

goð geþja: the Limits of Humour
in Old Norse–Icelandic Paganism

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Laughing at religion was possible for medieval Christians, whose Twelfth Night and Shrovetide revels seasonally encouraged the parody of God's priests and scriptures.¹ Here it is presumably the worshipper's, not the agnostic's, familiarity with the divine which 'breeds innocent humour within groups who share common knowledge and common assumptions'.² Within religious groups the humour is innocent even when propriety is transgressed, for 'without the veneration there would be no joke', and the common set of beliefs amplifies a shared response to jokes, be they ever so irreverent.³ The joker elicits the knowledge of others, who then find themselves contributing the background that will make the joke work; if it works (even tastelessly), the audience joins him in its response (even unwillingly) and both find themselves 'a community, a community of amusement'.⁴ And yet there are some who fail to see the joke, who might regard religious irreverence as blasphemous. To

¹ Cf. M. A. Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (Harmondsworth, 1997), pp. 220–61.

² Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross*, p. 232.

³ Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross*, p. 232. Cf. T. Cohen, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (Chicago and London, 1999), pp. 25–9.

⁴ Cohen, *Jokes*, p. 40.

what extent Norse heathen jokers could blaspheme is a question which I shall face here.

The best case of heathen reaction to a religious joke is that of a Christian humorist against pagans in *c.* 998, Hjalti Skeggjason, whose brother-in-law, Ísleifr Gizurarson, was ordained as the first bishop of Skálholt in 1056. In Ari's *Íslendingabók* (*c.* 1125) it is said that Hjalti was sentenced in the Alþing to the lesser outlawry

of *godgá*. En þat vas til þess haft, at hann kvað at lögbergi kviðling þenna:

Vil ek eigi *godgeyja*; grey þykki mér Freyja.⁵

Hjalti made his joke a year before Iceland became Christian by an act of the same parliament in *c.* 999.⁶ The word *godgá* occurs only in connection with the tale of Hjalti's bad day at the Alþing: in *Íslendingabók*, as above, and in *Landnámabók* (*Sturlubók*, ch. 367 and *Hauksbók*, ch. 322), *Kristni saga*, ch. 10 (*s.* xiii², author possibly Sturla Þórðarson) and *Njáls saga*, ch. 104 (*c.* 1290).⁷ *Kristni saga* provides the fullest account of the prosecution, which was led by the overbearing Rúnólfr Úlfsson, *goði* of Dalr. *Landnámabók* adds an aftermath: on his illegal return to Iceland, Hjalti and his followers got mounts to the Alþing from Hjalti's brother Þorvaldr, 'en engi treystisk annarr fyrir

⁵ *Íslendingabók*, ch. 7: *Íslendingabók. Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, ÍF 1 (Reykjavík, 1968), 15. Cf. *Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, A I–II, B I–II (Copenhagen and Oslo, 1912–15) B I, 131 (= *Skj*). 'For mockery of the gods. And it was held as grounds, that he had recited this ditty at the law-rock: I don't want to mock the gods (*or*, the gods to bark); to me Freyja seems to be a bitch.'

⁶ For the date, cf. P. Foote, 'Conversion', *Medieval Scandinavia: an Encyclopedia*, ed. P. Pulsiano and K. Wolf (New York, 1993), pp. 106–8.

⁷ *Íslendingabók. Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, p. 368; *Kristnisaga*, ed. B. Kahle, *Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek* 11 (Halle, 1905), 30–2; *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ÍF 12 (Reykjavík, 1954), 269.

ofríki Rúnólfs Úlfssonar, er sekðan hafði Hjalta um *godgá*'.⁸ It is worth noting that Rúnólfr was brother's son to the arch-heathen Valgarðr the Grey and cousin of Mǫrðr Valgarðsson. In *Njáls saga*, he acts as host to Otkell, one of the enemies of Gunnarr Hámundarson (chs. 52–3), and supports Mǫrðr in law against Gunnarr (ch. 65). Since Mǫrðr and Hjalti both married daughters of Gizurr the White, Rúnólfr, Mǫrðr's cousin, was Hjalti's kinsman by marriage. In his prosecution of Hjalti, therefore, it is likely that we see an instance of *frændaskemmm* ('kinsmen's shame'), a term for a law first passed in Iceland in *c.* 997 by which kinsmen of the third to the fifth degrees were shamed into prosecuting their family's religious rebels for the sake of the greater honour.⁹

This law had been passed in order to banish Stefnir Þorgilsson, a Christian lay preacher, whose crime according to *Kristni saga* was 'at meiða hof ok hǫrga en brjóta skurðgoð'.¹⁰ This offence, approximate to sacrilege, is related to blasphemy. Stefnir's punishment was mild, when compared with that of Wulfred, an English missionary in Sweden in the early eleventh century who was lynched by the crowd when he tried to smash an idol of Þórr in a pagan council.¹¹ There are other expressions whose meanings might overlap with 'sacrilege': *at granda véum* ('to injure the sanctuaries'), a crime charged to the

⁸ *Landnámabók* S367, H322: *Íslendingabók. Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, p. 368. 'While no other man could be relied upon, owing to the tyranny of Rúnólfr Úlfsson, who had convicted Hjalti for mockery of the gods'.

⁹ K. Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland: an Anthropological Analysis of Structure and Change* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 182 and 214.

¹⁰ *Kristni saga*, chs. 6–7: *Kristnisaga*, ed. Kahle, pp. 17–19, at p. 17. 'To mutilate temples and shrines while breaking carved gods'.

¹¹ 'Ydolum gentis nomine Thor in concilio paganorum cepit anathematizare'. *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* II.62: *Magistri Adam Bremensis Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, ed. B. Schmeidler, MGH SS rer. Germ. 2, 3rd ed. (Hannover, 1917), 122.

religiously disinterested sons of Eiríkr Haraldsson in an unnamed *drápa* by Einarr Helgason (c. 985); *at granda vé[í]* is said to be typical of Eiríkr himself in a verse which is attributed to Egill Skallagrímsson in *Egils saga*; and *göða gremi* ('fury of the gods') is used by Egill and also in *Vatnsdæla saga* as an expression for the gods' response to men who fail to do their duty to the laws and customs of their society.¹² The term *göðgá* ('mockery of the gods') is usually thought to refer to the verbal counterpart of sacrilege, to blasphemy, an offence which, by the laws of Moses or Justinian at least, was punishable by death. The heathen laws of Iceland have perished, but there it is reasonable to suppose that the form of verbal sacrilege was the making of an insult against a god. The native term for poetic insults or slanders is *níð*, about which there is much comment in the Icelandic Christian law. *Grágás* (c. 1119) stipulates full outlawry for the poet of even half a verse that contains either insult, or praise that the addressee can construe as one ('Scog Gang varðar ef maðr yrkir vm maN hálfá víso þa er löstr er í eða háþung eða lof þat er hann yrkir til haðungar').¹³ Such insults charged the offended party with *ergi*: passive homosexuality if against a man; probably promiscuity, if the object of the allegation was female. A charge of *ergi* entitled the defamed party to kill the slanderer.¹⁴ That an *ergi*, once enacted, was probably

¹² *Fagrskinna*, ch. 16: *Ágrip af Noregskonunga sögum. Fagrskinna – Noregs konunga tal*, ed. Bjarni Einarsson, ÍF 29 (Reykjavík, 1984), 112; *Egils saga*, ch. 56: *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, ÍF 2 (Reykjavík, 1933), 163 and 158; *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 33: *Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ÍF 8 (Reykjavík, 1939), 88–9. Cf. F. Ström, 'Níð, ergi and Old Norse Moral Attitudes', *Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture 10 May 1973* (London, 1974), pp. 1–20, esp. 1–6.

¹³ *Grágás*, § 238: *Grágás: Islændernes Lovbog i Fristatens Tid*, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen, 4 vols. in 5, *Nordiske Oldskrifter* 11, 17, 21, 22 and 32 (Copenhagen, 1850–70) II, 183. 'A man is liable to outlawry if he composes half a verse about a man in which there is blame or scorn, or praise which he composes as scorn.'

¹⁴ Ström, 'Níð, ergi and Old Norse Moral Attitudes', pp. 4–8; P. Meulengracht

regarded as an affront to the divine as well as the social order, is clear from a stanza attributed to the poet Þormóðr in *Fóstbræðra saga*, in which he refers to the gaping buttocks of a drowned enemy as a matter of *goðfjón* ('(what causes) hatred of the gods'), probably because the drowned man's posture resembles one of a woman offering herself to a man.¹⁵

By calling Freyja a bitch (*grey*) in his verse in c. 998, Hjalti had charged her with a female version of *ergi*. That much is clear from the symbolic *grey* in *Hávamál* that *Billings mæx* (probably the 'wife of Billings') leaves in her bedroom as her stand-in for sex with Óðinn (*Hávamál* 101), who regards the bitch as one *báðung* ('humiliation') among several that his promised date inflicted on him (*Hávamál* 102).¹⁶ Whether or not Hjalti's *goðgá* thus constituted a *níð* ('slander') is another matter, however. Hjalti, sentenced in the Alþing to just three years' outlawry, was not threatened with death or permanent exile. His relatively mild sentence may reflect his extended kinship with Rúnólfr, the prosecutor; but at any rate, it is doubtful that his *goðgá* was synonymous with an offence as severe as *níð*, which, if ever made against gods, might be regarded as 'blasphemy'.

Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, trans. J. Turville-Petre (Odense, 1983), pp. 68–74.

¹⁵ *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 23: *Vestfirðinga sögur*, ed. Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson, ÍF 6 (Reykjavík, 1943), 241–2. Cf. P. Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Níð and the Sacred', *Artikler: udgivet i anledning af Preben Meulengracht Sørensen's 60 års fødselsdag 1. marts 2000*, ed. T. Buhl, S. Lyng Dahl, H.-M. Foldberg, D. Glundtoft, P. Hermann and R. Hildebrand (Århus, 2000), pp. 78–88, esp. 82–6.

¹⁶ Sigurður Nordal, 'Billings mæx', *Bidrag till nordiske filologi tillagnade Emil Olsson* (Lund, 1936), pp. 288–95. Cf. *Hávamál*, ed. D. A. H. Evans, 2 vols., Viking Soc. for Northern Research Text Series 7 (London, 1986) I, 58–9 and 118 (note to st. 97). All unattributed Edda quotations will be drawn from *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. G. Neckel and H. Kuhn, 2 vols., 5th ed. (Heidelberg, 1983), vol. I, 'Text'.

In failing to approximate to blasphemy from the heathen standpoint, the word *godgá* undermines the idea of heathen piety. Unlike *níð*, this compound is not attested in the legal texts. Its second element derives from *geyyja* ('to bark; mock'). Hjalti plays on the ambiguity of this word, unexpectedly turning *god* from the verb's object to its subject, as if beginning with a promise to behave well among heathens after an earlier transgression against them. His words *god geyja* are syntactically analogous to a construction in *Hávamál* 135, in which a man is advised to be kind to beggars: 'gest þú ne geya né á grind hrekir'.¹⁷ The idea of *godgá*, then, was not only to scorn the gods, but also to expel them from one's society. Hjalti's fellow Icelanders, who did not see his joke, expelled him from theirs. In this light, it seems to be the corollary of *god geyja* that Norse heathens saw their gods as guests at the feast, with the same questions of precedence ('Hvar skal sitja sjá?', *Hávamál* 2), food (*Hávamál* 3–4), attentiveness ('þunnu hljóði þegir', *Hávamál* 7) and squabbling ('órir gestr við gest', *Hávamál* 32), as would arise for humans. It is hard to see much piety in these circumstances. Even Loki, the gods' professional joker, is not killed but outlawed when he charges Freyja with promiscuity in Ægir's feast in *Lokasenna* ('Ása ok álfa, er hér inni ero, hverr hefir þinn hór verit', *Lokasenna* 30).¹⁸ Loki's tirade is a *senna* ('statement of truths', cognate with *sannr*, 'true'). His statement about Freyja is true, in a sense, and in another poem Freyja makes fun of her own mystery to Þórr when she turns down his request that she wed Þrymr in the land of the giants: 'Míc veiztu verða vergiarnasta'

¹⁷ *Hávamál*, ed. Evans, I, 67 and 129–30 (for forms). 'Do not mock a guest nor should you drive him to the gate.'

¹⁸ *The Poetic Edda: Volume II: Mythological Poems*, ed. U. Dronke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 339. 'Of Æsir and elves who are here inside each one has been your bed-fellow.'

(*Þrymskviða* 13).¹⁹ These are two poems probably from the Christian era, from the eleventh and twelfth or thirteenth centuries respectively. But the fact that Hjalti walked off unscathed from Freyja in c. 998, even while his judges would have known her cult to be under threat, probably means that the question of religion is hardly relevant to these Eddic poets, because Icelandic heathens knew neither blasphemy nor veneration, two faces of the devout religious coin, as Christians understand these things.

'Heathen piety' for Norsemen must be redefined. There appear to be no surviving hymns to Norse gods, although Vetrliði's invocation of Þórr, a fragment, may be one (*Skj B I*, 127).²⁰ As the poetry alludes to the gods with a focus on exploits, not attributes, perhaps would-be praisers of heathen gods had a fear of litigation similar to that which directs skalds in *Grágás* to compose 'vm maN löst ne löf'.²¹ But even that degree of touchiness, if true, would add to the Norse gods' humanity. And when the gods die in Ragnarök, it is clear that they express not the failure of godhead but man at his best (*Vafþrúðnismál* 52–3, *Voluspá* 53–7). Human embodiments for deities are not only standard in Norse mythology, but also fundamental to their names, in that terms such as 'thunder', 'brilliance' and 'love' had long been personified respectively as *Þórr*, *Ullr* and *Frigg*.²² The inference from these names is that heathens gave human shapes to divine natural and abstract phenomena in order to deal with them personally. Portraying men as gods, the other way about, is also integral to Norse poetry, in which heathen skalds sometimes styled their patrons as gods and

¹⁹ 'You'll know that I have become the man-craziest woman alive.'

²⁰ Cf. J. Lindow, 'Addressing Thor', *Scandinavian Studies* 60 (1988), 119–36.

²¹ *Grágás*, § 238: *Grágás*, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen, II, 183. 'Neither blame nor praise of a man'.

²² R. North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, CSASE 22 (Cambridge, 1997), 204–59, esp. 232–46 and 255–8.

regularly used divine names as *beiti* for humans and giants.²³ Yet for gods the drawback to this two-way flow of influence is that weakness as well as strength attends the human form. The poet of *Lokasenna* (which, as John McKinnell says, 'has a surface of comic mockery') plays by this rule.²⁴ In this poem, Loki's technique is to deconstruct the gods by moralizing their mysteries as flaws of character. So, for example, Óðinn's quest to father an avenger for Baldr becomes a matter of effeminacy, Freyja's fertility becomes nymphomania, Njörðr's oceanic process deviancy (stanzas 24, 30, 34). Moralizations of the sacred are dangerous. As Frigg says to Loki, 'firriz æ forn røk firar' (*Lokasenna* 25):²⁵ that is to say, humans should not know too much, lest they end up unravelling the powers on which they depend. Even Þórr stands and falls by his humanity, and not only in his slow-witted entry into *Lokasenna*. His first duel with the world serpent is treated heroically in *Ragnarsdrápa* 14–20 (c. 850), *Húsdrápa* 3–6 (c. 990), Eysteinn's and Gamli's verses (?c. 1000), if not in at least three Viking Age stone reliefs.²⁶ But his anxious time in Skrymir's giant glove figures unflatteringly in *Hárbarðsljóð* 26–7 (?s. x) and in *Lokasenna* 60, as well as in Snorri's tale of Útgarda-Loki in *Gylfaginning*.²⁷ In the first,

²³ For example, cf. R. Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden: ein Beitrag zur skaldischen Poetik*, Rheinische Beiträge und Hilfsbücher zur germanischen Philologie und Volkskunde 1 (Bonn and Leipzig, 1921), 260–1 (*Baldr* × 40), 261 (*Gautr* × 22), 261–2 (*Njörðr* × 61).

²⁴ J. McKinnell, 'Motivation in *Lokasenna*', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 22.3–4 (1987–8), 234–62, esp. 259–60.

²⁵ *The Poetic Edda*, ed. Dronke, p. 338. 'Let men always shun old mysteries' (my translation and reading).

²⁶ *Skj* B I, 3–4; *Skj* B I, 128–9; *Skj* B I, 131; *Skj* B I, 132. Cf. J. McKinnell, *Both One and Many: Essays on Change and Variety in Late Norse Heathenism*, *Philologia* 1 (Rome, 1994), figs. 6–8.

²⁷ Cf. Snorri Sturluson: *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. A. Faulkes (Oxford, 1982), pp. 37, 67.

probably the oldest, instance:

Þórr á afl ærit, enn ekki hiarta;
af hræzlo oc hugbleyði þér var í hanzca troðit,
oc þóttisca þú þá Þórr vera;
hvarki þú þá þórðir fyr hræzlo þinni
hniósa né fisa, svá at Fialarr heyrði.

Hárbarðr inn ragi, ec mynda þic í hel drepa,
ef ec mætta seilaz um sund.²⁸

Snorri's jokes in *Gylfaginning* are Christianized embellishments, but the greater age of his theme, as seen in these other examples, breeds the suspicion that the Norse heathens had many stories in which they could laugh at Þórr besides other gods.²⁹

To turn suspicion into likelihood, we must look for evidence of sanctioned *goðgá* in skaldic verses with dates and contexts in the century preceding Hjalti's ditty in c. 998. My first of six examples is stanzas 23–4 of *Ynglingatal*, a genealogical poem which is held to have been composed by Þjóðólfr of Hvinir for King Rognavaldr of Grenland, and thus to be contextually datable to c. 890.³⁰

Veitk Eysteins enda folginn
lokens lífs á Lófundu,
ok sikling með Svíum kvóðu
józka menn inni brenna.

²⁸ '[Óðinn:] Þórr has enough strength, but no heart; in fear and cowardice of mind, you were stuffed into a glove, and then you didn't think you were Þórr; then, because of your fear, you dared neither sneeze nor fart in any way that Fjalarr might hear.

[Þórr:] Hoary-Beard the queer, I'd send you dead to hell if I could reach over this strait!

²⁹ Cf. McKinnell, *Both One and Many*, pp. 80–5.

³⁰ Pace C. Krag, *Ynglingatal og Ynglingesaga: en studie i historiske kilder*, *Studia Humaniora* 2 (Kristiansand, 1991), esp. 99–142. Cf. R. North, *Heathen Gods*, pp. 9–10.

Ok bitsótt í brandnói
 hlíðar þangs á hilmí rann,
 þás timbrfastr toptar nokkvi,
 flotna fullr, of fylki brann.³¹

In this conceit, it appears that Þjóðólfr stylizes Eysteinn as if this king were young Baldr on the pyre: Þjóðólfr's images of seaweed, a fire-ship and doomed sailors around a prince combine to suggest Baldr's ship-borne funeral pyre; while the thread-motif in *enda folginn* alludes to the fate-spinning Norns which are also the subject of an allusion in *Völuspá* (c. 1000), in which a sibyl sees the future for Baldr, the bleeding god, as being *orlog fölginn* (*Völuspá* 31).³² At first sight it might be thought that this stylization is entirely serious: Eysteinn's sudden death, like Baldr's, is unfair. Where a serious reading is subverted, however, is in the timing of the deaths. Baldr's takes place before his funeral; Eysteinn's funeral-pyre is his death, nor did Eysteinn expect to die so soon. In my reading, Baldr is not the primary target of Þjóðólfr's humour, which appears to be directed to the Swedish kings and the variety of their premature ends. But some of Eysteinn's indignity would attach to this god, nonetheless.

A second example of humour can be found in *Haustlög*, a work of mythology which was probably composed in c. 900 also by

³¹ *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 31: *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, ÍF 26–8 (Reykjavík, 1941–51) I, 60–1 (cf. *Skj B I*, 11). '[23] I know the end of the closed life of Eysteinn [the thread of his life] to have been concealed in Lófund, and that among the Swedes it was said that Jutish men burned the king within [sc. his house].

[24] And the biting sickness of the seaweed of the hillside [forest-fire] coursed onto the prince in his fire-ship, when, filled with sailors, the homestead's firm-timbered prow [hall] burned down upon the chieftain.' Cf. *The Haustlög of Þjóðólfr of Hvinir*, ed. R. North (Enfield Lock, 1997), pp. xxvi–viii.

³² *The Poetic Edda II*, ed. Dronke, p. 15.

Þjóðólfr, and possibly for Þorleifr inn spaki, a chieftain of Hordaland.³³ In the second of two surviving narratives in this poem, Þórr is treated with affection, as he races towards Hrungrnir (stanzas 14–20); in the first, however, Loki, Hœnir and particularly Óðinn are treated with mockery (stanzas 2–6). When Þjazi, in eagle's form, asks them for some roast ox from their cooking fire, Óðinn fails to see the risk:

Fljótt það foldar dróttinn Fárbauda mög vára
 þekkiligr með þegnum þrymseilar hval deila,
 en af breiðu bjóði bragðvíss at þat lagði
 ósvífrandi ása upp þjórhluði fjóra.³⁴ (st. 5)

With beef on a table, Loki as a bad-tempered serving boy and Óðinn as a naively festive host in a retained hall, Þjóðólfr frames a conceit that gives a human bathos to his gods. He has already called them *vélsparir varnendr goða* ('defenders of the gods economizing on trickery', st. 4), so perhaps they deserve the indignity. But there is no doubt that his comparison mocks them. No tale survives to tell us that Þjóðólfr's host thought his joke on Óðinn flat; the initial survival of this work suggests that he might have laughed at it. The title and vocabulary of *Haustlög* ('harvest-long (lay)') show that this poem was probably made for an autumn festival, in which any laughter would have been communal.

