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THE CONVERSION OF ICELAND

By Dag Strömbäck

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THE CONVERSION OF
ICELAND

A SURVEY

BY

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Honorary Life Member
of the Society

*TRANSLATED
AND ANNOTATED BY*

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VIKING SOCIETY
FOR NORTHERN RESEARCH
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PREFACE

IN 1960 I was honoured by an invitation from the Olaus Petri Foundation of Uppsala University to give a series of lectures on the Conversion of Iceland. I had recently been collecting and annotating the incomplete manuscripts which the late Professor Fredrik Paasche of Oslo had used for his brilliant Olaus Petri Lectures on a related theme, given in Uppsala in 1941.¹ The invitation I now received was all the more welcome because it gave me an opportunity to present my own attitude to problems connected with the Conversion of the Northern peoples, albeit in a more limited field.

Most of the text below represents my lectures of 1960. The circumstances of their composition naturally affected the style of presentation. By tradition the Olaus Petri Lectures are aimed at a general, not a specialist, audience. My main concern was to pursue a critical approach to the sources—surprisingly enough, almost a novel undertaking in this particular field.

Time passed and I had no leisure to put the lectures into shape for publication. I was happily kept in touch with the subject, in Uppsala by my supervision of Séra Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, who was working in the same field, and by the interest of my colleague, Dr Bo Almqvist, now Professor at University College, Dublin, and in London

¹ Fredrik Paasche, *Møtet mellom hedendom og kristendom i Norden*. Med minneord, innledning og noter utgitt ved Dag Strömbäck (1958).

by the learning and encouragement of my friends in University College and the Viking Society. It was then agreed that the Society should publish the lectures after some further revision and that they should be translated and annotated by Professor Peter Foote. The revision has chiefly resulted from closer attention to scaldic poetry and has led to expansion in Chapter III and a completely new Chapter IV. Other commitments did not allow me to finish this until the winter 1973-4.

In my original lectures I could spend little time on the writings of other scholars down to 1960, and I have found little reason to introduce discussion of work that has appeared since then. The annotation on the other hand has taken the chief contributions of the last fifteen years into account and may serve as a guide to them.

I am extremely grateful to the Council of the Viking Society for including this work in their Text Series; to Professor G. Turville-Petre, who read the translation in an early draft; to Dr Geraldine Barnes, who checked a number of references and quotations; and to Mr M. P. Barnes, who read a proof. It will be evident that my particular thanks are finally due to my friend and collaborator, Peter Foote.

Uppsala
and Djuphällen, Hedemora
August 1974

DAG STRÖMBÄCK

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Aarbøger</i>	<i>Aarbøger for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie</i>
<i>Altg. Rel.</i>	Jan de Vries, <i>Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte</i> ^a I-II (1956-7)
<i>Arkiv</i>	<i>Arkiv för nordisk filologi</i>
<i>Bps</i>	<i>Biskupa sögur gefnar út af hinu íslenska Bókmentafélagi</i> , I-II (1858-78)
<i>Den store Saga</i>	O. A. Johnsen and Jón Helgason, <i>Den store Saga om Olav den Hellige</i> (1941)
<i>DI</i>	<i>Diplomatarium Islandicum</i>
<i>Die Bekehrung</i>	K. Maurer, <i>Die Bekehrung des Norwegischen Stammes zum Christentume</i> I-II (1855-6)
<i>DN XVII:B</i>	Oluf Kolsrud, <i>Den norske Kirkes Erkebisper og Biskoper indtil Reformationen</i> (<i>Diplomatarium Norvegicum XVII:B</i> , 1913)
<i>Edda Snorra</i>	<i>Edda Snorra Sturlusonar</i> I-III (1848-87)
<i>Farms and Fanes</i>	Magnus Olsen, <i>Farms and fanes of ancient Norway</i> (1928)
<i>Fritzner</i>	J. Fritzner, <i>Ordbog over Det gamle norske Sprog</i> I-III (1883-96)
<i>Grágás</i> Ia-1b, II, III	Vilhjálmur Finsen, <i>Grágás . . . udgivet efter det kongelige Bibliotheks Haandskrift . . .</i> I-II (1852); <i>Grágás efter . . . Staðarhólsbók</i>

- (1879); *Grágás* . . . *Skálholtsbók* (1883)
- Hallfr. saga* (1939) *Hallfreðar saga*, in Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Vatnsdæla saga* (ÍF VIII, 1939), 133-200
- Hallfr. saga* (1953) Bjarni Einarsson, *Hallfreðar saga* (Samfund til Udgivelse af gammel nordisk Litteratur LXIV:I, 1953)
- Hkr.* *Heimskringla*
- Hkr.* I-III Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla* I-III (ÍF XXVI-XXVIII, 1941-51)
- Heiðinn siður* Ólafur Briem, *Heiðinn siður á Íslandi* (1945)
- ÍF* *Íslenzk Fornrit*
- ÍF* I Jakob Benediktsson, *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók* (ÍF I, 1968)
- Ísl. saga* Jón Jóhannesson, *Íslendinga saga* I-II (1956-8)
- KL* *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*
- Myth and religion* E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North* (1964)
- NK* *Nordisk Kultur*
- NK* VII Assar Janzén, *Personnavne* (NK VII, 1947)
- NK* VIII:B Sigurður Nordal, *Litteraturhistorie B: Norge og Island* (NK VIII:B, 1953)
- Saga Óláfs . . . af Oddr* Finnur Jónsson, *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar af Oddr Snorrason munk* (1932)

- Skj.* Finnur Jónsson, *Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning* A I-II, B I-II (1912-15)
- Um kristnitökuna* Björn Magnússon Ólsen, *Um kristnitökuna árið 1000 og tildrög hennar* (1900)
- Vorlesungen* K. Maurer, *Vorlesungen über Alt-nordische Rechtsgeschichte* I-V (1907-38)
- Ættegård og helligdom* Magnus Olsen, *Ættegård og helligdom. Norske stedsnavn sosialt og religionshistorisk belyst* (1926; transl. as *Farms and Fanes*, see above)

INTRODUCTION

THERE has always been an element of mystery and fascination in the sudden growth and blossoming of Iceland's literature in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. After being inhabited for not much more than two hundred years, a remote island in the North Atlantic emerges as the home of an outstanding literature in an age which may well bear comparison with the great periods of classical literature that have occurred elsewhere in the world. We can try to explain it in terms of the heritage and talent the Icelanders brought with them from Norway.¹ We can say with Fredrik Paasche that it was not 'the sleepy-heads who uprooted and went to look for land for themselves'.² We can point to the infusion of Celtic blood in some of the groups of early settlers, or to the visits of Icelandic chieftains and priests to the European mainland in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.³

1 Icelandic traditions that the settlers were predominantly of west Norwegian origin are supported by archeological evidence of their customs and material culture; see Kristjan Eldjárn, *Kuml og haugfé úr heiðnum síð á Íslandi* (1956), especially 426-40. For surveys of the problems of the Icelanders' ethnic origins see Jón Jóhannesson, *Ísl. saga*, I 27-38; H. Magerøy, *Omstridde spørsmål i Nordens historie III: Norsk-islandske problem* (Foreningen Nordens Historiske Publikasjoner IV, 1965), 9-77; Björn Þorsteinsson, *Ný Íslandssaga* (1966), 62-8.

2 *Landet med de mørke skibene* (1938), 307.

3 Jón Steffensen has recently concluded that the minimum figure for colonists of Celtic nationality, of all classes and both sexes, is about 13 per cent and the conceivable maximum as high as about

We may lay stress on the fact that after the conversion in A.D. 1000 (to use the traditional date¹), the Church in Iceland acquired a distinctively national character, with private churches attached to the homes of the chief families, served by priests who had close and constant contact with the farmers: they were recruited from their ranks, shared their traditional assumptions, and for the most part led the same kind of life.² But, as with other epochs of outstanding intellectual and artistic attainment, so with the golden age of Iceland's literature: no single formula will suffice. Whether one approaches it from its learned and literary side or confronts it in its popular and traditional aspects, it remains an achievement massive, unique, and bewildering.

40 per cent; see his 'Tölfræðilegt mat á líffræðilegu gildi frásagna Landnámu af ætt og þjóðerni landnemanna', *Saga* IX (1971), 21-39. For a survey, learned but uncritical, of Icelanders' voyages see Bogi Th. Melsteð, *Safn til sögu Íslands* IV (1907-15), 730-810; and further Einar Arnórsson, 'Suðurgöngur Íslendinga í fornöld', *Saga* II (1954-8), 1-45.

¹ Dr Ólafía Einarsdóttir has produced weighty arguments in favour of June 999 as the time of the Assembly at which the Icelanders accepted Christianity, a date which would accord with a number of other sources. She explains that when Ari says that it occurred in the same summer as the death of King Óláfr Tryggvason and that his death fell in the year 1000, the apparent discrepancy is because Ari began his year on 1 September, as was not uncommon. Since Óláfr was believed to have been killed on 9 September, this was just after the new year 1000 started. By our reckoning, starting the year on 1 January, both events fell in A.D. 999. See Ólafía Einarsdóttir, *Studier i kronologisk metode i tidlig islandsk historieskrivning* (Bibliotheca Historica Lundensis XIII, 1964), chs. 4, 7. Dr Jakob Benediktsson, *ÍF* I xxix-xxxv, criticises points of detail in Dr Ólafía's argument but accepts the plausibility of her main conclusion.

² See e.g. *Ísl. saga*, I 197-200; Jón Helgason (biskup), *Íslands Kirke fra dens Grundlæggelse til Reformationen* (1925), 56-7, 95-8.

If we look at the whole range of medieval Icelandic literature, we are struck by its astonishing versatility and variety. From the twelfth and thirteenth centuries there is, for example, an enormously abundant religious and ecclesiastical literature. To begin with this consisted chiefly of translations from Latin legends and homilies, but later on original works devoted to Icelandic church history were written, with subjects drawn from the first Christian period in Iceland and from the life and work of some of the more notable bishops of later times. But the laws were also codified early, and even grammatical works were composed. A number of sources indicate the early existence of the study of astronomy, mathematics and calendar computation. The field of personal history was certainly not neglected and we must assume that genealogical records were made from very ancient times.¹

Indeed, it is probably safe to claim that no people have cultivated the study of genealogy and family history with such widespread interest and intensity as the Icelanders. A little grammatical treatise from about the middle of the twelfth century refers to family history (*ættfræði*) as one of the branches of literature that was then written and read.² This genealogical interest finds its most notable

1 See e.g. Dag Strömbäck, 'The dawn of West Norse literature', *Bibliography of Old Norse-Icelandic Studies* 1963 (1964), 7-24; G. Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature* (1953), chs. 3-5, 7; Sigurður Nordal, *NK VIII:B* 190-1.

2 V. Dahlerup and Finnur Jónsson, *Den første og anden Grammatiske Afhandling i Snorres Edda* (1886), 2/7, cf. 20; Einar Haugen, *First Grammatical Treatise* (second, revised ed., 1972), 12-13.

expression in that thirteenth-century source-book, unparalleled in its kind in the world, known as *Landnámabók*.¹ This work gives us the history of the first settlers, their origins, family connections and descendants through several generations, sometimes right down to the thirteenth century. It has in recent years been suggested that this great pedigree-book, strewn with anecdotes and tales from local tradition, had its origin in an early collection of genealogical material chiefly made by the 'father of Icelandic history'—Ari Þorgilsson hinn fróði, who died in 1148.²

If we now consider the historical writing, the sagas of Icelanders and the poetry—those works which have especially given the outside world a sense of the unique character of this great age of Icelandic literature—we at once find ourselves facing problems of a particular kind. They are problems of heredity and milieu, of memory and the technical mastery of literary forms, of the art of oral story-telling and recitation, of men's appetite for remembering and preserving in various ways the events of the past and present. They are, in short, problems connected with the vast web of ideas we associate with the terms 'traditional' and 'popular'.

Icelandic historical writing shows a peculiar develop-

¹ *Landnámabók* is most recently edited by Jakob Benediktsson in *ÍF* 1. Standard diplomatic editions of the main recensions are: Finnur Jónsson, *Landnámabók* I–III (1900); *Landnámabók, Melabók* AM 106, 112 fol. (1921); Jakob Benediktsson, *Skarðsárabók* (1958). *Sturlubók* is translated in Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *The Book of Settlements* (University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies 1, 1972).

² For a full survey and the most recent discussion see Jakob Benediktsson, *ÍF* 1 xvi–xx.

ment from an inartistic presentation of critically sifted facts to an ample flow of narrative which can carry with it every kind of traditional tale and legend. Soon after 1120 Ari fróði began the composition of history in the vernacular and was so careful in his documentation that few events are recorded in his little *Íslendingabók* without citation of the source from which he obtained his information.¹ And his sources went back a long way! One of them, Hallr Þórarinsson, his own foster-father, was born in 995 and died in his ninety-fifth year. Hallr remembered his own baptism, 'three winters old', by one of the first missionaries in Iceland, and he also had many personal reminiscences of St Óláfr of Norway, who was killed in 1030.² When Ari speaks of the colonisation of Greenland by men from Iceland towards the end of the tenth century, it is on the authority of his own uncle, who had been told the facts when in Greenland by a man who had himself been with Eiríkr the Red on the voyage of settlement. Ari is a conscientious reporter who makes no irrelevant comments or additions. Quoting his sources and explaining why he thinks they are trustworthy, he is the first

1 See e.g. Jakob Benediktsson, *ÍF* I xx-xxii. Notable earlier editions of *Íslendingabók* are those by Finnur Jónsson (1930), with a facsimile of AM 113b fol., and Jón Jóhannesson (1956), with facsimiles of both AM 113a and AM 113b fol.

2 *ÍF* I 21; *Den store Saga*, 2/10-12; Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Hkr.* I 6-7. Hall's remembering does not appear abnormal in any way: 'Most investigators agree that, while the earliest memory may be as early as the first year or as late as the seventh, the average individual has, as his earliest recollection, an experience which occurred between the ages of three and four' (I. M. L. Hunter, *Memory*, revised ed. 1964, reprinted 1966, 271).

Scandinavian representative of a critical school of history.

There is reason to suppose that the same critical attitude was adopted in the later part of the twelfth century, when another Icelandic historian, whose work is unfortunately lost, wrote an account of contemporary events in Norway, just as it may also be discerned in certain further works written in the decades round 1200.¹ The question may also be posed whether the sober approach of Ari and his school did not have a fundamental influence on the singularly dispassionate chronicle-writing of the thirteenth century, on Icelandic affairs chiefly in the compilation now known as *Sturlunga saga* and on Norwegian affairs chiefly in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*.

But the thirteenth-century Kings' Sagas and Sagas of Icelanders indicate the emergence of a new outlook and the development of a new *genre*. It is probable that the impetus for the novel departure they represent was given, as Sigurður Nordal has tried to show, by the 'legendary' histories of Óláfr Tryggvason and St Óláfr composed at the end of the twelfth century by monks of the monastery of Þingeyrar.² This Benedictine house in the north of Iceland was opened in 1133 and became an influential literary centre. In these writings strict methods of historical criticism were abandoned. The authors saw no

¹ Sigurður Nordal, *Snorri Sturluson* (1920), 148-52; *ÍF* II (1933), lxi-lxv, lxvi-lxvii; *NK* VIII:B 193-7.

² Sigurður Nordal, *Snorri Sturluson* (1920), 154-5; *ÍF* II (1933), lxv-lxvi; *NK* VIII:B 199-203. On the interest in Óláfr Tryggvason see Lars Lönnroth, 'Studier i Olaf Tryggvasons saga', *Samlaren* (1963), 54-94.

reason why they should deny themselves the use of the mass of traditional matter which in one form or another had been current among the people for generations.

Thus on the one side began the composition of Kings' Sagas and works of related kind, whose highest level was reached in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, written, it is thought, in the years around 1230.¹ On the other side authors began to create the so-called Sagas of Icelanders, telling of the strife and destinies of chieftains and families in the tenth and early eleventh century—the first of these was written about A.D. 1200. At the same time, the ancient scaldic poetry of Norway and Iceland began to find written record. This poetry could provide the writers of both Kings' Sagas and Sagas of Icelanders with starting-points for their stories and with material to elaborate them. Much scaldic poetry was included in the *Prose Edda*, that remarkable textbook of poetics which Snorri wrote about 1220,² and in which material from some of the anonymous eddaic poems is also to be found. It was doubtless this work which, directly or indirectly, caused the collection and recording of hitherto unwritten, popular poetry about heathen gods and legendary heroes.³ Such 'conservation' activity is typified for us in the so-called *Poetic Edda*.⁴

1 Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Hkr.* I xxix; Sigurður Nordal, *NK VIII:B 219*.

2 Sigurður Nordal, *NK VIII:B 219*.

3 Cf. e.g. Elias Wessén, in *Saga och sed* (1946), 6–11; Jón Helgason, *NK VIII:B 30*.

4 Edited most recently in G. Neckel–H. Kuhn, *Edda* (Vierte . . . Auflage, 1962) and in the work in progress by Ursula Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, of which vol. 1, *Heroic Poems*, has appeared (1969). On

Snorri fully understood that Ari's historical work was the most reliable and conscientious to be had. He also understood the historical value of verse by ancient scalds, especially of stanzas composed immediately after the events they describe. In the prologue to his separate *Óláfs saga helga*, and similarly in the *Heimskringla* prologue, he says that a scald in the presence of a prince would not dare to laud him for deeds which both the prince himself and the rest of the audience knew to be unreal and false: "That would be mockery, not praise."¹ But Snorri had powerful artistic gifts. He was a skilful poet as well as a master of prose, and he undoubtedly took delight in presenting a dramatic account of events and circumstances, and generally in so arranging his material that all the parts were smooth and well rounded and a clear pattern of cause and effect could be traced. Snorri's artistic mastery can be seen by comparing his work with those older prose sources, Icelandic and Norwegian, which are still extant and on which he partly based his history. As a Swede I may be forgiven for my predilection for the episode of Þorgnýr the Lawman at the Uppsala Assembly as an example of Snorri's art at its most impressive, although even here we should remember that *Þorgnýr logmaðr af Svíartki* figures in a genealogy in *Landnámabók* and some plausible explanation of that would be necessary before Snorri's account of him could be

the sources of the *Codex regius* see especially G. Lindblad, *Studier i Codex Regius av Äldre Eddan* (Lundastudier i nordisk språkvetenskap 10, 1954).

¹ *Den store Saga*, 4-5; *Hkr.* I 5.

dismissed as purely imaginary.¹ On the whole, however, the Kings' Sagas should be marked 'fragile' before they are put into the hands of a historian. But it would also be wrong to forget that their airy bridges, gaily built under the urge of creative artistry and patriotic zeal, may still rest on firm piers of scaldic verse.

The Sagas of Icelanders (or Family Sagas, as they are also but less appropriately called) appear in all their brilliance in the course of the thirteenth century. They take their subjects from the tragic conflicts which seem to have been common in the first century after the Settlement. In many ways they have the characteristics of heroic epic in prose. It is at any rate remarkable to see how some of the great tragic themes and other characteristics of Norse heroic poetry are repeated or reflected in them. This has been fully demonstrated, for example, in such a masterpiece as *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, and much discussed in connection with *Laxdœla saga*. It may also be detected in certain parts of *Njáls saga*.²

¹ Ketill brimill átti Jórunn dóttur Þorgnýs lögmanns af Svíaríki, *ÍF* I 271. This is only in *Hauksbók*, but we cannot tell whether it was first included there (so Jakob Benediktsson, *ÍF* I 271, note *ad loc.*), or came from *Styrmisbók* (and in that case omitted in *Sturlubók*). But what could have caused such an insertion as late as c. 1300? Þorgnýr is a name otherwise used in West Norse sources only of two characters, both certainly fictive (see E. H. Lind, *Dopnamn*, 1905-13, *s.n.*), but it appears to be an authentic though rare Swedish (East Norse) name; see M. Lundgren, E. Brate, E. H. Lind, *Svenska personnamn frdn medeltiden* (Svenska Landsmål 10, 6-7, 1892-1934), *s.n.*; G. Knudsen, M. Kristensen, R. Hornby, *Danmarks gamle Personnavne* (1936-48), *s.n.*

² Magnus Olsen, 'Gísla saga og hittediktningen', *Festskrift til Finnur Jónsson* (1928), 6-14, and 'Om Gísla saga's opbygning', *Arkiv* 46 (1930), 150-60 (both papers reprinted in his *Norrøne studier*, 1938,

But no two sagas are exactly alike. In some we find a more chronicle-like account, where the author seems in close touch with local legends and family tradition. In others there is a more literary presentation—scenes are consciously constructed, with pregnant and telling dialogue and a steady progress towards a dramatic climax. Ultimately, of course, the material is inherited from the past, but in those works where the author's delight in his story-telling is greatest and his creative powers strongest, the underlying foundation of popular tales and traditions becomes less and less significant. Then a saga may come close to being a historical novel. As a *genre* Sagas of Icelanders seem to have reached their artistic zenith in the latter half of the thirteenth century. The crowning achievement is generally held to be *Njáls saga*, which both Sigurður Nordal and Einar Ól. Sveinsson, the foremost scholars in the field of saga-studies, assign to the last quarter of the century.¹

At the same time as we dwell on the Icelanders' astonishing literary activity in the thirteenth century, we must also bear in mind, as I suggested above, the existence among them of a healthy body of oral tradition. In

253-71); on *Laxdæla saga* see e.g. M. Schildknecht-Burri, *Die altertümlichen und jüngern Merkmale der Laxdæla Saga* (1945), 99-105; A. C. Bouman, *Patterns in Old English and Old Icelandic Literature* (1962), 133-40; on *Njáls saga*, *ibid.*, 8-11; Gudbrand Vigfusson and F. York Powell, *Corpus poeticum boreale* (1883), II 507; Knut Liestøl, *Upphavet til den isländske ættesaga* (1929), 159, 166. For a recent general discussion see O. Bandle, 'Isländersaga und Heldendichtung', *Afmælisrit Jóns Helgasonar* (1969), 1-26.

