



**HAL**  
open science

# THE BORDER OF HEATHENDOM: POETICS OF PAGANISM AT THE COURT OF HLADIR

Bianca Patria

► **To cite this version:**

Bianca Patria. THE BORDER OF HEATHENDOM: POETICS OF PAGANISM AT THE COURT OF HLADIR. Alban GAUTIER; Marie-Agnès Lucas-Avenel; Laurence MATHEY-MAILLE. Poésie et politique dans les mondes nordiques et normands médiévaux (IXe-XIIIe siècle), Presses universitaires de Caen, pp.137-158, 2024, 978-2-38185-223-2. hal-04776377

**HAL Id: hal-04776377**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04776377v1>**

Submitted on 11 Nov 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## THE BORDER OF HEATHENDOM: POETICS OF PAGANISM AT THE COURT OF HLAÐIR

### Politics, religion, and poetry in tenth-century Norway

Norse historiographies from the late twelfth century onwards present the introduction of Christianity in Norway as a political move attempted repeatedly by the successors of Haraldr hárfagri, but secured only under the reign of “the converter” Óláfr Tryggvason (r. 995-1000) and of the later sanctified Óláfr Haraldsson (r. 1015-30). Although tilted in favour of the two Óláfar, the centrality attributed to royal agency by the sources is probably trustworthy. At the turn of the millennium, Christianization grew intertwined with the formation of unified territorial entities in several European regions. Not unlike other emerging monarchies, the aspiring royal house of Haraldr hárfagri must have valued the opportunity offered by the new religion to enforce a centralized power system, consolidated by the theological legitimization of the monarch and by the nobility’s subjection to the principles of feudal hierarchy. During the Iron and early Viking Ages, Norway’s geographical configuration had favoured the formation of small political entities, led by chieftains and rulers with military, judicial-administrative and religious functions. In Latin sources, the several petty kingdoms prior to Norway’s unification are referred to as *patria*e, a term indicating their long-standing and distinct ethnic identities.<sup>1</sup> Traditional cults strengthened the tie between communities and local rulers, who, in absence of a professional priesthood, acted as mediators between the divine and the human spheres, controlled the places of worship and celebrated ritual sacrifices. As *blótmaðr* (“sacrifice-performer”) and patron of the main festivities, the local leader served a crucial function in the collective rituals of economic redistribution, administration of the community’s resources and social bonding.<sup>2</sup> The ruling families must have actively cultivated the connection established between religious/economic rituals and territorial identity. Nonetheless,

- 
1. *Historia Norvegie*, I. Ekrem and L. B. Mortensen (ed.), P. Fisher (trans.), Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum Press, 2003, p. 88-91; C. Krag, “Landskapsnavn på -land og -rike”, *Historisk Tidsskrift*, vol. 50, 1971, p. 341-356.
  2. D. Zori *et al.*, “Feasting in Viking Age Iceland: Sustaining a Chiefly Political Economy in a Marginal Environment”, *Antiquity*, vol. 87, no. 335, 2013, p. 150-165.

polytheistic cults appear to have been relatively permeable to external influences. Widukind of Corvey relates how the Danes had for a long time worshipped Christ alongside their own idols, whom, however, they would not dismiss in view of their great powers.<sup>3</sup> In the early ninth century, Anskar's preaching was often received positively in the area of Birka, where the religion was not completely new due to the presence of some Christian slaves.<sup>4</sup> In Norway as well, the penetration of Christianity had begun spontaneously among the population at least since the late ninth century, because of increasing contacts between Norwegians and Christians in the North Sea area.

Despite an inherent degree of ambiguity, archaeological evidence suggests that the earliest wave of exposure to Christianity affected the southern and coastal regions, and especially the marketplaces and trade centres, where the influx of material and immaterial imports from the overseas emporia was stronger.<sup>5</sup> Given the heathen cults' ease at assimilating alien elements, in this phase different practices are likely to have coexisted syncretically. In the internal areas and remoter mountain valleys, by contrast, traces of Christian practices are rare, and in several areas the permanence of the pagan ones is well attested until the end of the tenth century.<sup>6</sup> Rather than the introduction of Christianity, the turning point in the conversion process was thus the active suppression of paganism by royal initiative.<sup>7</sup> In this respect, local religious behaviours partly reflect the ability of the centralizing royal power to impose its dominion over neighbouring regions. The importance of Haraldr hárfagri's early unification was amplified in thirteenth-century kings' sagas, probably both because of retrospective projections of a later situation and for the purpose of creating a dynastic narrative legitimising the later monarchy.<sup>8</sup> In truth, Haraldr's domain was delimited and threatened by that of other powerful chieftains, among whom he was, at best, a

- 
3. Widukind, *Rerum gestarum Saxonicarum*, III, 65, in *Die Sachsen Geschichte des Widukind von Korvei*, P. Hirsch and H. E. Lohmann (ed.), Hanover, Hahn (MGH, SS rer. Germ.; 60), 5<sup>th</sup> ed., 1935, p. 140: *Dani antiquitus erant Christiani, sed nichilominus idolis ritu gentili servientes. Contigit autem altercationem super cultura deorum fieri in quodam convivio rege presente, Danis affirmantibus Christum quidem esse deum, sed alios eo fore maiores deos, quippe qui potiora mortalibus signa et prodigia per se ostenderent.*
  4. Rimbart, *Vita Anskarii*, cap. 11, in *Vita Anskarii auctore Rimbarto. Accedit Vita Rimbarti*, G. Waitz (ed.), Hanover, Hahn (MGH, SS rer. Germ.; 55), 1884, p. 32: *Plures quoque erant, qui eorum legationi favebant et doctrinam Domini libenter audiebant. Multi etiam apud eos captivi habebantur christiani, qui gaudebant iam tandem se mysteriis divinis posse participari.*
  5. S. W. Nordeide, *The Viking Age as a Period of Religious Transformation*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2011, p. 279-283, 323.
  6. B. Solberg, *Jernalderen i Norge. 500 før Kristus til 1030 etter Kristus*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Oslo, Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2003, p. 312-315; S. Brink, "New Perspectives on the Christianization of Scandinavia and the Organization of the Early Church", in *Scandinavia and Europe 800-1350. Contact, Conflict, and Coexistence*, J. Adams and K. Holman (ed.), Turnhout, Brepols, 2004, p. 163-175.
  7. S. Bagge, "Christianization and State Formation in Early Medieval Norway", *Scandinavian Journal of History*, vol. 30, no. 2., 2005, p. 107-134.
  8. H. Koht, "Sagaernes opfatning av vor gamle historie", *Historisk tidsskrift* vol. 5, no. 2, 1914, p. 379-396; C. Krag, "Norge som odel i Harald Hårfagres ætt. Et møte med en gjenganger", *Historisk tidsskrift*, vol. 68, 1989, p. 288-302.

*primus inter pares*.<sup>9</sup> Of these, Hákon Grjótagarðsson jarl of Hlaðir and Rognvaldr jarl of Møre were probably the most powerful.<sup>10</sup>

Before the two Óláfar, two attempts at top-down conversion had taken place, according to the sagas: the first one by Haraldr hárfagri's son, Hákon góði (r. 935-961), fosterling of king Æthelstan; the second one by the sons of Hákon's brother Eiríkr blóðøx, the Eiríkssynir, who eliminated their uncle and succeeded him in a joint rule (c. 961-970), initially as vassals of Haraldr Gormsson of Denmark.<sup>11</sup> Both Hákon góði and his nephews seem to have taken seriously the implications of their baptisms and the evangelization process was twice incepted with the abolition of the cult of idols and the destruction of pagan places of worship. In both cases, however, the advance of the new creed had to come to a standstill along the border of the regions of Þrándheimr and Hálogaland, where the population was reluctant to abandon the ancestral rites. Here, the "resistance" against the new customs was led by the house of the Hlaðjarlar ("the *jarlar* of Hlaðir", modern Lade). The jarldom's seat, in the area of present-day Trondheim, was an important node in the trading network between the North Sea and the Arctic regions and attained its greatest influence in the second half of the tenth century, under the rule of Hákon jarl Sigurðarson (reigned c. 965-995), known in the sagas both as *inn ríki* ("the powerful") and as *inn illi* ("the evil"). By means of military initiative and unscrupulous policy, Hákon managed to gain the alliance of Haraldr Gormsson, turning him against the Eiríkssynir and managing to eventually establish himself as the sole overlord on Norwegian territory. *Historia Norwegie* introduces him thus:

*Post mortem uero filiorum Gunnilde quidam Hacon, ob intemperatam animi crudelitatem Nequam cognominatus, cunctis exterminatis regulis perditisque tributiferis Sweonum, totius Norwegie monarchiam sub comitali dignitate sibi usurpauit maluitque comes quam rex secundum suos seniores uocari. Hic namque patre Siwardo, matre uero Bergliota, filia Thoris Tacentis, ex nobilissima <Morensium> ac Halogensium comitum prosapia extitit oriundus. Iste in armis potens, sed ydolatrie obnixe deseruiens, plerasque patrias circumcirca debellans suum longe lateque perampliauit imperium.*

After the deaths of Gunnhild's sons, one Hákon, styled the Wicked owing to his unbridled cruelty of temperament, first eliminated every chieftain and destroyed

9. The clearest picture, in this respect, is provided in *Historia Norwegie*, p. 80, which attributes to Haraldr the control of the coasts but only a formal dominion over the internal regions: *Haraldus Comatus [...]* *totius maritime zone regnum nactus est primus; mediterraneae quidem zone adhuc reguli presidebant, sic tamen quasi sub eius dominio.*

10. C. Krag, "The Early Unification of Norway", in *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia*, K. Helle (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, vol. 1, p. 184-201 (188).

