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Sibylla borealis

Kees Samplonius

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edited by
K.E. Olsen, A. Harbus and T. Hofstra

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Sibylla borealis: Notes on the Structure of *Völuspá*¹

Kees Samplonius

Hinter der *Völuspá* muss noch irgends etwas stecken, ein ganz bestimmter Schlüssel, der ungefunden ist. Und solange wir ihn nicht haben, ist alles Deuten halbbeschwichtigendes Flickwerk.²

In *Völuspá*, the poem which opens the Eddic lays collected in Codex Regius, the *völva* first recalls the Old Norse myths of creation, then proceeds to disclose the destiny of the gods, who will meet their fates in a last heroic battle. The poem therefore deals with pagan myth, but the imagery which it displays has interesting features. It has long been recognized that some of the motifs occurring in the poem are reminiscent of themes found in medieval Christian thinking. In his essay on dating Eddic poetry, a milestone in the history of Edda criticism, Edvin Jessen suggested that the fratricide and the darkening of the sun alluded to in Vsp. 45 and 57 echo events mentioned in the Gospels as signs foreboding the end of the era.³ Later scholars, notably Axel Olrik and, recently, John McKinnell have drawn up lists of what they see as Christian themes in *Völuspá*.⁴ Not all examples are equally convincing. Some of the resemblances can be explained as coincidence, others as the commonplaces of the (apocalyptic) genre, but not all of them can be eliminated thus, and together they make an irrefutable case for arguing for the *Völuspá* poet's debt to Christian thinking. As often, the observation raises more questions than it solves. If the poet was a Christian, what Christian rationale is there in the poem, and if not, why did he draw on Christian themes?

To call attention to the poet's ideological stance is one of the objectives of this paper. The poet's motives for composing *Völuspá* are hidden in the mists of time, and any

¹ This paper develops one section of my forthcoming book on *Völuspá*.

² *Andreas Heusler an Wilhelm Ranisch. Briefe aus den Jahren 1890–1940*, ed. Klaus Düwel und Heinrich Beck, *Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie* 18 (Basel, 1989), p. 313.

³ Edvin Jessen, *Über die Eddalieder. Heimat, alter, character, Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 3 (Halle, 1871), 1–84, 251–52, 494, at 24.

⁴ Axel Olrik, 'Om Ragnarok [I]', *Aarbøger for nordisk oldkyndighed og historie* (1902), 157–291, at 290; and John McKinnell, *Both One and Many. Essays on Change and Variety in Late Norse Heathenism*, *Philologia* 1 (Rome, 1994), p. 120.

attempt to retrieve them is a tall order, but this need not necessarily keep us from trying, since the poem contains a number of features which, properly analyzed, allow us to get an idea of the poet's working method, and, consequently, of the ideology underlying his composition. The method may be unconventional in terms of modern literary research, but as I see it, an analysis of the way in which the poet has handled his sources is imperative for a proper understanding of the poem.

The feature I want to discuss here concerns the figure of the *völva* which has lent the poem its name, more precisely her standing in history. It is this problem of the *völva*'s historical background, and consequently that of the poet's treatment of the figure, that will be central to the following investigation.

Of all the medieval prophetesses of the North, be they literary figures or persons of flesh and blood, the *völva* of *Völuspá* is probably the most famous, and she is certainly the most enigmatic of them all. The poet nowhere says that the fictional speaker of the poem is a *völva*, but the grammatically feminine form *fédda* in Vsp. 2 shows the speaker to be female, and Snorri repeatedly refers to the poem as *Völuspá*,⁵ which makes it a fair assumption that the speaker was a *völva*. Guðbrandur Vigfússon once referred to her as *sibylla borealis*, and I have adopted his term for my title, because it conveniently combines the Classical and Germanic elements which jointly account for the descriptions of the *völva* as found in Old Norse literature. I would not say that this composite background can be detected on every occasion, but I hope to show that in the more elaborate references to the figure, such as the descriptions contained in *Völuspá* and *Eiríks saga rauða*, we have to allow for a more diverse background than earlier scholarship suggests.

In his commentary on *Völuspá*, Finnur Jónsson confidently remarked that the poet, in depicting the *völva*, could draw on his living experience of *völur* in his own society: 'Der kan ingen tvivl være om, at den rolle, völvén her spiller, er lige tagen ud af livet, som dette formede sig i vikingetiden i Norge'.⁶ Finnur Jónsson was convinced of the genuinely Germanic character of the poem, and it probably never occurred to him that his remark touched on a fundamental question: the relation between the *völva* as depicted in the poem and the historical or literary figure on which the poet modelled her. It is only fair to say that Finnur Jónsson was no exception. The question has aroused little interest among scholars, although a discussion of it would certainly have contributed to a better understanding of the poem: no figure emerges out of nowhere, and certainly not a figure as dominant and characteristic as the *völva*. It is from the

⁵ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda, Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (Oxford, 1982), pp. 9, 14–16, 20, 35, 49, 51.

⁶ Finnur Jónsson, *Völuspá*, *Studier fra sprog- og oldtidsforskning* 84 (Copenhagen, 1911), p. 20.

völva's lips that the world's fate is revealed, and it is no exaggeration to say that her continuous presence on the *Völuspá* stage constitutes the poem's very framework. It is unlikely that the poet, in structuring the poem, invented the figure himself. She must have existed at the time when the poem was composed, and the poet most probably modelled his völva on a figure already very familiar to him. It is here that problems start. Was the poet inspired by literary sources, and if so, was this inspiration direct or indirect (i.e. did he gather his knowledge from hear-say)? Or did he, as suggested by Finnur Jónsson and others,⁷ use his personal knowledge of the völva as a living person? Unfortunately, our knowledge is extremely limited on this point. This is due partly to uncertainty about the poem's date and provenience in general, and partly to the fact, mentioned above, that in the past scholars were mostly concerned with other aspects of the poem. Nordal does not discuss the matter in his 1923 monograph, though his suggestion, a year later, to regard the skald Völu-Steinn, son of a völva, as the poem's author, clearly shows that he sided with Finnur Jónsson on this point.⁸ It seems, however, that his suggestion aroused but little interest, and Nordal later complained that his compatriots did not take the idea seriously.⁹

Fortunately, due perhaps to the rise of gender analysis as an academic category in its own right, interest appears to be growing. Jenny Jochens recently maintained that the description of Þorbjörg lítil-völva in *Eiríks saga rauða* gives credence to a historic reality of prophetesses among pagan Germanic-nordic tribes.¹⁰ Jochens links Þorbjörg's performance in eleventh-century Greenland to the Germanic seeress Veleda, mentioned by Tacitus a millennium earlier, and she claims that in terms of function there is no difference between these women.¹¹ The statement not only reiterates Finnur Jónsson's idea about the poet's source of inspiration, it also suggests that the Germanic seeress enjoyed a high social prestige throughout the whole of the medieval Germanic period. Similar views have been expressed by Ursula Dronke, who rejects Bruder's thesis that seeresses like Veleda were agents only of a lower form of cult, namely that of magic. Referring to the *Ota* passage in *The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill*, Dronke concludes: 'The North Germanic seeress at least seems to have known her worth and been revered for it'.¹² All

⁷ Cf. Ursula Dronke, 'Völuspá and Sibylline traditions', in *Latin Culture and Medieval Germanic Europe*, ed. Richard North and Tette Hofstra, Germania Latina 1 (Groningen, 1992), pp. 3–23, at 17.

⁸ Sigurður Nordal, 'Völu-Steinn', *Íðunn* 8 (1924), pp. 161–78, at 166.

⁹ See Petronella Boer-Den Hoed, *De Völuspá op de grens van twee werelden* (Amsterdam, 1960), p. 14.

¹⁰ Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia, 1996), p. 115.

¹¹ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, p. 206.

¹² Ursula Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, vol. II: *Mythological Poems* (London, 1997), p. 105; and Reinhold Bruder, *Die germanische Frau im Lichte der Runeninschriften und der antiken Historiographie* (Berlin etc., 1974), pp. 151–62; *Cogadh Gadhil re Gallaibh* (*The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill*), ed. James H. Todd (London, 1867), p. 13.

the same, Dronke is aware that 'if Bruder were wholly right, then the vǫlva of *Völuspá* might indeed owe her towering stature entirely to the Christian Sibyl', words that bring to mind the century-old, and as yet unsolved Bang-Rydberg controversy about the religious world of *Völuspá*.¹³ Apparently, much is at stake in solving this problem. So, to turn to our investigation, what were the vǫlva's features at the time when *Völuspá* was composed, say the late-tenth or the early-eleventh century?

AIM AND METHOD

In the discussion below, the problem of the vǫlva's historical background will be discussed by raising the following questions:

- a) Was the figure indigenous in the North, or was she nothing but a literary calque on the Sibyl of Antiquity?
- b) If the figure has roots in genuine Germanic tradition, how did she develop, and what stages did she go through?
- c) If the vǫlva of *Völuspá* displays Christian features, what bearing does it have on our understanding of the poem's structure?

In treating these issues, I will examine the various manifestations of the vǫlva in Old Norse, as well as in other literatures. I will first survey the testimony of poetry (both skaldic and Eddic), then look at the references to the figure contained in prose, such as the well-known description of Þorbjörg lítil-vǫlva in *Eiríks saga rauða*. In the second part of our investigation an attempt will be made to account for the various pictures which the different literary genres present to us. It will be argued that the different portrayals represent successive stages in the development of the vǫlva in literature (as distinct from history), and an attempt will be made to explain some features of the poem in the light of medieval Christian culture.

SKALDIC TESTIMONIES

In the middle of the tenth century the skald Kormákr describes a woman, Þorðís, who tries to protect him from being wounded in a forthcoming duel, as *hás vǫlva* 'hoarse vǫlva':

¹³ A.C. Bang, *Völuspá og de Sibyllinske Orakler*, Christiania Videnskabselskabs Forhandlinger 1879.9 (Christiania, 1879); and Viktor Rydberg, 'Sibyllinerna och Völuspá', *Nordisk tidskrift* (1881), 1–29 and 113–62, repr. with some alterations in *Undersökningar i germansk mytologi*, 2 vols (Stockholm, 1886–89), II, 482–588.

Mjök hafa troll of troðna
 trúir maðr konu annars
 eldreid at foldar
 ómissila þessa;
 vætti hins at valdi
 er at vangroði gengum,
 hvat of kennum þat henni?
 hás völv því þölv.¹⁴

The trolls have quite unsparingly — the man trusts another's wife — bewitched this woman; I expect that the hoarse *völv* will cause trouble on that account — why blame her for it? — when we go to the duelling ground.

The choice of the word *völv* is remarkable because of Þorðís's apparent use of magic, an activity not primarily associated with *völur* in saga-literature. Certain preparations were admittedly required to activate the inherent gift of prophecy which these women possessed, but as a rule we do not find *völur* involved in magic in the sagas. Yet, the stanza shows that at the time when the verse was composed, the term was associated with witchcraft. Unfortunately, the authenticity of the stanza is not undisputed.¹⁵ If the verse was composed by Kormákr himself, as Einar Oláfur Sveinsson and, more cautiously, Gabriel Turville-Petre have argued, then the association with witchcraft must be as old as the tenth century.¹⁶ Particularly significant is that the word *völv* does not occur in the prose narrative in which the verse is embedded. This may be coincidence, but it is also possible that the saga-author for some reason deliberately refrained from using it.

Another poet to use the word *völv* was Hofgarða-Refr, a skald living in the eleventh century. In *Snorra Edda* the following stanza is attributed to him:

Fœtir björn þar er bára
 brestr, undinna festa
 opt í Ægis kjapta
 úrsvöl Gymis völv.¹⁷

¹⁴ Text and translation by Heather O'Donoghue, *The Genesis of a Saga Narrative* (London, 1991), pp. 139–40. In the following, all translations are mine unless stated otherwise.

¹⁵ Bjarni Einarsson, *Skáldasögur* (Reykjavík, 1961), p. 144.

¹⁶ Einar Oláfur Sveinsson, 'Kormákr the poet and his verses', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 17 (1966), 18–60, at 37; Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry* (Oxford, 1976), p. 47. Jónas Kristjánsson (*Eddas and Sagas* [Reykjavík, 1988], p. 228) argues that the stanza, though not necessarily composed by Kormákr, must be older than the saga.

¹⁷ Text by Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, p. 92. Translation by Anthony Faulkes, *Snorri Sturluson. Edda* (London, 1987), p. 91, used with minor alterations.

She often brings the twisted-rope-bear [ship] into Ægir's jaws [under the waves], where the billow breaks, Gyimir's spray-cold *vplva*.

The verse offers no serious problems, except the structure of the sentence's subject *úrsvöl Gymis vplva*. There are two possibilities: the allusion is either to a wave, or to Rán, the wife of the seagod.¹⁸ The first explanation is reminiscent of Snæbjörn's description of waves as the nine *brúðir* of Ægir.¹⁹ It may be argued, perhaps, that whether the reference is to a wave or to Rán, the basic word *vplva* has been used neutrally here, without any negative connotations. This interpretation, however, does not seem very likely. The expression occurs in the context of ships lost at sea, a disastrous event of which *úrsvöl Gymis vplva* is said to be the active agent. So, Turville-Petre may well have been right to gloss the word *vplva* as 'witch' in his commentary.²⁰ What counts is whether the poet, in choosing *vplva* as a base-word, took account of this negative aspect of the word in the semantic spectrum, and chances are that he did.²¹ It may be added that the idea of ships lost at sea due to the doing of witches occurs elsewhere in Old Norse literature. It is also found, albeit in romantic form, in *Friðþjófs saga*, where the protagonist's ship is threatened by a sudden storm. Friðþjófr, suspicious that witchcraft is involved, climbs the mast, and speaks in verse: 'Sé ek trollkonur tvær á báru', 'Witches two on the wave I see'.²² The saga is hardly older than the late-thirteenth century, and its narrative highly romantic, but when it comes to details the author shows himself to be well acquainted with the habits and beliefs of his time, as can be gathered from another motif not commonly found in Old Norse literature. Friðþjófr, fearing that the ship is lost, breaks the golden ring which Ingibjörg has given him, and distributes the pieces among the members of his crew. There must be some connection with the sailor's habit of carrying on him a piece of gold to pay for his burial in case he drowns and is washed ashore.²³ The habit later manifested itself in the golden earrings which sailors until recently were wont

¹⁸ Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, p. 92.

¹⁹ Rudolf Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden* (Bonn und Leipzig, 1921), p. 98.

²⁰ Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, p. 92.

²¹ Interestingly, in Old English and Old Irish poetry the sea is likewise compared to a woman: in *Maxims* the sea is referred to as a violent female (*mægðesa*), and in Irish poetry we find the sea described as a fear-inspiring woman who drowns a sailor by beating his little vessel with her white locks, i.e. foam-topped waves (K. Olsen, Review of Richard North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature* [Cambridge, 1997], *Tijdschrift voor Skandinavistiek* 19 [1998], 187–193, at 190). It seems, therefore, that our kenning has archetypal overtones, but this does not affect our findings: if Refr was solely concerned to depict the sea as a female, he could have used any word for woman, and it would be left to explain why he chose *vplva* out of the many Old Norse *kvennaheiti* which he had at his disposal.

²² *Friðþjófs saga ins frækna*, ed. Ludvig Larsson (Halle, 1901), p. 26.

