

THE NORDIC APOCALYPSE

Approaches to *Völuspá* and
Nordic Days of Judgement

Edited by

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THE BACKGROUND AND SCOPE OF *VÖLUSPÁ*

Kees Samplonius

The poem that we call *Völuspá* presents itself as being spoken by a pagan seeress, a figure that must have lingered on in people's imaginations long after the original *völur* had vanished from real life (Samplonius 2001: 208). Yet 'hún enn lifir', and there she is again, called from the grave to deliver a message of recollection and prophecy to an audience that must have marvelled at this voice from the past.¹ It is from her alleged pre-Christian lips that we hear about ancient things long gone, and — as she proceeds — about the fate which awaits the pagan gods as the world is consumed by fire and replaced by a new one which has no place for them. Putting the tale in the mouth of this ancient seeress lends authority to the things she tells, tricking the audience into accepting the authenticity of the pagan world-view which the poem claims to present. This is also the way in which *Völuspá* has been perceived by generations of scholars, for whom the poem seemed to conjure up visions of dark secrets from a pagan world otherwise lost.² In spite of all the enthusiasm that the rediscovery of the poem evoked, it did not go unnoticed that some of its descriptions were reminiscent

¹ In this article, Eddic poetry is quoted in accordance with Jón Helgason's editions, Jón Helgason 1951-52. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine, without any claim to originality.

² Not so the seventeenth-century Scandinavian humanists who first dealt with the poem. On this early scholarly reception of *Völuspá*, see the article by Annette Lassen elsewhere in this volume. The desire to use *Völuspá* for reconstructing the pagan world-view does not flourish until after the success of Macpherson's Ossian poems published in 1762. This perception of the poem can be said to have dominated all *Völuspá* scholarship over the last 200 years. It can still be clearly discerned in recent contributions by Dronke (U. Dronke 1997) and McKinnell (McKinnell 2008), who, in different ways, both see *Völuspá* as a pagan Germanic apocalyptic poem with some Christian elements and influences.

of medieval Christian imagery. One of the first to express misgivings about the alleged all-pagan background of the poem was Karl Weinhold, who in the middle of the nineteenth century wondered whether the scenery of Náströnd (st. 38), the decline of morals which preludes *ragnarök* (st. 45), and the image of the Judge coming from above (st. 65) might not be due to Christian influence (Weinhold 1848: 312–14). Following his example, several later scholars drew up lists of possible Christian themes in *Völuspá*, but the scholarly community at large rejected most of these claims, particularly those made by the Oslo professor Christian Bang (Bang 1879). In retrospect, some of the claimed similarities may be doubtful, but many others are definitely difficult to dismiss. Modern scholarship is not as vehemently opposed to the idea of Christian influences being echoed in Old Norse mythology, but as regards *ragnarök*, the attitude is still largely one of denial.³

The following investigation started as an attempt to clarify the background of the Old Norse Doomsday as depicted by *Völuspá* and Snorri. Does it represent a genuinely pagan concept, or what? This question underlies the first part of this paper, which focuses on the agents of destruction which feature in *ragnarök*. The conclusions arrived at here, clearly suggesting Christian influence, prompt a number of additional questions about the ways in which Christian notions may have spread north. Ten years ago (Samplonius 2001: 185), I raised the question that if the poet were a Christian, what Christian rationale was there in the poem? I did not treat the question exhaustively, and the observations made in the first part of the present investigation have made it desirable to return to the problem and look at it again from a broader perspective. On the basis of this reevaluation, an argument will be presented regarding what I see as the poet's ideological motives for composing *Völuspá*.

The investigation has thus come to comprise the following aspects:

- I. The 'Christian motifs' of *Völuspá*.
 - I.1 Introductory remarks.
 - I.2 Agents of destruction: Surtr, Fenrir, and Loki.
- II. The diffusion of Christian ideas.
 - II.1 In which ways did Christianity spread?
 - II.2 The poet's motives for composing *Völuspá*.
- III. Conclusion.

³ John McKinnell probably articulates the general view when he speaks of 'the heathen Ragnarök' (McKinnell 2008: 17).

I. The 'Christian motifs' of *Völuspá*

I.1 Introductory remarks

When we find Old Norse mythological motifs to be reminiscent of Christian imagery, there are basically two possibilities: the resemblance is due to borrowing, or the result of collateral developments which took place independently of each other. Some scholars have gone a long way in their claims that sophisticated motifs with elaborate structures could develop collaterally in different times and places, depending on subject matter and cultural needs. Similar needs and situations, they say, lead to similar mythological responses. This explanation enjoys a marginal, yet undying popularity, possibly because it frees us from the need to account for the similarity of motifs in *Völuspá* and Christian imagery. In his book on *ragnarøk*, John Stanley Martin adheres to this polygenetic approach by viewing the eschatological struggle of the gods as probably of indigenous origin (Martin 1972: 139): 'Old Norse eschatological motifs,' he says, 'developed from traditional seasonal rituals for the reinvigoration and sustenance of the natural order' (Martin 1972: 117). However, the poem contains little to support this. *Völuspá*, strophe 25, may (though not must) reflect memories of some ancient myth or dramatized ritual to celebrate the seasonal cycle (or to ritualize a stage thereof),⁴ but it seems rather cramped to link such an annual festivity or drama to an eschatological battle that will annihilate the world.

Slightly different is the polygenesis advocated by Hilda Ellis Davidson, who views the similarity between *ragnarøk* and Christian imagery as being the result of convergent individual imaginations:

Much has been made of such points of resemblance, and also of Christian accounts of the burning of the world at doomsday, the darkening of the sun, and the falling of the stars. It is obvious that if one contemplates the destruction of the world, whether in a religious context or not, certain possibilities are bound to occur to the mind. Destruction by intense heat and cold and inundation by water are likely to be among them. [...] It must be admitted too that the falling of the stars and the darkening of the sun could well come into a poet's mind, even if he had not studied apocryphal literature or the writings of the early church. (Davidson 1981: 204)

⁴ The underlying fable possibly resembled the Iðunn story, where the gods become the prisoners of aging and diseases after Iðunn's abduction by the giants (North 1997: 43). Iðunn's mythical return symbolizes and narratively vouchsafes the seasonal recurrence of nature to man.

What makes this explanation problematic is the clause ‘if one contemplates the destruction of the world’, because, as anthropologists of religion tell us, myths about the creation of the world are common, whereas narratives of an impending world disaster are rare (Van Beek 2000: 32).⁵ To support her case, Davidson refers to the Skarpåker rune stone (Sö 154) in Södermanland (Sweden), stylistically dated to the period AD 1010–40 (Gräslund 2006: 126), the inscription of which, ‘iard s[k]al rifna uk ubhimin’ (Earth shall be torn asunder, and high heaven)⁶ she takes as offering proof that the pre-Christian North was familiar with the idea of the destruction of the world (Davidson 1981: 205). However, the ‘heaven-breaking’ formula found on the rune stone has parallels in early eleventh-century memorial poetry, as in Hallfreðr *vandræðaskáld’s* *erfdrápa* about Óláfr Tryggvason, strophe 29 of which runs as follows:

Fyrr mun heimr ok himnar,
 hugreifum Áleifi
 — hann var menskra manna
 mest gott —, í tvau bresta,
 áðr an glíkr at góðu
 gæðingr myni fœðask.

(Finnur Jónsson 1912: 156)

(The world and the heavens will burst, before a prince as great as the spirited Olaf is born — he was the best among men.) (Trans. by Lönnroth 1981: 320)

The fact that the motif occurs in a poem memorizing the missionary king Óláfr Tryggvason vouchsafes that the formula has a Christian context here. The same applies to the Skarpåker stone, the cross decoration of which suggests the formula to be due to an early diffusion of Christian apocalyptic imagery rather than to any pagan Germanic belief.⁷ This Christian setting has been acknowledged by Michael Schulte, who nonetheless seeks to reconcile it with Davidson’s view by making the inscription allude to a pagan Germanic cosmogony and eschatol-

⁵ ‘All over the world, in many cultures, a great variety of tales elaborate on beginnings, creations and origins. Many syntheses have been written, and these collections of the creation stories testify to a long standing scientific fascination. Compared to this treasure house, myths, legends and tales about the end of the world are in very short supply. Few myths handle the end of the world’ (Van Beek 2000: 33).

⁶ *Samnordisk runtextdatabas*. I am indebted to Henrik Williams (Uppsala) for the bibliographical references.