11. S. Bagge, "A Hero between Paganism and Christianity: Hákon the Good in Memory and History", in *Poetik und Gedächtnis. Festschrift für Heiko Uecker zum 65. Geburtstag*, K. Hoff, S. Kramarz-Bein et al. (Beiträge zur Skandinavistik; 17), 2004, p. 185-210. For an overview of the biographies of Norwegian rulers from the ninth and tenth centuries, see *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1. From Mythical Times to c. 1035*, D. Whaley (ed.), Turnhout, Brepols (Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages; 1), 2012 (hereafter SKALD 1), p. CXC-CCV.

those who paid taxes to the Swedes; he appropriated the crown of all Norway by his authority as jarl, but preferred that title to being known as king, in the same way as his predecessors. He took his origin from his father, Sigurd, and his mother, Bergljot, daughter of Tore the Silent, and so came from the noble family of jarls in Møre and Hålogaland. He was mighty in war, but obstinately paid homage to idols, and he vanquished many surrounding areas, extending his power far and wide.<sup>12</sup>

Besides Hákon's notorious cruelty and idolatry, the anonymous chronicler draws attention to his noble and powerful ancestors, the *jarlar* of Møre and Hålogaland, as well as to the fact that, unlike the Vestland rulers, Hákon retained the traditional title of jarl rather than assuming that of *konungr*, a choice which was probably meaningful for both political and identitarian reasons. Both these aspects are prominent in the celebration Hákon received from his court poets.<sup>13</sup> In support of his political agenda, Hákon mobilized the most prestigious form of propaganda of his time, the art of skaldic praise in *dróttkvætt*, making the court of Hlaðir the breeding ground of an impressive poetical output. The *drápur* composed for Hákon share a typical blending of stylistic experimentation and mythological imagery, in the celebration of the jarl as favourite of the gods. These poems create, for instance, counterpoints between the mythical world and the reality of Hákon's reign and this mixture of religious and political sentiments has been identified as the trademark of the jarl's propaganda.<sup>14</sup> In the struggle for political hegemony, faith had come to play an identity role for the contending factions, and the following analysis will address passages in which the *Hákonardrápur* explicitly reclaim a "heathen identity" in juxtaposition to Christianity. The religious elements in Hákon's poems are often interpreted as signs of ancestral notions of sacral rulership, but I will evaluate the hypothesis, already suggested by Edith Marold, that Hákon's militant paganism was in fact strongly influenced and informed by the adverse ideology of the Christianizers.<sup>15</sup> The impact of the propaganda of Christian Germanic kings engaged with the conversion of the heathens may provide a new interpretive key for the *Hákonardrápur*'s emphasis on a privileged bond between the ruler and the gods.

---

12. *Historia Norwegie*, p. 88-91.

13. Hákon is called exclusively jarl, and the title occurs five times in the ten complete stanzas of Tindr Hallkelsson's *Hákonardrápa*: R. Poole (ed. and trans.), in SKALD 1, p. 336-358. The title of jarl is topicalized in *Vellekla* (§ 1 and *passim*) and emphatically opposed to that of *jofurr*, "prince", in § 19: Einarr skálaglamm Helgason, *Vellekla*, E. Marold (ed. and trans.), in SKALD 1, p. 280-329 (306).

14. F. Ström, "Poetry as an Instrument of Propaganda. Jarl Hákon and his Poets", in *Specvlvm Norroenvm. Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, U. Dronke et al. (ed.), Odense, Odense University Press, 1981, p. 440-458; E. Marold, "Die Skaldendichtung als Quelle der Religionsgeschichte", *Germanische Religionsgeschichte. Quellen und Quellenprobleme*, H. Beck et al. (ed.), Berlin/Boston, De Gruyter, 1992, p. 685-719 (DOI: 10.1515/9783110877144.685); C. Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North. The Gods of the Norsemen*, London, Continuum, 2011, p. 123-169.

15. E. Marold, "Die Skaldendichtung als Quelle...", p. 688.

## Like a bridge of stones

The conflicts internal to the hárfagri dynasty must have forced Haraldr's son, Hákon góði, to secure the alliance with the Hlaðajarlar, and to seek their support against his brother Eiríkr blóðøx. His political dependence on the *Þrændr* allies is also the probable cause of Hákon góði's compliance towards their obstinate paganism. Hákon góði's death (c. 961) and the subsequent murder of jarl Sigurðr of Hlaðir by the Eiríkssynir (c. 962) lead to a dissolution of the balances previously achieved and, in the aftermath of the battle of Fitjar, the conflict between the two powerful houses became open and violent. In the following years, the Hlaðajarlar launched a programmatic emulation of the hárfagri dynasty's agenda, a dynamic that is held to be reflected in the rivalling relation between the two genealogical poems *Ynglingatal* and *Háleygjatal*.<sup>16</sup> The first, attributed to Þjóðólfr ór Hvíni, is generally interpreted as an attempt at linking the Vestfold rulers to the Svéar dynasty of the Ynglingar, descendants of the god Yngvi-Freyr.<sup>17</sup> The second was composed almost a century later by Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnsson for Hákon jarl. Eyvindr had been the skald of Hákon góði and, after the death of the king at the hands of his nephews, he turned to the late king's allies in Hlaðir and joined their faction against the Eiríkssynir, as witnessed by some polemical stanzas.<sup>18</sup> *Háleygjatal* is modelled on *Ynglingatal* for what concerns generic and structural features, but when it comes to content and style, Eyvindr's poem differs from his model in many respects. *Háleygjatal* is more explicit in its purpose of extolling the jarls of Hálogaland and their divine origin, traced back to the union between Óðinn and the giantess Skaði. The poem is also remarkable for the copious mythological references. These two features are programmatically expressed in the poem's *upphaf*, conventionally opened by the ritual request for silence:

*Viljak hljóð at Hóars líði,  
meðan Gillings gjöldum yppik,  
meðan hans ætt í hverlegi  
galga farms til goða teljum,  
hinn es Surts ór sökkdølum  
farmognuðr fljúgandi bar.*

I would wish for a hearing for the drink of Hóarr [Óðinn  
> poetry], while I [we] lift up the payment for Gillinger

16. Þjóðólfr ór Hvíni, *Ynglingatal*, E. Marold *et al.* (ed. and trans.) in SKALD 1, p. 3-60; Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnsson, *Háleygjatal*, R. Poole (ed. and trans.), in SKALD 1, p. 195-213 (see in particular the introduction, p. 196).

17. The genealogical and political purposes of the poem, however, are far from straightforward. Scholarship on *Ynglingatal* is copious, I therefore refer the reader to the most recent edition for a general discussion and further references, *ibid.*

18. Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnsson, *Lausavísur*, § 7-10, R. Poole (ed. and trans.), in SKALD 1, p. 224-230.

[giant > poetry], while we reckon his<sup>19</sup> lineage back to the gods in the cauldron-liquid [drink] of the burden of the gallows [Óðinn > poetry], that which the travel-furtherer [Óðinn] carried flying from the treasure-valleys of Surtr [giant].<sup>20</sup>

The opening stanza is dominated by the presence of the god Óðinn, whose function is twofold: not only is he the divine inspirer of poetry, but, as the poem will soon disclose, he is also the ancestor of the Háleygir. Detailed references to the mead-of-poetry myth, especially in the proemial sections of poems, become particularly common from the half of the tenth century onwards. The myth was known before, as attested by a fragment attributed to Bragi the Old (c. 850),<sup>21</sup> but in the earliest poems it did not play the strong conventional role which it increasingly assumed in skaldic proems after its boom with Egill Skallagrímsson and Hákon's skalds. In its marked "Odinic" quality, the verse attributed to Egill is in fact akin to the roughly contemporary poetry produced at the jarl's court in Hlaðir and, although not attached to Hákon's court, Egill apparently contributed to a similar poetic discourse. The themes of the divine origin of poetry and of the declared celebrative intent of *Háleygjatal* return, coming full circle, in the memorable closing of the poem.

