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Snorri's *Edda* in its intellectual environment (No hint of heathenism in Snorri's choices?)

This is a 'academical style' version of a much less scholarly and shorter text in which you find similar though more provocative arguments,
available at

<http://www.nordic-life.org/nmh/SnorriCultBackEng2.pdf>

Introduction, motivations and summary

This work attempts to deal with a seemingly unwelcome topic within academic research. While there is large flow of papers relating to the influence of Christianity on skaldic poetry, almost no one argues about its independence relative to Christianity. When this happens, subtle hints are at best given.

The most explicit example I could find of such an allusion is given by Faulkes (1983) where the following statement shows that Snorri was totally conscious of his *Edda* 'heretical' contents: "Undoubtedly one of his [Snorri's] motives for including the prologue [the introduction to his *Edda*]... was to avoid the criticism that his stories were dangerous to [Christian] orthodoxy... This preoccupation is made explicit in the so-called epilogue." Faulkes, as other experts, avoids to utter the fateful statement, though clearly implied by his text: "Snorri was fully conscious that his teaching was opposed to Christian orthodoxy."

All this must seem so obvious to academics who do not find interesting to arouse this topic. For example, Margaret Clunies Ross, in her 2005 book, [I so often quote her that I will shorten her name into MCR in the following. Thus, the above reference will take the form "MCR (2005)"] dedicates a whole chapter to "the impact of Christendom" on skaldic poetry. It shows how Christendom, after the year 1000, i. e. after the conversion of Iceland, developed a particular skaldic poetry. Never does she allude to the possibility that pre-Christian poetry could have been modified through a Christian influence, before or after the conversion of Iceland.

My personal experience, however, is in meeting more and more often someone who, by claiming this influence, demeans Scandinavian mythology as we got it through the poetic *Edda*, Snorri's *Edda*, some of the sagas, etc. Their basic argument is precisely that all these texts were either designed or written by Christian individuals more than two or three centuries after Iceland Christianization (that is partially true), and thus (this 'thus' appears absurd to me) they tell stories that are completely embedded in Christianity. Again, in Faulkes (1993) I found a mention of this problem: "Discussion of the sources of *Skáldskaparmál* in the past has mainly been concerned with two related issues, first the accuracy with which Snorri reproduces pre-Christian tradition in his work, and secondly the extent to which his work is influenced by the Christian, Latin thought of the Middle Ages."

I wish to study here to which extent pre-Christian skaldic poetry has not been influenced by the Christian thought of the Middle Ages.

I started to develop my argumentation after reading Peter Foote's (1984) and Judy Quinn's (1995) papers stressing the links between Snorri's *Edda* and the other treatises of metric poetry of which we shall now speak [Note that what is usually quoted as "Prose *Edda*" tends to

be now named by experts “Snorri’s Edda” because it actually contains a good amount of poetry, as we shall now see].

My reasoning is structured in six sections that may look obvious though they are never really exploited to comment Snorri’s work.

- §1. Four poetic treatises: 1140-1350
- §2. Comparing the 3rd and the 4th grammatical treaty
- §3. Oral/written memory
- §4. The composition of Snorri’s Edda
- §5. Laws and the Christian religion in Iceland
- §6. Snorri’s passions and Conclusion:

If Snorri invented some parts of Gylfaginning, he then did so in order to match his theory of skaldic poetry to the contents of the Edda poems. This is not very probable, however less improbable than to believe than he did it under the influence of Christendom.

Table of the principal events connected to this paper

Date	Events
930	First ‘Parliament of All’ (<i>Althing</i>) in Iceland. The Lawspeaker recites the laws at each of its sessions.
999/1000	Conversion of Iceland to Christianity. Heathens can practice at home.
1016	Paganism totally outlawed.
1117	Oral laws are written. They go on being ‘spoken’ by a Lawspeaker at the beginning of each <i>Althing</i> . (as claimed by the Book of Laws itself)
1140	First skaldic poetry treaty (<i>Háttalykill</i>) influenced by Latin prosody.
1179	Snorri’s birth.
1218-1220	Snorri in Norway.
1221	Snorri’s <i>Edda</i> drafting begins. This is the 2 nd poetical treaty. It is not influenced by Latin language nor prosody.
1242	Snorri murdered
1250	3rd ‘grammatical treaty’ (deals also with poetry).
1262	Iceland annexed to Norway
1273	Lawspeaker’s function withdrawn
1550	4th ‘grammatical treaty’ (deals also with poetry).

