

DECLAN TAGGART

SIDR, RELIGION AND MORALITY¹

For all that Old Norse scholarship over the last sixty years has carefully emphasised the artistry, industry, and intellect of early medieval Scandinavians and Icelanders, even the most generous of scholars can default to a view of them as communities of pirates, a position encapsulated in a comment by John Hines that the Icelander Egill Skallagrímsson's soulful poetry should "warn the non-Viking reader that the Vikings, however barbaric their behaviour, were not mindless barbarians" (Hines 1994–97, 102–3). For some earlier onlookers, this barbarianism stemmed from the northerners' pagan practices (e.g. de Vries 1970; Gehl 1937; Gordon 1957, xxxiii; Sigurður Nordal 1990, originally published in 1942 as *Íslenzk menning*). The majority of modern studies of Old Norse religion simply avoid the topic of morality entirely (a noteworthy exception is Lindow 2020, 479–80).

It is in this context that I address the word *siðr*, which is commonly translated as "custom" (or a variation on that term), though with secondary definitions like "moral life" and, very commonly, "religion" (Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson 1874, s.v. "siðr;" Fritzner 1886–96, s.v. "siðr;" de Vries 1962, s.v. "siðr;" Zoëga 1910, s.v. "siðr");² because of the nature of the corpus of works in which *siðr* appears, that definition is necessarily and mainly based on attestations to the term in early Christian texts. Did *siðr* have a signification like "moral" for Viking Age worshippers of Old

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2 No consensus exists on *siðr*'s etymology. The two strongest derivations have their roots in the idea of custom, though the first has connotations of individual habit (related to Sanskrit *svadhā* "particularity, custom:" Orel 2003, s.v. "*seðuz;" Pokorny 1948–69, 883; cf. de Vries 1962, s.v. "siðr"), whereas the other has greater underlying notions of social obligation (Kroonen 2013, s.v. "*sidu-;" Bammesberger 1990, 150, 159). In light of this uncertainty and the potential for the *siðr*'s semantics to have developed over the Viking Age and early medieval period, as Sundqvist advises (2005, 273) usage may be more helpful than etymology as a guide to the word's significance.

Norse gods such as Óðinn and Freyja as well?³ And, if so, what implications might the co-occurrence of “religion” and “morality” have? As far as I am aware, only Olof Sundqvist (2005, 274–75) has properly considered these dimensions of the word before and even then is restricted, by considerations of space, to two short paragraphs on morality and warrior ethics in the entry on *siðr* in the encyclopaedia *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*. The other major study of the word focuses on its religious dimension (Nordberg 2018).

Caveats

Before turning to the two research questions above, it is necessary to consider the sources in which *siðr* is recorded (and the accompanying challenges for investigators) and the direction taken by previous studies of the word.

Beginning with the latter, *siðr* has gained currency as an emic replacement for (or, more typically, a way of problematizing) the concept of *religion* in writing on Old Norse traditions (e.g. André 2005, 106, 125; Blomkvist 2016; Jennbert 2011, 23–24, 164; Raudvere 2005, 196). Annette Lindberg (2009) and Andreas Nordberg (2012, 2018) have rejected this approach and make the following arguments:

- Scholars problematize the term *religion* but rarely apply the same scrutiny to *siðr*, and in fact usage of *siðr* is inevitably based on modern research goals, cultural values, and understandings of early medieval thought, which twists an ostensibly emic concept into an etic one.
- A distinction is usually drawn between non-Christian or popular Christian *siðr* and (more institutional) Christian *religion* that does not reflect how religious traditions before or after the Conversion were conceptualized by their adherents.⁴

3 The label *Viking Age* is used throughout this article, following the traditional (Anglocentric) conception of a period that begins in 793 CE with an attack in Northumbria and ends in 1066 CE with a battle near York. These dates are potentially misleading, given the cultural, economic, and political continuity before and after (see Brink 2008a, 5). The label is used here simply to set practical research boundaries.

4 *Religion* is a loan word in several Nordic languages but only came into general use in the early modern period (see Nordberg 2018, 129). The conversions of different regions of the North

- The juxtaposition of *siðr* and *religion* tends to privilege Christianity by comparing Christian theology with non-theological elements of non-Christian traditions.

Even so, few of the articles cited above or in the work of Lindberg or Nordberg use *siðr* without recognizing the gulf between their conceptions of the world and that of a ninth-century worshipper of Freyja, and the specific term employed (*siðr*, *religion*, or another such as *lived* or *popular religion*) is surely less important than researchers' self-consciousness of its being provisional, their inherent biases, and the imposition that any term places on the model of history being built.

For this article, I have nevertheless chosen to favour Lindberg and Nordberg's reasoning and employ *religion*. As Nordberg argues in his first contribution (2012, 120–22), the term may be used if there is a recognition that it is a construction, not identical with an ever-changing reality but through which reality can be better apprehended and studied, despite the potential for souring analyses by basing them in a modern – potentially WEIRD (i.e. Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) – categorization of behaviour and outlook. *Religion* is a culturally inflected label, but whether I used it or *siðr*, my own biases will inevitably influence my perspective on Old Norse material; as any modern observer unavoidably does, I already come to that material with certain categories both consciously and unconsciously in mind, and while my sources may challenge those categories, they will also be contorted and twisted by them. Using an etic terminology appears to me the most candid response to this problem.

Furthermore, employing *religion* should not imply a belief that all traditions are the same (nor that the moralities of different cultures are). While two as dissimilar as the Old Norse and Abrahamic traditions do emerge from the same ordinary cognitive capacities (cf. White 2021), that cognition is expressed according to disparate cultural, physical, social, and technological environments. A nominally singular religion like Roman Catholicism might find its mythology and doctrines interpreted quite differently in, say, parts of twenty-first-century Spain and Ireland with practical consequences for everyday life; modern and medieval Catholicisms are at further removes from either of these modern counterparts (although, as Lindberg 2009 and

are mentioned in this article, Iceland's most frequently. That is supposed to have occurred in 999 or 1000 CE. On that event, see further Orri Vésteinnsson 2001; for a general overview of conversion and Christianization in what is now Scandinavia, see Brink 2008b.

Nordberg 2018 remark, that rarely presents a problem for scholars' application of religion to early conceptions of Christianity), and Old Norse worshippers have values, abstractions and narratives that are even more dissimilar still. Using a common terminology potentially highlights contrasts between traditions as well as correspondences and can be used to better explicate the object of study, especially in tandem with an investigation of the signification of related emic terms like *siðr*. Crucially for this study, it would be confusing to utilize *siðr* here as a conceptual category when it is the term being investigated.