It was probably in Trøndelag in c. 960 that Kormakr composed *Sigurðardrápa* in honour of Earl Sigurðr of Hlaðir. With the exception of effectively two stanzas quoted in Snorri's *Hákonar saga góða*, the

³³ *Haustlög*, ed. North, pp. xxxi–xli.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5. 'Swiftly the handsome lord of the land [Óðinn, Earth's husband] bade Fárbaudi's boy [Loki] deal out the whale of the cracking rope of spring-times [whale of the traces [changed from 'whip']: ox] among the thegns, and after that the Æsir's prank-wise disobliger [Loki] served up four bull-portions from the broad table'.

stanzas of this work are strewn about his *Edda*. The difficulties of stanzaic sequence in this poem are discussed by Bjarne Fidjestøl, who proposes pairing off *belmingar* into full stanzas.³⁵ I follow the sequence in *Skj B I*, 69–70, while quoting from Faulkes and breaking up st. 6 as stanzas 6 and 7:

Heyri sonr á (Sýrar) sannreynis (fentanna
orr greppa lætél uppi jast-Rín) Haralds (mína). (SnE v. 292)

Meiðr er mörugum æðri morðteins í dyn fleina.
Hjörri fær hildibörum hjarl Sigurði jarli. (SnE v. 211)

Eykr með ennidúki jarðhljótr dáfjarðar
breyti, hún sá er beinan bindr. Seið Yggr til Rindar.
(SnE vv. 12, 308)

Svall, þá er gekk með gjallan Gauts eld hinn er styr beldi
glæðfæðandi Gríðar, gunnr. Komsk Urðr ór brunni.
(SnE v. 241)

Hróðr geri ek of mög mæran meir Sigrøðar fleira;
haptscenis galt ek hánnum heið. Sitr Þórr í reiðum. (SnE v. 301)

Hafit maðr ask né eskis afspring með sér þingat
fésaranda at færa fats. Véltu goð Þjaza. (*Hákonar saga*, v. 68)

Hver myni vés við valdi vægja kind of bægjask?
þvít fúr-Rogni[r] fagnar fens. Vá Gramr til menja.
(*Hákonar saga*, v. 68)

Algildan bið ek aldar allvald of mér halda
ýs bifvangi Yngva ungr. Fór Hroprtr með Gungni. (SnE v. 21)³⁶

³⁵ B. Fidjestøl, *Det norrøne fyrstediktet* (Øvre Ervik, 1982), pp. 92–4.

³⁶ SnE = *Snorri Sturluson: Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, ed. A. Faulkes, 2 vols. (London, 1998); *Hákonar saga góða*, ch. 14: *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, I, 168. '[1] Let the lively son of the true tester of Haraldr [Earl Sigurðr] hear! (Being a generous man) I will let my yeast-Rhine of the Sýr [Freyja] of the poets of the fen-teeth [rock-poets': giants'; their Freyja: Gunnlōð; her yeast-Rhine: mead of

Each *belmingr* ends with a throw-away comment consisting of five syllables, an effect which Snorri, creating his own in *Háttatal*, calls *hjástælt* ('abutted'), adding that 'skal orðtak vera forn minni'.³⁷ Turville-Petre may be wrong when he says that these *minni* 'have nothing to do with the context'.³⁸ It is fairly clear that Earl Sigurðr is identified with Óðinn in stanzas 8 and 3, in which earl and poet in the main stanza are juxtaposed with Óðinn plus another subject in the *minni*. In st. 8, Kormakr makes himself an instrument for the earl's weapon-hand; as much as Gungnir is Óðinn's spear. The inference of st. 3 seems to be

poetry) be heard.

[2] The tree of the murder-twig [sword's tree: warrior: Sigurðr] is better than many a man in the din of arrows. The sword gets dominion for battle-keen Earl Sigurðr.

[3] The land-obtainer honours the provider of the deities' fjord [poetry] with a forehead-canvas [head-band?], he who binds the mast-top straight. Yggr [terrifier: Óðinn] bewitched Rindr.

[4] Battle swelled, when he who has brought about war, the feeder of Gríðr's mount [giantess' mount: wolf], advanced with the shrieking fire of Gautr [Óðinn's fire: swords]. Urðr [fate] came out of her spring.

[5] Even more glory, furthermore, I perform for the renowned son of Sigurðr [Earl Hákon]; him I have paid the wages of the gods' ?reconciler [poetry]. Þórr sits in his chariot.

[6] Let no man have food-dish or the bowl's offspring to take to the house of the man who inflicts wounds on his own vat's wealth. The gods tricked Þjazi.

[7] Which man's son would allow himself to quarrel with the ruler of the sanctuary? For it is the prince of the marsh-fire [gold-giver: Earl Sigurðr] who gives the welcome. Gramr [Sigurðr Fáfnisbani's sword] fought for necklaces.

[8] I who am young bid the most excellent power-wielder of the people of Ingvi-Freyr [men of Trøndelag] to hold over me his bow's quivering slope [hand]. Hroprtr [Óðinn] took Gungnir on campaign.'

³⁷ *Snorri Sturluson: Edda: Háttatal*, ed. A. Faulkes (Oxford, 1991), p. 10. 'The expression must be old proverbial statements.' Translation based on A. Faulkes, *Snorri Sturluson: Edda* (London, 1987), p. 176.

³⁸ E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 45–50, esp. 46.

that the poet, honoured as he is by the earl in a public ceremony, is as terrified as Rindr was when Yggr, with enormous difficulty (cf. Saxo's tale of Rinda),³⁹ made her the mother of Váli. If we accept these correspondences, the earl is identifiable with Óðinn in other places too. Given the focus on the earl's *hjǫrr* ('sword') in st. 2, the sword-kennung *Gauts eldr* ('Gautr's fire') suggests that Sigurðr himself is Gautr (Óðinn) in st. 4, so wild in battle that Urðr herself comes out to register the dead. Sigurðr, the earl who bestows his wealth on unlimited numbers of guests in st. 5, is probably ribbed there for his unquestioning bounty in the proverb *veltu goð Þjaza* ('the gods tricked Þjazi'). After all, it was Þjazi who tricked the *vélsporn* gods when Óðinn offered him an ox-portion in *Haustlǫng* 5, even if the gods just managed to survive by having Loki trick Iðunn back and by killing Þjazi (cf. *vélum leiða mey aptr*, 'unless with trickery you lead the girl back here', *Haustlǫng* 11). The Þjazi-proverb must mean 'But at what cost?': a jest about prodigality. But then, in the st. 7 which does follow st. 6, Kormakr turns on the gentry with *vá Gramr til menja* ('Gramr fought for necklaces'): each freeloader at Sigurðr's table, like Kormakr, may expect to become his sword, his foot-soldier, in the battles by which this Óðinn-hypostasis seizes yet more treasure. Kormakr does not forget Hákon, the earl's son, on whom he claims to load even more praise in st. 5: *sitr Þórr í reiðum* ('Þórr sits in his chariot': i.e. 'I'm on my way'). If Earl Sigurðr is flattered as Óðinn, it follows that Kormakr meant to style his up-and-coming son as Þórr.

Hákon became Þórr's more serious hypostasis when, as earl of his father's region and ruler over most of Norway (c. 978–95), he consolidated his power after his victory against the Danes in Hjørungavágr in c. 985. It is thought that Eilíf's *Þórdrápa* was one of many works composed then in his honour, one in which Þórr and the

³⁹ *Gesta Danorum* III.iv.1–7: *Saxonis Gesta Danorum*, ed. Olrik and Ræder, pp. 70–2.

giants can be read as an allegory of Hákon in action against the comic Danes and their allies.⁴⁰ In this baroque masterpiece Þórr wades across a torrent on his way to see the giant Geirröðr in his cave. The flood is rising because of Gjalp, the giant's daughter, who straddles the river the better to cascade into it from higher up.⁴¹ There is but one thing for Þórr to do:

Harðvaxnar lét (WT; R sér) herðir hallands of sik falla
 (gatat maðr njótr in neytri njarð-ráð fyr sér) (-)gjarðar;
 þverrir lét, nema þyrri (Þóms barna) sér Marnar
 snerriblóð, til svíra salþaks megin vaxa.⁴² (st. 7, *SnE* v. 79)

I take the prefix *njarð-* to have two meanings and the word *gjarðar* two cases and roles; thus *njótr* can go into the second clause in apposition to *maðr*, without competing with *herðir* in the first clause, while neither *maðr* nor *herðir* need be emended (as in *Skj* B I, 141). The consensus is for a singular compound *njarðgjørd* ('strength-belt', with *Njorðr*'s name in abstract form) in tmesis, but in a poem of so

⁴⁰ D. L. Davidson, 'Earl Hákon and his Poets' (unpubl. DPhil thesis, Oxford Univ., 1983), pp. 500–540.

⁴¹ *Skáldskaparmál*, ch. 18: *SnE* I, 24–5.

⁴² *SnE* I, 27. 'The temperer of the land of the whetstone [sword-temperer: warrior: Þórr] dropped his hard-grown (strength-) belt [*f. pl. acc.*] about himself; the possessor of the (strength-) belt [*f. sg. gen.*; Þórr] had not learnt as a man *Njorðr*'s strategies to be the more useful option; the diminisher of the *ogre's* (*/Þorn's*) children [giants] declared that unless *Morn*'s swift-blood [urine: river] dried up, his power would grow to the peak of the hall-hatch [to heaven] itself'. For MS variants, cf. *SnE* I, 173 (note on v. 79). Cf. Davidson, 'Earl Hákon and his Poets', p. 522. For a reading of this cascade as a female on male humiliation, one intended to emasculate Þórr, cf. M. Clunies Ross, 'An Interpretation of the Myth of Þórr's Encounter with Geirröðr and his Daughters', *Speculum Norroenum: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, ed. U. Dronke, Guðrún P. Helgadóttir, G. W. Weber and H. Bekker Nielsen (Odense, 1981), pp. 370–91, esp. 374–8.

many facets there is no reason why *njarð-* cannot also compound with *ráð*, its neighbour ('Njorðr's strategies').⁴³ The meaning would be that Þórr is too warlike to do what Njorðr would have done in his place, swallow the giantess' urine. Loki charges Njorðr with this refinement in *Lokasenna* 34:

Hymis meyar hofðu þik at hlandtrog
ok þér í munn migo.⁴⁴

whereby the river-drinking ocean is scorned as a patrician deviant.⁴⁵ This is the human perspective Eilífr appears to invoke for Njorðr in his poem, whose cult may have become marginal (cf. *Hallfreðr's claim to have left him a year before the other gods: 'fjorð lét ek af dul Njarðar').⁴⁶ There is no disrespect for Þórr in *Þórsdrápa*, who is fashioned into a more military hero than his prototype in *Haustlong*; but in *Þórsdrápa* 7 his prestige comes at another god's expense.

If Hákon could laugh at Njorðr's mystery in one poem, it seems that he was ready to make even more fun of Óðinn in another. 'Hákonardrápa' is the name scholars give a poem whose stanzas,

⁴³ Cf. E. A. Kock, *Notationes Norroenae*, 2 vols. [ptd as one] (Lund, 1923–41), § 449; K. Reichardt, 'A Contribution to the Interpretation of Scaldic Poetry: *Imesis*', *Old Norse Literature and Mythology: a Symposium*, ed. E. C. Polomé (Austin, TX, 1969), pp. 200–26, esp. 212–13; Davidson, 'Earl Hákon and his Poets', p. 544.

⁴⁴ *The Poetic Edda*, ed. Dronke, p. 340. 'Hymir's daughters had you as a piss-trough and made water into your mouth'.

⁴⁵ Clunies Ross ('Þórr's Encounter', p. 378) reads this scene as the humiliation of Njorðr 'during his captivity by the daughters of the giant Hymir', without noting that it is the *Æsir*, not the giants, who have taken Njorðr as a hostage in *Lokasenna* 34.

⁴⁶ *Hallfreðar saga*, ch. 6: *Vatnsdala saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 158, who translates: 'Í fyrra lét ég af villu Njarðar'; so, also, Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, p. 72: 'a year ago I abandoned the humbug of Njorðr'; *p.ace* Finnur Jónsson, *Skej* B I, 159.

scattered about in Snorri's *Edda*, are each attributed there to Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld Óttarsson. The patron of this work is not named, as Fidjestøl points out; Fidjestøl considers it possible that the work named *Hákonardrápa* was composed for Earl Eiríkr Hákonarson (i.e. in c. 1005).⁴⁷ There is a story in *Hallfreðar saga*, supported by a full line of *dróttkvætt* and elsewhere by a brief statement in *Skáldatal*, that Hallfreðr composed a poem in honour of Earl Eiríkr Hákonarson, who, in the saga, pardons him for the earlier maiming of one Þorleifr inn spaki.⁴⁸ It is clear from the saga context that Christian forgiveness is the theme of the story about Þorleifr. But it is also worth noting that the verse in *Hallfreðar saga* is not found in Snorri's *Edda*; that Hallfreðr does not stay with the earl longer than it takes to compose the poem whose beginning is quoted; and that Eiríkr's Christianity, not to mention his brother-in-law relationship with King Knútr, might have made *Hákonardrápa*'s heathen kennings undesirable in a court with Christian clergy.⁴⁹ Since Óláfr Tryggvason's Christianity ruled out the use of pagan metaphors in *Óláfsdrápa* and *Erfidrápa Óláfs*, which Hallfreðr dedicated to him, it is more likely that 'Hákonardrápa' was composed, after all, in honour of the apostate Earl Hákon. *Hákonardrápa*, then, describes a marriage between the Earl and Norway in lavish detail. It is reconstructed from a scattering

⁴⁷ Fidjestøl, *Det norrøne fyrstediktet*, pp. 102–6.

⁴⁸ *Hallfreðar saga*, ch. 11: *Vatnsdala saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 194–5.

⁴⁹ Cf. *Fagrskinna*, ch. 26: *Ágrip*, ed. Bjarni Einarsson, pp. 165–6: 'Þessir jarlar hofðu látit skírask ok heldu kristni, en engum manni þrøngðu þeir til kristni, nema létu göra hvern sem vildi, ok um þeira daga spilltisk mjök kristni, svá at nálíga var alheiðit um Upplönd ok inn um Þrándheim, en helzk kristnin með sjónum.' ('These earls [the sons of Earl Hákon] had themselves baptized and kept the Christian faith, but did not force anyone to become Christian, rather let each do as he wished, and in their day Christianity was greatly injured, so that throughout Oppland the country was almost entirely heathen and also around Trondheim, and most Christian by the coast.')

of stanzas (*Skj* B I, 147–8), so no claims can be based on stanzaic sequence, but the idea contained in stanzas ‘3–6’ is clear enough:⁵⁰

Sannyrðum spenr sverða snarr þiggjandi viggjar
barrhaddaða byrjar biðkván und sik Þriðja. (SnE v. 10)

Því hykk fleygjanda frakna (ferr jörð und menþverri)
ítra eina at láta Auðs systur mjök traudan. (SnE v. 121)

Ráð lukusk, at sá síðan snjallráðr konungs spjalli
átti einga dóttur Ónars viði gróna. (SnE v. 118)

Breiðleita gat brúði Báleygs at sér teygða
stefnir stöðvar hrafna stála ríkismálum.⁵¹ (SnE v. 119)

Óðinn’s union with Jörð had engendered Þórr; and his marriage with Norway, in particular, is hailed as glorious in Eyvindr’s *Háleygjatal* of c. 985.⁵² But while Hallfreðr attributes a *hieros gamos* role to Óðinn in *Hákonardrápa*, he characterizes this god rather differently from Eyvindr, as a ‘third-party’ (*Þriðr*) ‘furnace-eyed’ (*Báleygr*) husband,

⁵⁰ Cf. Davidson, ‘Earl Hákon and his Poets’, pp. 497–503. Cf. F. Ström, ‘Poetry as an Instrument of Propaganda. Jarl Hákon and his Poets’, *Speculum Norroenum*, ed. Dronke *et al.*, pp. 440–58, esp. 452–6. Fidjestøl (*Det norrøne fyrstediktet*, pp. 104–6), suggests the order 6, 3, 4, 5 in this case.

⁵¹ [3] The brisk receiver of the steed of the following wind [ship’s pilot] entices beneath himself with the true messages of swords the barley- (or, pine-cone-) wimpled waiting-wife of the Third One [Óðinn].

[4] For this reason I think that the spear-caster [Hákon] (Earth goes down on the man who diminishes his store of necklaces) would be hugely unwilling to leave the gleaming sister of Auðr [earth] alone.

[5] The deal closed in such a way that, afterwards, the king’s eloquent conversational confidant took possession of the only daughter, who was grown with (or, in) (back)-woods, of Ónarr [Norway].

[6] The broad-featured bride of Furnace-Eye [Óðinn’s bride: Norway] was lured by the harbour-ravens’ [ships’] captain to himself by the kingdom-building words of his steel blades.

⁵² Ström, ‘Poetry as an Instrument of Propaganda’, pp. 446–8.

whose deception by a bored peasant wife (*biðkván; viði gróna; breiðleita brúði*) follows on from her being sweet-talked (*snjallráðr; teygða -málum*) by a passing ship’s captain into taking his necklaces (*menþverri*). It is odd enough that Hallfreðr uses this ribaldry apparently to convey Hákon’s conquest of Norway. But why does he mock Óðinn while doing so? How, or with what licence, is easy enough: Óðinn is known to be cuckolded by his brothers (*Lokasenna* 26). But Óðinn was also acclaimed as Hákon’s ancestor, and if anything, Hallfreðr’s mockery of this god is even sharper than Þjóðólfr’s nearly a century earlier in *Haustleng*.

Whatever the sequence of stanzas ‘3–6’ of *Hákonardrápa*, the poet’s emphasis on the earl’s victories as a sexual conquest is so strong there that it suggests Hákon wished to sanctify real-life coercions as an institution of kingship. The historical records of Hákon in the closing years of his reign do show him to have made peripatetic use of his subjects’ wives and daughters through the fjords of western Norway.⁵³ Perhaps for this reason, *Hákonardrápa* may be dated to c. 990, a few years before Earl Hákon’s wronged subjects overthrew him.⁵⁴ Its style is confident, and in stanzas ‘3–4’ the poet appears to identify Hákon with Ingvi-Freyr in his predatory role in *Skírnismál*. Three elements within Hallfreðr’s ‘st. 3’ (the horse (*vigg*), sword (*sverð*) and the barley-wimpled woman (*barrhödduð*)) connect Hákon with Freyr, whose emissary Skírnir, in order to secure a giantess for his master, rides the god’s horse (*Skírnismál* 8–10), wears his sword (*Skírnismál* 23) and relays Gerðr’s promise to meet Freyr in

⁵³ Snorri distils earlier sources for this story in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, ch. 48: *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, I, 293–6. For a discussion of these sources, cf. A. Hamer, ‘Death in a Pig-Sty: Snorri’s Version of the Death of Hákon Jarl Sigurðarson’, *Latin Culture and Medieval Germanic Europe*, ed. R. North and T. Hofstra, Germania Latina 1 (Groningen, 1992), 55–69.

⁵⁴ Cf. SnE I, 158 (note to v. 10).

Barri ('barley', *Skírnismál* 41). With Norway's being *itr* in st. 4, Hallfreðr's text is also reminiscent of Iðunn, whose arms are *itrþvegirnir* ('gleaming washed') when she embraces her brother's killer in *Lokasenna* 17 (just as Gerðr fears to do in *Skírnismál* 16). These are traces of older mythologems, but in *Hákonardrápa* they appear to reflect a shift in the earl's politics by which he intended to revive the sexual privilege of archaic lordship. To do that, Hákon would probably have had to sideline Óðinn, whose cult is thought to have been boosted in the west of Norway by Haraldr hárfagri in the 880s.⁵⁵ The Freyr-ideology would have been a mistake, however, given Þórr's overriding popularity in the Viking age.⁵⁶ *Þórsdrápa* bears witness to a solidarity between Hákon and his people which *Hákonardrápa* may show him to be in the process of losing.

If these examples show wit at the expense of different deities, it can also be inferred that a heathen poet could mock one god from the relative safety of being friends with another. *Hárbarðsljóð* is a case where Þórr's 'slave' adherents (*þræla kyn*, st. 24) are no match for Óðinn's 'earls' (*iarla*, st. 24). In the more political context of occasional verse, however, Þórr generally comes out on top. He is more central to the harvest than either Óðinn or Loki in *Hauströng*; Njörðr can be mocked without fear of offending him in *Þórsdrápa*, although Óðinn, and perhaps Þórr, have lost prestige to Freyr in *Hákonardrápa*. With each shift of allegiance over time the pagan community is configured differently. That there were squabbles between cults is suggested by the Vanir-Æsir cult-war (*Völuspá* 23), the Óðinn-Þórr antagonism in *Hárbarðsljóð* and *Gautreks saga* (ch. 7),

⁵⁵ Cf. G. Turville-Petre, 'The Cult of Óðinn in Iceland', in his *Nine Norse Studies*, Viking Soc. for Northern Research Text Series 5 (London, 1972), 1-19, esp. 15-16.

⁵⁶ McKinnell, *Both One and Many*, pp. 67-86. Cf. North, *Heathen Gods*, pp. 260-6.

even an Óðinn-Freyr rivalry in the background of *Víga-Glúms saga*.⁵⁷ But the fact that the comic stories were traditional, meant that they were sanctioned. The heathen community, largely coterminous with the joker's 'community of amusement',⁵⁸ remained intact so long as it laughed at a god when his story invited humour, and preferably under the patronage of a divine rival. When Úlfr mocks Þorvaldr veili, who had asked him c. 998 to murder the missionary Þangbrandr, he appears to use Þórr as the butt of his humour:

Tekka ek, sunds þótt sendi sannreynir boð, tanna
hvarfs við hleypiskarfi, Hárbarðs véa fjarðar;
erat ráfaka rækis, röng eru mál á gangi,
sé ek við mínu meini, mínligt flugu at gína.⁵⁹

That is, with his kenning 'true tester of the strait of the fjord of Hoary-Beard's sanctuaries' (*sunds sannreynir Hárbarðs véa fjarðar*), Úlfr portrays Þorvaldr as two things: a traditional drinker of Óðinn's mead of poetry, a poet; and as a baffled Þórr, marooned on the other side of a (religious) gulf. Although Úlfr here appears to make fun of the Icelanders' principal god, it seems that he does so, formally at least, under the aegis of Óðinn in his role as Þórr's tormentor.

Hjalti, when he made his joke against a pagan deity, worked from the safety of knowing the Christian God. That much is clear from his

⁵⁷ Cf. Sigurður Nordal, 'Átrúnaður Egils Skallagrímssonar', *Skírnir* 98 (1924), 145-65, esp. 160-3; R. North, 'Óðinn gegen Freyr: Elemente heidnischer Religion in der Víga-Glúms Saga' (forthcoming in a *Gedenkschrift* for G. W. Weber, ed. M. Dallapiazza).