*Jólna sumbl enn vér gótum  
stillis lof sem steinabré.*

We have produced once more a drinking feast of the Yule gods [poetry], praise of the ruler, like a bridge of stones.<sup>22</sup>

Eyvindr employs here a bridge simile that cannot be said to be conventional, although the comparison between the durability of a praise poem and that of a monument has one precedent in the extant skaldic corpus. This is a stanza attributed to the closing of Egill's funerary poem for his friend Arinbjörn (c. 960), where he compares the activity of laboriously putting verses together to that of collecting the stones for a cairn:

*Vask árvakr bark orð saman  
með málþjóns morginverkum,*

19. The referent of *hans* ("his"), Hákon jarl, is not expressed explicitly. It is unlikely that it was expressed in a previous stanza (SKALD 1, p. 198), since this appears clearly to be the opening of the poem. *Hans* cannot refer to Óðinn, since the genealogy is declaredly traced all the way back "to the gods" (*til goða*), so its referent, Hákon jarl, was probably implied by the context of the poem's performance.

20. Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnsson, *Háleygjatal*, § 1 (SKALD 1), p. 197-198, with slight adaptations in the translation.

21. Bragi inn gamli Boddason, *Fragments*, M. Clunies Ross (ed.), in *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics*, K. E. Gade and E. Marold (ed.), Turnhout, Brepols (Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages; 3), 2017 (SKALD 3), p. 26-65 (61).

22. Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnsson, *Háleygjatal*, § 13 (SKALD 1), p. 212-213.

*hlóðk lofkost þann es lengi stendr  
óbrotgjarn í bragar túni.*

I was early awake, I gathered words together with the morning efforts of the speech-servant [tongue]; I piled up a praise-cairn [poem] that shall stand for a long time, uneasy to break, in the meadow of poetry.<sup>23</sup>

Egill pays tribute to his friend in his own manner: the analogy between poem and cairn is carefully crafted with the kind of sustained metaphorical technique which would become a trademark of late-tenth-century skaldic verse. The comparison with a funerary monument is fitting in the context of Egill's poem: the two creations share both the celebrative purpose and the promise of permanence in time, expressed, with typical Old Norse taste for litotes, by the emphatic *óbrotgjarn* ("not prone to break"). Given the circumstances of skaldic transmission, it is hard to say whether this image was an authorial invention or if the comparison between poems and monuments was an established convention in *erfídrápur* ("memorial poems"), but the kind of metaphorical play shown in this stanza is a characteristic of Egill's *kviðuháttr* poems, suggesting that the image might have been original. Whereas the metaphor is clear in Egill's case, the comparison between *Háleygjatal* and the bridge of stones is less obvious. The promise of durability of praise is clearly the central theme, but the bridge simile is unparalleled in the skaldic corpus. One might argue that Eyvindr is building a bridge linking Hákon jarl to his divine ancestors; in tenth-century Scandinavia, however, bridge building had begun to assume a new, distinctly Christian symbolic value.<sup>24</sup>

The Sälna runic stone (U 323, Uppland) can be dated on stylistic grounds to the RAK period (c. 980-1015).<sup>25</sup> The inscription is clearly connected to a Christian funerary rite, as it contains a prayer for the deceased's soul: *Guð hialpi hans and ok selu, forgefi hanum sakar ok syndir*, "May God help his spirit and soul, forgive to him misdeeds and sins".<sup>26</sup> There follows a *fornyrðislag* stanza celebrating the long-standing monument (*kuml*) built by the man's sons:

*Æi mun liggia, með aldr lifir,  
bro harðslagin, bræið æft goð[an].  
SvæinaR gærðu at sinn faður.  
Ma æigi brautarkuml bætra verða*

23. Egill Skallagrímsson, *Arinbjarnarkviða*, § 25, Finnur Jónsson (ed.), *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning B. Rettet Tekst*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2 vols, 1910-1915, Copenhagen, Rosenkilde og Bagger, vol. 1, p. 41.

24. I owe the input for the following discussion to an interesting observation about the Christian significance of bridge building, made by Pierre Bauduin during the conference at Cerisy.

25. A. S. Gräslund, "Dating the Swedish Viking-Age Rune Stones on Stylistic Grounds", *Runes and Their Secrets: Studies in Runology*, Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006, p. 117-140.

26. E. Wessén and S. B. F. Jansson, *Upplands runinskrifter*, (*Sveriges runinskrifter*), vol. 7, 2<sup>nd</sup> booklet, Stockholm / Uppsala, Almqvist & Wicksell, 1943, p. 43-49 (my own translation, as in the following quotation).



Always shall stand, as long as people live, the hard-hammered, broad bridge after the good one. The boys made it for their father, there can never be a better roadmonument.<sup>27</sup>

The epitaph shows a thematic affinity to Egill's stanza, suggesting a shared poetic discourse concerning memorial practices: the eternity of the monument (*æi mun liggja með aldr lifir = þann es lengi stendr*) is assured by its skilful realization (*harðslagin = óbrotgjarn*). Of course, whereas on the Sälna stone poetry celebrates an actual *brautar kuml* ("road-monument"), in Egill's stanza the poem itself is the *kuml*.<sup>28</sup> Bridges, as liminal spaces, seem to have played a role in pre-Christian rituality too,<sup>29</sup> but their connection to funerary and memorial rites is only attested in Christian contexts, when the early Church promoted the practice of erecting bridges and causeways as a form of intercession for the deceased's soul.<sup>30</sup> More to the point, the very mention of bridge construction on runic monuments from roughly this period seems to have amounted to a declaration of Christianity. Beside the numerous funerary inscriptions of the Sälna type, two significant examples are provided by the Frösö rune-stone (Jämtland, second half of the eleventh century), where the building of a bridge is explicitly associated with the conversion of the region,<sup>31</sup> and the Dynna stone (Hadeland, c. 1040-50), on which the declaration of bridge-building accompanies the earliest Norwegian instance of Christian iconography on a runic monument. These stones postdate the composition of *Háleygjatal* by some decades, but the earliest known Scandinavian bridge, the Danish Raving bridge, situated at c. 10 km from Jelling, is dendrochronologically dated to the years 978-980, in the latest years of Haraldr Gormsson's reign.<sup>32</sup> The construction of bridges, and of stone buildings in general, was one of the spheres in which technological skill served the cause of evangelization, since, as a number of sources testify,

27. E. Wessén and S. B. F. Jansson, *Upplands runinskrifter*, p. 45.

28. Another document mentioning a *stein:bru* (a "stone-bridge"), like the one of *Háleygjatal*, is the Christian funerary inscription on the runic stone of Stora Ek (Vg 4, Västergötland). See J. Jesch, "Runes and Verse: The Medialities of Early Scandinavian Poetry", *European Journal of Scandinavian Studies* vol. 47 no. 1, 2017, 181-202 (197).

29. J. Lund, "Thresholds and Passages: The Meanings of Bridges and Crossings in the Viking Age and Early Middle Ages", *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, vol. 1, 2005, p. 109-135.

30. L. Peterson, "Gæra bro fyrir sial. En semantisk studie över en runstensfras", *Heidersskrift til Nils Hallan på 65-årsdagen 13. desember 1991*, G. Alhaug et. al (ed.), Oslo, Novus, 1991, p. 341-351. B. Sawyer, "Kvinnor som brobyggare: om de vikingatida runstenarna som historiska källor" in *Kvinnospår i medeltiden*, I. Lövkrona (ed.), Lund University Press, 1992, p. 17-35; A.-F. Gräslund, "The Role of Scandinavian Women in Christianisation: The Neglected Evidence", in *The Cross Goes North. Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300-1300*, M. Carver (ed.), York, York Medieval Press, 2003, p. 483-496.

31. *austmoþ(r)kupfastarsun : lit [...] kiruabruþisauk h(only)t kristnoetalont*, "Östman Gudfast's son [...] made the bridge and he Christianized Jämtland". See S. Brink, *New Perspectives...*, p. 169.

32. E. Roesdahl, "At bygge bro. Om det ældste brobyggeri i Norden", in *Gulnares Hus. En gave til Hendes Majestæt Dronning Margrethe den Anden på fødselsdagen den 16. april 1990*, A. Bistrup et al. (ed.), Copenhagen, Samleren, 1990, p. 23-28.

