see the word *skyldr* which means both: obliged to and akin to) remains and will remain living for a long time, and the illustrations one could give of the fact, in the *samtíðarsögur*, are very numerous (e.g. *Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 16; *Þorgils Saga Skarða*, ch. 12. The whole argument of *Þorgils Saga ok Hafliða*

(where Hafliði Mátsson feels compelled to protect his nephew, Már Bergþórsson in spite of his contempt for the man himself, but supports him *fyrir frændsemi sakir* / ch. 6 /) rests upon this conception (see also *Sturlu Saga*, ch. 30 where Guðmundr dýri helps Páll Sölvason in a bad affair, because he is married to Arndís, Páll's daughter; *ibidem*, *Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 39; *Pórðar Saga Kakala*, ch. 2; *Porgils Saga Skarða*, ch. 20).

However, although the consciousness of belonging to a family group is nowhere absent from the mind of an Icelander, the religious or sacred strength of the link seems more or less lost, mainly for political or economic reasons. The *ætt* is no longer a sacred community (as shown by M. Cahen),<sup>1</sup> but a collectivity united by bloodties, possibly by affection, but chiefly through common interests and tradition, and all this, in a direction which tends towards a rationalization of the situation. Otherwise what way is there of explaining Guðmundr dýri's barbaric remark, that it would make no difference even if his daughter was included in the burning of Langahlíð (*Guðmundar Saga Dýra*, ch. 14), or the not less cruel reply of Eyjólfur Rögnvaldsson to his father who is inside the *bæjarhús* at Breiðabólstaðir when it is set fire to. Eyjólfur calls to him three times to come out, and as the old man refuses, Eyjólfur shouts: 'Brenndu þar þá, djöfulskarlinn!' (*Porgils Saga Skarða*, ch. 32). Thus when Heusler declares<sup>2</sup> that one never sees father pitched against son, or brother against brother, he probably forgets the tumultuous family of the Sturlungar!

The family cult had been responsible for the general organization of the house,<sup>3</sup> for its sacred character, and for the solidarity which reigned among its members<sup>4</sup> (visible in particular in the relations between master and servants). However, it is hard to say that many conscious traces of this cult remain in the mind of the Icelanders in the Age of the Sturlungar. If the *öndvegi* is still the seat of honour in the *skáli*, it is rarely called by its name (*Geirmundar Þáttur Heljar-*

<sup>1</sup> *La Libation*, Paris, 1921, p. 5 and p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Zum isländischen Fehdewesen in der Sturlungenzeit*, Berlin, 1912, p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> See V. Guðmundsson: *Privatboligen på Island i sagatiden*, København, 1889, *passim*.

<sup>4</sup> Á. Pálsson: *Sambúð húsbænda og hjúa á lýðveldistímanum*, in *Skírnir* CV, 1931, pp. 218 and 235: 'The house was a place of peace.'

*skinns*, ch. 2; *Sturlu Saga*, ch. 4; *Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 39) and we find simply no mention at all of the *öndvegissúlur* which, according to so many instances in *Landnámabók*, ought to be sure witnesses of a family cult. Moreover, the word *öndvegi* itself is replaced by the continental loan-word *hásæti* (in *Prestssaga Guðmundar Góða*, ch. 25) or even by a perfectly neutral periphrasis: *á inn eystra langbekk miðjan, á inn vestra bekk miðjan* (*Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 170).

Let us now look at some of the pagan sacraments: there is no trace in our texts of the *ausa barn vatni*; the only ceremony which is mentioned is the baptism (*skírn*, verb *skíra*); nor of the birth rites (such as presented by F. Ström<sup>5</sup>); no *tannfé*, no indication of interesting survivals in betrothal or marriage. The rites of burial will be dealt with at a later point.

The major annual festivals give an interesting example of substitution or adaptation. They have more or less, all of them, been preserved, but their significance has been altered, although some practices could easily be kept without harm. For instance, *jól* has become the Christian Christmas, and nothing could prevent the maintaining of *jóla-veizla*, *jóladrykkja*, *jólaboð* (*Þorgils Saga Skarða*, ch. 2 for instance) and *jólavist* or *jólafríðr*, provided the object of all these practices could be different from what it had been in the past. In the same way, the Church has assimilated the *vetrnætr* to the feast of Saint Michael (although *Guðmundar Saga Arasonar*, ch. 41 makes the distinction) and the *sumarmál* to the feast of Saint John.<sup>6</sup> The sense of the sanctity, past and present, of these dates, is not lost, and even their names remain unchanged: we very frequently find such expressions as *á vetrnáttahelgi* (for instance in *Þorgils Saga Skarða*, ch. 25), *á sumarmála helgi* (*Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 146), *at miðsumarshelgi* (*Þorgils Saga Skarða*, ch. 40). They go on playing an important part in public life: marriages, payment of fines, the concluding of a settlement often takes place at *vetrnætr* or *at miðju sumri* (*Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 5). Curious also is the fact that the third day of the *einmánaðarsamkváma* (The meeting of the *hreppsmenn*, supposing the *hreppar* to

<sup>5</sup> *Nordisk hedendom. Tro och sed i förkristen tid*, Göteborg, 1961, p. 42.

<sup>6</sup> L. Musset: *Histoire des peuples scandinaves au Moyen Age*, Paris, 1955, p. 135.

be a genuinely pagan institution in Iceland) is reserved for the formulation of public vows (*heitdagr*).<sup>7</sup>

If now we cast a glance over some fundamental aspects of the political and juridical institutions, it is clear that the greatest part of the deepest structures has remained unchanged, having in fact nothing to offend the new ideals coming from abroad. The old Germanic law had very ancient roots, its spirit was quite original, and most of its specific constituents—the administrative and political system, the jurisdiction, the constitution of popular assemblies or *þing*—existed long before the settlement of Iceland. The link between religion and law was also particularly deep-rooted, and this feeling could not but remain very sensitive, even in the XIIIth century. For instance, when Þorgils skarði delegates his powers to Þórðr Hítnesingr to consecrate the autumn *þing* at Þverá (*helga Þverárleið*, *Þorgils Saga Skarða*, ch. 27), it is clear that this consecration is a ceremony which is older than the christianization of Iceland, even though Þórðr had to pronounce Christian formulas. The same applies to the drinking toasts, as we will see later; the Church could modify the formulas, it could not alter the rites. And, sacred as it had certainly once been, we are astonished to see that one unique passage in the whole bulk of the *samtíðarsögur*, *Þorgils Saga ok Hafliða*, ch. 16 (where, moreover, the ironical intention is clear too), alludes to the inviolability of the *þing* (*þinghelgrin*). What is far more obvious in the *samtíðarsögur*, with their ceaseless fights, battles and murders during the *alþing* sessions and even in the *lögrétta* (*Prestssaga Guðmundar Góða*, ch. 2), is that the sacred character of this institution was not much felt. In a similar way, the respect for the tribunals, the authority of which should have been very old and undisputed, is, in the Sturlung Age, much contested. In 1234, Bishop Magnús Gizurarson is obliged to forbid people to carry weapons before tribunals (*Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 99), a fact which the deplorable habit of *hleypta upp dóminum* (*Þorgils Saga ok Hafliða*, ch. 18; *Sturlu Saga*, ch. 5) justifies enough.

Now, in the conduct of war or warlike enterprises, we could expect to find traces of ancient customs.<sup>8</sup> Besides practices which do not seem

<sup>7</sup> See E. Bull: *Folk og Kirke i Middelalderen*, Kristiania, 1912, p. 46.