§1. The four poetry treatises 1140-1350

This section is intended to show that Snorri belonged to a culture that undertook to build and transmit a theory of skaldic poetry. This cultural environment, though well-known of experts, is not widely pondered.

As MCR (2005, p 151) says: “Recent approaches to the manuscripts containing the treatises emphasize that ... they form part of a tradition of creative ... commentary on poetry ... that extended into the post medieval period in Iceland.” In fact, Icelandic poets started very

early to be interested in Latin prosody because the Latin language became a choice tool for the intellectual elite in Northern countries.

1. *The first treaty* applying Latin prosody as a theory for skaldic poetry was published around 1140 (note that Snorri was born in 1179). It was composed in the Orkneys and it is known under the name of *Háttalykill* [*hátr-lykill* where *hátr* = ‘way of life, measure, poetic meter’, and where *lykill* = ‘key’. It is also sometimes called by its Latin name, *clavis metrica*. Snorri’s corresponding work name, *Háttatal*, uses the word *tal* = ‘word, tale, poetic meter, list’]. *Háttalykill* is thus the first written indication of a sequence of learned poets and especially of poetry theoreticians who existed in Iceland throughout Middle Ages.

2. *The second treaty* is Snorri’s *Edda*. It expresses a firm opposition to the supremacy of the Latin language and versification, as opposed to the three other treatises.

Let us say at once that it is made up of four indivisible parts [MCR (2005, p. 162) claims that this last fact has been too much forgotten “particularly in modern times”], the Prologue, Gylfi’s misleading (*Gylfa-ginning*), the Poetic Measure of the skalds (*Skáldskapar-mál*), and the List of the Poetic Meters (*Hátta-tal*).

Before going back in detail, in section 4, to Snorri’s *Edda*, we need to locate its composition time. MCR (2005, p 160) provides this information: “Snorri’s *Edda* was probably composed in stages from c. 1221 onwards, beginning with the fourth part, *Háttatal*. Snorri is likely to have begun this part shortly after his visit in Norway, in 1218-1220.”

3. *The third treaty* has been called “third grammatical treaty” because it treats also of grammar and it follows the first two treatises that speak of pronunciation and orthography. Its poetic part explains in a systematic way skaldic prosody in terms of two other treatises about Latin prosody, well-known ones during the 13th century. His author was a nephew of Snorri, whose name is abundantly quoted in the treaty. It has been conceived around 1250, that is to say only 30 years after the beginning of the design of Snorri’s *Edda*, about 1220. It would be absurd to believe that Snorri did not belong to the same circles as his nephew. They must even have quite close of each other since they travelled together to Norway in 1237.

For more details on the poetic contents of the third treaty, refer to Sigurðsson (2000).

All the grammatical treatises all are downloadable in bilingual form Old Norse/Latin at http://www.septentrionalia.net/etexts/jsedda203_1gt.pdf. (204_2, 205_3, 206_4). We also find at <http://www.septentrionalia.net/etexts/3gt.pdf> Finnur Jónsson’s edition of the third treaty, with a translation in Danish. Each poem cited is given a numbering, which is used in the presentation of my counting in §2, although my results differ somewhat from Jónsson’s.

4. *The “fourth grammatical treaty”*

It is believed that it was written between 1340 and 1350, one century after the third. It is obvious that skaldic poetry of Christian inspiration developed during this century and we can expect that “The religious and learned nature of many of the illustrative quotations and prose glosses in the fourth grammatical treaty differentiates it strongly from earlier treatises” as stated by MCR (2005, p. 160).

