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The Context of Christianity and the Process of Composition of the *Prose Edda*[3]

O Contexto do Cristianismo e o Processo da Composição da *Edda em Prosa*

Abstract:
This paper addresses how the context of Christianity influenced the process of composition of the *Prose Edda*. Analysing the Christianization of Scandinavia and the religious scenario of 13th century Iceland, it investigates to what degree the Christian religion had an impact on the composition of the work and on its author, Snorri Sturluson, both directly and indirectly.
Keywords:
Prose Edda; Christianization; Medieval Scandinavia.

Resumo:
Este trabalho investiga como o contexto do Cristianismo influenciou o processo de composição da *Edda em Prosa*. Analisando a cristianização da escandinávia e o cenário religioso da Islândia no século XIII, busca-se entender o quanto a religião cristã gerou impactos na composição da obra e em seu autor, Snorri Sturluson, tanto direta quanto indiretamente.
Palavras-chave:
Edda em Prosa; Cristianização; Escandinávia Medieval.

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In reading the first lines of the *Prose Edda* one notices just how explicitly involved Christianity is in that work:

> "Almáttigr guð skapaði himin ok jǫrð ok alla þá hluti er þeim fylgja, ok síðarst menn tvá er ættir eru frá komnar, Adam ok Evu, ok fjǫlgaðisk þeira kynslóð ok dreifðisk um heim allan (Faulkes, 2005: 3)"[4].
>
> "Almighty god created heaven and earth and all the things that belong to them, and later two men from which the families are come, Adam and Eve, and their descendants multiplied and spread all over the world". [5]

Along the Prologue Snorri goes on narrating his Christian beliefs of creation and of the development of mankind. Later on, in *Skáldskaparmál*, the doctrine shows up again both in the warning that no Christian is supposed to believe in heathen gods (Faulkes, 2007a: 4) and on the enumeration of *kenningar* for Christ (Faulkes, idem: 76). These are straightforward manifestations of the Christian religion in the *Prose Edda*. But it also had an impact on how and why it came into being. The aim of this paper is to assess the influence of Christianity on the way the *Prose Edda* was composed, crosschecking the religious context of 13th century Iceland against Snorri's relationship with Christianity, the old beliefs[6] and his work.

The basis of our arguments is nowadays no object of great dispute. Firstly, I consider Snorri Sturluson to be the author of the *Prose Edda*, thus following the lead of Clunies Ross (1987 and 2010), Byock (2001), Lindow (2005), Faulkes (2005 and 1995 [translation]), and Moosbrugger (2010), who quote Snorri quite naturally as the author of the work in question, and Boulhosa, who affirms that "the authorship of Snorri Sturluson is presently considered certain and incontestable" (2004: 14). Secondly, I follow the unitarian view, according to which the structure of the work, consisting of a Prologue (unnamed in the manuscripts), *Gylfaginning* ("the deception of Gylfi"), *Skáldskaparmál* ("sayings concerning skaldship") and *Háttatal* ("list of meters"), would be original to the first version of the tractate[7]. Although there are many discrepancies in the text of the manuscripts, all of them present this same

[4] All Old Icelandic sources, except where otherwise stated, are edited by Anthony Faulkes and published by the Viking Society for Northern Research: *Edda - Prologue and Gylfaginning* (2005); *Edda - Skáldskaparmál* (2 vols.) (2007a); *Edda – Háttatal* (2007b).

[5] All Old Icelandic translations are our own.

[6] Notice I avoid using the term "Paganism" here for reasons later addressed.

[7] The *Prose Edda* is traditionally divided into four parts. In the Prologue, Snorri presents the Christian beliefs of creation and affirms that the old gods of his ancestors were Trojan heroes who had fled to Scandinavia after the war with the Greeks and cajoled the local populace into believing they were gods. In *Gylfaginning*, he presents many traditional stories of Norse mythology, ranging from the creation of the world to a description of Asgard, the dwelling of the gods, and the adventures of Loki and Thor. In *Skáldskaparmál*, the author describes the mythic origins of poetry and explains technical devices used by skaldic poets. In *Háttatal*, he lists a series of metric forms used in skaldic poetry.

division of sections (Boulhosa, idem: 14). This structure, then, would be original to the creation of the *Prose Edda* by the hands of Snorri, and none of the sections would consist of complete insertions. "Thus, *Snorra Edda* is now understood as a unified work of the thirteenth century, the result of historical inquiry anchored in contemporary ideas" (Lindow, 2005: 39).

According to *Íslendingabók*, the so-called *kristnitaka*, the political decree that made Iceland officially Christian, was the decision of the law reciter Thorgeir Thorkelsson in the *alþing* of the year 1000, a date considered roughly acceptable by historians. However, such decision did not result in the immediate substitution of the old beliefs for the new official religion. Bagge (2014: 59) argues that there are two theorical manners to approach the term Christianization. The first one presupposes the change of religious practices and beliefs, a process that requires a long time and happens gradually. Thus one would be referring to a timespan rather than a particular point in time. A second interpretation approaches the term as a formal decree designating Christianity as the only new official and lawful religion. In this sense it would be possible to consider the decision of the law reciter as a very important milestone of the process.