<sup>8</sup> See R. Boyer: La guerre en Islande à l'âge des Sturlungar, in *Inter-Nord* 11, 1971, pp. 184–202.



to convey any particular religious significance, and may be relevant to the so to speak natural ways of proceeding (as, for instance, the *kvi* in *Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 80), and besides those which may be described as Viking customs (the *bera allt til stanga* of *Þorgils Saga Skarða*, ch. 60), we find the famous wedge formation earlier noticed by Tacitus<sup>9</sup> in *Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 155 or *Þórðar Saga Kakala*, ch. 42. We know from *Skjöldunga Saga* that Óðinn himself was supposed to have initiated this tactic.<sup>10</sup> *Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 155 has the word *rani* (the snout of a pig). But here as elsewhere, it is never apparent that the possible religious sense of the practice is still of living or conscious significance. On the other hand, in battles such as the one at Örylgsstaðir, the strategy, if one can describe it as such, is banal, and the great warman of the time, Þórðr kakali, tries to apply European tactics in Iceland. We can also mention the swearing of the truce, *grið*, a very frequent practice in the *samtíðarsögur*. These texts give us every possible detail about this practice, and we have every evidence that the institution was highly regulated (see for instance *Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 67, or *Þorgils Saga Skarða*, ch. 15). If, as seems certain seeing the formulas preserved in *Grágás* or in *Grettla*, the operation had a sacred character, then the Church had no difficulty in adapting it and associating it with the truce of God such as edicted by the Council of Nice in 1041. The fact is that we see the progressive appearance of the word *kirkjugrið* (e.g. *Þórðar Saga Kakala*, ch. 31) in our texts, to replace the simple *grið*.

There remains one very interesting survival in *Hákonar Saga Hákonarsonar*<sup>11</sup> by Sturla. The latter remarks that, in the year of Hákon's accession to the throne, 'there was a good year, fruit trees yielded fruit twice in the year and the wild birds hatched twice'. This, naturally, reminds us of the ancient belief in the sacred king elected *til árs ok friðar, ársæll ok friðsæll*.<sup>12</sup> True to say, this detail, which would obviously show a clear survival, applies to Norway, not to XIIIth century Iceland. Has Sturla felt it inoffensive for his compatriots where the situation was quite different? Or have we to inter-

<sup>9</sup> *Germania*, VI, 6: *acies per cuenos componitur*.

<sup>10</sup> See Cleasby-Vigfússon-Craigie: articles *hamalt*, *svínfylking* and *rani*.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted here after the Norwegian translation by A. Holtmark.

<sup>12</sup> See F. Ström: *op. cit.*, pp. 48-51.

pret it as a Northern version of the ecclesiastical new view about the monarchy of divine origin (la monarchie de droit divin)?

b) We can now study features where the instances of adaptation or assimilation by the Church are more clearly visible. We have just seen cases in which the transference into a Christian context has already been completed. Here are a number of examples in which this transition is even more evident:

Let us take first the word *blót*. The sacrifice, as everybody knows, was the very centre of Northern paganism, the real moment when the whole pagan assembly felt united in a communion with the gods. In its successive phases, it represented the religion itself, certainly far more than the myths or individual practices. The *Landnámabók* could bear witness of its importance, if it did not also occur in a series of texts which do *not* belong to *samtíðarsögur* and show a remarkable tendency to archaism. What must be stated here is that there is no mention at all of *blót* in our texts. The word *blótmaðr* occurs in *Geirmundar Páttur Heljarskinns*, ch. 5, but we shall see that this is a text which does not deserve a place among the contemporary sagas and is in fact already an *Íslendingasaga*. For the rest, the word *blót* which occurs in *Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 67, 71 and 95, has suffered such a devaluation that it means simply swear or revile (*blót ok bölvun*). And the term *blótskapr* used in *Jóns Saga Helga II*, ch. 12, is a pure synonym of idolatry, copied down from some Latin text by Gunnlaugr the monk.

The sacrificial banquet or *veizla* (in its original form) could be long-lived, since it included practices which were other than sacred. Its importance in the Sturlung Age has remained considerable, and it is still the 'communion in drinking' defined by M. Cahen.<sup>13</sup> Its general form has not been altered: placing people according to their rank, bringing tables and food, pronouncing the old *formáli til árs ok friðar*, drinking to the memory of the dead, eating and drinking until drunkenness; during the *veizla*, entertainment of the guests with plays, dances, reading or recitations of sagas and poems: all this is often shown, the best instance being the *veizla* in Reykjahólar in *Porgils Saga ok Hafliða*, ch. 10 (but see also *Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 39 or 170).

<sup>13</sup> *La Libation*, op. cit., p. 29.

Here, the Church could not alter the situation and it had to adapt itself to circumstances. This it did by re-directing the old custom or institution to its own uses and benefits. The meaning and the importance of the *veizla* came from the drink (beer, *öl*) which was consumed, and which had to be consecrated first. Thence, the importance of the *formáli* and of the toasts. And we can see from our texts that the adaptation has been exhaustive: there are *veizlur* for purely religious purposes (not to speak of the assimilation of *jól* to Christmas). In *Páls Saga Byskups*, ch. 7, a *veizla* is given for the exhumation of Bishop Þorlák's relics; the same text, ch. 14, informs us that, in any place where he was invited, Bishop Páll had the *formáli* pronounced. As for the toasts, which were supposed to be given formerly to Óðinn, Þórr and Freyr, they are now given to Christ, the Holy Virgin and Saint Michael (*Lárentius Saga*, ch. 36; *Hákonar Saga Hákonarsonar*, p. 232). The toasts in honour of the dead (*drekka full franda*) are replaced by toasts to the dead man for whom the banquet is given (*drekka minni föður*, for instance). In other words: if the fundamental meaning and importance of the *veizla*, the assertion of the sacred character of the group, had remained unchanged through the times, its expressions and its precise rites have been given a Christian content, and there is no instance in the *samtíðarsögur* of genuine survival of pagan elements in the *veizla*, not at least in its external forms.

Another important feature of the ancient *blót* was, if we are to trust such texts as *Hervarar Saga ok Heiðreks*, the taking of oaths, usually so as to accomplish extraordinary deeds. This institution was obviously deeply rooted since we find it in the legislation, where it constituted a legal method of disculpation. If we assume the formula contained in *Víga-Glúms Saga*<sup>14</sup> to be authentic, then the oath taker had to swear upon a sacred ring placed in the temple or *hof* and the oath was to be made to the famous *Áss inn almáttki*, supposing that this last expression does not betray a Christian and, accordingly, un-genuine tincture. The comparison with *Árna Saga Byskups*, ch. 59, where bishop Árni himself dictates the formula, is enlightening: *Áss inn almáttki* has given place to *guð* and the *stallahringr* to the *bók*, that is to say the Bible. The word *baugeiðr* has been replaced by *bók-eiðr* or even by *lögeiðr*, which is thus 'neutral' rather than offensive.

<sup>14</sup> *Íslensk Fornrit* IX, p. 86. See also *Landnámabók*, Hauksbók, ch. 268.

And the only two passages in the *samtíðarsögur* which give any details state that, if one does not swear upon the Bible (*Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 129) it should be on the Holy Rood (*ibidem*, ch. 156).

One further point: it concerns the names of the days of the week and of the months of the year. If we are to trust *Jóns Saga Helga I*, ch. 24, Bishop Jón Ögmundarson would be the man who tried to substitute for the pagan names of the days of the week, such new names as *annarr dagr viku*, *þriðjudagr* and so on. We must confess that he succeeded in a remarkable way whereas, elsewhere in Europe, the efforts of for instance Bede the Venerable, or Isidore of Sevilla were a failure.<sup>15</sup> We find once *Týsdagr* (*Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 124) and once *Þórsdagr* (*Þorláks Saga Byskups*, ch. 18) in the whole bulk of our texts and most often even *sunnudagr* is replaced by *dróttinsdagr*. The same applies to the names of the months. Alongside *einmánaðr*, we find two instances of *gói* (*Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 43, and *Konungs Annáll* for year 1276). No mention of *þorri*, *frermánaðr*, *hrútmánaðr* or the others. The silence of the texts (latin expressions are in fact generally used for preference) is here particularly eloquent.