The label *morality* is also used below; while less controversial in Old Norse studies (presumably because the topic itself has been pondered less), as an etic term its validity could be queried on the same basis as that of *religion*, especially as multiple potential definitions exist. *Morality* is applied here, in the way that *religion* is, as a useful framework for analysis; following Bernard and Joshua Gert (2017), I use it descriptively to mean "certain codes of conduct put forward by a society or a group (such as a religion), or accepted by an individual for her own behaviour."

The corpus of literature attesting to Old Norse religion is fragmentary, which is a major challenge for this study, as it was for Nordberg's survey of *siðr*'s religious connotations (and arguably is for any investigation of Old Norse religion). Another difficulty is the extent to which that corpus has been altered, reinterpreted and partly created by Christians (see further and more generally McKinnell 2005, 37–49). Moreover, even within this relatively small and problematic body of texts, only a fraction utilize the word *siðr*, and the vast majority of these are by Christian authors working centuries after the conversion of their lands – although a few may have been composed by eleventh-century poets who grew up around the worship of Old Norse gods.

To address these issues, I work mainly with skaldic poetry, as it is often attributed to named poets and, comparatively speaking, more easily dated than sources like sagas; I stray most from skaldic poetry when attempting to widen the geographical range of the survey towards eastern Scandinavia. Given the difficulties with the available sources, I do not expect to definitively answer my research questions; nevertheless, the dearth of research on links between morality and religion makes the questions pressing all the same, and my hope is that even the cautious answers below are a useful step towards elucidating both those spheres of Old Norse thought.

The Various Meanings of *Siðr*

Religious

Nordberg (2018, 130) points to Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld Óttarsson's tenth *lausavísa* (*Skj.*, BI, 159) as the earliest appearance of *siðr* with religious semantics;⁵ the complications of that text will be discussed below. The earliest secure use is a work of hagiography from 1153, Einarr Skúlason's *Geisli*, which incorporates a kenning for the Christian god in its third stanza: "siðar⁶ heilags ... solar ... / ljósi" (the light of the sun of holy *siðr*). The adjective *heilagr* "holy" implies that *siðr* has a religious dimension here (as does its use in a divine kenning) but equally leaves open the possibility that the term's semantics are predominantly profane at this stage if a modifier like *heilagr* has to be present to bring out those religious connotations. On that basis, the sense of *siðr* at this stage may be more limited than "religion" and instead denote a behaviour that can (but might not) be religious.

The actual earliest instance of *siðr* may however date from shortly after the Conversion. Some manuscripts of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta*, *Njáls saga* and *Kristni saga* contain an enigmatic *lausavísa* telling of the killing of the Icelandic skald Vetrliði Sumarliðason by a *siðreynir* "siðr-tester" (*Skj.*, BI, 166; cf. Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 260–61; Ólafur Halldórsson 1958–2000, 157; Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson and Foote 2003, 22).⁷ However, there are numerous difficulties with the stanza that make it unreliable as the earliest attestation to *siðr*.

The first is the authenticity of the stanza (hereafter called *GuðLaus*),

- 5 Skaldic poems are cited from either *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* (the poem's name providing the reference) or Finnur Jónsson's *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning* (hereafter *Skj.*, and in which case volume and page numbers are given). Hallfreðr's *lausavísur* are taken from volume BI of the latter, where his name is spelled *Hallfrøðr*. Translations are my own.
- 6 This may alternatively be read as *siðar* "later," but this is rejected by Martin Chase, the poem's editor for *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, on the basis that it is hypermetrical.
- 7 *Reynir* could mean either "rowan" or "tester" here: cf. Snorri Sturluson 1998, 40, 64 with the suggestion of Snorri's editor on p. 192 and the parallels in e.g. *Skj.*, BI, 43, 53, 129, 139, 186, 259, 318. Because a slightly greater number of those examples favour "tester," I have preferred that in my translation, but "rowan" could fit as easily. Neither particularly clarifies the use of *siðr* other than to relate it to a man, although other compounds of *reynir* do imply a sense of being proven and experienced: e.g. "sunds ... / sannreynir" (true-*reynir* of swimming) (*Skj.*, BI, 130); "dreyrgra darra / dómreynir" (judgement-*reynir* of bloody

given its shaky attribution and supposed early date. It is light on details, supplying only the victim's name, and, using verbs in the singular, may be at odds with its prose contexts over the number of attackers and killings (cf. Jón Sigurðsson and Guðbrandur Vigfússon 1858–78, I, 14; Kock 1923–44, §2456; *Skj.*, BI, 166n.; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 261n.). This discrepancy, however, argues more for the authenticity of the poetry than against it; at least it was probably not composed for one of the sagas in which it is found. It is introduced in *Kristni saga* with the statement “[p]etta var kveðit um Guðleif” (this was composed about Guðleifr) (Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson and Foote 2003, 21). On this basis, some have argued that *GuðLaus* is part of a longer eulogy by a poet of Knútr Sveinsson (995–1035) to Guðleifr Arason, one of the killers named in the prose, mentioned in the Þórðarbók redaction of *Landnámabók* (348n.; Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 1977, 26–8). Jón Sigurðsson and Guðbrandur Vigfússon (1858–78, I, 14) point out that, while a reference in the *lausavísa* to southern Iceland does fit with Guðleifr's origins, the texts otherwise offer little to verify the connection – Guðleifr's name is not given in the poetry – or the eleventh-century dating. The verse is used as testimony by the sagas without affecting the course of their narratives, which is sometimes viewed as an indication of authenticity (based on the cautious discussion in Whaley 1993; cf. Clunies Ross 2005, which partially undermines those arguments). In sum, the evidence is circumstantial but argues for rather than against the early dating of *GuðLaus*, in particular the intimation that it pre-dates its prose contexts.

A second problem is manuscript variation. *Siðreynir* is a widespread reading and echoes a religious kenning for the breast as a “böenar smiðja” (smithy of prayers) in the first *helmingr* in some manuscripts (followed by *Skj.*). The thirteenth-century Gráskinna offers *sóknbeiðir* “attack-de-

spears [i.e. warrior] (*Skj.*, BII, 217); “Mótreyni ... mána / málma braks” (meeting-*reynir* of the moon of the clash of iron [i.e. warrior]) (*Skj.*, BI, 179); and similarly “sannreynd / ... við guð og mann” (proven true to god and man) (*Máriuvisur II*, st. 23). Another possibility is that the target of the kenning is “testing” older customs in a way that is interrogative or hostile: cf. *sökreynir* “dispute-*reynir*” (*Skj.*, AII, 47), referring to an Icelander who is praised elsewhere in the same poem for resolving conflicts, and *gedreynir* “temper-*reynir*” (*Skj.*, BI, 139), concerning the untrustworthy and antagonistic god Loki. If Christians already equated worshipping their god with moral worth, this testing could even have a moral dimension for them, but this is less supported by the semantics of other uses of *reynir*. (It is less likely still that *reynir* “tester” is being used to ironically comment on the morality of a killer, given how positive the *lausavísa* otherwise is about its protagonist(s).)