Considering the first sense of the term, Christianization in Iceland was a process that took centuries. Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir (2015: 28-9) works with the term "becoming" to advocate a blurring of the boundaries between what is pre-Christian and what is Christian during this period. She argues that the local process of Christianization, besides being gradual, was also characterized by a mixture of apparently conflicting elements but which are not actually separate: the old faith and Christianity were in constant contact and influenced each other all along. So the conversion, as a political decree, did not cause a peremptory rupture with the old beliefs and practices. It was just the first step of a long process of the adoption of the Christian faith, and one which was unequivocally influenced by several elements of the old faith along the way. Some pre-Christian practices remained side by side with those of the new religion: old habits die hard. Kristjánsdóttir calls those "resistances". The most explicit ones are the concessions included in the decree of the law reciter that still allowed certain pagan practices to be performed: the consumption of horse meat, the exposure of unwanted infants and the permission of rituals for the old gods in secrecy.

Jochens (1999: 621) argues that there was no decline of such practices for half a century in Iceland. Only after a constant exposure to missionaries and bishops did they slowly begin to diminish. But Kristjánsdóttir (op. cit.: 32) goes further, and demonstrates that, even though those three practices eventually declined or died out, the violations to other rules of the Church endured for centuries, especially the disrespect to clerical chastity and monogamy. As an example of a violation to the latter, the author quotes how Snorri Sturluson himself, our self-proclaimed Christian author of the *Prose Edda*, fathered several children by his two wives and concubines.

Just like certain pre-Christian practices remained all the way through 13th century Iceland, so did the old *stories* that they used to tell. More than two centuries after the *kristnitaka*, by the time when the *Prose Edda* was written down, the old stories of gods, heroes and giants still circulated orally among the people. As Wanner (2008:143) argues:

> "Evidence for Icelanders' continuing familiarity with myth comes from several sources, one of which is *Gylfaginning* itself. In writing this text, Snorri seems to have relied on two main sets of material: poetry, eddic and skaldic, and 'folk' traditions, i.e., stories about the gods that continued to circulate, mainly orally, at various levels of society. [...] The extent to which folk tradition is reflected in *Gylfaginning* is harder to judge, but I suspect that it contributed much to this text; at any rate, many think that Snorri used oral prose tales to craft its livelier episodes, such as those of the giant-builder or Þórr's journey to Útgarðr. Further evidence for knowledge of myth among at least the literate class of thirteenth-century Iceland is the recording of such material prior to and in the wake of Snorri's mythographic activity, above all the eddic poems collected in the Codex Regius manuscript c. 1270. There were also sagas with mythological material circulating at this time, such as *Skjöldunga saga* and *Völsunga saga*, as well as numerous Íslendingasögur that describe aspects of pagan belief and practice."

Thus, as Wanner explains, the arrival of the new religion did not mean that the transmission of traditional oral stories ceased or even diminished. What gradually changed was the way people viewed them. If in former times they belonged to the sphere of the sacred, they started then slowly migrating towards the profane (Lindow, op. cit.: 21). Gods who used to be worshipped religiously gradually became characters of myth and fiction. That is the perspective of Snorri towards the content of his work, as both the prologue and the direct warning in *Skáldskaparmál* clarify[8]:

> "En eigi skulu kristnir menn trúa á heiðin goð ok eigi á sannyndi þessar sagnar annan veg en svá sem hér finnsk í upphafi bókar er sagt er frá atburðum þeim er mannfólkit viltisk frá réttri trú, ok þá næst frá Tyrkjum, hvernig Asiamenn þeir er Æsir eru kallaðir fǫlsuðu frásagnir þær frá þeim tíðindum er gerðusk í Troju til þess at landfólkit skyldi trúa þá guð vera. (Faulkes, 2007a: 4)"

[8] One must tread lightly on the assumption that Snorri himself is responsible for this warning. I'm working here with the idea that the *Prose Edda* and its structure as a whole is authored by him, but pinning down that particular pieces of the text were written by himself is beyond the scope of this paper. This fact does not, however, deny or weaken the arguments that follow. For if not Snorri, someone else, say, a copyist, felt the necessity of inserting this passage in the text. For an extensive assessment of the structure of the *Prose Edda*, see Norðal (2001: 41-72)

> "And Christian men shall not believe in heathen gods or in these stories in any other way than one finds in the beginning of this book, where it is told of the events when mankind deviated from the correct faith, and then of the Turks, how the Asians who are called Aesir distorted their deeds in Troy so that the folk would believe that they were gods."