We now come to instances where reconstructions or importations are highly probable. I am here concerned with two different phenomena: certain features in the *Íslendingasögur* or similar texts, do not appear in the *samtíðarsögur*, and must therefore be deliberate reconstructions in the former, whatever their sources; on the other hand, there are many elements in the *samtíðarsögur* which are strongly reminiscent of details extant in European sources and which must therefore have been adapted to Icelandic conditions.

We can take place names as an example of the first phenomenon: the discrepancies between *samtíðarsögur* and *Íslendingasögur* (and *Landnáma*) are here very striking. A great number of toponyms witnessing the presence of a cult place has been listed by specialists.<sup>16</sup> They are generally simply missing in the *samtíðarsögur* where we can find only about a score of them in all.<sup>17</sup> No *Blótbjörk*, no *Goðafoss*,

<sup>15</sup> See Bede: *De Temporibus*, in Migne P. L., vol. XC, col. 281, or Isidore in Migne P. L., vol. LXXXII, col. 181.

<sup>16</sup> For instance Ó. Briem: *Heiðinn siður á Íslandi*, Reykjavík, 1945, pp. 75-85 and 134-137.

<sup>17</sup> That is: Helgafell, Heljardalsheiðr, Hofshöfði, Surtshellir, Þórsmörk, Þórsnes

no *Landdísasteinar*, such as are to be found in *Landnáma*. Are we to conclude that these latter are fingered formations? that is, do they exist there merely for the sake of couleur locale? Besides, the comparison made by Kolsrud between place names which remind of the name of a pagan god in Norway and similar place names in Iceland<sup>18</sup> shows a big difference, and it must be added that Kolsrud has investigated the whole of saga literature.

One might expect that pagan rites of death and burial would survive in XIIIth century Iceland, especially if we bear in mind the minute descriptions given in *Glúma*, *Gísla Saga Súrssonar* or *Egla*, and recall that these particular social institutions are amongst the most conservative in their development. But in reality this is not the case: there are no *veita nábjargir*, no *helskór* in *Sturlunga*. One must wonder, accordingly, whether the picturesque details just mentioned have not been taken from Latin or European sources where magical or strange practices concerning death are very frequent.

There is a field where discrepancies are still more surprising: it regards the so called ancient laws or judicial practices, so abundantly illustrated in *Íslendingasögur*. And this discrepancy is not only apparent in a comparison between *samtíðarsögur* and family sagas, it also exists between the *samtíðarsögur* and *Grágás*. If we compare the three thousand pages of the *samtíðarsögur* with the three hundred pages of a group including *Víga-Glúms Saga*, *Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða* and *Gísla Saga Súrssonar*, we discover that the former do not say one word of things which are clearly stated in the latter, such as *hólm-ganga* (ÍF IX, p. 12 or VI, pp. 10-11), the accusation against a dead man whose corpse is unburied (ÍF IX, pp. 32-33), the *lýritr* or *goði's* veto (ÍF IX, p. 84), the exact formulation of oaths (ÍF IX, p. 86), the *níðstöng* (ÍF IX, p. 88 or VI, p. 10), the taking of land by fire (ÍF IX, p. 89), the exact details about the way a *fjárnsdómr* has to be held (ÍF XI, p. 118), the *vápnatak* (ibidem), the *fóstbræðralag* (ÍF VI, p. 125), the *geirnaclar* (ÍF VI, p. 22), the difference between *launvig* and *morð* (ÍF VI, p. 44), the rites concerning the shrouding of the

in *Sturlunga* and *Heljardalsá*, *Hofsá*, *Hofsstaðir* (twice), *Hofsteigr*, *Hörgá*, *Hörgárdalur*, *Hörgárdalsheiðr*, *Hörgsholt*, *Hörgsland*, *Reynir*, *Reynines* and seven different *Hof* in the *Biskupa Sögur*.

<sup>18</sup> *Noregs Kyrkjesoga I. Millomalderen*, Oslo, 1958, pp. 49-50.

dead (ÍF VI, pp. 45–46) and the *seiðr* (ÍF VI, p. 56). We should not know anything about these pagan elements if we had only the *samtíðarsögur* at our disposal.

Are we therefore to conclude that the three *Íslendingasögur* just mentioned, as well as the *Íslendingasögur* as a group, reflect a deliberate attempt to reconstruct these pagan elements? Two possibilities present themselves: Either (i) that the features listed above, that exist in the *Íslendingasögur*, but are missing in the *samtíðarsögur*, are more or less genuine, and reflect an effort on the parts of the authors to recreate a past in accordance with their ideas of what it should have been like, or (ii) that these features were still social realities in the thirteenth century, yet the authors of the *samtíðarsögur* wanted to eliminate them from their texts so as to comply with the claims of the Church. The second view is hardly tenable since many different writers composed *samtíðarsögur*, and the same man may well have written both an *Íslendingasaga* and a *samtíðarsaga*, as is probably the case with Sturla Þórðarson. We are very tempted to conclude that the truth, the faithful reflection of reality, is rather to be found in the *samtíðarsögur*, whereas the *Íslendingasögur* are the works of antiquarians, the antiquities in question coming either from the Germanic past, or even from quite different sources.

Let us now take three different features which seem quite clearly to come from Europe and owe nothing to Northern or Germanic ancestry.

The first regards the *dansar*. Familiar as the term is today, it has never been studied in detail with the necessary distinctions. The word itself, of French origin, is capable of expressing at least three separate concepts which should be carefully distinguished. *Dans* may apply to: *leikr*, *spott* (or *flimtan*) and *mansöngur*. Without giving too many details—for this is a subject that would deserve a special treatment—let us say that all three types are present in the *samtíðarsögur*. In the first meaning: *dans* = *leikr*, it is a kind of play, accompanied by dancing and mimicking which may well have very ancient cultural roots. The rock engravings of the Bronze Age throughout Scandinavia suggest this at least. Into this group would come *vísa* 10 in *Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 33, where the quarrel between *Víðidalr* people and *Mið-fjörðr* inhabitants is thus depicted, and also *vísa* 6 in the same text,

ch. 28, which ridicules Kálfr Guttormsson. In spite of the probably extremely ancient Northern origins of this genre, D. Strömbäck and Stefán Einarsson<sup>19</sup> have established that it was also probably a foreign custom originating in the south-west of France<sup>20</sup> and that it may have undergone a strong revival in the XIIth–XIIIth centuries through the influence of the courtly literature which, it must be remembered, re-introduced to Europe the fashion of masks and disguises.<sup>21</sup> According to this theory, we would here be faced with an interesting phenomenon of revival through foreign influences.

The second type of *dans* is simpler. It is also satirical but we are not obliged to consider that it implied mimic, disguise or special attire. It would be represented by the *dansagerðir* made by Kolbeinn ungi's followers against Þórðr kakali in *Þórðar Saga Kakala*, ch. 39, or by those directed against Loftr Pálsson, or even by the *vísa* 18 of *Íslendinga Saga: Loftr er í eyjum / bítr lundabein*, and so on. K. Lie-støl and D. Strömbäck agree in giving this genre also a foreign origin<sup>22</sup> and therefore we may count this as a case of an Icelandic adaptation of a foreign model.