1 Sigurður Nordal, *NK VIII:B 261*; Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls saga* (*ÍF XII*, 1954), lxxv-lxxxiv.

Iceland it thrived under special conditions and achieved a rare solidity and strength.¹ Nowhere in the North were so many ancient poems, sagas and legends from different periods accumulated and preserved as in Iceland. We have to thank the Icelanders for practically all we know of Norse poetry.² And yet it is certain that what has come to us is only a fraction of what once existed. Many traditions were carried to Iceland from Norway, some perhaps from Norse communities in the British Isles. In the thirteenth century Snorri Sturluson not only knew by heart a great number of scaldic poems from the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries and much eddaic verse as well—a remarkable feat in itself—but his memory was also stored with a vast stock of the myths and legends that fed the poetic diction. He was in fact intimately acquainted with the poetry of nearly four centuries, most of which had never been recorded before his own day. And it is certainly safe to assume that other men before his time who were regarded as especially *fróðir*—wise and well-informed—had a comparably solid and extensive knowledge of early poetry and the lore needed to interpret it. Some notion of the antiquity of individual traditions is given by certain of the eddaic poems, whose narrative material can be traced back to the Migration

1 Knut Liestøl, *op. cit.*, especially ch. 5; Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *KL* VII (1962), 496–513.

2 On the regard Danish and Norwegian historians c. 1200 said they had for the Icelanders as preservers of traditions and poetry see especially E. F. Halvorsen, 'Theodricus Monachus and the Icelanders', *Þriðji Vikiingafundur* (Árbók hins íslenska Fornleifafélags, Fylgirit 1958), 142–55.

Age. In his *Edda* and *Heimskringla* Snorri transmits to us some of the very oldest scaldic poetry, Bragi's *Ragnars drápa* and Þjóðólf's *Haustlǫng* and *Ynglingatal*, composed before and about A.D. 900, and it is clear that through these we are reaching back to myths and legends that *antedate* the Viking Age. Further consideration of such points would bring us to problems concerning the total Scandinavian share in the mythical and heroic traditions of the Germanic world, and this is not the place for such a discussion. What cannot be emphasised too strongly, however, is that the first settlers in Iceland did not set sail from Norway and elsewhere with empty minds and unstocked memories.

CHAPTER I

THE CONVERSION OF ICELAND THE EVENTS AND THE SOURCES

‘IT was one hundred and thirty years after the slaying of Edmund, and one thousand after the birth of Christ by the common reckoning.’

Some days before midsummer a ship lands in the Vestmannaeyjar off the south coast of Iceland. Two Icelandic chieftains, Gizurr Teitsson and Hjalti Skeggjason, are the owners and masters of the ship. On board with them they have a priest called Þormóðr. They have just come from a meeting with King Óláfr Tryggvason in Norway, and they have solemnly promised him that their countrymen will now accept the Christian faith. King Óláfr had made unsuccessful attempts to convert the Icelanders before, and he is very angry at their obstinacy. He thinks of killing all the Icelanders he can find in Norway, or of retaliating in some other way. So it is a task of vital importance which the two Icelandic chieftains have undertaken. From Vestmannaeyjar they are ferried over to the mainland and they travel on by bridle-path and river-ford to the meeting place of the Althing at Þingvellir. The distance they cover is about ninety English miles. On the way one of the chieftains, Hjalti, has to be left in Laugardalr, a valley with warm springs some twelve miles east of the thing-place. He does not dare ride to the assembly, because at the Althing the previous summer he had been banished for blaspheming the gods.

At the Law-rock, the centre of the Assembly, he had spoken out with this insulting couplet:

Vilkaſt goð geyja,
grey þykkiumk Freyja.

I will not blaspheme the gods,
Freyja seems to me a bitch.¹

The other chieftain, Gizurr, rides on with his companions till they come to the great lake bordering the thing-place. There he halts at an inlet on the north-east side of the lake, called Vellankatla, 'boiling cauldron', because water bubbles up here from a subterranean spring. He stops and sends a message to the thing-place, a mile or two away, telling his friends and allies to come to meet him, for it has been heard that the opponents of the Christians mean to use force to keep them from the Thing. But as they gather there at Vellankatla, before making their way to the assembly, there is an unexpected arrival. Hjalti Skeggjason, who had been outlawed for blasphemy and who was not supposed to set foot on the hallowed ground of the assembly-place, now comes riding up, along with the other men who were left with him in

¹ The suggestion by F. Genzmer, *Arkiv* 44 (1928), 211-14, that the couplet should be interpreted as 'I do not want gods to bark, Frey seems to me a bitch', accepted by Halldór Hermannsson, *The Book of the Icelanders* (Islandica xx, 1930), 84, is unlikely to be right for linguistic reasons (the use of an accusative and infinitive construction with *vilja* is unparalleled); cf. Jakob Benediktsson, *ÍF* I 15, n. 7. Cf. also the word *goðgá*, 'blasphemy', whose second element comes from the same root as *geyja*. It is not as if one has to credit Hjalti with much humour to believe him capable of this irony.

Laugardalr. They all ride together now towards the thing-place, and friends and supporters come to meet them. The heathens for their part band themselves together, and they are on the point of joining battle. But sensible men are to be found on both sides and in the end there is no fighting.

Next day the two Christian chieftains, fresh from Norway and their meeting with Óláfr Tryggvason, go to the Law-rock and state their case, urging the cause of Christianity with extraordinary eloquence. Now there is a stir on both sides. In the heathen party each man formally names witnesses and declares himself freed from all legal ties with members of the Christian party, and everyone on the Christian side says the same of their pagan opponents. A complete rift in the assembly and in the unified law they had hitherto all respected is menacingly close. The Christians now ask one of their own party, the chieftain Hallr Þorsteinsson from the east of Iceland, to declare the laws appropriate for them. But he declines and prefers to do what will prove much more prudent. Using both words and money, he persuades the heathen Lawspeaker, Þorgeirr, who has been reciting the pagan law-code at the assembly for the past fifteen years, to declare the new law.¹ He is a wise man and does not

1 The Lawspeaker was elected by the *goðar* for a period of three years at a time. He was supposed to recite all the sections of the law-code at the Althing during his time in office, and repeat every year the section dealing with the procedures of that assembly; he consulted five or more men learned in law if his memory failed him. He received a fee for his work and half the fines imposed in cases judged at the Althing. See *Grágás*, III 649-50; *Ísl. saga*, I 66-8.

flatly refuse. He withdraws to his thing-booth, lies down and covers himself with a cloak. He lies there all day and all that night. He does not say a word. But next morning he sits up and has the message sent round that everyone should gather at the Law-rock. And when they are all assembled, he begins to speak to them. He starts by saying that great harm would result if the people of the country did not all have the same law. Discord and hostilities would arise and the country would be ruined by them. He quotes an example from history to show what the outcome would be if decisions at a time of conflict were left to pugnacious leaders and not to the whole people. For his part, he would advise that force should not be allowed to settle the issue—they should rather find some way of giving something to both sides—that is to say, a compromise should be looked for. 'Let us all have one law and one faith,' he says; and he adds, 'If we tear law asunder, we tear asunder peace.'

Towards the end of his speech he seems to have proposed that the assembly should leave it to him to pronounce the law, for the reliable source I am following in this account says that 'both sides agreed that all should have one and the same law, the one which he chose to pronounce'.

After this the Lawspeaker declared what the law of the land was to be. And in the new code he said that everyone should be Christian and all who had not yet been baptised should receive baptism. But the old law should stand as far as the exposure of children and the eating of horse-flesh were concerned. We may note that the latter was a

custom abhorred by Christians, originally because of its connections with heathen sacrificial feasts.¹

The Lawspeaker also said that under the new law people could sacrifice in secret if they wanted to, but they were liable to *fjorbaugsgarðr*, a penalty of banishment for three years, if the practice of sacrificing was proved against them by witnesses.

* * *

This, in all brevity, is what can be said with relative certainty about the formal and public acceptance of Christianity in Iceland. If, however, instead of going to the texts themselves, one turns to the scholarly works on ecclesiastical or general history in which this remarkable event is discussed, one finds that almost without exception no author has taken the trouble to treat the primary source-material from the standpoint of textual criticism, sifting it into categories of reliable, less reliable and unreliable in order finally to grasp the essentials of *what actually happened*. Earlier and later sources are lumped together, and on this basis writers have produced a

1 On the custom of abandoning unwanted newborn children, leaving them to die out in the open, see *Die Bekehrung*, I 433, II 181-2, and further Jón Steffensen, in *Saga-Book* XVII (1966-9), 196-205. On eating horse-meat and Christian opposition to it, see e.g. Brita Egardt, *KL* VII (1962), 280-1. It says in *Sverris saga* (ed. G. Indrebø, 1920, 27) that when Sverrir was going from Dalarna to Jämtland in the late 1170s he was obstructed by the inhabitants of Hälsingland. They would not provision his troops, and Sverrir then threatened to slaughter horses and said that the local people would become a byword if Christians had to eat horse-flesh to live among them. This protest did the trick. He and his men were hindered no more and their food supplies were taken care of.

reconstruction of the course of events that is elaborate and entertaining—and sometimes even plausible! This procedure began with Konrad Maurer's *Die Bekehrung des Norwegischen Stammes zum Christenthume* (1855–6), in many respects a work of admirable and monumental scholarship, and it has continued to the present day. There is, it is true, some criticism of the sources in Björn Magnússon Ólsen's little monograph, *Um kristnitökuna árið 1000* (1900), still more in the *Íslendinga saga 1* (1956) of Jón Jóhannesson, the young medieval historian whose early death was so great a loss to Icelandic scholarship, and it exists but is not as rigorous as it should be in Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson's *Kristnitaka Íslands* (1971). It is, I believe, possible to be still more radical in our approach to the sources, and in what follows I hope to indicate certain lines of enquiry and the results that may be looked for from them.

Our fundamental source of knowledge about the decision of the Althing in the year 999 or 1000 and what preceded it is Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók*,¹ written some time between 1122 and 1133. It gives a short account of the most important events in Iceland's history from c. 870 to c. 1120. Ari was born in 1067 or 1068 and died in 1148. The remarkable thing about this book is, as I pointed out in the Introduction above, that Ari constantly cites his sources. He got his information from sensible men and women with good memories, members of leading families, lawspeakers, priests. Ari himself was brought up

¹ For editions see p. 5, n. 1 above, and bibliographies in *Islandica* 1, xxiv, xxxviii (1908, 1935, 1957).

by a man who was born in 995 and who, as we read earlier, could remember his baptism at the hands of one of Óláfr Tryggvason's first missionaries to Iceland. This man was in his ninety-fifth year when he died, so we begin to understand how far back in time Ari could reach when it came to the preservation of historical facts. It is indeed astonishing how meticulous Ari can be in his presentation of details. We may note, for example, that he establishes the fact that the two chieftains who were to bring Christianity to Iceland first landed in mid-June (*es thu vikur væri af sumri*) in Vestmannaeyjar by referring to one of his best-informed source-men, who had himself been told this by *a man who was there on the islands* at the time (*Svá kvað Teitr þann segja, es sjalfr vas þar*).

Ari had intense interest in chronology—indeed, it seems to have been his chief preoccupation—and he is extremely consistent in his chronology throughout. He establishes it in relation to important events in the history of Iceland or Norway, and as a fixed starting point he takes the death of the East Anglian king, St Edmund, in November 870. Ari doubtless knew a version of the *Passio sancti Edmundi*, written by St Abbo of Fleury about 980.¹ There is every

¹ St Abbo lived from c. 945 to 1004. For Latin texts on St Edmund see *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina* (1898–1901) and *Supplementi editio altera* (Subsidia Hagiographica 12, 1911), nos. 2392–403. A life by Ælfric is in *Ælfric's Metrical Lives of Saints* iv (ed. W. W. Skeat, EETS, O.S. 114, 1900), 314–34; cf. Th. Wolpers, *Die englische Heiligenlegende des Mittelalters* (1964), 142–9. No Norse life of St Edmund is known and Ari's reference to 'his saga' is not evidence that one existed; cf. O. Widding, H. Bekker-Nielsen, L. K. Shook, *Mediaeval Studies* xxv (1963), 308. On the source of the date 870 (not given by Abbo or Ælfric), see Ólafía Einarsdóttir, *op. cit.*, 68–71, and Jakob Benediktsson, *ÍF* 1 xxii–xxiii.

reason to believe both that Latin hagiographic literature was to be found in Iceland, doubtless before 1100 and certainly soon afterwards, and that Ari could read it. He was, of course, educated for the church and ordained, although we do not know whether he officiated as a priest. His writing is concrete and appears quite dispassionate; his style seems a mixture of the homely and foreign. He is not always easy to translate, but if his syntax sometimes shows rather rough edges, it can be readily put down to lack of vernacular literary models and to Latin influence. According to Snorri Sturluson, who worked as a historian just about a century afterwards, Ari was the first man in Iceland to write historical lore (*fræði*) in the native language.¹ In all the many disputes over the historicity of events related in the Sagas of Icelanders no one has yet presumed to question the reliability of what Ari says in *Íslendingabók*.² In the case of Iceland's conversion to Christianity Ari is the major witness, and if the strictest critical methods are to be applied to the study of religious and church history in Iceland in the period in question, then his account is the only acceptable source: and, as will be evident, it is on his report that I based my sketch of the events given above. With the exception of one or two small notes in *Landnámabók* and a few stanzas of contemporary verse, all the other sources must be classi-

1 Ari prestur Þorgilsson enn fróði ritaði fyrstr manna hér á landi at norrœnu máli fræði bæði forna ok nýja (*Den store Saga* I 1/1-2; cf. *Hkr.* I 5).

2 A recent attempt by Sigurður Línal to reject Ari's account of Úlfjótr and his law (*Skírnir* 143, 1969, 5-26) has been hotly countered by Arnór Sigurjónsson (*Saga* VIII, 1970, 5-42).

fied as secondary. We may, it is true, also suspect that Ari's account is itself somewhat one-sided, because his chief source-man for this part of his work was a grandson of one of the two chieftains who came as Óláfr Tryggvason's ambassadors to the Althing. But in spite of this we have no reason to doubt the truth, both general and particular, of his description of the events at that assembly.

The other sources have quite a different character. They were written in a monastic atmosphere and in a period a good deal remoter from the events. The best of these sources of the second rank is *Kristni saga*, a title which may perhaps be most conveniently translated as 'Christianity's Chronicle'. It is a short account of Iceland's church history, probably written at the beginning of the thirteenth century. It follows Ari and occasionally borrows verbatim from his work, but also adds a good deal of new material. In style and form this novel matter is often reminiscent of saints' legends, and it must in part have been taken from a biography of Óláfr Tryggvason, written towards 1200 as a piece of hagiography by Gunnlaugr Leifsson, monk of Þingeyrar. Gunnlaug's work is unfortunately not extant in its original Latin form and we only know its Icelandic translation in excerpts inserted in other texts.¹

¹ *Kristni saga* is preserved in *Hauksbók* (AM 371 4to), see Jón Helgason, *Hauksbók* (Manuscripta Islandica 5, 1960), xii, but must also have been with *Landnámabók* in *Sturlubók* (a fragment of this text is preserved in *Skarðsárbók*; see Jón Jóhannesson, *Gerðir Landnámabókar*, 1941, 16-19, and Jakob Benediktsson, *Skarðsárbók*, 1958, xxix-xl, 193-5). It is generally thought that *Kristni saga* was first put

Óláfr Tryggvason's success in bringing about the conversion of the Icelanders was naturally counted among this missionary king's immortal merits, and all the 'legendary' sagas about him give some space to this episode. One may indeed wonder whether the flourishing composition of legendary works concerning Óláfr at the end of the twelfth century did not have the precise aim of establishing him as Iceland's patron saint, a process which, among other things, would have helped gifts to churches and monasteries to flow in the right direction. The Icelanders acquired their first native saint, Bishop Þorlákr Þórhallsson, in 1198, but up to that time many pious gifts and votive offerings must have left the country—we know, for example, that some went to Kirkwall, to the shrine of Magnús, patron saint of Orkney.¹

It is Gunnlaug's legendary *Óláfs saga* which also lies behind the longest and fullest description we now possess of the introduction of Christianity into Iceland, the account in the so-called 'Greatest saga of Óláfr Tryggvason', a compilation from the beginning of the

together by Sturla Þórðarson (1214-84), but the precise scope of the original work, its date and its sources are controversial; cf. e.g. Finnur Jónsson, *Hauksbók* (1892-6), lxxi-lxxiv; Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Om de norske kongers sagaer* (Skrifter utg. av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo. II. Hist.-Filos. Kl. 1936. No. 4), 120-4; Magnús Már Lárusson, *KL IX* (1964), 356. C. Albani seems to accept all too easily the work's reliability as a historical source; see his 'Ricerche attorno alla Kristnisaga', *Instituto Lombardo . . . Rendiconti. Classe di Lettere . . .* 102 (1968), 91-142.

1 On the cult of St Magnús in Iceland, see Magnús Már Lárusson, *Saga III* (1960-3), 470-503.

fourteenth century.¹ Of this monument of bombast and rhetoric I shall only say that much of its material has also been adopted by modern authors in what otherwise purport to be serious and scholarly accounts of the Conversion.

Another source of dubious worth is *Njáls saga*, the literary masterpiece from the last quarter of the thirteenth century.² It devotes six chapters to an account of the conversion of Iceland, two of them dealing with events at the Althing in the year 1000. Ari's report may be glimpsed as the ultimate source for some of it, but otherwise the matter is derived from Brother Gunnlaugr and, according to Professor Einar Ól. Sveinsson, also from traditions current in south-east Iceland. Einar Ól. Sveinsson considers that this section on Christianity in the saga originally formed a separate, written *Kristni þáttur*, specifically intended for the south-east of the country and most probably composed early in the thirteenth century in the Augustinian monastery of Þykkva-bær (founded 1168).³ The author of *Njáls saga* fitted this text into the framework of his book but took no great pains to conceal the joints.

It would take us too far afield to consider the contents of these later texts and compare them with Ari's clear and concise account. It is obvious that these later 'legendary'

1 Now in a new critical edition by Ólafur Halldórsson, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* 1-11 (Editiones Arnarnagnæanæ, Ser. A, 1-2, 1958-61).

2 Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls saga* (*ÍF* XII, 1954), 255-72 (chs. 100-5).

3 Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Um Njálu* (1933), 67-73; *ÍF* XII xliii-xlv.

texts may contain this or that element of factual truth, but we cannot accept any detail from them without the strictest critical investigation. As we recall, Ari's book makes it plain that the people who were not baptized were to receive baptism according to the new law, but he says nothing about the individuals concerned or the manner and time of their christening. *Kristni saga*, on the other hand, adds that everyone who had been at the assembly was baptized on the way home that same summer.¹ The people from the North and South Quarters were christened in the warm springs of Laugardalr, a few miles east of Þingvellir, because, as the text says, 'they would not go into cold water'! Some of the people from the Vestfirðir were also baptized in warm springs in South Reykjardalr. In connection with this mass baptism the same source says that when the heathen *goði*, Rúnólfr Úlfsson, was to be christened, his old enemy, the Christian chief Hjalti Skeggjason, said: 'Now we teach the old *goði* to gape over the salt' (*Gomlum kennu vér nú goðanum at geifla á saltinu*). The reference is clearly to the salt given to the catechumen at the *prima signatio*.² Remarks of this kind in *Kristni saga* might have a reliable tradition behind them or be derived from some trustworthy documentary source now lost. It is especially tempting

¹ *Bps.* I 25; *Hauksbók* (1892-6), 143-4; B. Kahle, *Kristnisaga* (Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek II, 1905), 42; cf. *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, II 198.

² On salt in the rite for catechumens and baptism see e.g. *Buchbergers Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*² IX (1964), 284-5 and references; Helge Fæhn, *KL* III (1958), 417 and bibliography, 418; E. Molland, *KL* XIII (1968), 440.

to believe that the words about Rúnólfr and the salt could be an orally preserved reminiscence of an actual event, because they must originally have formed a verse-couplet of an irregular kind.