⁷ Lönnroth rightly observes that in *Óláfsdrápa* ‘the topos is expressed in terms that are quite similar to the *Skarpåker* inscription’ (Lönnroth 1981: 320).

ogy that is being re-employed in a new Christian context (Schulte 2007: 64). Schulte wants to find support for this alleged pagan Germanic eschatology in the widespread occurrence of the alliterative ‘iǫrð/upphiminn’ formula in Old High German, Old Saxon, and Old Norse poetry (see Schulte 2007: 61). This wide diffusion is indeed noteworthy, but proves little about the existence of a genuinely pagan Germanic eschatology which in the North took the shape of *ragnarök*. It is only on the Christian Skarpåker stone that, indirectly, as part of what Marold calls the *Unvergleichlichkeitstópos* (the praise of the unmatched dead warrior who did not have an equal in life) (Marold 1998: 670), the formula strikes an eschatological note, and then only because of the verb ‘rifna’ (tear). Without such an additional verb or verbal clause denoting destruction, there is no reason to view the ‘iǫrð/upphiminn’ formula as evidence of an indigenous Germanic eschatology. As I see it, the words have first and foremost legal-formulaic overtones, reminiscent of phrases such as ‘á legi ok landi’ (on sea and land) and ‘á fjalli eða firði’ (on mountain or fjord), or ‘iǫrð ok fjöll’ (earth and mountain; references in Vogt 1936: 40–42), all of which, in one way or another, express the ‘always-and-everywhere’ topos of law codes. In combination with the verb *varða* (to watch over, ensure, see to something), the formula also occurs in *Griðamál*, II.1.a (Vogt 1936: 184, 190) and on the Ribe runic stick from c. 1300 (McKinnell, Simek, and Düwel 2004: 142). In these last two cases, the connotation appears to be that ‘earth and heaven’ are being called upon not only as witnesses, but also, symbolically, as guards.

I.2 Agents of destruction: Surtr, Fenrir, and Loki

Since we cannot conclude from silence, it is impossible to prove that no apocalyptic notions existed in Germanic societies prior to their exposure to Christian influences, but the lack of any sign thereof makes it appropriate to turn to the alternative possibility, namely that the ‘Christian motifs’ of *Völuspá* owe their occurrence to an early diffusion of Christian imagery. There are indeed good reasons for assuming that such early off-shoots of Christian imagery have been instrumental in the shaping of Old Norse mythology as we have it.

Surtr

As a paradigmatic example of such an early diffusion, I take *Völuspá*, strophe 52, which pictures the world’s destruction through fire. This central strophe in the *ragnarök* sequence of events describes how Surtr advances from the south ‘með

sviga lævi’ (‘with a scourge’ or ‘destroyer of branches’), a poetic description of fire which points ahead to Surtr’s impending encounter with Freyr — the fertility god of beast and soil — which will end with the death of the latter:

Surtr ferr sunnan
með sviga lævi,
skínn af sverði
sól valtíva;
griótbjörg gnata,
en gífr rata,
troða halir helveg,
en himinn klofnar.

(Jón Helgason 1951: 12)⁸

(Surtr moves from the south
with the scathe of branches,
there shines from his sword
the sun of the Gods of the Slain.
Stone peaks clash,
and troll wives take to the road.
Men tread the path from Hel,
and heaven breaks apart.)

(Trans. U. Dronke 1997: 21, with minor alterations)

The image presented here is that of Surtr as the gods’ ultimate antagonist, the arrival of whom sets off the fiery blaze that will destroy the world in the *ragnarök* holocaust. Up until now, Surtr’s prominent role in bringing about world cataclysm has not prompted much interest in the origin of the figure. Scholars have usually contented themselves with calling him ‘a folk-legendary fire-demon and giant’ (U. Dronke 1997: 147), or simply ‘a fire-giant’ (Hermann Pálsson 1996: 85). Additional comments have been rare and mostly limited to paraphrases of Snorri’s words about Surtr in *Gylfaginning*.⁹ The great majority of schol-

⁸ The manuscript variants are irrelevant.

⁹ Snorri’s description (Snorri Sturluson 1982: 9, 50–51) relies heavily on *Völuspá*, st. 52: only the notion of the unpassable hot land in the South described in chap. 3 of *Gylfaginning* may betray medieval encyclopedic knowledge: ‘Þá mælti Þriði: “Fyrst var þó sá heimr í suðrhálfu, er Múspell heitir. Hann er ljóss ok heitr. Sú átt er logandi ok brennandi. Er hann ok ófær þeim, er þar eru útlendir ok eigi eigu þar óðul. Sá er Surtr nefndr, er þar sitr á landsenda til landvarnar. Hann hefir loganda sverð, ok í enda veraldar mun hann fara ok herja ok sigra öll goðin ok brenna allan heim með eldi.”’ (Then spoke Third: ‘But first there was the world in the southern region called Muspell. It is bright and hot and it is unpassable for those that are foreigners there and

ars regarded the figure as very ancient,¹⁰ which set them apart from Friedrich Bergmann, who, as early as 1838, remarked that Surtr's role proved that the poet was familiar with volcanic landscapes:

les mythes sur le géant *Surtur*, v. 205, sont sans doute originaires de l'Islande, parce qu'il n'y a pas de pays où les sources chaudes soient en aussi grand nombre que dans cette île volcanique, et qu'il existe encore aujourd'hui en Islande, une grande caverne qui porte le nom de *Surtar hellir*. (Bergmann 1838: 183)

(The myths of the giant Surtr are undoubtedly of Icelandic origin, because there is no other country in which hot springs occur in such great numbers as this volcanic isle, and in our days a big cave there is still called *Surtar hellir*.)

This idea was subsequently worked out by Bertha Phillpotts, who arrived at the conclusion that Surtr was a volcano-giant and therefore, like the rest of the poem, of Icelandic origin (Phillpotts 1905). This conclusion is hard to accept. Designations such as the Icelandic place-name *Surtshellir* and the word *surtar-brandr* (for 'brown coal') may prove that Surtr came to be associated with volcanic phenomena in medieval Iceland, but it does not follow that the figure must have originated there. Sigurður Nordal speaks against this idea (Sigurður Nordal 1922–23: 98), even though he agrees that the country's volcanism must have provided an excellent habitat for the Surtr figure once the concept had arrived in Iceland (similarly Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1940: 134).

are not native to it. There is one called Surt that is stationed there at the frontier to defend the land. He has a flaming sword and at the end of the world he will go and wage war and defeat all the gods and burn the whole world with fire' (Snorri Sturluson 1987: 9). Attempts to account for Surtr's origin are not altogether lacking. Elard Hugo Meyer (Meyer 1889: 209) derived the line 'Surtr ferr sunnan | með sviga lævi' (*Völuspá* st. 52) from Ezekiel 20. 46–47 (Allioli 1887: 11, 901): 'Fili hominis, pone faciem tuam contra viam Austri [...] Et dices saltui meridiano: Audi verbum Domini: haec dicit Dominus Deus: Ecce ego succendam in te ignem, et comburam in te omne lignum viride, et omne lignum aridum: non extinguetur flamma succensionis: et comburetur in ea omnis facies ab Austro usque ad Aquilonem.' (Man, turn your face southward [...] And say to the wood in the south: Hear the word of the Lord: Thus speaks God, your Lord: See, I will set fire to you, and burn up all the green wood, and all the dry wood. The flame of wrath shall not be put out, and everybody from south to north will be scorched by it). The resemblance is intriguing, but probably coincidental: wood has always been the main fuel of fire, and its northward sweep here almost certainly derives from the prophet's geographical outlook. Mention must also be made of Axel Olrik (Olrik 1902: 232), who linked Surtr to Tethra, the king of the Fomorians (giant-like figures) of Celtic tradition (MacCulloch 1925: 608; Wessels 1994: 91), but the identification was rejected straight away by Wilhelm Ranisch (Ranisch 1904: 460) and Bernhard Kahle (Kahle 1905: 449).

¹⁰ See Olrik 1902: 232; Ranisch 1904: 460; Kahle 1905: 449; and Neckel 1918: 31.