²³ An early echo of this custom seems present in *Færeyinga saga*, where the farmer Þorgrímr finds on the beach the half-drowned Sigmundur, and kills him on the spot to get hold of the hero's golden ring.

to wear (and still do in comic strips). The saga-author did not draw this image from his imagination in depicting Friðþjófr's voyage, and it is conceivable that the motif of destructive storms evoked by women reflects old and genuine beliefs. This finds support in a pontifical writing to king Harald of Denmark, in which pope Gregory VII expressed concerns that in Denmark storms and pestilence were reportedly blamed on priests and women, and that the latter had been killed on such suspicion. Interestingly, the letter shows that also Christian priests were regarded with superstitious awe, though there is no mention of priests being subjected to popular attack for alleged use of magic:

Illud interea non praetereundum, sed magnopere apostolica interdictione prohibendum videtur, quod de gente vestra nobis innotuit: scilicet vos intemperiem temporum, corruptiones aeris, quascunque molestias corporum ad sacerdotum culpas transferre ... Praeterea in mulieras, ob eandem causam simili immanitate barbari ritus damnatas, quicquam impietatis faciendi vobis fas esse, nolite putare. Sed potius discite, divinae ultionis sententiam digne penitendo avertere, quam, in illas insontes frustra feraliter seviendo, iram Domini multo magis provocare.²⁴

In the meantime, this we cannot let pass, but even must forbid strictly by papal prohibition, what has become known to us about your people, namely that you hold priests responsible for (the occurrence of) storms, pollution of the air (i.e. epidemics) and all kinds of physical harm ... Moreover, do not believe that it finds justification in any divine law to commit (such) ungodliness against women, (who) for the same reasons (have been) subjected to a similar cruelty of barbarian justice. Learn rather to turn away this feeling of divine revenge by doing penance worthily, than to evoke the fury of the Lord even more by raging fatally without cause against these innocent women.

Gregory's letter to the Danish king was written 1080 AD, which makes it near-contemporary with Refr's stanza.

A third allusion to *völur* may be present in a verse by Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, quoted by Snorri in *Skáldskaparmál*:

Orð sær Yrsu burðar
inndrött jöfurr sinni
bjartplógaðan *bauga*
brattakr *völuspakra*;
eyss landreki ljósu
lastvarr Kraka barri
á hlémyldar holdi
hauks kölfur mér sjölfum.²⁵

²⁴ *Monumenta Gregoriana*, ed. Philippus Jaffé, Bibliotheca rerum Germanorum 2 (Berlin, 1865), p. 413.

²⁵ *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen, 1931), p. 142. Translation by Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, p. 99.

The prince [king Harald] sows the seed of Yrsa's son [gold] on the shining ploughed, steep cornfield of rings which cling to the joints; the faultless ruler pours the bright corn of Kraki [gold] on those falcon's lands [arms] of me myself, warmly covered with flesh.

Þjóðólfr lived in the mid-eleventh century, and the verse is generally considered genuine. The phrase *bauga vǫluspakra* is translated by Turville-Petre as 'rings which cling to the joints', but, as pointed out by Paul Bibire, it might well mean 'rings of the *vǫlva*-wise ones',²⁶ since the rings have been taken from the Swedish king Aðils, who is described in *Hrólfs saga kraka* as an ardent pagan and a great sorcerer ('hinn mesti blótmaðr ok fullr af fjólkýngi').²⁷ For that reason, Bibire says, the epithet 'witch-wise' may refer to this use of sorcery by the Swedes and their king. It could be objected that this interpretation uses a rather late and possibly unreliable text to elucidate an mid-eleventh century stanza, and some caution seems well-advised, but on the other hand, there is ample precedent. Þjóðólfr's expression 'stóðu Finna gjöld í skjöldum', 'the tribute of the Lapps stood in the shields' (in *Sexstefja* 14), can be understood only with the help of the thirteenth-century *Orvar-Odds saga*, where it is told that magic arrows were given as tribute by Gusir, king of the Lapps. As Turville-Petre points out, the explanation of this kenning shows the great age of some traditions preserved in late heroic sagas, which we regard suspiciously.²⁸ So, there is definitely a case for arguing that *vǫluspakr* alludes to magic practices, especially as in the days of Þjóðólfr the Swedes had not yet been converted to Christianity.

Other skaldic allusions are too late to be of much value. In *Skáldskaparmál* Snorri relates how Bragi the Old, driving through a forest late in the evening, is addressed in verse by a troll-wife (*trollkona*), who lists to him her troll names, one of which was *vilsinn vǫlu*:

Tröll kalla mik
tungl sjöt-Rungnis,
auðsúg jötuns,
élsólar þol,
vilsinn vǫlu,
vörð náfjarðar,
hvélsvelg himins;
hvat er tröll nema þat?²⁹

²⁶ Paul Bibire, Review of Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry, Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 19 (1977), 458–64, 463.

²⁷ *Fornaldar sögur norðrlanda*, 1, ed. C.C. Rafn (Copenhagen, 1829), p. 35.

²⁸ Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Harald the Hard-ruler and his Poets*, Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture (London, 1966 [1968]), p. 15.

²⁹ *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 165 (with normalized spelling and punctuation). Translation by Anthony Faulkes, *Snorri Sturluson. Edda*, p. 132.

Trolls call me moon of dwelling-Rungnir, giant's wealth-sucker, storm-sun's bale, *seeress's friendly companion*, guardian of corpse-fjord, swallower of heaven-wheel; what is a troll other than that?

Faulkes's translation 'seeress's friendly companion' is rather mild, since the verse certainly does not credit the *völva* with much social prestige. Trolls and troll-wives were thought to be active at night, and the description may hint at the *völva*'s use of sitting out at night, as alluded to in *Völuspá*, a time suitable for magic practices. The date of the verse is uncertain. It is only found in the manuscripts R and C (1eβ), which could suggest that it was composed and incorporated at a later stage, possibly in the second half of the thirteenth century.

LAYS OF THE EDDA

We also find the *völva* associated with magic in Eddic poetry. Her use of it is referred to in Ls 24, where Loki accuses Óðinn of having practiced sorcery in a *völva*'s ritual:

En þik sí[ð]a kóðu
Sámseyju í
ok draptu á vétt sem *völur*.³⁰

But you, people said, did sorcery on Samsey, and tapped on a tub-lid like the *völur*.

The reading <*sia*> is commonly emended to *síða* 'to practise sorcery'.³¹ This makes good sense, though it is also possible to read *sjá* (cf. *Njála* ch. 45: 'Þeir litu til ok kváðusk sjá hann', 'They looked, and said that they could see him'), thus retaining the manuscript reading.³² Here we are only concerned with 'drepa á vétt' in line three. The expression is not entirely clear, but commentators agree that it also has to do with magic practice. If the word *vétt* is identical with ON *vétt* 'lid', then the reference may be to the beating of drums or lids for magic purposes.³³

In *Völuspá* (st. 2) the *völva* recalls her youth in the world of the giants, which makes her a witness of primordial times. This feature, which is not found elsewhere in Old Norse, only underscores the special character of the poem:

³⁰ *Edda. Die Lieder des Codex regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. Gustav Neckel, Germanische Bibliothek 2, 9 (Heidelberg, 1927), p. 98. All Eddic references are to this edition (with normalized spelling).

³¹ Klaus von See et al. (*Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, II: *Götterlieder* [Heidelberg, 1997], p. 430), are sympathetic to Nils Lid's interpretation of <*sia*> as *síga* 'to sink into trance', even though such a meaning is not attested in Old Norse. The reference is to sorcery whichever reading is understood.

³² *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ÍF 12 (Reykjavík, 1954), p. 115.

³³ Dag Strömback, *Sejd. Textstudier i nordisk religionshistoria*, Nordiska texter och undersökningar 5 (Stockholm, 1935), p. 23.

Ek man jotna
 ár um borna
 þá er forðom mik
 fœdda hofðu.

I remember giants, born early in time, who long ago had reared me [*or*: did give me life].

The verb *fræða* means 'to give birth to', as well as 'to bring up', a meaning preferred by most commentators. Dronke argues that the latter meaning is indicated by the plural use of *jotna* (acc.), an argument that is not entirely convincing, since the use of singular for plural, and vice-versa, is well-known poetic practice in Old Norse.³⁴

The *völva* is also associated with giants in *Baldrs draumar*, though in a totally different way. In the poem, one of the youngest of the Eddic Corpus, Óðinn descends to the underworld, disguised, where he summons a *völva* from the dead, and asks her about Balder's fate. She reveals that Balder will be slain by his own brother. In a desperate attempt to invalidate the prediction, Óðinn denies her prophetic skills, scolding her 'þriggja þursa móðir', 'mother of three giants'. The accusation is surprising, since the *völva* apparently had no difficulty in seeing through Óðinn's disguise, which seems to suggest that the poet saw her as a true seeress. Óðinn's insult may be a reference to the *völva*'s background, as touched on in Vsp. 2, but it is also possible that Óðinn, his true identity being revealed (in a scene reminiscent of Vsp. 28),³⁵ angrily resorts to gossip that surrounded sorceresses and female soothsayers in general (cf. Háv. 87 and 113). As *Baldrs draumar* is younger than *Völuspá*, it may have been composed as an addition to it, perhaps in earnest, but more probably ironically, meant as entertainment only.³⁶

Unreliability as a characteristic of the *völva* is mentioned by the *Hávamál* poet. In a priamel dealing with the dangers of being naive the poet accuses her of flattery, and he warns the audience not to give her words any credit (Háv. 87):

Völu vilmæli ... trúi engi maðr.

No man should ... trust the flattery of a *völva*.

The warning suggests the existence of professional fortune-tellers. That prophecies had to be paid for is made clear by *Völuspá*, and it needs hardly be said that payment for

³⁴ Cf. Akv. 11 'Úlfr mun ráða'; and HH. II, 46: *brúðir* and *disir* (referring to Guðrún). *Völuspá* has several examples of it: *ill brúðr* (Vsp. 22/8); *tóptir* (Vsp. 62/6), for Óðinn's homestead and perhaps also *ganda* and *leikinn* (Vsp. 22).

³⁵ Cf. Ursula Dronke's remarks about Bdr. 9/1–2 (*The Poetic Edda*, II, 158): 'I suggest that the poet is attempting to render phrases in Vsp. 31/6 and 32/1–2 that he has not correctly understood'. See also n. 100 below.

³⁶ It could be added that the poem would be far more comprehensible if we assume a Christian background, since it would explain the *völva*'s markedly hostile attitude towards Óðinn.

service always opens the door for bribery. For that reason the *Hávamál* verse might well be indicative of the social conditions and status which at one stage characterized the vǫlva's professional behaviour, but as will be shown below, Old Norse literature contains little to suggest that corruption was the vǫlva's hallmark. The author of *Víga-Glúms saga* (ch. 12) reports that housewives thought it important to give a good welcome to a certain Oddbjörg, a wandering wise woman gifted with second sight, because they believed that what she said was influenced by their hospitality. Such conduct would be reminiscent of the expression *vǫlu vilmali*, but it is important to note that apart from the reference to housewives' gossip, there is little in the saga to support this view, because, as it turns out, Oddbjörg is not inclined to use flattery, even when pressure is brought on her to do so.

Finally, a low opinion of the vǫlva is expressed in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, 37, where *vǫlva* is used on a par with a *skollvís kona* 'deceitful woman,' accused of fashioning lies ('bartu skrok saman'). What exactly the poet was hinting at in using the word is not altogether clear, since the reference may be to old age, lascivious conduct, or unreliability. I will return to the passage later.

VÖLUSPÁ 22

A stanza which is difficult to explain is Vsp. 22, which deals with events probably connected with the 'fólkvíg fyrst í heimi' mentioned in the foregoing stanza. Nordal once called this part of the poem (i.e. st. 21–26) hard to understand, and he doubted that we would ever arrive at a generally accepted interpretation:³⁷

Heiði hana hétu
hvars til húsa kom
vǫlu velspá
vitti hón ganda.
Seið hón kunni
seið hón leikinn.
Æ var hón angan
illrar brúðar.

Bright One they called her, at all the houses she came to, the seeress with skills, and witchcraft she plied. Spells she cast where she could, spells she cast on the mind; she was ever the darling of evil women.

The verse enumerates the various skills and habits of the vǫlva, such as divination (*velspá*), the use of incantations (*seiðr*), as well as other activities discussed below. A

³⁷ Sigurður Nordal, ed. *Völuspá*, 2nd edn (Reykjavík, 1952), p. 89.

proper understanding is made difficult by the poet's way of metonymically touching on events and concepts. Central to the stanza's interpretation are its concluding lines, especially the word *illr*, an epithet which Dronke believes to be illustrative of the *völva*'s dubious sexual morals.³⁸ The idea had already been put forward by Jan de Vries more than sixty years ago,³⁹ but Dronke has provided it with an elaborate theoretical framework. Since the idea has far-reaching implications for our understanding of the poem as a whole, it is necessary to discuss the matter briefly.

In the stanza the *völva*'s activity is called *seiðr*, and in *Ynglinga saga* Snorri reports that Freyja first taught the *Æsir seiðr*.⁴⁰ It is probably on account of this dual relation of *seiðr* with the *völva* on the one hand, and the Vanir on the other, that some scholars assume an intimate connection between the *völva* and the cult of the Vanir. Thus Dronke states:

As the Vanir were gods of fecundity, the reputed obscenity of *seiðr* was no doubt linked with the sexual aspects of their nature. That bawdiness and sexual licence played their part in Heiðr's performance of *seiðr* and made her visits popular, is certainly suggested by the warmth with which 'bad women' welcomed her: *Æ var hón angan illrar brúðar*.⁴¹

The war of the *Æsir* and the Vanir, introduced in the foregoing stanza 21, with which our stanza appears intimately connected, Dronke explains in a Dumézilian vein. She compares it to the myth of the Asvins, the Sanskrit twin gods of rejuvenation, who like the Vanir had to fight for recognition as gods. To make her point clear, Dronke refers to Dionysus's battle for divine recognition, as told in Euripides's *Bacchae*, arguing that the moral loathing and scorn which was felt for the cult of Dionysus is reminiscent of the attitude of the *Æsir* towards the Vanir. Just as Dionysus is called a charlatan magician, and accused of infecting the women with madness and unchastity, the *völva* is welcomed with enthusiasm by bad women, as expressed in Vsp. 22/7–8. By treating Dionysus's maenads on a par with the 'bad women' of Vsp. 22, Dronke arrives at a structuralistic interpretation which has a persuasive touch. But is it tenable? To start with, Dronke's interpretation is possible only if we are willing to view the *völva* as an agent of the cult of the Vanir. Snorri's statement that Freyja first taught the *Æsir seiðr*, such as was practised among the Vanir, follows on his description of the war between the *Æsir* and the Vanir. The fact that Vsp. 22 occurs in the same context may have led scholars to inter-

³⁸ Ursula Dronke, 'The War of the *Æsir* and Vanir in *Völuspá*', in *Idee. Gestalt. Geschichte — Festschrift Klaus von See. Studies in European Cultural Tradition*, ed. Gerd Wolfgang Weber (Odense, 1988), pp. 223–38, at 228.

³⁹ Jan de Vries, 'Die *Völuspá*', *Germanisch-romanische Monatsschrift* 24 (1936), 1–14, at 11.

⁴⁰ *Ynglinga saga*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, ÍF 26 (Reykjavík, 1941), pp. 9–83, at 13.