* * *

Let us return to Ari and the Althing's acceptance of Christianity. The two Icelandic chieftains who come from Norway and preach the Christian message are Gizurr Teitsson, *hinn hvíti* ('the white'), a member of the high-born Mosfell family, and Hjalti Skeggjason, Gizur's son-in-law, also a member of a chieftain's family in the south country, though not of such distinguished descent as Gizurr. Both these men had been baptized a year or two before 1000 by a violent missionary-priest named Theobrand or Thangbrand, probably of Fleinish origin and with an English missionary training. According to Ari, Óláfr Tryggvason had sent Thangbrand to Iceland, and he did his work there with such ferocious zeal that he killed two or three men before he left the country. Apart from Gizurr and Hjalti, Ari names only Hallr of Síða (Síðu-Hallr) among the Christian leaders at the Althing at the time of the Conversion. He was of distinguished birth, and he appears in other Icelandic sources as a man whose worth was highly esteemed. He seems to have had great influence, especially in the east of Iceland, and in all the sources in which he is mentioned he appears as a man of wisdom and goodness and as one of the first adherents of Christianity in the country. That he too was baptized by Thangbrand may be inferred from Ari's short remark

about his conversion, linked as it is with his account of Óláfr Tryggvason's missionaries in Iceland, and it is plainly stated in texts such as *Njáls saga*, the 'legendary' sagas of Óláfr Tryggvason, and Snorri's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* in *Heimskringla*.¹

The Althing's decision to accept Christianity as the state religion of Iceland leaves us perplexed, mystified. People have asked, not entirely without justification, 'Was antique paganism so rotten at the core, so dilapidated a structure that the first puff of opposition was enough to bring it down?' Or was there such sovereign indifference to religion among the Icelanders that they did not care whether the nation was pagan or Christian as long as they were left in peace? It had not proved possible to bring about a comparable mass conversion in any of the other Scandinavian countries in the same period. Yet in Iceland what seemed almost impossible took place without bloodshed: representatives of the whole population gave corporate assent to the introduction of the Christian faith.

This problem must be considered from three points of view. There is a formal, legal aspect, a political aspect, and finally a religious aspect, and in the next three chapters we shall turn our attention to these.

¹ *ÍF* XII 257 (*Njáls saga*, ch. 100); *Saga Óláfs . . . af Oddr*, 126; *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, II 156; *Hkr.* I 320.

LAW AND POLITICS

AT this time the leading official and the highest authority in Iceland was the *lögsgumaðr*, the Law-speaker.¹ It was his duty to *speak* the law, and he had of course to know the whole law-code, by heart naturally since written codification of the laws did not begin until 1117-18. He was also chairman of the *lögretta*, the legislative court, which some people think had at one stage functioned as the judicial court of the Althing as well, though this view is not generally favoured now.² The list of Law-speakers is, as it were, a list of the regents of the Commonwealth. Ari gives the names of the first nineteen Law-speakers and the number of years they held office, from A.D. 930, when the Althing was finally established, down to about 1130, when the men were his own contemporaries. *Þorgeirr goði*, of Ljósavatn in the north of Iceland, is fourth in the list. When the assembly met in the year 999/1000, he had been Law-speaker for sixteen summers, and one can appreciate that in a state such as Iceland, where established forms of law were the foundation of communal existence, his words would have binding force. In this connection it is proper to emphasise the strength of the formal legalism prevailing in Iceland from c. 930, when Úlfjót's law was first adopted, and

1 See p. 15, n. 1 above.

2 It was Maurer's view, see *Vorlesungen*, IV 15, 337, 353, but cf. e.g. Einar Arnórsson, *Réttarsaga Alþingis* (1937), 70-4, Ólafur Lárusson, *Lög og saga* (1958), 78-9.

again after c. 965, when the country got its regular system of local assemblies and chieftainships (*goðorð*).¹ Many years ago Harald Hjärne described the social development of the Scandinavian countries and defined their individual national characteristics in an authoritative essay, written early in his career, on Scandinavian legal history. He speaks at one point of states which leave to posterity a consolidated system of law, from which others may benefit. And he continues: "This is the case with Iceland. And although this state was small, smaller than Athens and Florence and not like them adorned with the splendours of art and wealth, this "unproductive" island displays instead a legal life characterised throughout by the clearest reasoning and boldest courage."²

Now, there is one point in the description of the assembly of the year 999/1000 that deserves special attention. When the heathen *goði* and Lawspeaker, Þorgeirr, speaks of the importance of having *one* law and *one* religion, he does not at the outset let it be known *which* law and *which* religion they should have. It is only when both sides, pagans and Christians, have unanimously agreed that what he says shall be their law that he then shows his colours and announces that henceforth Christian law and faith are to be sovereign in the country.

1 Cf. *Grágás*, III 617, 700-1 (s.v. *goði*, þing 2); *Ísl. saga*, I 68-82, 94-102.

2 'Skandinavisk Laghistoria', *Svensk Tidskrift för Literatur, Politik och Ekonomi* (1876), 178-288; 259: Om än denna stat var liten, mindre än Athen och Florens och ej som de smyckad med konstens och rikedomens glans, så företer den 'improduktiva' ön i stället ett rättslif, genomträngdt af den klaraste tankekraft och det djerfvaste mod.

The attitude he expresses in the first part of his speech is purely legal and formal: it is not possible in Icelandic society to have more than one law; it is not possible to give judgement in accordance with two different codes of law, one for pagans, one for Christians; then the community, as a legal whole, splits into two and the country will be destroyed in lawlessness and strife. As Law-speaker of the Althing, Þorgeir's first concern was doubtless to try to work out some formula which would, as far as possible, preserve the existing law, developed hitherto under forms of heathendom. This is how he spent his time under his cloak! We do not know what the whole code he finally established in his mind was like, but we can see that in the preamble he laid it down that everyone in Iceland should be Christian and believe in God. This is how we find it at the opening of the Christian section (*kristinna laga þáttur*) in the written collections of laws from later times.¹ Exposure of infants, the eating of horse-flesh and secret sacrifice were concessions which Þorgeir made to win the heathens and the watchers and warders of the ancient law over to his side.² Otherwise, it is probable enough that no great changes in the old law were necessary—although the heathen ceremonies at the assemblies, to which I shall return later, must certainly have been abandoned or replaced.

1 Þat er upphaf laga vǫrra [Á dögum feðra vǫrra vǫru þau lög sett, *Grágás* II] at allir menn skulu kristnir vera á landi hér, ok trúa á einn guð, foður ok son ok helgan anda (*Grágás* 1A 1, II 1).

2 On the circumstances which gave rise to the indulgences over eating horse-meat and exposing infants see Jón Steffensen, *Saga-Book* XVII (1966-9), 196-205.

The authority and formal legal skill of the Lawspeaker thus contributed greatly to the relatively peaceful acceptance of Christianity as the national religion of the Icelanders in the year 999/1000. But we should certainly undervalue the strength and significance of the cult-organisation, if we claimed that Iceland thereupon immediately became, in fact as well as in theory, a Christian country. Paganism undoubtedly lived on in many places—but not officially. When the temperate and truthful Ari follows his description of the events at the Althing by saying, chiefly with reference to sacrificing in secret, 'But a few years later this piece of heathendom, like other pagan practices, was also abolished' (*En stöðarr fám vetrum vas sú heiðni af numin sem önnur*), I think he may well be guilty of some exaggeration. It can hardly have been before Iceland got its own native bishops, from 1056 onward, that Christian life in the country began to be taken more seriously. Of this, I shall say more later.

As we remember, Ari tells us that the chieftain Hallr of Síða gave Þorgeirr money (*keypti at Þorgeiri lögsögumanni*) to persuade him to announce what law they should all have. This detail is found also in the secondary, embellished sources, and these purport to know how much he gave him, although the sum varies considerably in the different texts.¹ I do not believe that this payment had anything to do with the Lawspeaker's fee, as some scholars have maintained, for then Ari would have expressed himself

¹ See *Die Bekehrung*, I 425 and note 22; *Um kristnitökuna*, 86 and note 1. Both Maurer and Björn M. Ólsen thought the sums mentioned constituted a fee rather than a bribe.

differently. But I do believe that a decent weight of silver could help to get the old pagan *goði* under way and steer him in the right direction! One of the secondary sources, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, written by the monk Oddr Snorrason about the end of the twelfth century, tells us that when Gizurr and Hjalti left Norway on their missionary voyage back to Iceland they got much money from King Óláfr, 'in order to make friends of the chieftains', *at vingask við höfðingja*, as it says in the text.¹ The source's historical value may be dubious as a whole, but that does not reduce the plausibility of the report that a special *douceur* was provided for the Lawspeaker, who was without doubt rightly regarded as the most important single person in the affair.

A detailed survey of the political circumstances under which Christianity was adopted in Iceland would fill many pages. Here I shall attempt only to consider the essential factors.

It is difficult to penetrate the bright shroud of legend which surrounds Óláfr Tryggvason and hard to know for sure the real personality and career of this missionary king. When his qualities and deeds were treated in Icelandic prose, from the end of the twelfth to the beginning of the fourteenth century, he had long since become a favoured figure in popular tradition. It is only with great difficulty that we can sift the historical facts from material which, on the one hand, is compounded to excess of tales of heroism and derring-do, and, on the other hand, is strongly marked by typical features of

1 *Saga Óláfs . . . af Oddr*, 128/2-3.

Christian hagiography. But we do possess contemporary verses about him,¹ and we do have some reliable information about him in texts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.² In this latter source and in the scaldic poetry he certainly appears as a man of flesh and blood, and a very outstanding man too. He probably grew up in *Garðar*, Russia, and then, after taking part in Viking raids in the Baltic and on the British Isles and Ireland, this son of a petty king in the *Vík* (the Oslofjord region and Bohuslän) appears about A.D. 995 as a pretender to the throne of Norway. He had come fresh from the famous siege of London in September 994, described in detail in texts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. But he was also converted to Christianity in England. According to Norse sources, he was baptised in the Scilly Isles, where Christianity had been long established and where Celtic monastic sites are known.³ We know, at any rate, from English sources that, after being instructed by Bishop Ælfheah of

1 *Skáldatal* only gives the names of two poets who composed on Óláfr Tryggvason, the important Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld, on whom see Chapter 4 below, and an otherwise unknown Bjarni skáld, on whom see *Edda Snorra*, III 495-8; on fragments of verse attributed to King Óláfr himself and references to other poets associated with him see Guðmundur Þorláksson, *Udsigt over de norsk-islandske Skjalde* (1882), 68-71. Óláfr is mentioned in verses by Þórðr Kolbeinson and Halldór ókristni, see verses quoted in *Hkr.* I 300, 365; Halldór also refers to the great ship, Ormr enn langi, *Hkr.* I 360-1, 370.

2 Summarised by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Hkr.* I cii-ciii. Cf. also Alistair Campbell, *Skaldic verse and Anglo-Saxon history* (The Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture . . . 1970), 7-8.

3 So Oddr Snorrason and Snorri Sturluson, cf. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Hkr.* I civ. Cf. B. H. St J. O'Neil, *Ancient Monuments of the Isles of Scilly* (1961), 11-13.

Winchester, he was confirmed in Andover at the end of 994 or early in 995.¹ From then on, this erstwhile viking chief, who had plundered monasteries and churches and been the scourge of Christian life and culture in England, became a wholehearted adherent of the new faith. Christianity was to be hammered into wicked heathen heads with the customary violence of the viking. After the death of the notable pagan, Earl Hákon, Norway lay open to receive him, especially Trøndelag, Earl Hákon's own province, and naturally the Oslofjord region too, Óláfr's own inheritance, although this was territory on which the Danish king had claims. Óláfr was particularly harsh in his treatment of Trøndelag, and in the end he seems to have succeeded in converting the province to Christianity, although it was by no means an easy task. How far he managed to convert Nordmøre and Sunnmøre is uncertain, despite the stories told in the sagas. The southerly part of the Vík (i.e. Bohuslän) was converted from the start, but the rest of the Oslofjord region proved poor soil for the missionary seed. Óláfr Tryggvason is said to have put a large part of the west coast of the country, from Hordaland to Sogn, under the charge of his brother-in-law, Erlingr Skjálǫgsson of Sola (near Stavanger), and the people of this region accepted Christianity at the Gulathing. A much more difficult task for Óláfr was the conversion of Hålogaland, and fantastic stories are told of his severe treatment of the

¹ C. Plummer, *Two . . . Saxon Chronicles Parallel* (1892), I 128, 129 (E, F s.a. 995), cf. 126 (A s.a. 993); M. Ashdown, *English and Norse Documents* (1930), 95.

Hálogaland chieftains.¹ On the whole, Ólaf's missionary work was done in haste, but, to judge from the scaldic poetry of Hallfreðr, his personality exerted a peculiar fascination, indeed compulsion, on others, and those who opposed him must also have respected him. As a Norwegian scholar has remarked, Óláfr Tryggvason could have seen hardly anything of Norway except the coasts in the short space of his reign.² He probably never entered the mountain and valley districts of the interior—and this must also indicate in some measure the limits of Christianity in Norway at the time of his death. It was King Óláfr Haraldsson's destiny to complete the work of conversion, and, as especially Fredrik Paasche has maintained,³ it was finally through his death at Stiklarstaðir in 1030 that Christianity struck real roots in Norway.

In his missionary work Óláfr Tryggvason turned his attention above all to chieftains and other influential men. This is stressed over and over again in the sources, and it was precisely because of this policy that he tried to win over the Icelandic chieftains at any price. His missionary effort was also marked by another aim: all the countries peopled by Norwegians or by men of Norwegian descent must be converted to the faith, and this was achieved

1 These brief remarks are based on the narrative in *Hkr.*; on the relations between Snorri's account and other sources, chiefly Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga*, see Bjarni Aðalbarnarson, *Hkr.* I cxx-cxxiv.

2 H. Shetelig, *Det norske Folks Liv og Historie* I (1930), 379.

3 F. Paasche, *Kristendom og kvad* (1914), ch. I, §§ 2-3 (= *Heden- skap og kristendom*, 1948, 38-44); *Olav den Hellige* (1921), 64-71; *Norvegia Sacra* 10 (1930), 123-5 (= *Artikler og taler*, 1948, 94-7).

first by the baptism of their leaders. The people of the Hebrides, Orkney, Shetland, the Faroes, Iceland, if they were not already Christian, must now become so. It is further told, but not in the earliest sources, that Óláfr also arranged the baptism of Leifr the Lucky, the discoverer of Vinland. He was the son of Eiríkr the Red, the first settler in Greenland, and it was his task to bring Christianity to the Greenland colony.¹

Now, one may of course wonder whether Óláfr Tryggvason had other ideas for Iceland over and above its straightforward conversion to Christianity. We know from Ari that, already before the special mission of Gizurr and Hjalti, Óláfr had sent the missionary bishop Thangbrand to Iceland and that Thangbrand had baptized several chieftains, including Hallr of Síða (cf. p. 25). Ari tells us that Hallr Þórarinsson of Haukadals, who was born in 995, was also baptized by Thangbrand. We also know for certain that before Thangbrand another bishop, Frederick, from Lower Saxony, had worked in Iceland and succeeded in converting a number of people.² We know too from the unanimous witness of other prose sources, especially *Landnámabók*, that some individuals in tenth-century Iceland either arrived in the country as Christians or accepted Christianity on voyages abroad.³ Christianity was consequently not an unknown religion when it was finally adopted by the Althing, and it had undoubtedly

1 Snorri is the earliest source for the conversion of Leifr Eiríksson and the Greenlanders, see *Hkr.* I 334, 347.

2 *DN* XVII:B 195-6.

3 Maurer, *Die Bekehrung*, I 90-107, 191-201, provides a large collection of material but no source-criticism; *Ísl. saga*, I 149-51.

already gained a gradual foothold in the country through the influence of certain families and individuals. We may be certain that in the years towards the turn of the century a Christian party was formed in Iceland, under the leadership of converted chieftains. But Ari, in speaking of the missionary activity of the 990s, also says: 'There were more chieftains, however, who spoke against Christianity and refused to accept it' (*en þeir vǫru þó fleiri, es í gegn mæltu ok neittu*). This stress on the attitude of the chieftains was natural enough when it was a question of attempting the conversion of such a commonwealth as Iceland, with its social emphasis on aristocratic descent and cult-leadership.

Óláfr Tryggvason knew this full well, and from Ari's account it appears that the king threatened to retaliate on Icelanders in Norway, if he failed in his aim. Secondary sources say that these Icelanders held in Norway as hostages were the sons and kinsmen of prominent men. This was one way to break down the opposition of the heathen leaders, but I also believe that the high-born Icelandic chiefs were afraid that the king would not hesitate to subjugate their country by force, if Christianity was not accepted.¹ Sveinn Forkbeard of Denmark had not yet begun the operations that were to lead to his final reckoning with Óláfr Tryggvason, and a week's voyage

1 The sources and the names they give of the hostages are discussed by Björn M. Ólsen, *Um kristnitökuna*, 72-3. Cf. L. Musset's observations in his essay, 'La pénétration chrétienne dans l'Europe du Nord et son influence sur la civilisation scandinave', *La conversione al cristianesimo nell'Europa dell'alto medioevo* (Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo xiv, 1967), 298-9, 311.

to Iceland would hardly seem enough to deter a swift-sailing and warlike Christian viking. It was, however, also possible to win faithful adherents to the Norwegian crown among the Icelandic chieftains. We know nothing of any such further understanding between the king on the one side and Gizurr and Hjalti on the other. But any split in the ranks of the Icelandic leaders could always be used to the king's advantage—as it was in the thirteenth century, when the Icelandic commonwealth came to an end and the country accepted the overlordship of the Norwegian king. The external political situation is a factor not to be disregarded in considering the Althing's remarkable decision to accept a new religion on behalf of the whole Icelandic nation.

CHAPTER III

RELIGION AND SOCIETY

IN the preceding chapter we saw how Óláfr Tryggvason, in his attempts to convert the Icelanders, concentrated his attention on the chieftains. We observed that under the circumstances this was a perfectly natural policy, since the work of proselytising reached the people through kings and leaders. But in Iceland at that time there were different and special reasons which made it imperative to win over the chieftains. Most of these men were connected with the *goðorð* organisation, which involved them in sacral and judicial duties within the pagan society. The Icelanders had no local leaders with hereditary rank, like the earls or *hersar* of Norway. (It was not until the thirteenth century that an earldom existed in Iceland, at any rate in name, after the intervention of the Norwegian king in the country's civil strife.) Instead, they had *goðar*. *Goðar* had existed ever since the creation of the Althing in A.D. 930, and from about 965, perhaps earlier, there was a kind of *goðorð* system, organised on a national scale. The word *goði*, or *guði* as it appears in some sources, must originally have meant priest, *ιερεύς*.¹ It is an ancient Germanic word, found in the Gothic biblical translation of Ulfilas, and in runic inscriptions

¹ The word *goði* is a denominative *n*-stem of common type, cf. e.g. F. Kluge, *Nominale Stammbildungslehre der altgermanischen Dialekte* (1926), §§ 12-16.

from the Viking Age.¹ Its first sense is 'he who has to do with the divine', and that must mean the keeper of the cult-place, the priest of the sacrifices. The authority vested in and exercised by an Icelandic *goði* was called *goðorð*. It is of the greatest interest for the history of religion to study the *goðorð* system of pagan Iceland, for it is clear that here we have relics of an ancient institution, once to be found among the Germanic peoples of Scandinavia and the Continent, which gave to one and the same individual both priestly and judicial functions.

The *goði* had authority over a certain part of the population—he had *mannaforráð*—and those who joined his following were his 'thingmen'. They had to accompany him to the assemblies and give him support there. His power clearly depended to a large degree on the number and standing of the men who accepted him as their leader. His thingmen were also expected to support him in his private feuds and to help him to reach a settlement in disputes of various kinds. In return, it was the duty of the *goði* to protect his thingmen and to foster their interests. The *goði* was thus a chieftain with great legal and political authority,² and in the heathen age there was

1 S. Feist, *Vergleichendes Wörterbuch der gotischen Sprache*³ (1939), s.v. The runic inscriptions are Danish, see Lis Jacobsen and E. Moltke, *Danmarks Runeindskrifter* (1941-2), nos. 190, 192 (Helnæs and Flemløse, Fyn, ninth century, concern the same man, referred to as *nura kupa* 'goði of the Nes-dwellers'), 209 (Glavendrup, Fyn, tenth century, refers to *kupa uia* 'goði (acc.) of the sanctuaries'). For a survey of the *goði-goðorð* problem see H. Magerøy, *op. cit.* (p. 1, note 1 above), 30-4.

2 Cf. *Grágás*, III 617-18; *Ísl. saga*, I 72-82; Ólafur Lárússon, *KL* v (1960), 363-6.

the added prestige conferred on him by his remarkable status as cult-priest.

In the main it can be said that there are only two sources of fundamental importance on which we can base conclusions about the *sacral* character of the *goðorð* institution in pagan Iceland. One is *Landnámabók*, the Book of Settlements; the other is the thirteenth-century *Eyrbyggja saga*, whose author shows strong antiquarian leanings.¹ Two of the redactions of *Landnámabók* contain a passage which gives an extremely interesting extract from the old heathen law, *Úlfjót's Law*, which was the law of the land from c. 930 until the acceptance of the new Christian code. This passage includes the following:²

Baugr tvíeyringr eða meiri skyldi liggja í hverju hofuðhofi á stalla; þann baug skyldi hverr goði hafa á hendi sér til lögþinga allra, þeira er hann skyldi sjálfir heyja, ok rjóða hann þar áðr í roðru nautsblóðs þess, er hann blótaði þar sjálfir.