“pagans were impressed by the obvious superiority which the Christians possessed in the material realm”.<sup>33</sup> Given the markedly Christian significance of bridge building in early-eleventh century Scandinavia, Eyvindr’s comparison, following his mention of a *jólna sumbl* (“drinking feast of the Yule-gods”) appears all the more marked. This is an unusual kenning, as observed by Russell Poole.<sup>34</sup> It alludes metonymically to the equation between poetry and a divine drink, ultimately referring once again to the mead-of-poetry myth.<sup>35</sup> The determinant of the kenning, however, is not Óðinn, as expected, but the *jóln* (noun plural), a collective indicating the divinities presiding over the celebrations of Yuletide around the winter-solstice, of which the *sumbl*, the drinking feast, was a crucial component.<sup>36</sup> The oddity of the kenning is due precisely to the presence of these specific, ritual-related divinities, whose mention might have something to do, perhaps, with the poem’s original context of performance. Furthermore, we must assume that in Christian contexts, by the time in which Eyvindr composed *Háleygjatal*, *jól* had already become associated and replaced by Christmas festivities. In this light, Eyvindr’s mention of the *jól* banquet in combination with the act of bridge building may perhaps be read as a polemic juxtaposition of two religiously significant practices, pitting the skald’s poetic “monument” against the new Christian ones. Ever since Hákon góði’s first conversion attempt, the contacts with Christian customs must have grown increasingly strong all over the country. Dynamics of antagonistic imitation and appropriation resulting from the side-by-side coexistence of the two religious systems have been suggested for several cultural products of the Viking Age, syncretism being most clearly detectable in material culture, visual arts and iconography.<sup>37</sup> As mentioned above, Eyvindr had been the skald of Hákon góði, whose relapse into the heathen faith is taken to be confirmed by the pagan content of *Hákonarmál*, the *erfidrápa* in eddic metre composed by Eyvindr himself. One stanza, mentioning Óðinn’s hostility, has sometimes been interpreted as a hint to the fact that

33. R. E. Sullivan, “The Carolingian Missionary and the Pagan”, *Speculum*, vol. 28, no. 4, 1953, p. 705-740 (727) (DOI: 10.2307/2849201).

34. Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finssonn, *Háleygjatal*, § 13 (SKALD 1), p. 212.

35. Cf. Glúmr Geirason, *Gráfeldardrápa*, § 1, A. Finlay (ed.), in SKALD 1, p. 248: *hapta beiðis gildi*, “the banquet of the ruler of the gods” [Óðinn > poetry].

36. Drinking is depicted as a typical activity at Yuletide both before and after the Christianization. In skaldic verse, it is mentioned by Þórbjörn hornklofi and by the Christian Sighvatr Þórðarson: Þórbjörn hornklofi, *Haraldskvæði* (late ninth century), § 6, R. D. Fulk (ed.), in SKALD 1, p. 99; Sighvatr Þórðarson, *Flokkur about Erlingr Skjálgrsson* (c. 1030), § 8, l. 1-4, J. Jesch (ed.), in SKALD 1, p. 640. I use the etymological spelling of names (Þórbjörn, Þjóðólfr, Sighvatr...), as opposed to the choice made in *SKP* in favour of a modernized spelling.

37. Þórr’s hammer pendants have long been interpreted as an “antipathetic response to Christianity” (S. W. Nordeide, *The Viking Age*, p. 235-244). For what concerns Viking Age ornamental styles, see N. Wicker, “The Scandinavian Animal Styles in Response to Mediterranean and Christian Narrative Art”, in *The Cross Goes North...*, p. 531-550. Syncretic associations between Þórr and Christian iconography have been identified for several Västergötland runic stones dating before the mid-eleventh century: see A. S. Gräslund, “The Late Viking Age Runestones of Västergötland. On Ornamentation and Chronology”, *Lund Archaeological Review*, vol. 20, 2014, p. 39-53 (52).

Hákon's conversion had enraged the heathen gods.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, as the conclusion of the poem assures, the deceased king is now securely in their company:

*Deyr fé, deyja frændr,  
eyðisk land ok lád,  
síz Hókun fór með heiðin goð;  
morg es þjóð of þéuð.*

Livestock are dying, kinsfolk are dying, land and realm become deserted, since Hákon went with the heathen gods; many a nation is enslaved.<sup>39</sup>

Besides evoking the lines of the Odinic *Hávamál* (“*Deyr fé, I deyja frændr...*”), Eyvindr's closing stanza dispels any doubt about the afterlife of the apostate Hákon: in the end, he went with the heathen gods, not with the Christian one. As observed by Sverre Bagge, this reference to the traditional gods as *heiðin* represents not only the first attestation of the use of the word “heathen” in Old Norse, but also “a clear indication of the existence of an alternative religion”.<sup>40</sup>

## The borderland of heathendom

Old Norse *heiðinn* is likely to be a loan from or a calque on the homologous Old English *hæðen* and Old Saxon *hēðin*, etymologically meaning “one who lives on the heath, in the wilderness”.<sup>41</sup> Its spread to the other Germanic languages is attributed to an early influence, in the sphere of Christian terminology, of Gothic, where a comparable use is first attested,<sup>42</sup> although the dynamics of such influence remain somewhat elusive.<sup>43</sup> In any event, when it first occurs in Germanic vernaculars, the

38. Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnsson, *Hákonarmál*, § 15, R. D. Fulk (ed. and trans.), in SKALD 1, p. 189.

39. *Ibid.*, § 21, p. 193.

40. S. Bagge, “A Hero Between Paganism and Christianity...”, p. 197-198.

41. In turn, the semantic shift from “person living in the wild” to “pagan” is understood as a calque on New Testament Greek *ἔθνικός* (with *ἔθνος* corresponding conceptually to Germanic \**haiþi*) or, possibly, on the Latin equivalent *pāgānus*. In Wulfila's Bible (Mark 7: 26), the expression *qinō haiþnō* translates the Greek *γυνή ἑλληνίς* (“Greek woman”), in the meaning of “gentile, non-Jewish woman”: W. Streitberg, *Die gotische Bibel. Zweiter Teil: Gotisch-griechisch deutsches Wörterbuch*, Heidelberg, Carl Winter, 1910, vol. 1, p. 54.

42. H. Bjorvand and F. O. Lindemann, *Våre arveord. Etymologisk ordbok*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Oslo, Novus forlag, 2019, p. 475-476: “*hedendom*”; *Oxford English Dictionary online* ([www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022: “*heathen*”. See W. P. Lehmann, *A Gothic Etymological Dictionary*, Leiden, Brill, 1986, p. 172-173. Nonetheless, in the Germanic languages a number of religious terms (e.g. the word for “church”) point unambiguously towards Gothic influence; see E. Wessén, “Om den äldsta kristna terminologien i de germanska fornspråken”, *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 44 (1928), 75-108.

43. P. Durkin, *Borrowed Words. A History of Loanwords in English*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 159-161.

term has already undergone the shift mirroring the semantics of *pāgānus*, expressing exclusively an “oppositional” meaning to the Christian religion. In this meaning, the word occurs in Sighvatr Þórðarson’s *Austrfararvísur* (c. 1019),<sup>44</sup> where a *heiðin* identity is proudly claimed by an inhospitable Svéar woman, who refuses to let the followers of king Óláfr Haraldsson into her farm, during the celebration of a sacrifice to the elves.<sup>45</sup> After the first occurrence in Eyvindr’s aforementioned *Hákonarmál*, § 21, the word seems to be attested again around the end of the tenth century in a *helmingr* attributed to Hákon jarl’s skald Tindr Hallkelsson:

*Morðskýja varð mávi  
Mistar gótt til vista  
heiðins dóms at háða  
hríð við markar síðu.*

After the waging of the storm of killing-clouds [shields > battle ], it became good for provisions the seagull of Mist [Valkyrie > raven] by the coast of the borderland of heathendom [Norway].<sup>46</sup>

The *helmingr* is notable for its use of the expression *heiðins dóms mörk* (“the [border] land of heathendom”), generally interpreted as referring to Norway, the entire country being in fact under Hákon’s dominion.<sup>47</sup> In later texts, the prevailing meaning of *mörk* is “forest”, but the etymological sense “borderland, inhabited area dividing two distinct territorial entities” seems more appropriate here, in combination with the genitive *heiðins dóms*, on the model of toponyms such as *Danmörk* (“[border] land of the Danes”), *Belamörk* (“land of the Þilir”), *Finnmörk* (“land of the Finns”), etc. In turn, the occurrence of the abstract *heiðinn dómr* at such an early stage is quite remarkable. The use of *dómr* (literally “judgement, ruling, dominion”) as a suffix denoting “state, condition, age” is rare in archaic Norse texts, and becomes productive after the Christianization, presumably under the influence of Old English loanwords such as *cristendōm*, *cynedōm*, *wisdōm*.<sup>48</sup> Of the three *-dómr* forms found in the Eddic corpus, one, *konungdómr*, is attested in *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* (§ 14), a poem difficult to date on linguistic grounds, showing no decisive pattern in the

44. On the skald Sighvatr Þórðarson, see Simon Leboutteiller’s contribution in this volume.

45. Sighvatr Þórðarson, *Austrfararvísur*, § 5, R. D. Fulk (ed. and trans.), in SKALD 1, p. 590: “*Gakkat inn*”, *kvað ekkja, / ”armi drengr, en lengra; / hræðumk ek við Óðins / – erum heiðin vér – reiði*”, “Do not come any farther in, wretched fellow’, said the woman; ‘I fear the wrath of Óðinn; we are heathen!’”