We now will illustrate the nature of these differences with two precise examples.

§2. A comparison between the 3rd and 4th grammatical treatises

1. *First example: Interpretation of a stanza quoted in the third treaty*

On the left of the image below you find this stanza, and its translation in Latin on the right.

Note the use, in the Old Norse version, of the Latin word ‘amphibologia’ to describe a stylistic device.

130	MALSKRUBS-FRÆÐI.	III. 13.	III. 13.	FIGURÆ ORATIONIS.	131
<p>AMPHIBOLOGIA er efanleikr sagnarinnar, ok verðr þat á margar leiðir ...</p> <p>Stundum verðr sjá figúra svá, at eitt orð hefir fleiri merkíngar⁵, sem kvað Ólafr:</p> <p>Kænn njóti vel vænnar vinr minn konu sinnar, vist er-að dapr um⁶ drósar drengr, ok eigi lengi.</p> <p>Hér er úvíst um þessa sögn <i>eigi</i>, hvárt þat er viðr-orð úeiginligt⁷ eða orð eiginligt.</p> <p>⁷) nætilicit, <i>negativum</i>, 748.</p>		<p>AMPHIBOLOGIA (ἀμφιβολογία) est ambiguitas dictionis, quæ multis modis fit: ...</p> <p>Interdum hæc figura incidit, aliquo vocabulo plures significatus habente, ut in his versibus Olavi:</p> <p>Prudens bene fruatur venusta amicus meus uxore sua (certe non sollicitus est de feminis juvenis) et retineat diu.</p> <p>Hic incertum est, utrum hoc vocabulum <i>eigi</i> sit adverbium improprium (negativum), an verbum proprium.</p>			

The translation of the above Old Norse text, placed on the left of the image, is as follows.

“Amphibology is an ambiguous speech, and it has several ‘ways’ ... We will study this figure (style), where a word takes several directions, thus spoke Ólafr:

Skilful, he enjoys well of the beautiful woman his, him, my friend, certainly, he is not upset around the girls this guy, but not for a long time [AND/OR] and he earned a long time. The meaning of *eigi* is ambiguous here, that it is an unsuitable adverb [negative] or a clean verb [positive].”

Understanding this poem is not obvious, nor why its ambiguity is of interest. Finlay’s (2004) paper helped a lot, and I share his conclusions. Obviously, the author of the poem is very envious of “this guy” who enjoys his beautiful wife and who besides turns ‘around’ other girls. The ambiguity is used here to make a complete sentence of few words by adding the two meanings. We obtain: “You well enjoyed this situation, it will however not go on for long.”

The author of the stanza thus wishes that “this guy” disappears as fast as possible. In the context of the 13th century, this poem is perhaps not a curse, but quite certainly a death threat. In any case, its obvious sexual content, together with a death threat, exclude a Christian influence on its making.

It would be unthinkable to find it quoted in the fourth treaty and, it is indeed not found there.

2. Second example: a counting of some names

The two treatises contain many allusions to mythology but they are often hidden and each would ask for a large amount of explanations. I thus chose to count nothing else than the quotations of known characters.

The fourth treaty contains biblical references to Adam, Abel, Christ (twice) and Mary (once). The names of Óðinn and Þórr are not cited.

Here are the names occurrences met in the third treaty.

Section 11 in the comments: Óðinn // Poem 64: Hnikarr (Óðinn) [This *visa* states that: “Huginn and Muninn fly away from Hnikarr’s shoulders of, Huginn towards the hung ones, Muninn towards the corpses”] // Poem 65: Kristi [of the Christ] // Poem 87: *farma* - Týr [Týr of the loadings = Óðinn. This is called a **kenning** with two terms, *farmr* and *Týr*, in order to name a third person or thing, here Óðinn.] // Poem 88: berg-Þórr, // Poem 96: a complex kenning for Þórr // Poem 121: Gautr [Óðinn – this is a **heiti** where a word or name replaces another one] // Poem 122: In a comment: Jesú Kristó // Poem 123: Mária.