⁴¹ Dronke, 'The War of the *Æsir* and Vanir in *Völuspá*', p. 228.

pret the stanza in accordance with Snorri's words, elsewhere in *Ynglinga saga*, that *seiðr*, apart from having been introduced by the Vanir, was attended by such wickedness (*ergi*) that manly men considered it shameful (*eigi skammlaust*) to practice it, for which reason it was taught to goddesses (or priestesses, as ON *gyðja* can denote either).⁴² Unfortunately, Snorri does not specify what this unmanly behaviour amounted to, nor does he refer to *völur* in this connection, and his comment, which provides the basis for Dronke's theory of the *völva*'s indecent behaviour, may well echo 'Æ var hón angan illrar brúðar' of our stanza (which Snorri does not quote). In fact, there is little in Snorri to suggest that the *völva*'s performance was characterized by sexual licence, and the whole idea may well stem from a confusion of two things: 1) the activity of the *völva* is called *seiðr* and 2) the Vanir practised a shameful kind of *seiðr*. This second observation need not be more than Snorri's own interpretation of Vsp. 22/7-8, but even if we were to accept it momentarily, then there would still be no evidence that the *völva*'s performance was equally bawdy and sexually provocative. As skaldic poetry shows, *seiðr*, the word on which such a conclusion ultimately rests, originally probably only meant 'incantation'.⁴³

Now, it is undeniable that Vsp. 22/7-8 refers to the *völva*'s conduct, and also that the use of *illr* implies a negative moral judgement. So, if the phrase does not allude to sexual licence, what, then, does it refer to? In her recent commentary Dronke reiterates this theory that the *völva*'s performance was part of the cult of the Vanir.⁴⁴ However, she gives simultaneously a somewhat different explanation, according to which the epithet *illr* reflects the popular moral disapproval, endorsed by the poet, of women who intimated with sorceresses and who might themselves dabble in spells to pursue personal enemies or lovers.⁴⁵ This interpretation has much to commend it, since it allows us to retain the manuscript reading *leikinn* 'possessed' (singular used collectively), which then denotes the people who had fallen victim to the magic practice that is

⁴² *Ynglinga saga*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, p. 19.

⁴³ The skalds use *seiðr* as the basic word in descriptions for battle (Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden*, p. 197), whereby the word apparently stands for 'song', the *tertium* being the humming sound produced at the performance of incantations (Strömbäck, *Sejd*, p. 119). In the early-eleventh century Eiríkr víðsjá uses the kennings *Fjölvis seiðr* and *lögðis seiðr*. Earlier still is Egill's *vigra seiðr* (the *seiðr* of the spears), provided the attribution to this poet is correct. Apart from the noun *seiðr* we find the verb *siða*, used by Kormákr by about 960 AD in the verse 'seið Yggr til Rindar' (Yggr [Óðinn] used magic to get Rind), in which the reference is clearly to magic. No specific connection can be detected with either the Vanir or the *völva*, and skaldic poetry, therefore, lends no support to the idea that *seiðr* was an intrinsic part of either of them.

⁴⁴ Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, II, 42.

⁴⁵ Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, II, 133. As far as *illr* is concerned, these different interpretations are hard to reconcile. In Dronke's 1988 interpretation ('The War of the Æsir and Vanir in *Völuspá*', p. 228) the *völva* figures as an agent of the gods of fecundity, in whose service she conducts her alleged obscene performance — thus causing the poet to use the epithet *illr* — whereas in Dronke's new interpretation (p. 133) the moral disapproval articulated in *illr* does not apply to obscene sexual behaviour of the *völva* herself.

described. The word *leikinn* is reminiscent of the formula *mutatio mentium hominum*, found in a collection of penitential decrees compiled in the years 1008–12 AD by Burchard, Bishop of Worms.⁴⁶ In the history of sorcery, love magic was an important concept. A survey of the medieval data led Heide Dienst to the conclusion that the practice was a predominantly female affair.⁴⁷ With this in mind I am inclined to interpret the phrase 'Æ var hón angan illrar brúðar' as a reference to love magic, alone or in combination with other activities perceived to be immoral (such as contraception).

It could well be that the similarity between our stanza and early medieval beliefs in witchcraft goes even further. I am referring to the phrase 'vitti hón ganda', which may have something to do with spiritual transport by means of magic. Old Norse *gandr* means 'stick,' and theoretically the expression could refer to medieval *sortilegia*, in which sticks were reportedly used, but a survey of the word's semantic field points in another direction. Apart from its basic meaning 'stick', ON *gandr* is occasionally used to signify an alleged animal of transport, mostly a wolf, in rare cases a horse. These meanings appear to be secondary, and probably derive from the alleged witches' habit of riding into the air,⁴⁸ as attested in the word *gandreid* 'witches' ride'. Dronke renders *vitja ganda* with 'to conjure spirits,' and perhaps the ritual was perceived in this way by its participants, but I prefer the basic meaning of *vitja* 'give power, give a magic might to' and *gandr* 'stick,' or else 'wolf' (as the result of theriomorphic transformation, seen from the *völva*'s point of view, wolves being the witches' steeds in Old Scandinavian tradition).⁴⁹ In that case 'vitti hón ganda' would refer to the *völva*'s alleged ability to

⁴⁶ The nineteenth Book of this compilation, commonly called *Corrector*, derives, with minor modifications, from a text compiled by Regino of Prüm a century before. In it, penitents are questioned whether they believe that women 'per quendam maleficia et incantationes mentes hominum permutare (posse)' (Wilhelm Boudriot, *Die altgermanische Religion in der amtlichen kirchlichen Literatur des Abendlandes vom 5. bis 11. Jahrhundert* [Bonn, 1928; repr. Darmstadt, 1964], p. 54) 'by certain charms and incantations can turn the minds of men'. Earlier still, in the ninth century, Hincmar, archbishop of Reims discussed whether certain women, by means of *maleficia*, could turn away love, and make a man impotent with his wife and full of detestation for her, and also, whether these women were capable of arousing erotic passion between unmarried people (Joseph Hansen, *Zauberwahn, Inquisition und Hexenproze im Mittelalter*, Historische Bibliothek 12 [Munich etc, 1900], p. 71).

⁴⁷ Heide Dienst, 'Zur Rolle der Frau in magischen Vorstellungen und Praktiken — nach ausgewählten Quellen', in *Frauen in Spätantike und Frühmittelalter: Lebensbedingungen, Lebensnormen, Lebensformen*, ed. Werner Affeldt, Beiträge zu einer internationalen Tagung am Fachbereich Geschichtswissenschaften der Freien Universität Berlin (Sigmaringen, 1990), pp. 173–94, at 191. Dr Arend Quak has directed my attention to *Egils saga*, in which an adolescent male by means of runes tries to win a girl's affection.

⁴⁸ Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon, *Íslensk orðsifjabók* (Reykjavík, 1989), p. 229.

⁴⁹ For a discussion of *gandr*, see Clive Tolley, 'Vprðr and Gandr: Helping Spirits in Norse Magic', *Arkiv for nordisk filologi* 110 (1995), 57–75, at 62–68. Not all of Tolley's arguments can be accepted, the main problem being that he uses the account of the eleventh-century *Historia Norwegiae* as if it were a present-day ethnographer's report.

travel to remote places at night, reminiscent of some of the activities which Burchard attributed to witches in his *Corrector* (90), where people are asked whether they believe that on certain nights women, accompanied by demons, ride into the air on animals:

Credidisti aut particeps fuisti illius incredulitatis, quod quaedam sceleratae mulieres retro post Satanam conversae daemonum illusionibus et phantasmatibus seductae credunt et profitentur se nocturnis horis cum Diana, paganorum Dea, et cum innumera multitudine mulierum equitare super quasdam bestias et multa terrarum spatia intempestae noctis silentio pertransire⁵⁰

Have you believed or participated in this folly, that there are wicked women who, turning back to Satan and seduced by the illusions and phantoms of the demons, believe and openly avow that in the hours in the night they ride on certain animals, together with Diana, the goddess of the pagans, and with a great many other women, in the silence of the dead of night cross many great lands ...?

Elsewhere (Corr. 70) Burchard speaks of this Diana of the witches' ride as 'quam vulgaris stultitia strigam Holdam vocat', 'whom the superstition of people calls the witch Holda'. No such reference to Holda is found in Regino's text, the source of the quoted passage, which shows that Burchard, apart from drawing on learned speculation, was also inquisitive about ideas deriving from popular beliefs and superstitions.⁵¹ Early scholarly attention focussed on the question whether and to what extent references like the *Holda* phrase quoted above can be traced back to Old Germanic thinking. Recent scholars tend to believe that there was no such thing as a witch-cult and that the concept of it was mainly a transposition of fairly basic ideas about magic which flourished for centuries in popular belief, and which were now branded as part of a devilish conspiracy to undermine the authority of the Church. As this change of attitude — which could be described as negative institutionalizing — did not take place before the fourteenth century, the question is irrelevant here. It suffices to point out that the *völva*'s doings mentioned in Vsp. 22 correspond neatly to activities attributed to witches in the works of Regino of Prüm and Burchard of Worms, though it would probably be unwise to assume a direct link of some kind. The similarity is best explained by assuming that the *Völuspá* poet, too, drew on wide-spread beliefs about witches, as well as on

⁵⁰ Boudriot, *Die algermanische Religion*, p. 55. An English translation of Burchard's *Corrector* can be found in John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal Libri Poenitentiales* (New York, 1990), pp. 323–45.

⁵¹ Rudi Künzel, 'Heidendom, syncretisme en religieuze volkscultuur in de vroege middeleeuwen. Problemen en perspectieven', in *Willibrord, zijn wereld en zijn werk*, ed. P. Bange, *Middeleeuwse Studies* 6 (Nijmegen, 1990), pp. 267–81, at 274. Künzel, 'Paganisme, syncretisme et culture religieuse populaire au Haut Moyen Age. Réflexions de méthode', *Annales. Economies Sociétés Civilisations* 47 (1992), 1055–66, at 1060.

medieval learned speculation. Popular beliefs about magic must have been fairly similar throughout medieval Europe, and the existence of the *sator arepo* formula in the Bryggen runic inscriptions shows the speed with which superstition could travel.⁵²

The conclusion appears to be that the vǫlva's activities listed in Vsp. 22 do not differ much from the doings attributed to witches in Western medieval belief. The vǫlva of our stanza greatly resembles a traditional witch, as found in eleventh-century superstition. The stanza nowhere says that the vǫlva herself indulged in any sexual activity. The passage may be sexually suggestive (and the name *Gullveig* may, as will be discussed later, even be a pun on the golden cup of the Great Whore), but if so, it is only suggestion that we are dealing with. The text refers first and foremost to the use of magic (be it specifically Northern or of a more general medieval kind), and not to sexual licence.

In the above, in discussing the testament of poetry, we have come across the vǫlva's involvement in magic. What this magic actually consisted of is hard to say. In the early Middle Ages sorcery was commonly understood as magic (*magia*), divination (*divinatio*), future-telling by means of sticks (*sortes*), thought to be achieved by means of spells (*incantatio*) and/or herbs (*herbae*). According to Snorri, *seiðr* enabled one to know the fate of men and to predict events that had not yet come to pass. It had the power to inflict death or misfortunes or sickness, or also deprive people of their wits or strength. If the picture of the vǫlva in Vsp. 22 resembles that of the traditional witch of medieval superstition, then her activities may also have included the use of herbs, salves and potions, and so on for various purposes. In *Haralds saga hárfagra* Snorri, after recording the sudden death of Hálfðan svartí, refers to rumours that the king had died from a poisoned drink which Gunnhildr had suborned a witch (*þjófakunnig kona*) to prepare.⁵³ Poison was traditionally regarded as a typical female stratagem, which, as with love magic, would be consistent with the words *ill brúðr* of our stanza.

Of interest is the epithet *velspár* in Vsp. 22/3. Referring to *Víga-Glúms saga* (ch. 12) and Háv 87 *vǫlu vilmali*, Dronke translates the words *vǫlu velspá* (22/3) as 'a prophetess of fair fortunes', arguing that the vǫlva flattered people with favourable prophecies.⁵⁴ The possibility of this cannot be denied, as corruption of this kind can possibly be found in all ages. However, as pointed out above, this interpretation finds but little support in chapter 12 of *Víga-Glúms saga*, to which Dronke refers. It is told here how the vǫlva, Oddbjörg, after having predicted the young boys a future of strife, refuses to make her words more pleasant. So, if we were to evaluate her behaviour, I would rec-

⁵² *Norges innskrifter med de yngre runer*, vol VI, 1: *Bryggen i Bergen*, ed. Aslak Liestøl (Oslo, 1980), p. 71. See also, on the date of the inscription, James Knirk, *Norges innskrifter med de yngre runer*, vol VI, 2: *Bryggen i Bergen* (Oslo, 1990), p. 240.

⁵³ *Snorri Sturluson. Heimskringla*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, 2nd edn (Copenhagen, 1936), p. 68.

⁵⁴ Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, II, 132.

commend the epithet *sannspár*, or the verse 'saga mun sannaz, sú er vǫlva segir', 'the vǫlva's tale will be found true', found in *Orvar-Odds saga*, rather than the word *vilmeli* of Háv. 87. Moreover, as pointed out by Finnur Jónsson, the adjective *velspár* cannot mean 'prophesying something good'.⁵⁵ In all probability the prefix *vel* has the same qualifying function 'very good' as in words like *velvakandi* and *velhoggvandi*, and the correct interpretation of *velspár* is 'prophesying competently, with great skill'. This emphasis on the vǫlva's power to prophesy with great skill seems to recall the opening lines of the poem, where the vǫlva offers to *fyrtefja vel* the fates of men. In the stanza no explanation is given of this sudden word of praise and recognition in a catalogue of otherwise dubious deeds. A possible reason will be discussed below.

As to the rest of Vsp. 22, *Heiði/Heiðr* probably represents an epithet rather than a proper name. The opening line 'Heiði hana hétu' does not necessarily reflect people's opinion about her: it may, as a word of praise, refer to the wicked women mentioned in the concluding lines 7–8. Interpreting the name as an epithet makes it easier to tie *Heiði/Heiðr* and *Gullveig* to each other, names which many scholars regard as referring to the same person. This paves the way for regarding the stanzas 21 and 22 as a hysteron proteron, a device of which the poet of *Völuspá* appears rather fond.⁵⁶

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Before turning to prose, we have to discuss the use of the word *vǫlva* in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, 38. In the stanza Helgi's halfbrother Sinfjötli boasts that his opponent (Guðmundr) was longing for him in the shape of a vǫlva:

Þú vart vǫlva
í Varinseyju,
skollvís kona,
bartu skrök saman
kvaztu engi mann
eiga vilja,
segg brynjaðan,
nema Sinfjötla.

⁵⁵ Finnur Jónsson, *Völu-spá*, p. 45; and *De Gamle Eddadigte*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen, 1932), p. 7.

⁵⁶ Cf. Vsp. 26 (2x), Vsp. 32/4 (compared to Vsp. 33/1), Vsp. 56/12, Vsp. 62/4 and Vsp. 24/7–8, provided *sporna vǫllu* is not just figurative speech. Also Vsp. 21/1, where the first battle of nations is triggered off by Gullveig's ordeal (as assumed by Nordal). This stanza may contain yet another instance, if Gullveig's sufferings by stabbing and burning are copied from Christian hagiography, where these tortures nearly always occur the other way round. An interesting example provides Vsp. 33/5, where the poet first speaks of Frigg's grief (5–8), when its perpetrator has already been killed in revenge (1–4).

A *vǫlva* you were on Varins Isle, woman full deceit who fashioned lies; of mail-clad heroes, no one, you said, should mate with you except Sinfjǫtli.

Helgakviða Hundingsbana is one of those flyting poems in which the contestants are prone to exaggerate, which, however, does not diminish its value as a source. The fact that Sinfjǫtli, in accusing his opponent of sexual anomaly, calls Guðmundr a *vǫlva* seems consistent with Dronke's idea that the *vǫlva*'s conduct in Vsp. 22, and that of *vǫlur* in general, was characterized by bawdiness and sexual licence. Such a conclusion is hardly compelling though, because, as shown above, the use of *vǫlva* need not be more than a reference to the female shape into which Guðmundr is said to have transformed himself. The notion of shameful sexual behaviour is undeniably present, but it is a man's subservient homosexual behaviour that the stanza mentions, a common accusation in Old Norse flyting. Sinfjǫtli (or the poet, for that matter) uses the word *vǫlva* to portray Guðmundr, not only as a woman (a reference to the servile homosexuality), but also, as an *old woman*, a detail that must have added greatly to the derisive effect of Sinfjǫtli's words. Kormákr's *vǫlva*, it will be remembered, was called *hás* 'hoarse', so there is certainly a case for arguing that *vǫlur* were *aged* women.