46. Tindr Hallkelsson, *Hákonardrápa*, § 7, l. 5-8 (SKALD 1), p. 350, with slight adaptations in the translation.

47. The reading of the *helmingr* requires emendations, discussed at length in the reference edition, but none of them concerns the expression *heiðins dóms mörk*.

48. D. A. Seip, *Norsk språkhistorie til omkring 1370*, Oslo, H. Aschehoug & Co., 1931, p. 121; A. Torp, *Gamalnorsk ordavleiding*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Lund, Gleerup, 1974, p. 36-37.

distribution of diagnostic features.<sup>49</sup> The other two, *megindómar* and *hórdómr*, are found in *Völuspá*, a text undoubtedly showing Christian influences, likely to be dated to the late tenth century and, quite possibly, to the poetic circle of Hlaðir.<sup>50</sup> Note, however, that in the compound *megindómar* (“mighty judgements”, referring to *ragnarökkr*), *dómr* retains its literal meaning and full function as a noun, modified by the prefix *megin-*.

The abstract *heiðinn dómr* occurs in a *lausavísa* by Sighvatr Þórðarson (c. 1031), again in an emphatically religious context: it is the stanza celebrating Saint Óláfr for standing godfather at the baptism of the skald’s daughter.<sup>51</sup> The expression *heiðinn dómr* thus appears inextricably connected to its opposite, *kristinn dómr*. In Norway, the earliest attestation of this expression in a contemporary source is the Kuli stone (Nordmøre), whose inscription states: *tualf : uintr : hafpi : kristin : tumr : uirit : i : nuriki*, “twelve winters had Christendom been in Norway”.<sup>52</sup> If the stanza attributed to Tindr Hallkelsson was in fact composed after the battle of Hjörungavágr (c. 985), then we would have an appropriation of the expression *heiðinn dómr* dating back to around the last quarter of the tenth century, in a deliberate celebration of Hákon jarl’s Norway as “the [border]land of heathendom”.

The attribution of this *helmingr* to the late tenth century is not obvious, as it belongs to the section of Tindr’s *drápa* (§ 2 and 5-11) that is only transmitted in a late and heavily corrupted witness of *Jómsvíkingasaga*, the manuscript AM 510 4to (c. 1550).<sup>53</sup> This witness contains parts of the original and longer redaction of the saga, as opposed to the so-called “group A” manuscripts, representing a shortened version that lacks several poetic quotations.<sup>54</sup> The AM 510 4to version stands out for containing various poetic stanzas otherwise unattested, as well as some which are also quoted by *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* and probably belonged to a lost common source.<sup>55</sup> Regarding the authenticity of the poetry contained in the different redactions of *Jómsvíkingasaga*, however, the stanzas which look more suspicious are not the isolated quotations of AM 510 4to. Spurious verse is rather found among the stanzas that are common to both branches of the tradition, typically lines attributed to the saga

49. Haukur Þorgeirsson, “Late Placement of the Finite Verb in Old Norse Fornyrðislag Meter”, *Journal of Germanic Linguistics*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2012, p. 233-269 (264-265).

50. M. Males and K. J. Myrvoll, *The Date and Purpose of “Völuspó”*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press (forthcoming).

51. Sighvatr Þórðarson, *Lausavísur*, § 19, R. D. Fulk (ed. and trans.), SKALD 1, p. 724.

52. The Kuli stone has for a long time been regarded as contemporary to a wooden causeway found in its vicinity, previously dated to c. 1034 (S. Brink, *New Perspectives...*, p. 167). Recently, the dendrochronological dating of the wooden structure has been reassessed to c. 1003-1004 (T. Thun, “Strekkekodene’ i myra: veien til Kulisteinen?”, in *Kulisteinen. Grensemerke i tid og rom*, M. Stige and O. Risbøl (ed.), Nordmøre museum, 2021, p. 115-118), and its relation to the runestone questioned, although not definitely dismissed (E. G. Ellingsen, “Arkeologien på Kuli”, *ibid.*, p. 87-107).

53. The manuscript is held in Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum.

54. Tindr Hallkelsson, *Hákonardrápa* (SKALD 1), p. 337.

55. B. Fidjestøl, *Det norrøne fyrstediktet*, Øvre Ervik, Alvheim og Eide, 1982, p. 23-24, 29, 43.

characters and strongly dependent on the narrative matter.<sup>56</sup> The *lausavísa* spoken by the Jómsviking Vagn Ákason, for instance, shows the typical traits of late-twelfth and thirteenth-century saga authors' attempts at composing archaizing *dróttkvætt*: plain syntax, simple or no kennings and exaggerated irregularities in the rhyme-scheme (internal rhymes in bold).<sup>57</sup>

*Sigvaldi hefr setta  
sjalfa oss und kylfu,  
en fárhugaðr fnauði  
fór heim til Danmarkar.  
Hyggr í faðm at falla  
fljótt vinkonu sinni,  
en fyr borð it breiða  
Búi gekk með hugrekki.*

Sigvaldi has put us ourselves under the cosh, but the little-hearted coward has gone home to Denmark. He thinks to fall swiftly into the embrace of his lady-friend, but Búi has gone over the broad gunwale with courage.<sup>58</sup>

The stanza is motivated by the saga narrative and is transmitted in both branches of the tradition, although it is unclear when it entered it. By contrast, the stanzas transmitted solely in AM 510 4to are attributed to known skalds and belong to courtly panegyrics mentioned in other sources too. Unlike Vagn's *lausavísa*, Tindr's verse shows no sign of active archaization, but rather genuinely archaic features,<sup>59</sup> as well as diction and themes consistent with the rest of the poem, quoted by Snorri. Thus, notwithstanding the complicated text-critical history of the *helmingr* and its poor preservation, the expression *heiðins dóms mörk* can be attributed with relative confidence to the late tenth century, a few years after Eyvindr reclaimed the word *heiðinn* in the *erfidrápa* for Hákon góði and around half a century before the attestation of the opposite concept, *kristinn dómr*, on the Kuli stone. Given the clearly Christian derivation of the expression *heiðinn dómr*, Tindr's kenning is thus an act of deliberate appropriation, proudly claiming the heathen identity of the lands placed under Hákon's rule. As the following paragraph will show, Hákon's skalds often identify the jarl's dominion with "the land of the gods", an expression which only makes sense in view of the contrast with an expanding political power using Christianity as a politico-ideological identifier.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 23-24.

57. M. Males, *The Poetic Genesis of Old Icelandic Literature*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2020, p. 219-232, 244-252.

58. Vagn Ákason, *Lausavísa*, § 1, M. Townend (ed. and trans.), in SKALD 1, p. 366.

59. Such as *aðalhending* in *a/ø* in Tindr Hallkelsson, *Hákonardrápa*, § 6, l. 4, p. 348 and § 8, l. 6, p. 351 (SKALD 1).

## The divine ruler

As several scholars have observed, the kenning technique of Hákon's skalds is employed to underpin oblique associations between the ruler and various gods. In Hallfreðr's *Hákonardrápa*, Hákon's subjection of the realm by means of military force and cunning political strategy is compared to Óðinn's seduction of the goddess Jörð ("Earth").<sup>60</sup> In a similar vein, Hákon's war exploits are compared to the feats of the warrior-god Þórr against the giants, as suggested in the stanza of the poem *Vellekla* that celebrates the restoration of the pagan cults:

*Öll lét senn inn svinni  
sönn Einriða mǫnnum  
herjum kunn of herjuð  
hofs lönd ok vé banda,  
áðr veg jǫtna vitni  
valfalls of sæ allan  
– þeim stýra goð – geira  
garðs Hlórriði farði.*

The wise one [Hákon] soon made all the harried lands of the temple of Einriði [=Þórr] and the sanctuaries of the gods, famous among the peoples, lawful for men, before the Hlórriði [=Þórr] of the fence of spears [shield > warrior = Hákon jarl] ferried evidence of slaughter to the path of the giants [mountains = Norway?] across all the sea; the gods guide him.<sup>61</sup>

Although several gods are used in kennings for "warrior", Þórr is generally not one of them. His occurrence in such a kenning is unique to this stanza in the extant skaldic corpus and is thus highly marked.<sup>62</sup> By using Þórr's appellative, Hlórriði, to indicate Hákon in the second part of the stanza, the poet compares him to the actual Þórr, called Einriði in the first one.<sup>63</sup> Such an implicit inversion of roles is a key feature

60. F. Ström, *Poetry as an Instrument of Propaganda*; R. Frank, "The Lay of the Land in Skaldic Praise Poetry", in *Myth in Early Northwest Europe*, S. O. Glosecki (ed.), Tempe (Ariz.), ACMRS, 2007, p. 175-196.