⁵⁸ Cohen, *Jokes*, p. 40.

⁵⁹ *Njáls saga*, ch. 102: *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 263: 'I'm not going to accede to the headlong cormorant of the teeth's vanishing [mouth's bird: fly], though the invitation is sent from a true tester of the strait of the fjord of Hoary-Beard's sanctuaries; it isn't my business (wrong are the plans now afoot; I can see in them harm to myself) to gape for the fly of the sailyard-nag's [ship's] extender [sailor].'

mockery of Freyja as a 'bitch' (*grey*). Hereby the gods are dogs, their interaction rather like a scene in the *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* (c. 1014), in which Archbishop Wulfstan describes a gang of men who buy a woman and use her 'an æfter oðrum, and ælc æfter oðrum, hundum gelyccast, þe for fylþe ne scrifað'.⁶⁰ There is no extant scene from Old Norse mythology in which Freyja is transformed into a real bitch. In this way, Hjalti's joke appears to represent an imported Christian conceit. In a heathen sense it had no basis in tradition; even if Freyja is promiscuous, it was not 'true' (could not be part of a *senna*) that she was a dog. This degree of cultural alienness may explain why there was a trial for Hjalti's ditty in the first place. Not only the penalty for this verse was mild, but of course the insult itself. Freyja was a relatively minor target. What would have happened to Hjalti if he had challenged Þórr?

To sum up, the evidence suggests that Norse and Icelandic heathens, while still heathen, did not know how to blaspheme. It seems that heathens could joke about their gods to each other so long as they did so within the scope of traditional motifs and with the backing of a more powerful god in each case as an insurance against personal retribution. Rulers could be styled as various gods, gods as flawed people, and it is likely that the communities that laughed at these permutations constantly changed religious configuration while keeping the same unfenced openness. That flexibility, so alien to Christianity, would have defined Norse paganism. The real blasphemy had to be directed from a foreign community, and to that extent, Hjalti's *god geyja* may be our sole surviving example.

⁶⁰ *The Homilies of Wulfstan*, ed. D. Bethurum (Oxford, 1957), p. 270, lines 88–9. 'One after the other, and each man after the other, most like dogs, that have no care for filth'.

In Search of Lost Time:
Aldhelm and *The Ruin*

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The Ruin – which it is almost traditional to describe as a ruin itself, as bad fire damage has obliterated large parts of the text in the Exeter Book – is a meditation on that most Anglo-Saxon of preoccupations: the transitoriness of worldly glory.¹ It takes the form of an extended description of an urban scene which alternates between the physical decay which confronts the poet in the present and an imagining, inspired by this vision, of what the city must have been like in the past. It is a poem of contrasts: between then and now, between a living city and a ruined shell, between the city as a collection of buildings and the city as a body of people with a corporate life. These contrasts serve to build up a unique sense of lost time, for not only does the author of *The Ruin* construct his own conception of the past, but he does so by examining the past constructions of other people.

In this paper I shall argue that, whether or not it is a description of an actual location – which most scholars take to be the Roman city of Bath, owing to the reference to hot streams in lines 43 and 46² –

¹ See C. E. Fell, 'Perceptions of Transience', *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. M. Godden and M. Lapidge (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 172–89.

² K. P. Wentersdorf, 'Observations on *The Ruin*', *MÆ* 46 (1977), 171–80, offers

The Ruin is itself a construction, an edifice of literary building-blocks which have been quarried from the works of past authors.³ In particular, I shall examine the possible role of Latin tradition in the formation of the *Ruin*-poet's vision of the past and his poetic sensibility.

I think this approach may be helpful, as *The Ruin*'s peculiarities of theme and style have not successfully been explained by purely vernacular referents: although it is true that *The Ruin* shares an elegiac mood with the other texts from the Exeter Book which have been designated as elegies, there are also important differences between this group and *The Ruin*.⁴ *The Ruin* does not make use of *ectopoeia*, the

the fullest exposition of the compelling archaeological evidence in favour of Bath; this conclusion was first reached in the nineteenth century by H. Leo, *Carmen Anglo-Saxonicum in Codice Exoniensis servatum, quod vulgo inscribitur 'Ruinae'* (Halle, 1865), and J. Earle, 'An Ancient Saxon Poem of a City in Ruins, supposed to be Bath', *Proc. of the Bath Nat. Hist. and Antiquities Field Club* 2 (1870-3), 259-70; alternative suggestions have since been made by G. W. Dunleavy, 'A "De Excidio" Tradition in the Old English *Ruin*?', *PQ* 38 (1959), 112-18, who favours Chester, and S. J. Herben, 'The *Ruin*', *Modern Language Notes* 54 (1939), 37-9, who suggests Hadrian's wall. Critics have also argued against *The Ruin* being a description of a specific location: see H. T. Keenan, 'The *Ruin* as Babylon', *Tennessee Stud. In Lit.* 11 (1966), 109-17; A. T. Lee, 'The *Ruin*: Bath or Babylon? A Non-archaeological Investigation', *NM* 74 (1973), 443-55; and W. Johnson, 'The *Ruin* as Body-City Riddle', *PQ* 59 (1980), 397-411.

³ For the purposes of argument I accept here the traditional eighth-century dating of *The Ruin* given by R. F. Leslie, *Three Old English Elegies* (Manchester, 1961), p. 35, although there has been no consensus on this matter.

⁴ The genre distinction is a problematic one: on this see J. Harris, 'Elegy in Old English and Old Norse: a Problem in Literary History', *The Old English Elegies: New Essays in Criticism and Research*, ed. M. Green (Cranbury, NJ, 1983), pp. 46-56. The corpus of Exeter Book poems traditionally regarded as elegies consists of *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *The Riming Poem*, *Deor*, *Wulf* and *Eadwacer*, *The Wife's*

trope of speaking through an imagined person, and it does not constitute a lament.⁵ Whereas the other elegies tend towards thoughts of consolation at the end, *The Ruin* – although the final section is so badly damaged that it is hard to say for sure – continues merely to describe the past life of the imagined inhabitants of the city. It features one of the most potent images of the Anglo-Saxon elegy – the remains of a past civilization crumbling under the inescapable pressure of fate (made explicit in *The Ruin* in line 24: *oppæt þæt onwende wyrd seo swiþe*)⁶ – but, while *The Wanderer*, probably the *locus classicus* of this motif, relates this general decay to the *eardstapa*'s personal lament for his own vanished way of life, *The Ruin* takes this image and expands it with unparalleled detail of the remains themselves, making the overall tone of the poem – in the words of R. F. Leslie – 'an imaginative nostalgia for a glorious past, stimulated by a particular scene spread out before the poet's eyes'.⁷ The overall theme, much more so than in the personal elegies, is simply *sic transit gloria mundi*.

A model for this type of text can be found in variants upon the *encomium urbis* theme: there are abundant late Latin examples of poems in praise of a city which, like *The Ruin*, describe in great detail

Lament, *Resignation*, *The Husband's Message* and *The Ruin*. See the discussion of elegy as a classification, rather than as a genre per se, in A. L. Klinck, *The Old English Elegies: an Edition and Genre Study* (Montreal, 1992), pp. 13-14.

⁵ The classic definition of the characteristics of Old English 'elegy' is that of Greenfield: 'a relatively short reflective or dramatic poem embodying a contrasting pattern of loss and consolation, ostensibly based upon a specific personal experience or observation, and expressing an attitude towards that experience'. S. B. Greenfield, 'The Old English Elegies', *Continuations and Beginnings: Studies in Old English Literature*, ed. E. G. Stanley (London, 1966), pp. 142-75, at 143.

⁶ See B. J. Timmer, 'Wyrd in Anglo-Saxon Prose and Poetry', *Neophilologus* 26 (1941), 24-33 and 213-28. *The Ruin* is quoted from ASPR III, 227-9.

⁷ Leslie, *Three Old English Elegies*, p. 3.

the city's architectural features and often the lives of its inhabitants.⁸ This genre, which was codified in the works of Menander the Rhetorician around 300, was described in the eighth century in a rhetorical tract:⁹

Urbium laudem primum conditoris dignitas ornat idque aut ad homines inlustres pertinet aut etiam ad deos, ut Athenas a Minerva dicitur constitutas: et ne fabulosa potius quam vera videantur. Secundus est de specie moenium locus et situs, qui aut terrenus est aut maritimus et in monte vel in plano: tertius de fecunditate agrorum, largite fontium, moribus incolarum: tum de his ornamentis, quae postea accesserint, aut felicitate, si res sponte ortae sint et prolatae aut virtute et armis et bello propagatae. Laudamus etiam illud, si ea civitas habuerit plurimos nobiles viros, quorum gloria lucem praebeat universis.¹⁰

The city described in *The Ruin* is praised in similar terms: the walls are mentioned in the first line, where they are described as *wraetlic* 'wondrous', even though *wyrd* 'fate' has shattered them. Other

⁸ See P. Zanna, "Descriptiones urbium" and Elegy in Latin and Vernaculars in the Early Middle Ages. At the Crossroads between Civic Engagement, Artistic Enthusiasm and Religious Meditation', *JM* 3rd ser. 32 (1991), 523–96.

⁹ Now Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Latin 7530, which contains a number of miscellaneous excerpts from rhetorical texts.

¹⁰ *Rhetores Latini Minores*, ed. K. F. Halm (Leipzig, 1863), p. 587. 'The founder's dignity furnishes the first praise of cities, and it pertains to famous men or even to gods, as Athens is said to have been founded by Minerva: and these things should not seem to be fabulous, but rather true. The second relates to the appearance of the walls and the location of the site, which is either inland or coastal, in the mountains or on a plain; the third relates to the fertility of the fields, the abundance of springs, the customs of the inhabitants: then, about the distinctions which they might have later acquired, either by good fortune (if these things came about and increased by themselves), or were augmented by prowess in arms and war. And if this city had many noble men, whose glory furnished light to everyone, that we praise likewise.'

architectural features – roofs, arches, gates – are described, which would also fall into the 'second praise' of the city.

The customs of the departed troops of men may have a particularly Germanic ring to them in *The Ruin*, with its description of *meodobeall monig mondreama full* 'many a mead-hall, filled with the joys of men' (line 23), but it fits the pattern of the encomium. We know that the inhabitants of the city were a martial people, and a noble people: they wear armour as, proud and flushed with wine, they look upon treasure, silver, on costly stones, on wealth, on property, on this precious jewel, this bright city in this broad kingdom (32b–38). Even after long years of decay, it is this impression of glory which comes to captivate the author of *The Ruin*.

There is no evidence that the works of Menander the Rhetorician or the eighth-century Frankish text quoted above were known in Anglo-Saxon England, and yet the *encomium urbis* was a genre of which the Anglo-Saxons were certainly aware.¹¹ The late Old English poem *Durham*, for example, is a neat exposition of the rhetorical device in an English context: it briefly describes Durham's location, dwelling once again upon the waterways in the vicinity, and specifying that there are stone constructions in the city. The main concern of the *Durham*-poet is the town's ecclesiastical glory, and so the description of the bishops and holy men of Northumbria dominates the bulk of the poem; but it is the town, specifically, which is 'extolled throughout Britain':

Is ðeos burch breome geond Breotenrice,
steppa gestaðolad, stanas ymbutan
wundrum gewæxen. Weor ymbeornad,
ea yðum stronge, and ðer inne wunað
feola fisca kyn on floda gemonge.

¹¹ See M. Schlauch, 'An Old English "Encomium Urbis"', *JEGP* 40 (1941), 14–28.

And ðær gewexen is wudafæstern micel;
 wuniad in ðem wycum wilda deor monige,
 in deope dalum deora ungerim.
 Is in ðere byri eac bearnum gecyðed
 ðe arfesta eadig Cudberch
 and ðes clene cyninges heafud,
 Osuualdes, Engle leo, and Aidan biscop,
 Eadberch and Eadfrīð, æðele geferes.
 Is ðer inne midd heom Æðelwold biscop
 and breoma bocera Beda, and Boisil abbot,
 ðe clene Cudberte on gecheðe
 lerde lustum, and he his lara wel genom.
 Eardiað æt ðem eadige in in ðem minstre
 unarimeda reliquia,
 ðær monia wundrum gewurðað, ðes ðe writ seggeð,
 midd ðene drihnes wer domes bideð.¹²

The Ruin and *Durham* appear to form a distinct sub-group of Old English poetry with an urban setting. In Anglo-Latin, Alcuin's *Versus de patribus, regibus et sanctis Euboricensis ecclesiae* comes close to fitting the paradigm, although it is only in one short passage near the beginning that the physical attributes of the city are described:

¹² ASPR VI, 27. 'This town is extolled throughout Britain, established on high, with stones around it, wonderfully grown up. The Wear surrounds it, a river strong with waves, and therein dwell many sorts of fish, many in the flood. And there is grown up a great forest: many a wild animal lives in its lair, in the deep dales there are many beasts. Also in this town, well-known to men, steadfast in grace, the blessed Cuthbert; and the head of Oswald, the holy king, lion of England; and bishop Aidan, and Eadberch and Eadfrith, his noble companions. Bishop Æthelwold is there with them, and the famous scholar Bede, and Boisil the abbot, who taught the holy Cuthbert in friendship, and he took his teaching well. In the minster are buried countless relics of the blessed; there many wonders come about, as writings relate, while God's company await the Judgement Day.'

Mecum ferte pedes, vestris componite carmen
 hoc precibus: patriae quoniam mens dicere laudes,
 et veteres cunas properat proferre parumper
 Euboricae gratis praeclarae versibus urbis!
 Hanc Romana' manus muris et turribus altam
 fundavit primo, comites sociosque laborum
 indigenas tantum gentes adhibendo Britannas
 nam tunc Romanos fecunda Britannia reges
 sustinuit merito, mundi qui sceptrata regabant.¹³ (15–23)

The correspondences in theme and imagery between Alcuin's poem and *Durham* are striking; it is worth noting that, in these two texts, as well as in *The Ruin*, it is only stone-built, Roman cities, which are lauded. Native Anglo-Saxon habitations, built in wood, do not seem to have attracted the attentions of such poets.¹⁴

The remains of the city in *The Ruin* are stone, but they have crumbled all the same, and so this poem is not such a straightforward exposition of a city's good points: it takes the eulogistic rhetoric of the encomium and applies it to a vision of a destroyed settlement and its vanished inhabitants. The overall mood might thus be said to resemble that of the *de excidio*,¹⁵ a type of text, if not a recognizable

¹³ *Alcuin: The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York*, ed. P. Godman (Oxford, 1982), p. 4. 'Walk with me, compose this song with your prayers: for my mind hastens to speak praises of our homeland, and quickly to proclaim in pleasant verses the ancient origins of the most renowned city of York. This high city a Roman hand first founded with walls and towers, bringing as companions and partners in these works only the native British people: for fertile Britain then rightly supported Roman rulers, who reigned over all the earth.'

¹⁴ R. I. Page, *Anglo-Saxon Aptitudes* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 22–4, notes that Anglo-Saxon ruins could themselves be imposing, but this does not seem to have prompted poetic endeavour in the same way that Roman remains did.

¹⁵ Zanna, "'Descriptiones urbium'", p. 524, offers a definition of a sub-genre of *elegiae urbium*, which he sees as a 'meditative reflection on the fated downfall of great cities, their present and future state'.

genre, which was well known in Anglo-Saxon England as a result of Gildas's polemical *De excidio Britanniae*.¹⁶ But a closer parallel to *The Ruin* is offered by a sixth-century Latin work on the decay of a civilization, Venantius Fortunatus's *De excidio Thuringiae*. In particular, the opening of this poem, with its emphasis on fate as the agent of destruction, and its dwelling on the architectural features of the city, seems to encapsulate the mood of the first half of *The Ruin*.

Condicio belli tristis, sors invida rerum!
 quam subito lapsu regna superba cadunt!
 quae steterant longo felicia culmina tractu
 victa sub ingenti clade cremata iacent.
 aula palatino quae floruit antea cultu,
 hanc modo pro cameris maesta favilla tegit.
 ardua quae rutilo nituere ornata metallo,
 pallidus oppressit fulgida tecta cinis.
 missa sub hostili domino captiva potestas,
 decedit in humili gloria celsa loco.¹⁷

(1–10)

Although this is only a brief excerpt from a much longer work, the correspondences between the two poems make the Fortunatus poem an interesting analogue – even if it cannot be claimed as a direct source – especially since Venantius Fortunatus was known in Anglo-Saxon England.¹⁸ Of early Latin authors, Bede knew at least one of

¹⁶ K. Hume, 'The "Ruin Motif" in Old English Poetry', *Anglia* 94 (1976), 339–60, at 348.

¹⁷ *Venanti Honori Clementiani Fortunati presbyteri italici: Opera poetica*, ed. F. Leo, MGH Auct. antiq. 4.1 (Berlin, 1881), 271. 'O sad condition of war, O fate envious of things! With what sudden collapse have proud kingdoms fallen! The pinnacles, which had stood happy for so long, lie conquered, burned, beneath a great disaster. The halls which flourished in Imperial care – these the mournful cinders now roof, in place of vaults. The high gleaming roofs which once shone, adorned with red-gold metal – pale ash now smothers them. Power was sent as a captive to a hostile lord; lofty glory sank into a humble place.'

¹⁸ See R. W. Hunt, 'Manuscript Evidence for Knowledge of the Poems of

his poems, and Alcuin was familiar enough with his work to cite him as a source.¹⁹ It should not surprise us to discover, however, that the Anglo-Saxon author who seems to have known and used the works of Venantius Fortunatus more than any other Englishman of the period is Aldhelm, abbot of Malmesbury, bishop of Sherborne and 'first English man of letters'.²⁰ It has been demonstrated, by Andy Orchard in particular, that Aldhelm knew the full range of Fortunatus's work, both his monumental *Vita S. Martini*, as well as his eleven volumes of occasional poetry.²¹ This knowledge forms an important part of the 'remembered reading' which underlies Aldhelm's own writings. And thus, when we find references to urban decay in Aldhelm, it may be tempting to see the influence of Fortunatus somewhere behind them.

Aldhelm's attitude to the past is necessarily coloured by his Christian beliefs: we see this when he speaks of the folly of pagans in believing fate to be the guiding force of their lives. He throws this in

Venantius Fortunatus in Late Anglo-Saxon England' (with an appendix, 'Knowledge of the Poems in the Earlier Period', by M. Lapidge), *ASE* 8 (1979), 279–95; Lapidge's appendix is repr. in his *Anglo-Latin Literature, 600–899* (London, 1996), pp. 399–407. The findings of Hunt and Lapidge supersede those of J. D. A. Ogilvy, *Books Known to the English, 597–1066* (Cambridge, MA, 1967), p. 140. Influence of Venantius Fortunatus upon *The Ruin* has long been suspected. See, for example, A. Brandl, 'Venantius Fortunatus und die angelsächsischen Elegien *Wanderer* und *Ruine*', *ASNSL* 139 (1919), 84; C. A. Hotchner, *Wessex and Old English Poetry, with Special Consideration of The Ruin* (New York, 1939), pp. 103–22, esp. 116–17, where she discusses knowledge of Venantius Fortunatus in Wessex; and Lee, 'Bath or Babylon?', p. 449.

¹⁹ Lapidge, 'Earlier Period', pp. 291–4. It is in the *Versus de patribus, regibus et sanctis Euboricensis ecclesiae* that Alcuin relies most heavily on Fortunatus, reproducing verbatim diction from the *Vita S. Martini*.

²⁰ M. Lapidge and J. L. Rosier, *Aldhelm: The Poetic Works* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 1.

²¹ A. P. M. Orchard, *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm*, CSASE 8 (Cambridge, 1994), 191–5.

as an appropriate aside during his narration of the life of St Benedict in his prose *De uirginitate*.

siquidem post deruta simulacrorum sacella et dissipatas fanaticae gentilitatis caeremonias, quae vitam veritatis expertem fato fortunae et genesi gubernari iuxta mathematicorum constellationem.²²

The Ruin is not given to such overt moralizing, but from the very start of the poem the relationship between paganism, fate and the destruction of the city is implicit. Line 1 mentions fate, and line 2 describes the *enta geweorc*, a term which I take to refer particularly to the remains left behind by a Roman, and importantly a pagan, civilization.²³ The reference in line 27 to *hyra wigsteal* 'their temples', implies a pagan sanctuary.²⁴ There is a degree of moral irony in the

²² *De uirginitate*, ch. 30: *Aldhelmi Opera*, ed. R. Ehwald, MGH Auct. antiq. 15 (Berlin, 1919), 269. 'After the sanctuaries of idols had been destroyed and the ceremonies of fanatical paganism routed – (paganism) which thinks according to the gang of astrologers, that life, empty of true meaning, is governed by the decree and formation of fortune.' M. Lapidge and M. Herren, *Aldhelm: The Prose Works* (Ipswich, 1979), p. 90.

²³ The phrase *enta geweorc* appears a total of seven times in Old English verse (see Table 1 on p. 38 below), and although this precise collocation does not necessarily refer to Roman remains in all these texts, it is possible to infer from the use of *burh enta* as an epithet for Rome in *Elene* that the Romans could quite properly be described as 'giants' in Old English verse. For A. V. Talentino, the implication of *enta* in the context of *The Ruin* is men of a former age who lived outside of Christian morality ('Moral Irony in *The Ruin*', *Papers in Lang. and Lit.* 14 (1978), 3–10, at 5. On the wider meaning and significance of this phrase, see P. J. Frankis, 'The Thematic Significance of *enta geweorc* and Related Imagery in *The Wanderer*', *ASE* 2 (1973), 253–69; cf. E. V. Thornbury, 'eald enta geweorc and the Relics of Empire: Revisiting the Dragon's Lair in *Beowulf*', below pp. 00–00.