To summarize: in poetry the *vǫlva* is associated with magic as early as the tenth century. Skaldic poetry contains little information, but the little which there is suffices to show that the picture was rather negative. More details are found in Eddic poetry, where she is accused of flattery (Háv 87), of performing magic rituals (Ls 24) and of various other activities commonly attributed to witches. Some stanzas (HH I 37; Vsp. 22) can be thought to hint at lascivious conduct, but these passages can also be explained otherwise. Only once (Vsp. 22) she is endowed with a positive quality: the gift to prophecy correctly, which occurs within a catalogue of her otherwise dubious activities. The picture of the *vǫlva* in Old Norse poetry, it seems, is outspokenly negative, and not altogether different from that of the traditional witch of early medieval times.

This conclusion makes it necessary to comment briefly on the view, advocated by Jochens and others, that the seeress/*vǫlva* enjoyed a high status throughout the whole of the medieval Germanic period. I know of no argument to sustain this view other than that of Dronke, who refers to the *Ota* passage in *The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill*, where the Viking sea-king Turgesius and his wife Ota are accused of trying to convert Ireland to Pórr-worship.⁵⁷ Ota is said to have chanted heathen spells and oracles at the altar of Clonmacnoise. The identification of Ota with the *vǫlva* dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century, a time when also the Icelandic sagas were still regarded as reliable documents. Much has changed since then, but until recently scholars have tended to accept the passage at face value. Although *The War of the*

⁵⁷ *Cogadh Gaeðhel re Gallaibh (The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill)*, ed. Todd, p. 13.

Gaebhil with the Gaill abounds with interpolations and biased views, and although it was written in the twelfth century, some 350 years after the Vikings raids started, only in recent times critics have started to recognize that the work has little historical basis. Donncha Ó Corráin claims that the only historical fact of the Turgesius story is the capture and drowning of a Viking leader of that name by Mael Sechnaill, king of the Uí Néill.⁵⁸ There can be no doubt, therefore, that the portrait of Ota in *The War of the Gaebhil with the Gaill* must be treated with caution. But even if we would be willing to view Ota as a vǫlva, then there would still be no reason for believing that the vǫlva enjoyed much social prestige. The passage offers little to go by, and not nearly enough to invalidate the testimony of the skalds. Indications are that at the end of the era the figure was associated with magic, and she does not seem to have enjoyed a high social status.

THE EVIDENCE OF PROSE

In Old Norse prose the picture is different. Apart from the fairly positive role of the vǫlva Oddbjörg in *Víga-Glúms saga*, quite elaborate descriptions of prophesying vǫlur can be found in other sagas. The gift of prophecy is attributed to men and women alike, but there appears to be a difference in appreciation. Women appear to be less often involved in black magic — at least not of the destructive kind, as practised by Kotkell in *Laxdæla saga* and Þorgrímr in *Gísli saga* — and in those cases where we do find them involved in magic the word *völva* is not applied to them. Thus Katla in *Eyrbyggja saga* is nowhere called a vǫlva, and the author of *Kormáks saga* similarly refrains from calling Þorðís a vǫlva, though the word occurs in the verse that accompanied the episode.

An extensive report of a vǫlva's seance occurs in *Eiríks saga*. The author of the saga describes the performance in considerable detail, and we are told that the vǫlva, Þorbjörg is the last survivor of ten sisters, each of which had been a vǫlva as well:⁵⁹

Sú kona var þar í byggð, er Þorbjörg hét; hon var spákona ok var kǫlluð lítill-vǫlva. Hon hafði átt sér níu systir, ok váru allar spákonur, en hon ein var þá á lífi. Þat var háttir Þorbjargar um vetrum, at hon fór at veizlum, ok buðu þeir menn henni mest heim, er forvitni var á at vita forlög sín eða árferð; ok með því at Þorkell var þar mestr bóndi, þá þótti til hans koma at vita, hvé nær létta myndi óaráni þessu, sem yfir stóð. Býðr Þorkell spákonunni heim, ok er henni þar vel fagnat, sem siðr var til, þá er við þess háttar konum skyldi taka ...

⁵⁸ Donncha Ó. Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans* (Dublin, 1972), p. 91.

⁵⁹ On this, see n. 84 and n. 85 below.

En er hon kom inn, þótti öllum mönnum skylt at velja henni sömiligar kveðjur. Hon tók því sem henni váru menn geðjaðir til. Tók Þorkell bóndi í hönd henni ok leiddi hana til þess sætis, sem henni var búit ...

En um morgininn, at áliðnum degi, var henni veittr sá umbúningr, sem hon þurfti at hafa til at fremja seiðinn. Hon bað ok fá sér konur þær, er kynni fræði þat, sem til seiðsins þarf ok Varðlokur hétu. En þær konur fundusk eigi. Þá var leitat at um bæinn, ef nokkurr kynni.⁶⁰

There was a woman in the settlement who was called Þorbjörg; she was a vǫlva, and was known as the Little Vǫlva. She had had nine sisters, and they all had been vǫlur, but she was the only one left alive. It was her custom in winter to attend feasts; she was always invited, in particular, by those who were most curious about their own fortunes or the season's prospects. Since Þorkell of Herjólsness was the chief farmer in the district, it was thought to be his responsibility to find out when the current hardships would come to an end. Þorkell invited the vǫlva to his house and prepared a good reception for her, as was the custom when such women were being received ...

When she entered the room everyone felt obliged to proffer respectful greetings, to which she responded according to her opinion of each person. Þorkell took her by the hand and led her to the seat which had been prepared for her ...

Late the next day she was supplied with the preparations she required for performing the witchcraft. She asked for the assistance of women who knew the spells needed for performing the witchcraft, known as Warlock-songs; but there were no such women available. So inquiries were then made amongst all the people on the farm, to see if any-one knew the songs.

As it turns out, the only person capable of reciting these songs is Guðríðr, who, being a Christian, initially refuses to have anything to do with it. Finally, however, she gives in and is rewarded by the vǫlva with a prediction:

'En þér, Guðríðr, skal ek launa í hönd liðsinni þat, er oss hefir af þér staðit, því at þín forlög eru mér nú allglöggð. Þú munt gjaförð fá hér á Grœnlandi, þat er sömiligast er, þó at þér verði þat eigi til langæðar, því at vegar þínir liggja út til Íslands, ok man þar koma frá þér bæði mikil ætt ok góð, ok yfir þínum kynkvíslum skína bjartari geislar en ek hafa megin til at geta slíkt vandliga sét; enda far þú nú heil ok vel, dóttir.' Síðan gengu menn at vísindakonunni, ok fretti þá hverr þess, er mest forvitni var á at vita. Hon var ok góð af frásögnum; gekk þat ok lítt í tauma, er hon sagði. Þessu næst var komit eptir henni af öðrum bæ; fór hon þá þangat. Þá var sent eptir Þorbirni, því at hann vildi eigi heima vera, meðan slík hindrvitni var framið.⁶¹

⁶⁰ *Eiríks saga rauða*, ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ÍF 4 (Reykjavík, 1935), pp. 206–07. Translation by Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, *The Vinland Sagas* (New York, 1966), pp. 81–82, with minor alterations.

⁶¹ *Eiríks saga rauða*, ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, pp. 208–09. Translation by Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, p. 83, with minor alterations.

'And as for you, Guðríðr, I shall reward you at once for the help you have given us, for I can see your whole destiny with clarity now. You will make a most distinguished marriage here in Greenland, but it will not last for long, for your paths all lead to Iceland; there you will start a great and eminent family line, and over your progeny there shall shine a bright light, but it is beyond my power to see it sharply. And now farewell, my daughter.' Then everyone went over to the vólva, each asking her whatever he was most curious to know. She answered them readily, and there were few things that did not turn out as she had prophesied. After this a messenger arrived for her from a neighboring farm and she went there with him. Then Þorbjörn was sent for; he had refused to remain in the house while such pagan practices were being performed.

In the family sagas the vólva occurs only sporadically, but when she does, she is treated with respect. Sometimes, as in *Eiríks saga rauða*, she is even led to the seat of honour by the host himself. All the same, the saga-writers seem ambivalent about her. They make no attempt to deny the esteem in which she was reportedly held, but at the same time they seem eager to articulate Christian disapproval. In *Eiríks saga* Guðríðr's father refuses to be present when the seance is performed, and in *Vatnsdæla saga* Ingimundr angrily dismisses the vólva's prediction that he will settle in Iceland. Yet, in all cases the prophecy turns out to be correct. She is not accused of magic practices, we find no references to alleged unreliability, and nowhere are dubious sexual practices hinted at.

HISTORICAL VERACITY

It is noteworthy that no vólva in the sagas has any fixed abode. They have no ancestry and no progeny; they are shadowy figures, mostly with stereotypical names, who travel from farmstead to farmstead, turning up when the narrative needs them and disappearing when no longer necessary. There is little to suggest that any saga author knew a vólva from personal experience. Old Norse literature situates the figure outside Iceland, though there was apparently a notion that the figure existed there in the early days of settlement, as can be concluded from an episode in *Laxdæla saga*.⁶² It does not appear, though, that any report has a firm base in reality. One possible exception is found in the *Landnámabók*, an account of the first settlers and their descendants. Compilation may have started around 1150 AD, or even earlier, but only revised versions from the thirteenth century have been preserved.⁶³ Here we read that:

⁶² *Laxdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ÍF 5 (Reykjavík, 1934), p. 224.

⁶³ Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, pp. 124–27.

Puríðr sundafyllir ok Völu-Steinn son hennar fór af Hálogalandi til Íslands ok nam Bolungarvík, ok bjöggu í Vatnsnesi. Hon var því kölluð sundafyllir at hon seiddi til þess í hallæri á Hálogalandi at hvert sund var fult af fiskum. Hon setti ok Kvíarmið á Ísafjarðardjúpi ok tók á kollótta af hverjum bónda í Ísafirði.⁶⁴

The völvur Puríðr the Sound-Filler and her son Völu-Steinn went from Halogaland to Iceland and took possession of Bolungarvík. They made their home at Vatnsness. She was called 'the Sound-Filler' because during a famine in Halogaland she filled every sound with fish by means of *seið*. She also fixed the Kvíar fishing ground in the open sea in front of Isafjord Bay, and took a hornless ewe in return from every farmer in Isafjord.

This Puríðr must have been an impressive person, since her son Steinn, the skald, was named after her, and not after his father, as was usual. It should be noticed that Puríðr's deeds seem to have been achieved by magic. Nothing is said about prophetic abilities. Of the *völvur* mentioned in Old Icelandic literature Puríðr may be the one historical figure; all the other descriptions appear to be highly literary. However, even if the historical existence of most *völvur* described in the sagas must be doubted, there is no reason to reject categorically the details that emerge from the descriptions. Stereotyped as they may appear, they do reflect the way later generations remembered them, and as such they may contain a kernel of truth.

Modern historians who study later traditions about past events have grown skeptical of the possibility to discern historical truth from later accretions. A majority of them now believes that the portrayal of people and things in these traditions tells us more about the way the writer looked upon such matters in his own time than about the events described. Birgit Sawyer has argued that the belligerent figure of the Nordic pagan shield-maiden, anxious to defend her state of chastity and eager to live independently, was created by Saxo in order to express his disapproval of wealthy women who chose to live independently of men by embracing a religious life.⁶⁵ As nuns or pious widows these women often donated gifts to the church, which led to the alienation of land from family property and was therefore perceived by wealthy land-owning families as a threat. By criticizing the chaste maidens of the past Saxo was able to address the issues of the day and voice his disapproval.

Sawyer's conclusion is a welcome reminder of the caution needed in the use of later historiography, but it has little bearing on our findings. Saxo may have used the shield-maiden for his own purpose, perhaps inspired by the Amazon warrior of Antiquity, but

⁶⁴ *Landnámabók* I–III (*Hauksbók. Sturlubók. Melabók*), ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen, 1900), p. 46. Translation by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *The Book of Settlements*, University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies 1 (Winnipeg, 1972), pp. 69–70.

⁶⁵ Birgit Sawyer, 'Women and the conversion of Scandinavia', in *Frauen in Spätantike und Frühmittelalter*, ed. Affeldt, pp. 263–81, at 281.

it is unlikely that he, as Sawyer claims, introduced the Nordic shield-maiden into Scandinavian pagan history. The concept seems to have existed in Nordic tradition prior to the days of Saxo, and it may even have had some basis in reality.⁶⁶ A similar state of affairs surrounds our Nordic *völva*. She, too, may have been revived for some particular purpose, for instance to predict the coming of a new religious world order, but the very fact that this role is bestowed upon her indicates that people must have been familiar with her. Or to reverse the matter: would there be any point in putting this prediction in the mouth of a prophesying woman totally unfamiliar to the audience? The answer can only be negative, and consequently the *völva* must have roots in genuine tradition. Is is another matter that the figure may have disappeared from society before the emergence of written reports. Of interest is a note in *Orms þáttir Stórolfs-sonar*, in which the unknown author informs his readers that:

Pat var þá tízka í þær mundir at konur þær fóru yfir land er völvur vóru kallaðar, ok sogðu mönnum fyrir orlög sín, árferð, ok aðra hluti þá er menn vildu vísir verða.⁶⁷

It was the custom at that time that women who were known as *völvur* traveled around the country and told men their fate and the prospect of the season and other things they would like to know.

To say with Jenny Jochens that the passage taps oral tradition about powerful pagan prophetesses in Germanic society is missing the point, apart from being doubtful: similar introductions occur elsewhere in Old Norse literature,⁶⁸ and the author probably gathered his information from there. The real significance of the passage(s) lies in its unequivocal statement that in the author's day (say, the late-thirteenth century), *völvur* were something of the past. That the *völva* had disappeared from society already at an early stage can also be inferred from the Law codes, which contain no stipulations about them. A possible reason may have been that after the conversion they saw themselves confronted, not so much with persecution from the Church, which still had to be organized in the newly converted territories, as with competition from priests, who probably became active in the distribution of apotropaic devices in exchange for

⁶⁶ Ursula Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 1: *Heroic Poems* (London, 1969), p. 58.

⁶⁷ *Two Icelandic Stories. Hreidars þáttir. Orms þáttir*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (London, 1951), p. 69. Translation by Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, p. 116.

⁶⁸ *Norna-Gests þáttir*, ed. Guðbrandr Vigfússon and C.R. Unger, *Flateyjarbók*, 3 vols (Christiania, 1860–68), 1, 346–59, at 358:

Þá fóru þá um landit völvur, er kallaðar vóru spákonur ok spáðu mönnum aldr. Því buðu menn þeim ok gerðu þeim veizlur ok gáfu þeim gjafir at skilnaði.

At that time *völvur* travelled around the country. They were called 'spae-wives' and they foretold people their future. For that reason people used to invite them home and give them hospitality, and they bestowed gifts on them on parting.

money. Kieckhefer has remarked that, up to the thirteenth century at least, 'rural priests seem to have been essentially grass-roots purveyors of ritual, happy to oblige their parishioners with uncritical use of such rites as they could perform'.⁶⁹ In these early days of the Church, priests must have had little means, and it is understandable that within certain limits they boosted their small income by providing people with 'magic' utensils, such as church dust or charms against injuries, for which there was a steady demand. The Church certainly did not approve of this, least of all the use of chrism or consecrated oil for magic purposes, which was repeatedly condemned at synods, but these practices must have been lucrative, and their occurrence difficult to prevent.⁷⁰ That priests could be regarded with superstition has already been mentioned.⁷¹

Things were not much different in newly Christianized areas. Gregory of Tours records a little anecdote of a youth who was cured through a Christian form of amulet, a relic of St Julian in a casket, placed on the youth's head. The use of Christian curative incantations, with as much hocus pocus as any pagan could wish for, was silently sanctioned by Ælfric, with the apparent aim of undermining existing magic practices.⁷² Official condemnation did little to prevent all this from happening, and things were hardly much different in the Scandinavian areas. Chances are that priests entered the *volva's* traditional domain and started to supply the market with apotropaic utensils. In the ensuing competition with the *vplur*, who traditionally had supplied the market with magic, the latter were no match for the priests, who, in the eyes of the villagers at least, were backed by religious as well as worldly authority. Memories of the *volva* may have lived on, just as in some European cultures we still listen to tales about bears and wolves (or witches for that matter) even though the species have long become extinct in the area. It is another matter that as time went by, details were lost and supplanted by features borrowed from Saami magic practices. The tapping on tub-lids (if that is what Ls 24 is about), for instance, may well be of Saami origin,⁷³ and the author of *Vatnsdæla*, in describing the *volva*, even endows her with Saami ethnicity. Also, the Law codes, which are silent about *vplur*, do refer to witches, and treat them on a par with *Finnar*, thus confirming that the latter were more of a reality.⁷⁴ Perhaps the comatose

⁶⁹ Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge Medieval Textbooks (Cambridge, 1989), p. 58.