We thus observe 4 quotation of Óðinn, 2 quotations of Þórr, 2 of Christ, 1 of Mary. Finnur Jónsson’s counting are different because he does not take into account obvious *kenningar* for a heathen god, which leads him to a more balanced counting between heathen mentions and Christian ones. It is clear that the mythological topics have been quelled by the biblical ones in the fourth treaty. On the contrary, the third treaty shows that in 1350, passionate of Latin culture scholars knew and quoted without problem poems related to heathen mythology.

Latin influence is quite clear within the 1st and 3rd poetical treatises does not seem to have implied an oppressive Christian influence among scholars, at least until 1250. This last influence became observable during the following century.

§3. Written/oral Memorization

I will now quote several specialists in Scandinavian mythology who felt the need for recalling their readers that the civilization where pre-Christian skaldic poetry developed is exclusively oral. As a matter of fact, our civilization does not seem to allot an objective value to the non-written, as if a writer, even an official historian, could not be mistaken or lie.

In Foote (1998) you will note how much this famous scholar is conscious of the problem: “Here we should perhaps not forget the powerful part played by memorizing in medieval schooling ... and it was common enough in earlier times that such books were learnt, not merely learnt from.”

I suppose that the reason why academics hesitate accepting that these large amounts of knowledge could have been learned by heart is due to our today way to memorize. As Jackson (1995) claims as if it were obvious: “An example [of lists] is the lengthy catalogue of the *heiti* of Óðinn (Grímnismál 46-54) ... which has as its primary function the storing and transmission of mythological information ... Such lists are likely to have been deliberately composed and learned, rather than recreated with each telling as oral narrative may have been.” Thus, Elizabeth Jackson seems to believe being ‘almost impossible’ to learn lists of words without a logical or narrative bond between the words and, in the cited paper, she highlights the techniques used to support their memorizing.

A similar example, interesting here by its somewhat indignant tone, is due to a distinguished etymologist, Anatoly Liberman (1996). While discussing etymologies, he recalls us that “... a usual *bula* was a versified list of names, that is, something mechanical and composed for memorization, not for pleasure.”

That lack of confidence in the memorizing capacities of our ancestors is completely debatable. Without evoking theatre actors of who still learn their texts by heart, the amount of eddic poetry orally stored, as Peter Foote recalls above, stresses that human beings are

casually able to faithfully store large amounts of information. I dare insisting here: If all this were so trivial, the belief that written (by one individual) knowledge is more reliable than oral knowledge (shared by a large number of people), should be trivially wrong. Let us now illustrate our claim of faithful information storing with examples drawn from ancient Scandinavian way of life

We find in Quinn (2000, p. 31) that “Many literary genres of the Scandinavian Middle Ages point to the existence of rich vernacular [in local language] oral traditions preceding and accompanying them – traditions of skaldic praise poetry, eddic mythological and heroic poetry, mnemonic lists and genealogies, narrative *prosimetra* [alternations of prose and poetry] and oral sagas. In many cases we know that writers mined oral traditions for their material ...” In order to show that this is attested at least until second half of the 13th century, on p. 45-46, she provides three examples of storytelling about ‘legendary’ (i. e. non-Christian) heroes during major events, two of them being historically recorded in 1119 and 1263. This confirms Snorri’s comments in his prologue to *Heimskringla* that “people still knew and recited poems about all the kings of Norway since Haraldr Finehair [850-932]...”

We understood that the activity to memorize poems was necessary for the poets, but it was also regarded as normal for anyone. Here are two examples of poem memorizing by a population to which we deny today the capacity to recite poems, the one of the warriors on a battlefield.

In the first example, poetry is learned just after Stiklastaðir battle, in 1030.

Townend (2003) says: “On the memorisation of skaldic poems there is also anecdotal evidence from later Norse prose ... in the well-known example of Óláfr’s poets ...” where three poets compose a poem about this battle and

vísur þessar námu menn þá þegar [*þegar* means ‘on the spot’]

The people [the soldiers] learned then at once these poems.