Snorri (or a copyist, see n. 6) is emphasizing here that he pursues a purely secular display of pre-Christian knowledge. His interest is technical, a mythographic and poetic investigation, not a religious one. Thus, by making that clear he a) avoids, at a personal level, a possible conflict between the object of his work and his personal faith; b) keeps the work's circulation safer against possible ecclesiastical censorship; and c) protects himself against possible accusations of pagan idolatry.

This rational way of conceiving historical persons or events as the source of sacred stories in the aforementioned passage, a process called euhemerism[9], also marks Snorri's abstaining himself from the religious view of the old beliefs. The representation of the old gods as lying men of Troy, besides linking Scandinavia to the glorious European past, a topic further addressed, is also a way of stripping religious beliefs from the myths (Lindow, op. cit.: 38). Thus the author removes from the now mythic pre-Christian stories any religious authority they might have held in the past. Those who were believed to be gods were nothing more than cheating humans who turned the local population away from the true faith, Christianity.

It is obvious that more than two hundred years of oral circulation since the conversion resulted in innumerous alterations of the old stories told throughout this time. It is highly unlikely that the material Snorri worked with reflected an immaculate picture of the beliefs of ancestors who preceded him by at least four generations. Variation is an intrinsic characteristic of oral discourse and it indubitably played a role in the transmission of those stories along the years. Furthermore, as I will elaborate further using examples, even when these myths were part of the sphere of the sacred, religion in Scandinavia at that time was not, by any means, systematically coherent or unified by a common standard like Christianity. What later came to be called Paganism by the Church after the process of Christianization in 11th Century Iceland was actually a conjunction of several different religious rituals and cults carried out in diverse ways depending on when and where they were practiced. This means that not only did the ways for worshipping vary, but probably also the religious stories which were told at the time. There was no central religious ruler, no Vatican, no rulebooks such as the Bible. Everything was more susceptible to change during the pre-Christian times. That being said, one should be aware that the stories Snorri collected could not reflect a "pagan reality", for the "pagan reality" was never one, but always multiple. By

[9] Euhemerism is the interpretation of mythological stories as having derived from real historical persons or events. That is, real historical persons or happenings are presumed to have taken mythic proportions due to exaggerations in the way they were transmitted across generations up to the point where they became legends.

turning the multiple into singular, one gets a static result, a very distorted picture of what a dynamic multitude of practices were like, an artificial attempt to view the old faith from Christian lenses. This unifying view is an impact of Christianity in the *perspective* of the work.

But the new religion also left its marks in the *content* of the *Prose Edda*, not only in the explicit Christian parts, but also probably in the mythic ones. During the more than two hundred years that followed the conversion, Christianity interacted continuously with "Paganism" and Christian elements certainly crept into the content of the old oral stories people told. As they were getting more familiar with the Christian doctrine, they probably incorporated some of its elements into their traditional tales when passing them on.

Snorri, who is a Christian, is also probably responsible himself for making up some parts of his accounts. According to Faulkes (2005: xxvi):

> "There is no reason to believe, however, that everything in *Gylfaginning* is derived from ancient tradition, whether oral or written. Snorri was a Christian and had only a scholar's and an artist's interest in mythology; he was preserving it for antiquarian, not religious, reasons [...]. He would not have felt it wrong to depart from or expand his sources in *Gylfaginning* too if artistic or other considerations required it, and he would probably not have felt inhibited from inventing new stories or drastically altering old ones if he saw fit."

Snorri no doubt had to do his own mending in many parts of his work in order to put together stories from multiple sources in a coherent way. Some of them probably contradicted each other or presented some kind of conflict which the author had to address accordingly. This probably meant, sometimes, inventing entire stories, and, sometimes, adapting them so that they could connect to each other in a smooth way.

A very illuminative example is found in *Gylfaginning*:

> "Ǫrn einn sitr í limum asksins, ok er hann margs vitandi, en í milli augna honum sitr haukr sá er heitir Veðrfǫlnir" (Faulkes, 2005: 50)

> "An eagle sits on the limbs of the ash (Yggdrasill) and he is aware of many things, and in the middle of his eyes sits that hawk which is called Vedrfolnir."

This is an odd disposition of animals: nowhere else in Norse myth do we hear of one bird sitting on top of another who is sitting on top of Yggdrasill. As Langer, Oliveira and Ferreira (2015: 18-22) have demonstrated in their analysis of the

representation of the eagle in Norse culture, the image of a bird of prey sitting on top of a cosmic tree is a recurrent motif in the iconography of stone carvings. These imageries, as they argue, are in consonance with literary accounts of myth whereby an eagle sits on top of a tree (the aforementioned section of *Gylfaginning* as well as *Grímnismál*, stanza 32). This description of two birds on top of one another, however, is unique. Thus, the situation provides us food for thought about whether Snorri might have gotten a little creative with his version of things. Could his account be the combination of stories come out of two different sources? Maybe Snorri knew about the original myth that an eagle sat on top of Yggdrasill, but then he may also have heard from some specific later report that it was a hawk, not an eagle. In order to conciliate the two different accounts, it is not unlikely that he may have decided to stitch them both together and add the two of them to his writings, making one animal sit on the other and not having to compromise with any version of the story.