mander,” Hauksbók presents *sigðreynir* “sword-reynir” (early fourteenth century), and the fifteenth-century AM 466 4to and seventeenth-century GKS 1003 fol. read *sigreynir* “victory-reynir” (on the relationships between some of these manuscripts, see Hall and Zeevaert 2018). Gráskinna is the outlier, but both its elements are common in kennings, and it fits as well with the violent themes of the stanza, as *siðreynir* does with the religious, potentially providing a third warrior kenning to a stanza that already has two. The other (also martial) readings may reflect influence from *sigtólum*, which metrically falls on the previous line of *GuðLaus* but is only two words away and on the same line in all three manuscripts. Nevertheless, *reynir* itself is repeated from the *lausavisa*’s first line, and it is impossible to know if that repetition is intentional or not. *Siðreynir*’s popularity makes it the preferred reading here, but question marks remain. Much the same could be said for the *lausavisa* in general: arguments can be made to the contrary, but the most likely scenario is that it contains the earliest instance of *siðr* with a religious denotation in the corpus.

Along with *Geisli*, the next earliest secure religious appearances of *siðr* appear in the twelfth-century *Óláfs drápa Tryggvasonar* and *Plácitusdrápa*.⁸ According to stanza ten of the former, Óláfr Tryggvason’s subjects turned “frá sið vǫndum... / ok illum... / goðum *nitti*” (from wicked *siðr* and denied evil gods),⁹ the reference to pagan deities making clear the religious context of *siðr*, while stanza fifteen apposes Óláfr’s offering of “siðir góðir” (good *siðir*) to Norwegians with the hatred heathens have for him, again suggesting that the *siðir* are religious in character. In *Plácitusdrápa*, *siðr* most obviously has a religious dimension in stanza eight, which refers to “siðr heiðinn” (heathen *siðr*). Some scholars use *siðr* as an all-encompassing terminology, embracing some element of myth as well as behaviours and traditions (e.g. Jennbert 2011, 23–24, 164; Raudvere 2005, 196; cf. Sundqvist 2005, 175). This poetry does not support that, but equally it expounds so little that it is difficult to be sure that *siðr* only refers here to tradition-upheld religious praxis. That praxis does have a moral dimension

8 On the dating of these poems, see *Óláfs drápa Tryggvasonar*, 1031 and *Plácitusdrápa*, 179. *Siðr* also survives in the earliest prose texts, which date to around this period. In the *Old Icelandic Homily Book* from c. 1200 (de Leeuw van Weenen 1993, 12v, 25r, 57v, 65v, 73r), its senses vary, moving from customs, to religion generally, to specific rites. On its use to refer to rites, see Sundqvist 2005, 273–74, and for a broader overview of the term’s religious semantics where it appears in prose and legal texts, Sundqvist 2005, 273–74, 275–76.

9 On the addition of *nitti* to this line, see *Óláfs drápa Tryggvasonar*, st. 10n.

in the instances from *Óláfs drápa Tryggvasonar*, but *siðr*'s primary sense is clearly religious.

These texts probably echo wider developments in the semantics of *siðr*, at least in West Norse. Einarr Skúlason, the poet of *Geisli*, spent time in Norway and composed for Swedish and Danish royalty (*SkP*2, 537), while *siðr* also refers to religion in *Jómsvíkingadrápa* (st. 7) by the (possibly Norwegian-born) Orcadian Bjarni Kolbeinsson, in the prose of (the again-possibly Norwegian) *Olafs saga hins helga* (Heinrichs et al. 1982, e.g. 84, 182; cf. Ólafur Halldórsson 1979, 134) and in Norway's early laws (*Eiðsivapingslög* 383; cf. Nordberg 2018, 131), all of which may date from the thirteenth century or earlier. Early references from eastern Scandinavia are harder to come by. Nordberg points to the Old Gnutish law codes of the island of Gotland (2018, 133; *Gutalagen*, 14; cf. *Guta saga*, 8, 10, 12), which connect religion with *siðr* in the early thirteenth century, if the prevailing dating of that law code is correct (Peel 2009, xxxvi–xl). “Religion” is also among the senses of East Norse *siðher* in *Konungastýrelsen*, which was probably assembled in the fourteenth century (Bureus 1964; cf. Ronge 1986), much later than *GuðLaus* or *Geisli* (others cited in Nordberg 2018, 133 are later still). Given how widespread *siðr*'s religious semantics are, however, the suggestion has to be that they were already present across Scandinavia before differences between East and West Norse accelerated in the thirteenth century (cf. Perridon 2002, 1018).

Religious?

Nordberg (2018, 130) turns to *lausavísa* 10 by Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld Óttarsson as the earliest use of *siðr* to refer to religion; if the ascription is correct, the text comes from the tenth century, an earlier *terminus ante quem* for that sense than *GuðLaus*.

The first *helmingr* of the text is especially relevant (*Skj.*, BI, 159):

Sá 's með Sygna ræsi
siðr, at blót eru kviðjuð;
verðum flest at forðask
fornhaldin sköp norna[.]¹⁰

10 Although too tangential to examine in depth, *sköp*, here translated as “fates,” is an intriguing word-choice. Related to the verb *skapa* “shape,” Karen Bek-Pedersen (2011, 17, 34–35, 170–71) establishes that, while it implies personal fates arranged by an external figure, it

That is *siðr* with the king of the Sygnir [Óláfr Tryggvason], that sacrifices are banned; we must shun most of the time-honoured fates of the *normir*.

Two issues present themselves here.

- Was this composed by Hallfreðr or any tenth-century Icelander?
- Does the term *siðr* refer to religion in this instance?

Supposedly concerning the poet's struggle to renounce the Old Norse gods (*Skj.*, BI, 158–59; cf. *Hallfreðar saga*, 153–59), the debate over the authenticity of Hallfreðr's *lausavísur* on his conversion has a long history. The opinion of their chief sceptic Bjarni Einarsson that they are just “too good to be true” (1981, 218; similarly, Bjarni Einarsson 1961; Dronke 1978, 26) is quoted frequently by later investigators (e.g. Abram 2015, 118; Whaley 2003, 237). Diana Whaley conducted the most rigorous investigation of the poetry's credibility, examining it against poetic, circumstantial, and mythological criteria and ultimately concluding that, if they are twelfth-century fabrications, “the Conversion verses represent a remarkably – implausibly? – good attempt to get inside the troubled head of a reluctant convert” (2003, 254); not that the stanzas are “too good to be true,” but that they are too good not to be. Nothing irrefutably connects them to Hallfreðr – the contents and the style could have been imitated by a later antiquarian – yet neither does anything count strongly against tenth-century composition (for further arguments in favour of authenticity, see Gade 2001, 71–74; Males 2017, n.42). The case is as strong as or stronger than that of many other purportedly early *lausavísur*, and on that basis I proceed assuming that the *lausavísa* containing *siðr* was composed by Hallfreðr.