⁷⁰ J.A. MacCulloch, *Medieval Faith and Fable* (Boston, 1932), p. 21.

⁷¹ In the *Ecclesiastical History* (I.25) Bede reports that King Ethelbert, during his first meeting with Augustine, showed fear lest the preachers of Christianity might resort to magic.

⁷² Valerie J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Oxford, 1991), p. 309.

⁷³ Strömbäck, *Sejd*, p. 24.

⁷⁴ The Law of the Eidsiváþing imposes heavy penalties on people who employ the services of *Finnar* *edá fordæðor*. See *NGL*, ed. J.R. Keyser and P.A. Munch, 5 vols (Christiania, 1846–95), I, 389.

or death-like state in which, according to some Eddic poems, the *völva* sinks back after her recitation, also copies shamanistic Saami practice, but in this case other explanations are possible as well.⁷⁵

What, then, were the *völva*'s features before her disappearance from the stage of history? Our survey of skaldic and Eddic evidence has shown that she was involved in various kinds of magic practice, some of it rather dubious. It is conceivable that some of these women possessed great healing skills. Snorri relates the story of a *völva* called Gróa, who just about succeeded in removing a piece of whetstone from Þórr's head by uttering a magic chant.⁷⁶ The name Gróa was carried also by other *völur*,⁷⁷ which makes it a fair assumption that we are dealing with a descriptive name denoting function. Etymologically the name derives from the same root as ON *gróa* 'to grow', which accords well with the healing skills the story endows her with. Of some interest in this connection is the story of Þormóðr's dying hour, in *Ólaf's saga helga*, when a healer woman approaches the severely wounded skald to locate his wounds:

Hon hafði þar gort í steinkatli, stappat lauk ok önnur grös ok velt þat saman ok gaf at eta inum sárum mönnum ok reyndi svá, hvárt þeir hefði holsár, þvíat kendi af laukinum út ór sári því, er á hol var. Hon bar þat at Þormóði, bað hann eta.⁷⁸

She had made a concoction in a stone kettle in which she had mashed leeks and other herbs and boiled them together, and that she gave the wounded men to eat. In that manner she tried to find out if they had wounds in vital parts, because she could smell the leek through a wound which went into the body cavity. She brought some of it to Þormóðr and told him to eat it.

The diagnosis reflects a fair amount of healing knowledge.⁷⁹ This woman is nowhere called a *völva*, which given the circumstances would have been surprising anyway.⁸⁰ On

⁷⁵ Cf. Judy Quinn, 'A chant came to her lips: Eddic prophecy in the Fornaldarsögur', in *Sagas and the Norwegian Experience*. Preprints of the Tenth International Saga Conference (Trondheim, 1997), pp. 533–42, at 539. It should be noticed that the eleventh-century *Ordo prophetarum* summons historical figures to testify in a way that could easily be interpreted as a kind of necromancy.

⁷⁶ *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 104.

⁷⁷ Hermann Pálsson, *Völuspá* (Reykjavík, 1994), p. 60.

⁷⁸ Snorri Sturluson. *Heimskringla*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 407. Translation by Lee M. Hollander, *Snorri Sturluson, Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway* (Austin, 1964), p. 520.

⁷⁹ The well-attested use of leek as a medical herb led Jutta Schmidt-Lorsen ('Bild Darstellungen auf wikingerzeitlichen Mähnenstuhlpaaren. Ein Diskussionsbeitrag', in *Zum Problem der Deutung frühmittelalterlicher Bildinhalte*, ed. Helmut Roth [Sigmaringen, 1986], pp. 297–302, at 301) into identifying as a *völva* a figure carrying an onion-like plant on a saddle decoration from Mammen. Unfortunately, the identification cannot be proved with certainty.

⁸⁰ It may be noted in passing that Þormóðr, in a gesture reminiscent of Óðinn's act in *Vsp.* 29, presents her with a valuable golden ring, but the resemblance may be coincidence.

an earlier occasion Þormóðr, heavily wounded, had been looked after by Gríma, described as a witch-like woman, but called a good doctor (*leknir góðr*) in the saga.⁸¹ The Law of the Eidsivabing, in a section on pagan practices (I, 45), stipulates fines for women who are found guilty of supplying people with herbs for medical purposes: 'kona hvær, er fær mæð lif oc læz kunna bœta mannum ...',⁸² 'each woman, who deals in (magic) herbs and claims to be able to cure people'.

Whether or not the *völur*, or some of them, committed themselves to primitive health care — primitive in the sense of non-classical — indications are that in the late tenth and early-eleventh century the figure of the *völva* played some role in Nordic society, but it can only have been marginal: a travelling figure without any real power. People may have believed in the powers of these women, and they probably consulted them for healing, sortilege and divination, and they may have purchased potions from them, but they certainly also feared them. Their social status was probably low, their existence not without risks. Pope Gregory VII's letter of 1080 AD indicates that their lives could be in danger if bad weather caused crops to fail, or ships to be lost at sea. If things turned out badly, they were killed, an outcome which accords with the punishment that Friðbjófr bestows on the witches who had tried to sink his ship. That *völur* could fall victim to popular outbursts of violence is further indicated by the nickname *völubríótr* 'witch-destroyer', carried by some men in the tenth century.⁸³ With the coming of Christianity their position deteriorated further. Their activities were now looked upon as pagan, and to make matters worse, they also had to face competition from Christian priests whom the largely only nominally converted villagers, as Gregory's pontifical letter indicates, initially saw as the Christian equivalent of witches. Quite a few early post-Conversion charms and amulets have come to light, and priests, or low-ranking clerics, may have had a hand in their manufacture and distribution, a phenomenon which must have contributed greatly to the *völva*'s disappearance from a changing society.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

The *völva* did not vanish overnight, at least not from literature. There are indications that at a certain stage the figure was adapted for a particular purpose. As shown above, the picture of the *völva* is considerably more positive in the sagas than in poetry. A close reading

⁸¹ *Fóstbraeðra saga*, ed. Björn K. Þóroftsson, ÍF 6 (Reykjavík, 1943), p. 242.

⁸² *NGL*, I, 390.

⁸³ For instance Vémundr, a Norse chieftain in Harðangr (*Snorri Sturluson. Heimskringla*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 102), and Ólafr Ásgeirsson rauðfeldar, a farmer in Svarfaðardalur in Northern Iceland (*Landnámabók* I–III, ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 194).

of the description of the vǫlva in *Eiríks saga* may reveal a possible explanation. Here we read the following intriguing statement: 'She had had nine sisters, and they all had been prophetesses,⁸⁴ but she was the only one left alive'. It is probably the occurrence of the number nine in Old Norse mythology which has led some scholars to believe the sisters to be nine in total.⁸⁵ Such an interpretation, however, lacks a firm basis. The text states clearly and unequivocally that she had had nine sisters and that she was the only one still alive. This makes the detail only more interesting, since Old Norse mythology, unlike the Bible, has no affinity with *ten* as a symbolic number. The feature has been explained in various ways. Ólafur Halldórsson interpreted the fact that Þorbjörg's nine sisters had all died as an indication that a considerable period of time had passed since the colonization of Greenland started,⁸⁶ whereas Nordal, in an attempt to show that Vǫlu-Steinn possessed similar prophetic powers as his mother — the vǫlva Þuríðr, mentioned above — took Þorbjörg's nine sisters as proof that sibylline power was hereditary in the North.⁸⁷

I suggest another solution. In my view the number is probably a reference to the sibyls of Antiquity who are said to have been ten in number. The number occurs several times in Lactantius's *Divinae Institutiones* (1.6), where Varro is mentioned as his source:

'Ceterum Sibyllas decem numero fuisse', easque omnes enumeravit sub auctoribus qui de singulis scriptitaverunt.⁸⁸

He [Varro] says that the Sibyls were ten in number, and he enumerated them all under the writers, who wrote an account of each.

⁸⁴ So AM 544 qv. (*Hauksbók*), dating from the early-fourteenth century. This last detail is missing in the fifteenth-century manuscript AM 557 qv. (*Skálholtsbók*), thought to be closer to the original (Sven B.F. Jansson, *Sagorna om Vinland*, 1: *Handskrifterna till Erik den rödes saga* [Stockholm, 1945], p. 82), but in fact our phrase only elaborates a notion that is already contained *in nuce* in the preceding phrase 'she had had nine sisters', since in Old Norse genealogy female relatives are mentioned only rarely, and only for specific purposes (mostly for establishing lineage to illustrious men of the past).

⁸⁵ P.D. Chantepie de la Saussaye (*The Religion of the Teutons* [Boston, 1902], p. 391) interpretes the phrase as meaning that Þorbjörg was the only one remaining of nine sisters. Hilda Ellis Davidsson (*Gods and Myths of the Viking Age* [New York, 1981], p. 120) similarly interpretes the vǫlva as the last survivor of a company of nine women, as does Helga Kress (*Mátugar meyjar. Íslensk fornþéttmenntasaga* [Reykjavík, 1993], p. 37): 'hún er sú eina á lífi af níu systurum sem allar voru spákonur'. In all instances the error seems unintentional. That it could have serious consequences all the same shows the case of Folke Ström (*Diser, normor, valkyrjor* [Stockholm, 1954], p. 60), who interpreted the presumed number of nine vǫlur as indicative of a connection between the vǫlva and the fertility cult practised in Uppsala every nine years.

⁸⁶ *Eiríks saga rauða. Texti Skálholtsbókar AM 557 4^{vo}*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson (Reykjavík, 1985), p. 356.

⁸⁷ Sigurður Nordal, 'Vǫlu-Steinn', p. 166. Cf. Kees Samplonius, 'From Velede to the Vǫlva. Aspects of Female Divination in Germanic Europe', in *Sanctity and Motherhood. Essays on Holy Mothers in the Middle Ages*, ed. A. Mulder-Bakker (New York etc., 1995), pp. 68–99, at 75, 94.

⁸⁸ *Lactance Institutions divines*, ed. Monat, Pierre, Sources chrétiennes 326 (Paris, 1986), p. 76. Translation by William Fletcher, *The Works of Lactantius* (Edinburgh etc., 1871), pp. 15–16.

The statement recurs in Isidore of Seville's seminal *Etymologiae* (VIII.8.3–7):

Decem autem Sibyllae a doctissimis auctoribus fuisse traduntur ... Celebrior autem inter ceteras ac nobilior Erythraea perhibetur.⁸⁹

Very learned authors relate that there were ten Sibyls ... The Erythraean Sibyl, however, is said to be the most celebrated and famous of them all.

Lactantius's number of ten sibyls is echoed in the medieval Prologue, which in one redaction (represented by the manuscript group ϕ) precedes the text of the Sibylline Oracles, and which can be dated no earlier than the sixth century AD.⁹⁰ These ten sibyls of medieval tradition correspond exactly to Þorbjörg and her nine sisters, a similarity too close to be fortuitous. It should further be noted that the author of *Eiríks saga* uses the prophecy to make the *völva* allude to the coming of a new faith — Christianity — even though she is still unable to identify it.⁹¹ The Greenland setting is depicted as religiously backward, and reminiscently heathen: none of the inhabitants objects to the performance of the *völva*; the Icelanders, on the other hand, all do. Details like these do not fail to leave the impression of a highly un-Christian and even pagan environment, but it is paganism in decline, where people have the greatest difficulty in fulfilling its rituals. Þorbjörg is, indeed, introduced as the last of her kind, a survivor of the heathen past. This last detail could indicate an acquaintance with St Augustine of Hippo, who in his *De civitate Dei* (XVIII.23) acknowledged only one Sibyl, the one who had truly prophesied the advent of Christianity, for which reason he was prepared to give her a place in his City of God:

Haec autem Sibylla sive Erythraeam sive, ut quidam magis credunt, Cumaea ita nihil habet in carmine suo, cuius exigua ista particula est, quod at deorum falsorum sive factorum cultum pertineat, quin immo ita etiam contra eos et contra cultures eorum loquitur, ut in eorum numero videatur, qui pertinent ad civitatem Dei.⁹²

⁸⁹ *Isidorus Hispanensis Etymologiae*, ed. W.M. Lindsay, vol. II (Oxford, 1911).

⁹⁰ J.J. Collins, 'Sibylline Oracles', in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York etc., 1983), pp. 317–472, at 327. A valuable summary of the various aspects of sibylline literature, including a short survey of the main manuscript strands, is found on pp. 317–of this work. For the influence of sibylline tradition in the Latin West, see Bernard McGinn (n. 117) and Peter Dronke (n. 115).

⁹¹ It is thought that the author of the saga had in mind Bishop Brandr of Hólar (d.1201), and bishop Þorlák of Skálholt (d. 1133), both descendants of Guðrīðr. In MS AM 557 qv. (*Skálholtsbók*) no mention is made of the failing power of the *völva*. Here the allusion is tied to Guðrīðr's progeny, over which 'there shall shine a bright light'. However, if we juxtapose this bright [Christian] future to the semi-pagan setting of the prediction, the deliberate contrast is obvious, and suggests a wider perspective.

⁹² *Sancti Aurelii Augustini episcopi. De civitate Dei*, 2 vols (Leipzig, 1877–92), II (*Libri XIV–XXII*), 287. Translation by Whitney J. Oates, *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, 2 vols (New York, 1948), II, 427.

But this Sibyl, whether she is the Erythraean, or, as some rather believe, the Cumaeian, in her whole poem, of which this (*scil.* the Acrostic quoted by A.) is a very small portion, not only has nothing that can relate to the worship of the false or feigned gods, but rather speaks against them and their worshippers in such a way that we might even think she ought to be reckoned among those who belong to the city of God.

In medieval tradition the gift of prophecy the true faith, prior to the advent of Christianity, was attributed to most of the ten sibyls, but as the above passages show, there was a tendency to single out one of them as the sibyl *par excellence*: the Sibyl of Erythraea. We thus read in Lactantius's *De ira Dei* (22.5):

Sibyllas fuisse multas plurimi et maximi auctores tradiderunt ... hi omnes praecipuam et nobilem praeter ceteras Erythraeam fuisse commemorant.⁹³

Many great authors write that there have been many sibyls ... All commemorate the Erythraean as the most excellent and the most respected.

According to some sources, for instance pseudo-Aristoteles, the Sibyl of Erythraea was identical to the Sibyl of Cumae.⁹⁴ Lactantius records that the songs of the Erythraean Sibyl, which Roman legates had been sent to collect, were given a place on the Capitol, but he simultaneously reports that the fate of the Romans was written (*conscripta*) in the books of the Cumaeian Sibyl. All this may have contributed to the slight confusion about the Sibyl's exact identity discernible in Augustine's account, but he clearly regarded this one Sibyl as probably belonging to those who will enter the *civitas Dei*, the Christian community of the elect. Later medieval texts, such as the eleventh-century play *Ordo prophetarum*, based on a pseudo-Augustinian sermon, also display only one righteous proto-Christian Sibyl.⁹⁵ Emile Mâle has pointed out that until the late Middle Ages the only individual sibyl occurring in art was the Erythraean Sibyl.⁹⁶

⁹³ *Caelii Firmiani Lactantii Liber de ira Dei*, ed. Henricus Kraft and Antonia Wlosok, *Texte zur Forschung* 4 (Darmstadt, 1974), p. 72.

