

Did Christianity fumble with Snorri's *Edda*? (Strong hints of heathenism in Snorri's choices)

Yves Kodratoff

Introduction, motivations and summary

This is a provocative version of a much more scholarly text in which you find similar though deeper arguments and an exhaustive list of my references, modern and ancient ones, available at <http://www.nordic-life.org/nmh/SnorriCultBackEng1.pdf>

This work deals with a seemingly unwelcome topic within today academic research. It raised its passion during the last two centuries: “*To which extent Snorri's work has been influenced by the Christian, Latin thought of the Middle Ages?*” This somewhat outdated topic comes back in fashion as pushed forward by a popular belief that demeans Scandinavian mythology as we got it through the poetic Edda, Snorri's Edda, some of the sagas, etc. This push comes from a single source but generates two opposite streams. Its source seems to express a straightforward good sense argument as follows: “*All these texts were either designed or written by Christian individuals more than two or three centuries after Iceland Christianization. Therefore, the stories they tell are completely embedded in Christianity. It follows that nor Snorri's Edda nor poetic Edda are faithful representatives of Scandinavian prechristian culture.*” One of the two streams generated by this argument is a Christian one, and its propaganda claims again and again that all attempts to rebuild the old Heathen faith are doomed to fail. The second one, a pagan one, concludes that the old texts are very inspiring but their precise understanding is useless.

I hope to refute the source of their argument because

1. Snorri belonged to a culture that undertook to build and transmit a theory of skaldic poetry instead of adjusting it to Christendom. All other theoreticians did use a model inspired by Latin prosody but, until 1350, they illustrate their theories with examples more often drawn from the Heathen mythology than from the new Christian mythology. Snorri, on his part, does not ignore Christian poetry but cites a tiny amount of it as compared to the huge amount of Heathen poetry he delivers to us. He besides does not use Latin at all.

2. Many people believe now impossible to store, in a human brain, large amounts of poetry, and to transmit it faithfully. We actually have many examples of ‘by heart’ learning poetry and judicial information. The last one proves that faithful brain-storing has been very casual among our Northern ancestors, as much as its storming version is now popular.

3. Modern analysis has found that it is likely that Snorri's Edda has been written by starting with its less known part, ‘List of Poetic Meters’ (*Háttatal*) and ending with its most famous part, ‘Gylfi's Misleading’ (*Gylfaginning*). It shows that Snorri's purpose in writing his Edda has been delivering a treaty of poetry instead of a collection of old myths, as non-experts tend to believe now. By his way of speech in (*Háttatal*), we can be sure that Snorri believed in the importance of his poetic treaty. The examples he provides might have been influenced by his urge to prove his theory, certainly not by any Christian influence.

4. Following the Icelandic law after year 1016, Christianity is the unique legally allowed religion in Iceland, and a penalty of three years exile punishes the offenders.

Claiming that Snorri and other intellectuals of his time were Christian is at least dubious: They were obviously forced to claim being Christian. As a negative instance, one of Snorri's nephews has been publicly accused of being an Óðhinn's devotee.

5. Snorri lived under a strong passion for power and 'high' politics, and also for his major historical work on the lives of the kings of Norway. Most of these kings were Christian and imposed their faith in Scandinavia. He rendered these facts but we cannot claim that his History is written for the greatest glory of the Church. For instance, his detailed descriptions of how Heathen resistance has been eradicated under torture is unique in the annals.

Table of the principal events connected to this version

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

Snorri belonged to a culture that undertook to build and transmit the principles of skaldic poetry. This cultural environment, though well-known of experts, is not widely pondered. 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. It was composed in the Orkneys and it is known under the name of 'Key to Poetic metres' (*Háttalykill*). It is 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 the Prologue, Gylfi's Misleading (*Gylfaginning*), Skalds' Poetic Measure (*Skáldskaparmál*), and the List of the Poetic Meters *Háttatal*. Modern analysis considers that it is made up of four **indivisible** parts. This first part composed is *Háttatal* instead of

Gylfaginning though the last, together with the prologue, is placed at the beginning of all editions of Snorri's Edda.

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.

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 it to be strongly different from earlier treatises. 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.* This stanza tells of the author's jealousy for a 'friend' who is happier in his love life. The poem states that this will not last for long which, in the context of Iceland in the 13th c. amounts to a death threat. This poem is certainly not Christendom inspired and evokes Heathen rules of life.

2. *Second example: a counting of some names.* The third treaty contains 4 quotes of Ódhinn ('Odin'), 2 of Thórr ('Tor'), 2 of Christ, 1 of Mary. On its side, the fourth treaty contains biblical references to Adam, Abel, Christ (twice), Mary (once) and none to Ódhinn and Thórr.

It is clear that the biblical topics became widespread in the fourth treaty. On the contrary, these themes, though existing, stay unobtrusive in 1250.

§3. Written/oral Memorization

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. Here are some examples of memorizations that were 'ordinary' in the old times, though they would seem incredible nowadays.

In the first example, poetry is learned just after Stiklastaðir battle, in 1030 where three poets composed a poem about this battle and

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.