An arm-ring of two ounces or more should lie on the 'stall' in each 'chief temple'. Each *goði* should wear that ring on his arm at all the 'law-things' over which he himself presided, and redden the ring beforehand in the blood of the beast he himself sacrificed there.

In a following passage we are told the formula used in the thing-proceedings when men swore oaths on this same ring.

1 On *Landnámabók* see p. 4, note 1 above; *Eyrbyggja saga* is best edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson in *ÍF* IV (1935).

2. Quoted from *ÍF* I 313-15 (*Hauksbók*). The text must have been in *Styrmisbók*, the *Landnámabók* redaction made by Styrmir Kárason (died 1245). For a detailed discussion of the difficult problems connected with the *Landnámabók* texts and other sources where *Úlfjót's Law* is found see *ÍF* I xcvi-ci.

This passage from the ancient law has an authentic flavour, and there is no reason to suppose that it is the invention of some meddling editor of the thirteenth century.¹ It might on the other hand be plausibly argued that this passage is based on notes made by Ari towards a larger and more detailed history of Iceland than the short survey we now possess in the extant *Íslendingabók*. Such a passage may also have been included in the oldest *Landnámabók*, in whose preparation and composition Ari undoubtedly shared.² However this may be, I believe that what is said here about the *priestly function* of the *goði* must be counted completely authentic.

Eyrbyggja saga, written perhaps about 1250, perhaps a generation earlier,³ also throws light on the religious duties of the chieftain. In it we find a notable description of how a devotee of Thór takes land in Iceland, builds a *hof*, sees to the proper maintenance of the cult, selects a

1 For a critical résumé of recent discussion of the oath-formula see Peter Foote, 'Observations on "syncretism" in early Icelandic Christianity', *Visindafélag Íslendinga: Ársrit*, 1974. Interesting and sometimes controversial views on pagan survivals and the state of early Christianity in Iceland are found in recent papers by Hans Kuhn: 'Das Fortleben des germanischen Heidentums nach der Christianisierung', *La conversione al cristianesimo nell'Europa dell'alto medioevo* (Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo xiv, 1967), 743-57; 'Das älteste Christentum Islands', *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum* 100 (1971), 4-40; see also his book, *Island* (1971), especially Chapter xii.

2 On Ari's share in *Landnámabók* see Jón Jóhannesson, *Gerðir Landnámabókar* (1941), 211-26; *ÍF* I cvi-cxx.

3 Sigurður Nordal, *NK VIII:B 247-8*, puts it after *Laxdæla saga*, written in the 1240-50 decade. Arguments for an earlier date are offered by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *ÍF* iv xlv-liv. For discussion of the saga-writer's sources see Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *ÍF* iv v-xxxiv; idem, 'Eyrbyggja sagas kilder', *Scripta Islandica* 19 (1968), 3-18.

special, sanctified site for a thing-place in the vicinity of the *hof*, and gives land to all the men who came with him from Norway. In his Norwegian home he had been a leader, and now in Iceland he became the *hofgoði* of the community. Of the position and function of the *goði* the saga says this (ch. 4):

. . . stóð þar stalli á miðju gólfinu sem altari, ok lá þar á hringr einn mótlauss, tvítøgeyringr, ok skyldi þar at sverja eiða alla; þann hring skyldi hofgoði hafa á hendi sér til allra mannfunda . . . Til hofsins skyldu allir menn tolla gjalda ok vera skyldir hofgoðanum til allra ferða, sem nú eru þingmenn hofðingjum, en goði skyldi hofi upp halda af sjálfs síns kostnaði, svá at eigi rénaði, ok hafa inni blótveizlur.

A stall stood in the middle of the floor, like an altar, and on it lay a ring, made in one piece and weighing twenty ounces; all oaths were to be sworn on this ring; the *hofgoði* should have it on his arm at all assemblies . . . Everybody [in the district] should pay taxes to the *hof*, and be obliged to follow the *hofgoði* on all journeys, just as thingmen are obliged to follow chieftains nowadays [in the thirteenth century], and the *goði* should maintain the *hof* at his own expense, so that it did not become dilapidated, and should hold sacrificial feasts in it.

Opinions about the value of *Eyrbyggja saga* as a source may of course differ. The author is evidently a collector, and he shows himself to be very familiar with the Snæfellsnes locality and its old traditions. He is a man of conservative tastes, a lover of antiquity and the recollection of antiquity. No other saga offers so much information about early beliefs and customs, and when it is possible to check his record against other sources or to set it

against the background of what we otherwise know of pagan conduct and pagan concepts, we find that what he tells us fits very convincingly into the whole picture.

It seems to me that the close connection of the *goði* with the heathen cult is certainly established. He acts as a kind of president at the local thing-meetings, and while he maintains law and order in his own district at all times, he does so especially at and through the assemblies. The local thing is 'hallowed' by his performance of certain rites, at which he wears on his arm the special bracelet, described above, dipped in the blood of a sacrificial animal. In the summer he rides at the head of his thing-men to the national assembly, the Althing, and we may assume that he is again wearing the symbol of his authority on his arm. The Althing also had to be consecrated by a special rite before the general business of the Assembly began. According to a notice in *Landnámabók*, this ceremonial consecration of the Althing was a duty which fell to the *goði* holding the *goðorð* in the family of Ingólfr, the first settler, whose land bordered the site of the Assembly at Þingvellir.¹ This particular chieftain had to recite the appropriate formulas, and as the performer of this rite he was called *allsherjargoði*.² Þorkell máni, grandson of Ingólfr, had doubtless held this office before his election as Lawspeaker—he was the immediate

1 See *ÍF* I 46, note 3; cf. Einar Arnórsson, *Réttarsaga Alþingis* (1937), 31-2.

2 On *allsherjargoði* and other terms with *allsherjar* as first element see *Vorlesungen*, IV 298; *Fritzner*, I 802-3; D. Hofmann, *Nordisch-englische Lehnbeziehungen der Wikingerzeit* (Bibliotheca Arnarnag-næana XIV, 1955), § 351.

predecessor of Þorgeirr Ljósvetningagoði. In *Landnámabók* it says that Þorkell was the most righteous heathen that men knew of, and when he felt his death approaching, he asked to be carried out into the open air, so that he might die in the sun's rays, 'and commended himself to whatever god had made the sun' (*ok fal sik á hendi þeim guði, er sólina hefði skapat*).¹

We can thus glimpse in pagan Iceland the outlines of a religious and legal organisation from which the country's constitutional system developed. The *goðorð* were regulated on a firmer basis and allotted a fixed number about the year 965, when a law was adopted which divided the country into quarters, with three thing-divisions in each quarter and three *goðorð* in each division. An exception was made for the Northern Quarter which was to have four thing-divisions, each with three *goðorð*. Iceland thus had 39 *goðorð* in the later pagan period, while previously they seem to have numbered 36.² After the conversion to Christianity, the number of *goðorð* was increased and the priestly function of the *goði* disappeared completely, although one may say that the private churches of the chieftains in the first Christian decades, before the development of a general ecclesiastical system, continued in a way the pagan *hof*-organisation which made the chieftain personally responsible for the upkeep of the cult-centre. Not all the families who first held *goðorð* succeeded in keeping theirs, and in the thirteenth century the *goðorð* system more or less fell to pieces. The authority

1 *ÍF* I 46, 47.

2 *Ísl. saga*, I 68-9, 74-5, 79-80, 91-2.

it represented was then more and more frequently bought, sold or given away, and in the end, by the time Iceland became subject to the Norwegian crown, all the *goðorð* in the country were in the hands of only five families.¹

In pagan times the *goðar* were the men of highest rank in Iceland and the maintenance of the country's religious organisation was their responsibility. In the work of conversion it was thus a matter of essential importance to get through to them and the system they represented.

As we saw above, a *goði* maintained a cult-centre, a *hof*. Icelandic place-names in *Hof(-)* give us a fairly clear picture of their distribution over the country. They have been plotted on a map by Ólafur Briem and we see that twenty-four farms have the uncompounded name *Hof* and thirteen the compound name *Hofstaðir*.² This total of thirty-seven brings us very close to the number of *goðorð*, after *c.* 965 thirty-nine. The majority of these names are attested in early sources, *Landnámabók* and sagas; others first occur in later sources, but it seems unlikely that any of them could have come into existence after the introduction of Christianity, and we must accept the fact that most of these names belonged to heathen cult-centres. One site generally accepted as that of an ancient *hof* was carefully excavated a little over sixty years ago. This was at *Hofstaðir* near *Mývatn*, and it was found to consist of a large hall, *c.* 36 metres long and *c.* 6 metres wide at the gable ends and *c.* 8 metres wide in the middle. It was divided into a central aisle and two side aisles by posts

1 Cf. e.g. Ólafur Lárusson, *KL* v (1960), 364.

2 *Heiðinn síður*, 137, 187, and end-map.

resting on stone foundations. Over a 25-metre stretch in the central aisle were found the marks of the long fires that had once burned there, and in one central part relics of bones of various animals, including horse-bones. At the north end of the hall there was a smaller room, some 6 metres by 4, with its own entrance.¹

The site laid bare by this excavation was interpreted in the light of the detailed description found in ch. 4 of *Eyrbyggja saga* of a Thór's *hof* at *Hofstaðir* on the north side of Snæfellsnes. It is situated not far from *Helgafell*, 'the holy mountain', a name which puts us in touch with ideas of sacred places and the afterlife that must have played a large part in the heathen religion of Iceland. In ch. 11 of this thirteenth-century saga we find a magnificent description of strange events supposed to have taken place after Þorsteinn Codbiter's death, some time in the first half of the tenth century. The scene is this holy mountain. Þorsteinn and some of his men have been drowned out in the firth. A shepherd out with his flock suddenly sees that the hill opens on the north side. He looks inside and sees great long fires blazing; he hears a loud murmur of voices and the clatter of drinking-horns. As he listens, he can make out what is said, and he hears a welcome given to Þorsteinn Codbiter and his companions. Þorsteinn is invited to sit in the high-seat opposite his father, the old Thór-worshipper, Þórólfr Mostrarskegg. This seems a thoroughly pagan scene, reflecting very

1 Daniel Bruun and Finnur Jónsson, 'Om Hove og Hovudgravninger på Island', *Aarbøger* 1909, 245-316; cf. the new investigation of the site reported by Olaf Olsen, *Hørg, hov og kirke* (1966 = *Aarbøger*, 1965), 182-94.

ancient beliefs, associated with particular localities, where a hill or mountain is regarded as the sacred preserve of a family or community. Members of the family and adherents of the local cult go into this mountain after death and are welcomed by their kinsmen in a feasting-hall. Some passages in *Landnámabók* indicate the prevalence of the idea of such 'death-mountains'.¹

The representation of the world of the dead as a banqueting hall, where members of the kin sit cheerfully round the long fires and drink their mead, is also found in another curious and fascinating text, *Gísla saga Súrssonar*.² It would take too long to discuss this theme as it deserves. It is evident, as I have suggested elsewhere,³ that ideas about Valhøll were also closely connected with this concept of the afterworld as a mountain hall or banqueting chamber, where after death kinsmen sit in merriment around the blazing fires and welcome with satisfaction any new arrivals from their family. We can, if we like, look on this belief in the afterworld as a glad place of assembly for members of the kin as the Valhøll-faith of the farming society. In this particular complex of ideas concerning the next world, with its emphasis on merry-making and feasting, we may be sure that notions of heaven as a place of bliss, preached early as an essential part of the Christian message, found ready points of

1 *ÍF* I 98, 99, 139-40, 233; cf. Dag Strömbäck, 'Några drag ur äldre och nyare isländsk folktro', *Island* (Skrifter utg. av Samfundet Sverige-Island I, 1931), 65-9; *Heiðinn síður*, 110-13.

2 *Gísla saga*, ch. 22; in Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson, *Vestfirðinga sögur* (*ÍF* VI, 1943), 70-1.

3 Dag Strömbäck, *loc. cit.* (note 1 above), 67-8.

contact. Scandinavian rune-stones clearly show that the concept of paradise undoubtedly had its place in the first Christian teaching. One inscription from the early Christian period in Bornholm, for example, says: 'Christ and Saint Michael help their souls into light and paradise.'¹

To return to the *goðar* and their *hof*, it must be said that a cult-organisation was solidly established throughout Iceland. Images of the gods were made and the chieftains maintained halls where many men could share in the ritual meal. Everything pertaining to the cult was under the supervision and guardianship of the *goðar*. And it was the traditional cult of their forefathers in Norway that the colonists brought to their new home in the Atlantic. According to reports in *Landnámabók*, the first settlers sometimes brought with them parts of their homes that had religious significance for them, especially the *öndvegissúlur*, 'high-seat posts', and in this way something of their old sanctity was transferred to the new country.² Of one settler, Þórhaddr from Mæren in Sparbu (Trøndelag), it is even said that he brought with him earth from the site of his *hof*, along with pillars from the building

1 Lis Jacobsen and E. Moltke, *Danmarks Runeindskrifter* (1941-2), no. 399 (Klemensker-St. I, c. 1100-50); for similar examples from Sweden see e.g. Sven B. F. Jansson, *The Runes of Sweden* (1962), 92-7. On the terminology cf. B. Kahle, *Die altnordische Sprache im Dienste des Christentums I* (1890), 119-20; C.-E. Thors, *Den kristna terminologien i fornsvenskan* (Studier i nordisk filologi 45, 1957), 446; Carl-Martin Edsman, *KL III* (1958), 438-43, with references.

2 For references to *öndvegissúlur* see e.g. Dag Strömbäck, 'Att helga land', *Festskrift tillägnad Axel Hägerström* (1928), 198-220 (= *Folklore och filologi*, 1970, 135-65); G. Turville-Petre, 'Thurstable', *English and Medieval Studies presented to J. J. R. Tolkien* (1962), 241-9 (= *Nine Norse Studies*, 1972, 20-9).

itself. He settled in Stoðvarfjörðr in the east of Iceland, and the text adds that he 'laid the sanctity of Mæren over the whole firth' (*lagði Mærina-helgi á allan fjörðinn*).¹ We see how a degree of sanctity was thus transferred, almost in concrete fashion, to the new cult-district.

The gods chiefly worshipped in Iceland were Thór and Freyr, and we must regard them as the primary objects of the sacrifices and religious ceremonies in the thirty-nine cult- and thing-communities in late tenth-century Iceland. The dominant divinity was undoubtedly Thór. His name figures in a great number of place-names and personal names and he is often mentioned in literary sources, early poetry and late prose.² Verse from the end of the tenth century reveals that it was chiefly to him that men looked for opposition to the new faith in Christ. When a gale sent the ship of Thangbrand the missionary drifting out to sea, smashed it and washed it up again outside Hítará, north of Borgarfjörðr, a heathen poetess called Steinunn made the following verse:

Þórr brá Þvinnils dýri
Þangbrands ór stað löngu,
hristi búss ok beysti
barðs ok laust við jörðu;
munat skíð of sæ síðan
sundfært Atals grundar,
hregg þvít hart tók leggja
hónum kent í spónu.

1 ÍF 1 307 (*Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók*).

2 References to Thór in myths and iconography are collected in H. Ljungberg, *Tor* (Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift 1947:9); *Altg. Rel.*, II 107-53; *Myth and religion*, 75-105.

Thór tore Thangbrand's long beast of the sea-king from its place; he shook the tree of the prow and smashed it and struck it against the land; the ski of the ground of the sea-king will not henceforth be fit to swim over the sea, for the strong gale, attributed to him [Thór], broke it to splinters.

And in a following stanza she says that 'Christ did not protect the ship' (*hlífðit Kristr . . . malmfeta varrar*). Another pagan poet in a verse from the same period says *vera munu bænd í landi*, which in the context means 'the gods are evidently in the land'.¹

The predominant veneration of Thór by the chieftains and their cult-communities answers to what we know of the pagan religion of Norway, not least in its western parts.² But some of the Icelandic *goðar* probably concentrated their worship on Freyr, the god of fertility.³ This appears from the fact that three Icelandic chieftains are known specifically as *Freysgoðar*, i.e. leaders of cults and assemblies particularly associated with Freyr. There is other evidence too which leaves us in little doubt that this peculiar cult existed in tenth-century Iceland. In ancient times the real centre of the cult appears to have been Uppsala in Uppland, Sweden, although it is clear that it also flourished to some extent in Trøndelag in Norway.⁴

1 Steinunn, *Skj.* A I 135-6, B I 127-8 (here followed; there are no serious problems of interpretation); anonymous, *Skj.* A I 179, B I 169.

2 *Ættegård og helligdom*, 253-4 (= *Farms and fanes*, 294-5); *Heiðinn siður*, 15-33; *Myth and religion*, 85-98.

3 *Ættegård og helligdom*, 247-56 (= *Farms and fanes*, 287-96); *Heiðinn siður*, 33-50; *Myth and religion*, 165-8.

4 *Ættegård og helligdom*, 269-71 (= *Farms and fanes*, 312-15); *Myth and religion*, 169. On the type and distribution of Freyr/Freyja names in Norway see M. Olsen, *Hedenske kultminder i norske stedsnavne*

A priestess played a part in the cult, and such a figure is met with in texts with the title of *hofgyðja*. The cult seems to have been more conservative than the cult of Thór and in its fertility rites it doubtless had a more lascivious and dramatic character. It is to the cult of Freyr and his female counterpart, Freyja, that Hjalti alludes in his couplet at the Althing, 'I will not blaspheme the gods, Freyja seems to me a bitch.' As Magnus Olsen has maintained, the cult of Freyr in Iceland points especially to connections with Trøndelag in Norway, while the cult of Thór has closer associations with the districts of the Gulathing.¹ The cult of the god Njörðr was also known in Iceland, but only to a very limited extent.² The religion of Iceland's farming society hardly included the cult of Óðinn, despite his importance for poets like Egill Skalla-Grímsson and Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld.³ Even in the period of transition between paganism and Christianity, poets continued to maintain that the gift of poetry, their scaldic inspiration, came to them from Óðinn. Hallfreðr, for example, newly converted to Christianity, says:⁴

(Skrifter utg. av Videnskapsselskapet i Kristiania. II. Hist.- filos. Kl. 1914. No. 4, 1915), 26-49, 67-9. For a more cautious view of the connections see *Altj. Rel.*, II 199-203.

1 *Ættagárd og helligdom*, 247-55 (= *Farms and fanes*, 287-96).

2 *Heiðinn síður*, 50-4.

3 See Sigurður Nordal, 'Átrúnaður Egils Skallagrímssonar', *Skírnir* 98 (1924), 145-65 (= *Áfangar* II, 1944, 103-28); G. Turville-Petre, 'Um Óðinsdyrkun á Íslandi', *Studia Islandica* 17 (1958), 5-25; in English as 'The cult of Óðinn in Iceland' in *Nine Norse Studies* (1972), 1-19.

4 *Skj.* A I 168, B I 158 (here followed); *Hallfr. saga* (1939), 157; (1953), 55-6.

Öll hefr ætt til hylli
 Óðins skipat ljóðum,
 algilda mank aldar
 iðju várna niðja,
 en trauðr, þvít vel Viðris
 vald hugnaðisk skaldi,
 legg ek á frumver Friggjar
 fjón, þvít Kristi þjónum.

The whole generation of mankind has made poems for Óðin's favour; I remember the all-worthy occupation of our forefathers, but it is with reluctance that I treat the first husband of Frigg with hostility because we serve Christ, for the rule of Viðrir suited the poet well.

But, even so, Óðinn was never the object of a public cult in Iceland.

As mentioned earlier, Steinunn the poetess said in her verse against Thangbrand, *hlíföt Kristr . . . malmfeta varrar*, 'Christ did not protect the ship'. Here one should note that in this undoubtedly authentic stanza it is a heathen woman who has the name of Christ on her tongue. The name must have been familiar to her, as to others, not only through the missionary activities of the late tenth century but also through traditions and tales transmitted from the age of settlement. In opposition to Christ, the god of the Christians, she sets up Thór, who is the mightier of the two and her god.¹ When towards

1 As a possibly old and 'historical' parallel, though obviously not one that can be accorded the same status as a source in scaldic verse, may be cited the famous account of Helgi inn magri in *Landnámabók* (*ÍF* 1 250-2). Helgi is said to have been 'mixed' in his faith, believing in Christ but invoking Thór for voyages and hard undertakings (Helgi var blandinn mjök í trú; hann trúði á Krist, en hét á Þór til sjófara ok harðræða). He called his farm in Iceland Kristnes, after Christ in

the end of the same stanza she remarks with some irony,

lítt hykk at goð gætti
Gylfa hreins at einu,

goð here is to be translated as 'the god', i.e. Christ, and the sentence means, 'I think that the god gave but little protection to the ship.'

We can see from scaldic poetry from about A.D. 1000 that Christ played an important part in the preaching of the new faith. We may believe that he was portrayed as a hero, brave, strong and just—in a guise suitable for a heroic age, that is—but also with other qualities—he was faultless (*meinalauss*) and pure (*hreinn*). To this must have been added that he was an omnipresent power who, like the pagan gods, could be invoked and worshipped in life's every situation. Christ was a source of success and strength, just as some kings and chieftains were (cf. below). Heaven and paradise for good and righteous men, hell for the wicked and unjust, doubtless also had a part in the early missionary teaching.