⁹⁴ *Sibyllinische Weissagungen*, ed. Alfons Kurfess (Berlin, 1951), p. 14.

⁹⁵ Illustrative in this respect is the *Index Sibyllarum*, a text copied from Hrabanus Maurus's *De Universo*, which in many manuscripts precedes the prophecy of the Tiburtine Sibyl. After recording the sibyls' names and origins, ending with the Tiburtine Sibyl, the *Index* comments: 'Et cuius carminibus multa de Deo et Christo scripta continentur', 'And whose [the Tiburtine Sibyl's] verses contain much written about God and Christ'. In some manuscripts, however, the prediction has been transferred to the Erythraean Sibyl: 'Sane in carminibus quinte Sibille Erithraee multa de Deo et Christo scripta inveniuntur' (*Et sibyllinsk Orakel fra Middelalderen*, ed. A.C. Bang, *Christiana Videnskabselskabs Forhandling* 9 [Christiania, 1882], p. 22) This is a remarkable alteration and a valuable indication of the strength of Augustinian tradition.

⁹⁶ Emile Mâle, *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century* (New York etc., 1972), p. 338.

Therefore, alongside a traditional (encyclopedic) enumeration of ten sibyls, we find a medieval tradition in which allusions to sibylline prophecy are restricted to the Erythraean Sibyl, believed to have foretold true things about the Redeemer. Similarly, Þorbjörg, of all the ten *völur* which the saga mentions, is the only one to prophesy Christianity, which may explain the curious and hitherto unexplained cognomen *litil völua*. Just as prior to the advent of Christianity, the Erythraean Sibyl had prophesied the True Faith, Þorbjörg, on a modest scale, prophesied the coming of Christianity to Greenland, and symbolically to the pagan North.

VÖLUSPÁ 2

A similar construction seems present in *Völuspá*, a view based on a new interpretation of Vsp. 2:

Ek man jotna
ár um borna
þá er forðom mik
fœdda hofðu.
Nío man ek heima
nío íviðjur
mjötvið mæran
fyr mold neðan.

I remember giants, born early in time, who long ago had reared me (*or*: did give me life).
Nine worlds I remember, nine *íviðjur*, the famous tree under the earth.

Enigmatic is *íviðjur* (plural of *íviðja*). The word itself means something like 'giantesses, witches', but contextually this meaning is puzzling. Dronke recently maintained that the nine *íviðjur* are no other than the nine giantesses mentioned in *Hyndluljóð*, where they are said to have born 'one of the races of the divine powers'.⁹⁷ Dronke equates these nine giantesses with the nine sisters who according to the few preserved lines of the poem *Heimdallargaldr* jointly gave birth to the god Heimdallr. As she sees it, Heimdallr denotes the world tree, and his nine mothers must accordingly be the tree's roots. This theory, which was first put forward by Sophus Bugge, and later advocated by Eduard Neumann, has two shortcomings.⁹⁸ First, none of the nine names of the giantesses in *Hyndluljóð* contains elements relating to trees or roots. Dronke discusses the problem at some length,

⁹⁷ Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, II, 109.

⁹⁸ Sophus Bugge, *Studier over de nordiske Gude- og Heltesagns oprindelse*, 2 vols (Christiania, 1889–96), I, 491. Eduard Neumann, *Das Schicksal in der Edda* (Giessen, 1955), p. 89.

without, however, arriving at a satisfactory explanation. Second, these giant girls gave birth 'at the edge of the earth' ('við jarðar þróm'), and not at the centre of it, the place one would expect a world tree to emerge (as would befit a proper *axis mundi*).⁹⁹

Another interpretation is possible. The word *íviðja* occurs also in *Hyndluljóð* (st. 48) as a synonym for giantess. The etymology is uncertain. Some have suggested a connection with OE *inwidde* 'malicious' and ON **ívið* (in *íviðgjarn* 'evil'); others have connected it with *viðr* 'wood'. Whatever the etymology, the fact remains that *íviðjur* can denote giantesses, and as such the word is interpreted by most scholars.

In Old Norse myth the *völva* is associated with the world of giants. *Völuspá* (st. 2) tells us that she was brought up by giants, or, as the word *fæða* can also mean 'to give birth', that she descended from them. Whatever meaning is understood, it remains to be seen to what extent this quality of hers is originally Germanic.¹⁰⁰ In the first Sibylline Oracle the Sibyl describes herself as one of the daughters-in-law of Noah (I, 288–91), whose generation she refers to as of giant race (I, 123–25).¹⁰¹ The notion that long ago the world was inhabited by giants circulated also in early-eleventh century England, as can be gathered from a homily by Ælfric:

Nu [ne] ræde we on bocum þæt man arærde hæþengyld on callum þam fyrste ær Noes flode, oðþæt þa entas worhtan þone [wundorlican] stypel æfter Noes flode, and hym swa feala gecorda God þar forgeaf swa þæra wyrhtena wæs.¹⁰²

Now we do not read in books that man started idolatry in all the time before Noah's flood, till the giants fashioned the wondrous tower after Noah's flood, and God there granted them as many languages as there were builders.

The theme is repeatedly touched upon in Anglo-Saxon poetry, for instance, in less explicit form, in the opening lines of *The Ruin*.¹⁰³ It is probably against the background of such

⁹⁹ Cf. Hermann Schneider (*Die Götter der Germanen* [Tübingen, 1938], p. 91): 'Der Baum des Lebens ist vielen Völkern ein *Weltemittelpunkt*, der Kraft und Leben spendet. Er steht im *Nabel der Erde* und reicht bis zum Himmel empor ...' [my italics].

¹⁰⁰ As mentioned earlier (n. 38), in *Baldur's draumar* a *völva* is scolded for a giantess ('þriggja þursa móðir'), a reference, perhaps, to Angrboða, the giantess who bore Loki three monstrous children. See Friedrich W. Bergmann, *Weggewohnts Lied (Vegtams kvida)*, *Der Odins Raben Orakelsang (Hrafn galdur Odins)* und *Der Seherin Voraussicht (Völuspá)* (Strassburg, 1875), p. 35; and Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, II, 157. The accusation, which seems unfounded, may well be a satiric reference to Vsp. 2.

¹⁰¹ Collins, 'Sibylline Oracles', pp. 337, 341.

¹⁰² *Homilies of Ælfric: A Supplementary Collection*, vol. II: *A Supplementary Collection*, ed. J.C. Pope, EETS OS 260 (Oxford, 1968), p. 680.

¹⁰³ *The Ruin*, ed. G.P. Krapp and E.V.K. Dobbie, ASPR 3, pp. 227–29:

Wrætic is þes wælstan; wyrde gebræcon,
burgstede burston, brosnað enta geweorc. (1–2)

allusions to the 'work of giants' in poetry that Ælfric's reference to Babylon must be seen.¹⁰⁴ In medieval Christian imagery Babylon symbolizes the place of vice and the abode of the non-elect: the *civitas terrena* in which the wandering soul strives for redemption.

It is possible that the motif of the vǫlva's youth among giants touches on the same theme — giants as the lost generation of primordial times — but the reason for using it here was probably a wish to emphasize the vǫlva's great age, and hence her reliability as a witness. Whatever the background of the motif, genuinely Germanic or not,¹⁰⁵ there can be little doubt that in using it the *Vǫluspá* poet linked the vǫlva to the world of the giants. This makes it conceivable that *íviðjur*, as a synonym for giantesses, refers to *vǫlur* here. The nine *íviðjur*, then, stand for nine *vǫlur*, corresponding to Þorbjörg's nine sisters, who are nothing but an imitation of the sibyls of medieval tradition. The fact that the vǫlva remembers them implies that they had gone, which makes her stand out as the one true Sibyl, who, like Augustine's Sibyl, prophesied the coming of Christianity. Similarly, the nine *íviðjur* of *Vǫluspá* may stand for the nine sibyls, who had failed to prophesy the True Faith, which may, or may not account for the somewhat pejorative term *íviðjur*. The vǫlva commemorates them because they, as indicated by the verb *muna*, belong to the past (as they do in *Eiríks saga*, where they are reportedly dead at the time of Þorbjörg's performance).

Splendid is this wall of stone; destroyed by fate, the city buildings have crumbled, the work of giants is rotting away.

Similarly in *The Wanderer* (ASPR 3, pp. 134–37):

Ypde swa þisne eardgeard ælða Scyppend
op þæt burgwara breahtra lease
eald enta geweorc idlu stodun. (85–88)

Thus laid waste this city the Creator of men till bereft of the gay sounds of citizens the ancient structure of the giants stood desolate.

On this theme, see Bernard J. Muir, *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*, 2 vols (Exeter, 1994), II (*Commentary*), 488–95 and 655–60. The discomfort that the Fall brought upon humankind is mirrored in the gloomy reflection on the ruins of that city, but the nostalgia it depicts is not for the city's past meriment. On the contrary, the voice that we hear is of one who has perceived the city's true nature and who longs to go to the New Jerusalem. The theme of the journey from Babylon to Jerusalem will be touched on again below.

¹⁰⁴ The idea was not confined to England. On the continent it occurs in the Middle High German *Anno-lied* (ed. E. Nellmann [Stuttgart, 1975], p. 14), which dates from the mid-eleventh century. Here it is told how long ago Semiramis built Babylon:

Diu alten Babilōnie stiphti si
van cīgelin den alten
die die gīgandī branten. (10, 2–4)

She built ancient Babylon, of the old bricks manufactured by giants.

¹⁰⁵ Interestingly, the *Beowulf* poet also uses the phrase *giganta geweorc* 'manufactured by giants' (1562; to denote a very ancient sword), which shows that he, too, associated the giants with generations long past.

A similar state of affairs probably surrounds the nine worlds which the *völva* remembers. It could be tempting to compare her words with the nine worlds (*heimar*) mentioned in *Gylfaginning* (chs 3 and 34),¹⁰⁶ but the latter echo medieval speculations about the nine types of suffering in Hell for evil souls, as found in Honorius' *Elucidarium*, a popular handbook of theology, which was translated into Icelandic in the twelfth century.¹⁰⁷ Some scholars have tried to identify the nine worlds of Vsp. 2 with the various abodes mentioned in *Snorra Edda*, such as Ásgarðr, Miðgarðr, Vanaheim(a)r, Álfheimr, Jötunheimr, Niflheimr, and so on,¹⁰⁸ but these places are nowhere described in this sense. Moreover, as with *íviðjur*, the verb *muna* implies that these *nío heimar* are something of the past.¹⁰⁹ My suggestion, therefore, is to link the nine worlds which the *völva* commemorates with the ten *saecula* of Roman sibylline tradition. Sibylline literature has been poorly preserved, but the remnants which have come down to us make clear that it recognized ten periods, starting with the paradise, creation, flood, and ending with a restoration of blissful conditions in the tenth period.¹¹⁰ It was in this tenth and last period that the primordial Golden Age would return, preceded, however, by a general degeneration and plunge of the world into chaos.¹¹¹ If we, as advocated above, take *heimar* temporally,

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Ludvig F.A. Wimmer, *Oldnordisk læsebog* (Copenhagen, 1903), p. 155.

¹⁰⁷ A similar classification occurs in Dante's division of Hell into nine; see Konrad Lorenz, *Snorri Sturluson, Gylfaginning. Texte, Übersetzung, Kommentar, Texte zur Forschung* 48 (Darmstadt, 1984), p. 424. The nine realms of the dead mentioned in *Vafþrúðnismál* probably hark back to such medieval speculations about Hell. Cf. Herman Brandes, *Visio Pauli* (Halle, 1885), p. 98; and Jacob Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, vols I–II, 4th edn (Gütersloh, 1876), p. 664.

¹⁰⁸ *Edda. Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Faulkes, p. 106; and *Vafþrúðnismál*, ed. Tim William Machen, *Durham Medieval Texts* 6 (Durham, 1988), p. 87.

¹⁰⁹ Bugge, *Studier over de nordiske Gude- og Heltesagns oprindelse*, I, 491; Peter Schjødt, 'Nío man ec heima, nío íviði, mjötvíð mæran fyr mold neðan', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 107 (1992), 156–66, at 157. The nine heavens found in a thirteenth-century list of *Himins heiti*, and interpreted by some (Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, II, 110) as a reflex of genuinely Germanic myth, probably reflect Christian speculations. Cf. Reinbot of Durne's *Georg*, written by about 1240 AD (*Der heilige Georg Reinbots von Durne*, ed. C. von Kraus, *Germanische Bibliothek* 3,1 [Heidelberg, 1907]; Herbert Kolb, 'Der ware Elicon', *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 41 [1967], 1–26, at 6:

Höher künic Altissimus
in dem niunden himel oben. (3818–19)

The idea harks back to Antiquity, from where it found its way into both Western and Eastern Christianity. Cf. Jacob Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, vol. III: *Nachträge und Anhang*, 4th edn (Gütersloh, 1877), p. 237; Vilhelm Schneemelcher, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen*, vol. II: *Apostolisches. Apokalypsen und Verwandtes* (Tübingen, 1989), p. 633.

¹¹⁰ Rob Brouwer, *Aurea aetas* (Culemborg, 1976), p. 108; Collins, *Sibylline Oracles*, p. 323.

¹¹¹ The theme enjoyed ample diffusion in late Antiquity: Servius comments (*ad Eclogue* IX, 46) that an Etruscan diviner Volcatius interpreted the *Iulium sidus* as a sign that Rome's tenth *saeculum*, the golden Age of Apollo, was about to begin. Delivered under the similitude of a dream, the doctrine of cosmic world ages found its way into the *Tiburtine Sibyl*, a late sibylline text, but apart from Augustine's cento the

as successive periods of time, then the statement of the *völva* would fit in exactly with sibylline tradition. Nine periods have passed by the time the *völva* starts her song. She recalls what has happened, and how it all came to an end, and then proceeds to sketch the Last Battle and the new world, the New Jerusalem that will emerge.

SIBYLLINE LITERATURE IN THE WEST

Rydberg and others have objected that sibylline literature was almost totally unknown in tenth-century Western Europe, which, it was claimed, excludes the possibility of *Völuspá* being indebted to it. The argument, which constituted Rydberg's main defence against Bang's thesis of a Christian influenced *Völuspá*, has lost much of its weight since the find of a probably seventh-century Latin sibylline prophecy, *Mundus origo mea*, preserved in three manuscripts, two of which date from the ninth century. As Dronke points out, the prophecy's unusual theology and vitality of idiom shows it to be a fresh creation within a living sibylline tradition, not an isolated antiquarian work.¹¹² The observation is weighty, because the more we reckon with individual genius, the less we are obliged to look for corresponding models in order to assume that the poet, in composing *Völuspá*, was influenced by sibylline traditions. In the Latin Middle Ages, the knowledge of sibylline tradition, though less prominent than in Antiquity, was never entirely lost.

In his *Civitas Dei* (xviii.23) Augustine records in Latin twenty-seven acrostic verses about the signs of Judgement, *Iudicii signum*, translated from Book VIII of the *Oracula Sibyllina*. The acrostic, which was musically versified into a *Cantus Sibyllae*, was most influential in conveying sibylline tradition to the Latin West. The verses *Iudicii signum* were incorporated in the pseudo-Augustinian sermon *Contra Iudaos*, thought to have been composed in the fifth or sixth century.¹¹³ This spurious sermon, which in slightly abbreviated form came to serve as a liturgical lectio,¹¹⁴ gave rise to the prophet-play *Ordo prophetarum*, known to have been performed at eight centres in Northern

only one to develop into a medieval tradition of its own. See Wilhelm Bousset, *Die Himmelsreise der Seele* (Darmstadt, 1960), p. 53.