A detailed analysis of this particular case is beyond the scope of this paper. What I wish to emphasize here is that it consists of a much probable effort to turn what is multiple into one, putting together two individual animals into one single figure, superposing one over the other. This attempt to come up with a single, unified account of something that is multiple *par excellence* is much probably the result of a Christian unifying view of things. Christianity does not work with multiple versions: the doctrine works with revelations, with single, true versions of things, the ones that are contained in the Bible. Having in mind that Snorri had a Christian education both in religion and way of thinking, Christianity also had an impact in the *Prose Edda* in that it acted through the view of the author upon the material about which he writes: he was trying to make a diffuse conjunction of stories fit together, turning the multiple into one, making coherent sense out of a multitude of conflicting tales. That is, once again, applying a Christian unifying and centralizing view upon an old oral disperse material.

One should have in mind, thus, when analyzing the *Prose Edda*, that such work is a final product put together out of Christian, Pre-Christian and authorial elements. Wanner (2008: 142) argues:

> "On the other hand, Snorri did not include every variant of every myth known to him, nor was he above refining his sources. Indeed, tinkering in the name of systemicity and coherence was entailed by his project, which required him to clarify the mythology for uninformed readers rather than confuse them with unnecessary or conflicting detail. That Snorri was willing to compromise his survey's fidelity to tradition for pedagogical expedience calls, as many have recognized, for caution when using *Gylfaginning* as a guide to pre-Christian Germanic religion."

Thus, we have three sources intertwining themselves in the *Prose Edda*: Christianity, Pre-Christian oral stories and the hands of an author. What is worth emphasizing in

this particular paper is that Christianity is unequivocally a part of the *content* of the work not only in the explicitly Christian parts, but all over it simply because it composes, along with the other two sources, the historical context during which those oral tales were transmitted.

Lindow states that "indeed, an irony of Scandinavian mythology is that without Christianity it would not have been recorded, for the Church brought the culture and technology of writing" (Lindow, op. cit.: 22). Although it seems a bit exaggerated to affirm in a historical hypothesis that *x* would not happen had *y* not intervened, I agree with the essence of what the scholar says. The Church was indeed responsible for bringing the literary culture and the Latin alphabet to Scandinavia. It is known that Scandinavians used a runic alphabet in pre-Christian times, but these were not used for literary ends, only for minor inscriptions on utensils, weapons, memorial stones and maybe magical rites. Only after the coming of Christianity did the vast literary production in the region begin. This process came to fruition thanks to changes brought by the Church both culturally, with the diffusion of the habit of reading and writing among an educated minority, as well as technically, with the skills for producing parchment out of animal skin, ink and quill, and most importantly, the already mentioned bringing of the Latin alphabet (Clunies Ross, 2010: 44).

Again, the transition from an oral culture to a literary one was not an immediate process, but a gradual one which impacted mostly on a restricted social stratum, the educated minority. According to Palamin (2011: 7), "it is important to emphasize that the oral tradition did not cease to exist all at once giving way to writing. On the contrary, both forms coexisted. Thus, we can envision the influence of the coming of Christianity in both [oral and written] traditions." The oral circulation of poetic, legal and mythic discourses remained strongly popular, and the runic carvings in fabricated objects, stones, bones etc. also persevered side by side with the new kind of writing. The new literate practice slowly superseded the old ones, but it did not, by any means, extinguish them.

Gísli Sigurðsson (2004: 2) argues that

> "As elsewhere in Europe, once Iceland had been brought within the family of the Catholic Church it acquired with it the Church's technology of reading and writing and its international literature of learning, philosophy, and long, well-structured stories of saints and distant lands and peoples. But, for whatever reason, in Iceland things were different: having gained the new technology and the learning that went with it, the Icelanders were not content merely to translate and reproduce the literature the Church supplied them with, but set about exploiting their newly acquired skills to write down their own stories and poems as well as to create new ones."

The case of literacy in Iceland is peculiar in comparison to that of the rest of Scandinavia in two aspects: (1) its vast literary production, significantly more numerous than that of continental Scandinavia; (2) the predominance of the vernacular language in this production, whereas in the continent Latin was more popular. Regarding the first topic, Clunies Ross (idem: 11-12) presents many different hypotheses formulated since the 12th century that try to account for this phenomenon: the long and dark nights of winter and the barren landscape (Saxo Grammaticus); the preoccupation to deny stories spread throughout the continent that Icelanders were descendants of slaves and base men (*Þórðarbók*); the fusion of an established rich oral tradition, the Christian literature in Latin and the vernacular European genres, such as chronicle and romance (modern scholars in general); the great availability of calf skins, with no other practical utility in the farm economy of Iceland, as a cheap source of parchment (Sigurður Nordal). Clunies Ross herself emphasizes the role of the solid oral tradition in Iceland that precedes the Christian times, when that land was already famous for its court poets, storytellers and legislators. Once this established tradition came into contact with the literary culture brought by the church, educated Icelanders made extensive use of this new medium and the abundant profusion of literary works began.