Þórbjörn díarskáld, of whom we know little beyond the fact that he lived about the end of the tenth or beginning of the eleventh century, is thought to have been an ardent devotee of Thór. Thanks to Snorri Sturluson we have some fragments of a poem by Þórbjörn on Thór, in which he praises the god's might and achievements. But it appears that he also made Christian poetry—perhaps when he was older—and a fragment of this is also

whom he put his faith (Helgi trúði á Krist ok kenndi því við hann bústað sinn). Kristnes is given as Helgi's home by Ari in his genealogy of Icelandic bishops in *Íslendingabók* (ÍF 1 27).

preserved in Snorri's *Edda*. There he says of someone who had been baptized that he had received 'White-Christ's greatest good fortune' (*Hvítakrists . . . hæsta giptu*).¹

Another Icelandic poet who belongs to the Conversion age is Eilífr Guðrúnarson. He composed a poem on Thór which we also know from Snorri's *Edda*. Its theme is the mythical narrative of Thór's visit to Geirrøðr the giant. Eilífr speaks of Thór with the greatest seriousness and admiration, for example as 'sky-king' (*himinsjóli*), 'owner of the strength-belt' (*njótr njarðgjarðar*), and 'wagon's god' (*karms Týr*), and one gets the impression that he had a deep-anchored faith in Thór and his exploits as a destroyer of giants and evil beings. But Eilífr has also left us a fragment of a Christian poem (once more in Snorri's *Edda*), and there Thór has had to yield to Christ. We have only a half-stanza from this poem, but in it Christ appears as 'Rome's mighty king' (*ramr konungr Róms*), who has 'put on new strength in the lands of the powers of the mountain' (*remðan sik lǫndum setbergs banda*).²

1 *Skj.* B I 135. In *Skaldskaparmál*, our only source for verse by Þórbjörn, Snorri cites among his *Þórskeningar* two fragments of a poem on Thór by Þórbjörn díarskáld (*Edda Snorra* I 256, 260); among his *skipskeningar* he cites four lines from the Christian poem and attributes them to a Þórbjörn who is not distinguished by any nickname (*Edda Snorra* I 446). Finnur Jónsson assumes they are the same man in *Skj.*, but introduces a slight note of reservation in *Den oldnorske og oldislandske Litteraturs Historie* (1920-4), I 521. W. Lange's rendering of *fekk giptu Hvítakrists* as 'er empfang die Segnung des Krist' seems to me doubtful (*Studien zur christliche Dichtung der Nordgermanen 1000-1200*, Palaestra 222, 1958, 51).

2 *Skj.* B I 144. On the interpretation of this half-stanza see F. Paasche, *Kristendom og kvad* (1914), 18-19 (= *Hedenskap og kristendom*, 1948, 61); Jón Helgason, *NK VIII:B* 153; W. Lange, *op. cit.*, 54-7.

For the once dedicated worshippers of Thór, Þorbjörn and Eilífr, we thus see that Christ took Thór's place. We do not know the circumstances of their conversion. One may conjecture, however, that missionaries in Iceland took pains to present Christ as a figure who in strength and luck (*gipta*) and the ability to ward off malignant powers and their assaults—realities as much in pagan times as in others—could not only match but outdo Thór, the most popular of the native gods.

The early scaldic poetry, our safest source for the mentality of the Conversion period, contains other references and kennings which suggest that Christ was the central figure in the missionary preaching and the convert's response. *Landnámabók* has an account of Herjólfur Bárðarson who sailed to Greenland at the time when Eiríkr inn rauði settled there, in the 980s.¹ A Christian from the Hebrides was on board with him and he made a poem called *Hafgerðingadrápa*, from which the refrain is quoted. It contains a kenning, *meinalausan munka reyni*, 'faultless lord of monks', which must certainly refer to Christ (and not God the Father) because of the adjective *meinalauss*.²

A Christ-centred attitude also appears in a half-stanza by Skapti Þóroddsson the Lawspeaker. Skapti, who was born well before the Conversion, was nephew of the first

1 *ÍF* 1 132-3.

2 *Skj.* B I 167. F. Paasche, *Kristendom og kvad* (1914), 17 (= *Heden- skap og kristendom*, 1948, 51), interprets the kenning to mean either God or Christ but *meinalauss* is a much more likely adjective for God the Son than God the Father. The same objection applies to Lange's version, *op. cit.*, 58.

Christian lawspeaker, Grímr of Mosfell.¹ Grímr succeeded Þorgeirr Ljósvetningagoði (probably in 1002) and was rapidly succeeded by Skapti who held office for 27 summers and died in the same year as St Óláfr of Norway, A.D. 1030.

Skapti praises the power of 'the lord of monks', i.e. Christ, as the mightiest of all (*máttir es munka dróttins mestr*) and adds: 'mighty Christ created the whole of the world and built the hall of Rome.'² The lines also contain the phrase, *aflar goð flestu*, and again I think the word *goð* can hardly be taken as referring to God the Father but rather to Christ: 'the god (i.e. Christ) is capable of most' (cf. Steinunn's *lítt hykk at goð gætti*, discussed above).

If we return to Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld, who composed in both pagan and Christian times and whose conversion took place under the influence of the viking monarch, Óláfr Tryggvason, we find that Christ has a very prominent place in his poetry, Christian or Christian-influenced. In the stanza quoted on p. 52 above he says he 'serves Christ' (*þvít Kristi þjónum*), and in another that he is forced to turn away from *Njarðar niðjum* ('descendants of Njörðr'), to pray to Christ (*Krist at biðja*).³ It is true that he is aware that Christ is God's son (*erum leið*

1 *ÍF* I 19.

2 The whole fragment reads, *Skj.* B I 291:

Máttir es munka dróttins
mestr, aflar goð flestu;
Kristr skóp ríkr ok reisti
Róms höll veröld alla.

3 *Skj.* B I 159, *lv.* 10; *Hallfr. saga* (1939), 159; (1953), 58.

sonar reiði, | vald es á frægt und foldar | feör . . .),¹ but in the poetry he composed after his baptism, God the Father does not figure as notably as Christ does. It is the 'son's anger' (*sonar reiði*) he is loath to incur. It was hard for him to tear himself away from his old gods, but he would rather have their anger than the anger of Christ, his new god and his ideal. That seems the right way to interpret his *lausavísa* 9.

Hallfreðr composed a memorial lay for his godfather, Óláfr Tryggvason, doubtless soon after the year 1000, and his faith in Christ once more appears in the final stanza: 'may Christ the pure have the soul of the bold king in heaven' (*kæns hafí Kristr enn hreini | konungs ond ofar londum*).² That *God* should receive or help the souls of the dead is a more or less standing expression in Christian runic inscriptions in eleventh-century Scandinavia, but in Hallfreð's prayer it is Christ who is asked to keep the dead king's soul.

For an understanding of the conversion mentality Hallfreð's poetry is one of our most precious sources, since it reflects the struggle of an individual to free himself from pagan beliefs and customs and to try to accept wholeheartedly the new Christian teaching. This must have been all the more difficult for an actively pagan poet, whose creative ability was considered a gift from Óðinn and the elements of whose art were very largely drawn from pagan mythology. Hallfreðr, like Egill before him, had undoubtedly in a figurative sense drunk *Óðins*

1 *Skj. B I* 159, *lv.* 9; *Hallfr. saga* (1939), 158; (1953), 57.

2 *Skj. B I* 157.

mjóðr, Óðins ægir, Yggs full. As a poet therefore Hallfreðr had lived completely in a heathen world before his conversion, and there is no reason to believe that he had then been anything but a sincere worshipper of the gods, a man who did his duty in the pagan society in which he had his place. It was his meeting with Óláfr Tryggvason which brought him to belief in Christ. Altogether Hallfreð's personality and milieu offer so much of interest to any student of the events and poetry of the Conversion age that I have devoted a later chapter to a critical account of his career.

In Iceland Christianity encountered a people of religious mood. They were aware of the numinous and had firm respect for forms, formulas and ceremonies, for commands and prohibitions derived from religious observance as well as from secular law. Already in this may be seen the prerequisites for the adoption of a new order, not least when the Christian dispensation could fulfil three conditions: it could preserve the old legal system and the idea of one nation; it could satisfy the need for religious reverence, now with worship of a novel deity, mightier than the old gods, not subject to Ragnarøk but ruling through eternity; and in its early stages it could adapt itself to existing social forms. The place of the *hof* built and kept in repair by the chieftains was taken by churches erected by the leaders on their farms. The local thing-men of the *goði* attended his church, as they had once attended the sacrifices he had organised and the feasting at his *hof*. Contributions that members of a cult-community had previously made to maintain their religious practices must

now have come in some form to the church and its owner, and they were finally regularised in tithe-payments.¹ Burial in consecrated ground was an assured benefit in return. *Eyrbyggja saga* (ch. 49) tells of a church built by Snorri goði near the hill of ancient heathen veneration, Helgafell, soon after the Conversion. According to the saga, the chief was assured that a man was guaranteed places in heaven for as many of his followers as could stand to hear the service in the church he built. And this, the text says, 'much encouraged men to build churches' (*ok hvatti menn þat mjök til kirkjugerðar*).

Icelandic literary sources do not tell us whether any ancient cult-building, in whole or in part, was ever converted into a church, after the removal of everything associated with paganism and after proper Christian consecration. It is possible that such conversions took place.² We can in this connection recall the famous letter from Pope Gregory the Great to Abbot Mellitus, dated 18 July 601. This letter says, among other things, that the temples of the pagan Anglo-Saxons are not to be destroyed, although the idols in them should be. Then the temple should be sprinkled with holy water, a Christian altar erected and relics of the saints placed in it. If the

1 *DI I* (1857-76), 70-162; *Grágás*, 1b 205-14; cf. Björn Þorsteins-son, *Íslenska Þjóðveldið* (1953), 205-7; *Isl. saga*, I 204-9; on its operation and social importance see e.g. P. G. Foote in *Saga-Book XIII* (1946-53), 208-9.

2 Cf. Peter Foote and David M. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement* (1970), 417-18, with references. On early churches, their numbers and status cf. Sveinn Víkingur, *Getið í eyður sögunnar* (1970), 52-170, and Gunnar Smedberg, *Nordens första kyrkor* (1973), though neither of these works can be safely regarded as authoritative.

temple is well built, says Gregory, then it is particularly fitting that evil spirits should be dispossessed of it and that, instead, it should be dedicated to the worship of the true God. And, he continues, the people who see the temple undisturbed will afterwards so much the more easily leave their errors and so much the more willingly come together to the places familiar to them, there to learn to know the true God and to pray to Him. *Nam duris mentibus simul omnia abscidere impossibile esse non dubium est, quia is qui summum locum ascendere nititur gradibus vel passibus, non autem saltibus elevatur.* 'It is, without doubt, impossible to cut away everything at once from obstinate minds, for when one tries to reach a summit, one mounts not in leaps but step by step.'¹

I said earlier that the Icelanders were by no means completely ignorant of Christianity when the new faith was finally adopted by the Althing. Individual Christians had indeed lived in Iceland from the time of the settlement onwards. The first inhabitants of Iceland were Christian hermits. We know for certain that Irish anchorites were there at the beginning of the ninth century.

In early Irish Christendom there was an unusual emphasis on the virtue of solitude for the religious. It was probably ultimately derived from the eremitical practices of the Christians of Asia Minor and Egypt. The idea of withdrawal from the world was connected with ideas of penance and the annihilation of self. In Ireland it became a movement that favoured a kind of

¹ *Gregorii I Registri L. VIII-XIV* (Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Epistolarum Tomus II, 1899), 303-31 (XI 56).

penitential exile and drove its adherents to live on isolated rocks off the Irish coast or make long voyages in the North Atlantic. They used a simple boat made of skins stretched over a wooden framework, the so-called *curach* (a word related to Latin *corium*, 'skin'). A later Irish poet has expressed the feelings of those anchorites who sailed out to become exiles for Christ:

There is a blue eye which will look back
at Ireland; never more shall it see the men
of Ireland nor her women.¹

This strange yearning to do penance through exile, which, as far as we can see, represented a movement quite independent of the active missionary work of the Celtic Church, carried Irish anchorites out to the lonely islands of the Atlantic. In their primitive but seaworthy craft they voyaged to the Hebrides and Orkney, and then sailed on to Shetland, the Faroes and, finally, Iceland. The extent of their voyages can be seen from the occurrence of place-names in *pap-* on these Atlantic islands, and, in some instances, from the sadly indistinct traces of their habitation in caves and cell-like houses.² Mention

¹ Máire and Liam de Paor, *Early Christian Ireland* (1958), 52. On the vessels and voyages of the Irish, see e.g. G. J. Marcus in *The Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, Fifth Series, LXXVI (1951), 353-63, 469-79.

² Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 'Papar', *Skirnir* 119 (1945), 170-203; Hermann Pálsson, 'Minnisgreinar um Papa', *Saga* v (1965), 112-22; on two *papa* place-names in the Faroes, cf. Christian Matras, 'Papýli í Føroyum', *Varðin* 14 (1934), 185-7; idem, 'Írsk orð í føroyskum', *Almanakki fyri tað ár eftir Kristi føðing* 1966, 22-32 (31-2). On Christian remains in Orkney and Shetland from pre-Norse times and the period overlapping the Norse settlements, see A. W. Brøgger, *Den norske bosetningen på Shetland-Orknøylene* (Skrifter utgitt av Det

is also made of them in early literary sources. In Norse a hermit of this kind was called *papi*, in Irish *pap*, *pupa* (cf. *pobba*), a name ultimately derived from Latin *papa*, 'father'.¹ From the Hebrides in the south to Iceland in the north there is a whole series of place-names which have this word as an element. Very often such names refer to smaller islands, inaccessible places away from regular routes: Pabbey in the Outer Hebrides, Papa Vestray, one of the remotest and loneliest of the Orkney islands, Papa Stour in Shetland and Papey off Álftafjörður on the east coast of Iceland, an island with precipitous cliffs where landing is difficult. This last was just the sort of place to which the Irish hermits were drawn. Other names in Iceland also bear witness to their isolated dwellings, usually in caves or rock-clefts. Ari fróði refers to these anchorites in his *Íslendingabók* and gives some interesting information about them, and they are also spoken of in *Landnámabók*. Ari says that when Norsemen landed in Iceland, they found Christian men: 'whom the Norsemen call *papar*, but they went away because they would not stay here and share with heathen men' (*þeir es Norðmenn kalla papa, en þeir fóru síðan á braut, af því at þeir vildu eigi vesá hér við heiðna menn*). He goes on to say that they 'left behind them Irish books, bells and croziers; from this one could understand that they were

Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo. II. Hist.-Filos. Kl. 1930, No. 3), 121-40; H. Marwick, *Ancient Monuments in Orkney* (1952), 26-8; C. A. Raleigh Radford, in *The Northern Isles* (ed. F. T. Wainwright, 1962), 165-74. No confirmed sites associated with *papar* have as yet been found in the Faroes and Iceland.

1 Hermann Pálsson, *op. cit.*, 120-1.

Irish' (*létu eptir bækr trskar ok bjöllur ok bagla; af því mátti skilja at þeir váru menn trskir*).¹ One can almost visualise how the holy men in their glorious solitude were outraged by this intrusion on their peace, and how they hurried down to their boats of skin, leaving various belongings behind them, and once more set sail over the wide ocean, perhaps seeking fresh isolation in Greenland or perhaps setting course to the south, back to the lands they had left.

About the year 825 the Irish monk Dicuil, who taught in France, wrote a book called *De mensura orbis terrae*. He seems to have used surprisingly few informants from among his own contemporaries. They could certainly have provided him with much more information about many of the countries and provinces, islands and seas and rivers that he describes in his book. After all, the Carolingian Age was an age of international learning when scholars from various countries met together at the court of Charles the Great and his son Louis.

But Dicuil is not an author who is curious about facts from his own time. He is almost entirely interested in the past and his chief aim is to assemble and criticise material from earlier historians and geographers like Plinius Secundus, Julius Solinus (third century), Priscianus (fifth century), Isidore of Seville (sixth and seventh centuries) and others.² Only on some occasions—and notably

1 *ÍF* 15.

2 J. J. Tierney, *Dicuili liber de mensura orbis terrae* (*Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* VI, 1967), 27-33. Cf. also H. Zimmer, *Über die frühesten Beziehungen der Iren mit den Nordgermanen* (*Sitzungsberichte d. Berliner-Ak. d. Wissenschaften*, 1891).

twice—does he refer to what people have told him. In connection with notes on Egypt (VI, 12-18) he thus speaks of a 'brother Fidelis' who in the presence of Dicuil's teacher Suibne had given a report on a branch of the Nile, which joined the Red Sea to the Nile, and on a long sail on the Nile which had brought them to the seven Pyramids, 'the barns of Joseph' (*septem horrea . . . quae sanctus Joseph fecerat*).¹ The second time he really uses contemporary informants is when his description concerns the islands north of Scotland, and particularly the location of Thule—as a geographical concept known since the days of Pytheas. Here he refers to clerics who thirty years before—*c.* 795, when Dicuil was probably still in Ireland—had given him an account of their experiences in the far North.

I think we can trust both his notes on brother Fidelis's journey on the Nile and the reports given to him by Irish anchorites who had been to an island in the North Atlantic, which according to their description must undoubtedly have been Iceland.

They told him that they had been on this island from late January to late July. They said that the summer nights there were remarkably light; the sun went down but only as if it were hiding itself behind a hill. It did not get dark, and one could see to work just as well as if it were bright daylight—even to pick lice out of a shirt! One may imagine, he continues, that if one went up onto the highest mountain, one would perhaps see that the sun never disappeared at this time. They related further, he

1 J. J. Tierney, *op. cit.*, 62-3.

says, that there was open sea around the country but that north of the island, a day's sail away, they had met the frozen sea.¹

This is the earliest account we have of Iceland and it confirms what the Icelandic literary sources tell us about the stay of Irish anchorites in the country. But these men did not leave the Christian faith behind them in Iceland; they did not stay to convert the new Norse colonists.

We find, however, other early traces of Celtic Christianity in Iceland, as far back as the settlement itself. A number of the first colonists came from Norse areas in Ireland and the Hebrides, and some of them had been instructed in the Christian faith of the Celtic population among whom they had lived. One of them was Helgi the Lean, the progenitor, one way or another, of all the most distinguished families in and around Eyjafjörður. Helgi was

1 *Ibid.*, 74: Trigesimus nunc annus est a quo nuntiauerunt mihi clerici qui a kalendis Febroarii usque kalendas Augusti in illa insula manserunt quod non solum in aestiuo solstitio sed in diebus circa illud in uespertina hora occidens sol abscondit se quasi trans paruulum tumulum, ita ut nihil tenebrarum in minimo spatio ipso fiat, sed quicquid homo operari uoluerit uel peduculos de camisia abstrahere tamquam in presentia solis potest. Et si in altitudine montium eius fuissent, forsitan numquam sol absconderetur ab illis. In medio illius minimi temporis medium noctis fit in medio orbis terrae, et sic puto e contrario in hiemali solstitio et in paucis diebus circa illud auroram in minimo spatio in Tyle apparere quando meridies fit in medio orbis terrae. Et idcirco mentientes falluntur qui circum eam concretum fore mare scripserunt et qui a uernali aequinoctio usque ad autumnale continuum diem sine nocte atque ab autumnali uersa uice usque ad uernale aequinoctium assiduam quidem noctem, dum illi nauigantes in naturali tempore magni frigoris eam intrabant ac manentes in ipsa dies noctesque semper praeter solstitii tempus alternatim habebant. Sed nauigatione unius diei ex illa ad boream congelatum mare inuenerunt.

not exactly committed to the faith, however, for, as we recall, he is said to have believed in Christ but to have invoked Thór when it came to 'voyages and hard undertakings'.¹ Even so, he called his farmstead in Eyjafjörðr Kristnes. A more significant strain of Celtic Christianity is doubtless to be detected in the man called Ørlygr Hrapsson. According to the account in *Landnámabók*,² he was a Norwegian who was brought up by an Irish bishop in the Hebrides. When he decided to go to Iceland, the bishop fitted him out with consecrated earth, an iron bell, a service-book and other things, and described to him the place where he should build both his farm and a church dedicated to St Columba. Ørlygr was blown off course and first made land in the Vestfirðir; from there he sailed south and on Kjalarnes, below Mount Esja, he found the place he was seeking. There he built his home and a church dedicated to St Columba in accordance with his instructions. The text says that Ørlygr and his kinsmen put their faith in Columba, and a later tradition could add that the treasures from his first church, the bell and the book, were still in existence in the thirteenth century. One redaction of *Landnámabók* makes the revealing statement that Ørlygr's descendants also believed in Columba, even though they were not baptized!³ Yet another settler of the heathen age, Ásólftr alskik, appears to have attempted to introduce Irish Christianity into Iceland. The account of him in *Landnámabók* is unfortu-

1 Cf. p. 4, note 1 above.

2 *ÍF* I 52-5.

3 *ÍF* I 55 (Þeir trúðu á Kolumkilla, þó at þeir væri óskírðir, *Hauksbók*), cf. 54 (Þeir Ørlygr frændr trúðu á Kolumba, *Sturlubók*).

nately not entirely clear.¹ Because of his Christianity heathen people apparently shunned him and drove him from one district to another in the south of the country. He seems to have been a quiet, peace-loving man, of the Celtic Christian type, one who would rather give way than fight. Finally, he settled on Akranes and ended his days there as a hermit, taken care of by a friend who was also a Christian.