Siðr here could refer to the action of banning sacrifices or to the Christian religion that has prompted that ban. The former interpretation is simpler and as supported by broader usage as religious semantics are,

can also have negative connotations of fickleness. The term may imply that Hallfreðr is leaving behind the *normir*, the supernatural group who supposedly control fate, for a new, less negative fate, set out by another divine figure. Bek-Pedersen does observe (2011, 171) that *skop* is the most common term for describing fate in connection with the *normir*, so perhaps those undertones are inadvertent, but the use of *forðask*, which can mean “escape” as well as “shun,” argues for intentionality.

including in a work by Hallfreðr himself: after recounting Óláfr's bravery in battle, *Erfidrápa Óláfs Tryggvasonar* comments on itself that “frægrs til slíks at segja / siðr” (it is a famous *siðr* to relate such [behaviour]) (st. 1).¹¹ As Ernst Albin Kock proposes (1923–44, §2449), the most straightforward interpretation of *siðr* here is as “practice” or “custom” (referring to poetry-making), an individual action based on the expectations created by a longer tradition. The formulation is similar across Hallfreðr's two poems: roughly, “it is a *siðr* to X.”

Similar too is the implied signification of *siðr* in several verses from the twelfth century. In Gamli kanóki's *Harmsól* (a morally exhortative praise poem for Christ), as people are led into sin, their “døkkvir *siðr*” (*siðr* darkens) (st. 55); conversely, at the start of the century, Gísl Illugason describes how “*siðr* batnaði” (*siðr* improved) (*Erfikvæði* about Magnús berfættr, st. 7; highlighted in Sundqvist 2005, 274), when Magnús berfættr reconciled with a group of rebellious subjects (the poet specifies that they act with *rækðum* “affection” towards Magnús); and a *lausavísa* by Bjarni Kálfsson (2009) criticizes soldiers for not giving up their horses to him and his group as “*siðr* inn vesti” (the worst *siðr*). Bjarni depicts it as an upsetting of the social structure, servants riding while their superiors walk. In each of these cases, the usage refers to human behaviour yet is heavily morally inflected. That behaviour is being judged. Nevertheless, the usage makes more sense as “behaviour” or “practice” than “morals” or “moral norms,” even if it is gesturing in that direction.

In the twelfth century, *Háttalykill* refers to the intensification of effort in battle as a *siðr* created by warriors (st. 12; perhaps with especially strong associations with tradition, if these fighters are being glorified as the originators of the practice) and to generosity as the “*siðr* jöfra” (*siðr* of kings) (st. 80), Óláfr Haraldsson being lauded for fulfilling custom. Perhaps freer from moral implications is the term *lands siðr* “*siðr* of the country” (*Máruvísur II*, st. 10; similarly, e.g. Bureus 1964; Holm-Olsen 1945), although it crops up much later in the fourteenth or fifteenth century.

Sorting through these analogues, Hallfreðr's *lausavísa* has neither the judgemental undertones of some nor the implied contextualization of tra-

11 Manuscripts of *Fagrskinna* render *siðr* as *sudr* and *þiðr*, variants that no editors accept as far as I can tell, although some do manage to read *siðar* (gen. sg.); Kate Heslop, the poem's most recent editor, only finds *siðr* (nom. sg.), as do I: for discussion and references, see *Erfidrápa Óláfs Tryggvasonar*, st. 1n.

dition of others; yet the simple notion of individual action runs through each of them and fits well with the *lausavísa* (even closer parallels exist in prose: e.g. Driscoll 2008, 36; Snorri Sturluson 1911, 528). Given the precedent in Hallfreðr's own work and these comparisons, as well as the extra mental gymnastics required to attach *siðr* to religion in the *lausavísa*, it seems best to understand *siðr* as "(individual) practice."

Even if the primary sense of *siðr* is not "religion," however, Hallfreðr is a sophisticated enough poet that religious connotations could be inferred, given the context of *siðr*'s usage. In a stanza about conversion, those connotations would add extra weight to the push and pull of alliances being described, especially as the first two lines balance Óláfr's personal practice with the social practice of sacrificing to gods; in a *lausavísa* and within a series of *lausavísur* that often sketches the new in conflict with the old, the Christian with the heathen, this opposition could be intentional.¹²

Moral

Sundqvist (2005, 274) refers to the above-cited twelfth stanza of *Háttalykill* and first stanza of *Erfidrápa Óláfs Tryggvasonar* (though following a questionable edition of the text: see fn. 11) to distinguish between the moral semantics of *siðr* and those that are particular to "the warrior ethos and exemplary military conduct." In light of the other examples adduced above as comparison for Hallfreðr's *lausavísa*, relating to the obligations of a poet and a king, Sundqvist's formulation should be expanded. *Siðr* can refer to the expectations of anyone in society, based on their perceived station or function (cf. Taggart 2022a, 441–43, 449; Taggart 2022b, 310–11).

This is already attested in Þórarinn loftunga's *Tøgdrápa* (c. 1028–30 CE), in which the compound *siðnæmr* "siðr-learned" (st. 1) characterizes King Knútr Sveinsson. Matthew Townend suggests that it refers to "Knútr's Christian courtliness" (*Tøgdrápa*, 853), and Knútr was a Christian given to signalling his devotion, yet *siðnæmr* would be unique in the extant stanzas of *Tøgdrápa* in referring to religion; the compliments paid

12 The *helmingr* ends with reference to the "fornhaldin skop norna", and the adjective *fornbaldinn* "time-honoured" may be an understated criticism of Óláfr's practice, which lacks the obligation to tradition that *siðr* can come with elsewhere. The element *forn-* "ancient" may also signal wordplay, the time-honoured fates of the *normir* a metonymy for *forn siðr*, implying that the Old Norse religion was already known by that name during the Viking Age (cf. Nordberg 2018, 131).

to Þórarinn's patron are functional, covering areas such as his talent as a leader (st. 5), skill in battle (stt. 2, 7), and generosity (st. 8). In the Old Norwegian *Konungs skuggsjá* (Holm-Olsen 1945, 42) *siðnæmr* signals a courtier's ability to quickly learn the behaviour demanded by their role (ironized in *Strengleikar*, 216, in which the related *siðnæmiligr* describes a courtly romance). As such, the likelihood is that Þórarinn's *siðnæmr* refers to Knútr's experience in courtly matters without necessitating a prominent religious dimension – and demonstrates how meeting a station's social expectations is considered laudable.