¹¹² Dronke, 'Völuspá and Sibylline traditions', p. 9. Of special interest are lines 56–58, in which the sibyl, in words reminiscent of the end of Book VII, tells us that she expects fire, and that she will be burnt twice (57–58), but also, in the foregoing line 56, that she knows that her form will return to her.

¹¹³ In the sermon a procession of pagan and Old Testamental figures, each of them distinguished by an iconographic feature, and individually introduced by the formula 'dic et tu ...' ('Speak thou ...'), delivered a prophetic message relative to the coming of Christ. The most important of these witnesses, and the last to deliver its prophecy (the acrostic *Iudicii signum*), was the Sibyl.

¹¹⁴ Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1933; repr., corr. 1962), II, 125.

Europe,¹¹⁵ from the late-eleventh to the fourteenth century. Another strand of sibylline tradition consisted of texts collected from Lactantius's *Divinae institutiones*, and presented under the heading *Dicta Sibyllae magae* in the manuscripts, often in combination with the *Mundus origo mea*, sometimes also with the pseudo-Augustinian sermon, *Contra Judeos*.

There were accordingly several routes along which knowledge of sibylline traditions could filter through to the *Völuspá* poet. Apart from the *Dicta*, the *Tiburтина* and the *Mundus origo mea*, the voice of the Sibyl is heard in the *Cantus*, the *Sermo*, and the *Ordo*. The latter three differ in that they were recited aloud, a circumstance which implies a larger audience and a greater diffusion than would ever be the case with texts meant to be read individually. From the late-ninth century we have a melody for the *Cantus* notated in liturgical manuscripts, but as to its performance we lack specific information, as Peter Dronke maintains:

Did the singer in the ninth or tenth century enact the Sibyl's rôle, or only sing it? Was the music performed by 'a choirboy in womanly dress, wearing a robe with sleeves slit to the shoulders, richly embroidered in Oriental taste? Did he arrive at the cathedral ... finely painted and mounted on a well-caparisoned horse, with a great retinue of children and drummers, psalteries, trumpets, tambourines and rebecs?' These are quotations from two much later descriptions of the Sibyl's song. It is tempting to suppose that similar vitality of performance already existed in the earliest periods, though about this we lack specific documentation.¹¹⁶

Apart from the encyclopedic summaries in Isidore of Seville and Hrabanus Maurus and apart from the evidence provided by the manuscripts themselves, medieval knowledge of sibylline tradition can be inferred from occasional references. In Merovingian France, an acquaintance with the Sibyl can be concluded from the so-called *Pseudo-Fredegar*, a chronicle of the mid-seventh century, whereas for Carolingian times scholars have pointed to Druthmar of Corvai and Freculph of Lisieux, both of which cite the Sibyl.¹¹⁷ As for England, familiarity with the figure is recorded in Anglo-Saxon times for both Aldhelm (d. 709) and Ælfric, and later, in the twelfth century, also for John of Salisbury and Geoffrey of Monmouth. Francoise Henry has

¹¹⁵ Peter Dronke, 'Hermes and the Sibyls: Continuations and Creations', in *Intellectuals and Poets in Medieval Europe*, *Storia e Letteratura* 183 (Rome, 1992), pp. 219–44, at 229.

¹¹⁶ Dronke, 'Hermes and the Sibyls', p. 227.

¹¹⁷ Bernard McGinn, 'Teste David cum Sibylla: the Significance of the Sibylline Tradition in the Middle Ages', in *Women of the Medieval World: Essays in Honor of John H. Mundy*, ed. J. Kirshner and S.F. Wemple (Oxford, 1985) pp. 7–35, at 18; repr. in McGinn, *Apocalypticism in the Western Tradition* (Aldershot, 1994), Text IV. For sibylline influence in Geoffrey of Monmouth, see Sophus Bugge, 'Nogle bemærkninger om Sibyllinerne og Völuspá', *Nordisk Tidsskrift* 4 (1881), 163–72, at 169.

suggested that in Ireland the prophet role of the Sibyl was well-known already in the early-tenth century.¹¹⁸

Did the *Völuspá* poet have knowledge of sibylline literature? We will never know with certainty — evidence for textual borrowing is simply inconclusive¹¹⁹ — but there can be little doubt that knowledge of it had spread to the West well before the turn of the millennium, and I see no reason to deny him access to it.

The composition of *Völuspá* must have changed the status of the *völva* positively, though this upgraded status may have been confined to the area of literature. The date of *Völuspá* is uncertain, but the poem was undoubtedly composed well before the thirteenth century, the time of saga-writing, and influence of the poem may account for the more or less respectful attitude towards the *völva* in some of the sagas. Actually, this need not surprise us. Nordal was probably right in suggesting that the *völva*'s name *Heiðr*, found in *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Órvar-Odds saga*, can be traced back to *Völuspá*.¹²⁰ The influence of the poem may explain the ambivalent attitude on the part of the saga author, who saw himself confronted with two different aspects of the *völva*: on the one hand a dubious figure of pagan times whose legacy lingered on in poetry; on the other a respectful figure who had predicted the True Faith. In the sagas the latter dominates, which may give us an explanation as to why the author of *Kormáks saga* declined to use the word *völva* for a woman who was practising magic.

¹¹⁸ Françoise Henry, *Irish Art during the Viking Invasions* (Ithaca, 1967), p. 173. The argument is based on her analysis of the Last Judgement scenes depicted on Muiredach's Cross at Monasterboice. Here, at the centre of the cross-piece, we find Christ standing in judgement, with on his left the seated David playing his harp, and on his right a fluting figure, whom Henry identified with the Erythraean Sibyl. The identification would provide further evidence for the figure's diffusion, but recently Peter Harbison has expressed doubts about the identification, which, therefore, must remain open (*The high crosses of Ireland: an iconographical and photographic survey*, vol. 1 (Bonn, 1992), p. 298). That early-medieval Ireland was not wholly ignorant of the Erythraean Sibyl is proved by a gloss on Servius in a ninth-century Irish manuscript (Codex Bernensis 363), in which reference is made to a certain *mac Giallái*n (probably the deacon Niall *mac Giallain*, d. 854 or 858), said to have known the figure (Whitley Stokes and John Strachan, *Thesaurus paleohibernicus. A Collection of Old-Irish Glosses, Scholia, Prose and Verse*, 2 vols (Dublin, 1903; repr. 1975), II, 235. I am indebted to Dr Cees Veelen-turf for directing my attention to the passage.

¹¹⁹ Interestingly, in *Völuspá* two different, yet converging motifs have been superimposed: we have, on the one hand, a seeress, whose gift enables us to learn about the future, and, on the other, a necromantic act of some kind (cf. Vsp. 66/8) to the same purpose. A similar combination is found in *Ordo prophetarum*, but with a difference. The *Ordo* tries to show that knowledge of the True Faith was available prior to the coming of Christ, which makes the combination preconditional to the play's structure. In *Völuspá*, no such combination is required, which might suggest that our poet was indebted to the *Ordo*, or a text similar to it.

¹²⁰ *Völuspá*, ed. Nordal, p. 81.

THE VÖLVA OF VÖLUSPÁ: AD HIERUSALEM A BABYLONIA?

It remains to discuss the vǫlva as a vehicle of the divine things revealed in *Völuspá*. The fact that we identified the female speaker as a vǫlva makes it necessary to define her relation to the vǫlva of stanza 22. We are confronted with a problem here. Is the witch-like figure of this stanza compatible with the vǫlva reciting the poem, and if so, how do we explain the seemingly incongruent pictures which the poet presents to us? By summing up her various uses of magic the poet effectively leaves us with the picture of a morally dubious figure, whereas the present vǫlva, as described in the poem's opening stanza, proceeds in an atmosphere of high social prestige, addressing as she does the assembly of men and gods. On the one hand, we have the impressive vǫlva of more than human stature — a figure who apparently belongs to both the past and the present-day world of the audience, the end of which she solemnly foretells — on the other, a witch-like creature of low prestige. How do we reconcile these different statures? Critics have not dwelt on the contrast,¹²¹ nor explained it satisfactorily. An easy way out was attempted by Wilken, who argued that the two vǫlva's have nothing to do with each other.¹²² This would remove the problem indeed, but it would be surprising if the explicit reference to the vǫlva's vices in Vsp. 22 would be void of meaning, the speaker being a vǫlva herself. Perhaps therefore, a new line of interpretation might be suggested.

In order to understand the incongruity, it must be viewed in a wider perspective. In itself it is not extraordinary that a fictional speaker or singer introduces a fellow bard in his song. Two poets commonly regarded as traditional, Homer and the *Beowulf* poet, sing in their songs of counterpart singers on the distant scene they sing of, and by doing so make us draw the conclusion that they, the present poets, derive their story from those distant poets who were with the heroes of the past. The trick, Robert Creed says, is to get us believe in the connection between the present poet and the past one in the tale we are listening to.¹²³ If we read *Völuspá* with Creed's findings in mind, we become aware of the fact that the vǫlva we are listening to — the *present poet* in Creed's terminology — has been around since the earth's early days. We are even in the com-

¹²¹ The exception being Dronke (*The Poetic Edda*, II, 99), but her solution of three competing sibyls, though stimulating, builds on premises that I find difficult to subscribe to.

¹²² Ernst Wilken, 'Zur Ordnung der *Völuspá*', *ZfdPh* 30 (1898), 448–86, at 462.

¹²³ Robert Creed, 'Widsith's Journey Through Germanic Tradition', in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation*, ed. L.E. Nicholson and D. Warwick Frese (Notre Dame, 1975), pp. 376–87, at 382. Similar structures can be found elsewhere in Old Germanic literature. It is clearly present in the Old English *Widsið* and, excessively even, the Old Norse *Norna-Gests þáttur*, where it has been oddly combined with the Melca-ger motif.

fortable position of not having to argue a connection between the female singer/speaker and the past of which she speaks, since the poet has made the link explicitly clear by the vǫlva's act of remembrance in the second stanza. The *Vǫluspá* poet differs from Homer and the *Beowulf* poet insofar that he turns the vǫlva's memories into a pattern of retrospection of world history. The poet may have been helped by the motif of the prophetess's old age — a traditional one in sibylline literature (Heraclite uses it, as does Virgil, whose Cumaean Sibyl is explicitly called *longaeva*) — but if the poet found it in his sources, he has used it with great artistic skill. Glimpses of the poet's ideological scheme can be divined by studying the way in which he presents the stages of human history, one of which is addressed in our stanza 22. Here, having described the creation of the world and its inhabitants, ending with the portentous picture of the Nornes' arrival, the poet suddenly alludes to the rise of pagan practices in society, providing a catalogue of the vǫlva's skills and actions.

If, as argued earlier, Vsp. 21–22 constitutes a *hysteron proteron*,¹²⁴ then Vsp. 22, in terms of naturalistic time sequence, must precede the events of stanza 21. To assume a narrative coherence — as nearly all critics have tended to — allows us to identify the vǫlva of Vsp. 22 with the burned *Gullveig* of Vsp. 21. This in turn, confirms our above impression of different, yet converging time-levels in the poem, since the poet explicitly informs us that she (*Gullveig*/*Heiðr*), despite her ordeal, is still alive, thereby drawing yet another link between past and present. The identification of *Gullveig* with *Heiðr*, however, requires at least some explanation of how the two stanzas belong together. It must be pointed out in this connection that the *Vǫluspá* situation differs from that found in the *Iliad* or *Beowulf* in that the latter poets, by introducing counterpart singers, suggest not merely continuity, but a continuity that is principally unchanged: the present singer, it seems, can shade into the past one of his tale. In *Vǫluspá*, on the other hand, the present singer, the vǫlva, differs fundamentally from the past one in her tale, and the connection between past and present which the poet seems eager to emphasize is characterized by a remarkable change of stature. As the poet explicitly connects the present vǫlva with the past vǫlva (Vsp. 2) and simultaneously, by remarking that she is still alive, links the witch-like vǫlva of Vsp. 22 to the present time of the poet and his audience, the conclusion appears to be that at one stage the vǫlva of the past was transformed into the present speaker. With the metamorphosis of the earlier into the present vǫlva, the latter has gained the towering prestige which we find her endowed with in the poem's opening lines, where she addresses gods and men with a solemn 'I'. The former witch of individual magic has grown into a figure of revelation to the converted Christian society of which the audience forms a

¹²⁴ Karl Müllenhoff, *Deutsche Altertumskunde*, vol. v (Berlin, 1908), p. 97.

part. An indication that the vǫlva of Vsp. 22 is no other than the fictional speaker of the poem appears to be the adverbial *vel*, the use of which characterizes the performance of both the former (*velspá*) and the present vǫlva (*vel fyrtelja*). It is even possible that the word *velspá*, the only positive quality of the earlier vǫlva, gives us a clue of how the metamorphose came about.

It may be pushing the evidence too far, but the treatment which Gullveig suffers in Vsp. 21 seems to resemble in many respects the torture to which some of the Christian saints are subjected in hagiographic tradition. Gullveig is stabbed with spears and burned, but all to no avail. Similarly, medieval saints were tortured because they refused to denounce the True Faith. Often the torture to which they were subjected had little effect, and like Gullveig the saints survive initially, though mostly they perish in the end, as required for martyrdom. We thus find the same ingredients of stabbing and burning, as well as, and above all, immunity from fire. The resemblance does not, however, stop here. The phrase 'þó hon enn lifir', 'yet, she still lives' is remarkably reminiscent of the afterlife that saints were thought to enjoy after their glorious martyr deaths. One wonders whether it is possible that the vǫlva, too, was tortured because of something she had said or testified to. It is in this connection that the word *velspá* deserves special attention, the one positive quality we find her endowed with in Vsp. 22. Is it conceivable that her power of prophecy made her, like the pagan sibyl of Antiquity, conceive a vision of the True Faith,¹²⁵ and that her public announcement of it provoked a hostile reaction against her? Standing firm to her vision, she survives the ordeal of fire and iron, and unharmed she grows in stature, evolving to a new person, that of the present vǫlva. Such an interpretation would reconcile the seemingly incompatible statures of the vǫlva of Vsp. 22 and the vǫlva reciting the poem, and turn them into a story of vision and conversion, thus providing the stanzas Vsp. 21–22 with an unexpected internal cohesion. Stabbing and burning were a regular part of the torture some female martyrs were subjected to, as recorded, for example, in the ninth-century *Song of St Eulalia*, written in the vernacular in Northern France.¹²⁶ St Eulalia was venerated in England at an early date. She is mentioned by Aldhelm, and by Bede in his hymn to St Etheldreda: 'Scorched by fierce flame, Eulalia endures'. The combination of burning and stabbing, the first of which proves unsuccessful, appears to be a stand-

¹²⁵ Cf. Vsp. 31/1–4, where she refers to Balder as a blood-stained sacrifice. Blood is the origin of Christian salvation. Is it possible that the vǫlva recalls her former vision here?

¹²⁶ *Song of St Eulalia*, ed. Karl Bartsch and Leo Wiese, Chrestomatie de l'ancien français, 12th edn (Leipzig, 1927), p. 4. An incomplete English translation can be found in: Elisabeth Pendreigh Work, *The Foundations of Vernacular Eloquence in Gallo-Romance from the Song of St Eulalia to the Song of Saint Fides* (Ann Arbor, 1982), p. 118. Eulalia's life-story was versified by Prudentius in *Peristephanon Liber*, ed. and trans. H.J. Thompson, 2 vols, 2nd edn (London, 1961), I, 98–345, at 142–56.

ing motif in the *passio* of many female saints.¹²⁷ An illuminating example occurs in the Life of St Agnes, of which we have at least two tenth-century Latin accounts, one of them by Flodoard, Canon of Rheims,¹²⁸ and vernacular versions from the turn of the millennium. It is unlikely that the Old Norse translation existed at the time *Völuspá* was composed, but the Old English translation found in Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*, contains the same details of burning and stabbing.¹²⁹

The similarity is remarkable and hardly coincidental. There is a fair possibility that the picture presented in Vsp. 21 owes a great deal to medieval hagiography, though the extent of the influence is hard to define. Theoretically, the influence need not have been more than a distorted saint's life of the above kind, the details of which may have been borrowed independently of their hagiographic context. It is more likely, however, that the poet knew the context from which he was borrowing. An explanation of this kind would provide the stanza with a coherent meaning, and there is every reason for arguing that some if not most features of Vsp. 21 must be explained along these lines.