As for the third type, the most interesting for us, it is represented in *Sturlunga* by one verse only: *Mínar eru sorgir þungar sem blý* (*Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 200) sung by Þórðr Andréasson the very day of his death, and, also by the famous *vísa* 74 in the same saga, sung by Þórir jökull when dying (*Upp skalt á kjöl klifa / köld er sjávar drifa . . .*). Elsewhere, the texts speak, without further detail, of *dansleikar* (*Þorgils Saga ok Hafliða*, ch. 10, where the association *dans-leikr* is interesting), *hringleikr* (*Sturlu Saga*, ch. 20), *dans sleginn í stofu* (*Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 76) and, in *Jóns Saga Helga I*, ch. 24, of *mansöngur*: in all cases, the text allows us to think that we are in presence of real dance in the present meaning of the word, accompanied by music, and erotic, elegiac, or lyrical song. This is, no doubt, the French *carole* which was well-known in aristocratic circles in Den-

<sup>19</sup> D. Strömbäck: Cult remnants in dramatic dances, in *Arv* 4, 1948; S. Einarsson: Horse dance in the *Sturlunga Saga*, in *Folkloristica*, Uppsala, 1960.

<sup>20</sup> It is also attested by Tacitus: *Germania* XXIV.

<sup>21</sup> See for instance F. Heer: *Medeltiden*, Stockholm, 1966, p. 105.

<sup>22</sup> K. Lie-støl: Dei eldste islenske dansekvæde in *Arv* 1, 1945; see note 19.

mark at the beginning of the XIIth century<sup>23</sup> and where, for the rest, the quotation from Þórðr Andréasson finds an exact equivalent: 'Eya, huad sorigen du est tung!'<sup>24</sup> Thus, the *dansar* are an ideal example of this confusion or fusion which occurred in Iceland during the Sturlung Age, between local traditions, pagan remnants and foreign influences.

Let us take another point: let us look at the custom of *fóstr* (the fostering of a child): this practice was universal in Iceland in the Sturlunga Age, the case of Snorri Sturluson's fostering by Jón Loftsson that proved to be the only means of soothing Hvamm-Sturla's anger being the most expressive (*Sturlu Saga*, ch. 34). It seems clear nowadays that this is an import from Ireland rather than a typical Germanic heritage.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, I shall give one instance of 'superimposition'. The role of fate and the consultation of its edicts by means of the drawing of lots, whatever their nature, is well established amongst religious features typical of the Germanic peoples, being already witnessed by Tacitus.<sup>26</sup> The practice has not yet disappeared in the Sturlung Age and the *samtíðarsögur* give numerous instances (see *Sturlu Saga*, ch. 23, *Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 162). *Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 100 gives interesting details: dice (*teningar*) were used and the text quotes the usual expression *kasta daus ok ás*, which is an obvious translation of the French *jeter deux et as*, to denote a very bad result. It was a term of *trictrac* (Icelandic *kvátra*, itself coming from the French *quatre* pronounced /kwatre/ at that time because it was played on a small table divided into four parts).

To sum up: in this field of cults and institutions, the general impression is that of a constant effort to substitute possibly ancient practices by new features, borrowed either from Ireland or from the whole Western world. Of the cult practices and of their embodiment in social institutions, there is very little left in the *samtíðarsögur*. In any case, any clear awareness of the original religious meaning of

<sup>23</sup> J. de Vries: *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte*, Berlin, 2 ed. 1967, § 162.

<sup>24</sup> *Danmarks gamle folkeviser*, number 37.

<sup>25</sup> See K. Gjerset: *History of Iceland*, London, 1923, p. 92; *ÍF* III, p. 7, note 1; O. Loyer: *Les chrétientés celtiques*, Paris, 1965, p. 67.

<sup>26</sup> *Germania* X; see also R. Boyer: *L'Islandais des sagas*, Paris, 1967, ch. 1.



these practices seems to have disappeared. The Icelandic society of the *samtíðarsögur* does not stand at an equal distance between pagan and Christian ways of living. This society appears to be quite well installed in the new state of things.

## II. GODS AND MYTHS

We shall, I think, draw still more drastic conclusions from the investigation of our second chapter, which concerns gods and myths of old Northern Europe, as seen in the *samtíðarsögur*. F. Paasche declared<sup>1</sup> that 'under the action of Christianisation, it was comparatively easy to dispose of the major gods: they (their statues) had been transported into the temples and they disappeared with them'.

Verification of this is swiftly achieved. There is a passage in *Jóns Saga Helga* I, ch. 24, where Týr, Óðinn and Þórr are mentioned in connection with the names of the days of the week. Then *Sturlu Saga*, ch. 31 compares Hvamm-Sturla to Óðinn (because he is in danger of becoming one-eyed, as is Óðinn); Sturla Sighvatsson is twice called Dala-Freyr because of his luxurious house and style of living (*Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 71 and 85).

These instances reveal a good knowledge of the Northern mythology: they are applied with great skill. But, studying the *samtíðarsögur*, one does not see how to confirm G. Turville-Petre's opinion when he says that 'the gods were a living aspect of the life of the old Icelanders'.<sup>2</sup>

The above examples came from the prose passages of the *samtíðarsögur*. It goes without saying that the situation is perforce different in the *vísur*, since this kind of poetry was hard to write without the employment of *kenningar* and *heiti* which, in their turn, almost automatically used the names of gods or references to myths. There are in the whole of *Sturlunga Saga* 53 *kenningar* dealing directly with mythology. Of these 53, 13 concern Óðinn under his various titles, 5 relating to Freyr, 3 to Baldr and 1 to Njörðr. There is no mention of Þórr. There too, we discover a most remarkable knowledge of the Northern mythology. Such rare Óðinn's names as Hnikarr, Rögnir or

<sup>1</sup> *Møtet mellom hedendom og kristendom i Norden*, Oslo, 1958, p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> *Um Óðinsdyrkun á Íslandi*, in *Studia Islandica* 17, 1958, p. 9.

Þundr are used; small divinities like Gerðr, Njörun, Rán or Hlín, or valkyries like Guðr, Göndul, Mist, Hildir, Sigrlöð; even mythological sea-kings like Gylfi, Áli, Sigarr, are present. What is more remarkable is the very strong sense of the artistic potential of this mythology which is there displayed: the employment of certain legends attached to heroes like Hamðir, Hrólfr kraki, Heðinn or giants like Suttungr and Iði, is very conscious and clever in the same way as the references to the myth of the origin of poetry with the two vessels Boðn and Són. I want to state here that the purely decorative value of these references is prominent, and admirable as well. But, to take an example: calling Bishop Guðmundr (*Íslendinga Saga*, vísa 2) the maple of the fire of Gylfi's ground: *Gylfa láðs báls hlynr* (Gylfi's ground being the sea, the fire of the sea being gold, the tree of the gold being the man, here Guðmundr) is certainly very satisfying for a lover of technical acrobatics, but it is difficult to attach a religious value to the image, the link between Guðmundr and Gylfi being hard to see. One might even speak here of inadequacy.

Let us add that these mythological *kenningar* represent only one fifth of the total number of *kenningar* in *Sturlunga* (53 of 246). All the other are 'neutral', that is to say, without precise references to mythology, as for example *geirnets hyrjar hreggmíldr* (*Íslendinga Saga*, vísa 13) for a man inclined to fighting, literally: liberal in the storm of the fire of the net of the spears.