Little, therefore, distinguishes warrior ethics as *siðr* to a greater degree than performances of propriety in other roles. This is likely true across gender and class boundaries as well – the throwaway characterization by Bjarni Kálfsson of his tormentors as servants relies on class protocol; in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, a king is castigated as *siðlauss* “without *siðr*” (st. 43) for dressing up as a woman and milking goats, the domain of women or enslaved people according to Sundqvist (2005, 274; cf. *Skj.*, BII, 295). A chieftain must not act as an enslaved person should; an enslaved person may be treated very differently from other members of society. Such orthodoxies exist in all societies; here, they are to some extent encapsulated in *siðr*.

Several texts from the twelfth century have been cited in which *siðr* implies judgement against social expectations. The oldest surviving work in which those undertones blossom fully is Gamli kanóki's *Harmsól* (later twelfth century). Christ has “fríðir... / siðir” (beautiful *siðir*) according to stanza 60; and *siðabót* “*siðr*-remedy” can be achieved with the aid of the Holy Spirit (st. 3), just as the biblical King David did for his *synðir* “sins” (st. 48). This is the oldest text I can find in which “moral” is the most natural translation for *siðr*. However, the closeness of *siðabót* to Gísl Illugason's “*siðr* batnaði” (behaviour improved) (mentioned above) reflects how fluid the boundaries can be between the term's senses.

Ósiðr, the inverse of *siðr*, appears regularly in prose and delineates objectionable behaviour in Old Icelandic and Old Swedish law codes from the late thirteenth century (*ONP*, s.v. “*ósiðr*,” Schlyter 1830, 23; Schulman 2010, 152), yet it only surfaces four times in extant poetry according to the database of the Skaldic Project. The earliest of these, Markús Skeggjason's *Eiríksdrápa* (composed 1103–7) is clearly moral in its use of *ósiðr*, using

it as a catch-all term for outlawry, piracy, and theft (st. 6). Probably from later in that century, stanza 16 of *Óláfs drápa Tryggvasonar* describes Óláfr Tryggvason having banned *ósiðr* among warriors who loved *lǫstr* “a fault, misdemeanour, vice,” after telling us that the same king punished thieves. Given that Óláfr’s legend fixates on religious change (the poem has previously depicted him subjugating non-Christians, and *siðr* appears with religious semantics in stt. 10 and 15, as discussed above), that *lǫstr* may be religious in nature, linking immorality with religion, although the stanza does not actively promote this reading (cf. the younger *Hugsvinnsmál*, st. 100 and *FoGT*, st. 33).

The early poetic sources using *siðr* without religious semantics do so in Old Icelandic, although *Tøgdrápa* is for a Danish king and the term is well-attested in such senses in Old Norwegian prose such as the thirteenth-century *Konungs skuggsjá* (Holm-Olsen 1945). *Osidher*, the East Norse cognate of *ósiðr*, also appears in *Östgötalagen* (Schlyter 1830, 23) and *Konungastyrelsen* (Bureus 1964), which ostensibly date to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries respectively (Ronge 1986; Stähle with Holm 1988). Moral semantics were not limited to West Norse. Indeed, *sidher* itself likewise appears in *Konungastyrelsen*, where it can mean both “behaviour” and “moral.” Returning to the point with which I concluded the survey of religious material, if Harry Perridon (2002, 1018) is correct that the North Germanic languages showed relatively little variation by the end of the Viking Age, and that their substantial differences arose afterwards, this implies that these senses of *siðr* were already present across the Germanic-speaking North by the eleventh century. Confidence in that assertion must be limited, however: the lexicons of East and West Norse are little-compared, and research so far has concentrated on phonological divergence (cf. Simensen 2002, 961).

In Summary

Siðr means “(individual) practice” in the tenth-century poetry of Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld Óttarsson.

- The word possesses connotations of judgement, based on the fulfilment of social expectations, in Hallfreðr’s other surviving use (*Erfidrápa Óláfs Tryggvasonar*, st. 1); these are also present slightly later in *Tøgdrápa* (st. 1).

- While *siðr* appears to have moral undertones by the twelfth century, the youngest extant text in which the term could simply denote “moral” is *Harmsól* (stt. 3, 48, 60), probably composed closer to the century’s end – although *ósiðr*, with its own conspicuous moral dimension, first appears in *Eiríksdrápa* (c. 1103–7).
- A religious sense may be first evidenced in *GuðLaus*, unsecurely dated to the early eleventh century; the earliest reliable use of *siðr* with religious significance is in 1153 (*Geisli*, st. 3), though the text appears to refer to the relatively narrow semantics of religious praxis.¹³

These conclusions are cautiously made. The texts’ intentions with *siðr* are rarely clear from the word’s immediate context, and the semantics are often fuzzy and defy my attempts to neatly distinguish between *siðr* as behaviour (measured against a consensus-guided code of conduct) and *siðr* as moral (the code of conduct directing behaviour); would a king who fails to display generosity be accused of a moral failing (and especially in comparison with someone of lower station or with fewer resources)? Perhaps (cf. Taggart 2022b, 310–11). Expectations of etiquette and morality may crossover, at least in view of this article’s definitions; even if the sense “moral” is not attested during the Viking Age, the term is already connected to the judgement of conduct in a way that reflects social and moral norms.

The Lateness of *Siðr*

The earliest extant *siðr* is from the tenth century. According to the Samnordisk runtextdatabas, it does not appear in runic inscriptions from any period, but as *siðr* does not seem to have been borrowed from a contemporary Germanic language (see fn. 2), the word was presumably in use throughout the Viking Age, however seldom.

This prompts two queries: Can modern scholars refer to the semantics

13 Two tenth-century poems called *Hákonardrápa* by Tindr Hallkelsson (st. 4) and Guthormr sindri (st. 5) are excluded from consideration as *siðr* is in both cases a minority manuscript reading. In the first case, the alternative readings are preferable for reasons of alliteration, although in the second the word in question, *siðbætir*, arguably fits better into Guthormr’s narrative and is attested elsewhere (Kock 1923–44, §2743).

of *siðr* to understand Viking Age thought, even though the word only survives in texts from the last years of that period? And why does *siðr* not appear in earlier texts, regardless of its definition? Neither of these have firm answers; the only response can be hypotheses based on later use and current understandings of early northern cultural trends.

Where is the Viking Age siðr?

The scarcity of *siðr* in early texts, regardless of meaning, could be an accident of preservation or signal that the terminology did not gain importance until later. The former is not a radical suggestion, given the low quantity of poetry that has been preserved overall and of instances of *siðr* within that body, as well as the environment in which Old Norse texts were transmitted, in which material addressing non-Christian religion directly is less likely to have survived (Taggart 2021, 286–87). On the other hand, while kennings based on Old Norse mythic tropes fall out of use in the eleventh century (Clunies Ross 2005; Males 2017), some poetry utilizing them does continue to be transmitted. It would seem quite an accident for a comparatively neutral term like *siðr* to be wiped out when those kennings were not.