²⁴ There has been some debate over the meaning of *wigsteal*; Leslie stated that 'all the other compounds of *wig* in Old English are used in the context of war' (*Three Old English Elegies*, p. 73). As Wentersdorf points out ('Observations on *The Ruin*', p. 174), Leslie's assertion is incorrect: *wigsteal* itself bears the

suggestion that these pagans, who believed in fate, were themselves undone by its capriciousness.²⁵ Aldhelm would surely have approved of such a conclusion, as he probably wished to associate St Benedict with the prophecy in Amos VII.9: 'demolientur excelsa idoli et sanctificationes Israhel desolabuntur'.²⁶ This attitude unsurprisingly permeates Aldhelm's writings, and yet it is well known that he read with great relish the works of pagan authors. His pupil, Æthilwald, wrote to praise Aldhelm the teacher for the 'veritable sagacity of your blessedness, being imbued, I believe, with almost all praiseworthy writings, both of secular (literature) produced with the fluency of verbal eloquence, as well as of the spiritual corpus'. The eternal truths of scripture of course took precedence, but the pagan authors had left behind a body of work which was still praiseworthy for its form, if not for the belief system it may have represented. Likewise in *The Ruin*, the remains are magnificent, even if the pagans themselves have withered away.

Aldhelm's potential indebtedness to Fortunatus and the *de excidio* tradition, however, reveals itself in specific episodes in his work

(Christian) meaning of 'sanctuary' in two Old English texts (*Leofric's Vision*, ed. A. S. Napier, *Trans. of the Philol. Soc.* 1908, 184; *Laws of King Edmund*, 'Be wifmannes bewedduge': *Ancient Laws and Institutes of England*, ed. B. Thorpe (London, 1840) II, 254), and there are numerous compounds which are formed from *wig* and refer to pagan idols: see B–I, s.vv. 'wiggild', 'wigsmið', 'wigweorðung', etc.

²⁵ This point has been made by Talentino, 'Moral Irony', 8–10; he probably goes too far, however, in ascribing a moralistic element to the poem; the description of the former inhabitants' way of life (lines 32b–36), which Talentino reads as condemnation for their drunken wantonness and savagery in warfare and their profligate wealth, does not imply such condemnation: line 48b, *þæt is cynelic þing*, 'that is a noble thing', seems to close the poem on a positive note.

²⁶ 'The high places of the idol shall be demolished, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste.'

rather than in his general outlook. In the *Carmen de uirginitate*, during the account of the life of St Sylvester, he tells us of a dream which the emperor Constantine had, and which Sylvester interpreted as an instruction that the imperial capital should be moved to Constantinople. In the dream, a hideous crone is revived from death and rejuvenated, and the emperor does her great honour. This is how Sylvester interprets the dream:

Femina, quam torua crevisti luce vetustam,
 Quae tibi horrebat multum squalente senecta,
 Urbs est, quam vulgo Bizanti nomine dicunt:
 Constantinopolis post haec vocitetur in aevum!
 Nomine nempe tuo gestat per saecula triumphos;
 In qua murorum praecelsa cacumina quondam
 Nunc prostrata solo veterescunt arce ruenti;
 Moenia marcescunt et propugnacula nutant,
 Quae quassat caries et frangit fessa vetustas.²⁷ (632–40)

Constantine is charged with rebuilding the city, and Aldhelm continues the construction metaphor:

Per quos erectis castrorum turribus altis
 Moenia murorum restaures imbrice rubra!²⁸ (646–7)

The detail of the colour of the bricks, together with the description of the crumbling walls and battlements, is not traceable to a previous

²⁷ *Aldhelmi Opera*, ed. Ehwald, p. 379. 'The woman, whom you thought was old in grim appearance, who disgusted you so much by her decrepit senility, is the city which men commonly call by the name of Byzantium: henceforth let it be called Constantinople for all time. Indeed, in your name it will perform triumphs throughout all ages. In this city the once lofty heights have grown old and now, fallen from their eminence, they lie strewn on the ground. The walls decay and the battlements totter – decay shatters these things and infirm old age destroys them.' Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic Works*, p. 117.

²⁸ *Aldhelmi Opera*, ed. Ehwald, p. 380. 'Having erected the lofty towers of a fortress, you shall renew the walls of the building with red brick.' Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic Works*, p. 117.

version of the *Vita Syluestri* and it strongly recalls parts of *The Ruin*.

Further extraneous details about the nature of building materials are found in Aldhelm's prose rendering of the episode from Sulpicius Severus's *Vita S. Martini* in which Martin destroys the pagan temples. The source text describes Martin's desire to destroy the temple, and the way in which he had to call upon divine assistance to achieve this goal.²⁹ Aldhelm usually extracts carefully the fundamental parts of the narrative from his sources in the prose *De uirginitate*, in line with the text's nature as a catalogue of saintly behaviour: there is little room for embellishment. And yet in this instance he goes on to describe the temples in much more detail than does Sulpicius:

Priscorum dilubra paganorum a cimentario politissimis compacta
 petris rubrisque tegularum imbricibus tecta mortalium diffidens
 amminiculo et angelorum fretus suffragio, qui hastati et scutati famulo
 Dei praesidium laturi venisse leguntur, solo tenuis deruta quassavit,
 evertit, destruxit.³⁰

Here pagans are once again explicitly linked to building in stone: the shrines of their gods were evidently an impressive structure, built, like the city in *The Ruin*, by craftsmen. In the Old English, the builders are referred to as *waldend wyrhtan* 'lords and makers', or else possibly a compound meaning master-builders. This collocation of *waldend* and *wyrhta* occurs elsewhere in Old English as an epithet for the Christian

²⁹ Sulpicius Severus, *Vita S. Martini*, ch. 13. Quoted by Ehwald, *Aldhelmi Opera*, p. 261.

³⁰ *De uirginitate*, ch. 26: *Aldhelmi Opera*, ed. Ehwald, p. 262. 'The sanctuaries of the ancient pagans which had been constructed from stones polished by the mason and covered with red roof tiles, he shattered, overturned and destroyed by casting them to the ground, distrusting the assistance of mortals and relying on the help of the angels, who are said to have come armed with spears and shields to bring aid to the servant of God.' Lapidge and Herren, *Prose Works*, p. 85.

deity;³¹ this implies a high degree of approbation for the creative skills of these heathen artisans, and the temples that Aldhelm describes are also worthy of mention for the quality of their construction.

Although terracotta or clay roof tiles are naturally red, it is interesting to note that both Aldhelm and the *Ruin*-poet both specifically describe the roofs of the buildings as being this colour. In line 30 of *The Ruin* there is a very unusual descriptive phrase which expresses this: *ond þæs teaforgeapa tigelum sceadedð*. *Tigel* for 'roof tile' is found nowhere else in the poetic corpus, and *teaforgeap* is a hapax legomenon, the meaning of which has been much disputed, but which is a compound with the first element meaning 'red lead'.³² This has been adduced partly from its appearance as a gloss for Latin *minium* in the Antwerp glossary.³³ *Tigelum*, which is not uncommon in prose, is also found in glosses, and it is used to gloss the lemma *imbricibus* in the same passage on St Martin from Aldhelm's prose *De uirginitate* in two manuscripts: Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, 1650,³⁴ and Oxford, Bodleian Library, Digby 146.³⁵ So the *Ruin*-poet appears to choose words which might have been obtained from glossaries to

³¹ See Table 1 (below, p. 38) for text references.

³² See Klinck, *Old English Elegies*, p. 216. The rendering of *teaforgeapa* that she adopts is 'this red-arched thing', this 'arch of red stone'.

³³ Antwerp, Plantin-Moretus Museum 47. Printed by T. Wright, *Anglo-Saxon and Old English Vocabularies*, 2nd ed., rev. R. P. Wülker, 2 vols. (London, 1884) I, 34. There is also an edition by L. Kindschi, *The Latin-Old English Glossaries in Plantin Moretus 32 and British Museum MS Additional 32246* (unpubl. PhD dissertation, Stanford Univ., 1956).

³⁴ *The Old English Glosses of MS. Brussels, 1650 (Aldhelm's De laudibus uirginitatis)*, ed. L. Goossens, Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België: Klasse der Letteren 74 (Brussels, 1974), 291 (glossing line 2218).

³⁵ *Old English Glosses, Chiefly Unpublished*, ed. A. S. Napier, *Anecdota Oxoniensia* 4 (Oxford, 1900), nos. 10, 2261 and 2262.

describe almost exactly the same architectural detail as the text from in which one of the glosses was available.

Throughout, the vocabulary of *The Ruin* is highly idiosyncratic, and merits further discussion. Of the 225 words in this poem, 37 are found nowhere else in Old English verse, which equates to 16.4%, and of these 37, 24 are unique compounds. Although a comparison with the rest of Old English is difficult, such an incidence of hapax legomena seems unusually high. Many of the compounds are part of a vocabulary of architectural and topographical description newly coined to describe an urban scene, and so the proportion of new words is perhaps unsurprising, but this reliance on neologisms displaces to a large extent the formulaic diction which normally characterizes this type of poetry. Apart from *enta geneorc* in line 2, there are only seven formulas which appear elsewhere in the corpus; even these are rarely found in an identical syntactic or metrical situation. The effect of this switch from formulaic doublets to unusual, apparently newly-invented compounds is to create a heightened poetic vocabulary which requires greater interpretation on the part of the audience, which was probably accustomed to the repetition of standard formulas as both a structural device, and a way of placing a text within a wider poetic context known to them. The vocabulary of *The Ruin* is part of a process of defamiliarization, which shifts the text slightly away from the expected norms of Old English verse. This process might be said to mirror the lexical choices made by Aldhelm and other authors of 'hermeneutic' Latin, where archaisms, Graecisms and glossary words all contributed to the complex, prolix and somewhat tortuous nature of their prose.³⁶

³⁶ The vocabulary of the hermeneutic style was defined by Lapidge as 'the ostentatious parade of unusual, often very arcane and apparently learned vocabulary', including archaisms, neologisms, and loan-words, particularly from Greek. 'The Hermeneutic Style in Tenth-Century Anglo-Latin Literature', *ASE*

Formula in <i>The Ruin</i>	Other Exeter Book poems	Poems from other codices
1 <i>wrætlic is þes wealstan</i>		<i>Maxims II</i> 3
2 <i>enta geweorc</i>	<i>Wanderer</i> 87	<i>Maxims II</i> 2 <i>Beowulf</i> 2717, 2774 <i>Andreas</i> 1235, 1495
7 <i>waldend wyrhtan</i>		<i>Christ and Satan</i> 584 <i>Andreas</i> 702 <i>Metres of Boethius</i> 30, 7
11 <i>steap geap</i>		<i>Maxims II</i> 23 <i>Solomon and Saturn</i> 453 <i>Genesis A</i> 2558 <i>Juliana</i> 675
25 <i>snlyt eall fornorn</i>		
34 <i>wlonc ond wingal</i>	<i>Seafarer</i> 29	
41 <i>bat on hrepre</i>		<i>Beowulf</i> 3148

Table 1. Formulaic diction in *The Ruin*.

As can be seen from Table 1, the one text which shows a surprisingly high number of verbal parallels to *The Ruin* is *Maxims II*. In the first five lines, we learn that cities are seen from afar, the ingenious work of giants, those which there are on this earth, wondrous work of wall-stones':

Cyning sceal rice healdan. Ceastra beoð feorran gesyne,
orðanc enta geweorc, þa þe on þysse eorðan syndon,
wrætlic weallstana geweorc. Wind byð on lyfte swiftust,

4 (1975), 67–111, at 67, repr. in his *Anglo-Latin Literature, 900–1066* (London, 1993), pp. 105–149; see also the remarks of J. Marenbon, 'Les sources du vocabulaire d'Aldhelm', *Archivum Latinitatis Medii Aevi (Bulletin du Cange)* 41 (1979), 75–90. J. W. Earl, 'Hisperic Style in the Old English "Rhyming Poem"', *PMLA* 102 (1987), 187–96, attempts, with limited success, to apply the criteria of hermeneutic Latin style to the Old English *Riming Poem*, which is also found in the Exeter Book.

þunar byð þragum hludast. þrymmas syndan Cristes mycclc,
wyrd byð swiðost.³⁷ (1–5a)

Here, fate is said to be the most severe, recalling line 24b of *The Ruin*, *wyrd seo swiþe*. It seems strange that a poem of such a general proverbial aspect should use phrases which are found also in a poem which is so rooted in a specific location, and which uses such an unusual vocabulary to describe a specific scene. As *Maxims II* is believed to be among the earliest extant Old English poems, possibly dating in some form to the conversion period,³⁸ we might safely assume that if the author of *The Ruin* borrows from any one vernacular text, *Maxims II* is that poem.

But the author of *The Ruin* departs from the norms of Old English not merely by his use of a non-standard vocabulary. He or she also demonstrates a number of stylistic quirks which seem unusual, but which may have parallels in Anglo-Latin. The most striking example of this is the prevalence of double alliteration, where two stressed syllables in the first half-line alliterate with each other as well as with a stressed syllable in the off-line. 80% (32 out of 40) of the legible verses in *The Ruin* feature double alliteration, which is clearly a very conscious effect. The *oppæt*-clause at line 24, which is the culmination of the first half of the poem, with its reference to fate as an agent of change, has only single alliteration, after a very

³⁷ ASPR VI, 55. 'A king must rule a kingdom. Cities are seen from afar, the ingenious work of giants, those which there are on this earth, wondrous work of wall-stones. Wind is swiftest in the air, thunder the loudest in its seasons. The powers of Christ are great; fate is the most severe.'

³⁸ See, e.g., A. Brandl, 'Vom kosmologischen Denken des heidnisch-christlichen Germanentums: der früh-ags. Schicksalsspruch der Handschrift Tiberius B.13 und seine Verwandheit mit Boethius', *Sitzungsberichte der preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, phil.-hist. Klasse* 16 (1937), 116–25; A. Ricci, 'The Chronology of Anglo-Saxon Poetry', *RES* 5 (1929), 257–66.

nearly continuous string of double-alliterating verses up to this point; this patterning directs our attention to fate's role in the city's decay. Elsewhere in Old English, double alliteration is fairly common, with an average of almost 47% of lines bearing this type of alliteration, but no other poem is nearly so insistent in its use of this device.³⁹

Aldhelm, it has been suggested, made a feature of alliteration in imitation of vernacular practice in his octosyllabic Latin verse,⁴⁰ and this includes some instances of double alliteration, but Aldhelm's approach to this device is unsystematic, and only 23% of the lines in his *Carmen rhythmicum* feature double alliteration. It is in the works of his pupil, Æthilwald, that the rate of double alliteration in Latin octosyllables shoots up above even the average distribution of this type of line in Old English, and the structure of these lines is practically identical to that of the vernacular model. There is little doubt that Æthilwald consciously imitated vernacular verses, as Aldhelm rebuked him in a letter for perhaps straying too close to the pagan poetry that Æthilwald suggests he learnt from Aldhelm himself.⁴¹ Æthilwald's alliterative practices in his octosyllabic verse show that he has learnt all too well the art of secular versification. In his poetry, for example, all vowels alliterate with each other, and *f*, *v* and *ph* all alliterate, just as in Anglo-Saxon macaronic poetry.⁴² And, as both his poetry and *The Ruin* stand so far above comparable texts in their use of double alliteration, it is perhaps not too far-fetched to postulate potential influence of the one upon the other. It may seem

³⁹ B. R. Hucheson, *Old English Poetic Metre* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 271.

⁴⁰ M. Lapidge, 'Aldhelm's Latin Poetry and Old English Verse', *Comparative Lit.* 31 (1979), 209–31, at 218–23, repr. in his *Anglo-Latin Literature, 600–899*, pp. 247–269; Orchard, *Poetic Art*, pp. 45–7.

⁴¹ Aldhelm, *Letter to Æthilwald: Aldhelmi Opera*, ed. Ehwald, p. 500. Trans. Lapidge and Herren, *Prose Works*, p. 168.

⁴² Orchard, *Poetic Art*, p. 49, n. 114.

a perverse line of argument, that a specifically Germanic metrical feature should lead to the suggestion of Latin influence, but through Aldhelm, Æthilwald and down into the octosyllables of other West Saxon poets such as Boniface and his circle, all of whom existed in a West Saxon literary milieu similar to that which probably produced *The Ruin*, alliteration was almost as much a part of Anglo-Latin stylistics as it was of Old English.⁴³ Latin authors, however, did not rely on alliteration for their metre as vernacular poets generally do; it was a conscious poetic effect, and the heightened use of double alliteration in *The Ruin* seems to be an attempt to achieve something similar. That the *Ruin*-poet's approach to double alliteration may be paralleled with Æthilwald's is perhaps shown by the fact that *Riddle* 40, a translation of one of Aldhelm's Latin *Enigmata*, in fact shows considerably less than average double alliteration: 30%, which is not too far away from the 23% of lines in Aldhelm's rhythmical verse which exhibit this feature. This may constitute evidence that Latinate Anglo-Saxon poets were capable of a good deal of sensitivity in choosing when and where they appropriated stylistic effects from the other tradition.

There are other stylistic features which may have derived from Latin: the six instances of rhyme in this poem, and the other instances of rhyme in Old English verse, have been identified as a Latinate device,⁴⁴ although the internal half-line rhyme of lines such as *scorene, gedrorene* (5b) and *steap geap gedreas* (10b) much more closely resembles the type of rhyme which predominates in Old English verse – with the exception of *The Riming Poem* and lines 1236–50 of *Elene*, both of which texts exhibit something akin to leonine rhyme –

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 242–53.

⁴⁴ Earl, 'Hisperic Style', pp. 189–91. The best discussion of rhyme in Old English is that of O. D. Macrae-Gibson in the introduction to his edition of *The Old English Riming Poem* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 21–5.

than the end-rhyme which is often found in Anglo-Latin couplets.⁴⁵ *The Ruin* is also notable for its unusually low incidence of enjambment; most lines are self-contained sense units.⁴⁶ Aldhelm, too, is noticeable for the prevalence of end-stopping in his hexameter verse, perhaps as a result of his inexperience with the metre;⁴⁷ his caesura-patterning is simplistic and unvaried, with the caesura in his hexameter lines falling with great regularity in the middle of the hexameter line, creating something similar to vernacular half-lines.⁴⁸ It seems clear that even the stylistic quirks of the *Ruin*-poet cannot be sourced to a particular Anglo-Latin author, they can often be paralleled in the works of Aldhelm and his followers.

There has been a growing suspicion over the years that Old English and Anglo-Latin poetry must have been mutually influential;⁴⁹ Anglo-Saxon poets who wrote in Latin would naturally have known Old English, and William of Malmesbury's oft-quoted description of Aldhelm's unmatched prowess as a vernacular poet is worth mentioning again.⁵⁰ It is interesting to note that the poems for which

⁴⁵ See F. Kluge, 'Zur Geschichte des Reimes im Altgermanischen', *Paul Braun Beiträge* 9 (1894), 422–50, esp. 425–6 and 429–30. Of Old English poems, *Beowulf* appears to contain the most instances of this type of rhyme; *steap geap gedreas* resembles *Beowulf* 1423a *flod blode weol*, and even more closely resembles *Exodus* 463b *flod blod gewod*.

⁴⁶ Not until lines 6b–7a is there a phrase which makes no sense within a half-line: another extreme stylistic effect; Lee, 'Bath or Babylon?', p. 452.

⁴⁷ Lapidge, 'Aldhelm's Latin Poetry', p. 217. Orchard, *Poetic Art*, p. 115, postulates that Aldhelm's attitude towards end-stopped hexameters may indicate the influence of 'oral tradition'.

⁴⁸ Orchard, *Poetic Art*, pp. 92–4.

⁴⁹ See, e.g. W. F. Bolton, 'Pre-Conquest Anglo-Latin: Perspectives and Prospects', *Comparative Lit.* 23 (1971), 151–66; Earl, 'Hisperic Style', p. 187; and Lapidge, 'Aldhelm's Latin Poetry'.

⁵⁰ *Gesta Pontificum*, ed. N. E. S. A. Hamilton, RS (London, 1870), p. 336.

influence of Anglo-Latin have been claimed are generally associated with a West Saxon literary milieu: Michael Lapidge has forcefully argued for a West Saxon origin for *Beowulf*,⁵¹ whilst James W. Earl's insistence that the Exeter Book *Riming Poem* constitutes an example of 'hisperic' Old English analogous to 'hermeneutic' Latin would militate in favour of a West Saxon origin, as the hermeneutic style was developed and popularized in West Saxon foundations. The translation of Aldhelm's *Enigma* c, 'De creatura', into Old English is similarly preserved in the Exeter Book as *Riddle* 40. It seems incontestable that *The Ruin* should be viewed as part of this same bilingual tradition of West Saxon poetics: first, it is almost certainly a poem describing Bath, and it is preserved in a Wessex manuscript. The stylistic features shared by *The Ruin* and Latin poems of Aldhelm and his followers are suggestive, but they can be no more than that: to compare Old English verse and Latin hexametrical or octosyllabic verse is not to compare like with like: their verse forms must, by their nature, differ much more than they agree.

The Ruin, however, is not to be associated with the West Saxon Anglo-Latin tradition merely on stylistic grounds; there is a cumulative weight of evidence, which seems incontrovertible. *The Ruin's* formulaic diction may be found in a small number of texts, all with possible West Saxon connections: *The Wanderer* is preserved in the Exeter Book; *Beowulf* is possibly West Saxon and has been associated with Aldhelm, and *Andreas* may be closely connected to *Beowulf*, on lexical grounds; *Maxims II* has been claimed as a West Saxon production.⁵² There are also the similarities between *The Ruin*

⁵¹ M. Lapidge, 'Beowulf, Aldhelm, the *Liber Monstrorum* and Wessex', *SM*, 3rd ser. 23 (1982), 151–92, repr. in his *Anglo-Latin Literature, 600–899*, pp. 271–312.

⁵² The provenance of *Maxims II*, which is preserved only in London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B.i (s. xi^{med}), is unclear; two suggestions have been offered. S. A. Brooke, *The History of Early English Literature*, 2 vols. (London,

and the *De excidio Thuringiae* of Venantius Fortunatus, whose work was sufficiently well known in early Wessex that King Ine (688–726) had an epigram based upon Fortunatus's poems inscribed in his new church at Glastonbury; Aldhelm is otherwise the only Southumbrian author who demonstrably quotes from Fortunatus.⁵³ Most compelling of all, though, are the direct links between the motif of ruined cities in *The Ruin* and the works of Aldhelm. Kathryn Hume, rightly stressing that motif study must be rigorous to have any validity or usefulness, argues that there is no 'ruin motif' in Old English poetry;⁵⁴ I think it safe to say, however, that the use made of ruin imagery by Aldhelm and the author of *The Ruin* constitutes a motif by itself, a motif which represents a shared attitude towards the Roman past; but it is a motif within Anglo-Saxon poetry, not merely Old English. The peculiarities of *The Ruin* may best be explained by examining them in the context of an Anglo-Saxon poetic culture which breaks down the barriers between Latin and the vernacular, just as Aldhelm broke down those barriers when he interspersed his crowd-pleasing tales in Old English with quotations from scripture.⁵⁵

1892) II, 241–90 discusses the *Maxims* poems and argues that they were composed at York. A Wessex origin is hypothesized, albeit on not much firmer grounds, by M. Anderson and B. C. Williams, *Old English Handbook* (Boston, MA, 1935), p. 287.