A crowd of victorious soldiers learns poems on the field, something we cannot even imagine.

In the second example, poetry is recited during the battle. It is found in a famous Tacitus’ (98) quotation that deserves a precise translation. Tacitus describes the behavior of German soldiers as follows:

Sunt illis haec quoque carmina [carmen = song, poetry, enchantment], quorum relatu, quem barditum [*barditus* = Germanic battle song] vocant, accendunt animos futuraeque pugnae fortunam ipso cantu [*cantu* = ablative of *cantus* = by the song, enchantment, poem] augurantur. Terrent enim trepidantve, prout sonuit acies, nec tam vocis [singular genitive of *vox* = voice, sound of voice, sound, tone, (in the singular:) word, term, (in the plural:) pronounced words, speech, (in poetry:) language. Its plural genitive would be *vocium*] ille [nominative masc. sing. , *ille* = ‘the one before’, here *cantus*] quam virtutis concentus videtur.”

Here is an almost textual translation:

Are also with them these ‘songs’, by the narration of which, which (narration) they call *barditus*, they set ablaze the hearts and (they predict) the fortune of the future battle by this same song they predict. In fact, they terrorize [the enemy] or are agitated violently, as if the army in line of battle, not so much that one before (*ille*: song) of the voice, than sounds rather the concert of courage.

As you see, the translation in English of *vocis* by ‘a succession of words’ or ‘what they utter’ sounds more fitting to a “concert of courage.” But this plural, using the meaning ‘language’ of *vox*, would be the sign of a very unusual access of poetry from Tacitus and tends to render the meaning that the battle songs (a plural which cannot be recalled by the singular *ille*) are rather howling than real poems. This is not what Tacitus says who, with his usual dry precision, announces that the warriors’ voice is not that of a usual singer, and it is understood that they howl more than they sing their poems (instead of understanding that their words are not a ‘real’ poems).

Lastly, in a less anecdotic way, we must remember that a very significant function was the one of the Lawspeaker (*lögsögumaðr*) who, according to Dennis et al.’s translation, had to “recite all the sections of all [laws] over three summers and the assembly [*þing* (Grágás 1852)] procedure each summer ... All men with seats on the Law Council are also required to be always present at the reciting whenever the Lawspeaker wished to recite the laws ...” Although these laws had been written in 1117, they remained unchanged from the beginning of the 11th century, when they were adjusted to take into account the conversion, until the year 1262, date where Iceland passed under Norwegian control. In fact, the Lawspeaker was not removed before 1273, as said by Orfield (1953). It is thus probable that the Lawspeakers, among them Snorri Sturluson, continued reciting the laws during three centuries. At any rate, even if we consider Snorri’s case as not proven, reciting laws learned by heart could not have stopped before 1117 and this still illustrates the people’s memorizing possibilities.

Thus, learning poems was as much a social activity as private one. When a skald recited old poems, it is probable that several people in the assembly also knew them and that a process of mistake correction would have taken place in the event of divergence. This recalls the capacity that children still have to remind a tale word for word, and to let us severely know that we are ‘mistaken’ when we deviate from our initial version.

§4. The composition of poetic Edda

Let us start with some obvious facts. Snorri has been born with a silver spoon in his mouth, in a very active intellectual environment.

Even a tourist advertisement on Internet refers to the place where Snorri has been raised and proposes us to visit “Oddi, historic site, ... where is found a farm attended by the intellectual elite in the middle Ages.” Encyclopedia Universalis recalls that “Snorri had the luck to be brought up [until he reached 20] by Jón Loftsson who ... maintained, in Oddi, in the south of Iceland, the most alive intellectual center of the time.”

The influence of Latin culture, such as its theorizations of poetry, were obviously of primary importance in this environment, as shown by the existence of three of the grammatical treatises described in §1. Living in such an intellectual enthusiasm, we can imagine how he became involved in the theory of skaldic poetry, which constituted at the time a topic of debate for the intellectual elite.