Attempting to increase the clarity of this picture, I have counted instances of *siðr* (simplex or in compounds but not *ósiðr*) alongside stanzas and fragments of verse that survive from the ninth century until the eleventh (Figure 1), reckoning each stanza and fragment as a unit regardless of length and using the dates given by *Skj.* (BI). Unfortunately, this information can only provide a suggestion of the past reality. A stanza of ten lines has the same weight in these calculations as a fragment with two, and Finnur Jónsson's datings can be queried on the basis that poetry may be inauthentic and that a poet is counted in a single century even when their work spans two (arguably the year 1000 is the only boundary meaningful for its own sake, due to the Alþing's conversion). However, Figure 1 would not be much more dependable even if the dates were painstakingly scrutinized, eddic poems included, and individual lines counted, given that no one knows how many verses have been lost from each century (particularly from non-Icelanders). Likely, proportionately more poetry is missing for every century counted back in time. A total of the poetic units that were actually composed in each century might articulate a very different trend than the quantities surrendered by today's fragmentary corpus.

<i>Century</i>	<i>Extant Poetic Units</i>	<i>Instances of Siðr</i>
Ninth	143	0 (0%)
Tenth	663	1 (0.15%) ¹⁴
Eleventh	889	3 (0.34%)
Twelfth	1268	16 (1.26%)

Figure 1

The volume of preserved skaldic poetry increases greatly century by century: almost fifty per cent more survives from the twelfth century than from the eleventh, and the quantity from the ninth century is far smaller than later years. In fact, 4.6 times the poetry endures from the tenth century than the ninth, yet only one instance of *siðr* is extant in the tenth-century corpus. It should therefore be unsurprising that the term is not preserved from the ninth century.

By the twelfth century, usage of *siðr* has nominally increased; it is used over five times more than in the eleventh. Where the previous three hundred years combined only manage to throw up four instances of *siðr*, the twelfth-century “Golden Age” of Christian poetry, as Katrina Attwood names it (2005, 45), offers sixteen. Arguably, then, *siðr* gained currency while Christianity (and especially Christian literature) exploded, perhaps as the disparity between religions old and new become clearer and/or Christians reflecting on non-Christian culture needed a vocabulary to frame their discussion. The sense of difference that Christians felt looking back was enough that *forn siðr* could mean not only the behaviours and concepts but also the period of Old Norse religion; Þórr and Freyja were worshipped “í fornum sið” (in the olden times) (*ONP*, s.v. “siðr”). Religion is the characteristic change between the two eras.

Several arguments count against this. The first is that the divergence between *forn* and *nýr siðr* must have been obvious much earlier than *Geisli*, for example. Christianization was a long process, and worshippers of Old Norse gods had contact with Christian and other non-Old Norse traditions in the Viking Age and before. Already in the tenth century, Hallfreðr was distinguishing between Christ and the gods “ór heiðnum dómi” (from heathendom) (*Skj.*, BI, 158; similarly, *Hákonardrápa* by Tindr Hallkelsson,

14 Finnur Jónsson deems GuðLaus to be tenth century, and the works of Hallfreðr as eleventh.

st. 7; cf. Whaley 2003, 240).¹⁵ The twelfth century did not see a fundamentally new need that catalysed an increase in *siðr*'s popularity. The second is the existence of *GuðLaus*, already seemingly dealing with religion in the early eleventh century. The third must be that a shift from three to sixteen is not a dramatic increase when set alongside the numbers of poetic units from those centuries – less than a percentage point. It could be an accident that *siðr* survives from later years in greater numbers.

As stated above, these figures do not constitute a reliable guide to past use and cannot be used to calculate a trend with statistical significance. This exercise is a visualization of what modern scholars do not have and cannot know. That being the case, *GuðLaus*'s existence and *siðr* being native to Old Norse should weigh most heavily. Already the term denotes a range of concepts in early medieval North Germanic dialects. Therefore, it was probably more popular before the turn of the millennium than the literature attests, and its absence reflects the loss of culture in general, especially from the early Viking Age.

A Moral Age

The uncertainty over *siðr*'s prevalence and usage during the Viking Age makes for a bad start to answering whether it already had moral semantics in that period. Several additional factors might be called on, nevertheless: the length of the interlude between the end of the Viking Age and the first appearance of *siðr* approximating to Modern English “moral;” the closeness of earlier denotations to “moral;” and the geographical span covered by that sense of the word.

Siðr first appears with moral significance in the 1100s, the earliest instance being *ósiðr* in *Eiríksdrápa* around forty years after the traditional end of the Viking Age and just over a century after the conversion of Iceland (but not the end of the Christianization process there or in the other Nordic countries). In the east, the definition is among the first to appear at all and is prevalent in the fourteenth century (by the standards

15 While there is little that persuasively argues that the phrase *for siðr* was used during the Viking Age (cf. Nordberg 2018, 131; fn. 12), markers such as baptism would certainly have emphasized the distinctions between sets of religious concepts and practices. That early northerners ascribed prestige through the authority of anonymous and ancient tradition (McKinnell 2020; cf. e.g. *Vafþrúðnismál*, st. 1; *Fragment*) also makes it more plausible that Old Norse religion would already have been described as *for* before Christianization began in earnest.

of the small extant corpus). Above, I gave the caveat that lexical variation between West and East Norse (and Old Gnutish) is understudied in comparison to, for instance, phonological deviations; nevertheless, semantic consistency does seem more likely to persist from the Viking Age than arise from later influence of West Norse on eastern languages. Indeed, influence probably travelled in the other direction, especially from the fourteenth century onwards (Herbert 2007). As I also noted above, the more pronounced “moral” denotation of the word is not far from the connotations of judgement, based on the fulfilment of social expectations, already prominent in *siðr* in the tenth-century work of Þórarinn loftunga and Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld (and one of its possible etymologies; see fn. 2). When set alongside the geographical range across which *siðr* “moral” is found, this early date suggests that the term could denote the concept of morality in the Viking Age.

Both poems are addressed to Christian kings and so may have been influenced by how the term was used by Christians. However, Hallfreðr, at least, was brought up as a worshipper of Old Norse gods, and that religion was not immediately extinguished with the conversion of Iceland, so Christian influence is not a better explanation for *siðr*’s meaning in these poems. That meaning could also reflect earlier Christian contact, as many other concepts of Old Norse religion might; unadulterated, homogenous Old Norse religion existed no more than unadulterated, homogeneous Christianity ever has. Whether this is a concern matters only to researchers for whom the (less answerable) question of origins is more important than the relevance of the concept and word to worshippers of Old Norse gods.