Sigurður Nordal's rejection of Phillpotts' argument was presumably based on the use of the name Surtr as a *jotnabeiti* (giant name) by Eyvindr *skáldaspillir*, who had lived in tenth-century Norway. However, there is another good reason for assuming that Surtr has a non-Icelandic origin. The name itself provides no clue, other than its being cognate with the adjective *svartr* (black), an etymology that was put forward long ago (Finn Magnúsen 1828: 735; Bergmann 1838: 236) and never seriously questioned. The problem is what we are to make of this, contextually. Sigurður Nordal pointed out that giants are depicted as dark-hued in Icelandic tradition (Sigurður Nordal 1922–23: 98), which is correct, but hardly conclusive since many otherworld creatures are envisaged as dark and lacking in colour (Samplonius 2003: 79), and not just in Iceland. Most commonly associated with darkness in medieval Europe are the Devil and his ilk. Black devils admittedly also figure in other religious environments, such as Tibetan Buddhism (Waddell 1895: 338), but nowhere as frequently and prominently as in medieval Christian literature and art from the early ninth century onwards. Examples abound. The devils at the cathedrals of Autun and Bourges and in many Psalters are black (Link 1995: 52), as are the devils on the twelfth-century Torcello mosaics in Italy (Link 1995: 112; see further the illustration accompanying the article by Pétur Pétursson in this volume). The *Vita Sancti Anthonii* also depicts the Devil as black, as do the *Acta Bartholomei*, where a cast-out demon is said to be 'black like an Ethiopian' (MacCulloch 1932: 61). In his Catholic Homilies (Ælfric 1983: II, 120), Ælfric calls the Devil 'se sweartha deofol' (the black devil), and he records that the isle of Lindisfarne was inhabited by 'swearthe deoflas' (black devils (Ælfric 1983: II, 142)) until the holy man Cuthbert drove away 'ða swertan gastas' (the black spirits (Ælfric 1983: II, 152)). The same conception is found in the Norwegian *Hómiljubók* (Book of Homilies), where the fallen angels are said to have lost their brightness and been turned into 'svartum dioflum' (black devils (Holtmark 1964: 37)); and in the late *Sigurðar saga þögla* (Loth 1963: 242), which uses the simile 'svartr sem fjáandi' (black as a devil). In spite of all of these well-attested occurrences of black devils in medieval art and literature, there is no reason to view Surtr as a medieval Christian devil in disguise. And there is equally little ground for viewing Surtr as the fruit of pagan speculations about the physiology of otherworld creatures, because, as *Völuspá*, strophe 52 and *Vafþrúðnismál*, strophe 51, make clear, the figure was primarily associated, not with darkness but with fire:

Surtr ferr sunnan
með sviga lævi.

(Jón Helgason 1951: 12)

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(Surtr moves from the south
with the scourge of branches.)

Víðarr ok Váli
byggja vé goða,
þá er sloknar surtalogi.

(Jón Helgason 1965: 9)

(Vidar and Vali
will dwell in the gods' homes
when the *surtalogi* is extinguished.)

To my mind, the key to a proper understanding of Surtr's role in Old Norse myth is contained in the word *surtalogi* in *Vafþrúðnismál* (see above). From Resenius' seventeenth-century edition onwards (Faulkes 1977: chap. XLIX), commentators have unanimously interpreted this word as meaning 'Surti flamma' (flame of Surtr). This view has persisted throughout the last centuries, and led scholars such as Hans Kuhn (Neckel and Kuhn 1962-68: I: *Text*, 54) and, more recently, John Lindow (Lindow 1997: 169) and John McKinnell (McKinnell 2008: 17) to alter the manuscript reading to **Surtar logi*. Gustav Neckel (Neckel 1927: 370) went as far as calling the attested scribal form a curious 'sprachliche Merkwürdigkeit' (linguistic characteristic) of the manuscript Gks 2365 4^{to} (the Codex Regius), caused by a dissimilative loss of the ending *-r*. However, the same form ('surtalogi') occurs in AM 748 I b 4^{to} and all the manuscripts of *Snorra Edda*. For that reason, Anthony Faulkes once suggested that, as the first element of a compound, *Surtr* could generate a weak form **Surti* (gen. **Surta*) (Snorri Sturluson 1982: 174), something proposed earlier by Sveinbjörn Egilsson (Sveinbjörn Egilsson 1840: 791). Unfortunately, the hypothetical name thus constructed finds no support in Old Norse tradition, and the whole idea seems to reflect an attempt to explain the attested manuscript reading of 'surtalogi' without departing from the long-fostered meaning 'flame of Surtr'. This is not to say that medieval Icelanders may not have understood the expression in that way — the chances are that they did — but it is hardly the original sense of the word. The compound as found in the manuscripts is best viewed on a par with other words such as *svartabjór* (dark beer), *svartagaldr* (black magic), *svartaviður* (a species of birch), *svartasviþr* (deep gloom), *svartamunkr* (a black monk), and *svartameistari* (a 'black master': a friar of the Dominican order), all of which are of masculine gender. There is accordingly no hindrance to *surtalogi* being viewed in a similar way as originally meaning 'a black or dark flame/blaze', in other words, without reference to any proper name whatsoever.

Why is the above interpretation of *surtalogi* preferable to the traditional one? Minor support for it is afforded by the reading ‘svartalogi’ (dark flame) given instead of ‘surtalogi’ in the Uppsala manuscript of *Snorra Edda* (Snorri Sturluson 1962–77: II, 268), which shows that the scribe understood the word in this way. My main reason for adopting this interpretation, however, is semantic, because a meaning of ‘black fire’ for *surtalogi* would shed an unexpected light on Surtr’s background and his role in Old Norse mythology.

As it turns out, the notion of ‘black fire’ occurs with some frequency in medieval Christian speculations about the afterlife. Depending on his merits in life, the dead man’s soul was assigned to join either the wicked or the just. Most souls had to join the wicked, at least temporarily, in anticipation of a final judgement. Only a few made it straight to the righteous, where they went on to enjoy such splendours as ‘dies sine nocte, lux sine tenebris’ (light without darkness) and ‘gaudium sine fine’ (happiness without end).¹¹ Quite different were the conditions of Hell, the abode of the malefactors, whose wrecked souls were exposed to sufferings such as ‘tenebrae sine luce’ (darkness without light) and ‘ignis sine extinctu’ (eternal fire).¹² It was certainly not seen as a very pleasant place, or, to quote the Old High German *Muspilli* (c. 850), ll. 25–26, ‘uue demo in vinstri scal | sino virina stuen, prinnan in pehhe’ (Woe to him who must pay for his sins in darkness and burn in the fires) (Mettke 1970: 58). These two features of fire and darkness crop up time and again in medieval descriptions of Hell, in Iceland and Norway no less than in other parts of Christian Europe. To give an example, the early eleventh-century poet Sigvatr Þórðarson refers to the ‘heitr eldr’ which might await him ‘í svörtu helvíti’ (in black Hell) (Finnur Jónsson 1911a: 353) should he ever dream of deserting his lord.

If the medieval Hell was characterized by both hot fire and ultimate darkness, one must assume that the fire had to be black, which is precisely what we find in various medieval sources. In the poem *De die iudicii* (*Judgment Day*, II), written between AD 716 and 731, Bede speaks of ‘ignibus nigris loca plena gehennae’ (l. 94: the regions of Hell filled with black fires) (Caie 2000: 131). Ælfric says in his *Catholic Homilies* (Ælfric 1983: I, 132) that ‘þa earman forscyldegodan cwyllmiað on ecym fyre, and swa-deah þæt swearte fyr him nana lihtinge ne deð’ (the miserable guilty ones shall suffer torment in everlasting fire, and yet that swart fire shall give them no light) (trans. by Thorpe in Ælfric 1983: I, 133; Van

¹¹ This is echoed in *Völuspá*, st. 64: ‘um aldrdaga ynðis nióta’. On the unspeakable wonders of Heaven, see Hill 1969.

¹² On the five horrors of Hell, see Johnson 1993.

Os 1932: 112). And in his *Vision of Drythelm*, the same author offers us a glimpse of a Hell filled with flames of black fire ('ligas sweartes fyres') into which the souls of wicked people are thrown (Ælfric 1983: I, 351). In another homily preserved in MS Hatton 115, miserable souls are described as suffering 'on swaertum brine' (in black fire) (Scragg 1992: 60).¹³ The Old English *Christ*, III, ll. 1531–36 (Muir 1994a: 105), states that on Judgement Day, Christ with his right (= mighty) hand will swing the sword of victory so that 'on þæt deope dæl deofol gefealleð | in sweartne leg [...] on witehus | deaðsele deofles' (the Devil will fall into the deep pit, into black flame [...] into the house of punishment, the Devil's hall of death) (trans. in Bradley 1982: 245, with minor alteration).