61. Einarr skálaglamm Helgason, *Vellekla*, § 14 (SKALD 1), p. 301. The interpretation of the kenning *veg jǫtna*, "the path of the giants" (an unparalleled kenning for the mountain areas of Norway?) raises some syntactical problems (see discussion, *ibid.*, p. 302). Nonetheless, the reading *vé* endorsed by Hans Kuhn is syntactically simpler, but stemmatically weaker: H. Kuhn, "Laboe: Rund um die *Völuspá*", in *Mediaevalia litteraria. Festschrift für Helmut de Boor zum 80. Geburtstag*, U. Henning and H. Kolb (ed.), Munich, C. H. Beck, 1971, p. 1-14 (5-6).

62. R. Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden. Ein Beitrag zur skaldischen Poetik*, Bonn/Leipzig, Schroeder, 1921, p. 159-163.

63. M. Clunies Ross, "Style and Authorial presence in Skaldic Mythological Poetry", *Saga-Book*, vol. 20, 1978-1981, p. 276-304 (286).

in the peculiar work attributed to another of Hákon's skalds, Eilífr Goðrúnarson.<sup>64</sup> His only known poem, *Þórsdrápa* ("Eulogy for Þórr"), is the sole surviving *drápa* in courtly meter celebrating a god.<sup>65</sup> As several scholars have observed, however, the kenning technique of the poem invites us to glimpse Hákon jarl's military campaigns behind Þórr's expedition to the land of the giants. Norwegian hydronyms occur in the kennings describing the elements of the mythical landscape crossed by the god.<sup>66</sup> The giants are systematically referred to by names of peoples confronted by Hákon, and Þórr is represented as an "oath-bound viking" on a raiding expedition, ambushing a foreign leader inside his hall.<sup>67</sup> Beside *Þórsdrápa*, nothing has survived of Eilífr's production but a small poetic fragment transmitted in *Skáldskaparmál*; curiously enough, this is the *helmingr* that opens the section devoted to kennings for Christ.<sup>68</sup>

*Setbergs kveða sitja  
sunnr at Urðar brunni;  
svá hefr ramr konungr remðan  
Róms banda sik lǫndum.*

They say that [he, *scil.* Christ] sits on a seat-shaped crag in the south at the well of Urðr; thus the strong king of Rome [Christ] has strengthened himself in the lands of the gods.<sup>69</sup>

It has been argued that this fragment celebrates Christ, betraying Eilífr's later embracement of the new faith, possibly in circumstances similar to those of Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld's conversion.<sup>70</sup> Unlike Hallfreðr, who famously became the skald of Óláfr Tryggvason, however, Eilífr is not known for having composed for other rulers than Hákon jarl. In fact, various elements suggest that the *helmingr* is more likely to reflect a pagan perspective, representing Christ as a foreign ruler who has

64. H. Lie, "Þórsdrápa", in *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder fra vikingetid til reformasjonstid*, I. Andersson and J. Granlund (ed.), vol. 20, Oslo, Gyldendal, 1976, p. 397-400.

65. Only fragments survive of a couple of poems likely composed for Þórr dating to the conversion period; see J. Lindov, "Addressing Thor", *Scandinavian Studies*, vol. 60, no. 2, 1988, p. 119-136.

66. C. Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North...*, p. 154.

67. Eilífr Goðrúnarson, *Þórsdrápa*, § 9, E. Marold (ed.), in *SKALD 3*, p. 95. E. Marold, "Skaldendichtung und Mythologie" in *Poetry in the Scandinavian Middle Ages. The Seventh International Saga Conference. Atti del 12° congresso internazionale di studi sul medioevo*, Spoleto, 4-10 settembre 1988, T. Pàroli (ed.), Spoleto, CISAM, 1990, p. 107-130.

68. Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, A. Faulkes (ed.), London, Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998, vol. 1, p. 76.

69. Eilífr Goðrúnarson, *Fragment*, § 1, J. Krüger (ed. and trans.), in *SKALD 3*, p. 126.

70. W. Lange, *Studien zur christlichen Dichtung der Nordgermanen 1000-1200*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958, p. 53-55; G. W. Weber, "Die Christus-Strophe Des Eilífr Goðrúnarson", *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*, vol. 99, no. 2, 1970, p. 87-90.



wrongfully expanded his dominion in the land of the gods.<sup>71</sup> Firstly, to use the term *þond* (“divine powers”) when referring to the pagan divinities would have been highly controversial in a Christian context: once repudiated, the old divinities were dismissed as false idols or demons, divine nature being a prerogative of the one God. However superficially or recently indoctrinated Eilífr might have been, it would not have done him much good to compose such a *helmingr*, if his genuine intent was indeed to praise Christ. Secondly, the attributes of this particular Christ resist interpretation from a Christian perspective. Both the fact that he sits on a *setberg* and his relation to *Urðar brunnr* (“the well of Urðr”) have so far not found a satisfactory explanation, as they do not fit clearly into Christian doctrine or, at least, we have lost the key to access the poet’s understanding of them. Snorri’s introductory comment is not very elucidating either: *Forn skáld hafa kent hann við Urðar brunn ok Róm, sem kvað Eilífr Guðrúnarson*, “The early poets have indicated him [Christ] by referring to *Urðar brunnr* and Rome, as Eilífr Goðrúnarson said”. Snorri’s laconic introduction could mean either that he considered the association to *Urðar brunnr* so obvious as not to require an explanation, or, perhaps, that he himself had no clear idea of what it implied. His general praxis, however, is to provide explanations for rare or obscure kennings and, when he fails to do so, it often appears as if he himself lacked the adequate frame of reference.<sup>72</sup> In any event, he seems to consider the periphrases contained in the *helmingr* as proper of the *forn skáld*, the “poets of old”. This expression occurs only in this instance in *Skáldskaparmál*, but it is used several times in *Háttatal*, where the metrical and stylistic peculiarities of the *forn skáld* are illustrated but not endorsed.<sup>73</sup> As shown by Jonas Wellendorf, Snorri uses the term *forn skáld* in juxtaposition to that of *höfuðskáld* (“great/main poets”).<sup>74</sup> The *höfuðskáld* are the authorities that Snorri prescribes to follow and imitate, as illustrated by the programmatic opening passage of *Skáldskaparmál*:

*En þetta er nú at segja ungum skáldum þeim er girnask at nema mál skáldskapar ok heyja sér orðfflōða með fornum heitum eða girnask þeir at kunna skilja þat er hulit er kveðit [...]. Enn skal láta heyra dæmin hvernig höfuðskáldin hafa látit sér sóma at yrkja eptir þessum heitum ok kenni<n>gum [...].*

And this must be told now to the young poets, who desire to learn the language of poetry and acquire eloquence by means of old terms, or who desire to be able to

71. My analysis is informed by some arguments proposed and discussed in M. Males and K. J. Myrvoll, *The Date and Purpose...* However, I shall add some observations to the same effect.

72. Compare, for instance, his explanation of the sword-kennig “Heimdallr’s head” (Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, p. 19) with the lack thereof for the kenning “wind of the giantess” (*ibid.*, p. 108).

73. Snorri Sturluson, *Háttatal* [1991], A. Faulkes (ed.), London, Viking Society for Northern Research, 2007, p. 8, 24, 26.

74. J. Wellendorf, “The Formation of an Old Norse Skaldic School Canon in the Early Thirteenth Century”, *Interfaces: A Journal of Medieval European Literatures*, vol. 4, 2018, p. 125-143 (DOI: 10.13130/interfaces-04-08).

understand what is composed in an obscure way [...]. I shall thus let [them] hear further examples of how the *höfuðskáld* have found it fitting to compose by means of these *heiti* and kennings [...].<sup>75</sup>