Norms and Flexibility

Morality is not much easier to separate from religion than from custom and practice in the extant usage of *siðr*. When the anonymous poet of *Líknarbraut* describes their god as *siðskjótr* “*siðr*-quick” (st. 6), are they praising values that are moral or religious? At times, this ignorance indicates how little context a twenty-first-century researcher has for understanding a word’s significance in skaldic poetry; at others, however, it can reflect how morals proceed from Christianity for many of the poets who

use *siðr* (foregrounded in e.g. *Harmsól*, st. 3). Was the same intermingling of senses true for Viking Age worshippers of Old Norse gods? Was Old Norse religion based in (potentially moral) social norms, and, as a result, were those norms less flexible?

A long-standing view is that religion permeated Old Norse culture and society (see further Nordberg 2012). Few scholars expressly extend this into the area of morality, unless honour and masculinity are concerned (for exceptions, see Sundqvist 2005, 276; Lindow 2020, 479). Law and the land's administration, however, have received particular attention, above all a judgement preserved in the twelfth-century *Íslendingabók*, supposedly from the mouth of the lawspeaker overseeing the Conversion: "höfum allir ein lög ok einn sið" (let us all have one law and one *siðr*) (2018, 135–36; cf. *Íslendingabók*, 17; Sundqvist 2005, 275; Nygaard 2021, 156–57). In the texts examined above, there are hints of blending of another type of *siðr* with law as well; according to Hallfreðr's *lausavísa* 10, it is the *siðr* of Óláfr Tryggvason "at blót eru kviðjuð" (that sacrifices are forbidden), *kviðja* "ban, forbid, banish" being a word with legal force (Bjarni Einarsson 1961, 193, notes a close echo in the *Gulapingslög*; cf. *Gulapingslög*, 18, and, further, e.g. *Frostapingslög*, 245; *Gulapingslög*, 16; *Óláfs drápa Tryggvasonar*, st. 16). Óláfr's *siðr* is to modify the law, thereby altering the *siðr* of others.

Sundqvist (2005, 275) points out that, in a text like *Östgötalagen* (Schlyter 1830), *siðr* and *lög* may be close to synonymous yet in another clearly distinct; *Íslendingabók*'s "ein lög ok einn sið," for instance, separates the concepts rather than joining them. Simon Nygaard's suggestion (2021, 156) of conceptualizing one as built on the other seems to capture this relationship. They are related but not the same. As Nygaard goes on to say, "a change in religion means a new law built on this new religion" (2021, 156), and that is surely the impression that *Íslendingabók* wants to give. Even whilst *siðr* excludes the law, it is shown to encompass much of the foundational (potentially religious) ideology of society. *Siðaskipti* "shift in *siðr*," a term first recorded in thirteenth-century texts (*ONP*, s.v. "siðaskifti;" cf. Nordberg 2018, 132), signifies a change in religion but also in perceived norms, behaviour, and rationales for norms and behaviour.¹⁶ Change in *siðr*

16 *Perceived* is worth emphasizing here. Actual behaviours and norms themselves may not change, even though they are thought to have done so by religious proponents, and identity is not the only religious factor that can influence the prevalence of acts like sharing and altruism (see e.g. Preston, Salomon and Ritter 2014; Stamatoulakis 2013).

equates to change in society; change in society entails change in the law, and hence, as discussed briefly above, later texts can break Icelandic history down into the ages before and after Conversion.

However, the actual legal change reported in *Íslendingabók* is (rather famously) a compromise. To maintain peace, the laws become Christian in general but still permit the exposure of infants, eating horsemeat, and “blóta á laun” (to sacrifice in secret) (*Íslendingabók*, 17). Although the last act could be punished if witnesses were produced, on the face of it *Íslendingabók* is implying that more than one *siðr* can co-exist within the same law. Yet *Íslendingabók* immediately undermines this idea by relating that the non-Christian practices were made entirely illegal “síðarr fám vetrum” (a few years later). These exceptions could have been dropped because Icelanders had learned that *siðr* and law could not be separated without impeding the functioning of society, or because Christians had grown to dominate politics enough to force through the change. Certainly, Hallfreðr’s *lausavísur* demonstrate that a Christian could already view their *siðr* as exclusive of non-Christian *siðr* in the tenth century; Hallfreðr’s text carefully but plainly conveys that he is giving up his previous gods because of the demands of his patron Óláfr’s Christianity.

Yet the presentation of the exceptions in *Íslendingabók* is curious and hints at its own biases (on those, see Schach 1982; cf. the parallel accounts in Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson and Foote 2003; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954). Recorded over a hundred years after the Conversion, *Íslendingabók* likely does not reflect the events as they occurred, least of all in its quotations of historical speech like “ein lög ok einn sið”. Yet those details may be part of a wider design that (sometimes subtly) condemns Old Norse religion. For example, greater criminality (and shame) is attached to transgressions performed in secret (*Grágás* 1974, 154, 162–64; cf. Andersson 1984, 496–505). Given that, *Íslendingabók* says, non-Christian sacrifice must be conducted in secret and is, practically-speaking, illegal as it can be prosecuted, the text is casting non-Christians in the conversion moment as transgressors practising a *siðr* that was inherently morally compromised.

It seems, therefore, that northern Christians perceived their own *siðr* as inflexible and based on social norms – and may already have done so when Hallfreðr was composing for Óláfr – but the doubtfulness of

Íslendingabók's testimony makes it difficult to say if non-Christians felt the same. Nonetheless, the awkwardness of the events as they are told in *Íslendingabók* may hint that a kernel of fact is at the heart of the narrative; a compromise followed by later abolition is bad storytelling, intimating that Icelandic *siðr* around the Conversion was flexible enough to be separated from law until Christianity attained dominance. In this it is supported by hints from elsewhere that the practice of Old Norse religion was not exclusive of Christianity (Dubois 1999 surveys signs of both co-existence and conflict). Yet the situation likely varied or was more circumstantial than these tendrils of evidence allow for: without looking farther than *Íslendingabók*, one can find a penalty for blasphemy against the Old Norse gods (p. 17),¹⁷ and even if Christianity is the social disrupter bringing legal change in Iceland, the narrative allots considerable resistance to adherents of Old Norse gods as well. Likely there were connections between religion, law, and governance before Christianity began to exert pressure (for examples, see Taggart 2022a; Nygaard 2021; and above all Brink 2002), and in general *siðaskipti* potentially had serious costs for a worshipper of an Old Norse god, alongside alienation from their in-group. Conversion for Hallfreðr, according to his *lausavísur*, meant renouncing sacrifice (*lausavísur* 6, 10) but also the gods' love and favour (*lausavísur* 7, 9), support (*lausavísur* 7, 8), good luck (*lausavísa* 6), skaldic tradition (*lausavísa* 7; see Males 2017 for this in action), and the *skopp* of the *nornir* (see fn. 10). (Further consequences should be expected that were not directly relevant to his poetry.)