The last passage is particularly interesting, because it leads to another contextual manifestation of the motif, since it is not just in Hell that the notion of black fire occurs in medieval literature. We also find it, albeit less conspicuously, in a Judgement Day setting. This may seem surprising as the joint occurrence of darkness and fire in Hell which had prompted this feature did not by necessity apply here. Furthermore, the Last Judgement holocaust fire comes from above, as a heavenly tool to cleanse the earth, not as a punishment in its own right. All the same, it does not seem that medieval commentators were overly concerned about upholding these distinctions, at least not in texts that were being edited for exhortative purposes. As Graham Caie points out, in Old English eschatological literature no distinction is made between the terrors of the apocalypse and of Hell (Caie 1976: 113). Emotionally, on the receptive side, there must have been a similar overlap, since most people undoubtedly dreaded Judgement Day as a day of wrath.¹⁴ In early medieval writings, the Judgement Day fire is thus frequently compared to other events of destruction in which black fire plays a role. The Old Saxon *Heliand*, ll. 4368–75, records that 'so uuard ok that fiur kuman [...] that thea hohon burgi | umbi Sodomo land suart logna bifeng [...] so uuirdid the lazto dag' (just as the fire came that engulfed the strong towns of Sodom in black flame [...], so also, will be the Last Day) (Sievers 1878: 297; my translation). Apparently, there was no hindrance to viewing black fire as also being a feature of the apocalyptic destruction, as seems to be the case in ll. 965–66 of *Christ*, III (Muir 1994a: 85), which speak of 'se swearta leg' (black flame) which will burn the seas, the earth and the heaven with all the heavenly bodies. All this makes

¹³ Later writers occasionally allow a little light to glow in Hell, not out of Christian mercy, but to increase the sufferings of the damned, who thus can see the scenes of horror around them (McDannell and Lang 1988: 84).

¹⁴ See Mettke 1970: 58 (ll. 55–56): 'verit denne stuatago in lant, verit mit diu vuiru viriho uuison' (The day of doom will be on earth and visit mankind with fire).

clear that, at least in vernacular texts composed to be read to the laity, the black fire concept was closely associated with, and eventually tied to, the horrors of Judgement Day.

Metaphorically, the black fire of Hell occupied one end of the moral spectrum of Christian light imagery, the opposite end being represented by fire which glowed with great intensity without physical heat. The latter reflected the radiance of holy men, the former the fire of Hell, which burned with great heat without giving any light (De Nie 1987: 161). The fire which scourges the world on Judgement Day possesses both qualities, its actual performance depending on the moral qualities of those exposed to it. It purifies the good, and destroys the evil. For the righteous, it will burn with great light without causing physical hurt, whereas the wicked will experience a great heat that destroys them in pain and confines their souls to the abyss of Hell. The fact that Víðarr and Váli survive the *surtalogi* (*Vafþrúðnismál*, st. 51) unscathed may well contain an echo of this distinction. It may also account for the curious remark in the Uppsala manuscript of *Snorra Edda* (Snorri Sturluson 1962–77, II, 34), that after the world is burnt to ashes the best place to reside will be ‘á Gimlé meðr Surti’ (with Surtr in Gimlé), although the value of these words, which do not occur in the other redactions, still awaits investigation.¹⁵

At some presumably early stage, the black fire concept of Hell and of Judgement Day must have found its way to Norway and Iceland, where it came to be called *surtalogi* as a designation of the destruction through fire which would befall the world. Detached from its original context and unchecked by doctrinal Christian orthodoxy, the motif adapted itself to its new, ultimately Icelandic environment and in time the fiery catastrophe came to be envisaged as being brought about by a personified agent of destruction, whose name was extracted from the compound. Fortunately, the compound *surtalogi* itself did not vanish, making it possible to reconstruct the main outline of this evolutionary process of adaption, as has been shown above. The development is less fantastic than might seem, in view of the fact that in the Old English *Judgement Day II* and *Christ III*, the apocalyptic fire also appears ‘personified as a ruthless tormentor, seeking

¹⁵ If Finnur Jónsson (Finnur Jónsson 1911b: 51) and Sigurður Nordal (Sigurður Nordal 1952: 148) are correct in assuming that Gimlé means ‘igni resistens’ (fire-proof), then the name may echo the concept of the Third Heaven (often equated with the Heavenly Paradise), which, according to medieval tradition was the place assigned to those classes of human creatures (like martyrs) who had found special favour with God, this being the reason they went straight to Heaven (Van Os 1932, 111). At the Final Judgement, when everything will be purged by fire, the Third Heaven escapes being burned, for no purging or purifying is needed there.

out and punishing evil' (Caie 1976: 148). Perhaps the Norsemen (used here to include the inhabitants of the Norse settlements in the Atlantic) got their inspiration from the British Isles.

However, Surtr's performance in *Vǫluspá*, strophe 52 is more than just a distorted personification of the Christian black fire motif. The picture also involves an intriguing additional detail, namely Surtr's enigmatic luminous sword (ll. 3–4), which so far has eluded explanation.¹⁶ If the figure of Surtr takes its origin from Christian Hell and Judgement Day imagery, then we may well go further and ask ourselves whether the origin of his sword might not also be found there. The answer appears to be in the affirmative, as the following passage from the Old English *Blickling homily x* shows:¹⁷

Ne þearf þas nán man wenan þæt his lichama mote oþþe mæge þa synbyrþenna on eorþscrafe gebetan; ah he þær on moldan gemolsnaþ & þær wyrde bideþ, hwonne se ælmihtiga God will þisse worlde ende gewyricean, & þonne he *his byrnsweord* getyhþ & þas world ealle þurhslyhþ, & þa lichoman þurh sceoteð, & þysne middangeard tocleofeð, & þa deadan upstandaþ. (Morris 1874–80: I, 109; my italics)

(No man need think that his body may or can amend the sin-burden in the grave; but therein he shall rot to dust and there await the great event [the Doom], when the Almighty will bring this world to an end, and when he will draw out his fiery sword and smite all this world through and pierce the bodies, and cleave asunder this earth; and the dead shall stand up.) (Trans. in Morris 1874–80: I, 108)

The indications are, therefore, that Surtr's enigmatic fire-sword derives its origin from the above passage, or another of the same kind. Bearing this in mind, we may well proceed further and consider whether the phrase 'þa deadan upstandaþ' (the dead shall stand up) in the quoted passage might not be equivalent to the words 'troða halir helveg' (*Vǫluspá*, st. 52), which would then refer to the resurrection of the dead for the Final Judgement.¹⁸ This idea derives support from Ælfric's homily *Domenica II: In adventum Domini* (Ælfric 1983: I, 616), which states: 'forðan ðe heofonlic fyr ofergæð ealne middangeard mid anum bryne, and

¹⁶ As Holtsmark notes, 'Løsningen er neppe funnet' (the answer is hardly found) (Holtsmark 1950: 68).

¹⁷ The homily has been preserved in a compilation from about AD 971 or later, but thought to echo 'antecedent vernacular homiliaries which could have been extant even in pre-Alfredian times' (Greenfield and Calder 1986: 71).

¹⁸ See Mettke 1970: 59 (ll. 81–82): 'denne scal manno gilih fona deru moltu arsten, lossan sih ar dero leuuu vazzon' (Then each man will arise from the earth; each will free himself from his grave).

ða deadan arisað of heora byrgenum mid ðam fyre' (for heavenly fire will pass over all the world with one burning, and the dead will arise from the grave with that fire) (trans. by Thorpe in Ælfric 1983: 1, 617)). Commentators have customarily viewed 'troða halir helveg' (*Völuspá*, st. 52, 7) as alluding to the widespread death of people, which is syntactically possible, but not necessary. Anne Holtsmark interprets the words as referring to the return of the dead from Hel (Holtsmark 1950: 69), which would make *Völuspá*, strophe 52, 7 fit in with the strophe's Christian background advocated here. In spite of this Christian background, the picture presented in *Völuspá*, strophe 52, is definitely not book-learned. It is unthinkable that a Christian cleric would compose a strophe by ripping individual Christian motifs and piecing them together in such a distorted way. The Old Norse tradition of Surtr seems to have developed from a popular notion of a personification of the black fire of Hell and Doomsday, additional details being drawn from Christ's role as avenger at the end of times. The development is best looked upon as a merger of the two, something that took place in popular tradition and ultimately drew on the terrors which people were told awaited them on the Day of Judgement. The resulting motif depicted in *Völuspá*, strophe 52, clearly had a foothold in popular belief, and most likely we are dealing with an instance of genuine syncretism, by which I mean the adaption of alien images and cultural concepts into new mythical conceptualizations.

The Christian background of Surtr raises the question whether the other agents of *ragnarök* might not equally be products of Christian influence. As for the *Múspells ljóðir* (*Völuspá*, st. 51), this possibility has long been acknowledged (see recently McKinnell 2008: 11). Heimdallr, similarly, might well be a product of syncretism (see further the article by Steinsland elsewhere in this volume).¹⁹ I will restrict myself here to the figures of Fenrir and Loki, the key forces of evil in Old Norse mythology. Pioneering work was carried out here by Sophus Bugge and Hjalmar Falk a century ago, and the following discussion may be seen as a re-evaluation of their findings (Bugge 1881–89; Falk 1908).