More details concerning these first Christians in Iceland and others like them could be given from the literary sources, but by way of general conclusion we can say that, although they may have been influential in some districts, especially in the south and just north of Reykjavík, their Celtic Christianity was not powerful enough to make headway against the organised pagan cults and the social order associated with them. A precise assessment of the impression made by Celtic Christianity on the religious ideas and intellectual culture of the Icelanders in the tenth century remains to be made: a delicate and difficult problem whose solution will undoubtedly need the co-operation of scholars from several different fields of study.

1 *ÍF* I 61-5.

CHAPTER IV

HALLFREÐR VANDRÆÐASKÁLD

HALLFREÐR was counted one of the master poets in Iceland, his work a model for following generations. It is thanks to Snorri's use of many examples from his verse in *Skáldskaparmál* that we now have preserved at least nine half-stanzas of his *Hákonardrápa*—a poem made by a pagan poet in honour of a pagan prince, probably about the year 990. Snorri ranked Hallfreðr among *hofuðskáldin*, the most respected poets, one of those who really understood their art and had that intimate knowledge of mythology and heroic legend that was necessary for skilful verse and word-craft. In the *Skáldatal*, that list of poets which in its original form must belong to Snorri's age, Hallfreðr is also counted among the poets of Óláfr Tryggvason,¹ and in his *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, ch. 83, Snorri says, 'We take information and evidence from Hallfreð's poems in what is said in them about Óláfr Tryggvason.'² This shows Snorri's respect for scaldic poetry, but it probably also shows that he nursed some suspicion of the truthfulness of the literary sources and oral traditions about Óláfr Tryggvason that he otherwise had to work with. But in his estimation Hallfreð's poems were based on reality and were true. It is the same attitude as is expressed in Snorri's Prologue to his separate *Óláfs saga helga* and *Heimskringla*, where he talks

¹ *Edda Snorra* III 274.

² *Hkr.* I 332.

of the value of scaldic poetry and the measure of reliability he accords to the poems of the court-poets.¹

If we wish to follow the principle Snorri enunciates and to adapt it to the study of Hallfreð's own life and personal development—of vital interest as these are for the history of the Conversion—we ought properly to restrict ourselves entirely to his poems. The saga about him is a comparatively late work, preserved as an independent entity in *Möðruvallabók* (AM 132 fol.) from the first half of the fourteenth century, and also found in separate parts in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*.² Fragments in the fifteenth-century AM 557 4to also belong to this latter work.³ Rejection of the prose texts in this way will inevitably mean that our portrait of Hallfreðr is sketchy and incomplete, but it will have the merits of truthfulness. It has always been the custom to make as much use of the saga as of the poetry in presenting this fascinating character, the prose filling the gaps between the verses. An unhistoric text has been treated as historic evidence.

In effect, we have only the saga's word for most details of Hallfreð's career and the quirky, artistic, bohemian

1 *Den store Saga*, 3-5, *Hkr.* I 4-5—Tökum vér þat allt fyrir satt, er í þeim kvæðum finnsk um ferðir þeira eða orrostur; p. 8 above.

2 Cf. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *ÍF* VIII (1939), lxxiv-lxxix; parallel texts from *Möðruvallabók* and the principal texts of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* are printed with variants in Bjarni Einarsson's edition, *Hallfr. saga* (1953); cf. also Ólafur Halldórsson, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* I-II (Editiones Arnarnagnæanæ, Ser. A, I-2, 1958-61).

3 Dag Strömbäck, *The Arna-Magnæan Manuscript 557 4to* (Corpus codicum Islandicorum medii ævi XIII, 1940), 12-13.

nature that is supposed to have earned him the nickname of 'the troublesome poet'. But his poetry ought to be able to tell us various things about people he met and experiences he either knew at first hand or learnt from others, and it may thus claim status as a prime historic source. His extant lines on Hákon jarl Sigurðarson, though mere fragments, tell us that Hákon was a great sea-warrior, who had had a hard struggle to win power in Norway and to be 'married to the land' as if to a bride.¹ Probably Hallfreðr is referring to the jarl's victory over the Jómsvíkingar at Hjørungavágr. The two poems on Óláfr Tryggvason both have much to tell of his travels and raids in different countries, and it is of special note that the memorial lay gives valuable information concerning the battle of Svǫld. The same poem also tells us clearly that Óláfr was the godfather of Hallfreðr.

What is then to be made of the *lausavísur* attributed to Hallfreðr in his saga? What do they tell us about him?

1 The lines are quoted twice in *Skáldskaparmál* (*Edda Snorra* I 320, 400):

Ráð lukust, at sá síðan
snjallráðr (*var.* -inæltr) konungs spjalli
átti einga dóttur
Ónars, viði gróna.

'Negotiations were so concluded that the brilliant (*var.* eloquent) confidant of the king had to wife Ónar's only daughter, grown with woodland' (i.e. the land of Norway). In the main my translation follows Sveinbjörn Egilsson's Latin version, *Edda Snorra* I 321, 401, cf. *Skj.* B I 148. It is interesting to find Hákon's possession of Norway ambiguously expressed in terms of marriage to the land he rules. This can be paralleled on the one hand by widely attested ideas about the relations that exist between a land's fertility and a ruler's conduct, and on the other by Old Testament notions of Jerusalem as the bride of God and the idea of a Christian bishop's 'marriage' with his church, of which his episcopal ring is usually regarded as symbolic.

Like other scaldic poetry from the end of the tenth century, these stanzas are very often hard to interpret and sometimes evidently corrupt after a long passage in oral transmission—sometimes too the fourteenth-century scribes have mis-handled them badly. But if we try to bring out the salient points of the information they contain, disregarding whatever the prose in which they are embedded may say, we appear to learn the following facts.¹

Setting aside the first *lausavísa* for later consideration, we discover that Hallfreðr is deeply in love with a girl called Kolfinna, only daughter of Ávaldi (lv. 2). It will be a long time before his thoughts cease to turn to her, a lady of mild and steadfast disposition. In a storm at sea he thinks of Kolfinna, a woman 'of good family', and his desire for her is stronger than if she had been promised him to wife (lv. 3). A later half-stanza is about the difficulty of mooring the ship because of high seas (lv. 4). Then in lv. 5 there is reference to his meeting with King Óláfr Tryggvason (*viðlendr konungr*) and to the king's gift of a sword (*konungsnautr*). As a result of his encounter with the Christian king the poet examines his pagan past (lv. 6), speaks of his respect for the heathen poetry of his ancestors and says that he is reluctant (*trauðr*) to hate Óðinn because he (now) serves Christ (lv. 7). He goes on to assure the king (*hplða reifir*) that he rejects the name of Óðinn (lv. 8). But he does not stop there. He takes a further step on the Christian's road and explains

¹ The *lausavísur* referred to in the following are numbered as in *Skj. B* 1 157-63. I have generally accepted the readings and forms of *Hallfr. saga* (1939), where of course the numbers differ.

that he accepts the anger of Freyr and Freyja and Thór the strong, that he earlier abandoned the deceit of Njörðr (*dul Njarðar*), and that evil spirits (*grömm*) can keep Óðinn—but, as for himself, it is to Christ he now prays and it is his anger that he is unwilling to incur—Christ who under the Father of the world has glorious power (*frægt vald*—lv. 9). He expresses his loyalty to the new faith in the next stanza. ‘The prince of the men of Sogn’ (*Sygna ræsir*), King Óláfr that is, has forbidden heathen sacrifice (*blót*), people must set aside the ancient belief in destiny controlled by the Norns and abandon the worship of Óðinn; the poet himself is compelled (*neyddr*) to turn away from the descendants of Njörðr in order to pray to Christ (lv. 10).

Then comes a stanza about a sword (lv. 11), but I will refrain from quoting its contents because the textual state of the second *helmingr* hardly allows a firm decision as to whether it is the king Hallfreðr addresses or someone else.

A journey to Denmark (to *Sigvaldi jarl*) and Sweden (Gautland) is described in chs. 7 and 8 of *Hallfreðar saga*, but the stanzas relating to it are not very informative. In the first of them Hallfreðr speaks of his generosity towards a man whom he was unwilling to deceive but who nevertheless deceived him (lv. 12); in the second he tells of the blood-vengeance he took on the slayer of Auðgisl (*Auðgísls bana*—lv. 13); and in the third he describes how he threw this ‘houndish’ (*hundgeðjaðr*) man to the ground and treated him in such a way that he would no more continue his evil deeds against mankind (lv. 14).

The stanzas in chs. 9 and 10 all refer to Kolfinna and Gríss and must consequently have sprung from Hallfreð's experiences in Iceland. The first, lv. 15, mentions Gríss and his relationship to the woman (*lýsibrekkja leggjar iss*), i.e. Kolfinna. I believe Jón Helgason¹ is right in suggesting that the second half of lv. 16 and the second half of lv. 15 should be exchanged; the structure and continuity in both are then much improved. In lv. 15 Gríss is scorned for his malodorous sweating (*heitr ofremmðar sveiti*), and the poet reckons the woman suffers torment (*kvöl þolir hón*) before the ugly man (Gríss) dares creep to join her under the bedclothes (*þorir skriða und vaddir*)—he is not swift to go to bed with the lady (*hann esa hvíluþráðr við hlaðs Gunni*). Lv. 16 also gains in terms of shape and logic by the exchange, though its relation to lv. 15 is now a case of hysteron proteron. For the poet here describes how the man (Gríss) goes ponderously and reluctantly to bed—like a herring-crammed fulmar moving on the water—while she (Kolfinna) sinks her head towards him like a swimming swan (*sem ǫlpt á sundi*). He praises the bright woman's disposition (*lund ljóssa vifa*). Lv. 17 continues with scornful words about Gríss, who is well provided with provender and cattle but all the same will not possess the woman (?). Lv. 18 refers to Kolfinna's response to the verses (about Gríss). She has anxieties, but the poet sings her praises and finds a delicious balm (*dýrliigr анги*) comes from the young woman. In the next stanza, lv. 19, Hallfreðr says it would mean little to him to be cut down in the woman's arms, if only he could sleep in her embrace;

he says that he has already run the risk of visiting her, for he cannot control his passionate love for her (*ofrækð*). Lv. 20 is obscure but must refer to the coarse insults the poet has inflicted on the cowardly Gríss in his verses—something that pleases him (*hvat mik teitir*).¹ Lv. 21 is easier to understand. It describes the homecoming of the women from the pasture-sheds (*frá seljum*); all are 'smooth-skinned' (*sléttfjallaðar*) and look well; the poet refuses to take any responsibility if the woman (Kolfinna) is at all upset, for now each man takes a girl.

Lv. 22 must be assumed to concern Már Jörundarson and his attack on Hallfreðr.² In the first half the poet says that the 'gold-waster', the man, the chieftain Már, conceited (*dulrækinn*) as he is, prepares an attack on the poet, but, he adds, I each day remember the delightful woman. For the second half it seems best to follow Finnur Jónsson and take the *Flateyjarbók* text, with the modest emendation of *hlokæirs* to *hlautgeirs*. We then get: 'but it (an attack on me) will be much harder for the pagan sacrificer (*hæli-Baldri hlautgeirs*, for the man who flaunts the sacrificial blood twig) than to lick the inside of his sacrificial bowl (*sleikja sinn blóttrygil innan*).³

1 It seems to me that Sveinbjörn Egilsson's translation and explanation of *fló ek af gyltar grísi / geitbelg* as 'detraxi porcello pellem caprinam, i.e. coegi hominem mollitiem deponere' (*Lexicon poeticum*, 1860, s.v. geitbelgr) still offer the best guide to its interpretation. It appears to be this stanza which projects real *níð*.

2 It is extant only in *Möðruvallabók* and *Flateyjarbók*; the versions are printed parallel in *Hallfr. saga* (1953), 110.

3 I follow the reconstruction and interpretation proposed by Finnur Jónsson in *Arkiv* 18 (1902), 317-19. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Hallfr. saga* (1939), 187-8, keeps generally closer to the text in *Möðruvallabók*, but the import of the second half-stanza there seems

Lv. 23 also has some difficulties, but essentially it concerns on the one hand the poet's continuing love for Kolfinna (. . . *hugr við Kolfinnu*) and on the other his willingness to fight a duel against Gríss should it be necessary (. . . *vísar mér at Grísi á eyri*). The next stanza, lv. 24, is a pure love-lyric, unusually transparent and well preserved: 'When my eyes light upon the woman, I seem to see a ship gliding between two islands; and when I see her in the group of ladies, then it is as if I watch a splendid ship under way with gilded gear.'

In lv. 25 the poet complains that he—a brave man and one who has been distinguished by gifts of ringing gold from a king and an earl—should now have to pay 'mischief-fines' (*glapaskuldir*) to the gourmet Gríss for such trifling verse and go without Kolfinna into the bargain. Lv. 26 tells of an ocean voyage: in the gale he was struck in the side close to the heart by a spar; he is wet from the waves breaking over the ship: 'the frothy billow will not spare the poet.' The next stanza, lv. 27, continues this with thoughts on his imminent fate: 'The great-hearted woman (Kolfinna)—the lady who received (from nature's hand) so delicate a disposition—will dry the tears from her soft eyelashes with her white hand, if the men now toss my corpse over the gunwale; earlier I was a cause of grief to the young woman.' And then comes the poet's last stanza, lv. 28, before he dies: 'I should die now without care (*sorglaust*) if I knew my soul was saved; but young

certainly the same as in Flateyjarbók, and they are in full agreement on *sleikja sinn blóttrygil (blóð-) innan*, whether the emended *hlautgeirr* is preferred or not.

I had a sharp tongue, (but) God must decide where I shall lead my life' (in the next world—*hvar aldri skal slíta*).

These *lausavísur* reveal glimpses of a restless, passionate character, full of unquenchable love for a woman and constant hatred for the man she is forced to live with.

His love is described as almost stronger than it would be even if the woman had been promised to him (*þótt unnum nú áttgóðri . . . nær betr an væri heitin mér*—lv. 3)¹ and as *ofrækð* (lv. 19), 'excessive affection, ardent passion'. This goes on through all his life, as if inevitable and fated, something inseparable from his nature, as lv. 27, composed shortly before his death at sea, also demonstrates. This is why the account in the prose saga of his marriage with a certain Ingibjörg in Sweden seems so strange.

In a paper on *Hróa þáttur* I once pointed out a number of elements which it shares with *Hallfreðar saga*.² I believed that the saga had exerted influence on the composition and on some individual motives in the account of Hrói's visit to Svíþjóð. Reconsideration of the narrative of *Hallfreðar saga* leaves me in no doubt that it was the model for some particulars in the *þáttur*, but at the same time I see that it must be concluded that the whole of this episode in *Hallfreðar saga*, all his journey to Gautland and Svíþjóð, is a late creation in best *Märchen* style. There may have been an original close-knit saga about Hallfreðr from early in the thirteenth century,³ but the

1 So *Skj. B I* 157, cf. *Hallfr. saga* (1939), 150.

2 *Donum Grapeanum* (Acta Bibl. R. Upsal. 5, 1945), 431-2.

3 It is thought to be from the 1220s, cf. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *ÍF* VIII (1939), lxxiii; Sigurður Nordal, *NK* VIII:B 239.

account of his Swedish sojourn cannot have been part of it; that must have been written a good deal later, hardly before *c.* 1300. The style and motives of this section, which is loosely built around three of the poet's stanzas, are closely akin to those of *Hróa þáttr*, whose origin must, as I have tried to show, be assigned to the first half of the fourteenth century. In both the saga and the *þáttr* the story of the Swedish visit ends with the hero's marriage to the daughter of a chieftain, in Gautland in the one case and in Svíþjóð in the other. In the saga she is called Ingibjörg, in the *þáttr* Sigrbjörg. All we can really glean from Hallfreð's three stanzas in this part is that he was treacherously attacked by a man who sought his life (in order to possess himself of his goods) and that he killed this man who had killed Auðgísl and whose custom it was to fall upon people (i.e. he was a highway robber).

Hallfreð's lines on Gríss hold a note of bitter antagonism. Gríss is counted a failure in every way, a feeble, unmanly creature, especially in his husbandly relations with Kolfinna. There can be no doubt of the *lostr* and *háðung* in this poetry—that is, it ranks as poetry punishable at law¹—and it is noteworthy that lv. 18 says that Kolfinna suffers on account of these derogatory verses, which were doubtless retailed through the district. The poet himself admits that they caused him to pay atonement (*glapskuldir*—lv. 25) and had given anxiety to the woman (lv. 27). And in his last stanza he confesses that he has been *harðr í tungu*. In *Landnámabók* it says that Brandr Ávaldason (Kolfinna's brother) killed Galti

1 *Grágás* 1a-1b § 238, II § 377.

Óttarsson (Hallfreð's brother) at the Húnavatn assembly *fyrir nið Hallfreðar*;¹ and this shows that his poetry was regarded in early traditions concerning him as criminal calumny of the kind called *nið*. One of our earliest sources about Hallfreðr is the *Íslendinga drápa* (c. 1200) attributed to Haukr Valdísarson, but it is perhaps not surprising that we find no reference to his satiric verse in its laudatory lines. There we find reference only to his journey 'eastward', to join Óláfr Tryggvason, the honour he won from two princes (*doglingar*) and his exploits as a warrior.²

It is, however, the information that Hallfreð's stanzas give us of the shift from paganism to Christianity that is of most interest in the present connection. And here it is time to return to lv. 1, which I left aside in the preceding survey. In the saga it figures in a context (ch. 4) which makes it evident that it was attributed to the period when Hallfreðr was still a heathen, i.e. before his meeting with Óláfr Tryggvason. In it he says that the anger of the 'sinker of many troughs' who is 'thoroughly pagan' (*allheiðinn*) and 'truly cowardly' (*sannargr*) appears to him about as frightening (*ægilig*) as if an old and rather big pantry watchdog growled fretfully, *úti fyr búri*, at the arrival of guests. The description *allheiðinn* on the lips of someone who is himself a heathen sounds odd from the start! It seems to me that the kenning *sökkvair margra troga*, 'sinker or destroyer of many troughs', for which various interpretations have been offered,³ is best taken

1 *ÍF* I 224.

2 *Skj.* B I 542.

3 E. A. Kock's interpretation, 'destroyer of many milk pails' (*mánga mjólkbyttors ódare*), *Notationes norræne* (1923-44), § 3216, seems to me hardly plausible.

to refer to the performance of sacrificial rites. The blood of the sacrificial victim was collected in a small bowl, *trygill* (cf. Modern Icelandic *tryggildi*), called, as in lv. 22, *blóttrygill*. A commoner term for the same object is *blótbolli* or *hlaubolli*.¹ It is difficult to dissociate the *trog* of lv. 1 from the *blóttrygill* of lv. 22, and I agree with Konrad Jarausch and Sophie Krijn that the two must go together in some way.² Lv. 22 refers to Már Jörundarson's desire to attack Hallfreðr, and the latter scornfully replies that it would be easier for Már to lick out his sacrificial bowl than to attempt it.³ If we think that lv. 1 also refers to Már (and the prose makes the verse a reply to some words of Már), the connection with lv. 22 becomes clearer still. The conclusion must be that lv. 1 is wrongly placed in the saga. It belongs to a later stage in the narrative, when Hallfreðr returns to Iceland as a Christian. His contempt for the *allheiðinn* Már and his pagan rites is all the stronger. We thus also learn from the verse that Már Jörundarson, who lived at Másstaðir in the north of Vatnsdalr in central north Iceland, engaged in pagan sacrifice (*blót*), and this in so notable a fashion that

1 See e.g. *Hákonar saga góða* in *Hkr.*, ch. 14 (*Hkr.* I 168), *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 4 (*ÍF* IV, 1935, 9).

2 *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde*, N.F. I (1930), 267; 'Halfred Vandraedaskáld', *Neophilologus* XVI (1931), 46-55, 121-31.

3 The sarcasm about licking out the sacrificial bowl is paralleled in the famous words on the despised Swedish pagans put into the mouth of Óláfr Tryggvason before the battle of Svölð. They are first known in Oddr Snorrason's account: Auðveldara man Svíum verða ok blíðara at sleikja innan blótkoppa sína (*var. sleikja blótbolla sína*) en ganga upp á Orminn langa undir vápn vár . . . ok þess væntir mik at ekki þurfi vér at óttask hrossæturnar (*Saga Óláfs . . . af Oddr*, 212-13; cf. *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, ch. 104, *Hkr.* I 357).

Hallfreðr could call him *allheiðinn* and allude to his handling the troughs in which blood of sacrificial animals was collected. Már is a leading figure in *Vatnsdæla saga* but there is no reference there to his activity as a *blótmaðr*. In the prose immediately following this first *lausavísa* in *Hallfreðar saga*, Már is, however, addressed as *Blót-Már*,¹ and it does not seem very likely that this was occasioned merely by the verse itself but rather suggests that there was some wider tradition of his zeal as a worshipper of the pagan gods. We find no further reference to him in this capacity in *Hallfreðar saga*. Here his chief function is to woo Kolfinna on behalf of Gríss, acting for him in approaching Ávaldi, her father (chs. 3-4); he also helps Gríss to pursue and attack Hallfreðr (ch. 4), and later prepares an ambush to kill Hallfreðr though without success (ch. 10). He is thus very much an ally of Gríss.