Therefore, the flexibility of Old Norse *siðr* is probably sometimes illusory – both as a function of its being reported in later Christian texts and because its praxis was not seriously tested until Christianization began in earnest – and sometimes a sign of individual, circumstantial, or communal variety. The situation remains ambiguous, given the lack of evidence (and the late dating of instances of *siðr*), but certainly there is evidence to suggest that a *siðr* in the Viking Age could embrace a very large sphere of meaning, incorporating an array of norms as well as religion, as much for non-Christians as for Christians, and probably reflecting the links between

17 While *Íslendingabók* does say *goðgá* “blasphemy,” Grønlie 2006, 24 nevertheless suggests it may have been for slander. Parallels are so lacking that it is impossible to discount either possibility.

these various aspects of social life. This makes intuitive sense: following social norms, whether they have a religious rationalization or not, tends to be viewed favourably by the majority of a society. Inevitably, judgement comes with following or not following them – hence the sense of obligation that is connected with *siðr* even in some of its oldest surviving attestations – and while some of those norms may be simple prosocial acts like sharing, others can be intimately connected with religion. For modern worshippers, offering devotion to a god can be as much of a moral act as sharing is, for instance (White and Norenzayan 2022).

Conclusion

The provisionality of the above discussion is inescapable, in terms of dating, semantics, use and development. What statistician would base hypotheses regarding non-Christian usage of a term on a corpus in which the vast majority of attestations to that term come from Christian sources? A very low percentage, I would imagine. The conclusions here are too based on inferences (as most reconstructions of Old Norse religion are) to be sure that they accurately describe *siðr*'s significance in the early North. Equally, however, the possibilities that these conclusions represent should remind scholars to avoid firm beliefs regarding the separation of Old Norse religion not only from law but also from morality.

Siðr had a moral denotation in the Christian era, and it is plausible to extend this backwards into the Viking Age for non-Christian usage, when probably the word was used more than the surviving texts suggest. Some of the oldest extant uses of the term have connotations of obligation and judgement. Old Norse religion and morality may have been linked, whether religious ideology generated or merely reflected moral (and other) norms.

Siðr may not have meant “moral” for any Old Norse speaker in exactly the same way as *moral* does for a speaker of modern English (which itself will vary between individuals and groups); it is not an emic term to be used in modern research to describe a Viking Age or an early medieval code of conduct, especially given the term's importance for scholars of religion. Nevertheless, *siðr* is the surviving word that most captures that concept.

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ÁGRIP

Siðr, trú og siðferði

Efnisorð: siðferði, norræn trú, kveðskapur, *siðr*, *Íslendingabók*, siðskipti, kristnitaka

Fræðimenn hafa á síðustu fimmtán árum mikið rýnt í trúarlega merkingarfræði fornnorræna orðsins *siðr*, en siðferðileg vídd þess hefur nánast ekki hlotið neina umfjöllun. Mögulega stafar það af því að fræðimenn hafa almennt ekki beint athygli sinni að siðferði þeirra sem dýrkuðu norræna guði, nema í tengslum við heiður eða karlmennsku. Markmið mitt er að takast á við þetta og meta hvort siðferðileg merkingarfræði orðsins *siðr* hafi þróast með kristnitöku eða verið til áður.

Í greininni eru greind merkingarsvið elstu dæma um orðið *siðr*, og þau tengd við trúarbrögð, einstaklinga eða siðferði. Síðastnefnda merkingin kemur fyrst glögglega fyrir í kvæðinu *Harmsól* á tólftu öld, þó að siðferðisvíddir komi upp fyrir. Á grundvelli þessara siðferðisvídda, landfræðilegrar útbreiðslu hugtaksins og orðsifjafræði, legg ég til að *siðr* í merkingunni „siðferði“ hafi verið viðtekið og jafnvel vinsælt á víkingaöld.

Greininni lýkur með því að skoða samband siðferðis og trúar í samhengi við orðið *siðr* og lagabreytingar. Vera má að kristinn *siðr* hafi mótast seint á víkingaöld en *siðr* tengdur norrænum guðum kann að hafa verið minna sveigjanlegur en stundum er gert ráð fyrir, í ljósi þess hve stórt hlutverk trúarhugmyndir léku í daglegu lífi fólks til viðbótar við áhrif þeirra í lagalegu og stjórnsýslulegu samhengi. Ef til vill merkti hugtakið *siðr* ekki „siðferði“ í fornnorrænu á sama hátt og *moral* í huga þeirra sem tala nútímaensku (eða *siðferði* í nútímaíslensku), og sönnunargögnin gætu verið of ósamfelld til að styðja við tilgátuna um almenna notkun hugtaksins fyrir siðareglur. Þrátt fyrir það er *siðr* það varðveitta orð sem einna helst fangar nútímahugtakið *siðferði*.

SUMMARY

Siðr, Religion and Morality

Keywords: Morality, Old Norse religion, skaldic poetry, *siðr*, *Íslendingabók*, conversion, Christianization

The religious semantics of Old Norse *siðr* have been heavily scrutinized by scholars over the last fifteen years, yet its moral dimensions have almost not been considered at all. In this, research on *siðr* may reflect the lack of attention paid in general to the morality of worshippers of Old Norse gods, beyond considerations of honour and masculinity. With this article, I aim to fill this gap in scholarship and to assess whether *siðr*'s moral semantics developed with the Christianization of the North or pre-existed it.

To begin, I survey the earliest surviving instances of *siðr* and distinguish a range of denotations from their uses, from “religious praxis” to “individual practice” to “moral”. The last of these senses first clearly appears in *Harmsól* in the twelfth century, although moral dimensions do arise earlier. Despite the dearth of earlier attestation, it is proposed on the basis of those moral dimensions in earlier usage and the term’s geographical spread (as well as its etymological derivation) that *siðr* “moral” was popular and relevant during the Viking Age.

The article concludes by briefly considering the relationship between morality and religion in the context of *siðr*, chiefly through the prism of legal change. Christian *siðr* may be inflexible already in the late Viking Age; however, *siðr* associated with Old Norse gods may also be less accommodating than is sometimes assumed, given how deeply embedded Old Norse religion was in the lives of its adherents and its possible legal and administrative connections. *Siðr* may not have meant “moral” for any Old Norse speaker in the same way as *moral* does for a speaker of modern English, and the evidence is too provisional to promote its use as an emic term for a Viking Age code of conduct. Nevertheless, *siðr* is the extant word that most captures that concept.

Declan Taggart

Íslensku- og menningardeild Háskóla Íslands

Eddu við Arngrímögötu

IS-107 Reykjavík

declan@hi.is