⁵³ Lapidge, 'Earlier Period', pp. 402–3.

⁵⁴ Hume, 'The "Ruin Motif"', pp. 259–60.

⁵⁵ I should like to thank Andy Orchard and Emily Thornbury for their help with this paper, and the members of the 2000 Cambridge Colloquium in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, particularly Clare Lynch, for their helpful discussion.

Did Columba's Tunic Bring Rain?
Early Medieval Typological Action
and Modern Historical Method

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Like most medieval hagiography, Adomnán's *Vita S. Columbae* focuses on the miraculous. As a result, his narrative, and those of his contemporaries, has frequently met incredulity among modern audiences. Occasionally, however, various episodes in hagiography directly challenge our general assumption of ahistoricity. One such episode appears in book two, chapter forty-four of Adomnán's *Vita S. Columbae*. Since this episode is the focus of my paper, I give it here in full.

Miraculum quod nunc deo propitio describere incipimus, nostris temporibus factum propriis inspeximus oculis. Ante annos namque ferme xiii. in his torpentibus terris ualde grandis uerno tempore facta est siccitas iugis et dura, in tantum ut illa domini in leuitico libro transgressoribus coaptata populis comminatio uideretur imminere, qua dicit: 'Dabo caelum uobis desuper sicut ferrum, et terram eneam. Consummetur incassum labor uester, nec proferet terra germen nec arbores poma praebebunt', et cetera. Nos itaque haec legentes, et imminentem plagam pertimescentes, hoc inito consilio fieri consiliati sumus, ut aliqui ex nostris senioribus nuper aratum et seminatum campum cum sancti Columbae candida circumirent tunica, et librís stilo ipsius discriptis, leuarentque in aere et excuterent eandem per ter tunicam qua etiam hora exitus eius de carne indutus erat, et eius aperirent libros et legerent in colliculo angelorum, ubi aliquando caelestis patriae ciues ad beati uiri conductum uisi sunt descendere.

Quae postquam omnia iuxta initum sunt peracta consilium, mirum dictu, eadem die caelum in praeteritis mensibus, martio uidelicet et apreli, nudatum nubibus mira sub celeritate ipsis de ponto ascendentibus ilico opertum est, et pluvia [sic] facta est magna die noctuque discendens. Et sitiens prius terra satis satiata oportune germina produxit sua, et ualde laetas eodem anno segites.¹

Adomnán's claim to have witnessed this event with his own eyes makes a strong claim to historical accuracy, and has convinced Charles Doherty, Máire Herbert and others of the event's occurrence.²

¹ Adomnán, *Vita S. Columbae* II.xliv: *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, ed. A. O. Anderson and M. O. Anderson, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1991), p. 172. 'The miracle which by God's favour we are now about to recount took place in our own time and we witnessed it with our own eyes. It happened about seventeen years ago. Right through the spring a severe drought lasted unrelieved so that our fields were baked dry. It was so bad that we thought our people were threatened by the curse which the Lord imposed on those who transgressed, where it says in Leviticus: "I will make your heaven as iron, and your earth as brass. And your strength shall be spent in vain: for your land shall not yield her increase, neither shall the trees of the land yield their fruit", and so forth. As we read this and thought with fear of the blow that threatened, we debated what should be done, and decided on this. Some of our elders should walk around the fields that had lately been ploughed and sown, carrying with them St Columba's white tunic and books which the saint had himself copied. They should hold aloft the tunic, which was the one he wore at the hour of his departure from the flesh, and shake it three times. They should open his books and read aloud from them at the Hill of Angels, where from time to time the citizens of heaven used to be seen coming down to converse with the saint. When all these things had been done as we had decided, on the same day – wonderful to tell – the sky, which had been cloudless through the whole of March and April, was at once covered, extraordinarily quickly, with clouds rising from the sea, and heavy rain fell day and night. The thirsty ground was quenched in time, the seed germinated and in due course there was a particularly good harvest.' R. Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba* (Harmondsworth, 1995), pp. 199–200.

² M. Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry: the History and Hagiography of the Monastic*

Not all have been convinced, however. Richard Sharpe, following Gertrud Brüning, has drawn attention to the general and verbal similarities of Adomnán's account to an episode recorded in Gregory the Great's *Dialogi*.³ According to Gregory, whenever the citizens of Nursia were threatened by a long drought, they would raise the tunic of Euthicius, offer up prayers, and process through the fields, whereupon rain would come at once.⁴ As a result of these similarities, Sharpe comments, 'Adomnán's use of this text...raises an insoluble problem: ... Did it happen, is it a literary fiction, or was the act itself influenced by Gregory's book?'⁵

I believe that this problem is not insoluble. Moreover, an answer to the question of the episode's historicity is important for the literary historian, since whether or not the event occurred dramatically affects

Familia of Columba (Oxford, 1988), pp. 137–8; C. Doherty, 'The Use of Relics in Early Ireland', *Irland und Europa: die Kirche im Frühmittelalter*, ed. P. Ní Chatháin and M. Richter (Stuttgart, 1984), pp. 89–101, at 96. Doherty views the event as 'a forerunner of the many relic circuits which took place throughout the eighth century'. Neither Doherty nor Herbert, however, note the devotional background that this paper presents.

³ G. Brüning, 'Adamnans Vita Columbae und ihre Ableitungen', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 11 (1917), 213–304, at 251.

⁴ 'Euthicius uero, qui praedicti Florentii in uia Dei socius fuerat, magis post mortem claruit in uirtute signorum. Nam cum multa ciues urbis de eo soleant narrare miracula, illud tamen est praecipuum, quod usque ad haec Langobardorum tempora omnipotens Deus per uestimentum illius assidue dignabatur operari. Nam quotiens pluuiam deerat et aestu nimio terram longa siccitas exurebat, collecti in unum ciues urbis illius eius tunicam leuare atque in conspectu Dei Domini cum precibus offerre consueuerant. Cum qua dum per agros exorantes pergerent, repente pluuiam tribuebatur, quae plene terram satiare potuisset.' Gregory the Great, *Dialogi de miraculis patrum italicorum* III.xv.18: *Dialogues*, ed. A. de Vogüé, 3 vols., Sources chrétiennes 251, 260 and 265 (Paris, 1978–80) II, 326.

⁵ Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, p. 59.

our understanding of Adomnán as an author. If the event did occur, then Adomnán's account becomes a more or less accurate description of an historical event. If the event did not occur, then Adomnán's account, and his own personal testimony, cannot be trusted for historical accuracy, and, indeed, are alien to historical concerns, and may even be downright intentionally deceptive. The interpretation of this event therefore affects our reading of the Life as a whole and its aims and purposes.

If the literary historian must therefore investigate history, it is nonetheless not clear where to begin. There are no other accounts besides Adomnán's about the event in question, so it is impossible to compare Adomnán's report with the reports of others. What I have therefore undertaken is to place the details of Adomnán's account within the general devotional background of the early Insular middle ages. The results of this investigation suggest that a procession with relics was a likely response to natural disaster in the early Insular middle ages. The nature of the evidence of this argument cannot prove that the event happened precisely as Adomnán indicates, but, combined with Adomnán's personal testimony, it does demonstrate that the event is highly likely to have occurred. Once the historicity of the event has been established, we can investigate more accurately Adomnán's relationship to his alleged source, Gregory's *Dialogi*.

As already mentioned, the details of Adomnán's account reflect religious practices common in the early middle ages. Adomnán's notion that the drought had come upon the people on account of their sin has parallels not only with the bible, which Adomnán himself points out, but also with the general early medieval belief that sin resulted in disaster. For example, Gildas, writing in the sixth century, attributes the fall of the British to their sins.⁶ Within a more

⁶ Gildas, *De excidio Britonum* 1.3 and xxiv.1, among other places: *Gildas: the Ruin of*

agricultural context, Bede's commentary on Genesis notes that mankind loses control over nature through disobedience to God.⁷ A similar theme is found in Felix's *Vita S. Guthlaci*, written around 735.⁸ These theological views parallel the statements in Leviticus, and mirror the punishment given mankind for the primal Fall. The link between righteousness and fertility can also be found in the apparently native Irish concept of *fír flathemon*, in which the fertility of a kingdom depends on the 'truth' or just judgement of its king. The concept of *fír flathemon* appears in a variety of early vernacular texts, and would become wide-spread throughout western Europe by means of the *De duodecim abusivis*, written in the late seventh century.⁹ Adomnán's association of crop failure and unrighteousness was therefore a common one for his time and culture.

Likewise, the response of walking around the fields appears to reflect practices, or at least thought-frameworks, common in the early British Isles. Encircling or encompassing appears to have played a significant role in early Irish religion. One *geis* in early vernacular

Britain and Other Works, ed. M. Winterbottom (London, 1978), pp. 13 and 27.

⁷ Bede, *Hexaameron*, bk I, comment on Gen. 1.28: PL 91, cols. 9–190, at col. 31. Note the similar comment in Bede, *Vita (prosaica) S. Cuthberti*, ch. 21: *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, ed. B. Colgrave (Cambridge, 1940), p. 224. For more on the connection in exegesis between the Fall and nature, see the note by Colgrave, *Two Lives*, p. 350.

⁸ Felix, *Vita S. Guthlaci*, ch. 38: *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac*, ed. B. Colgrave (Cambridge, 1956), pp. 118–20.

⁹ For examples of *fír flathemon* in early vernacular texts, see *Audacht Morainn* and *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*. *Audacht Morainn* was compiled c. 700, and *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* was first written down during the ninth century; both works were dependent on earlier tradition. For the texts of these works and commentary, see *Audacht Morainn*, ed. F. Kelly (Dublin, 1976) and *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, ed. E. Knott, Med. and Mod. Irish Series 8 (Dublin, 1936). For the date of *De duodecim abusivis*, see *Audacht Morainn*, ed. Kelly, pp. xv–xvi.

literature prohibited walking left-handwise around a particular place.¹⁰ The circle itself seems to have carried mystic significance, to judge from the various stone circles still to be seen in various parts of the British Isles. Similarly, the location of cult centres in early Gaul suggests that borders had mystic associations in early Celtic religion.¹¹ Moreover, the comparative evidence offered by the Roman *ambarualia* and the *suouetaurilia*, both of which involved circling the fields with sacrificial offerings in order to ensure a good crop, suggest that walking the borders could be associated with fertility in an Indo-European context.¹²

Although one cannot expect Adomnán to have been familiar with the practices of La Tène continental Celts, or the Roman festivals, these practices highlight associations that appear to have lived on into Adomnán's time. Mystic liminality, in a literal sense, can be seen in the *Vita prima S. Brigidae*, in which the saint is born in the doorway, with one of her mother's legs being outside the house, and the other inside.¹³ Moreover, *Sanas Cormaic* notes, albeit perhaps imaginatively, that the poet-seer *fili* places a chewed morsel of raw meat behind a door and then sleeps in order to receive a prophetic dream.¹⁴ The

¹⁰ E.g. *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, ch. 16 (line 170): *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, ed. Knott, p. 6 and *Beatha Máedóc Ferna* (2), § 277: *Bethada Náem nEreann: Lives of Irish Saints*, ed. C. Plummer, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1922) I, 289.

¹¹ P. Ó Riain, 'Boundary Association in Early Irish Society', *Studia Celtica* 7 (1972), 12–29, at 14.

¹² For a brief discussion of the *ambarualia*, see H. H. Scullard, *Festivals and Ceremonies of the Roman Republic* (London, 1981), pp. 124–5; and L. Adkins and R. Adkins, 'Ambarualia', *Dictionary of Roman Religion* (New York, 1996), pp. 6–7.

¹³ *Vita prima S. Brigidae*, ch. 4: *Acta Sanctorum*, Feb. 1, pp. 118–29, at 121–2.

¹⁴ Cormac Ua Cuilennáin, *Sanas Cormaic*, 'Imbass forosnae': *Sanas Cormaic: an Old Irish Glossary*, ed. Kuno Meyer, *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts* 4 (Dublin, 1912), p. 64. For an overview of liminality in early Irish literature and thought, see J. F. Nagy, 'Liminality and Knowledge in Irish Tradition', *Studia Celtica* 16–17

protective aspect of encirclement can be seen in the seventh-century *Lorica of Laidcenn*, in lines such as:

Tege totum me cum quinque sensibus
et cum decem fabrefactis foribus,
uti a plantis usque ad uerticem
nullo membro foris intus egrotem¹⁵ (83–6)

The link between encirclement and fields can be seen in Anglo-Saxon charms, such as the tenth-century charm *For Unfruitful Land*, which involves blessing four pieces of turf from the four quarters of the land.¹⁶ And the *Vita S. Martini* by Sulpicius Severus indicates that the practice of walking around fields with a statue for the sake of fertility, a version of the *ambarualia*, was common at least in late fourth-century Gaul.¹⁷ A similar walk around a hill in Locronan,

(1981–2), 135–43.

¹⁵ *The Hisperica Famina II: Related Poems*, ed. M. Herren, *Studies and Texts* 85 (Toronto, 1987), pp. 86–8. 'Cover all of me along with the five senses and the ten skillfully-made doorways, so that from the soles of my feet to my summit, I may not be ill in any member, inside or out.' Compare the eighth-century *Lorica of St Patrick (Faeth Fiada)*:

Crist limm, Crist reum, Crist im degaid,
Crist indium, Crist isum, Crist uasum,
Crist desum, Crist tuathum. (lines 62–4)

J. Carey, *King of Mysteries: Early Irish Religious Writings* (Dublin, 1998), pp. 127–35 at p. 134. 'Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ below me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left.'

¹⁶ ASPR VI, pp. 116–18. For brief discussion, see S. A. J. Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London, 1982, rpt. 1995), pp. 544–6.

¹⁷ Sulpicius Severus, *Vita S. Martini*, ch. 12: *Vie de Saint Martin*, ed. J. Fontaine, 3 vols., *Sources chrétiennes* 133–5 (Paris, 1967–9) I, 278. Sulpicius notes that this was a pagan procession. Fontaine links the eventual development of the Rogations with these pagan agrarian festivals; *Vie de Saint Martin*, ed. Fontaine, II, 722.

Brittany, was held until recent times, and a small number of people still make ritual walks around holy wells in Ireland.¹⁸

Most similar of all to Adomnán's procession, however, are the Rogationtide and related processions practised in western Europe since at least the fifth century. Mamertus, bishop of Vienne from roughly 461–475, seems to have been the first to introduce the *rogationes*.¹⁹ As a response to a year-long series of earthquakes, incursions of wild animals into the city and a fire, Mamertus declared that the three days before the Ascension should be filled with fasting and processions. When the calamities ceased after these days of fasting and procession, news of the event is said to have filled Gaul, and many other districts followed Mamertus's example. The Council of Orléans, in 511, declared that the churches under its authority should celebrate the *rogationes* on the three days before the Ascension. In due course, the celebration of the Rogation days spread to Rome, and were officially adopted by Leo III at the turn of the ninth century.

Rome had other penitential processions besides the Rogations, however. According to Lapidge, 'from some time in the sixth century

¹⁸ For Locronan, see A. Rees and B. Rees, *Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales* (London, 1961), p. 197. Some older women still circle Tobar Éinne, on Inis Oírr, saying prayers and placing a stone on the well's wall for each circuit that they do; this information comes from private correspondence with Máire Bean Uí Dhufaigh of Inis Oírr.

¹⁹ For a useful introduction to the Rogation days, and similar penitential processions, see *Anglo-Saxon Litanies of the Saints*, ed. M. Lapidge, HBS 106 (London, 1991), pp. 8–11. For more thorough reviews, see H. Leclercq, 'Rogations', *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, ed. F. Cabrol and H. Leclercq, 15 vols. (Paris, 1907–53) XIV, 2459–61; H. Leclercq, 'Marc, Procession de Saint', *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne*, ed. Cabrol and Leclercq, X, 1740–1; and J. H. Miller, 'Rogation Days', *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 15 vols. (New York, 1967) XII, 551.

onwards, it was customary at Rome to hold penitential processions in time of peril.²⁰ Thus, Gregory of Tours, and the papal letters themselves, record that Gregory the Great confronted divine wrath in the form of floods, food shortages, and ultimately a plague, by instituting on the feast of St Mark seven penitential processions, originating in different parts of the city and all heading to the church of Maria Maggiore; these processions were to sing and cry to the Lord for mercy.²¹ This procession became called the *major litania* and was later frequently linked with the *litaniae* or *rogationes* instituted by Mamertus.

²⁰ *Anglo-Saxon Litanies*, ed. Lapidge, p. 10.

²¹ Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum* X.i: *Gregorii episcopi Turonensis libri historiarum*, ed. B. Krusch and W. Levison, MGH SS rer. Merov. I.1, 2nd ed. (Hannover, 1951), 477–81; Gregory the Great, *Denuntiatio pro septiformi letania: S. Gregorii Magni Opera: Registrum epistularum Libri VIII–XIV. Appendix*, ed. D. Norberg, CCSL 140A (Turnhout, 1982), 1102–4. When presenting this paper, I followed Lapidge (*Anglo-Saxon Litanies*, p. 10) in stating that this procession took place on the Feast of St Mark (25 April). Further research has persuaded me that this is not the case since neither Gregory of Tours nor the papal record of the *Denuntiatio* mention the Feast of St Mark in connection with this procession. In fact, an addition to the *Denuntiatio* notes that this procession was held again on 29 August 603 (*Opera*, ed. Norberg, p. 1104), whereas Gregory of Tours records that the original celebration lasted three days, not just one. Furthermore, Leclercq ('Marc', X, 1740) notes that the procession recorded in Gregory of Tours and the *Denuntiatio* headed to the church of Maria Maggiore whereas the *major litania* on 25 April was associated with the Basilica of St Peter. Later tradition did, however, link Gregory the Great's septiform litany with 25 April, e.g. Walahfrid Strabo, *De rebus ecclesiasticis*, ch. 28; PL 114, cols. 919–66, at col. 962. The procession that Strabo describes as having taken place on 25 April must be the same as that described in Gregory of Tours and the *Denuntiatio*, since Strabo makes mention of a flood (*inundatio*), a plague (*lues*), the recent passing of Pope Pelagius ('primo Pelagio papa extincto'), and the septiform nature of the procession. All of these details are also to be found in the account by Gregory of Tours, and many of them also in the *Denuntiatio*.

Not only did these *litaniae* have a penitential aspect in the face of God's punishment, but they could also have a particularly agricultural focus. In a tract on religious ceremonies attributed, doubtfully, to Bede, and drawn on in a tract attributed, also doubtfully, to Alcuin, the author comments that the *major litania* is held on 25 April in order to ask God to preserve the new crops at a time when 'the corn shoots up, the fruit of the trees comes forth from its flower, the vines and olives burst forth from their trees and the animals graze the fields'.²²

With regards to Anglo-Saxon England, processions with song, or *litaniae* as they had come to be called, seem to have been a common liturgical practice. Thus, according to Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*, St. Augustine approached his initial meeting with Æthelberht of Kent in a procession carrying a cross and an image of Christ and singing a penitential litany asking for mercy.²³ Lapidge notes that litany-processions were also used when visiting the sick.²⁴ Moreover,

²² 'Messēs pullulant, arborei fructus ex flore procedunt, vineae et olivae suis arboribus erumpunt, animalia campos tondent'. Anonymous (Pseudo-Bede), 'De litania majore', *De officiis libellus*. PL 94, cols. 531–40, at col. 537. Anonymous (Pseudo-Alcuin), *De divinis officiis liber*, ch. 22: PL 101, cols. 1173–1286, at cols. 1224–5. Cf. Amalarius, *De ecclesiasticis officiis* I.xxxvii and IV.xxiv: PL 105, cols. 985–1242, at cols. 1066–8 and 1207. Caesarius of Arles had earlier linked the Rogations with good weather, 'pacem temporum', in sermon 208. Likewise, the Old English Martyrology links the *major litania* with 'smytelico gewidra ond genihtsume wæstmas'. For these references, see J. E. Cross, 'The Use of Patristic Homilies in the Old English Martyrology', *ASE* 14 (1985), 107–28, at 116 and 123; Cross cites the texts in *Caesarii Arletanis Opera*, ed. G. Morin, CCSL 104 (Turnholt, 1953), pp. 828–34; and *Das altenglische Martyrologium*, ed. G. Kotzor, 2 vols., *Abhandlungen* (Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, phil.-hist. Klasse) ns 88 (Munich, 1981), II, 105.

²³ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* I.xv: *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), p. 74.

²⁴ *Anglo-Saxon Litanies*, ed. Lapidge 44–5. Lapidge does not term these litanies 'processions', but the passage from the *Regularis concordia* which he quotes:

Cuthbert's *Epistola de obitu Bedae* shows that Rogation day processions were practised in England by 735. According to Cuthbert, he and his fellow monks had to leave their beloved abbot for a brief time on the day of his death, which was the Wednesday before Ascension Thursday, 735, in order to partake in the Rogation day procession. According to Cuthbert, 'From the third hour, we walked with the relics of the saints, as the custom of the day demanded.'²⁵ At least by 735, therefore, the Rogation day proceedings included the use of relics. Relics may indeed have been used in processions at a considerably earlier date, since the cross and image of Christ mentioned by Bede in Augustine's procession could certainly encourage the addition of other mementos. Eddius Stephanus reports that a procession carrying relics went to meet the body of the dead Bishop Wilfrid in 709.²⁶ At any rate, the use of relics formed an integral part of the celebration of the Rogations commanded by the Council of Clofeshoh in 747, and relics are mentioned in the Old English Martyrology's description of the *major litania*.²⁷

Iona's procession therefore seems to have been an adaptation of the *rogationes* and *major litania* for the purposes of the Iona community. It should perhaps be noted that the timing of the event, which Adomnán places in May, fell near the celebration of the *major litania*,

'cum omni congregatione eant ad uisitandum infirmum canentes psalmos paenitentiales, consequente letania', grammatically implies that they are singing (*canentes*) while they are walking (*eant*). Lapidge quotes this text from *Regularis Concordia: the Monastic Agreement*, ed. T. Symons (London, 1953), p. 64.