These scaldic stanzas give us a glimpse of the heathendom to be found in the Icelandic countryside in the 990s. In the case of Már and his sacrificing, it was probably of a more private character, since he does not seem to have had any official function to perform at the central *hof* of his district (presumably situated at the farm called Hof a good 10 kilometres from his home at Másstaðir in Vatnsdalr).

Continuing to restrict ourselves to the verses and ignoring the prose, we can conclude that Hallfreðr on his journey 'eastward' undoubtedly met Óláfr Tryggvason, the missionary king of Norway, with whom he entered

¹ *Hallfr. saga* (1939), 146; (1953), 26, 35.

into close personal relations because of his poetry and, we may assume, because of his originality and boldness. Those relations were so close that when Hallfreðr was converted and received the sacrament of baptism the king himself stood godfather to him (*Erfidrápa*, 26, 28). Just as his love for Kolfinna was sincere and constant, so now Hallfreðr is seized with an intense and boundless admiration for King Óláfr. This is perhaps not so clearly apparent from his *lausavísur* but is entirely so from the *Erfidrápa*; this has a personal note of warmth and friendship which raises it high above the conventional eulogistic lays of the period in consequence. We are certainly not mistaken in seeking the reason for the poet's conversion in his whole-hearted admiration for the king. For Hallfreðr the 'prince of the men of Sogn', *viðlendr konungr*, is a heroic figure, 'mightier than any other battle-eager king under the sky in the North' (*Erfidrápa*, 28). And, of course, the religion of so prodigious a hero must have seemed to Hallfreðr the only right and proper faith to have. The pagan beliefs that Hallfreðr had grown up with in his isolated Icelandic surroundings must yield before it.

Despite their limitations, the mythological elements in the five *lausavísur* 6-10 (two of them only half-stanzas) give us significant information about the paganism Hallfreðr stems from. Óðinn is naturally a central figure for the poet—he calls him 'lord of Hliðskjalf' (*harri Hliðskjalfar*, lv. 6), with reference to old notions of Óðin's dwelling and a high-seat from which he could see over the whole world. In lv. 7 he uses one of the many *heiti* which the poets favoured for Óðinn: *Viðrir*, probably

'the weather-god'.¹ A less usual name for him, *frumverr Friggjar*, 'Frigg's original, or first, husband', is found in the same stanza. The allusion must be to the ancient mythical tale about Óðin's brothers Vé and Vílir told by Snorri in *Ynglinga saga*—he says that during Óðin's long absence they made Frigg their joint wife.² We find the same reference in *Lokasenna*, 26, where Loki says that Frigg, *Viðris kvæn*, i.e. Óðin's wife, who had always been unbridled where men were concerned (*hefir æ vergjörn verit*) had taken Vé and Vílir to her bosom.³

Lv. 9 provides us with a concentrated list of the heathen divinities Hallfreðr had learnt to know in Iceland. They are Freyr, Freyja, Njörðr, Óðinn (Grímnir) and Thór. This is certainly a representative collection of both *Vanir* and *Æsir*, and undoubtedly the divinities at the centre of the pagan pantheon in Iceland. It is true that evidence for the cult of Njörðr is slighter in Iceland, where only two place-names commemorate him, than in Sweden and Norway, where he belonged to older religious strata; but along with Freyr and *hinn almatki áss* (undoubtedly Thór) he is given a prominent position in the Icelandic 'heathen' oath preserved in *Hauksbók* and other texts, and his name occurs very frequently in scaldic poetry.⁴ The cult of Freyr is well attested in Iceland,⁵ and we had an incisive reminder of the notable

1 See Hj. Falk, *Odensheite* (Skrifter utg. av Videnskapsselskapet i Kristiania. II. Hist.-filos. Kl. 1924, No. 10), 34.

2 *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 3 (*Hkr.* I 12).

3 Víli, not Vílir, is the form in *Lokasenna* and *Gylfaginning*, ch. 6 (*Edda Snorra* I 46).

4 *Myth and religion*, 162-3. 5 *Ibid.*, 165-8.

significance of Freyja in the pre-Christian Icelandic world-picture in Hjalti Skeggjason's miniature blasphemy of the year 999 (see pp. 14, 51 above). There is of course no need to doubt that Thór and especially Óðinn belonged to Hallfreð's heathen world. We see from lv. 9 that the ancient goddesses of fate, the Norns, also figured there. In that same verse Hallfreðr speaks of *Njarðar niðjum*, and one may wonder whether this should not be interpreted literally as a reference to Freyr and Freyja, the children of Njörðr, rather than in vaguer fashion as a reference to the Æsir, the gods in general.¹

In sum it may be said that a study of the verses of *Hallfreðar saga*, and of the verses alone, can give us a picture of the poet's milieu and world of ideas, of his personality and mental development. However incomplete that picture necessarily is, it must at all events be nearer the truth than the portrayal of Hallfreðr given by the saga, for I see no reason at all to doubt the verses' authenticity. Finnur Jónsson's judgment of 1912 may still stand:² the verses are, he wrote, 'individual and relevant to such a degree that it would be inconceivable that such stanzas could be composed at a later date, could be forgeries. It is also impossible to maintain in the case of Hallfreðr, the chief poet of the period around 1000, whose poems

1 So Finnur Jónsson, *Lexicon poeticum*² (1931), s.vv. niðr, Njörðr.

2 *Aarbøger* 1912, 47: De er i den grad individuelle, aktuelle, at det vilde være utænkeligt, at sådanne vers var digtede senere, var falsknerier. Overfor Hallfred, hovedskjalden fra tiden ved 1000, af hvem store dele af fyrstekvad haves, er det også umuligt at gøre gældende, at det vilde være usandsynligt, at han havde været i stand til at digte disse vers. Hertil kommer til overflod den sproglige og hele øvrige form.

on princes are preserved in large fragments, that it would be unlikely that he was capable of composing these stanzas. On top of that there is in all abundance the evidence of the language and every other aspect of the form.¹ It is on the other hand doubtful whether all the stanzas have been rightly placed in the prose narrative, and still more doubtful whether the fourteenth-century scribes understood them.

Clearly it would be possible to add to the portrait of Hallfreðr by a thorough analysis of the other poems attributed to him, *Hákonardrápa*, *Óláfsdrápa* and the *Erfidrápa* (*Óláfsdrápa* II), but it has been necessary to restrict ourselves to the verse which is most closely connected with his conversion to Christianity. But even on the basis of limited studies of his poetry and its style and vocabulary, it is possible to make one important observation. That is that the mythological element—the legacy of his pagan youth—is relatively far smaller in the poems we have from after the time of his conversion than in the nine half-stanzas that remain of his heathen verse. This question of the use of mythical nomenclature and the attitude of the Christian scalds to the pagan inheritance on which their style and language vitally depended was considered by Professor Erik Noreen in his little-noticed but to my mind extremely weighty and convincing ‘Skiss över skaldestilens utveckling’ published in 1922.²

1 Cf. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *ÍF* VIII (1939), lix–lx, who shares Finnur Jónsson’s opinion. Bjarni Einarsson, on the other hand, is doubtful of the authenticity of the verse, see *KL* VI (1961), 62.

2 *Studier i fornvästnordisk diktning* II (Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift 1922; *Filosofi, språkvetenskap och historiska vetenskaper* 4), 18–30.

But the problem of how scaldic poetry with its basis in heathen mythology could be reconciled to the new Christian dispensation is one that has engaged scholars from Rudolf Keyser's time onwards. His brief survey, 'Den gammelnorske Skaldekunst', published in 1866,¹ contains many worthwhile observations which subsequent scholars have developed in different ways. If the scaldic art was to be kept alive—which it was in fact in Iceland for several centuries after the Conversion—then 'for its sake the heathen legends of gods and heroes had to be remembered, Christianity notwithstanding'.² Keyser also mentions the difficulties that must have arisen in the very generations that saw the change from paganism to Christianity when the propriety of a poet's use, in traditional style, of names of pagan gods in the presence of Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson was of immediate relevance. And he also indicates how, once the tenets of Christianity were firmly established, scaldic poetry once again put on the whole pagan panoply, a fresh precondition for its continued existence. 'Now . . . when the first Christian doubts were overcome, the old myths of the Æsir were regarded as a subject for scholarly interest, which one could occupy oneself with for the sake of scaldic art without any offence to Christianity . . . True, to give still less cause for scandal, a kind of historic interpretation was accorded the myths of the Æsir faith, inasmuch as the gods of the heathen were presented as heroes and leaders

1 *Efterladte Skrifter* I (1866), 61-5.

2 *Op. cit.*, I 62: . . . maatte ogsaa de hedenske Gude- og Heltesagn for dens Skyld gemmes i Mindet, Christendommen til Trods.

who had lived in the remote past and who had been celebrated as divine by a benighted posterity.¹

This brief explanation of the importance of scaldic poetry for the preservation of pre-Christian mythology is still regarded as valid in all essentials by scholars in the field of Northern research. The point which Erik Noreen takes up in particular is the restricted use of heathen references in the kennings employed by newly converted scaldic poets. His analysis begins with the poetry from the end of the heathen period and the start of the Christian age. Einarr skálaglamm's *Vellekla*, composed in honour of Hákon jarl some time after the battle of Hjørungavágr, is typically heathen. In the 20 stanzas and 17 half-stanzas that we have of this lay there are no fewer than 33 instances of the names of pagan divinities, most of them in kennings. In the nine half-stanzas that we have of Hallfreð's *Hákonardrápa* the number of mythical names is again comparatively large—five in all. In general Noreen concludes that the poetic style representative of the last stages of paganism is 'quite overburdened with mythical names'.² With this verse so heavily encrusted with pagan properties he contrasts Hallfreð's post-Conversion *Erfi-*

1 *Op. cit.*, I 63: Nu . . . da de første christelig-religiøse Betænkkeligheder vare overvundne, betragtede man de gamle Asamyther som en videnskabelig Gjenstand, med hvilken man for Skaldekunstens Skyld, uden Anstød mod Christendommen, kunde sysle . . . Man gav vel Asatroens Myther, for end mere at fjærne al Anledning til Forargelse, et Slags historisk Udtydning, idet man fremstillede Hedenkommens Guder som Helte og Høvdinger, der i den fjærne Fortid havde levet, og hvem de forblindede Efterkommere havde skjenket guddommelig Dyrkelse.

2 *Op. cit.*, 20.

drápa and the poetry of Sigvatr Þórðarson. In the 26 stanzas of Hallfreð's great *Erfiðrápa* commemorating Óláfr Tryggvason, there is only a single kenning that can properly be termed pagan (*Týr Heðins meyjjar*, 'warrior'¹). And in the extensive corpus of Sigvat's poetry—152 stanzas and six half-stanzas—there are no more than seven or eight names of pagan gods. The conclusion must be that both these major scalds, who each had a missionary king as his friend and his ideal, purposely avoided the names of pagan divinities. As Noreen says, "They did their best to steer clear of this heathendom, even though personal habit and deep-rooted literary tradition sometimes led them to stumble."²

Erik Noreen goes on to survey the development of scaldic poetry in the eleventh century, when—thanks to Sigvat's influence—it underwent a remarkable simplification of style. In general the poets avoided the artificial and complex and made restrained use of elements drawn from heathen mythology. This contributed to the comparative purity of scaldic style in this period which, as Noreen puts it, saw 'the introduction of classicism into a baroque age'. Óttarr svarti, Arnórr jarlaskáld and Þjóðólfr Arnórsson went on in Sigvat's spirit. The development of this 'pure' style culminates in Steinn Herdísarson in the latter part of the eleventh century. At the end of that century and in the twelfth century there is a great

1 On the legend behind this kenning see Magnus Olsen, *Norrøne studier* (1938), 216–19.

2 *Op. cit.*, 21: De ha synbarligen gjort sitt bästa för att undvika denna hedendom, om också egen vana och inrotad litterär tradition någon gång bragt dem på fall.

renewal of the pagan elements in poetic style. Erik Noreen connects this sudden transformation in the twelfth century with the emergent literary and antiquarian occupations and interests characteristic of that age as a whole. The pagan gods 'now lead a totally literary life—entirely comparable with the classical divinities elsewhere'.¹

It is clear that in style and kennings the pagan poets borrowed from each other, and it is also clear that to a large extent scaldic art was cultivated and developed at the courts of princes. But in the case of pagan Icelandic poets, poets with an immense stock of heathen myths and heathen names, of legendary kings and antique heroes—like Hallfreðr *before* his conversion—the question remains as to where they gained their vast knowledge. Is it possible that in Iceland there were special scaldic schools in the pre-Christian period, obedient to pagan observance and connected with the chief centres of the sacrificial cults?

1 *Op. cit.*, 28: de hedniska gudarna . . . leva nu ett rent litterärt liv—fullt jämförligt med de klassiska gudarnas på annat håll . . .

CHRISTIANITY IN ICELANDIC MOULDS

IT would now be appropriate to say something about conditions in Iceland in the eleventh century, when the new faith, clearly beset with great difficulties, was kept alive by foreign missionary bishops with an imperfect understanding of the Icelandic language,¹ and when the country was drawn more and more into the sphere of interest of the metropolitan see of Bremen.² Instead of attempting a full survey of this period, however, I shall first do no more than consider a few events which were of decisive importance both for the young church in Iceland and for the participation of the Icelanders in the education and culture of western Europe. Then I shall touch on some aspects of the ultimate literary influence of the conversion of the Icelanders to Christianity. Steps towards assimilation of the ideas and ideals of Christianity were

1 See *ÍF* I 18, and references given there in note 1; *Hungrvaka*, chs. 2-3, in *Bps.* I 62-5, Jón Helgason, *Byskupa sögur*, I Hefte (1938), 77-8, 80-2.

2 Bishop Ísleifr is spoken of by Adam of Breinen who wrote c. 1075, see B. Schmeidler, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*³ (1917), 273-4. Links with Hamburg-Bremen must have suffered later in the eleventh century because of the archbishop's dispute with the papacy (this is why Gizurr was consecrated in Magdeburg, see below), and were finally severed by the creation of the northern metropolitan sees, first Lund (1103/4) and then Nidaros (1153). The strongest foreign influence in Iceland in the later twelfth century was doubtless French and Anglo-Norman, partly disseminated by way of Norway. On earlier Continental influence see Peter Foote, 'Aachen-Lund-Hólar', *Bibliothèque de la Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres de l'Université de Liège*, Fasc. CCVIII (1974), 53-76.

taken by the Icelanders themselves, pre-eminently by the creation first of a single native bishopric and then by a division of the country into two sees.

Iceland's first bishop was Ísleifr, son of the chieftain Gizurr Teitsson hinn hvíti, who had played so notable a part in the acceptance of Christianity. Ísleifr was sent early, probably as a boy, to be brought up in the convent at Herford in Westphalia, and in the school there he must certainly have received a thorough European education.¹ After travels in Germany and a journey to Rome, he was consecrated bishop of the Icelanders by Archbishop Adalbert of Bremen in 1056. His episcopal residence was an estate that belonged to his family, the old chieftain's seat called Skálaholt. Ísleifr saw the necessity of providing education and Christian upbringing for his countrymen, and he turned Skálaholt into Iceland's first centre of learning. Ari, our most reliable guide, says this: 'When chieftains and prominent men in Iceland saw that Ísleifr was much more capable than other clergy available in this country, then many of them sent him their sons to be educated, and afterwards let them be ordained as priests' (*en es þat sá hofðingjar ok góðir menn, at Ísleifr vas miklu nýtri en aðrir kennimenn, þeir es á þvísa landi næði, þá seldu hónum margir sonu sína til læringar ok létu vigja til presta*).²

Gizurr, Ísleif's own son, was also given a careful

¹ Herford had been founded c. 790; Foote, *ibid.*, 56-7; R. Köhne, 'Bischof Ísleifr Gizurarson . . .', 67. *Jahresbericht des Historischen Vereins der Grafschaft Ravensberg* (1972), 1-38.

² *ÍF* I 20; for sources on Ísleifr see *DN* XVII:B 259.

education and, like his father, was sent to Herford. After many travels he returned to Iceland and in time became his father's successor as bishop in Skálaholt. He was consecrated by the archbishop of Magdeburg in September 1082.¹

We know very little about the cathedral school and its activity at Skálaholt, so we welcome all the more warmly the information we have about education at Hólar, the centre of the northern diocese. The new see with jurisdiction over the Northern Quarter of Iceland was formally founded in 1106, and Jón Ögmundarson became the first bishop, consecrated by Archbishop Asger of Lund on 26 April that year.² He had received his formal education at the cathedral school in Skálaholt and, although he had also been abroad, there is every reason to suppose that the school he established at Hólar was modelled on Ísleif's school in the south.

A critical reading of the versions of Bishop Jón's biography, written first in the opening years of the thirteenth century, leaves us with a vivid impression of the teaching and everyday life at Hólar. He built a school-house just west of the church door. There the youngsters who came to him, chiefly from his own diocese, received a thorough grounding in Latin. One of the schoolmasters came from Götaland, Gísli *hinn gauzki*, who taught 'grammar'.³ There was also a girl

1 For sources on Gizurr see *DN* xvii:B 260.

2 For sources on Jón Ögmundarson see *DN* xvii:B 270.

3 On Gísli Finnason (Finnsson) see *Bps.* I 163-4, 168, 235-6, 239. A certain Gíslo is known as bishop in Linköping (Östergötland) from 1139 (or earlier) till his death probably early in the 1160s, cf. Herman

there, Ingunn, it is said, who was by no means inferior in book-learning to the other pupils. We are told, indeed, that she taught grammar to many pupils, and often corrected Latin writings by having them read aloud to her while she herself did sewing or weaving or other hand-work. In her tapestries she pictured scenes from the lives of saints, in this way 'declaring God's glory not only with the words of her mouth but also with the work of her hands', as it says in the text.¹ There was a special teacher for church-song and verse-making, Rikini, said to be French in one text; he was also the bishop's chaplain.² Manuscripts were written in the school, service books doubtless, and Latin legends of the saints, and homilies, perhaps translations of such works as well. But some texts of the work of classical Latin poets were apparently also be found at Hólar at this time. The life of Bishop Jón contains an interesting passage concerning young Klængr, later to become bishop in Skálaholt. He was found by the bishop reading Ovid's *Ars amatoria* on the sly. The bishop forbade him such reading, for 'man's frail

Schück, *Ecclesia Lincopensis* (Stockholm Studies in History 4, 1959), 47-50. There is no way of telling whether this prelate had spent any of his career in Iceland, though it does not seem very likely on chronological grounds and the name Gíslí is rather common (cf. *NK VII*, 1947, 253).

¹ *Bps.* I 241; cf. Dag Strömbäck, *The Epiphany in Runic Art* (The Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture . . . 1969), 8-10.

² *Bps.* I 168, 173-4, 239, 246-7. It seems most likely that Rikini (German Rich(w)ini) came from Lotharingia or from what is now western Switzerland; cf. N. Beckman, *Alfræði íslenszk* (1908-18), II xx-xxi; Jón Jóhannesson, *Skírnir* 126 (1952), 82; L. Friedrich, *Die Geographie der ältesten deutschen Personen-Namen* (1922), 27; Peter Foote, *art. cit.* (p. 89, note 2 above).

nature was eager enough for sensual delights and carnal love without needing to kindle his thoughts with unclean and sinful poetry'.¹

Thus, with Christianity, European education and European literature came to Iceland, and along with them, of course, the art of writing. The first decades of the twelfth century saw the beginning of a great period of cultural acquisition, but the last decades of the eleventh century must have been an essential preparatory stage. The literature that the Icelanders became acquainted with consisted in the first place of saints' lives and homilies, but, from the very beginning, their libraries must also have contained a variety of textbooks and such profane works as were commonly found in the cathedral and monastic schools of the age. When Bishop Þorlákur Rúnólfsson of Skálholt lay on his death-bed in 1133, he asked to be read Gregory the Great's *Cura pastoralis*, and with this reading he entered into his eternal rest.²

Not much of the twelfth century had passed, moreover, before clerics began to translate all kinds of legends of the apostles and saints, all kinds of homilies and textbooks. We find a brief note concerning this in an early grammatical work, written in Iceland about the middle of the

1 *Bps.* I 165-6, 237-8. Ovid was of course well known in medieval schools, in the North as elsewhere, cf. E. Kölbing, *Flóres saga ok Blankiflúr* (Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek 5, 1896), 9, Anm. zu Z. 11; Fr. Paasche, *Symbolae Osloenses* XIII (1934), 132-3; M. Schlauch, *Romance in Iceland* (1934), 46-7; Astrid Salvesen, Allan Karker, *KL* XIII (1968), 63-6. On Ovid and the *Art of Love* in medieval Europe see also C. H. Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (1939), 108-9.

2 *Hungvaka*, ch. 12, in *Bps.* I 74, Jón Helgason, *Byskupa sögur*, I Hefte (1938), 96.

twelfth century, which I mentioned at the beginning of this book (p. 3). There the anonymous author expressly says that reading and writing have become customary in Iceland, and he then counts up the available kinds of literature: laws, genealogies, translations of religious works, and the writings of Ari.¹ Translated ecclesiastical literature thus precedes the Sagas of Icelanders and Kings' Sagas, and in the next part we may see something of the significance this religious literature had for the development of secular saga-writing.