By contrast, Snorri's use of the term *forn skáld* in *Háttatal* generally implies a prescriptive distancing. The fact that in *Skáldskaparmál*, a work devoted to poetic diction, the *forn skáld* are mentioned only in association with Eilífr's cryptic Christ *helmingr* raises a question. Could this mean that Christ's association with *Urðar brunnr* and the kenning "king of Rome" are found in a poem whose Christian inspiration is, at least, dubious? If this is the case, the introductory remark might entail the usual distancing implied elsewhere by Snorri when using the expression *forn skáld*. The symbolic meaning of "the well of Urðr" remains elusive, but the concept occurs in three poetic sources with markedly pagan contents, namely *Hávamál* (§ 111), *Völuspá* (§ 19) and Kormákr Ögmundarson's *Sigurðardrápa* (§ 4).<sup>76</sup> Of these, the latter is a panegyric dedicated to Hákon jarl's father, whereas, as mentioned above, the poem *Völuspá* has been connected to the poetic circle of Hlaðir. The well of Urðr thus seems to have been part of the late-tenth-century pagan discourse. In turn, the kenning "king of Rome", besides being a plain understatement of Christ from a properly Christian perspective, reflects the tendency to associate ethnic and territorial identity to the cult of certain gods, which is typical of ethnic religious systems.<sup>77</sup> The confrontation between the two faiths is portrayed, with political lucidity, as the juxtaposition of two factions in a territorial conflict, the foreign god being represented as a foreign sovereign, with his power seat in Rome. In this context, it might be worth mentioning the fact that in 962, Otto I had been crowned Emperor of the Romans by the Pope and to the Christological associations between Ottonian rulers and Christ I shall return soon. The expression *banda lǫnd* ("lands of the gods") seems, furthermore, to imply that the traditional divinities of the North have a rightful claim on the territories "usurped" by the king of Rome. This impression is reinforced by the fact that the metrical collocation of the words *bǫnd* and *lǫnd*, highlighted by internal rhyme, occurs frequently in poems composed for the Hlaðjarlar: *austr lǫnd at mun banda*, "[Hákon took] the lands in the east at the will of the gods";<sup>78</sup> *hofs lǫnd ok vé banda*, "the land of the temple [...] and the sanctuaries of the gods";<sup>79</sup> *bǫnd at vildu landi*, "the gods wanted, for the land [?]"<sup>80</sup>

75. Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, p. 5-6, my own translation.

76. *Edda. Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, G. Neckel, H. Kuhn and S. Sigfússon (ed.), Heidelberg, Carl Winter, 1983, vol. 1, p. 34, 5; Kormákr Ögmundarson, *Sigurðardrápa*, § 4, E. Marold (ed. and trans.), in *SKALD* 3, p. 279.

77. S. Bagge, "Christianization and State Formation...", p. 115.

78. Einarr skálaglamm Helgason, *Vellekla*, § 8, l. 2 (*SKALD* 1), p. 292-293.

79. *Ibid.*, § 14, l. 4, p. 301.

80. Tindr Hallkelsson, *Hákonardrápa*, § 8, l. 6 (*SKALD* 1), p. 351.

The collocation occurs again in the refrain of *Bandadrápa* (c. 1000): *Dregr land at mun banda*, “[he] wins land at the pleasure of the gods”.<sup>81</sup> Composed by Eyjólfur dáðaskáld for Hákon’s son Eiríkr before his conversion to Christianity, *Bandadrápa* (“*Drápa* of the gods”) is considered “one of the last overtly pagan eulogies” and its refrain is an active allusion to *Vellekla*, symbolizing Eiríkr’s continuity with his father’s rule.<sup>82</sup> In this context, it is worth mentioning that *Bandadrápa* also contains the only other skaldic attestation of the mysterious word *setberg*, found in Eilífr’s Christ-fragment. The passage has not been satisfactorily solved,<sup>83</sup> but the lexical correspondence between *Bandadrápa* and Eilífr’s *helmingr* reinforces the impression that the latter was composed within the circle of the court of Hlaðir and in a climate of both intense poetic exchange and active promotion of a pagan discourse.

Ultimately, the collocation *banda lǫnd* reflects the corner stone idea of Hákon’s propaganda, contained in the expression *heiðins dóms mǫrk*: the full identity between Hákon’s domain and that of the pagan gods. This idea seems to presuppose active confrontation with a Christian political power and in the perspective of an impending Christianization of the land. In the words of *Vellekla*, “the gods guide and favour”<sup>84</sup> Hákon’s military successes, not only because he is a rightful ruler, but, more substantially, because the territory that Hákon would lose to foreign powers would be lost for the gods as well: on the other side of the border, another king – and god – is growing strong.

The idea that the pagan gods guide and protect Hákon’s rulership is a recurrent one:

*Valfǫllum hlóð vǫllu*  
*(varð ragna konr gagni)*  
*hríðar ǫss (at hrósa)*  
 – hlaut Óðinn val – Fróða.  
*Hver sé if, nema jǫfra*  
*ættrýri goð stýra?*  
*Rammaukin kveð’k rikir*  
*ogn Hókunar magna.*

The god of the storm of Fróði <sea-king> [battle > warrior = Hákon] piled up the fields with the slain; the descendant of the gods [=Hákon jarl] could boast of victory; Óðinn was allotted the slain. What doubt might there be that the gods guide the destroyer of the kin of princes [... Hákon jarl]? I declare that the exceedingly powerful gods increase the might of Hákon.<sup>85</sup>

81. Eyjólfur dáðaskáld, *Bandadrápa*, § 2, R. Poole (ed.), in SKALD 1, p. 457.

82. Eyjólfur dáðaskáld, R. Poole (ed. and trans.), in SKALD 1, p. 454.

83. *Ibid.*, p. 460.

84. See *Vellekla* (SKALD 1): § 14, l. 7, *þeim stýra goð*, “the gods guide him” (*scil.* Hákon), p. 301; § 31, l. 7-8, *Rammaukin kveð’k riki / rogn Hókunar magna*, “I declare that the exceedingly powerful gods increase the might of Hákon”, p. 322.

85. Einar skálaglamm Helgason, *Vellekla*, § 31 (SKALD 1), p. 322.

Such stanzas, where the gods are directly involved in Hákon's military success and concerned about granting him his well-deserved power, are often interpreted as informed by a particularly pagan sentiment. In truth, we know relatively little about pagan ideas of rulership, but it is worth considering that the contemporary ideology of Christian kings, especially the ones engaged in conflicts with pagan peoples, presented substantially similar ideas, as illustrated by a propagandistic piece such as *Ludwigslied* (c. 882). It is God who grants victory to the Christian ruler, who guides his hand in battle and confirms him in his power. Similarly, the identification of Christ with a foreign king and, reversely, the representation of Hákon as an avatar of the gods Óðinn and Þórr have been attributed to pagan conceptions about Germanic sacral kingship, implying an overlapping, if not "an absolute identity between the mythical [divine] ancestor and the living descendant".<sup>86</sup> It is noteworthy, however, that a strong emphasis on the sacrality of the king and on the analogy between him and Christ had been gaining ground during the ninth and tenth century in post-Carolingian monarchies, especially in the context of military propaganda.<sup>87</sup> In turn, this development has been interpreted as a Germanization of the figures both of Christ and of the Christian king, under the influence of traditional notions of rulership.<sup>88</sup> A work like *Heliand* suggests that the adaptation of Christ to the military ethos of the local nobility had been key to the strategies employed in the conversion of the Saxons.<sup>89</sup> Religion had also been central to the military propaganda of Carolingian kings, but Christo-centric theories of kingship became especially influential from the ninth century onwards in Anglo-Saxon England and Ottonian Germany, the two kingdoms which acted as the main sources of political and religious influence on tenth-century Norway. As observed by Robert Deshman, the shift towards the representation of the *Christus rex*, although rooted in traditional and long-standing notions about the kingship of Christ, received an iconographic conventionalization only in tenth-century Anglo-Saxon and Ottonian art:

- 
86. O. Höfler, "Der Sakralcharakter des germanischen Königtums", in *Vorträge und Forschungen: Das Königtum. Seine geistigen und rechtlichen Grundlagen*, T. Mayer (ed.), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Lindau/Konstanz, Jan Thorbeck Verlag, 1965, vol. 3, p. 75-104 (p. 81).
87. E. Boshof, "Die Vorstellung vom sakralen Königtum in karolingisch-ottonischer Zeit", in *Das frühmittelalterliche Königtum. Ideelle und religiöse Grundlagen*, F.-R. Erkens (ed.), Berlin, De Gruyter, 2005, p. 331-358; A. Grabowski, *The Construction of Ottonian Kingship. Narratives and Myth in Tenth-Century Germany*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2018.
88. C. Erdmann, *The Origin of the Idea of Crusade* [1935], Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1977, p. 3; J. C. Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity. A Sociohistorical Approach to Religious Transformation*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 23-24, 40-41, 209-214.
89. G. R. Murphy, *The Saxon Savior. The Germanic Transformation of the Gospel in the Ninth-Century Heliand*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1989; G. R. Murphy, "The Old Saxon Heliand", in *Perspectives on the Old Saxon Heliand. Introductory and Critical Essays, with an Edition of the Leipzig Fragment*, V. A. Pakis (ed.), Morgantown, West Virginia University Press, 2010, p. 34-62. On the dynamics of "Germanization" and "Christianization" detectable in a work like *Heliand*, see the discussion by H. Haferland, "The Hatred of Enemies: Germanic Heroic Poetry and the Narrative Design of the Heliand", *ibid.*, p. 208-233.