²⁵ 'A tertia autem hora ambulauimus cum reliquiis sanctorum, ut consuetudo illius diei poscebat.' Cuthbert, *Epistola de obitu Bedae: Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 579–87, at 584.

²⁶ Eddius Stephanus, *Vita S. Wilfrithi*, ch. 66: *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus*, ed. B. Colgrave (Cambridge, 1927), p. 142.

²⁷ Cross, 'The Use of Patristic Homilies', pp. 114–5.

held on 25 April, and near the movable Rogations, which start thirty-seven days after Easter, and therefore generally in May. It may even be that the ceremony Adomnán describes is actually a Rogation day procession particularly adapted for Columba's *familia*. If so, this would not be the first miraculous rainfall as a result of a Rogationtide ceremony. Gregory of Tours records in the *Vitae patrum* that St Quintianus was asked during the Rogation days to pray against the drought that had afflicted the countryside of Auvergne.²⁸ Quintianus responded with a passage from Chronicles, and rain duly fell.²⁹ Like Adomnán, Quintianus considered the drought to be a punishment sent by God upon the sin of the people.

Even if the procession described by Adomnán was not performed during the *rogationes*, it seems to have drawn on the general ethos behind such processions: it does penance, it asks for mercy, it is associated with agriculture and drought. The way homilies link the *major litania* and the *rogationes* together suggests that the category of penitential procession in the face of God's wrath fit both ceremonies, and that the same genre could be applied to other processions.³⁰ In other words, the power of the *major litania* or the *rogationes* was not linked to the particular days on which they were celebrated, but rather to the idea of penitential procession. As a result, the *litania* itself, and

²⁸ Gregory of Tours, *Vitae patrum*, ch. 4: PL 71, cols. 1009–96, at col. 1025.

²⁹ 'Si clauso caelo pluviae non fuerint propter peccata populi, et conversi deprecati faciem tuam fuerint, exaudi, Domine, et dimitte peccata populi tui, et da pluviam terrae quam dedisti populo tuo ad possidendum.' Gregory of Tours, *Vitae patrum*, ch. 4: PL 71, col. 1025. 'If on account of the sins of the people the sky has been closed and there has been no rain, if they should return to you and beseech your face, listen, O Lord, and forgive the sins of your people, and grant rain to the land that you have given into the possession of your people.' Cf. II Chron. VI.26–7.

³⁰ E.g. Anonymous (Pseudo-Bede), *De majori litania* (Homily III.97): PL 94, col. 499.

not the day on which it was done, is the important thing, and penitential processions could theoretically be performed on any given day. Indeed, the processions or *litaniae* for the sick, practised in Anglo-Saxon England and Carolingian France, show that petitional processions were not tied to a particular season.³¹

If, as hopefully shown, the procession around the fields was not an unusual response to a disaster, neither was the choice of relics. According to Adomnán, the community shook Columba's cloak, the one he had been wearing on his death-day, three times, and read from the saint's books. Both cloaks, including death-shrouds, and books appear to have been common relics in the early medieval British Isles. For example, the death-shroud (*sindo*) of Saint Guthlac seems to have been preserved at Crowland. According to Felix, Guthlac was buried in clothes sent to him by one Ecgburh.³² Twelve months later, Guthlac was found uncorrupt and his death-clothes sparkling clean, whereupon Guthlac's body was wrapped in clothes sent by the male anchorite Ecgberht, not to be confused with the female Ecgburh.³³ Felix does not mention what happened to Guthlac's original death-shroud, but it seems reasonable to suppose that it was kept as a relic

³¹ Charlemagne, *Epistola V: ad Fastradam reginam*: PL 98, cols. 897–8; Charlemagne, *Epistola XVI: ad Garibaldum episcopum*: PL 98, cols. 918–20. *Anglo-Saxon Litanies*, ed. Lapidge, pp. 44–5.

³² Felix, *Vita S. Guthlaci*, ch. 50: *Felix's Life*, ed. Colgrave, pp. 154–6.

³³ *Ibid.* ch. 51: p. 162. Colgrave's speculations (*Felix's Life*, pp. 193 and 194) that the cloak of Ecgberht is actually just the cloak of Ecgburh are not necessary, especially since Bede's *Vita S. Cuthberti*, which Felix was eager to imitate, clearly states in ch. 42 that new clothes were put on Cuthbert when his body was found incorrupt; *Two Lives*, ed. Colgrave, pp. 290–5. I understand the *re* of *revolvit*, which Colgrave translates as 'again' (*Felix's Life*, pp. 162–3), to modify the verb alone, i.e. Pega wraps up Guthlac's body once more, this time in the shroud sent by Ecgberht; the *re* does not indicate that it is the same shroud in which Guthlac was wrapped the first time.

in the shrine set up in Crowland by King Æthelbald of Mercia.³⁴ These would not have been the first of Guthlac's clothes to be used as relics – according to Felix, a retainer named Ecga in the service of King Æthelbald was cured from madness through wearing Guthlac's girdle, which he used ever since to protect himself from Satan.³⁵ Similarly, the touch of Guthlac's sheepskin cured another *gesith* of blood-poisoning caused by a thorn.³⁶

Felix's nonchalant account, in which two people send garments suitable for death-clothes to the saint, suggests that the practice was common in England at the turn of the eighth century. Similarly, Bede's *Vita S. Cuthberti* reports that the abbess Verca had sent a shroud to Cuthbert which the saint had kept for his death-shroud.³⁷ When Cuthbert's body and death-clothes were found to be incorrupt eleven years later, the garments were sent to the bishop, who ordered that fresh garments be put on the body.³⁸ It is not clear what happened to the original garments, but the shoes, at least, were kept on display with other relics of the saint.³⁹

While the Anglo-Saxons clearly attached some value to the death-shroud and other garments of the saints, Irish hagiography also attached importance to saints' clothes. St Patrick's robe (*casula*) is miraculously preserved from fire in Muirchú's seventh-century *Vita S.*

³⁴ Felix, *Vita S. Guthlaci*, ch. 51: *Felix's Life*, ed. Colgrave, p. 162.

³⁵ *Ibid.* ch. 42: pp. 130–2. A somewhat similar story can be found in Bede's *Vita S. Cuthberti*, ch. 23: *Two Lives*, ed. Colgrave, pp. 230–4.

³⁶ Felix, *Vita S. Guthlaci*, ch. 45: *Felix's Life*, ed. Colgrave, pp. 138–40.

³⁷ Bede, *Vita S. Cuthberti*, ch. 37: *Two Lives*, ed. Colgrave, p. 272. Compare Wilfrid, who was wrapped in a robe provided by Bacula; Eddius Stephanus, *Vita S. Wilfrithi*, ch. 66: *Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, ed. Colgrave, p. 142.

³⁸ Bede, *Vita S. Cuthberti*, ch. 42: *Two Lives*, ed. Colgrave, p. 292–4.

³⁹ Anonymous, *Vita S. Cuthberti* IV.xiv: *Two Lives*, ed. Colgrave, p. 132. cf. Bede, *Vita S. Cuthberti*, ch. 45: *Two Lives*, ed. Colgrave, p. 298–300.

Patricii.⁴⁰ The *Vita S. Cainnici* reports that Saint Cainnech brought the dead abbot of Achadh Droma to life by placing his cloak (*tunicula*) over the corpse.⁴¹ Apparently, this cloak was still on display and venerated in Achadh Droma at the time of the writing of the Life sometime in the eighth or ninth centuries.⁴² Moreover, many Irish saints were later reputed to have cloaks that could serve as boats, or that would increase in size upon request.⁴³ Considering that Venantius Fortunatus records the clothes of the saints being used for healing purposes in sixth-century Gaul, it seems that the cloak was a standard part of the repertoire of saintly relics in the early middle ages.⁴⁴ Such use of clothing has biblical parallels in the *sudaria* (and *semicintia*) of Paul mentioned in Acts, the healing of the unclean woman by the robes (*uestimenta*) of Jesus in Mark, and perhaps the wrappings (*linteamina, sudarium*) left behind by Jesus in the empty tomb in John.⁴⁵

The use of books that a saint had copied as relics also appears to have been common, especially in Ireland. Adomnán several times reports various miracles attached to books that the saint had written.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Muirchú, *Vita S. Patricii* I.xx (xix): *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, ed. L. Bieler, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* 10 (Dublin, 1979), pp. 94–6.

⁴¹ Anonymous, *Vita S. Cainnici*, ch. 32: *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. C. Plummer, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1910) I, 164. A similar miracle is recorded in the *Vita S. Ruadani*, ch. 27: *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. Plummer, II, 251.

⁴² For a discussion of the date of this Life, see R. Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives: an Introduction to the Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford, 1991), p. 300–18.

⁴³ E.g. *Vita S. Endei*, ch. 8: *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. Plummer, II, 63.

⁴⁴ E.g. Venantius Fortunatus, *Vita S. Radegundis*, ch. 34: *Venanti Honori Clementiani Fortunati presbyteri italicici: Opera pedestria*, ed. B. Krusch, MGH Auct. antiq. 4.2 (Berlin, 1881), 38–49, at p. 47.

⁴⁵ Acts XIX.12; Mark V.25–34 (cf. Luke VIII.42–8); John XX.5–7 (cf. Luke XXIV.12).

⁴⁶ Adomnán, *Vita S. Columbae*, II.viii–ix: *Adomnán's Life*, ed. Anderson and Anderson, pp. 104–6. Cainnech's books, moreover, are miraculously saved from

St Molaise and St Patrick were also associated with certain books that, along with the Psalter of St Columba, would later be placed in *cumdaig*, or ornamental book-caskets, during the eleventh century.⁴⁷ Within the Iona monastery, Adomnán reports that the books in conjunction with the saint's clothes were used on another occasion to ask Columba for a change in the winds; perhaps this combination, of books and clothes, was deemed particularly effective in dealing with the weather.⁴⁸

So far, the evidence from native religious thought and Christian *litaniae* has shown that a procession around the fields was a natural and reasonable response to a calamity, such as a drought. Moreover, the choice of relics reflected common contemporary practices in the British Isles. The concord between Adomnán's procession and the contemporaneous devotional background suggests that the procession did actually occur, and was not simply a literary borrowing from Gregory the Great. Indeed, the Iona monastery could easily have decided upon such a procession without ever having read or heard of the tale in Gregory's *Dialogues*.⁴⁹

fire in the anonymous *Vita S. Cainnici*, ch. 28: *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. Plummer, I, 163.

⁴⁷ *The Stowe Missal*, ed. G. F. Warner, 2 vols., HBS 31–2 (London, 1915) II, xlv. Interestingly, the 'Cathach' of Saint Columba, as the Psalter is also called, was connected with encircling even in later times; according to Kenney, the book was carried three times sunwise round the army of the Cenél Conaill before a battle in order to ensure their victory. J. F. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical* (New York, 1966), p. 630.

⁴⁸ Adomnán, *Vita S. Columbae*, II.xlv: *Adomnán's Life*, ed. Anderson and Anderson, pp. 174–8.

⁴⁹ Moreover, the actual verbal similarities between Gregory's account and Adomnán's are few. Namely, both authors use isolated forms of *siccitas*, *terra*, *levare*, *tunica*, *pluvia*, and *satiare*. The authors do not share any substantial phrases, and they frequently choose different words, for example, Gregory *agros* /

Accepting the veracity of Adomnán's report, however, calls into question the literary-historical methodology that cast doubt on Adomnán's eye-witness testimony in the first place. If the basic outlines of Adomnán's account seem highly likely to have happened, despite the literary echoes and parallels, then one must ask whether literary parallels are adequate to show that a hagiographic episode is unhistorical. The obvious answer is, of course, no, as the present case-study shows. Yet literary parallels are used frequently to do precisely that. For example, Anderson and Anderson in their first edition of *Adomnán's Life of Columba* decided that Adomnán's description of a sword decorated with the teeth of sea beasts must have been a 'literary product of Adomnán's imagination', because Solinus in the third century reported that the Irish decorated the hilts of their swords with the teeth of sea animals.⁵⁰ Yet Richard Sharpe

Adomnán *campos*, Gregory *pergerent* / Adomnán *circumirent*. Moreover, the two accounts differ substantially in detail – thus, Gregory's account makes no mention of shaking the tunic, nor of reading from books. With regards to the most unusual of the shared words, *satiare*, this word was commonly associated in other authors with water (e.g. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, bk VIII, lines 835–6, and more influentially Psalm CIII.13, which describes the earth, watered by God, bringing forth crops), and particularly with thirst. In fact, *satiare* and *sitis* / *sitio* are very frequently lexically linked, e.g. *M. Val. Martialis Epigrammata*, ed. W. M. Lindsay, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1929), bk VI, poem 35, line 5; *Isidori Hispalensis episcopi etymologiarum siue originum libri xx*, ed. W. M. Lindsay, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1911) VIII.ii.28; Isidore, *Quaestiones in veterum testamentum – in Genesim*, ch. 17 (PL 83, cols. 207–88, at col. 248); Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Iob* XVIII.liv (PL 76, cols. 9–782, at col. 94); Anonymous (Pseudo-Bede), 'De Iusu Isaac cum Ismaele', *Quaestionum super Genesim ex dictis patrum dialogus* (PL 93, cols. 233–364, at col. 317). Adomnán's description of 'sitiens prius terra...satiata' must therefore be informed by the larger context of Latin literature, not just the *Dialogues*, especially since the passage from Gregory's *Dialogues* does not use *sitis* / *sitio*.

⁵⁰ 'Macheram beluinis ornatam dolatis...dentibus'. Adomnán, *Vita S. Columbae*

has since shown that the Solinus passage in question was an interpolation that Adomnán could not have seen, and suggests instead that Adomnán is describing an actual type of sword, the Old Irish for which is *colg dét* 'sword of tooth'.⁵¹ Sharpe did, however, cast guarded suspicion on whether Columba sailed to Ireland with twelve companions, as Adomnán and a contemporaneous addition to the B manuscripts claim.⁵² Sharpe comments, 'This apostolic number may arouse suspicions as to the genuineness of the list, but it must be remembered that St Columba as well as Adomnán knew the gospels; he may have set out deliberately with that number of companions to establish his church in Britain.'⁵³ Sharpe's statement effectively casts

II.xxxix: *Adomnán's Life*, ed. Anderson and Anderson, p. 156. For the Andersons' comments in the first edition, see *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, ed. A. O. Anderson and M. O. Anderson (London, 1961), pp. 21 and 424, n. 7. All abbreviated citations refer to the second edition.

⁵¹ Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, p. 339, n. 314.

⁵² On the date of the 'Appendix' preserved in the B manuscripts, see T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'The New Edition of Adomnán's *Life of Columba*', *Cambrian Med. Celtic Stud.* 26 (1993), 65–74, at 68 (esp. n. 14).

⁵³ Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, p. 19. Sharpe does not note the many other instances of twelve companions in insular contexts. For example, Columbanus is also reported to have departed from Ireland with twelve disciples in the late sixth century; *Críth Gablach*, composed in the early eighth century, prescribes twelve as the number of a king's companions; Adomnán claimed that Oswald was baptized along with twelve of his retainers; and Bede reported that Eanfrith travelled with just twelve retainers, and that bishop Aidan received twelve English boys for instruction. Rees and Rees have collected many other examples of this theme. Although there is no space for a full discussion here, the wide spread of this theme in a variety of sources, hagiographical, historical and legal, inclines me to believe that travelling with twelve companions was an actual practice in early Ireland. Jonas, *Vita S. Columbani* I.iv: *Ioniae Vitae Sanctorum Columbani, Vedastis, Iohannis*, ed. B. Krusch, SS rer. Germ. 37 (Hannover, 1905), 1–294, at 160. *Críth Gablach*, ed. D. A. Binchy, *Med. and Mod.*

doubt on the number twelve by referring to the Gospels, and then defends the number twelve by referring to the same Gospels! This reasoning may seem dubious at first, but it introduces an important principle, namely that early medieval Christians acted typologically, that is, they consciously strove to imitate their predecessors, even in details that can seem trivial to a modern consciousness. As a result, literary parallels can equally be historical realities.

Examples of this typological action, or at least portrayals of conscious typological action, are abundant in early medieval literature. The eighth-century Felix notes that Guthlac goes out into the wasteland of the East Anglian fen in order to imitate the examples of the desert fathers whose Lives he has read.⁵⁴ Bede claims that Cuthbert constantly strove to imitate the fathers, and encouraged others to do the same.⁵⁵ As a result, Cuthbert took up working with his own hands, and worked various miracles in imitation of other saints.⁵⁶ Imitating renowned saints was not only a subject of Cuthbert's teaching, and the practice of several Insular saints, but was also encouraged by the Rule of Benedict, chapter forty-two of which ordains that hagiographical reading be undertaken by the monks.⁵⁷ Moreover, major doctrinal issues in the British Isles were resolved by appealing to the examples set by the saints. Thus, the Roman form of

Irish Series 11 (Dublin, 1941), p. 18 (see the retinues (*dám*) for *rú benn* and *rú buiden*). Adomnán, *Vita S. Columbae* I.i: *Adomnán's Life*, ed. Anderson and Anderson, p. 16. Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* III.i and III.xxvi: *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 212–14 and 308. Rees and Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, pp. 150–3 and 196–7.

⁵⁴ Felix, *Vita S. Guthlaci*, ch. 24: *Felix's Life*, ed. Colgrave, p. 86.

⁵⁵ Bede, *Vita S. Cuthberti*, ch. 7: *Two Lives*, ed. Colgrave, p. 178.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* ch. 19: pp. 220–2.

⁵⁷ *La Règle de Saint Benoît*, ed. A. de Vogüé and J. Neufville, 6 vols., Sources chrétiennes 181–6 (Paris, 1971–7) II, 584.

coronal tonsure was considered to be the tonsure of St Peter.⁵⁸ Adherents to the so-called 'Celtic Easter' thought that they were following the example of the Apostle John and also that of Columba and his successors.⁵⁹ According to Bede and Eddius Stephanus, King Oswiu decided the Easter controversy at the Synod of Whitby by deciding to follow the practice of St Peter over that of St Columba, since to Peter had been entrusted the keys to heaven whereas Columba had not received such power.⁶⁰ In sum, following the examples of the fathers was seen as leading not only to personal holiness and miraculous powers, but also to doctrinal orthodoxy. The mark of truth was therefore precisely unoriginality – one should imitate what one found in books. As a consequence, the apparent modern temptation to use literary parallels and unoriginality as a sign of historical fiction runs into obvious problems. As seen, the very 'source' of the literary parallel could have been the source of the historical action. Moreover, it seems that early medieval authors drew upon the language of other authors when describing similar events.⁶¹ As a result, even accounts with significant verbal borrowings may relate base events rooted in historical reality.

For the purposes of historical investigation, I suggest that we treat passages with literary borrowings and echoes as we would those passages devoid of such parallels; all passages, whether having literary parallels or not, require careful study of the cultural background, other reports and the author's sources of information before a judgement can be made on an episode's historicity or lack thereof.

⁵⁸ E.g. Felix, *Vita S. Guthlaci*, ch. 20: *Felix's Life*, ed. Colgrave, p. 84.

⁵⁹ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* III.xxv: *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 298–308.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* Eddius Stephanus, *Vita S. Wilfrithi*, ch. 10: *Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, ed. Colgrave, pp. 20–3.

⁶¹ Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, p. 59.

Only after such judgements have been made can the literary historian accurately address the question of an author's style, purpose *et cetera*. After all, we need to know what was there already before we can determine what the author added – we need to know the material the author had before we can accurately determine how he shaped it.

In the case of Columba's relics and rain, Adomnán has recorded an event likely to have occurred in that culture. There is no need or reason to doubt his account; indeed the element of his personal eye-witness testimony makes it one of the best-attested episodes in the *Vita*. I can now answer several of Sharpe's original questions. 'Did it happen?' Apparently, yes. 'Was it literary fiction?' For the most part, no. 'Was the act itself influenced by Gregory's book?' Possibly, though not necessarily, since the *litaniae* and *rogationes*, along with associations from native religion, were more than sufficient in themselves to provide the instigation for such a procession.

Not Drowning but Waving:
the Sagas of Icelanders after the Golden Age

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Constructing a cultural past is, more often than not, a matter of repeating a particular story until it becomes an assumption. So I would like to begin by telling you one. Like many origin myths, it is not entirely true, and tends to exaggerate rather; but it is no less powerful for all that. I shall call it 'The Rise and Fall of the Classical Saga'.

King Haraldr ruled over part of Norway, and as he grew more powerful he became overbearing. Many independently-minded chieftains emigrated to Iceland. They set up a republic or commonwealth in 930 AD – unique in medieval Europe, anticipating modern nationalism by eight centuries. Despite constant pressure from Norway, they remained stubbornly independent, ruled by Conscience rather than Church or King. But the delicate balance of power on which the commonwealth depended started to break down, especially after the evil Church of Rome got its claws into this pristine society. During the thirteenth century, power became concentrated in the hands of a few enormous chieftains. The crafty king of Norway played them off against each other, hoping to add Iceland to his empire. Iceland almost sank into a brutal and disgraceful civil war, and the legal and social traditions of the commonwealth were under threat of extinction.

Appalled at this impending loss, and dismayed at the social evils which had hastened it, many literati were moved to examine and record their heritage. Fortunately, they were geniuses, and they engaged imaginatively in 'dialogues with the Viking Age'. The result was an unparalleled feat of national self-fashioning: the 'classical' Sagas of Icelanders. Half a millennium before Jane Austen and George Eliot, these lachrymose literati produced the finest body of realistic prose fiction in the Western world. But in 1264, Iceland fell at last into the clutches of Norway. Somewhere in the distance, an offstage orchestra started playing Wagner. There was a final flowering of achievement: in 1280, *Njáls saga* was written. But a generation later, the literati started to lose touch with commonwealth traditions. The 'classical' saga fell into a rapid decline. It was all downhill from here. Famine, plague, volcanic eruptions and political subjection played sad havoc with the Icelanders' national pride, and they stopped engaging in serious literary dialogue with their past. Unable to cope with the sheer tragedy of it all, they escaped into a vulgar fantasy-world of giants, trolls, knights and superheroes, borrowed shamelessly from the Continent. It was not until the growth of the independence movement in the nineteenth century that the new literati could once again reclaim the glorious literature of their tragic Golden Age.