¹⁹ This deity does not figure in place names, nor does he have any cult of functional domain of his own. His role seems confined to myth, where he displays, in a slightly confusing manner, a number of features normally associated with the Archangel Michael, such as the blowing of the trumpet which signals the last battle (Turville-Petre 1964: 154). If the figure has a role in paganism, it is confined to the last stage of it, say the early tenth century, when Christian influences were increasingly making themselves felt (see Samplonius 2003: 85 note). I will deal with Heimdallr more extensively elsewhere.

Fenrir

In the poem *Eiríksmál*, said to be from AD 954, Óðinn states that he had Eiríkr slain because ‘óvíst’s at vita | sér ulfr inn hǫsvi á sjǫt goða’ (no one knows | when the grey wolf will visit the abodes of the gods), which shows that Fenrir, or at least the image of the apocalyptic wolf attacking the abodes of the gods, was known as a destructive force at that time. But does that make it a pagan Germanic concept? Rural communities had undoubtedly hostile feelings about these predators in the surrounding woods. Old English and Old Icelandic poetry both portray wolves as creatures whose appearance symbolizes the collapse of human civilization. *Atlakviða*, strophe 11, describes how ‘ulfr mun ráða | arfi Niflunga | gamlir gran-verðir | ef Gunnars missir’ (The wolf shall rule the inheritance of the Niflungs, wolves — aged and grey-hued —, if Gunnar is lost).²⁰ In the Old English poem *The Wanderer*, preserved in the *Exeter Book* compilation from about AD 1000 (Greenfield and Calder 1986: 130), wolves turn up at the homesteads of men after the inhabitants have deserted these places, the ruins of which are described as crumbling, wind-blown and frost-covered (Muir 1994c: 220). The wolf belongs to the wilderness and wastelands, and, as a rule, avoids contact with humans. It was viewed with hostility by people because of its predatory raids on herds and flocks, and because of its occasional attacks on individual travellers in cold winters, exaggerated reports of which may have spread easily, contributing to a general fear of the kind expressed in the *Exeter Book* maxims. Here (Muir 1994b: 257), after calling wolves treacherous beasts (‘felefæcne deor’), the unknown writer goes on to say ‘ne huru wæl wepeð wulf se græga, morþorcwealm mæcga, ac hit a mare wille’ (the grey wolf does not weep over the slaughter and sudden death of men, but always wishes it more). The picture is that of a ferocious, bloodthirsty beast living in the wastelands, the land of the exiled, from whence it makes fearsome incursions into the world of humans. The animal was associated with the life of the exiled, and the disappearance of human habitation (as in *Atlakviða*, strophe 11, noted above, where the wolf’s appearance is the result, not the cause, of the farm’s desertion). However, it also stood for treachery and deceit, as is visualized in the image of the ring entwined with a wolf’s hair in *Atlakviða*, strophe 8, and, even more strongly, in the behaviour of King Ingjaldr in *Ynglingasaga* (Finnur Jónsson 1911a: 26), a ruler who murders his guests and burns his opponents alive after having been given a wolf’s heart to eat in his youth. The wolf’s behaviour at *ragnarök* is thus fully in accordance with the animal’s bad reputation in real life.

²⁰ This conception is not specifically Germanic: Gildas compares the Saxons with flocks of wolves (Howe 1989: 42).

Nonetheless, these negative connotations alone would hardly have been sufficient to enlist the wolf among the terrors of *ragnarøk* had it not been for the way in which the animal was portrayed in Christian preaching and homilies, where it was regularly equated with the Devil. As Ælfric puts it:

Se wulf is deofol, þe syr wð ymbe Godes gelaðunge, and cepð hu he mage cristenra manna sawla mid leahtrum fordon. Þonne sceal se hyrde, þæt is se bisceop oððe oðer lareow, wiðstandan þam reðan wulfe mid lare and mid gebedum. (Ælfric 1983: I, 238–40)

(The wolf is the devil, which lies in ambush about God's church and watches how he may fordo the souls of Christian men with sins. Then shall the shepherd, that is, the bishop or other teacher, withstand the fierce wolf with doctrine and with prayers.) (Trans. by Thorpe in Ælfric 1983: I, 241)

This picture of the wolf as a snatcher of human souls must have roots in John 10. 12, from where it found its way to Christian writers such as Gregory the Great.²¹ John 10. 12 and Ælfric use the picture as a simile, but such distinctions were probably lost on most members of medieval society, where this connotation of the wolf easily turned into real fear. The earlier-noted *Blickling Homiliary* contains an often-quoted vision of Hell, in which Paul sees black souls hanging from a cliff, with their hands bound and devils in likeness of monsters seizing them like greedy wolves ('swa swa grædig wulf' (Morris 1874–80: I, 208)). In vernacular writings, the idea manifests itself in designations such as the Middle High German *hellewolf* and *hellewargen* (Grimm 1878: 294). A pictorial echo of such belief is perhaps present on the eighth-century Dunfallandy stone (Scotland), where we see a wolf-like monster swallowing a human being who is trying in vain to get away (Curle 1940: 79, figure 7d). There is accordingly a case for reconsidering the etymology of Fenrir that was advanced by Hjalmar Falk a century ago and totally discarded since.²² Falk proposed that the Old Norse *Fenrisúlfr* should be viewed as a derivative of the Latin (*lupus*) *infernus* with its first element deleted, as in *postoli* (lat. *apostolus*) and *pistill* (lat. *epistola*), a well-attested phenomenon with Latin words borrowed into Germanic languages, and stemming from the different stress patterns in pronunciation (Falk 1908: 142). This etymology derives support from the Old Saxon *fern* (gen. *fernes* (Hell)), a native rendering of the Latin *infernum*. To me, this etymology makes more sense than the customary explanation of *Fenrir* as **Fen-bris-ulfr* (wolf living in fenland with

²¹ Referred to by Grimm 1878: 832, the reference of which I have been unable to check.

²² See Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon 1989: 171.

brushwood) proposed by Axel Kock (Kock 1926: 73).²³ The apocalyptic status of the wolf in Old Norse mythological tradition may have been promoted by ancient Germanic superstition of the moon-threatening monsters, which, as Hrabanus Maurus' reference in *Contra eos qui in lunae defectu clamoribus se fatigabant* (Hrabanus Maurus 1864: 79) shows, was known in early ninth-century Germany.²⁴ In *Vǫluspá*, the poet stops short of equating Fenrir and the moon-swallowing wolf, while Snorri keeps them apart (Snorri Sturluson 1982: 14), so apparently there was some confusion.

Loki

Yet another derivation needs reconsideration, namely that of *Loki*. Much has been said about the alleged semantics of this name, none of which has won any consensus (see Libermann 1992). My suggestion is that we return to the long-forgotten explanation proposed by Bugge (Bugge 1881–89: I, 71; Bugge 1899: lxxiii), who interpreted *Loki* as short for *Lucifer*, with the vowel *-o-* being the result of a tendency to bring the name into conformity with the morphology of the class II strong verbs, the *nomina agentis* of which mostly have zero grade.²⁵ Apart from being impeccable, the derivation accords well with many of *Loki*'s features in Old Norse tradition. In *Gylfaginning* (Snorri Sturluson 1982: 35), Snorri refers to *Loki* as 'sá er flestu illu ræðr' (who is responsible for most evil), which dovetails with designations of the Devil in medieval literature. Gregory of Tours calls the Devil 'auctor nequitiae' (the author of all evil) (Gregorius Turoniensis 1974–77: I, 232 (IX.6)) and 'tentator' (tempter) (De Nie 1987: 92). *Gylfaginning* (Snorri Sturluson 1982: 26) describes *Loki* as 'fagr' (fair) and 'fríðr' (beautiful) which again makes him a counterpart of *Lucifer*, who is alluded to in

²³ Falk suggested that in Old Norse the name was mutated to make it accord with the native idea of a watery abode (ON *fen*) of the dead (Falk 1908: 140). This is possible, but not necessary, since, as noted above, foreign names could fare strangely in Old Norse.

²⁴ Bo Gräslund assumes that *Vǫluspá*, st. 41 — and in particular the words '[Fenrir] rýðr ragna siqt' — echo fearful memories of massive volcanic activity (or a meteoritic collision) around the year AD 536, which must have blackened the sun for some time, colouring the skies red and making crops fail (Gräslund 2007). If so, the notion of a sun-swallowing creature may have been around as early as in the sixth century, leaving it to Christian influence to shape and name the monster, as well as make it part of a monocyclic world expectation. This development, if true, would be a valuable example of how mythology can grow from originally unrelated components to present a seemingly coherent picture of the wolf as a participant agent of apocalyptic destruction.

²⁵ Bugge complicated matters by also linking the name to Old English *loca* (enclosure), which was unhelpful in getting his explanation accepted (Libermann 1992: 127).