Although the tenth-century invention of the crowned Christ developed from the earlier tradition, this innovation also marked an important break in the same tradition. Carolingian art had essentially carried on the Late Antique and Early Christian iconography of triumphal crowning. The wreaths and diadems associated with Christ were symbols as much of victory and triumphant martyrdom as of kingship. But the new Anglo-Saxon and Ottonian iconography shifted the emphasis decisively from Christ the Victor to Christ the King, from a Late Antique to a fully medieval concept of the Cosmocrator. The age-old reluctance to represent Christ directly wearing the diadem, the insigne of temporal rulers, was finally overcome in order to make more explicit than ever before the kingship of Christ.<sup>90</sup>

A tight relation between Christ and the ruler is also key to several textual sources produced in this period for Ottonian and Anglo-Saxon kings.<sup>91</sup> In the nearly contemporary description of Haraldr Gormsson's baptism by Ruotger, the biographer of Otto I's brother Bruno, the pagan king and his people "bow their necks to Christ, the king of kings", a wording whose political undertones become clear in the context of Haraldr's formal submission to his Saxon neighbours.<sup>92</sup> Christ is the king of the Ottonian emperor, who, in turn, is called *vicarius Christi* in the Mainz *ordo* (c. 960), used in the crowning ceremony of the Ottonians.<sup>93</sup> Similarly, in a homily by Ælfric of Eynsham (c. 1002-1005), the king is *Cristes sylfes speligend* ("Christ's vicar") and has the duty to protect his people from the (pagan) enemy, if necessary giving his life as Christ did.<sup>94</sup> This common development has been explained as a result of the two kingdoms' engagement in military campaigns against heathen peoples, England mostly defending itself from Norse incursions, the Holy Roman Empire, by contrast, pursuing an expansionist policy in pagan territories. Thus, in Widukind's account of Otto I's coronation in Aachen, bishop Hildebert mentions Christ and Christianity specifically – and exclusively – in connection with the military dimension of Otto's imperial function:

*Ipse autem accedens ad altare et sumpto inde gladio cum balteo, conversus ad regem, ait: "Accipe", inquit, "hunc gladium, quo eicias omnes Christi adversarios, barbaros et malos Christianos, auctoritate divina tibi tradita omni potestate totius imperii Francorum, ad firmissimam pacem omnium Christianorum".*

90. R. Deshman, "Christus rex et magi reges: Kingship and Christology in Ottonian and Anglo-Saxon Art", *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, vol. 10, 1976, p. 367-405 (377).

91. R. Deshman, "Christus rex et magi reges...", p. 367-405. See, for instance, the *Christus rex* in the illumination of the Benedictional of St. Æthelwold of Winchester (c. 963-984), British Lib. Add MS 49598, fol. 70r.

92. *Ruotgeri Vita Brunonis Archiepiscopi Coloniensis*, chap. 40, G. H. Pertz (ed.), Hanover, Hahn (MGH, SS; 4), 1841, p. 270: *Siquidem eo tempore et rex eorum Haroldus cum magna suae multitudinis regi regum Christo colla summittens, vanitatem respuit idolorum.*

93. *Le Pontifical romano-germanique du dixième siècle*, C. Vogel and R. Elze (ed.), Vatican City, Biblioteca apostolica vaticana, 1963, vol. 1, p. 246-261.

94. *Homilies of Ælfric. A Supplementary Collection*, vol. 1, J. C. Pope (ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press (Early English Texts Society, Original Series; 259), 1967, p. 380-381.

Then he [Hildebert] went to the altar, picked up from it the sword with the belt and, addressing the king, said: "Receive this sword, with which you shall defeat all the enemies of Christ, both barbarians and evil Christians, having received by God's authority supreme power over the entire empire of the Franks, for the sound peace of all the Christians."<sup>95</sup>

The idea of the *proelium Christi* against the pagans, where Christ himself would fight beside the Christian king, had become a cornerstone of post-Carolingian and especially Ottonian ideology; similar developments can be observed in Anglo-Saxon royal ideology.<sup>96</sup> In the tenth century, contacts between these Christian kingdoms were not only ideological, but concretely dynastic, since Otto I married Edith, the sister of the Anglo-Saxon king Æthelstan, at whose court Hákon góði, first Christian king of Norway, had been fostered and baptized. The centrality of the *imitatio Christi* had thus brought about new stress upon the royalty of Christ not least in the visual arts, possibly the most direct medium for political and religious propaganda.<sup>97</sup> Such intertwined notions of royalty and divinity are thus likely to have reached Norway, via both England and Denmark, and informed the local understandings of the figures of the Christian king and of Christ himself, both among believers and pagans.

Considering the centrality of the *imitatio Christi* in contemporary royal ideology, Hákon jarl's *imitatio* of Þórr, as hinted at in *Þórsdrápa*, represents an interesting ideological product. The use of Þórr as a match to Christ is well-attested. A syncretic/analogical understanding of the two figures is suggested by monuments such as the Gosforth cross.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, the diffusion of Þórr's hammer pendants and of pagan consecration formulas on runic monuments are generally interpreted as anti-Christian responses.<sup>99</sup> As observed by John Lindow, it is probably no coincidence that the only poems addressing Þórr – in the past interpreted as remnants of an alleged pagan "hymnic" tradition – flowered "at precisely the period of the Christian mission".<sup>100</sup>

## Conclusions

Around the year 974, Haraldr Gormsson and Hákon jarl confronted the army of the Holy Emperor Otto II along the Danevirke. This campaign marked a turning point in the Norwegian jarl's career, celebrated by his skalds as a triumphal display of loyalty

95. Widukind, *Rerum gestarum Saxoniarum*, II, 1, p. 66, my own translation.

96. C. Erdmann, *The Origin of the Idea of Crusade...*, p. 26-31, 105-107.

97. *Ibid.*, p. 384.

98. O. Gschwantler, "Christus, Thor und die Midgardschlange", in *Festschrift für Otto Höfler zum 56. Geburtstag*, vol. 1, H. Birkhan and O. Gschwantler (ed.), Vienna, Northing, 1968, p. 145-168; A. Kabell, "Der Fischfang Thors", *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, vol. 91, 1976, p. 123-129.

99. E. Marold, "Thor weihe diese Runen", *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, vol. 8, 1974, p. 195-222 (214-216).

100. J. Lindow, "Addressing Thor...", p. 134.

and military prowess.<sup>101</sup> Nonetheless, the Dano-Norwegian forces were eventually defeated. Norse sources present the conversion of the two Northern rulers as a consequence of this campaign, even though Haraldr had long been converted.<sup>102</sup> In any event, there is little doubt about the sustained politico-religious pressure emanating from Ottonian Saxony throughout the tenth century, and programmatically so after the synod of Ingelheim (948). As put by Theodoricus monachus, *Haraldus, rex Dacie, tunc temporis timebat ualde Ottonem, christianissimum imperatorem, qui ei suaue iugum Christi imponere disponebat – quod et fecit*<sup>103</sup>. The Holy Roman empire to the South exerted political, military, and religious pressure on Denmark and, indirectly, on Norway, but it “present[ed] – at the same time – a model for an ambitious conquering king”, sustained by a Christo-centric propaganda.<sup>104</sup> For the rest, the *suave iugum Christi* must have made its pressure felt in various ways. Several poetic texts produced around the court of Hlaðir show signs of antipathetic syncretism, presupposing sustained but conflictual proximity between the contending religions. The paganism of the Hlaðjarlar was likely affected by the militant confrontation with Christianity and, due to this, some of its attributes may have been deformed or may have received an amplified stress.<sup>105</sup> The emphasis on Hákon’s reclaim of the traditional title of jarl, for instance, is meaningful in a context in which the enforcement of a Christian monarchic model was often a necessary act of submission to foreign powers. The present analysis addressed the passages which most clearly suggest a dynamic of interaction, mutual acknowledgement or polemic appropriation between Christianity and paganism, evaluating the hypothesis that some of the most peculiar traits of Hákon’s poems – such as the emphasis on the divinity of the ruler – may in fact respond to similar views held by the Christianizers. As for pre-Christian Europe, skaldic poems put us in the almost unique condition of getting a glimpse of such a dynamic from contemporary sources, shedding some light on the ideological climate of pre-unification Norway, during the turbulent tenth century.

Bianca PATRIA  
University of Oslo

101. Einarr skálaglamm Helgason, *Vellekla*, § 25-28 (SKALD 1), p. 314-318.

102. M. H. Gelting, “Poppo’s Ordeal: Courtier Bishops and the Success of Christianization at the Turn of the First Millennium”, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, vol. 6, 2010, p. 101-133.

103. Theodoricus, *De Antiquitate Regum Norwagensium*, E. Kraggerud (ed.), Oslo, Novus Forlag, 2018, p. 22-23, “At that time Harald, king of Denmark, was desperately afraid of Otto, the holy emperor, who was determined to place him under the gentle yoke of Christ, and this he did.”

104. S. Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom. State Formation in Norway, c. 900-1350*, Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010, p. 24.

105. E. Marold, “Die Skaldendichtung als Quelle...”, p. 688.