Such is the 'origin myth' of the Sagas of Icelanders, with my apologies for the purple passages. But if you look into many histories of Iceland, you will find the same romantic sentiments.¹ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson's *Age of the Sturlungs* describes thirteenth-century Iceland with his heart on his sleeve:

it was true that a world was coming to an end, a world perhaps corrupt and full of suffering, but wonderful in many ways: the world of the

¹ See Jón R. Hjálmarsson, *A Short History of Iceland* (Reykjavík, 1988), pp. 57–60; Sigurður Nordal, *Icelandic Culture*, trans. Vilhjálmur T. Bjarnar (Ithaca, NY, 1990), pp. 300–2; Sigurður Nordal, *Íslenski menning* (Reykjavík, 1942), pp. 351–3.

Icelandic Commonwealth, its view of life and its culture. There followed peace, but it was the peace of the graveyard.²

As several historians have since demonstrated, this 'catastrophe theory' wildly extrapolates from sources themselves given to exaggeration.³ The rise-and-fall 'origin myth' is a Romantic construct.⁴

Why was it constructed? The answer – to simplify enormously – lies in the Icelandic national awakening. Nineteenth-century nationalists saw the commonwealth as a 'golden age', lamenting Iceland's violently tragic fall into subjection. Using the sagas as historical sources, they invoked the individualism of saga heroes to inspire their descendants with national feeling.⁵ But as the dream of

² Einar Ó. Sveinsson, *The Age of the Sturlungs: Icelandic Civilization in the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Jóhann S. Hannesson, *Islandica* 36 (Ithaca, NY, 1953), 102–3; Einar Ó. Sveinsson, *Sturlungaöld: drög um íslenska menningu á þrettánda öld* (Reykjavík, 1940), p. 110.

³ On *Íslendinga saga's* exaggeration of the violence characterizing mid-thirteenth-century Iceland, later historians' misleading construction of discrete historical 'ages', and the considerable social continuity after 1262–4, see J. L. Byock, 'The Age of the Sturlungs', *Continuity and Change: Political Institutions and Literary Monuments in the Middle Ages: a Symposium*, ed. E. Vestergaard (Odense, 1986), pp. 27–42.

⁴ On the way in which the Commonwealth's political autonomy was itself constructed retrospectively by means of a thirteenth-century 'optical illusion', see K. Hastrup, 'Defining a Society: The Icelandic Freestate between Two Worlds', in her *Island of Anthropology: Studies in Past and Present Iceland*, Viking Collection 5 (Odense, 1990), 83–102 (at 100–2).

⁵ See Gunnar Karlsson, 'The Emergence of Nationalism in Iceland', *Ethnicity and Nation Building in the Nordic World*, ed. S. Tägil (London, 1995), pp. 33–62 (at 49–50); Gunnar Karlsson, 'Icelandic Nationalism and the Inspiration of History', *The Roots of Nationalism: Studies in Northern Europe*, ed. R. Mitchison (Edinburgh, 1980), pp. 77–89. Compare Sigurður Nordal's evaluation: 'the ghosts of the Saga Age had enough life in the end to become standard-bearers

independence became reality in the early twentieth century, there was less need for such rhetoric.⁶ What Iceland needed, to stand proudly among nations, was a unique contribution to world culture – a status symbol to justify its independent existence.⁷ There was also a growing consensus among scholars that the Sagas of Icelanders were historically unreliable; but their importance for the Icelandic self-image somehow had to be retained. The solution was obvious. The nation's favourite stories were redefined as creative masterpieces – 'one of the most powerful literary movements in recorded history', as Sigurður Nordal put it in 1940 with characteristic energy.⁸ He and his learned colleagues, the so-called Icelandic School, put Iceland on the world map by publicizing its remarkable medieval anticipation of a modern genre, the realistic historical novel.⁹ The 'classical saga' canon was established anew.

What has gone without remark is that the canon contained exactly the same texts, both as historical sources in the nineteenth century and as historical novels in the twentieth. In other words, despite Nordal's emphasis on fictionality, the criterion by which sagas were valued was still content, not literary form. A 'good' saga had to be a serious creative response to the commonwealth's 'cruel

leading the way in the drive for freedom in our time' (*Icelandic Culture*, p. 302); Sigurður Nordal, *Íslenski menning*, p. 353.

⁶ Iceland gained home rule in 1904, a university in 1911, official autonomy as a 'kingdom' in 1918 and complete independence in 1944.

⁷ See J. L. Byock, 'Modern Nationalism and the Medieval Sagas', *Northern Antiquity: The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga*, ed. A. Wawn (Enfield Lock, 1994), pp. 163–87.

⁸ Sigurður Nordal, *Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða: a Study*, trans. R. G. Thomas (Cardiff, 1958), p. 57; Sigurður Nordal, *Hrafnkatla*, *Studia Islandica* 7 (Reykjavík, 1940), 68.

⁹ See P. Arnold, 'The Post-Classical *Íslendingasögur*: a Sub-Genre among the Icelandic Family Sagas' (unpubl. PhD dissertation, Leeds Univ., 1996), pp. 256–7.

compulsion of honour' and 'tragic actions'. Frivolity was a sign of 'discontent with reality'.¹⁰ The saga-author needed to have lived within memory of the commonwealth, in order to be familiar with its unique social and legal structures. Consequently, the fictional chivalric and legendary sagas were devalued. As we have seen, their politically incorrect affiliations with disreputable 'foreign elements'¹¹ like Continental *fabliaux*, placed them beyond the pale. The Icelandic School explained their immense popularity in fourteenth-century Iceland as a collapse of national pride. This left the serious 'classical saga' as a 'glass' in which thirteenth-century Icelanders 'could aspire, at least in imagination, to see themselves'.¹²

Certainly, this 'origin myth' can shed much light on the way Icelanders constructed their past. It underpins Vésteinn Ólason's recent book, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, perhaps the finest and most sensitive introduction to the 'classical sagas' for the non-specialist reader. Vésteinn characterizes them as 'dialogues about...the loss of an entire world',¹³ which simultaneously express 'an idealised view of the past' and 'developing anxieties in the face of an uncertain future'.¹⁴

¹⁰ Einar Ó. Sveinsson, *Dating the Icelandic Sagas: An Essay in Method*, trans. G. Turville-Petre, Viking Soc. for Northern Research Text Series 3 (London, 1958), 125; Einar Ó. Sveinsson, *Ritunartími Íslendingasagna: rök og rannsóknaraðferð* (Reykjavík, 1965), p. 162.

¹¹ H. Koht, *The Old Norse Sagas* (New York, 1931), p. 180.

¹² R. Kellogg, 'Introduction', *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, 5 vols. (Reykjavík, 1997) I, xxix–liii (at liii). This view is strengthened by anthropological studies of Saga Age society, asserting the broad historicity of the sagas as 'indigenous social documentation' which happens also to be 'a major literature'. See J. L. Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Enfield Lock, 1993), pp. 49–50.

¹³ Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age: Narration and Representation in the Sagas of Icelanders*, trans. A. Wawn (Reykjavík, 1998), p. 9.

¹⁴ Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues*, p. 22.

He and his colleagues have moved on from the aggressive chauvinism of the Icelandic School, but his book retains and refines both the nationalistic 'origin myth' and the 'classical' canon. This conservatism is part of the book's appeal: it feels good to be told by a leading scholar in the age of deconstruction that we are quite right – perhaps even rather clever – to admire *Njáls saga* so much. Our aesthetic presuppositions, born of novel-reading, are nurtured and stimulated. Vésteinn celebrates the 'classical saga' as a dialogue with the past – a dialogue of special value because it transmits that past not as a fiction, but 'as a lived experience'.¹⁵ There really was, as the Icelandic Minister of Education put it in 1997, 'a time when heroes rode proudly across the land, their actions guided solely by the dictates of individual conscience'.¹⁶

But there are other ways to construct a past than this frankly Romantic approach suggests. Medieval Icelandic literature presents a bewildering variety of narrative forms, and an entire spectrum of outlooks upon the Viking past. But the nationalist 'origin myth' prevents us from appreciating the different approaches of 'post-classical' narrative forms on any terms other than literary decadence. This is particularly true of the so-called 'post-classical Sagas of Icelanders', since the term suggests a failed attempt at perpetuating the 'classical' genre. In fact, this multifarious group of texts only underlines the artificiality of such generic terms.¹⁷

In any case, the all-important thirteenth-century composition of the 'classical' sagas, established largely on stylistic grounds by the

¹⁵ Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues*, p. 246.

¹⁶ Björn Bjarnason, 'Foreword by Björn Bjarnason, Icelandic Minister of Education, Science and Culture', *The Complete Sagas*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, I, ix.

¹⁷ See P. W. Cardew, 'Genre, History and National Identity in Icelandic Saga Narrative' (unpubl. PhD dissertation, Leeds Univ., 1996), pp. 278–80.

Icelandic School, has been exposed as a circular argument.¹⁸ Only *Egils saga* and *Laxdæla saga* survive in pre-fourteenth-century fragments: most Sagas of Icelanders are only extant from the mid-fourteenth century onwards. To preserve the thirteenth-century canon, therefore, double standards need to be applied. I have attempted to illustrate this in Table 1 opposite.

With the 'post-classical' sagas, scholars have been happy to infer a late composition from late attestations because these sagas are so self-evidently 'young'. But with all the late-attested 'classical' texts, a great leap of faith has been made, simply on the basis of literary style and what might be called 'commonwealth awareness'.¹⁹ It is of course likely that many 'classical' texts were indeed written down in the thirteenth century, but it is no less likely that 'post-classical' texts were too. Conversely, it is quite possible that *Hrafnkels saga* and *Valla-Ljóts saga*, those paradigms of 'classicism', were composed in the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. To separate the two kinds of saga in the standard evolutionary parabola is as Procrustean (and historically dubious) as attempting to fit Shakespeare's comedies, histories and tragedies into three respective chronological 'phases'. Above all, the 'classical' canon is a matter of taste, personal or political.

Having established this point, let us put it into practice by examining a different mode of constructing the past. I would like to look at the way in which some 'post-classical' Sagas of Icelanders make playful forays into the narrative realms of legendary and

¹⁸ Örnólfur Thorsson, "Leitin að landinu fagra". Hugleiðing um rannsóknir á íslenskum fornþóknemntum', *Skáldskaparmál* 1 (1990), 28–53.

¹⁹ For some of the problems associated with the old philology, see P. A. Jorgensen, 'Producing the Best Text Edition: Herculean and Sisyphean', *Scandinavian Studies* 65 (1993), 329–37 (at 332). On the difficulty of taking editorial scepticism too far, see K. Wolf, 'Old Norse – New Philology', *Scandinavian Studies* 65 (1993), 338–48.

	earliest attestation	traditional dating of 'original'	difference (years)
1. Sagas surviving in Möðruvallabók			
* <i>Finnboga saga</i>	1330	1300	30
<i>Droplaugarsonar saga</i>	1330	1220	110
2. Sagas surviving in late-fourteenth-century fragments			
* <i>Bárðar saga</i>	1390 (fragment)	1350	40
* <i>Harðar saga</i>	1390 (fragment)	1350	40
<i>Gísla saga</i>	1390 (fragment)	1240	150
<i>Vatnsdæla saga</i>	1390 (fragment)	1270	120
3. Fifteenth-century texts			
* <i>Þorskefninga saga</i>	1400	1350	50
* <i>Þórðar saga breðu B</i>	1400 (fragment)	1380	20
<i>Reykdale saga</i>	1400	1200	200
<i>Ljósvefninga saga</i>	1400 (fragments)	1270	130
<i>Hansa-Þóris saga</i>	1400 (fragment)	1280	120
<i>Vápnfirðinga saga</i>	1420 (fragment)	1240	180
<i>Þorsteins þátr stangarhöggis</i>	1420 (fragment)	1250	170
4. Sixteenth-century texts			
* <i>Víglundar saga</i>	1500	1420	80
<i>Hrafnkels saga</i>	1500 (fragment)	1280	220
5. Post-medieval texts			
* <i>Jökuls þátr Búasonar</i>	1600	1480	120
* <i>Fljótsdæla saga</i>	1600	1500	100
<i>Gunnars saga Þiðrandabana</i>	1600	1220	380
<i>Valla-Ljóts saga</i>	1600	1240	360
<i>Þorsteins saga hvíta</i>	1600	1280	320
<i>Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar</i>	1700	1260	440

Table 1. A selection of Sagas of Icelanders in chronological order of attestation.²⁰

²⁰ 'Post-classical' sagas are marked with '*'. Dates of attestation are taken from *ONP: Registre*; for the sake of argument, I have shown only the earliest possible datings. 'Traditional dating' is a rough average of the datings of individual saga 'originals' found in recent English and Icelandic reference works.

chivalric sagas – the world of Norse romance. They deflate the heroic or aristocratic posturing usually associated with this mode by juxtaposing it dissonantly or bathetically with the homely life of the Icelander. It would be misleading to employ the terms ‘parody’ and ‘burlesque’ here,²¹ as we cannot identify a ‘target text’ or even genre being parodied. When discussing this ‘parodic’ tone,²² then, I prefer to use the vaguer word ‘anti-heroic’.

In the ‘classical’ texts, Icelanders often prove their heroism abroad, and the geographical shift is paralleled by a stylistic move towards Norse romance. Chivalric and legendary motifs accumulate, and after his sea-battle, berserk-bashing or mound-breaking, the Icelander returns home a hero. ‘Post-classical’ texts make mischief with this idealizing process, fragmenting the notion of the ‘heroic’ where the ‘classical’ saga forges dramatic unity. *Finnboga saga* is usually dismissed as a half-baked attempt to idealize Finnbogi the Strong as a ‘superhero’:²³ he seals his heroic reputation, conventionally enough, by killing a dangerous bear in Norway. The way in which this deed is introduced, however, warns us against taking it too seriously:

Þá mælti Finnbogi: ‘Stattu upp, bersi, ok ráð móti mér; er þat heldr til nökkurs en liggja á suðarslitri þessu.’ Björninn settist upp ok leit til hans ok kastar sér niðr. Finnbogi mælti: ‘Ef þér þykir ek of mjök vápnaðr móti þér, þá skal ek at því gera,’ – tekr af sér hjálminn, en setr niðr skjöldinn ok mælti: ‘Stattu nú upp, ef þu þorir.’ Björninn settist

²¹ F. J. Heinemann describes *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* as a ‘parody of a typical saga’ in his introduction to his translation in *The Complete Sagas*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, V, 313.

²² Viðar Hreinsson *et al.*, ‘Preface’, *The Complete Sagas*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson I, xiii–xxv (at xxiii); this reference, however, is to *Fóstbræðra saga*.

²³ Margrét Eggertsdóttir, ‘*Finnboga saga ramma*’, *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. P. Pulsiano and K. Wolf (New York, 1993), p. 194; Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues*, p. 217.

upp ok skók höfuðit, lagðist niðr aptr síðan.²⁴

This belongs more to the pantomime than the heroic biography: small wonder that Finnbogi repeatedly refuses to recount the details when questioned. Readers disappointed in his unglamorous later career in Iceland²⁵ would do well to recall the humorous question-mark placed by this episode over traditional concepts of heroism.

A subtler but more consistent critique of such concepts is found in the second recension of *Þórðar saga breðu*.²⁶ Þórðr is a typically heroic Norwegian aristocrat, who serves as King Gamli’s champion and makes stirring battle-speeches.²⁷ But geography has a profound effect on him. Once he has settled in prosaic Iceland, he does not even try to gain a chieftaincy. He devotes all his time to building boats and halls and going to the market, fighting (and boasting of his ancestry) only when compelled. But he is envied by the bullying chieftain Skeggi, whose posturing is subtly mocked by the narrator. Whereas Þórðr’s sword was an honourable gift from a grateful king, the bullying Skeggi has to grab his sword Sköfnung from a dead king, in an incongruous mound-breaking anecdote. This anecdote comes

²⁴ *Finnboga saga*, ch. 11: *Kjalnesinga saga*, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, ÍF 14 (Reykjavík, 1959), 274. ‘Finnbogi said, “Stand up, bear, and attack me; that’d be more worthwhile than lying on that dead sheep.” The bear sat up, looked at him, and flopped down. Finnbogi said, “If you think I’m over-armed against you, I’ll remedy that,” – removed his helmet, put down his shield, and said, “Now stand up, if you dare.” The bear sat up and shook his head, then lay down again.’

²⁵ See for example J. Kennedy’s introduction to his translation of *Finnboga saga* in *The Complete Sagas*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, III, 221.

²⁶ Only fragments of the first recension are preserved. This text presents Þórðr as a straightforward and rather belligerent ‘hero’, leading one to suspect that the second recension represents a conscious reworking. See *Brot af Þórðar sögu breðu: Kjalnesinga saga*, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, pp. 229–47.

²⁷ *Þórðar saga breðu*, ch. 1: *Kjalnesinga saga*, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, pp. 165–6.

straight from the world of the legendary sagas, reminding the audience of the sword's supernatural property as well as establishing that Sköfnung was 'bezt sverð hefir komit til Íslands'.²⁸ Skeggi swaggers about with it, but Sköfnung kills nobody and audience expectation mounts. Finally, in chapter 10, he and Þórðr stand face to face in the moonlight, swords drawn – but then their families arrive and separate them. Desperately frustrated, Skeggi storms back to the local farm and slaughters a feeble old man in his bedroom, then makes an incongruously 'heroic' speech to the headless corpse.²⁹ The bathos is repeated when, during the reconciliatory wedding, Þórðr accidentally draws Sköfnung.

Eiðr mælti: 'Þetta er þarfleysa, fóstri minn.' Þórðr svarar: 'Hvat mun saka?' Eiðr segir: 'Þat er náttúra sverðsins, at nökkut verðr at höggva með því, hvern tíma er brugðit et.'³⁰

Þórðr is now in a classic Norse-romance dilemma. How can he get out of it without making a scene?

Þórðr segir, 'Þat skal prófa,' ok hljóp út ok kvað hann skyldu görtra við merarbeinin ok höggr hross eitt, er stóð í túninu.³¹

The romantic 'magical gift' motif is deflated for a second time. No wonder Skeggi is so furious: Sköfnung was meant for better things. A similar deflatory role is played by the equally anticlimactic magic

²⁸ *Þórðar saga breðu*, ch. 2: *Kjalnesinga saga*, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, p. 169. 'The best sword that ever came to Iceland'.

²⁹ *Þórðar saga breðu*, ch. 10: *Kjalnesinga saga*, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, p. 214.

³⁰ *Þórðar saga breðu*, ch. 12: *Kjalnesinga saga*, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, p. 221. 'Eiðr said, "That's rather unnecessary, foster-father." "What's the harm?" Þórðr replied. "It's the property of the sword that it must strike something whenever it's drawn."'

³¹ *Þórðar saga*, ch. 12: *Kjalnesinga saga*, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, p. 221. 'Þórðr said, "I'll try it out," and ran outside, saying it would have to chew on horse's bones, and slew a horse standing in the hayfield.'

gloves in *Þorskefirðinga saga*.³² In both sagas, heroic posturing prevents these potent emblems of a legendary past from fulfilling their potential.

The dissonance between romantic or legendary worlds and prosaic Iceland has its finest comic expression in *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*. In this saga, the humble stargazer Oddi, who was neither a poet nor a singer,³³ spends the night on Flatey, where he has been sent on an errand. He dreams that he is back home at his master's farm, and that a guest is telling a typical legendary saga about King Geirviðr of Gautland. When this storyteller mentions the king's poet, something remarkable happens:

En þegar þessi maðr, Dagfinnr, var nefndr í sögunni, þá er frá því at segja, er mjök er undarligt, at þá brá því við í drauminum Odda, at hann Oddi sjálfr þóttist vera þessi maðr, Dagfinnr, en gestrinn, sá er söguna sagði, er nú ór sögunni ok drauminum ... En nú síðan er drauminn svá at segja sem honum þótti sjálfum fyrir sik bera, Odda, þá þóttist hann vera Dagfinnr ok ráðast í ferðina með konunginum Geirviði.³⁴

³² After a spate of legendary-saga adventures in Scandinavia, the hero Gull-Þórir returns to Iceland with a pair of magic gloves, also gifts from a mound-dweller. Þórir is told that if he strokes his men with these gloves before a battle, they cannot be wounded. Back in Iceland, Þórir becomes increasingly isolated, and his heroic feats are forgotten as his fortune wanes. In ch. 15, Þórir and his men are about to defend themselves against a large company. At this point the gloves are at last mentioned: Þórir puts them on to render his men invincible before the enemy sees them. The audience anticipates victory on a supernatural scale. But before Þórir can touch them, his vainglorious companion Vöflu-Gunnarr rushes out to attack, and spoils everything. The gloves never reappear. See *Þorskefirðinga saga*, chs. 3 and 15; *Harðar saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, ÍF 13 (Reykjavík, 1991), 184 and 211.

³³ *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, ch. 1: *Harðar saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, p. 459.

³⁴ *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, ch. 4: *Harðar saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni

'Dagfinnr' subsequently recites a splendid poem. But when the dream is approaching its climactic sea-battle, 'Dagfinnr' bends down to tie his shoelace. He wakes up 'ok var þá Oddi, sem ván var'.³⁵ After looking at the stars and remembering his dream-poem, he goes back to bed and his dream continues heroically from where it left off. After another praise-poem, 'Dagfinnr' wins the king's sister's hand in marriage. The *kurteisligr* ('courtly') happy ending arrives, and they live happily ever after.³⁶

But the dream is over. Oddi wakes up and remembers part of his second poem, which appears to be a fourteenth-century archaizing imitation of a *drápa*. After these stanzas, the saga ends with truth-claims, and finally: 'Má ok eigi undrast, þótt kveðskaprinn sé stirðr, því at í svefni var kveðit'.³⁷ This resembles the humorously self-conscious authorial protestations in some of the sillier Norse romances.