Mariu saga with the same epithets (Unger 1870: 558).²⁶ In *Lokasenna*, Loki also boasts of the seduction of a good many goddesses, something that brings to mind the medieval perception of adultery as an act instigated by the Devil.²⁷ Finally, just as the bound Devil is said to break loose at the end of times, Loki breaks free to lead the forces of evil bent on world destruction at *ragnarök*.²⁸ None of these similarities amounts to proof, but in conjunction their testimony is difficult to ignore. Jan de Vries acknowledges Loki's resemblance to the Devil, but tries to preserve the figure for paganism by introducing the idea of predisposition, stating that: 'Loki could never have adopted the character of Satan, if he had not been predisposed to it' (De Vries 1933: 199). However, if Loki was a god (or at least a supernatural being of some sort) with the character of Satan and with a name best explained as short for *Lucifer*, strong arguments are needed to make him an Old Germanic deity. De Vries does not produce any such argument, and resorts to the once prevalent consensus that 'we do not accept any longer that *Loki* is only an abridged form of *Lucifer*' (De Vries 1933: 198).²⁹ This line of approach was adopted also by other scholars, mostly with little force of argument. Slightly more cautious is Holtsmark's conclusion that, 'det er forskjell på mytenes Loke og Snorres vurdering av ham, og at der hos Snorre har sneket seg inn mange trek som tillhører den kristne djevel' (there is a difference between the Loki of the [skaldic] myths [as recounted in *Haustlång* and *Þórsdrápa*] and Snorri's account of him, into which many aspects that belong to the Christian Devil have crept) (Holtsmark 1964: 67). However, the question remains the same. If this 'mytenes Loke' differs markedly from the Loki Snorri described, how did it come about

²⁶ See Ælfric 1983: 1, 10: 'Ða waes þæs teoðan werodes ealdor swiðe fæger and wlitig ge-sceapen, swa þæt he was gehaten Leohtberend' (Now the prince of the tenth host was formed very fair and beauteous, so that he was called Lightbearing) (trans. by Thorpe in Ælfric 1983: 1, 11).

²⁷ See Klapper: 'Conventione facta diabolus amore inordinatio ambobus vulnerauit' (Klapper 1914: 295).

²⁸ Some investigation is needed into the motif of Loki being caught with his own net (Snorri Sturluson 1982: 48). In medieval German tradition, it was said that the net was a tool used by the Devil to catch the souls of sinners. Gurjewitsch, summarizing a sermon by Bertold of Regensburg, states: 'Der Teufel gleicht einem Jäger: ewig legt er Fangschlingen und Netze aus, um Seelen einzufangen' (Gurjewitsch [Gurevich] 1997: 202). The motif may also have been used for comic effect in the style of the early twentieth-century slapstick movies.

²⁹ Note the use of the imaginary 'we', which usually signals lack of inner conviction on the speaker's part. De Vries seems to rephrase the equally weak argument by Elisabeth Gras that 'dat hij [Loki] wat betreft zijn oorsprong betreft de duivel is, gelooft tegenwoordig niemand meer' (nobody these days believes that, as regards origin, he [Loki] is none other than the Devil) (Gras 1931: 76).

that features such as 'slægð' (slyness, cunning) and 'lævíss' (mischievous, evil) were ever bestowed on the figure?

The only sensible answer is that, for all of the variances of manifestation, Loki drew his name from the Christian Lucifer and remained associated with him in various ways. His role in *Haustlong* and *Bórsdrápa* may differ from that allotted to him by Snorri, but the difference is hardly essential, and it does not follow that this early 'mytenes Loke' posited by Holtsmark had nothing to do with the Christian Devil. Already in *Haustlong* (c. AD 900) the deceitful side to his character is being testified to in strophe 12: '[Loki] sveik' ([Loki] betrayed) (Kristensen 1930: 85; North 1997: 51). Slightly later, in the first half of the tenth century, we find the fettered figure on the sculptured large cross at Gosforth (Cumbria) in the north of England, which suggests that Loki (if it is Loki that is depicted) was associated with the Crucifixion, either as an early offshoot of Christian lore, or as a pagan prefiguration of Christian truth (Samplonius 2000: 120). In my conception, both of these processes may have been at work in bringing about the depiction of the figure on the Cross's shaft. By this, I mean that early borrowings of the Lucifer figure seem to have entered the realm of native story-telling, in which the figure developed additional features that helped it adapt to its new cultural environment. This led to the emergence of hybrid, semi-pagan versions of Loki which may have circulated for some time, one of them eventually surfacing on the Gosforth Cross with the purpose of demonstrating that Anglo-Scandinavian paganism had some features that made it typologically equivalent to Christianity.

The heathen or merely superficial Christian Nordic people may have liked this Lucifer derivative, because the figure was suitable for good story-telling, just as the Devil figures in many popular tales in the rest of Europe.³⁰ It is hardly without reason that Þjóðólfr of Hvinir speaks of Loki as 'sagna hrærir' (rouser of tales) in *Haustlong*, strophe 9 (North 1997: 36). The central role of story-telling in medieval oral societies leaves little doubt that the people of early medieval Norway and Iceland also came to know the function attributed to the Devil in Christian culture, and that they may have retold these stories with native deities replacing the Christian *figurae dramatis*. This may have been done deliberately, as a means of facilitating the introduction of the Christian message to a native audience, or out of convenience, in order to make the tale accord with established narrative traditions. The Baldr myth, to which Loki's role is central, may also well result from such an indigenization of the Christian salvation epic, although when and where this came about is difficult to say.

³⁰ Turville-Petre has drawn attention to 'Scandinavian folk-tales, recorded in recent times, in which Loki is named. These tales are laden with popular motifs, such as are commonly applied to Lucifer and Beelzebub' (Turville-Petre 1964: 141).

II. *The diffusion of Christian ideas*

II.1 In which ways did Christianity spread?

Christian influences may have started as early as the second and third centuries AD, when Christian communities are recorded for Cologne, Mainz, and Trier (Baring-Gould 1891: 3). As paganism was eclectic, Christian ideas could circulate freely.³¹ We have to reckon with the fact that already, at an early pre-missionary stage, Christian imagery was spreading north, some of which must have been adapted by local people, giving rise to hybrid, seemingly indigenous pagan myths.³² The intermediate period between first acquaintance and final conversion must have been characterized by various kinds of syncretistic ideas, though when and how exactly these took shape escapes our knowledge. As the finds of Christian amulets in tenth-century Birka graves (Gräslund 1992: 190) show, people acknowledged the power of the Christian religion long before they adopted the new faith. The pagans accepted that Christ was a god, but not that he was the only God. Since pre-Christian Germanic religiosity and social structure were fundamentally interrelated, pagan celebrations required social solidarity and as long as the new converts to Christianity complied with that, all was well.³³ Problems started when the Christians refused to take part in socio-religious festivities with fellow villagers, but reports suggest that, even then, the community at large initially sought to preserve unity (Cusack 1998: 43). Historians have tended to tie the conversion in different countries to one specific event, and in Iceland this was the moment at which the Christians managed to push through the legal acceptance that their religion should prevail to the exclusion of all others. Prior to that,

³¹ This must have led to unorthodox variants not unlike those attested for remote and only superficially converted areas, whose Christian notions occasionally adopted independent features. Boniface makes mention of a priest called Clemens who taught that Christ brought both believers and unbelievers, the baptized and the unbaptized, back from Hell (Benson 1995: 43; Hauck 1904–29: I, 558). That such things also happened in northern Europe seems suggested by Prandr's *credo* described in *Fereyinga saga* (Kuhn 1969–78: IV, 193; Foote 1984: 92).

³² There is, of course, a difference between simple motifs, which, as folklorists have shown, can easily travel great distances, and complex religious concepts, which migrate more slowly. However, fundamentally, the development is the same.

³³ Jonas of Bobbio's *Vita Columbani* relates (chap. 54) that St Columba unexpectedly came upon a pagan festivity, some participants of which had been converted to Christianity. Columba rebuked them and made them leave (Munro 1895: 32; Cusack 1998: 79). This shows that initially individual converts did not find it problematic to go on participating in traditional pagan festivities, and, secondly, that orthodox missionaries objected to converts taking part in such socio-religious gatherings with non-believers.

however, there must have been two factions, one Christian, and one that was not (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1978: 77). The story of Iceland's conversion shows that the main concern of Þorgeirr the Law-speaker at the time was not to find out which religion was best — we hear no religious arguments as part of the debate — but to prevent the country from breaking into two different communities. According to Orri Vésteinsson, the Christian faction received its impetus from the chieftains' desire to sustain their power base more economically than before, when the power of a chieftain had relied on the redistribution of a personal surplus of resources among his supporters (Orri Vésteinsson 2000: 18). In Orri's view, the Christianization of Iceland was quick and economically conditioned, not the outcome of a gradual process. Orri may be right about the strategy of the chieftains, but it does not follow that there were no early pockets of Christianity in Iceland prior to the island's official conversion.