* * *

In *Njáls saga* (ch. 133) it is told that one night, after the burning to death of Njáll and his sons in their house, Flosi Þórðarson has a fearful dream. He dreams that he is at the farm that stood under the huge dark crag called Lómagnúpr in the south of Iceland. He goes outside and looks up at the precipitous rock-wall, and the mountain-side opens and out of it comes a man, dressed in goatskin, carrying an iron staff in his hand. This strange man begins to shout, and he calls out the names of Flosi's men, one after another. When he has called out ten names, he stops for a while. But then he starts shouting again and calls the names of another group of Flosi's followers, one by one. Then he recites a verse, in which he says that the noise of spears will be heard between the mountains and that bloody dew will rain on many men. With this he

1 V. Dahlerup and Finnur Jónsson, *Den første og anden grammatiske Afhandling i Snorres Edda* (1886), 2/7-9, 21-2: bæði lög ok áttvísi eða þýðingar helgar eða svá þau en spaklegu fræði, er Ari Þorgilsson hefir á bækur sett af skynsamlegu viti; and cf. p. 3, n. 2 above.

thrusts his iron staff into the rock, causing a mighty din, and then disappears into the mountain. This is the end of the dream. Flosi is troubled by his dream and early in the morning he sends for a friend of his, famous for his wisdom, who comes and interprets the dream. He says, 'It is my notion that all those who were called are doomed. It seems best to me that you and I tell this dream to nobody for the time being' (*Þat er hugboð mitt at þeir muni allir feigir, er kallaðir váru. Sýnisk mér þat ráð, at þenna draum segi vit engum at svá búnu*).

As we recall, this episode in the saga is preceded by the dramatic description of the great fire at Njál's farm. The conspirators, with Flosi at their head, have burnt Njáll, his wife, and their sons to death in the house. The deed is done—but the Flosi who rides from the scene is by no means proud and triumphant. Even as he stands there in front of the smoking remains of Njál's farm and beholds his work, he is told that Njál's son-in-law, Kári Sölmundarson, as lusty a fighter as the sons of Njáll themselves, has succeeded in escaping from the blazing house. Flosi foresees the revenge which will be mercilessly exacted by Kári, and, full of forebodings, he retires to his farm at Svínafell. It is here that he has his strange dream.

What are we to make of this episode in the *Njáls saga*? Is there anything unusual about it, anything which sets it off from the rest of the work, anything that gives it the appearance of being foreign or extraneous? Do we not often hear of interpolations and revisions in the texts of sagas? These questions can be answered at once: the episode is wholly Icelandic in expression and idiom, in

its localisation and scenery, and in its imaginative form. It is to be found in the earliest and best manuscripts of the saga, those commonly assigned to *c.* 1300, and it has been skilfully worked into the action of the saga. It is, so to speak, organically connected with the narrative, which in this saga, more than in any other in the classical literature of Iceland, is constructed in such a way that accounts of omens, visions or other strange occurrences, gradually prepare the reader for descriptions of great, decisive events.

Before 1943 no critic or commentator had taken this description of Flosi's dream for anything but a composition on an autochthonous theme, perhaps even dependent on a certain substratum of oral transmission, reaching far back into the Icelandic past. In a study published that year, however, Einar Ól. Sveinsson demonstrated that the source of the description could be traced to an episode in the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great.¹ This collection of biographies and miracle-tales in dialogue form was written *c.* 590–600, and its style and subject-matter had great influence on both religious and popular literature in medieval Europe. The *Dialogues* were translated into English, among other languages, as early as the time of Alfred the Great, and the work was provided with a preface by that unusual monarch and man of letters.

In the first part of Gregory's *Dialogues*² we are told

¹ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Á Njálsbúð* (1943), 8–13; 170, Athugasemd við bls. 10; idem, *ÍF* XII lxxi–lxxii.

² Quoted by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Á Njálsbúð* (1943), 170; cf. U. Moricca, *Gregorii Magni Dialogi Libri IV* (1924), 47–8 (lib. I, cap. viii).

that above an abbey in Italy, called Suppentonia, stood a huge rock (*ingens rupes*) with a deep abyss under it. One night the abbot of the monastery heard a voice from the rock, calling him by name. He understood that this meant he would depart this life. But the voice was heard again and now called seven of his fellow-monks by name. Then there was a short pause, after which the voice was heard again, now naming an eighth monk. The monks later died in the order in which their names had been called, with a somewhat greater interval between the deaths of the seventh and eighth monks than between the deaths of the others. This interval corresponded to the pause in the premonitory cries. It cannot be denied that this legend from the *Dialogues* forms the basis for Flosi's dream in *Njáls saga*. Even the characteristic detail of the pause between the cries and the significance of this in the way the omen was fulfilled is retained in the saga.

There are, moreover, no circumstances of textual history to clash with such a conclusion. Gregory's *Dialogues*, as well as his *Homilies*, were among the books translated into Norwegian and Icelandic at a very early stage. One of the very oldest of extant Icelandic manuscripts, thought to have been written c. 1200 and thus considerably older than any manuscript of the Icelandic Family Sagas, contains long passages translated from the *Dialogues*. And fragments of these popular dialogues also occur in translation in other Icelandic manuscripts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.¹

¹ See O. Widding, H. Bekker-Nielsen, L. K. Shook, *Mediaeval Studies* xxv (1963), 311. Cf. also R. Boyer, "The influence of Pope

A problem which cannot be fully discussed here is that of the ultimate origin of the translation of the Gregory texts preserved in Icelandic manuscripts. They may be Icelandic works from the beginning, but Professor D. A. Seip has also maintained that the extant texts go back to Norwegian originals from the middle of the twelfth century.¹ For the time being, this question is doubtless best left open, but what must certainly cause us to wonder is that the oldest Icelandic manuscript of the *Dialogues*, the one from c. 1200 just mentioned, was found at the end of the seventeenth century in the little country church at Kálfafell, a mere six or seven miles from the mountain of Flosi's dream.² How long had it been there before it was carried to Copenhagen? But even if its place of discovery is reckoned mere coincidence, giving no grounds for the assumption that this particular exemplar of Gregory's *Dialogues* played a part in the birth of the *Njáls saga* in the thirteenth century, we must still recognise the fact that, in a district where oral tales concerning the main characters and events of *Njáls saga* were presumably current right down to the time it was

Gregory's *Dialogues* on Old Icelandic literature', *Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference* . . . (ed. P. Foote, Hermann Pálsson, D. Slay, 1973), 1-27—though much of what the author calls 'influence' is far from direct and sometimes the term is clearly inappropriate to explain the relationship between the similarities he demonstrates.

1 D. A. Seip, *The Arna-Magnæan Manuscript 677, 4to* (Corpus codicum Islandicorum medii aevi XVIII, 1949), 34-9; idem, *Nye studier i norsk språkhistorie* (1954), 92-100.

2 Kr. Kälund, *Katalog over Det Arnemagnæanske Håndskriftsamling II* (1894), 94, with references; D. A. Seip, *The Arnemagnæan Manuscript 677, 4to*, 7-10.

written, early translations or copies of one of the best-known miracle collections of the Middle Ages were also to be found. For, although the historical events on which *Njáls saga* is based belong to the end of the tenth and the beginning of the eleventh century, the material was collected—or, if we like, the ‘historical novel’ was composed—in the last twenty-five years of the thirteenth century, and the oldest manuscripts of the saga are, as I said, from about 1300.

This direct connection in terms of literary motive between chapter 133 of *Njáls saga* and a passage in Gregory’s *Dialogues* obviously gives us an insight into the origin of the saga. For a long time *Njáls saga* has been thought of more as the creation of a single author than as a product of tradition and its connection with the *Dialogues* appears to confirm this view. There are so many other details in the saga that point to an author making conscious use of written sources that one may reasonably believe that Gregory’s work was one of the books he knew; and this seems all the more likely if I am right in thinking that material from Book IV of the *Dialogues* is reflected in another chapter of *Njáls saga*. But, of course, the possibility cannot be completely overlooked that some of the contents of the *Dialogues* became familiar to people in Iceland through sermons and in this way became part of their rich and vivid story-telling resources. Learned and literary elements might in this fashion have become common property, orally available for saga-narrative. The material is immense and in notes like these I can only touch upon a few problems which especially seem to

merit discussion. Detailed examination of a saga, whether it be one of the Sagas of Icelanders or one of the Kings Sagas (and I am really speaking of these types only), soon leads to the discovery that it has a character of its own and that behind it stands a person, an author, with individual propensities, interests and knowledge. One author is preoccupied with the idea of fate and believes that what happens is foreordained and inevitable. Another takes delight in the careers and characters of individual people; another in antiquities and olden times, in genealogies and descriptions of ancient customs and practices. Some appear to treat inherited tradition with care; others seem freer, more independently creative. It is therefore hard to generalise about this remarkable prose literature of early Iceland, which had its roots in the twelfth century, reached its highest level during the thirteenth century and enjoyed another brief, late flowering at the beginning of the fourteenth century.

Each saga is a work on its own, with its own complex of problems concerning author, tradition, sources, and so on. General discussions of so-called 'book prose' and 'free prose', of chronology and the development of narrative art, yield few results, since they deal with such varied material and there are so many hypothetical factors. The only thing one can say in general terms about the soil from which this great literary blossoming sprang is that it was irrigated by many channels of tradition, in both poetry and prose. Or each saga may be likened to a watercourse fed by many streams, some strong torrents, some mere dribblets. The traditions flourished and were

fostered in an aristocratic setting, among people with a heroic conception of life that favoured in every way the development of this kind of poetry and prose which preserved and, inevitably, glorified the past.

But at the same time as we establish and accept the fact of this background of native tradition, we must also be aware of the influence of education and scholarly endeavour in Iceland from the latter part of the eleventh century onwards. As we have seen, this was the time when the first links were forged with the monastic schools of western Europe, links which became stronger in the twelfth century, an age in which all kinds of religious and learned literature flourished in Iceland. As I said in the Introduction, legends and homilies were translated, the study of astronomy and chronology prospered, time was devoted to grammatical literature written on European models, schools and monasteries were founded. European culture begins and continues to pervade Iceland, but it encounters, without swamping it or sweeping it aside, an indigenous tradition, strong, ample, multifarious. In considering the interplay between these two great elements, foreign and native, there are a number of problems which need to be further elucidated. Above all, I am of the opinion that the influence of the early religious translated literature on the style and matter of the thirteenth-century sagas has not as yet been properly clarified.

As part of the discussion arising from the example we have just considered from *Njáls saga*, I should like to speak briefly of a distinctive quality in Icelandic saga-art. It is closely bound up with the questions touched on here.

I refer to the virtuosity which Icelandic authors display in constructing scenes and giving descriptions which appear to be genuinely Norse, but which, on further examination, can be seen to rest on a foreign substratum. It is a seductive art and can easily lead the uninitiated astray.

In *Heimskringla* Snorri Sturluson, in his usual limpid, orderly style, tells of the young Óláfr Tryggvason's visit to the Scilly Isles off the coast of Cornwall.¹ When Óláfr was lying with his ships off these islands, he heard of a remarkable soothsayer there who could foretell the future. Óláfr was seized with curiosity and wished to find out whether this man really had the gift of prophecy. He arranged for one of his men, the tallest and most handsome, to be dressed in fine clothes, and he ordered him to pretend to be the king. But when the man came to the soothsayer, the latter saw through the deception at once and said, 'You are not the king, but I counsel you to be loyal to your king.' Snorri goes on to tell how the king himself then went to the soothsayer and received advice from him and information about the future.

This episode from *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* is also briefly related in some older texts,² but Snorri tells it with more pleasure and artistry than any of the other authors. The episode is also to be found in *Óláfs saga helga*, earliest in a version which is perhaps to be dated to the

¹ *Hkr.* I 266-7.

² Finnur Jónsson, *Ágrip af Nóregs konunga sögum* (Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek 18, 1929), 20-2; G. Storm, *Monumenta Historica Norvegiæ* (1880), 114-15 (*Historia Norvegiæ*); cf. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Hkr.* I civ.

end of the twelfth century. This tells of St Ólaf's visit to a hermit (*einsetumaðr*) in England.¹

The basis for the story of king and soothsayer-hermit is also to be found in Gregory's *Dialogues*. It is appropriate for us to see how the anecdote goes in the Norse version of this work.² Totila was king of the people called Goths. He heard that Benedictus (Benedict of Nursia) had the spirit of prophecy, but he did not believe it. However, he wished to look into the matter. One of his followers, a man called Riggo, was very handsome. The king dressed him in his own royal garb and sent him to Benedict's monastery. The idea was that the holy man should think it was the king himself. But when Riggo, dressed in the king's robes and accompanied by his attendants, came to the monastery, Benedict was already sitting outside, and as soon as Riggo came within earshot, the holy man shouted out, 'Take off the clothes you are wearing, my son. They are not your own.' We are told that 'then Riggo was seized with terror and fell flat to the ground, as did the rest of his retinue, and repented of mocking God's thrall'. The event was related later to King Totila, and he then went with great respect to the holy man and learnt much from him about the future and about how long he would live.

1 O. A. Johnsen, *Olafs saga hins helga* (1922), 18-19; *Den store Saga*, II 760; cf. Lars Lönnroth in *Samlaren* (1963), 60-1.

2 Þorvaldur Bjarnarson, *Leifar fornra kristinna fræða íslenskra* (1878), 147-8; C. R. Unger, *Heilagra manna sögur* (1877), I 167-8, 211-12; quoted also by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Hkr.* I civ. For the Latin text see U. Moricca, *Gregorii Magni Dialogi Libri IV* (1924), 101 (lib. II, cap. xiv).

The story in *Óláfs saga helga* is closer to Gregory's account than the one in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* is. In both cases we can clearly see with what freedom the original anecdote has been adapted for insertion into a particular 'historical' context of interest to Norwegians and Icelanders.

It is obvious that items of this sort are of no value to a historian looking for facts. They are adornments to the story and are intended to attract or keep the pleased attention of a reader or listener. They have been openly taken from European hagiography. One must also bear this in mind when judging the historical value of the account given in the Kings' Sagas of the conversion of the Scandinavian North to Christianity. The fact is that the descriptions of Óláfr Tryggvason's and St Ólaf's dealings with the representatives of paganism and their idols and temples often make use of material ultimately derived from early European saints' legends, where the struggles of holy men and women against heathendom in the Roman Empire are portrayed. Even in instances where the setting appears to be genuinely Norse, European material often provides the foundation.

When Snorri Sturluson devotes two chapters of his *Óláfs saga helga*¹ to a description of the conversion of the inhabitants of Gudbrandsdal, the material drawn from popular tradition has been so diluted as to be almost drowned. Some names, chiefly that of Dala-Guðbrandr, and one or two local tales about a thing-meeting where the

¹ Chs. 99-100 in *Den store Saga*, I 271-82, chs. 112-13 in *Hkr.*
II 183-90.

king faced the yeomen of Gudbrandsdal are probably the only native, traditional elements. The rest consists of a very skilful portrayal of the struggle between paganism and Christianity, the basic stuff of which is drawn from European legends.

An example of such an imported motive is the description of the mighty image of the god Thór, decked with gold and silver, which is greeted by the common people at the assembly with bowed heads, but which King Óláfr shows no respect for. Instead, he gets one of his men to strike down the idol with a club, to the horror of the people, and when it splits open, rats and lizards and snakes stream out from inside. Until a connecting link has been fully established, casual reading in patristic literature suggests that an ultimate model for this motive might be found in the dramatic description of Bishop Theophilus's treatment of the idol of Serapis in Alexandria. The bishop, to the consternation of the populace, orders one of his men to hew down the magnificent image, whereupon hordes of mice rush out of it.¹

¹ The detail of the mice seems to occur first in Theodoretos's *Church History*, v xxii, apparently as an embellishment on Rufinus's account (Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 82, 1859, cols. 1246-7, cf. Rufinus, *Historiae ecclesiasticae*, xi 23, in E. Schwartz and Th. Mommsen, *Eusebius Werke* II, 1908, 1028); Theodoretos's account was translated into Latin by Cassiodorus in the sixth century, *Historiae ecclesiasticae*, ix 28 (*Historia ecclesiastica tripartita . . . editionem curavit Rvdolphvs Hanslik, Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum* LXXI, 1952, 538-9). There were doubtless images to be cast down in Scandinavia, of course. Adam of Bremen tells, for example, of an English missionary martyr, 'Wolfredus', who smashed *ydolum gentis nomine Thor* in Sweden c. 1030, see B. Schmeidler, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*³ (1917), 122.

There is one theme, or it may almost be called a *genre*, in Christian medieval literature which had definite and obvious influence on the poetry and prose of Norway and Iceland. This is the so-called vision literature. Its subject was a matter of constant topical significance: the question of the life hereafter. Bede's famous story remained typical. When King Edwin in Northumbria was hesitant about Christianity, his most eminent adviser, also a pagan, said that the king should adopt Christianity if it could perhaps give more certain knowledge of man's life after death.¹

Gregory the Great did much to foster interest in vision stories, both in his *Dialogues* and his homilies, and after him they flourished with notable vigour and abundance in the pious literature of the Middle Ages. He tells stories of people who, suddenly removed from life and body in this world, are carried off to witness the torments of Purgatory, where however improvement of the soul's condition is also possible, or to Hell, where existence is permanently painful, or to green meadows where the blessed walk in light and fragrance. Those who have experienced such excursions into the other world then return and describe what they have seen and heard. This literature often describes the struggle to possess the human soul, the clash between powers of light and darkness which may occur when a man departs this life. We find vivid descriptions of the scene where bright angels attempt to protect the soul and black demons try to snatch her as their prey.

¹ *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, lib. II, cap. xiii (C. Plummer, *Baedae Opera Historica* I, 1896, 112).

Vision-poetry—later to find its sublimest expression in Dante's *Divine Comedy*—must have influenced Norse thought and literature at an early stage. Stray examples of such influence are to be found even in eddaic poetry, particularly in *Völuspá*. And it is quite obvious that it has also crept into some of the sagas, where it is mingled, sometimes in a confusing way, with traditional native ideas. To mention a single example, we may feel quite convinced that the extraordinarily compelling description of the death of young Þiðrandi in the 'greatest saga' of Óláfr Tryggvason clearly reflects the vision-tales. Out on his father's farm in Iceland Þiðrandi has seen nine dark-clad women with drawn swords riding towards the steading from the north, while nine women dressed in bright clothes ride from the south. These come to defend him but they are too late to save him from the cruel attack of the dark-clad women. He has time to tell what he has seen before he dies. In this description old conceptions of the *dísir* have mingled with Christian ideas of the fight between hosts of light and darkness over the souls of the dying.¹

One must not think that the connections are always obvious. As I suggested above, part of the originality and artistry of the Icelandic saga-authors is that they can adapt and assimilate learned and foreign elements in their stories in such a creative way that at first sight they do not seem alien at all. This art, drawing on all the resources of creative imagination, is so rich, so varied and so

¹ Dag Strömbäck, *Tidrande och diserna* (1949; = *Folklore och filologi*, 1970, 166–91).

dynamic that the foreign element, where useful or relevant, is readily absorbed and made an integral part of the narrative whole.

The existence of foreign elements in Iceland's early literature must not however blind us to the preservation of native traditional material in great abundance and variety. We have seen that not everything in sagas is authentic and indigenous but we should not therefore conclude, as some scholars have been tempted to do, that they are all imaginary and built on foreign models. These rewarding texts need in fact to be approached with understanding and patience, whether by the literary scholar, the historian or the folklorist. Students need the guidance of men of wide learning, who can unravel the strands, look deep into Iceland and the North but far and wide outside them as well, and then balance the probabilities and improbabilities of fact or fiction, loan or independent creation, oral or written source. We must proceed with caution, neither so credulous as to think that because a connection between two similar things is conceivable, it must necessarily have existed, nor so incredulous as to deny that ancient and genuine traditions were alive in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, transmitted under the peculiarly favourable circumstances that prevailed in Iceland.

The description of Flosi's terrifying dream in *Njáls saga* presents us at one and the same time with a foreign motive and the familiar and homely picture of a mountain troll, dressed in goatskins and carrying an iron staff in his hand. He is a *bergbúi*, a mountain dweller, who

firmly belongs to the Icelandic and west Scandinavian scene. In these areas ideas about such figures are richly developed in ancient beliefs and folk-tales; the iron staff and similar objects of iron are to be found in medieval stories, ballads and church murals.¹ Here we have a Norse atmosphere so genuine in its detail that we might willingly allow ourselves to be convinced that some old, popular tradition lay behind the story of the dream in *Njáls saga*. When, now, we find that the core and catalyst of the tale is in Gregory's *Dialogues*, when we observe what an organic piece of composition it is and how smoothly it is fitted into the narrative, we feel the hand of an inspired and learned author, equally at home with the foreign and the native material on which he drew in creating the greatest of all sagas. And to appreciate such genius fully we too need to be equally at home with the Icelandic and European strands of these early writings. Side by side and interwoven both are of decisive significance in making the Icelandic sagas a classic and universal literature.

1 Cf. e.g. Axel Olrik, *Nordens Trylleviser* (1934), 48-9 (on St Óláfr and mountain dwellers).