The author's uncanny grasp of the narrative mechanisms of dream is worth a separate study in itself. Legendary Gautland, with lashings of chivalry, is superimposed on twelfth-century Iceland by means of a dream, which also mixes the imaginary landscape with

Vilhjálmsson, p. 465. 'Now when this man Dagfinnr was named in the saga, something very odd happened in Oddi's dream: Oddi himself seemed to be Dagfinnr, while the guest who was telling the saga is now out of the saga and out of the dream ... From here on, the dream must be told as Oddi himself seemed to experience it, thinking he was Dagfinnr and preparing for a journey with King Geirviðr.'

³⁵ *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, ch. 7: *Harðar saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, p. 471. 'And was Oddi again, as might be expected'.

³⁶ *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, ch. 8: *Harðar saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, p. 476.

³⁷ *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, ch. 9: *Harðar saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, p. 481. 'Nobody need be surprised if the poetry is rather stilted, since it was composed in his sleep.'

local place-names. In the gap between these two narrative worlds, the 'saga' of Oddi's dream and its twelfth-century substrate, we can locate that 'large field of potential irony' whose presence scholars still deny in the 'completely objective' Sagas of Icelanders,³⁸ and whose recurrence in 'post-classical' texts is deplored. How we interpret that irony is a matter for speculation.³⁹ One possibility, at least, brings us back to the old notion of 'post-classical' romance as stylistic escapism. Are we meant to conclude that Oddi's dream represents a marginalized Iceland's yearning for the good old days when men were real men? I doubt it. As with *Grettis saga*, in many ways a tragic counterpart to *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, the very concept of 'heroism' is subtly undermined, as well as the time being out of joint. Maybe the dream-saga is mocking such hypothetical yearnings, by pretending to pander to them. Perhaps this is over-subtle; but one other short, late saga reduces *ad absurdum* the idea that the near-civil war ending the commonwealth made people bury their heads in the sand of romance. This is *Jökuls þátrr Búasonar*, composed by someone who was not satisfied with the ending of *Kjalnesinga saga*, in which Jökull kills his own father in self-defence. In this sequel, Jökull is so mortified that he flees from Iceland to a rumbustious Nordic world of clumsy trolls and giants, where he rescues a prince, marries a princess, and goes with them to Saracen-land, where he finally inherits the throne, safely cocooned from moral complexities in the Technicolor world of chivalric romance.⁴⁰ Who knows? Perhaps these sagas were supposed

³⁸ Robert Kellogg, 'Introduction', pp. xxxiv-xxxv; Jónas Kristjánsson, 'Foreword', *The Complete Sagas*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, I, xi.

³⁹ Þórhallur Vilmundarson lays out the evidence for the dream-narrative being a *roman-à-clef* about twelfth-century disputes over chieftaincies in the Reykjadalr area. Some of this is striking, some exceptionally tenuous. See *Harðar saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, pp. ccxiv-ccxxii.

⁴⁰ *Jökuls þátrr Búasonar. Kjalnesinga saga*, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, pp. 47-59.

to make people laugh.

Thankfully, these neglected texts are now available in English translation in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*. But their availability is hampered by the product's punishingly high price. This, and the daunting array of distinguished Presidential prefaces, hints at a more familiar motive than making the sagas 'accessible'.⁴¹ The canon serves its old purpose: 'sagas' are historical works of 'classical wisdom' which 'invite comparison with the masterpieces of classical Greece',⁴² 'monumental works' proving 'that true democracy prevailed in Iceland in its earliest days...unhindered by the overburdening presence of central authority'.⁴³ In this most monolithic form, the 'classical' canon is elevated from status symbol to totem object, both representing and embodying Iceland's heroic independence in the face of European centralization.

'May the sagas grow and flourish like the sacred ancient ash,' intones Jónas Kristjánsson in conclusion;⁴⁴ and we can be fairly certain he was not referring to the anti-heroic frivolities of the 'post-classical' sagas. I hope I have shown in this short time that we need not work within that grand but restricting paradigm. Relegating flippancy to the cultural doghouse prevents us from appreciating the phenomenal scale and variety of the Icelandic literary achievement. I shall conclude with the words of *Göngu-Hrólf's saga*:

I'd like to thank those who've listened and enjoyed this story, and since those who don't like it won't ever be satisfied, let them enjoy their own misery. Amen.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Björn Bjarnason, 'Foreword', p. ix.

⁴² Ólafur R. Grímsson, 'Foreword by the President of Iceland, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson', *The Complete Sagas*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, I, vii–viii (at vii).

⁴³ Björn Bjarnason, 'Foreword', p. ix.

⁴⁴ Jónas Kristjánsson, 'Foreword', p. xi.

⁴⁵ Hermann Pálsson and P. Edwards, *Göngu-Hrólf's saga* (Edinburgh, 1980),

p. 125. *Göngu-Hrólf's saga*, ch. 38: *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*, ed. Bjarni Vilhjálmsson and Guðni Jónsson, 3 vols. (Reykjavík, 1943–4) II, 461. 'Hafi hverr þökk, er hlýðir ok sér gerir skemmtan af, en hinir ógleði, er angrast við ok ekki verðr at gamni. Amen.'

eald enta geweorc and the Relics of Empire:
Revisiting the Dragon's Lair in *Beowulf*

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The rather picturesque engraving of a Neolithic grave-mound on Sjælland which forms figure 5 in Klaeber's edition of *Beowulf* might be regarded as the seal upon the official interpretation of the dragon's habitation in the final portion of the poem.¹ Introduced by the poet as a *stanbeorb* (2213a) or *hlæw* (2296b), the mound in which the hoard was hidden was identified as 'evidently a chambered tumulus' as long ago as 1869.² This categorization has subsequently been refined with sometimes remarkable specificity: 'a Stone or Early Bronze Age

¹ *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. F. Klaeber, 3rd ed. (Lexington, MA, 1950), p. vii; all citations from *Beowulf* taken from this edition, and those from other Old English poems from ASPR. Klaeber's illustration, of a megalithic double passage grave in Udby, Holbæk Amt, is drawn from M. Hoernes, *Die Urgeschichte des Menschen nach dem heutigen Stande der Wissenschaft* (Vienna, 1892), facing p. 302 (Figure 1 opposite); the original excavation is reported in *Antiquarisk Tidsskrift* 1846–8, 217–223; for further discoveries see P. V. Glob, 'Korshøj: en Dobbeltjættestue ved Udby i Vestsjælland', *Fra Danmarks Ungtid: arkæologiske Studier til Johannes Brøndsted paa 50-Aarsdagen*, ed. H. Norling-Christensen and P. V. Glob (Copenhagen, 1940), pp. 67–92. It is not clear that a fifty-foot-long dragon (*Beowulf* 3042) could fit comfortably in either of the two chambers.

² J. Thurnam, 'On Ancient British Barrows, especially those of Wiltshire and the Adjoining Counties; Part I: Long Barrows', *Archæologia* 42 (1869), 161–244, at 202–4.

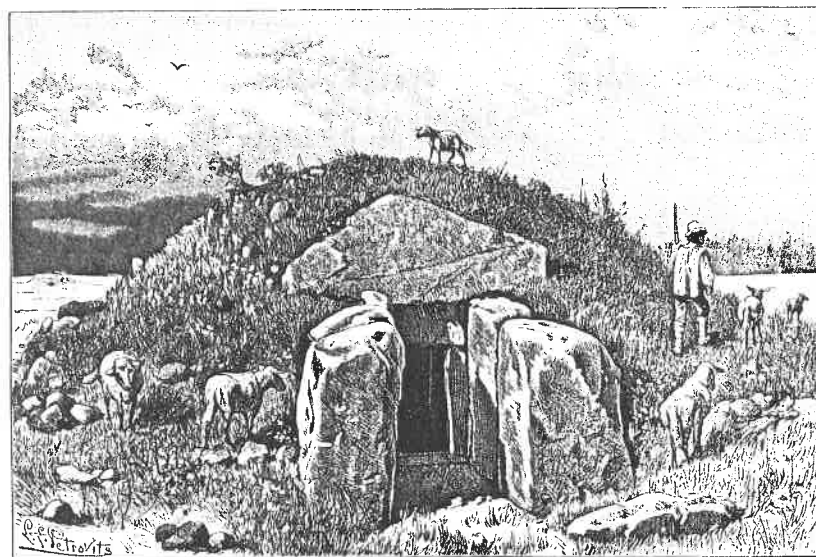


Figure 1. The megalithic passage grave at Udby, Holbæk Amt.

barrow',³ 'a passage grave of the megalithic period' with overtones, as to the treasure, of Anglo-Saxon royal burials in the style of Sutton Hoo;⁴ 'a megalithic tomb, not Scandinavian, but more probably Irish or Scottish'.⁵

So many critics have been so willing to state that 'there can be no doubt as to which [type of Neolithic tomb] the dragon's barrow in *Beowulf* belongs'⁶ chiefly because of a chain of unusually specific links in terminology which allow the *Beowulf*-poet's description to be tied to

³ W. W. Lawrence, 'The Dragon and his Lair in *Beowulf*', *PMLA* 33 (1918), 547–83, at 576.

⁴ H. R. Ellis Davidson, 'The Hill of the Dragon: Anglo-Saxon Burial Mounds in Literature and Archaeology', *Folk-Lore* 61 (1950), 169–85, at 179.

⁵ A. Keiller and S. Piggott, 'The Chambered Tomb in *Beowulf*', *Antiquity* 13 (1939), 360–1.

⁶ Lawrence, 'The Dragon and his Lair', p. 574.

identifiable archaeological remains. In the Anglo-Saxon poem, the dragon's *beorb* is twice described as *enta geweorc* (2717b, 2774a), 'the work of giants', and in the description of Denmark in the preface to his *Gesta Danorum*, Saxo Grammaticus wrote that 'Danicam vero regionem giganteo quondam cultu exercitam eximiae magnitudinis saxa veterum bustis ac specubus affixa testantur.'⁷ Even in recent times it was customary for a megalithic structure in Denmark to be called a *jættestue*, or 'giant's room';⁸ and since many are still extant, it is possible to gain a fairly exact picture of 'the work of giants' as perceived by Saxo, and, in the same Germanic tradition, the *Beowulf*-poet. Hence figure 5 in Klaeber's *Beowulf*.

But as some critics have likewise remarked, in the dragon-fight episode 'the background of scenery...is often vague or inconsistent',⁹ and the ambiguities in the *Beowulf*-poet's sparse descriptions make absolute classification more difficult than has often been recognized. A few 'facts' are of course easily obtainable. First, the dragon's lair is made of stone: it is referred to as a *stanbeorb*, 2213a, and is consistently described as *stan* throughout the episode – at, for example, 2553b, 2557b, and 2744b. Also, despite some disagreement on this point,¹⁰ the *beorb* itself is man-made: the vocabulary of

⁷ *Gesta Danorum*, Praefatio iii: *Saxonis Gesta Danorum*, ed. J. Olrik and H. Ræder, 2 vols. (Copenhagen, 1931–57) I, 9. 'That the Danish area was once cultivated by a civilisation of giants is testified by the immense stones attached to ancient barrows and caves.' P. Fisher and H. Ellis Davidson, *Saxo Grammaticus: the History of the Danes*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1979) I, 9.

⁸ As was noted very early on: see Thurnam, 'Ancient British Barrows', pp. 205–6.

⁹ K. Sisam, 'Beowulf's Fight with the Dragon', *RES* ns 9 (1958), 129–40, at 140.

¹⁰ E.g. Sisam ('Beowulf's Fight', p. 131), like Schücking much earlier (L. L. Schücking, *Untersuchungen zur Bedeutungslehre der angelsächsischen Dichtersprache* (Heidelberg, 1915), pp. 71–81), is of the opinion that the dragon inhabits a natural cave on the sea-coast.

architecture which pervades the descriptions of the mound¹¹ might be considered as metaphorical or merely ambiguous language for natural formations, if the mound were not specifically introduced as *nive be næsse, nearocraftum fæst* 'new upon the headland, sealed with secure devices' (2243) in the first explanation of the treasure's origin.

These relative certainties mesh well with the idea of a Neolithic tomb, as does the use of the words *hlæw* and *beorb* – both of which can mean 'hill or raised ground' but which frequently have the specific meaning 'barrow'.¹² Other aspects of the *hlæw*, however, have required sometimes elaborate explanations in order to reconcile them with this theory. Two descriptive passages will serve to illustrate this:

Geseah ða be wealle ...
 stondan stanbogan, stream ut þonan
 breacan of beorge; was þære burnan wælm
 heaðofyrum hat¹³ (2542a, 2545–2547a)

Ða se æðeling giong,
 þæt he bi wealle wishycgende
 gesæt on sesse; seah on enta geweorc,
 hu ða stanbogan stapulum fæste
 ece eorðreced innan healde.¹⁴ (2715b–2719)

The word *stanbogan* (2545a, 2718a) has in particular proved

¹¹ E.g. *weall* 'wall' (2307b, 2526a, 2542a, 2716a, 2759a, 3060a, 3103a), *eorðweall* 'earth-wall' (3090a); *reced*, *sele* 'hall' (3088a, 3128b), *eorðsele*, *-reced* 'earth-hall' (2410a, 2515a, 2719a), *bringsele* 'ring-hall' (2840a, 3053a); *stanbogan* 'stone arches' (2545a, 2718a); *stapul* 'support, post' (2718b); *brof* 'roof' (2755b).

¹² B–T, s.vv. 'hlæw', 'beorb'.

¹³ 'Then by the wall he saw stone arches standing, a stream emerged there from the hill; that burning river was hot with battle-fires.'

¹⁴ 'Then the nobleman went and sat, pondering deeply, on a seat by the wall; he gazed upon the work of giants, saw how the eternal earth-hall contained inside stone arches securely on supports.'

problematic. The compound is found in all of Old English only in these two passages, and there is a difficulty in knowing precisely what is intended by it: literally 'stone bows', the word would seem to mean 'stone arches'. The arch in its technical sense, however, was unknown in the Neolithic period, although in some graves 'a kind of vaulted ceiling is obtained by laying stones horizontally which project beyond each other',¹⁵ forming a rounded corbelled ceiling which 'is quite unknown in the late megalithic architecture of Scandinavia. It occurs however not infrequently in the chambered tombs of Ireland and Scotland',¹⁶ a fact which has led some commentators to suppose that the description in *Beowulf* 'might have been compiled by the original bard from the accounts of raiders returning from these parts, or it may have been added [i.e., interpolated] in England by one personally acquainted with such monuments';¹⁷ while others have suggested that *stanbogan* 'might equally well be applied to the heavy cross-pieces of stone set upon the uprights, *stapulas*, which formed the entrance to the passage, and, particularly in Scandinavian tombs, gave an accurate key to the structure of the interior'.¹⁸

In other words, in order to accurately describe an English or Scandinavian megalithic tomb, the recurring word *stanbogan* must be very metaphorical and imprecise ('bow' is used to describe a square post-and-lintel shape). Meanwhile, the *stapulas* must be taken as meaning simply 'supports' – and this, in turn, is rather vague if referring to the weight-bearing walls of a corbelled vault – and thus quite different from a very similar-sounding passage in *Andreas*:

He be wealle geseah wundrum fæste
under sælwage sweras unlytle,

¹⁵ Lawrence, 'The Dragon and his Lair', pp. 577–8.

¹⁶ Keiller and Piggott, 'The Chambered Tomb', pp. 360–1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 361.

¹⁸ Lawrence, 'The Dragon and his Lair', p. 579.

stapulas standan, storme bedrifene,
eald enta geweorc¹⁹ (1492–1495a)

The pillars, called *marmanstan* 'marble' three lines later, are apparently classical-style columns, and in general, the setting of *Andreas* 'is apparently envisaged as being like a Roman province', as is indicated also by the heavy use of Latin loan-words.²⁰ As Frankis has demonstrated with reference to the entirety of the Old English poetic corpus, the phrase *enta geweorc* (found in *Andreas* 1495a and, with reference to the dragon's mound, in *Beowulf* 2717b and 2774a) has specifically Roman connotations in *Andreas*, *The Ruin*, *Maxims II*, and possibly in *The Wanderer*.²¹ It is curious, therefore, that any Roman connotations in *Beowulf* – especially in 2715b–2719, a passage verbally extremely similar to the 'Roman' *Andreas* 1492–1495a – should be considered obviated by the *Beowulf* passage's apparent reference to 'an ancient burial-mound',²² and the phrase *enta geweorc* interpreted as an instance of 'an older Germanic concept' reflected more properly in Saxo Grammaticus and Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning* than *Andreas* or *The Ruin*.²³

Romanitas in *Beowulf* has never won particularly wide acceptance, though it has been suggested with moderate frequency; purely Germanic material culture has generally been preferred.²⁴ In the very

¹⁹ 'By the wall he saw great columns remarkably steady, pillars standing along the hall's wall, lashed by storms, the ancient work of giants.'

²⁰ P. J. Frankis, 'The Thematic Significance of *enta geweorc* and Related Imagery in *The Wanderer*', *ASE* 2 (1973), 253–69, at 255–6.

²¹ Frankis, 'The Thematic Significance', p. 257.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 254.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

²⁴ See also, for instance, M. Osborn, 'Laying the Roman Ghost of *Beowulf* 320 and 725', *NM* 70 (1969), 246–55, for a refutation of the necessity to presume Roman-style pavement in either Heorot or the surrounding road network.

early part of the last century, for instance, Stjerna proposed (in vain) that the dragon's treasure-chamber be regarded as a description of a Roman ruin.²⁵ Stjerna's peculiar literalism – he read the poem as if it were a treatise on antiquities – is indeed hardly defensible; and yet insistence that the dragon's mound itself must be a picture of a Scandinavian or British Neolithic grave so consistent and exact that one can 'form a correct idea of the archæological type to which it belongs'²⁶ is unnecessarily dogmatic, and – much more importantly – requires the suppression or distortion of portions of the text.

Beowulf is not an historical record of fifth-century Scandinavia, and the poet was not concerned to make it so. This is made clear enough by the description of Grendel's mere, notoriously characterized as 'a gallimaufry of devices'²⁷ fusing multiple elements from sources as diverse as the folk-tale basis of *Grettis saga* and the image of hell from the *Visio S. Pauli*;²⁸ and there seems no reason that the poet should make archaeological exactitude his goal two-thirds of the way through the poem. It seems very reasonable, therefore, to accept the possibility of a mingling of disparate details in this scene, and thus to consider Brodeur's more moderate observation that the

²⁵ K. Stjerna, *Essays on Questions Connected with the Old English Poem of Beowulf*, trans. and ed. J. R. Clark Hall (London, 1912), pp. 37–9: a theory 'obviously untenable' (Keiller and Piggott, 'The Chambered Tomb', p. 360), 'wholly astray in its main conclusions' (Lawrence, 'The Dragon and His Lair', p. 579, n. 40).

²⁶ Lawrence, 'The Dragon and His Lair', p. 572.

²⁷ E. G. Stanley, 'Old English Poetic Diction and the Interpretation of *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, and *The Penitent's Prayer*', *Anglia* 73 (1955), 413–66, at 441.

²⁸ See, *inter alia*, K. Malone, 'Grendel and his Abode', *Studia Philologica et Litteraria in Honorem L. Spitzer*, ed. A. G. Hatcher and K. L. Selig (Bern, 1958), pp. 297–308; C. Brown, 'Beowulf and the *Blickling Homilies* and Some Textual Notes', *PMLA* 53 (1938), 905–16; and R. L. Collins, 'Blickling Homily XVI and the Dating of *Beowulf*', *Medieval Studies Conference Aachen 1983*, ed. W.-D. Bald and H. Weinstock (Bern, 1984), pp. 61–9.

beorb 'seems, as the poet conceives it, to combine the actual features of a primitive barrow with those of a Roman ruin'.²⁹

The appellation *enta geweorc* and the vocabulary of Roman architecture – the *stapulas* and *stanbogan*, as well as the frequent use of the Latin loan-word *weal* – make a link to Roman ruins a natural interpretation of the text. Application of such a context to an underground treasury would not require a departure from Anglo-Saxon popular thinking, as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry for 418 reveals:

Her Romane gesomnodon al þa gold hord þe on Bretene wæron, ond sume on eorþan ahyddon. Ðæt hie nænig mon siþþan findan ne meakte, ond sume mid him on Gallia læddon.³⁰

Moreover, one of the treasures in the dragon's hoard appears to have certain Roman connotations:

Swylce he siomian geseah segn eallgylden
heah ofer horde, hondwundra mæst,
gelocen leoducraftum; of þæm leoma stod,
þæt he þone grundwong ongitan meakte ...
segn eac genom,
beacna beorhtost.³¹ (2767–2770, 2776b–2777a)

²⁹ A. G. Brodeur, *The Art of Beowulf* (London, 1960), p. 127.

³⁰ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* 418 A: *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, ed. C. Plummer (Oxford, 1892–9) I, 10. Except for minor spelling variants, MS E is identical. 'In this year, the Romans gathered all the treasuries of gold that were in Britain, and hid some in the earth, so that no one should find it afterward, and some they took with them into Gaul.'

³¹ 'He also saw a golden standard hanging high above the hoard, the greatest of hand-wonders, fastened with the craft of limbs; light shone from it, so that he could see the floor...he likewise took the standard, the brightest of beacons'. The manuscript reading of 2769b is actually *leoman*; Tripp's suggested interpretation 'he [Wiglaf] stood out of the light, so that he could see the floor' (R. P. Tripp, Jr, 'The Restoration of *Beowulf* 2769b and 2771a, and Wiglaf's

range of meaning. The recognition of Roman elements in the construction of the dragon's mound, for instance, allows our understanding of the scene to be tintured by the remembrances of departed worldly power and glory traditionally awakened by such ruins in Old English literature, and the nexus of associations which Frankis showed to be concentrated about the *enta geweorc* formula may – despite his own apparent doubts – be accurately attributed to the *beorb*. The elegiac tone, and inevitable parallels between the defeated Romans and doomed Geats, are fully consonant with the theme and tenor of the final portion of *Beowulf*, and show, moreover, a sort of emotional historical consciousness – a vision focused more on the perceived meaning of history than on any precise event – which fits well with our understanding of the poet's recreation of a vanished pagan world. Indeed, the *Beowulf*-poet's freedom to select and recombine those elements of the past which he believed to be most important and significant, contrasts rather amusingly with his interpreters' tendency to be too tightly fettered by our own critical past.