Regarding the reason for this vast literature to have been written in Old Icelandic, Clunies Ross argues that because of the initial weak political influence of the Church in the region, Latin, its official language as a political institution, also had little impact there since the beginning (Clunies Ross, idem: 45). In his chapter "A peaceful conversion: the Viking Age Church", Jesse Byock (2001: 292-307), states that the geographical circumstances of Iceland initially kept it away from the direct powers of the Christian Church. The bishopric of Hamburg-Bremen, the first institution responsible for the Christianization of Scandinavia, had little interest in the isolated island off the coast. Thus, in the early times of Christianization, Iceland enjoyed relative religious autonomy in comparison to its continental counterparts, in which the Church invested a lot more time, funds and energy. For that reason the process there was most peculiar: Christianity did not impose itself politically upon the rule of the established local chiefs. Instead, it actually made them stronger. The *goðar*, as they were called, were initially given the religious position to spread Christianity by the Church.

They erected churches in their properties which generated income to themselves and many took over the position of Christian priests. In this case, there occurred a simple transference of the religious role they played as priests of the old faith to the new one, except now they were getting income out of it. Sometimes these chiefs did not become priests themselves, but hired someone to fill in that role and submit to their rule. In either case, making use of the new religion, their political and economic powers grew. Therefore, even after the Church created the bishoprics of Lund, and later Niðarós, by which it intended to intensify its presence in Scandinavia, it could not insert itself politically upon the island. The *goðar* were at that time already too strong both in religious and political affairs. Their power had

grown so intensively that it was too late for the Church to try to get them to submit peremptorily to its power[10].

The weak presence of the Church in Iceland since the beginning of the Christianization resulted in Latin, its official language as a political institution, remaining aside from both the common people in general and also from the religious leaders. In order to carry out the new Christian rites and properly spread the new faith, chiefs had the sacred writings translated from Latin to the vernacular, and held their religious ceremonies in the local tongue. In writing, their language, Old Icelandic, was adapted to the new Latin alphabet. Christianity had a solid cultural and religious impact on Iceland, but its political influence, which Latin usually accompanied, was meager. So it was that, as time passed, Old Icelandic grew stronger in power and prestige as the official language of Iceland both in the secular and the religious sphere, and Latin was, for the most part, left out.

How do the aforementioned arguments apply to the *Snorra Edda*? Firstly, the work is a major example of the integration between a strong local oral tradition, both in its dealing with mythical content (narrative) as with skaldic activity (poetry), using the tradition of writing brought by Christianity and composed in the Old Icelandic language. Besides, as mentioned earlier, Christianity was undoubtedly mixed up in this traditional material during its oral transmition, making it hard for us to track what is purely Northern Germanic and what is Christian, and, moreover, what is made up by the author.

Faulkes (2005: xxvi) emphasizes the role played by the point of view of a Christian author, educated in the molds of a systematic and organized religion, over a religious past of multiple and highly variable practices which changed according to when and where they were carried out:

> "Moreover it is unlikely that Snorri gives a very accurate picture of Norse mythology as a whole. Both *Vǫluspá* and *Gylfaginning* treat heathen mythology in a systematic way which was surely alien from the nature of the heathen religion itself, which must have consisted rather of a disorganised body of conflicting traditions that was probably never reduced in heathen times to a consistent orthodoxy such as Snorri attempts to present. His account of it is coloured by his Christian education which would have taught him to expect a religion to be a system of coherent beliefs"

In "How uniform was the Old Norse religion?", Brink (2007) answers his title-question analyzing theophorical place names[11]: no uniform at all. Certain gods were

[10] This eventually escalated to several conflicts between the Church and the *goðar* (Faulkes, 1995: xii).