The idea of a solidly pagan Iceland before the year 999 is based on both written and archaeological records, but neither are beyond question. *Sturlubók*, the redaction of *Landnámabók* compiled by Sturla Þórðarson after the middle of the thirteenth century (Jón Jóhannesson 1941: 224), reports that Iceland was 'alheidet' (totally pagan) for almost a century after the Icelandic colonists from the Hebrides abandoned the Christian faith they or their parents had earlier adopted (Finnur Jónsson 1900: 231).³⁴ The entry in *Sturlubók* derives some support from the burial customs in tenth-century Iceland, which appear to be thoroughly pagan (Orri Vésteinsson 2000: 18). We have to realize, though, that Icelandic historical records from Ari onwards seem committed to stressing the missionary role of Óláfr Tryggvason, the purpose being, perhaps, to glorify him as the missionary king who won over Iceland for Christianity. From that perspective, it would have been highly undesirable to refer to the presence of Christianity in Iceland prior to King Óláfr's missionary activity. This may account for the explicit remark that the Christianity which the early colonists brought vanished within a generation.³⁵

The archaeological testimony is more difficult to refute, based as it is on verifiable data extracted from artefacts, rather than on posterior records written by Christian scribes who may have had their own agenda. On the other hand, customs can be conservative, and they may thus have continued for some time after the introduction of new Christian religious concepts. The caution needed in dating these finds is best illustrated by the Skriðudalur horse burial, which archaeologists would have dated to the mid-tenth century, had not radiocarbon

³⁴ The manuscripts actually read actually 'allheidet' (to a high degree/very much pagan).

³⁵ See Sawyer 1989: 21. Harris points out that in the popular conception, Óláfr Tryggvason was very nearly a saint (Harris 2008: 9).

C-14 analysis proven it to be half a century younger (Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir 1998).³⁶ The discovery of Viking-Age weaponry in Christian churchyards of the Danelaw (Bailey 1980: 44) also shows that people after their conversion sometimes stuck to burial habits which an orthodox clergy must have frowned upon.³⁷ *Landnámabók* and the sagas also tell us about settlers bringing in local women from the British Isles. DNA research has revealed that a comparatively high percentage of the female population in Iceland had Gaelic roots, which suggests that such an influx of Gaelic women, voluntary or not, must have occurred on a larger scale than was previously thought (Orri Vésteinnsson 2006: 31, 58). These women had presumably been raised in Christian tradition, which meant that they were familiar with basic Church structures and doctrines, not just stray Christian motifs detached from their original contexts. Yet another indication of the coexistence of Christian and heathen notions in the period prior to official conversion could be the heathen temple oath, which, according to *Hauksbók*, was sworn in the name of Freyr, Njörðr and ‘hinn almáttki áss’ (the all-powerful god (Finnur Jónsson 1900: 96)).³⁸ The identity of the unnamed mighty deity has been much discussed (Turville-Petre 1972: 5; Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1978: 36), but the adjective ‘almáttugr’ betrays Christian influence, whereas the word ‘áss’ links the oath to the pre-conversion period. In all probability, the circumscription was aimed at accommodating a mixed Christian-pagan society by being applicable to both Christ and Þórr, so that the use of one and the same formula enabled every person to swear in the name of the god he acknowledged to be mightiest.³⁹

There were accordingly various conduits along which Christian ideas and religious lore could find their way to Iceland well before the year 1000. Tying the introduction of Christian ideas to one specific momentum — an official conversion, subsequently taken as an *ante quem non* — does not do justice to the way these ideas spread. Tenth-century Iceland (and Anglo-Scandinavian Britain, for

³⁶ This tallies with Else Roesdahl’s observation that remains of definitely pagan burial customs survived in Denmark until the 980s, ‘even in royal surroundings’ (Rosedahl 1997: 238).

³⁷ On the Isle of Man, boat-graves have been found inside a Christian cemetery, but opinions differ about the meaning of this (Bersu and Wilson 1966: 13).

³⁸ Kuhn 1969–78: IV, 169; ‘ein Zeugnis für den Synkretismus der späteren Zeit.’ See also Foote 1984: 93 and Gschwantler 1998: 743.

³⁹ Something similar may apply to the phrase ‘sva se mæ guð hull’ (so may the *guð* [n. pl.] preserve/ bless me) of the Old Swedish *Äldre Västgötalag* (oldest manuscript from c. 1225), which, according to Hans Kuhn, was used in order that ‘Christen und Heiden so mit derselben Formel schwören konnten’ (Christians and pagans could thus swear with one and the same formula) (Kuhn 1969–78: II (1971), 325).

that matter) must have been a melting pot of pagan and Christian notions. Terry Gunnell has suggested that Iceland's official conversion 'under-the-cloak' was a largely cosmetic affair, orchestrated by the chieftains to convince the ignorant that the change was necessary and divinely sanctioned (Gunnell 2009). If so, paganism must have been kind of dead already among the higher social echelons, something which accords with earlier reports of people who did not sacrifice any longer and only trusted in their own 'mátt ok megin' (personal strength).

II.2 The poet's motives for composing *Völuspá*

So what bearing do the above findings have on our understanding of the genesis of *Völuspá*? Who composed the poem, when, where, and to what purpose? Here, I will restrict myself to the poet's reasons for composing *Völuspá*, which I believe to have been twofold.

In the early days of *Völuspá* criticism, it was widely thought that the poet's intent was to defend the old faith against the new one (see Schach 1983: 111). The possibility of Christian influence was initially denied. As it became increasingly problematic, this view was modified, some scholars now allowing for the presence of Christian motifs which they thought had been borrowed by the *Völuspá* poet to counter the advance of the Christian religion: imitation in the service of pagan resistance. The earlier stance had been principally one of polygenesis and collateral development, whereas its later variant was willing to accept some Christian influence. What united the two stances was their firm belief in a pagan poet, who, it was thought, had composed the poem to curb the advance of Christianity. This view can be said to dominate twentieth-century *Völuspá* scholarship, from Chantepie's remark, 'What else than a fear of the encroachments of the Christian religion can have induced him to make the attempt?' (Chantepie de la Saussaye 1902: 203), to Ursula Dronke's 1992 statement that:

The challenge of Christian argument has provoked a heathen theology, presented in *Völuspá* with sharper contours and a more comprehensive scope than elsewhere in Norse tradition. (U. Dronke 1992: 20)

Dronke elaborates this view in another contribution written a year later, in which the idea has been combined with an implicit notion of polygenesis:

Völuspá would originate — I suggest — in the recognition that much of Christian doctrine has its counterpart in Norse: the poet and his circle might be sustained by the conviction that there was no need for a Norseman to adopt Christianity in order to have a religion just as good. (U. Dronke 1993: 122)

This view implies that certain myths and features of paganism were elevated into prominence because of their similarity with Christian doctrine, the inference being that the poem, for all its Christian reminiscences, is thoroughly pagan. However, even Dronke (U. Dronke 1997: 93) recognizes that the sometimes highly profiled imagery contained in the poem is too reminiscent of Christian notions for us to view the poem as being totally unaffected by Christian thought. As McKinnell notes, ‘the coincidence required for it to be true is improbably large’ (McKinnell 2008: 15). It is a different matter that the poet may have used Christian elements borrowed by his ancestors in a grey past, the origin of which had faded beyond memory, and that he used them precisely because of their apparent resemblance with Christian imagery. If these elements had found their way north at an early stage and managed to become part of native cultural or narrative traditions in Scandinavia, a pagan poet may well have mistakenly viewed them as a genuine ‘Norse counterpart of Christian doctrine’.