There is no need, however, to assume that the motif, as presented in the stanza, is merely a calque on the torture of some female martyrs, as described in Christian hagiography. The killing of Gullveig was probably not a device of the poet's own making. He may have endowed the story with features that helped him to incorporate it in the poem in the way we find it presented there, but the story itself may well have been part of his native tradition. For similar reasons, he may have emphasized features that were already present in his source. Those aspects which (as in Vsp. 22) were met with a similar moral response in both Christian and heathen tradition, such as magic and sorcery must have been particularly suitable. One such example is the motif of the seeress's initial wickedness, displayed in Vsp. 22, which also occurs in sibylline literature. In

¹²⁷ See, for instance, the Lives of St Lucia and St Juliana.

¹²⁸ PL 135, 744-48.

¹²⁹ Ælfric's *Lives of the Saints*, ed. Walter W. Skeat, EETS OS 76 (London, 1881), p. 184. The Old Norse text describes her ordeal as follows:

En Aspasius domandi let kynda eld mikinn i augliti lydsins ok let kasta meyiunni i logann midian. En er þat var giort, þa skiptiz loginn i tvo stadi ok brendi lydinn a hvoratveggja hond, en hana sakadi ekki hitinn þess at helldr. En blotmenn (sogdu) þetta (af) fiolkyngi hennar. (*Heilagra Manna sögur*, ed. C.R. Unger, 2 vols [Christiania, 1877], 1, 20-21).

Aspasius, the Judge, bade men kindle a very great fire in front of the people, and had the girl thrown into the midst of the flame. When that was done, the flame divided itself into two parts, and burned up the people on both sides, whereas she stood unharmed in the heat. But the idolaters said this be due to her witchcraft.

When the torture continues, Agnes extinguishes the fire through prayer. The outraged judge has her stabbed with a spear ('let spíoti leggja i briost meyarinnar'), whereupon the girl dies. At a vigil at her grave, they see a light in the air and a flock of girls wearing cloths of gold thread ('skryddar gullofnum cleðom').

Book II (339–47) of the Sibylline Oracles, the seeress calls herself an ill-minded sinner who has committed shameless deeds, and in Book VII (151–55) she recalls the evils and many other lawless things which she formerly did, and resolves:

Therefore fire has eaten and will devour me again.
For I myself will not live, but an evil time will kill me,
when men who pass by will fashion a grave for me by the sea;
and they will destroy me with stones,
for when I was speaking to the Father
he communicated to me the dear Son.
May you stone me! Stone me all of you
For thus will I live and fix my eyes on heaven.¹³⁰

These last lines of Book VII leave us with the impression of a seeress who has sinned gravely, and who now, having seen the True Faith, sorrowfully hopes to atone for her deeds by suffering a martyr's death. This interpretation accords with my explanation of Vsp. 22, even though the throwing of stones has been replaced by stabbing and burning, a mode of torture dominant in later hagiographic tradition. As there are no signs that Book VII was known in the Latin West, direct influence is unlikely, but the quoted passage shows us where to look for an explanation.

It is here the name *Gullveig* comes into play. Some hundred years ago Wilken, followed by Mogk, dismissed the idea that the name, in itself, could be of any significance, remarking that a king called Friedrich was not necessarily a man of peace either.¹³¹ Such rhetoric is unfounded, however. Compound names with a first element *gold* occur in Old High German and Old English, but in Old Norse only very rarely. If such a name crops up in Old Norse we may reasonably consider that it was designed for a special effect. We should, therefore, not refrain from using the name if doing so leads to a better understanding of the stanza. Unfortunately, the meaning of *Gullveig* is ambiguous, since gold traditionally symbolizes not only purity, but also human avarice and desire, qualities which inevitably corrupt the soul. Consequently, the name can be interpreted in various ways. It may hint at the shining of light and brightness with which martyrs were sometimes associated in hagiographic writing — which would accord neatly with our above remarks about stabbing and burning — but it is also possible that the *Völuspá* poet was thinking of one of the most extreme personifications of sin which the Middle Ages knew: the Great Harlot of Babylon, the symbol of fornication. Following a lead by Bugge, Elard Hugo Meyer has suggested

¹³⁰ Collins, 'Sibylline Oracles', p. 414.

¹³¹ Wilken, 'Zur Ordnung der *Völuspá*', p. 480; Eugen Mogk, *Zur Gigantomachie der Völuspá* (Helsinki, 1924), p. 4.

that the second element *-veig*, which he regarded as ON *veig* (f) 'strong drink', derived from Old English *wæg(e)* 'cup'.¹³² The argument was that if *-veig* stood for 'cup', *gullveig* might be a rendering of *poculum aureum*, the main attribute of the Harlot in medieval tradition.¹³³ Scholars did not take much notice of Meyer's suggestion, which suffered further from the fact that Bugge himself shortly afterwards abandoned the idea of ON *veig* being a loan from Old English.¹³⁴ However, to regard *Gullveig* as a calque on *poculum aureum* does not require ON *veig* to be a loan-word, and speculative as Meyer's suggestion might be, it is not without merit. After all, the Erythraean Sibyl reportedly came from Babylon, an origin mentioned by Pausanias (x.12), Lactantius, Isidore of Seville, and others.

Even without such considerations, it is possible to assume that the *Völuspá* poet, in depicting her fate, was referring to the martyr quality of the seeress, as well as to her shameful behaviour of earlier days. If thoughts about the seeress's initial sins crossed the poet's mind, then he may have chosen the name *Gullveig* deliberately, as a play on the Harlot's *poculum aureum*. In doing so he stressed the *völva*'s progression from the secular level toward the spiritual, or, in terms of character display, the transformation of the sinful seeress into one testifying to the Truth, for which she, like the Sibyl of Book VII, suffered persecution. The relation between the early and the later sibyl/*völva* would then correspond to the contrast between Babylon the Great, and the New Jerusalem, antithetic to it. The opposition between the two was traditional in the Middle Ages, and the thought of one almost immediately led to the other. *Völuspá* differs insofar as the poet combined the two figures into one, thus reducing the contrast between opposite figures to one of different stages of growth and spiritual perception: the seeress, for all her sins, transmutes into a figure of Truth. A similar combination of Babylon and Jerusalem in one person, that of an initially sinful woman who is converted, occurs in Hermann of Reichenau's account of Mary Magdalene.¹³⁵ There are some differences,

¹³² Bugge, *Studier over de nordiske Gude- og Heltesagns oprindelse*, 1, 6; Elard Hugo Meyer, *Völuspá. Eine Untersuchung* (Berlin, 1889), p. 96

¹³³ The source of this picture was, of course, Revelation 17.4, in which mention is made of a woman 'habens poculum aureum in manu sua, plenum abominatione, et immunditia fornicationis ejus', 'holding a golden cup in her hand, full of abomination and uncleanness of her fornication'.

¹³⁴ Bugge claims (*Studier*, p. 542): 'Imod at oldn. *veig* "stark drikk" skulde være Laanord fra Angelsaksisk, taler det nu i norske Dialekter brugelige *veigja* "Saft"'. As the last part of Bugge's book was considerably delayed, Meyer could not have knowledge of Bugge's new view on Old Norse *veig*.

¹³⁵ Mary is portrayed as a whore from Babylon, whose perverse pleasures are listed in some detail, but whose eyes are opened on meeting Christ. See Peter Dronke, *The Medieval Lyric*, 2nd edn (London, 1978), pp. 44–47; Richard K. Emmerson, 'Introduction: The Apocalypse in Medieval Culture', in *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, ed. Emmerson and B. McGinn, (Ithaca etc., 1992), pp. 293–332, at 322. On the figure of Mary Magdalene in medieval drama, see Peter Dronke, 'Laments of the Maries: From the Beginnings to the Mystery Plays', in *Idee, Gestalt, Geschichte*, ed. Weber, pp. 89–116.

one of them being that in *Vþluspá* the figure of the penitent female sinner is part of the poem's framework, and her life-story, though repeatedly touched on, nowhere takes precedence over her narrative function of conveying knowledge of things past and future. The roughly contemporary but unconnected case of Hermann of Reichenau (d. 1054 AD) shows that around the time in which *Vþluspá* was composed, say the late-tenth or the early-eleventh century, there was some currency in the idea of portraying the early wrongs of a converted female sinner in terms reminiscent of the Great Harlot. The idea is of course not as explicit in *Vþluspá* as it is in Hermann of Reichenau, but acceptance of it would not only explain the name *Gullveig* in Vsp. 22, but also place the change of the seeress's stature in a wider perspective: *ad Hierusalem a Babylonia* (to use Abelard's words).¹³⁶ This interpretation is admittedly rather daring, but it does account for the textual and verbal connotations no less satisfactorily than much that has been written on Vsp. 22. After all, the biblical Apocalypse in which the portrait of the Harlot is contained had an enormous influence on many areas of medieval culture. It could be added that the apple which Eve persuaded Adam to eat was expressed figuratively as a drink,¹³⁷ symbolized as a cup of death, *poculum morti* — death as the result of primordial sin — imagery which naturally touched on the cup of the Whore, with the result that already at an early stage the two were identified with each other in commentaries on the Scripture.¹³⁸

What meaning exactly the poet attributed to the name we will never know, especially as it may have been more than one. It is probably wise not to rely too heavily on the interpretation of *Gullveig* as a pun on the Harlot's golden cup. Nor is there any

¹³⁶ In *Sabbato ad Vesperas*, in *Mediaeval Latin Lyrics*, ed. Helen Waddell, 4th edn (London, 1935), p. 164.

¹³⁷ The theme is richly developed in the Old English *Guthlac B* (ASPR 3, pp. 72–88)

Nænig monna wæs
of þam sigetudre sibþan æfre
godes willan þæs georn, ne gynnwised,
þæt he bibugan mæge þone bitran drync
þone Eue fyrm Adame geaf,
byrclade bryd geong. (865b–70a)

Ever afterwards, there was no man from that distinguished stock so zealous in the will of God or so amply instructed that he may avoid the bitter drink which Eve the young bride gave and served up to Adam of old. (Translation S.A.J. Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* [London, 1982], p. 271)

¹³⁸ Thus Gregory writes in his seminal *Moralia in Job*, xxxiv.15:

Calix aureus dicitur, quia dum pulchra esse temporalia ostendat, stultas mentes in sua concupiscentia debriat, ut speciosa temporalia appetant, et invisibilia pulchra contemnunt. *Hoc aureo calice prima sponte sua Eva debriata est*, de qua historia veritatis dicit ... (my italics; PL 76, 733)

See Ute Schwab, 'Eva reicht den Todesbecher. Zur Trinkmetaphorik in altenglischen Darstellungen des Sündenfalles', in *Atti dell'Accademia Peloritana*, Classe di Lettere Filosofia e Belle Arti 51 (Messina, 1974), pp. 7–108, at 28.

need to: even if we dismiss any direct association of the name with the Harlot, there is still sufficient ground for interpreting the vǫlva's ordeal in Vsp. 21 as a stage in a spiritual progression of what I labelled 'ad Hierusalem a Babylonia'. As the hagiographic features of the stanza make clear, the idea is in no way dependent on the name's etymology.

CONCLUSION

A survey of the various data concerned with the Old Norse vǫlva and analogue figures leads to the following conclusions:

1. The figure was indigenous in the North, but in the tenth century she was associated with magic, and her status was low. She certainly existed prior to the composition of *Vǫluspá*, but as a pitiable witch-like figure without the elevated stature which some scholars have been eager to discern.
2. The composition of *Vǫluspá* influenced the status of the vǫlva in Old Norse literature, especially prose. Authors may have had ambiguous ideas about her, but they no longer associated her with magic. Instead, the emphasis is on her prophetic capacity: 'Saga mun sannaz, sú er vǫlva segir'.
3. To convey his message, the *Vǫluspá* poet remodelled the vǫlva in such a way as to make her the equivalent of the sibyls of Antiquity as preserved in medieval tradition.
4. The different stature of the vǫlva in Vsp. 22, as distinct from Vsp. 1, can be viewed as a stage in a process of spiritual growth: the sinful seeress transmuted to bear testimony to the True Faith. To signal the turning-point (or rather the confrontation with ruling conventions that followed it), the poet endowed her with features borrowed from Christian hagiography.

This interpretation implies a thoroughly Christian background of *Vǫluspá*. Already the phrase 'meiri ok minni', in the opening stanza of the poem, articulates the very Christian idea that at the Final Judgement no difference will be made between poor and rich, each man being judged according to *opera sua*. The same applies to the poem's concluding stanza, with its sudden focus on the dragon, a feature which has puzzled generations of scholars, but which might evoke the Christian belief that the Last Judgement will not terminate the punishments of Hell. On the contrary, the

torment, institutionalized now, will continue to exist ever after, to the delight of the righteous (as Honorius has it).¹³⁹

The question remains: can such an elaborate frame of Christian references have been intelligible to the listeners? The audience's understanding of the poem must have varied greatly, depending on the individual ability to recognize and relate to congruent structures. Some listeners may have picked up references and codes that were missed by others. This also holds for the poet's art of integrating different contents: on the one hand the plain narrative, pagan in its subject matter, on the other the underlying Christian symbolism.¹⁴⁰ We probably have to allow for several levels of understanding in the poem, each of them with its own set of references, and it is at the intersection of these frames of references that the poet sometimes uses names or phrases that seem deliberately ambiguous, such as *Askr* and *Embla* (reminiscent of *Adam* and *Eve*), or *áþekkr* (as a play upon *Þökk*, in Dronke's interpretation).¹⁴¹ To assume complementary exegetic levels in the structure of the poem is conventional, and it certainly is not out of touch with medieval practice. The ninth-century *Vita Sancti Remigii* by Hincmar of Reims, for instance, consists of different parts intended for different audiences. The common people were to hear about miracles, healings, assistance and other manifestations of sainthood, whereas the chapters intended for the educated use the same events for moral edification.¹⁴² In *Völuspá* we have not separated texts for different audiences, but one text with different sets of references, matching different levels of auditory perception. It is along these lines, I suggest, that the seemingly bizarre concurrence of pagan and Christian elements in *Völuspá* must be explained.

¹³⁹ The juxtaposition of reward and punishment at the Last Judgement is a common Christian motif, both in literature and iconography. The thought is articulated by Prudentius in Hymn XI of *Cathemerinon Liber* (ed. and trans. H.J. Thompson, 1, 100–03):

Insignis ipse et praeminens
meritis rependet congrua,
his lucis usum perpetis,
illis Gehennam et Tartarum. (109–12)

He himself, raised in eminence above all, shall requite each according to his deserts, giving these to enjoy unending light, those to suffer hell and Tartarus.

¹⁴⁰ One could compare so-called crossover books, children's books which work on two levels of understanding: there is the story level, appreciated by adults and children alike, but usually a deeper meaning is hidden between the lines, full of punning and metaphor that encourages one to draw a moral or philosophical conclusion.

¹⁴¹ Ursula Dronke, 'Pagan Beliefs and Christian Impact: The Contribution of Eddic Studies', in *Viking Revaluations*, Viking Society Centenary Symposium 14–15 May 1992, ed. A. Faulkes and R. Perkins (London, 1992), pp. 121–27, at 123.

¹⁴² Aron Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 52.