There may be cases which look mythological at first view, but are in fact not. For instance, *Hrafn's Saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, ch. 19, tells us that, at the place where Hrafn was beheaded, the grass grew green the following summer, a detail which reminds us immediately of a similar remark about the burial mound of Þorgrímr in *Gísla Saga Súrssonar* (because, this last text says, there had been a strong friendship between Þorgrímr and the god Freyr).<sup>3</sup> But, as A. Tjomsland noticed<sup>4</sup> this is a point which approaches the banal in the Saints' or Martyrs' lives in Latin. Here we are confronted with a 'reverse movement': a detail has been taken from Church literature and adapted to the vernacular (Hrafn is clearly presented as a kind of saint in his saga),

<sup>3</sup> See *ÍF* VI, p. 57.

<sup>4</sup> Introduction to *The Saga of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson*, Ithaca, 1951, p. XIV.

and finally turned into a so-called Northern mythological detail in *Gísla Saga*.

Another point may attract our attention: the frequent presence, especially in the dreams which constitute a kind of set theme in sagas of all kinds, of animals and, accordingly, the link which one is tempted to establish with old pagan beliefs. It is well known that the raven was Óðinn's favourite animal, the swine or the ox or the horse, Freyr's and so on. All these animals and others play a part in the *samtíðarsögur*. The raven remains a bird of fatality in *Íslendinga Saga*, *vísa* 9 or *vísa* 21. The pig is present in *Prestssaga Guðmundar Góða*, ch. 4, although I have suggested elsewhere<sup>5</sup> that the detail may have been borrowed from Pope Gregory's *Dialogues*. There is a furious bull in *Þorláks Saga Byskups*, *yngrí gerð*, ch. 47 (and in *Jarteinabók Þorláks Byskups* I, ch. 29) which is soothed by an invocation to Þorlákr. It is naturally possible to see in all these stories traces of ancient religious fears, although they may equally well belong to stock images resting on timeless superstitions and therefore not be specifically pagan.

It is an unexplained fact that the seal has been considered a special and fateful animal by the Icelanders. The nickname Orknhöfði (head of a seal) given to Hallr Teitsson in *Þorgils Saga ok Hafliða*, *vísa* 13, and the monster Selkolla which frequently torments Bishop Guðmundr (*Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 25; *Jarteinabók Guðmundar Byskups*, ch. 20) are evidence of this. What is to be pointed out here, however, is that, very curiously, it looks as it were the Church itself which made use of the strange properties of this animal: it plays an important part in the tales of miracles, being very often the instrument of the miracle-doers (e.g. *Þorláks Saga Byskups*, ch. 26; *ibidem*, *yngrí gerðin*, ch. 45; *Jarteinabók Þorláks Byskups* I, ch. 5 and 22).

There can be no doubt that the horse possessed a magical and ritual value in the old Scandinavian religion. Once more, we can invoke here Tacitus's testimony,<sup>6</sup> and we think also of Freyfaxi in *Hrafnkatla*. The Church was obviously aware of the importance of the horse,

<sup>5</sup> The influence of Pope Gregory's *Dialogues* on Old Icelandic literature, in *The Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference*, London, 1973, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Tacitus: *Germania* X, 4-5, see also G. Gjessing: Hesten i förhistorisk kunst og kultur, in *Viking* 7, 1943, and B. Egardt: Problem kring hästskallar, in *Rig* 33, 1950.

since one of its first orders was to forbid the eating of horse flesh. Nevertheless, its role remains considerable in the *samtíðarsögur*. The horse was also supposed to possess certain powers, amongst others, the ability to foresee the future. And indeed, it appears in several dreams in *Sturlunga* (*Hrafn's Saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, ch. 18; *Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 190). Particularly interesting is Sighvatr Sturluson's dream in *Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 132, where Sighvatr sees his own horse, named Fölski: the horse asks his master why he does not invite him to eat and drink; then, he takes his place at Sighvatr's table and devours everything at hand, the plate included. Just then, Sighvatr recites a *vísa* (number 54 in *Íslendinga Saga*) which, mark the point, contains a metaphor which is directly borrowed from his brother, Snorri Sturluson (Hunger is Hel's plate, see *Gylfaginning*, ch. 34). Is Fölski Sighvatr's *fylgja*, since it is clear that his appearance foretells Sighvatr's death? The common name *fölski*, which also occurs in *Gylfaginning*, applies to the ashy remains of an object which has been burned beyond recognition. Moreover, Fölski devouring the plate, strongly reminds us of Logi eating up the trough, once more in the *Gylfaginning* (ch. 46) in his match against Loki. This makes in all three direct references to *Gylfaginning*, and we must bear the fact in mind for a while.

There remain a few details concerning earlier heroes which deserve attention. In the famous chapter of Jóreiðr's dreams (*Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 190), Guðrún Gjúkadóttir appears, and says, notice the fact: 'It does not matter whether I am pagan or christian, but I am the friend of my friends': a declaration which shows a visible contempt for all religious feelings; it may seem quite natural also that Snorri Sturluson called his *búð* at the *althing* Valhöll (*Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 80). And if the valkyries are present in the famous *vísa* 4 in *Íslendinga Saga* (Guðr and Göndul), perhaps also in same text ch. 122 (the woman who tears out men's heads with a kind of net), their images are purely symbolical: they belong, as J. de Vries would say, to the mythological apparatus of heroic poetry, not to the faith.<sup>7</sup> Let us notice that the Church, here too, has assimilated the notion: the saint hermit Hildir is

<sup>7</sup> *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, 2 ed., Berlin, 1956, § 193.

called God's *skjaldmær* (a typical heiti for the valkyries) in *Jóns Saga Helga I*, ch. 48.

One curious element has also to be mentioned: it concerns the phenomenon of *herfjöturr*, this uncouth and sudden paralysis which strikes a man, in a battle for instance, or at the very moment when it is most important for him to spring into action: incapable of taking flight or of defending himself, he is killed on the spot. There are very few instances of this in the whole of Icelandic literature, except in *Sturlunga*, where one finds several cases of it (*Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 144, *Sturlunga Saga II*, p. 288; those two examples using the word *herfjöturr* itself). There is a valkyrie who is named Herfjöturr: she is mentioned in *Grímnismál* (strophe 36), a poem which is recorded in Snorri's *Edda*. The problem is that of knowing whether or not this notion—which may well be founded on quite normal or physiological features—is Germanic or Northern at all. We have instances of similar occurrences in Homer's works (*Odyssey XXII 297 seq.* and *Iliad XII 358-360 or XXII 5 seq.*) or even in *Atharva Veda* (VIII.8 or XI.9) and two miracles at least in the *jarteinabækur* remind us of it: *Odda-verja Páttur*, ch. 6, and *Jarteinabók Þorláks Biskups II*, ch. 1. Identical remarks would apply to a similar phenomenon, *Þeim var bilt*, in relation to the goddess Bil and are illustrated, in connection with the god Þórr himself, once more in the *Gylfaginning* (ch. 44). It occurs several times in *Sturlunga*, for example in *Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 98.

These are all the instances I could find of references to gods and myths in the *samtíðarsögur*. They call for an important and very significant remark: practically *all* the details which have just been listed above, scanty as they are, could have come from Snorri Sturluson's works (all of them written before 1241, and some of them some twenty years earlier), especially *Gylfaginning*. This possibility is particularly convincing for the Fölski episode in *Íslendinga Saga*. It is as if Sturla Þórðarson and other authors of *samtíðarsögur* had tried to apply in their works what they had learned in Snorri's works—and we do know that Snorri did not compose his *Edda* out of regret at the passing of the old faith, but on pedagogical and so-called historical

grounds. As regards the *kenningar* and the *heiti*, the greatest number of them reflects an attentive reading of the *Skáldskaparmál*.

I think one may conclude that, as far as mythology is concerned in the *samtíðarsögur*, the so-called pagan revival or pagan survivals are a purely literary feature devoid of all living religious significance.