The second example is the one of the Lawspeaker. Before each *Althing*, the highest Icelandic dignitary, called a Lawspeaker, had to recite all the sections of the laws. This person was elected on the grounds of his political influence, not for his huge memorization ability. He had to learn them by heart and recite them in front of the assembly. The laws were not written down before 1117. If this dignitary had a relatively bad memory, the Book of Laws (*Grágás*) details how he can be helped but does not hint at the existence of a prompter.

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.

§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 *Althing*. 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.

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, Foote and Perkins:

“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.”

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. Here are two facts which attest of their existence.

The first is the name given to these heathen rebels: *hundheiðinn*. This word still exists in Cleasby-Vigfusson’s dictionary, 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:

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 this nephew, 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.

§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. He 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.

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*.

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.

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.

Bibliography

Régis Boyer, First Saga Conference, 1971. <http://vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/The%20first%20international%20saga%20conference.pdf>

Margaret Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics*, D. S. Brewer Cambridge, 2005.

Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, Richard Perkins, *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás*, Univ. of Manitoba Press, 1980.

David A. H. Evans, *Hávamál*, Viking Society for Northern Research, Text Series, Introduction p. 12-18, 1986.

See <http://www.vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/Text%20Series/Havamal.pdf>

Anthony Faulkes, 1983 ‘*Pagan Sympathy: Attitudes to Heathendom in the Prologue to Snorra Edda*’. In *Edda . A Collection of Essays*. Ed. R. J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason. Manitoba; 283–314. Online at <http://www.vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/Pagan-sympathy.pdf>

Anthony Faulkes 1993, ‘The sources of *Skáldskaparmál*: Snorri’s intellectual background’, download at à <http://www.vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/Sources-of-Skaldskaparmal.pdf>

Skáldskaparmál, Antony Faulkes ed. , 1998, Viking Society for Northern Research, download at à <http://vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/> .

Háttatal, Antony Faulkes ed. , 2007, Viking Society for Northern Research, download at à <http://www.vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/Edda-3.pdf> .

Alinson Finlay, *Skalds, Troubadours and Sagas*, Saga Books XXIV (1994-1997) p. 105-202. <http://www.vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/Saga-Book%20XXIV.pdf>

(Íslendingabók 2006) English translation : Íslendingabók, Ch. VII, Viking Society, Book Series, volume XVIII, see <http://www.vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/Text%20Series/IsIKr.pdf> . In Old Norse see: <https://archive.org/details/slendngasgur01magngoog> .

Peter Foote, *Latin rhetoric and Icelandic poetry – Some contacts*, in *Aurvandilstá*, Odense University Press, p. 249-270, 1984.

Peter Foote, *Introduction to Theodoricus Monachus, An account on the ancient history of the Norwegian kings*, Text Series , Viking Society for Northern Research, Vol. XI, 1998. <http://vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/>

Grágás Konungsbók (1852) Edition Vilhjálmur Finsen, reproduced by Odense Universitetforlag, 1974; p. 208, Ch. 116, “*lög sögo manz þátr*”, download at <http://www.septentrionalia.net/etexts/gragas.pdf>

Elizabeth Jackson, *Eddic Listing techniques and the coherence of « Rúnatal »*, *Alvíssmál* 5, 1995, p. 81-106. On line at <http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~alvismal/>

Judy Quinn, *From Orality to Literacy in Medieval Iceland*. In Margaret Clunies Ross, ed. , *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 42, p. 30-60, 2000.

Judy Quinn, *Eddu list: The Emergence of Skaldic Pedagogy in Medieval Iceland*, *Alvíssmál* 4, 1995, p. 69–92. On line at <http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~alvismal/>

Anatoly Liberman, *Alvíssmál* 6 (1996), p. 63-98. Online at <http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~alvismal/> .

Lester B. Orfield (1953), *The Growth of Scandinavian Law*, **Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953.**

Gísli Sigurðsson. 2000. 'Óláfr Þórðarson hvítaskáld and oral poetry in the west of Iceland c. 1250: the evidence of references to poetry in *The Third Grammatical Treatise*'. [Translation of Gísli Sigurðsson 1993]. In *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, 96–115. Cambridge: Cambridge U. P.

Snorri Sturluson, 'Edda' (i. e. *Prologue, Gylfagining, Skáldskaparmál, Háttatal*) Translation A. Faulkes, Everyman 1987.

Sturlunga Saga, Ch. 31, Vigfusson ed. , Oxford 1878.

Tacitus, 98, *De Origine et Situ Germanorum*, §3. Download at à <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/tac/g01000.htm>, <http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/book/lookupname?key=Tacitusus%2C%20Cornelius>, and in French: <http://remacle.org/bloodwolf/historiens/tacite/table.htm> .

Matthew Townend, 'Whatever happened to York Viking poetry ? Memory, Tradition and the Transmission of Skaldic Verse', in *Saga-Book Vol. XXVII* (2003) p. 48-90. See <http://www.vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/Saga-Book%20XXVII.pdf>