[11] Theophorical place-names are places named after gods. For example: *Odenslund* is related to Odin; *Froeyslandum*, to Frey; *Torsvallen*, to Thor etc.

favored in some regions, others in other ones. Crosschecking the data he collected with the contents of the *Snorra Edda*, for example, a great discrepancy is evident between the strong profusion of the god Ullr and, probably, of his cult, mainly in Sweden, and his practically null importance in Snorri's mythography. The influence of this god, worshiped with greater strength in the East of Scandinavia, apparently did not reach the ears of the author who dwelled in the West – or was ignored by him. Therefore, due to the enormous variation of practices, cults and beliefs all throughout Scandinavia, it's not adequate to expect a uniform portrait of a supposedly pagan religion. Snorri's work is certainly informative and valid in itself, but one should not ever expect it to portray accurately a pagan past. The term "pagan" itself, in the singular, denotes an imprecision, a biased view influenced by the Christian view of things, for there is no such thing as a single pagan past. Anderson (1999: 82) argues that what existed in Scandinavia was a multitude of beliefs and cults with a few similarities, but which were by no means coherent and uniform, and that presented many differences:

> "Surviving evidence suggests that heathen beliefs and practices were an integral part of everyday Scandinavian life, and the term 'heathen religion' which we of necessity employ probably reveals more about modern conceptions of what constitutes 'religion' than it does about pre-Christian Scandinavian understandings"

Clunies Ross (1987) and Faulkes (2005) define the *Prose Edda* as a tractate that combines (a) a mythographical and historiographical investigation of the ancient "pagan" religion and (b) a manual of *ars poetica* about the skaldic technique. Snorri probably wanted to write about the old faith because of his interest in myth and history of the ancient religious practices of his ancestors (Faulkes, 2005: xvi) and to insert Scandinavia into the glorious past of Europe, advocating that it had been populated by descendants of the great mythical heroes of Classical Antiquity. Thus, the author wished to link the pre-history of the north to that of the rest of Europe (Faulkes, idem.: xxiii-iv; Lindow, op. cit.: 37-9). Moreover, there also exists the hypothesis that the report of these myths (mainly in *Gylfaginning*) was just a means to support the *ars poetica* parts of the work (*Skáldskaparmál* and *Háttatal*), a matter that will be further addressed.

Let us begin by assessing the relation between Christianity and Snorri's mythography. After the author's introductory remarks in the Prologue and in the beginning of *Skáldskaparmál*, where he makes it clear that he intends to narrate myths through a secular, non-religious light, he seems to feel pretty confident about conducting his stories about the old gods without any fear of reprehension or ideological conflict with his own faith or the Church. Furthermore, even if such an initiative could be frowned upon by the institution, its struggling political influence in Iceland, as already mentioned, could hardly implicate serious problems for the author.

It does not seem, either, that Christianity coerced the circulation of the old stories among the populace, for they were still very popular around the time of Snorri. As Gísli Sigurðsson (2004: 5) argues:

> "But Snorri's learning as it appears to us in the writings attributed to him bears witness first and foremost to a man highly educated in the oral culture and lore of his own people, in knowledge that was passed on from man to man an added to and changed by each generation, and that constantly took on the shape of the present while preserving material that went back to the mists of antiquity."

Thus, it seems that the impact of Christianity in content probably only occurred, as mentioned before, in the progressive incorporation of some of its elements into these stories during their circulation, and in the gradual transition of how people dealt with them, passing them over from the sphere of the religious to the profane. Trusty evidence that these stories still had an open circulation among people and that they remained popular all the way through the 13th century Iceland is the profusion of their content recorded in many contemporary sagas, such as the *Volsunga Saga*, *Ynglinga Saga* and *Hrólfs Saga Kraka*[12], just to name a few.

As for the reasons for Snorri to want to compose a tractate about Skaldic Poetry, Faulkes (1995 [translation]: xii), Lindow (op. cit.: 27), and Sigurður Nordal (apud Clunies Ross, 1987: 17) point to the attempt to save skaldic poetry from obscurity and extinction. Clunies Ross (idem: 47) agrees to the plausibility of such hypothesis, but affirms that the excessive emphasis on it has undermined for a long time the importance of *Gylfaginning* as part of a mythographic work, interpreting it as simple means to support the techniques taught in *Skáldskaparmál* and *Háttatal*. But the *Edda* does not seem to have simply been a treatise on poetry. It probably also held a mythograpical agenda. Faulkes himself, in a later book (2005: xvi), diminishes the weight of this "support role hypothesis" and emphasizes the solo importance of *Gylfaginning* in the work. The delusion of Gylfi connects itself, indeed, to the rest of the *corpus* of the *Edda* that deals with poetry, but it is not exclusively a means to an end. It is also, by itself, one can argue, an end: documenting a collection of traditional old stories.

Getting back to the *ars poetica* topic, if there ever occurred a decline on skaldic poetry, Christianity could be hypothetically considered as a threat to it for direct and indirect reasons. A first direct one could be the possible coercion of the utilization of *kenningar* and *heiti* referring to the old faith. Christianism might disapprove of the reference to old pagan beliefs in poetic compositions. Such hypothesis, however, is promptly discarded by Lindow (op. cit: 27):

[12] These are all sagas of old mythic heroes in which gods take a part.

> "A skald could fashion *kennings* from myth and legend, however, and his audience could comprehend them without believing them to be true or sacred. Such an attitude is implied by the continuation, virtually unchanged except for lull during and after the conversion, of the *kenning* system of skaldic poetry well into the Christian period, culminating in *Snorra Edda*, a handbook of poetics designed to save skaldic poetry not from the church but from the changing poetic fashions of the day."