### III. THE OTHER WORLD

Obviously, it cannot be possible to draw such radical conclusions from a study of the ideas that the Icelanders may have had of the other world, and of the beings who were supposed to inhabit it. For here, we reach the deepest of all religious structures. Nevertheless, I feel somewhat inclined to contest E. Ó. Sveinsson's view when he writes that

the old belief in spiritualism, dreams, apparitions and ghosts has maintained itself, without fully agreeing with the Christian faith.<sup>1</sup>

We know that the other world was a reality for the Old Germanic Peoples, that they had a cult for the dead as supporters and protectors of the family, that they believed in the migration of souls, and that their religion was highly eschatological.<sup>2</sup> The notion of *hugr* corresponds fairly well to our conception of a soul foreign to the body it inhabits, capable of freeing itself from it and of acting independently. In that case, it could take a proper shape, *hamr*, which was like the symbolical figure of the internal ego. Certain individuals had this property like our modern werewolves: at night, they could escape from their bodies which remained inert as dead, and go elsewhere to commit mischiefs. Such a man was said to be *hamrammr* or *ramm- aukinn*. *Landnámabók* gives many instances of this.

We must notice that there is only one mention, however, of such an event in the *samtíðarsögur*, and that in *Geirmundar Þáttur Heljar-skinns*, a rather late text. In this connection an important observation must be made. It may be true that the *hamrammr* phenomenon is of shamanistic origin<sup>3</sup> and Snorri's *Ynglinga Saga* tells us things about

<sup>1</sup> *Um íslenskar þjóðsögur*, op. cit., p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> See F. Ström: *Nordisk Hedendom*, op. cit., pp. 146-148.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 81.

Óðinn which are not at all different from what we can learn in shamanistic texts.<sup>4</sup> Let us, however, take a closer look at *Prestssaga Guðmundar Góða*, ch. 19: we read there that the priest Guðmundr Arason has fallen asleep, from physical exhaustion, against a deacon who is sitting next to him; after a while, the deacon does not feel the weight of Guðmundr's body at all. And at the same time, a man in a distant region who has been long tormented by a *flagð*, having just invoked Guðmundr, sees the saint appear in a blaze of light, and sprinkle holy water on the *flagð*, which immediately disappears into the ground, never to return. This story may be relevant to the *hamrammr* complex and, as such, belongs, under Christian disguise, to genuine Northern traditions which reflect shamanistic influences. But rare is the mention of a *hamrammr* man travelling in human form—they are usually supposed to take the shape of an animal—and, which is far more interesting, a reader who was not aware of Northern antiquities would doubtless take the whole story as a rather commonplace case of levitation, a property frequently attributed to Christian saints in medieval hagiography.<sup>5</sup>

Belief in the immortality of the soul, whatever its form, has given birth in the North to another body of creeds which expresses itself in the importance attached to the phenomenon of the *landvættir*: these could be the souls of the dead which take refuge in places or things, which 'inhabit' them, and thus protect their descendants.<sup>6</sup> They want a special cult and offerings, that is if we are to trust many of the tales from *Landnámabók* and *Kristni Saga*. There was here too a real difficulty for the Church which, as a consequence, fought hard against belief in the *landvættir*, as we can see at the beginning of Úlfjótr's laws. Once more, we are obliged to state that there is, in the *samtíðarsögur*, only one mention of *landvættir*, and one additional reference in *Geirmundar Þáttur Heljarskinns* (the well-known story of the rowan-trees at Skarð).

<sup>4</sup> *Ynglinga Saga*, ch. VII (ÍF XXVI, pp. 18 ssqq).

<sup>5</sup> See for instance O. Leroy: *La lévitation*, Paris, 1928.

<sup>6</sup> See Jón Helgason: *Íslands Kírke frá dens Grundlæggelse til Reformationen*, København, 1925, p. 18; K. B. Ólafsson: *Landvættir og álfar*, in *Andvari*, haust 1962, pp. 260–271.

As there are similarities between *landvættir* and *álfar*,<sup>7</sup> we shall, perhaps, be more lucky if we seek for the latter in the *samtíðarsögur*. But here too, the harvest is poor. *Prestssaga Guðmundar Góða*, ch. 4, borrows probably from German annals, for the year 1167, the mention of strange beings—*kynjamenn*—riding in the sky. Two *kenningar* for warrior use the word *álfr* (sword's *álfr* in *Þórðar Saga Kakala*, *vísa* 3, fight's *álfr* in *Hákonar Saga Hákonarsonar*, p. 192). And, if we accept E. Ó. Sveinsson's suggestion that references to *álfar* are intended in two different tales of miracles (in *Þorláks Saga Byskups*, ch. 51 and in *Jóns Saga Helga* I, ch. 30), then the examination of these passages shows close links with the impish creatures and devils familiar in European saints' lives in Latin. Here, par excellence, a foreign literary influence has superseded what may originally have been a genuine belief. The visible effort of the Church has clearly been to assimilate all possible pagan creatures of the other world, genuine or not, to the Christian images of devils. And in many a case, the intervention of such beings either seems invented for the sake of edification, especially in the *jarteinabækur*, or has been placed there for purely artistic purposes.

The situation with regard to reincarnation is complex. There is in *Þorgils Saga Skarða*, ch. 62, a passage which seems to indicate a genuine belief in the migration of souls. The text says that, once Þorgils skarði has become, after Kolbeinn ungi, the chief of the Skagafjörður, the inhabitants of this district thought that 'Kolbeinn ungi was back (*aftr kominn*) and reborn (*endrborinn*)'. Snorri Sturluson says exactly the same about Hákon the Good, who was Haraldr hárfagri *endrborinn*, in *Heimskringla* (ÍF XXVI, p. 150).<sup>8</sup> There is a good means of verifying this belief: it consists in studying the choice of names given to children. Everyone knows that, according to specialists,<sup>9</sup> in the Germanic world this custom obeyed strong principles: one had to give children part of the names of their parents: Ásgeirr and

<sup>7</sup> F. Jónsson: *Álfatrúin á Íslandi*, in *Elmreiðin* I, 1895, pp. 95–103; K. B. Ólafsson, art. cit., pp. 269–270.

<sup>8</sup> See also de Vries: *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, op. cit., § 138.

<sup>9</sup> M. Keil: *Altisländische Namenwahl*, Leipzig, 1931; E. Wessén: *Nordiska namnstudier*; J. Jónsson: *Um íslenzk mannanöfn*, in *Safn til sögu Íslands* III, 1896–1902, pp. 569–700.



Þorgerðr should have children called Geirr and Þorgeirr, and so on . . .

A statistical study of all the names included in the *samtíðarsögur* convinces us immediately that these principles were not applied in Iceland. The only evidence is that one can possibly detect a predominating name within one given family, generally because this has been the name of an illustrious ancestor: Sæmundr in the Oddaverjar family, Gizurr in the Haukdælir, Þórðr and Magnús in the Reykhylltingar, Egill amongst the Mýramenn, and so on . . . Moreover, we see an increasing popularity of the names of saints, Icelandic saints chiefly, such as Jón. If we compare statistically the frequency of names in *Njála* on one side and in the *samtíðarsögur* on the other side, we see that the most popular names in *Njála* are Þorkell (18 out of 229 names), Ketill (16/229), and Þorsteinn (15/229) whereas in the *samtíðarsögur*, they are Jón (166/401), Þórðr (119/401) and Þorsteinn (117/401). Names which exist in the *samtíðarsögur*, but are absent in *Njála* are: Páll (39/401), Andréas (20/401), Nikulás (14/401), Markús (13/401) etc. . . . This is a good illustration of the progressive substitution of the cult of the saints for the old cult of pagan heroes.