One of his nephews was brought up in the same settings and proved his knowledge of the Latin language and prosody by authoring the third grammatical treaty. That Snorri knew or not Latin is not relevant here since he never quotes a work written in Latin. [Note however, that Faulkes (1993) manages to give life to this topic by his acute scholarship]. At any rate, Snorri has been raised in a cultural environment that knew well the Latin language and unless he was a ‘bad pupil’, he had to know the scholarly work of the time. That he avoided to take into account

Latin prosody cannot thus be allotted to his ignorance of the current of thought that carried out, in a hundred years, *Háttalykill* to the third grammatical treaty.

When these obvious arguments are taken into account, we can better understand why modern analysis tends to assign creation dates to the parts of Snorri's *Edda* that are in the opposite order of its editorial ordering: this takes better into account Snorri's intellectual surrounding. As MCR (2005, p. 163) puts it: "Háttatal is ... likely to have been the first part [of the four ones of Snorri's *Edda*] to have been composed ... [it] is, of the four parts of Snorri's *Edda*, the closest to Latin schoolbooks in terms of its structure and mode of commentary ... [it] is probably to be dated to the early 1220..." She (2005 p. 161) goes on stating "There is some evidence that *Skáldskaparmál* was never fully finished in a modern sense."

Moreover, *Háttatal* can be seen as dealing with two topics. The first is a long laudatory poem for his Norwegian hosts (1218-1220) as we announced in §1. We can expect he wrote this poem in Norway or little time after his departure. The second, in prose, comments these verses and shows that (almost) each one of them illustrates a form of skaldic prosody that Snorri recommends as being 'really' skaldic. This makes of *Háttatal* a treaty of skaldic poetry independent of Latin poetry.

Here is an example of these comments spread in *Háttatal*. He asks: "*Hvar eru nýgervingar?* (What are the *nýgervingar?* new constructions, i.e. allegories). He then describes twelve acceptable poetic licenses in the use of these 'new constructions'. Faulkes (2007, lines 8. 29-31) gives us the ninth one as follows:

*er þat at reka til innar fimtu kenningar, en ór ættum er, ef lengra er rekit.
En þótt þat finist í fornskálda verka, þá látum vér þat nú ónýtt.*

It is (authorized) to 'walk' until the fifth kenning, but it is out of the families, if it walks further. And it seemed that happened in the work of ancient skalds, consequently we evaluate that now as being non valid.

This means that if a metaphor called a kenning contains more than five related terms, it does not belong to the forms now authorized although it was used by the ancient skalds. This quotation is particularly interesting for us because Snorri allows himself to criticize the ancient authors and to prohibit the use of some poetic forms. This illustrates that he wished to make of *Háttatal* a treaty of skaldic poetry, based on the old heathen poems. This intention again clearly appears in *Skáldskaparmál*.

In *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri is less stern and sees it as a didactic work for the teaching of young skalds. As we find in Faulkes (1998, section 1. 27-28)

*þetta er nú at segja ungum skáldum þeim er girnask at nema skáldskapar ...
skili hann þessa bók til fróðleiks ok skemtunar.*

That is to say: We can say now to the young skalds who wish to learn the language of the skalds' poetic meter... that they understand this book like a game on knowledge and as an entertainment.

This 'backwards to its chapters' way of thinking the chronological order of the design of Snorri's *Edda* upsets our understanding of his intentions. We tend to call "prose *Edda*," his *Edda* because we reduce it to *Gylfaginning* and the beginning of *Skáldskaparmál*. We do not see why *Háttatal* would be of interest since it does not contain the beautiful prose stories that made Snorri famous. Conversely, if *Háttatal* has been composed first, then *Gylfaginning* is nothing but a long prose explanation, which puts in context the *heiti* and the *kenningar* of *Skáldskaparmál* and *Háttatal*.