The idea of such a ‘mistaken identity’ has much to recommend it, but I think it very unlikely that the poem was composed as a pagan attempt to stop the advance of an encroaching Christian religion. In all probability, Christianity had already firmly established itself, and the poet was probably a Christian himself (or herself, for that matter), and not just a nominal Christian because his religious stance actually closely matches that of an orthodox conformist. His aim, it seems, was not to treat pagan mythology as being on a par with Christianity and present it as being an alternative option, but rather to show that his ancestral past had something that made it consonant with Christian truth. One of the most widespread modes of thought in the Middle Ages was typology: an attempt to harmonize the two Testaments. Since God does nothing in vain — ‘nihil vacuum neque sine signo apud Deum’ (in God there is nothing without purpose or due signification) (Irenaeus 1857: 3 (iv.21) — the events described in the Old Testament must have a meaning, which was found by redefining the event in terms that made it foreshadow the message of the Gospels. The use of typology abounds in commentaries on the Old Testament (Daniélou 1993, *passim*), but came to be extended to give meaning also to the pre-Christian history of nations other than the Jews, and hence to any pagan culture prior to the coming of the true faith.⁴⁰ Such typological parallels enabled pagan mythology to survive in a Christian niche, and if our

⁴⁰ Donahue refers to the history of the continental ancestors of the Goidels, in which ‘the prehistory of the Irish is arranged as a parallel to the history of the Jews as recounted in the Old Testament’ (Donahue 1964: 67). An early example of typology applied to pagan gods is provided by an Easter hymn attributed to Paulinus of Nola (c. 400), which opens with the words ‘Salve, o Apollo vere, Paeon inclite | pulsor draconis inferni’ (Hail, O true Apollo, famous Healer, victor over the infernal dragon) (Rahner 1966: 115). The ‘true Apollo’ is, of course, Christ.

poet wanted to present native history along these lines, it was not without precedent. Such analogues could clearly not be made up at random, though. The North had a past of its own, and to be effective, the approach had to use images that were part of a collective memory of cultural references. If the people failed to identify the imagery used as part of their cultural heritage, the exercise would be pointless.

That the typological approach was known in the North can be gathered from the depiction of the pagan culture-hero Sigurðr Fáfnisbani on Christian church portals.⁴¹ Applied to our poem, the inference would be that the poet carefully selected and deliberately arranged the events recorded in the poem for this purpose, and that he presented Baldr's death as an indigenous *figura Salvatoris* (Samplonius 2003: 223, note 125).⁴² By making the northern past fit in with Christian world history and presenting it as pointing ahead to redemption, the poet to some extent positions his ancestors on a level with the chosen people. This would be neither remarkable nor unique, as can be seen from the work of Bede, to whom history revealed that the Anglo-Saxons were God's new chosen people and that their kings were destined to rule the promised land of Britain, notwithstanding the fact that they traced their bloodline back to Woden (Howe 1989: 62). *VǪluspá* takes a similar approach, in that the course of events can be construed as proof that the descendants of the pagan Æsir — the Scandinavian audience of the poem — are entitled to the homesteads they are living on, as seems touched on *VǪluspá*, strophe 62, which states 'búa þeir Hǫðr ok Baldr Hropts sigtóptir' (Hǫðr and Baldr inhabit Hroptr's victory homesteads). The difference is that in *VǪluspá*, strophe 62, this continuity of place and *gens* has been combined with a discontinuity of *mores*. The old era was one of feuds and battles (hence: *sigtóptir*), whereas the new time is one of peace and reconciliation.⁴³ I may be pushing the argument too far here, but no one can dispute the idea that the poem shows how while the pagan gods disappear, their progeny live on to inherit a future reign of bliss. The *vǪlva*'s prophecy thus stretches from the world's crea-

⁴¹ It is irrelevant here whether we view the depicted hero as a semi-biblical typus of Christ (Düwel 1988: 270), or, as argued by Gschwantler, as an indigenous counterpart of Michael the Dragon-Slayer (Gschwantler 1998: 745).

⁴² As Dronke points out, the image of the bleeding Baldr, and of the weeping mother, recall Christian stereotypes (U. Dronke 1997: 93). Like Christ, Baldr will return to the new world after the apocalyptic destruction of the old world.

⁴³ The difference with Bede is also — and perhaps chiefly — one of genres: Bede wrote history, and *VǪluspá* is a prophecy. For an analysis of the semantic connotations of the nouns used in the second part of *VǪluspá*, st. 62, see Lindow 1997: 166. To me, the situation depicted here is reminiscent of Síðu-Hallr's abstention from revenging the death of his son (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1954: 412).

tion to its replacement with a new and everlasting morally just world (*Völuspá*, st. 64). This wide range of world history conspicuously resembles the sweep of medieval Christian history embracing the Creation, the Fall, the Redemption, and the Last Judgement. With their teleological view of world history, the Christians saw historical events as stages of a divinely directed scheme of salvation, fate being the executive aspect of an ultimately divine power.⁴⁴ Does our poet present the course of events in a similar vein, that is, as being unavoidable and predestined? It definitely seems to be the case, because, to quote Hermann Pálsson (Hermann Pálsson 1996: 37) ‘the notion of fate permeates the poem throughout’. In other words, the pagan gods were doomed to go under because they lacked the knowledge and moral virtue of the True Faith. At least that is how the poet presents it. In fact, the gods disappear because the poet composed with the knowledge of hindsight, and he knew that they had historically disappeared. It is this knowledge which the poet uses to his advantage by giving in retrospect a moral twist to the story of the pagan gods’ disappearance.

This brings us to what seems to have been the other aim of the *Völuspá* poet. Scholars have claimed that the poet regards the pagan gods with respect and that he does not treat them as worthless (U. Dronke 1992: 14). It is true that he does not deride them as the *Lokasenna* poet does. All the same, the picture he gives is one of immoral and powerless gods. They are powerless because they fail to overcome the forces of darkness and chaos and keep them out of the world they have created. This is a retrospective *Völuspá* shares with the Old English poem *Beowulf* from AD 700–1000, which also describes a past in which things were larger and better, as well as more terrible than in the days of the audience. Heorot, Hroðgar’s hall in *Beowulf* is said in ll. 309–10 to be ‘foremærost recede under roderum’ (the most illustrious building under the skies) (Klaeber 1928: 12), just as Beowulf’s hall in l. 2326 is called ‘bolda selest’ (the best of buildings) (Klaeber 1928: 88). The epithets are used to display the splendour and craftsmanship of the buildings as characteristic of a heroic past. These people had been pagans, regrettably, but rather than denouncing them, the Anglo-Saxons felt proud of their ancestors who had lived in this heroic age and maintained their standing in a world of chaos and turmoil. Lineage from them to the present provided their descendants with prestige and simultaneously legitimized the king’s claim to power, even though his royal progenitor was no other than Woden (Howe 1989: 62). However, for all its *pietas* towards the past, the poem envisages pagan society as being harassed

⁴⁴ Examples are many. Augustine, in ch. 1 of *De civitate Dei* (Augustine 1877–91: I, 1), regarded the sack of Rome by the barbarians as an instrument of God’s providence. King Alfred, in his translation of Boethius’s *Consolatio*, similarly calls fate ‘godes weorc’ (God’s work) (Frakes 1988: 95).

by the powers of darkness embodied by monsters such as Grendel and his dam. The poet provides an emphatic account of virtuous heathens such as Hroðgar and Beowulf, but the relief brought by such noble pagans could only be temporary, since society itself was still imperfect, and true and lasting peace not to be expected before the coming of Christianity. In a similar fashion, *Vǫluspá* displays a world doomed to go under, but here the focus is not on ancestral virtues, but on the shortcomings of the protagonists, morally flawed gods whose oath-breaking the poet stresses (*Vǫluspá*, st. 26) with a fourfold reference ‘á gengoz eiðar, orð ok særi, mál ǫll meginlig’ (oaths were broken, the words and vows, the mighty pledges). Guilty of killing and oath-breaking, the Æsir failed to uphold the world order they had founded. It is hardly a coincidence that the fate of Óðinn and the punishment of Loki coincide with the punishments meted out to the morally wicked in *Vǫluspá*, strophes 38–39. Apparently, the poet saw them as belonging to the class of perjurers, adulterers, and murderers listed in this strophe.

III. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that in composing *Vǫluspá*, the poet used elements of various cultural origins. We have Old Germanic elements, which are few in number and actually little more than the mere names of Þórr, Óðinn, Frigg. Secondly, and no less old, are some stray motifs of a folkloristic nature, such as that of the monster snatching the heavenly bodies, and, possibly, as suggested above, the enigmatic myth of ‘Óðs mæri’s abduction alluded to in *Vǫluspá*, strophes 25–26, which may be traced back to Indo-European times. The third group is rather large and consists of sometimes greatly distorted, originally Christian motifs and figures (such as Loki, Fenrir, Surtr, ‘Muspellz lýðir’, and possibly also Heimdallr) which developed among the Nordic people in the period between their first acquaintance with Christianity and their eventual collective conversion to it. At the time of the composition of the poem, these indigenized syncretistic adaptations had gained currency to the degree that our Christian poet could, in retrospect, view them as being characteristic of the ‘pagan’ culture which had preceded Christian society. He then carefully arranged these figures and the myths around them within an overall Christian structure with the aim of demonstrating the self-destructive nature of paganism, simultaneously, by means of typology, bringing the native past into the teleological tradition of Christian world history. In short, *Vǫluspá* must be regarded as the assimilation of a pagan past with a Christian message.

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