We have just spoken of trolls. The notion is very complex. Kelchner sets the equation *troll* = *jötunn* = the soul of a dead person, ordinarily, somebody wicked.<sup>10</sup> But the reading of the *samtíðarsögur* shows that this description is not strictly limited to trolls, since it is equally applicable, sometimes to *draugr*, sometimes to *álfr*, sometimes even to *landvattnr*. The process of christianization has not missed the opportunity of reducing all these categories to common devils; see the expression *troll vísi yðr til búrs* (in *Jarteinabók Guðmundar Byskups*, ch. 18). *Troll* is also assimilated to *draugr* or *flagð* in many passages of *Prestssaga Guðmundar Góða* or *Jarteinabók Guðmundar Byskups*. The general impression is that it is very difficult to make a distinction between these different forms of nomenclature.

On the other hand, there are clearly some Christian stories which are given so-called pagan features when reference is made to the other world. Such is the case of the vampire Faraldr, in *Hrafns Saga Svein-*

<sup>10</sup> *Dreams in Old Norse Literature*, Cambridge, 1935, pp. 40-45. L. Musset agrees in *Histoire des peuples scandinaves*, op. cit., p. 135.

*bjarnarsonar*, vísa 3, who probably does not belong to the genuine pagan mythology but is, on the contrary, very frequent in the Latin *vitae*. He resembles the horrible Járngrímr who appears to Guðmundr guðijpekkr in *Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 141: all these figures remind us very strongly of the numerous *Danses macabres* or *Vers de la Mort*, so popular during the Middle Ages throughout Europe.

One word more about the difficult and complex notion of *fylgja* and/or *hamingja*, a kind of protective spirit attendant on one individual, or one family. It is highly probable that these figures go back to pagan sources. We find, unfortunately, or typically enough, four mentions only of *fylgjur* (or *hamingjur*) in our texts: these are *Þorgils Saga Skarða*, ch. 12, where Þórðr Sturluson appears in a dream to his son Sturla to inform him of the arrival of the *viðbjörn* (that is Þorgils skarði), then *Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 90, where Sighvatr Sturluson guesses that Valgarðr Styrmisson is *feigr* by looking at the latter's horse. The word *fylgjur* itself occurs in *Sturlunga Saga II*, p. 287 (*óvina fylgjur*) and in *Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 70 (*ófriðarfylgjur*). This is very little evidence of an element which all specialists consider to be one of the most important in Northern paganism.<sup>11</sup> How are we to interpret this scantiness?

The answer may be that the concept of *fylgja* fused conveniently with the Christian notion of a guardian angel. Through the intermediary of such anglo-norman texts as Henri d'Arce's *Vitas Patrum*<sup>12</sup> we can quite clearly see how the two notions can be confused or amalgamated. Besides this, the Icelanders were early acquainted with the notion of *fylgjuengill*, and this would facilitate the eradication of the pagan image.

What we may conclude from this section of the study is that the Church had brought with itself to Iceland a lot of stories and beliefs which could assimilate or replace the ancient Northern beliefs concerning the other world. The ground was firm: in both camps there was the same certainty that the other world existed and was inhabited. Judging from the *samtíðarsögur*, one must very often wonder whether the details given of the other world are not in fact taken from Latin

<sup>11</sup> See B. Melsteð: *Íslendinga saga*, Kaupmannahöfn, 1903-1930, vol. II, p. 102; G. Turville-Petre: Dreams in Icelandic Tradition, in *Folklore* 69, 1958.

<sup>12</sup> Lines 5960-5961.

or continental sources, *vitae* in latin, tales of miracles, 'scientific' writings and so on . . . Even in the case of what may seem to be genuine, one feels justified in speaking of superimpositions, as photographers would term it. On an old Northern pattern, the Church has grafted or imposed new images and stories, and probably only the outer Christian form was visible to the *samtíðarsögur* authors' contemporaries.

#### IV. WITCHCRAFT AND MAGIC

If we now study witchcraft and magic, I am aware of the fact that we are on the border of religion proper, and that such a study is far more difficult than the previous ones. For this is a field in which religion and faith do not necessarily play a prominent part. On the other hand, E. Ó. Sveinsson remarks judiciously that the Church brought with itself 'a whole world of witchcraft and sorcery'.<sup>1</sup> And it is true, it is very difficult in many cases to make a distinction between practices which may be genuinely Northern and the sorcery of the Western world.

We shall begin with a very important consideration: all the practices that we have the right to consider as genuinely pagan, such as *seiðr*, *galdr*, *gandreið*, *sending*, *níðstöng* are *totally* missing from the *samtíðarsögur*. This is surely surprising to anyone who has read the *Íslendingasögur* or *Landnámabók*.

The only passage in the *samtíðarsögur* which may shed some light on the matter is *Jóns Saga Helga* I, ch. 24 (or the parallel text in II, ch. 12) where it is said that bishop Jón Ögmundarson (1106-1121) fought against all evil customs, witchcraft (*fjölkyngi ok forðæðuskapr*), magic (*galdrar ok gerningar*), optical illusions produced by spells (*sjónhverfiligr kuklaraskapr*) and esoteric practices (*forneskja*) and *Jóns Saga Helga* II adds here, idolatry, *blótskapr*— This enumeration, in its alliterated form, does not have a genuinering: monk Gunnlaugr must here have translated a Latin formula. *Jóns Saga Helga* I gives examples: Bishop Jón forbade the promulgation of superstitions (*hindrvitni*) such as these concerning the moon and the names of the days of the week, he denounced *dansar* and *mansöngs-*

<sup>1</sup> *Um íslenskar þjóðsögur*, op. cit., p. 67.

*vísur*. It is very little evidence to work from, and rather deceptive. Let us try to see if a closer examination of the texts can give us more.

We can begin with the runes, since their magic value is generally admitted.<sup>2</sup> They appear three times in *Sturlunga* (*Prestssaga Guðmundar Góða*, ch. 13, *Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 112 and 150) and twice in *Hákonar Saga Hákonarsonar* (p. 191). But a comparison with *Egla* or *Grettla* is significant: never in *Sturlunga* are their so-called magical virtues mentioned. In three of these five examples, the word is used simply to denote inscription, and *Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 150 seems decisive: Oddr Sveinbjarnarson sends to Snorri Sturluson a letter written in Pope Gregory's *Dialogues*, where it occurs at all possible opportunities of runes). But nobody was able to read them! On the contrary, we see in *Sturlu Þáttr*, ch. 3, how Sturla Þórðarson uses runes in a derisive way.

We may content ourselves with speaking only en passant of the very numerous details concerning prophecies, second-sight and the like. There is practically no important character in the *samtíðarsögur* who is not gifted with this special power. I have studied the question elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Of course, this faculty could belong to Northern antiquities and could even show remnants of shamanism. But we must remember that this is, par excellence, the attribute of saints and martyrs in medieval hagiography. And, to give a more precise source, it is a set theme in Pope Gregory's *Dialogues*, where it occurs at all possible opportunities. *Heilagra Manna Sögur* and *Postola Sögur* show that this kind of literature was fairly well known in Iceland and there is no need to labour the point further. The position with regard to such features is exactly the same as with dreams, another conventional point in the sagas, and probably of the same origin: they appear to be a somewhat obligatory element or device, which is given a purely literary utilization. Here, we are far from *Völuspá* or *Fáfnismál*! For the rest, the characters who are the most endowed with the prophetic gift are the three saint bishops of Iceland!

I am not saying that there are no pagan magical practices recorded in the *samtíðarsögur*: they are certainly present and have been duly

<sup>2</sup> G. Turville-Petre: *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, Oxford, 1953, p. 17; L. Musset: *Introduction à la runologie*, Paris, 1965, does not agree.