Therefore, if there existed any attempts by the new faith to coerce the use of *kenningar* with pagan references, these failed. And in fact, not only did skalds keep on using mythical references, but they also took in the new God and inserted Him into their formulaic stock, placing Him side by side with the old ones:

> "Hvernig skal Krist kenna? Svá at kalla hann skapara himins ok jarðaʀ, engla ok sólar, stýranda heimsins ok himinríkis ok engla, konung himna ok sólar ok engla ok Jórsala ok Jórdánar ok Griklands, ráðandi postola ok heilagra manna" (Faulkes, 2007a: 76)."

> "How shall Christ be known? One is to call him shaper of heaven and earth, of angels and the sun, steerer of the world and of the realm of heaven and angels, king of heavens and of the sun and of angels and of Jerusalem and of Jordan and of Greece, ruler of the apostles and of holy men."

Christ became, then, another option that composed the palette of words used in poetry alongside the other old gods and creatures. Snorri himself, a Christian, uses a multitude of pagan *kenningar* in *Háttatal*, the last part of his *Edda*, without using a single Christian one. Lindow (op. cit.: 28) points out that even Christian poets who used references to Christ did not refrain from also using the old pagan references in the same works.

Another hypothetical direct threat of the Church to skaldic poetry could be its attempt to prohibit the circulation of the old pagan stories. This would cause a progressive disappearance of elements fundamental to the comprehension of *kenningar* and *heiti*, techniques that formed the backbone of the genre. As their meanings derived directly from mythological contents, it was necessary for one to know the latter in order to understand the former. Therefore, if the Church tried to coerce the circulation of these stories, the comprehension of *kenningar* and *heiti* could be hindered. However, such argument should also be discarded for reasons referred to in the previous discussion about the mythographic content of the work: even after the coming of Christianity, the stories of the old gods flowed freely around the populace. Therefore, as Lindow points out in the previous quotation, the reason for the decline of the skaldic production, if it ever occurred, was not caused by religious motives. The best guess, then, would be the competition with other

narrative genres, and that leads to another hypothetical claim that might implicate Christianity in the decline of skaldic poetry. An indirect one: the introduction of writing in Iceland and the consequential predatory competition with the prose genres there.

According to Faulkes (1995 [translation]: xii), "oral poetry, which from Viking times and perhaps earlier had been Scandinavian culture's principal means of expression and preservation, was being rapidly supplanted in this function by written prose". The most prestigious prose genre of that time was the Icelandic Saga, so Faulkes cites it as the most important substitute for the previous function of poetry as keeper of history and means of entertainment at social events. Therefore the culture of writing, brought by Christianity, could be taken as a reason for the decline in skaldic composition because it made the rise of the saga genre possible. It is also worth stating that regardless of there having been a decline in the production of skaldic poetry or not, this would not necessarily be the only reason why the *Prose Edda* might have been written. It might have had many other functions other than saving the genre from extinction: systematizing the art of poetry, investigating how it works, improving the quality of its production, perpetuating the importance of the genre etcetera.

Furthermore, this possible decline did not necessarily happen due to the coming of literacy. Clunies Ross (2010: 47) argues that the introduction of writing did not by any means provoke the end of the oral culture, so traditional and important in that society, let alone extinguish it. Literacy only reached a minority of the population, so, even after the advent of writing, oral discourse still remained the greatest means of social communication:

> "It is worth emphasising here that the advent of literacy was probably a gradual process and one that was not distributed very evenly throughout society. Even by the end of the Middle Ages, there were probably many Icelanders who were unable to read or write. It is therefore likely that oral communication and oral composition remained important artistic means of expression during the whole of the medieval period and beyond, and that these oral traditions influenced the written texts produced by literates at every step of the way."

It is interesting to take in consideration that Saga, the most popular prose genre in Iceland, may have constantly been narrated orally before an audience. While we cannot pinpoint definitively that this was always the case, there is evidence, mostly derived from passages of sagas themselves, that hints at this possibility. Sigurðsson (2004: 35-7) quotes several excerpts and arguments that point to this direction, the most illustrative of which is the *Saga of Thorgil and Haflidi*, where an episode of recitation during a wedding is portrayed:

> "Þar var nú glaumr ok gleði mikil ok skemtan góð ok margskonar leikar, bæði dansleikar, glímur ok sagnaskemtan [...] Frá því er nǫkkut sagt, er þó er lítil tilmoka, hverir þar skemtu eða hverju skemt var [...]. Hrólfr af Skálmarnesi sagði sǫgu frá Hrǫngviði víkingi ok frá Óláfi liðsmannakonungi ok haugbroti Þráins berserks ok Hrómundi Gripssyni, ok margar vísur með." (Þorgils saga ok Hafliða apud Clunies Ross, 2009: 19).
>
> "There was now happiness and great glee and good entertainment and many kinds of games, both dancing and wrestling, and storytelling [...] It is told, although of little importance, who provided the entertainment there and what it was [...]. Hrolf of Skalmarnes told a story about the Viking Hrongvid and Olaf the king of warriors and of the mound breaking of Thrain the berserker and Hromund Gripsson, and with many verses".