In fact, *Skáldskaparmál* contains also descriptions of Scandinavian mythology and MCR (2005, p. 171) notices that they go often "beyond what was strictly necessary for his

purpose.” We thus understand that Snorri became aware that the amount of needed mythological explanations would go beyond what was “strictly necessary” and was going to hinder his theory of poetry. He must then have felt the need to ‘finally’ create a purely mythological section, known by us under the name of *Gylfaginning*. These explanations obviously are simple conjectures, but it does remain that they make it possible to guess how Snorri’s *Edda* could have been composed in the reverse order of its edition. This last assumption being the one of modern analysis, and even if Snorri’s thought did not exactly along the lines I followed, they incarnate this modern analysis.

§5. Laws and the Christian religion in Iceland

We must begin by recalling that the old Icelandic laws go back to 930 when a kind of elected Parliament has been created, called *Alþing*. One of the principles of this pre-Christian code is that the religious and temporal powers are in the hands of the same individuals called *goðar* (one *goði*).

During the conversion, around year 1000, heathens tried to slightly modify this principle, but about fifteen years later, it was fully applied and Iceland swung entirely into Christianity. These two stages are recognizable in *Íslendingabók* (2006):

Skyldu menn blóta á laun ... En síðar fám vetrum var sú heiðni af numin sem önnur.

People could do a *blót* [usually translated as ‘sacrifice’ - and this, discreetly on their premises]... But (after) a few winters these ‘heatheneries’ were abolished, as others.

The editors of the English translation specify that this correction of the law took place in 1016. In straight words, this means that as of 1016 any other religion than the Christian one started to be prohibited in Iceland. This prohibition was made under penalty of “lesser outlawry.” It means that the sentenced one was practically forced to leave his country for a 3 years period (wherefrom it was a ‘lesser’ punishment’).

This law remained oral until 1117, date on which it has been written. Here is its first rule, as given in the translation of Dennis et al. (1980, p. 23):

“It is the first precept of our laws that all people in this country must be Christian and put their trust in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.”

The recall of the terms of the law was entrusted, before each *Alþing*, to a Lawspeaker who had to learn them by heart and to recite them before the assembly. Before the date of 1117, it is thus certain that the laws were orally transmitted. The translation of Dennis and al. , (p. 187) presents thus this reciting: “It is also prescribed that the Lawspeaker is required to recite all the sections of all over three summers and the assembly [*þing* (Grágás 1852)] procedure each summer ... All men with seats on the Law Council are also required to be always present at the reciting whenever the Lawspeaker wished to recite the laws...”

[[*Side remark about memorization*: The Speaker was not a kind of actor in charge of this work. The Lawspeaker was Iceland highest dignitary designated according to his political influence, not because of his good memory. If it happened that he was not able to memorize easily, the text of Grágás (1852) explains what help he could receive to memorize, but it does not say a word about a possible prompter. If one had existed, he certainly would have been paid and thus quoted.

This high position, which was occupied twice by Snorri, was removed in 1273 after Iceland submitting to Norway in 1262. Since this text of law remained into force until 1273, it appears very improbable that the law was not applied, i. e. the law was probably recited until this date, in particular by Snorri.]]

It is thus obvious that ‘everyone’ was Christian in Iceland in the beginning of the 13th century, according to the books. We do not know precisely who were actually not Christian since they were in hiding. Follow two facts that attest of their existence.

The first is the name given to these heathen rebels: *hundheiðinn*. This word still exists in the dictionary of Cleasby-Vigfusson, which quotes 4 occurrences of them in the literature. According to the etymology, it should mean ‘huge heathen’ but it became obviously a traditional insult as “dog of a...!” here “dog of a heathen!” The existence of this word is enough to show that such heathens existed: It would not exist if there were no need to speak of them.

The second is a famous anecdote relating to another of Snorri’s nephews, Sturla Þórðarson (1214-1284). During an argument with a competitor, the last one’s wife rushed towards Sturla, pointing a knife towards his eye. As described in *Sturlu Saga* (1878):

Hon ...lagði till Sturlu Þórðarsonar ... ok mælti þetta við : “Hví skal ek eigi göra þik þeim líkan, er þú vil líkastr vera – Óðinn?”