<sup>3</sup> In: *The influence of Pope Gregory's Dialogues . . .*, op. cit.

recorded elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> I am simply pointing out that many of these features could be Christian as well, or could have been imported with Christianity.

For instance, much has been written about the famous *sólarsteinn* which is mentioned several times (in *Hrafn's Saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, ch. 11, 19, *Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 30, and even in *Guðmundar Saga Arasonar* by Arngrímur Brandsson, ch. 26.<sup>5</sup> As Th. Ramskou points out, it may have been a kind of *leiðarsteinn* used as a navigational aid, and accordingly a genuine Northern discovery. But scientific works such as those recorded in *Rím* I were not unknown to Iceland, and it is quite reasonable to think that the *sólarsteinn* goes back to Pliny the Elder or to Isidore of Sevilla. The latter, to be sure, was read by Icelanders in the XIIIth century.

We can imagine, on the other hand, that the popular medicine, such as practised, for instance, by the famous *læknir* Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, could employ more or less magical methods. It is true that in this violent and quarrelsome Icelandic society wounds were often incurred, and we have many an example in the sagas of treatments and healings which, astonishing as they are for us, must have been effective. Of course, it is not necessary to invoke magic to provide a satisfying explanation of these results. Such realistic and matter of fact people as the Icelanders of the Sturlung Age may equally well have been reaping the benefits of their keen sense of observation and well known manual dexterity. What remains to be said is that the *samtíðarsögur* and particularly the *jarteinabækur* of the *biskupa sögur* do not show traces of especially strange practices (See *Hrafn's Saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, ch. 4; *Jóns Saga Helga* I, ch. 44; *Prestssaga Guðmundar Góða*, ch. 6; *Íslendinga Saga*, ch. 81; *Svínfellinga Saga*, ch. 3; *Porgils Saga Skarða*, ch. 7). We must therefore concentrate our attention on Hrafn's doings. There is no sign of professional magic or occultism in his behaviour, and if there is an instance of a non-scientific approach, it consists (in ch. 5) in the recitation of five *Pater Nosters* before beginning an operation. As for his science, several studies—and most recently Jónas Kristjánsson's thesis *Um Fóst-*

<sup>4</sup> Cf. chiefly N. Lid in *Nordisk kultur* XIX, 1935.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance P. G. Foote: Icelandic 'sólarsteinn' and the Medieval Background, in *Arv* 12, 1956.

*bræðrasögu*— have demonstrated that Hrafn faithfully followed the teaching of the Salerno school, either directly or through Montpellier, which he is supposed of having personally visited when travelling abroad.<sup>6</sup> Also the popularity of the famous *Regimen Sanitatis Salernitanum* was as great in Iceland as in the rest of medieval Europe.

One last detail: much has been written also about a curious passage in *Prestssaga Guðmundar Góða*, ch. 6, where a boat threatened by shipwreck tries to avoid the danger by so-called magical means: the crew tries to find out whether there isn't a man on board who knows 'the highest name of God' (*nafn guðs it hæsta*), this being in their minds the only means to calm the tempest. Doubtless, in Northern paganism as in other primitive religions, the strength of sacred names must have been great.<sup>7</sup> But as far as *guðs nafn it hæsta* is concerned, it reminds us of a similar passage in the *Roman de Flamenca*,<sup>8</sup> or could draw its origin from the Latin cantilenas, so popular at the time, since it is said of King Sverrir, in *Sverris Saga*, that he sung the *Alma chorus Dei* during the Norðness battle in 1181.<sup>9</sup>



From this brief survey of a problem which, certainly, is far more difficult than it has been presented here, I think we may draw three conclusions:

First, the genuine pagan feelings and survivals in the *samtíðarsögur* appear to be insignificant. One remains impressed by the fact that the authors are either perpetually trying to make *couleur locale*, probably for purely literary ends, or, more precisely, are engaged in a process of reconstruction. Their main concern does not seem to be what they have to say, but how they should say it. And the influence of the models of all kinds that they had at their disposal played a very important part. I think this attitude is typical of a society which wants to create and elaborate its own past according to the idea they have formed of it from other texts. We have to remember constantly that

<sup>6</sup> See A. Tjomsland, the introduction of *Hrafn's Saga*, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> See de Vries: *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, op. cit., § 216 and B. Gröndal: *Folketro i Norden*, in *ANOH*, 1863, pp. 127 ssqq.

<sup>8</sup> P. Meyer: *Le roman de Flamenca*, Paris, 1865, pp. 316-317.

<sup>9</sup> See *IF IX*, Jónas Kristjánsson's Introduction, p. LXV.

Iceland, newly discovered and inhabited as it was, lacked very old traditions and that it had to create its own history. As time goes by, this mental habit or mentality grows and gathers force.

This is quite visible in the *samtíðarsögur* and could provide an explanation of the evolution which gave birth to the *Íslendingasögur* proper. As I have suggested twice before, it is very interesting to see that the text in *Sturlunga* which is the richest in survivals is also the most recent of the collection, *Geirmundar Þáttur Heljarskinns*, probably written about 1300, to serve as a sort of introduction for the whole series of sagas. In its six pages—it is a very short text—this *þáttur* gives information (and in most cases, these details appear nowhere else) about the conditions of slaves, the scald Bragi, ways of living typical of Vikings (*herfang*, *skotpenningr*, *friðland*), a man who was a great *blótmaðr*, another who was *hamrammr*, not to mention the rowan-tree episode. More important, it is the only text where the anger of the pagan gods is illustrated (and it is worth saying that this point finds an exact parallel in *Landnámabók*). Now, such obvious mistakes as the detail about the parity between gold and silver being 1 to 10 (instead of 1 to 8 as it must have been in the Viking Age) show that the author has tried to reconstitute an image of the past, probably using lost texts such as *Hróks Saga Svarta* and oral traditions associated with Skarð. Here, it seems quite clear that Þórðr Narfason, if he is the author of this text, has endeavoured to recreate a society and an atmosphere as he imagined that they should have been. He is projecting onto a rather loose historical frame his readings, his actual experiences or fancies.

And this is the final observation I should like to make. Through their readings, either directly, or through the intermediary of the Church, the authors of *samtíðarsögur* initiate in their works a process of re-creation of the past. This movement reaches its high point in the *Íslendingasögur* and then enters an irreversible movement of devaluation and decay with the *fornaldarsögur*. It is remarking that the more we follow this progression: *samtíðarsögur*—*Íslendingasögur*—*fornaldarsögur*, the greater is the pagan revival, the more numerous are the so-called pagan survivals. A lover of Northern antiquities has, on the whole, rather little to learn from *Íslendinga Saga*, a deal more from *Eyrbyggja Saga* or *Fóstbræðra Saga*, and a great deal from let

us say *Gautreks Saga* not to speak of *Örvar-Odds Saga*. How this movement began is not so hard to retrace: in all fields, the Icelanders of the XIIth and XIIIth centuries undertook to gather, organize and then commit to writing, using foreign patterns and often distant memories, first their laws, then their general and particular history, and thus the distinctive quality of their earlier society, mentality, mythology and religion. Even though, not unfrequently, their ultimate source may be oral, their sagas and first of all their *samtíðarsögur* show, especially as regards the so-called pagan survivals, a deep literary impregnation.

This is a society which gives us the impression of possessing a strong desire to record for posterity an image of its personality, in terms which will be comprehensible also to contemporaries and the contemporary world. This means that, in my opinion, the true value of these masterpieces is not so much their content, but the way in which they are written. But that is quite another story!

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