Clunies Ross judges that such a report plausibly portrays a situation in which sagas could have been performed: an oral recitation as entertainment at social events. Also important for this paper is the excerpt "with many verses (*margar vísur með*)", which suggests that even prose stories contained poetry, as in fact it is evident in many sagas: narrative is often adorned with passages of poetry. The *Prose Edda* itself also quotes a lot of Eddic oral poetry. Therefore, taking in consideration both the performance and the poetical content of the sagas, one can infer that orality was never dissociated from prose in the 13th century. Even if a text was *written*, it was frequently adorned with poetry to please the audience, and its final aim was always to be presented as an *oral performance*. Again, the vast majority of people in Iceland were illiterate then, and they were the main audience to whom those stories would be told. Audience as from latin *audio*, "to listen", that is, they were those who *listened* to the stories which were *recited*.

While, again, this is not to be taken at face value as definitive evidence that saga is inherently an oral genre in performance, it does lead us to believe that they were much possibly recited orally[13]. According to Clunies-Ross (2009: 17), "we know relatively little from medieval sources about the performance of sagas, assuming for the moment that for the most part they were performed orally or read aloud, nor do we have much hard evidence about who performed or created them". So although the scholar in question does forewarn her readers that this is not completely confirmable, she does tend to believe in the oral dimension of saga performances.

If prose apparently did not ruin the oral element of performance and storytelling, could it have, on the other hand, hindered the skaldic technique in its *composition*? It seems ironic that Snorri would want to defend a genre he felt was threatened by the very means he was using to do that: a prose work. He himself was a saga enthusiast, the author of *Heimskringla* and possibly of *Egils Saga*.

[13] For counter-arguments, see Sigurðsson, 2004: 37

Hypothetically speaking, the introduction of writing could, perhaps, have been responsible for the decline in oral poetry, if it did happen. One cannot deny that possibility, because the introduction of written discourse may change the psychology of men and alter the way they use language[14], something that would have an impact on how one composes poetry. Scrutiny of that matter is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is possible to refute such argument by affirming that only a minority of the population of 13th century Iceland could read or write. That change of mentality brought by literacy would probably take some time to establish itself after people had mastered writing. Thus, this psychological change caused by the new medium does not seem much applicable in the case of Iceland at that time. But the one thing we can be fairly certain about is that Snorri probably did not envisage a dangerous equation between literacy and skaldic poetry: for him, the former did not seem to threaten or destroy the latter. After all, it would be too incoherent for him to dedicate himself so intensively to a technique (written prose) that could cause the extinction of the one he wished to defend (skaldic poetry), and even more so to defend *in prose* about a genre he felt was threatened by it.

In summary, the means for the production of skaldic poetry were still available in 13th century Iceland, and neither cultural nor religious context seems to have induced a decline in its production. As already argued: (1) oral communication remained the most important means of artistic performance, never having been destroyed by the introduction of literacy brought by the Church; (2) the pagan *kenningar* were still available alongside the Christian ones, and there is no evidence of coercion by the Church - if there was any, it was certainly ineffective-; and (3) the mythical apparatus, indispensable background for the understanding of *kenningar* and *heiti*, was also available, since the old stories still circulated among the people – the only difference was that they were interpreted from a profane perspective, not a religious one anymore.

Therefore, if there occurred, in fact, a decline in the production of skaldic poetry by the time of Snorri, Christianity did not play a definitive role in it. Neither by coercion of the old stories nor by the bringing of literacy (even in sagas, the oral performance was indispensable). As for the mythographic aspect of the *Prose Edda*, if the Church ever tried to impede its circulation due to its "pagan" content, it failed, for the work has survived and is still available to us nowadays. Apparently, Christianity was never a threat to Snorri, either because the work seemed harmless, or due to the Church's weak political power over the region. On the contrary, it seems that Christianization was what made the *Prose Edda* possible – for it brought literacy and the culture of reading and writing to Iceland, which, united with the rich local oral tradition, prompted Snorri to write his work. Thus, the conversion played a fundamental role in the possibility for us to have access to these stories of a Norse past, even if they provide a distorted picture of. Christianity manifests itself in the *Prose Edda*, then, (a) in form, in that it brought the technology that made its

[14] See Torrano, 2009: 18-9, for example.

production possible, writing; (b) in perspective, in that the work portrays a view of a pagan past through Christian lenses; and (c) in content, in that it is inserted both explicitly and subtly in the mythical narratives, mixed up with the old oral tales and the creative writing of Snorri Sturluson.

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