She rushed towards Sturla Þórðarson... and said this to him: “Why would I not make you like [similar to] your beloved one, who you love the most - Óðinn?” [Óðinn is famous for being one-eyed]

This scene describes an attempt at murder but also, without saying, a charge of heathenism, as far as Sturla’s ‘beloved one’ is Óðinn, which is forbidden and punished by ‘lesser outlawry’.

This does not say that Snorri was also a kind of *hundheiðinn*, but that all the members of his family were not models of piety.

Compulsion has never been a way of in-depth convincing, especially for the intellectuals or the powerful. We know quite well that there existed in Iceland a class of persons who were both rich and learned, for example Jón Loftsson who raised Snorri until his 20th year. This class was obviously passionate for the Latin language and Snorri was not less passionate to magnify his indigenous culture, skaldic poetry and his language.

§6. Snorri’s passions and conclusion

His passion for power and ‘high’ politics has certainly been Snorri’s dominant one. It caused his murder in 1242 on the orders of Hákon IV, king of Norway. When Snorri went to Norway in 1218-1020, he met a 14 years old king Hákon, controlled by a regent (until 1223), the future duke Skúli. During his stay, Snorri had formed close links with these two characters and the great poem around which is built *Háttatal* is written in praise of both. Norway knew a series of wars of succession during the previous century and Skúli ended up fighting his king. Snorri, if he wanted to preserve his political power had to choose between the two, and he chose to support the loser, Skúli, and lost his life for it.

He thus played a very important political role, without any doubt with the will to influence the way in which Iceland was going to be attached to Norway.

In Iceland, he was twice the most significant character of his country, the Lawspeaker, 1215 to 1219 and, again 1222 to 1231.

We hardly have information on his private life, but his love life seems also led by the will to create useful alliances. His two successive wives were very rich persons and thus

formed a powerful support. Admittedly, he also had several illegitimate children, but this was not rare in these great families.

Snorri is especially famous as an historian. All the summaries of his life present him as being one of the best historians of the Middle Ages for his *Heimskringla*, or *Life of the kings of Norway*. The conclusion of Faulkes (1993) is eloquent on this topic: "He is neither a theologian nor a mythologist, but a historian in all his writings."

In Iceland during the 13th century, the practice of disparaging lampoons, inherited from paganism, that could discredit an individual had not disappeared. It follows that a poet was as admired as dreaded. We saw an example of such a lampoon in §2. Snorri's taste for power could thus only agree with his taste for poetry. *Gylfaginning* provides a compact description of ancient mythology under the pretext of supplementing knowledge to young poets. Let us not forget also that parts of these myths are included in the first chapter of *Heimskringla*, called *Ynglinga saga* where much knowledge of the pre-Christian times is gathered.

There is nothing here that would point towards a deliberate will on Snorri's side to include Christianity in his work.

This influence could have been exerted in a more general way, on the whole community of well-read men who orally transmitted the ancient legends and their poetry. The historical example of a *lögsögumaðr* in charge of reciting the corpus of the Icelandic laws, obligatory in fact until 1117, shows that this population was used to preserving word for word memory of masses of documents. A unanimous approval of the intellectuals would have been needed to modify ancient myths in order to include in them ideas resulting from Christendom. Snorri himself, his nephew author of third grammatical treaty, etc. show us that this unanimity never existed.

Christian influence on some episodes of the sagas has been highlighted very early during the 19th century. More recently, see the 1st article of 1st *Saga Conference* by Régis Boyer (1971). Conversely, for eddic poetry, see clearly ironic Evans' comments (1986) about those who found Christian influences in *Hávamál*. Snorri communicated to us the content of this type of poetry. It follows that Boyer's and his followers' remarks do not apply at all to the texts and the myths with which Snorri dealt.

As I said in introduction, all this pushes me to acknowledge that if Snorri had 'invented' some parts of *Gylfaginning*, he then would have been motivated by a will to match his theory of skaldic poetry to the contents of the eddic poems. This is not very probable, though more probable than to believe that he did it under the influence of Christendom.

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