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LEGENDARY FICTION IN FLATEYJARBÓK¹

The legendary sagas of Iceland are sometimes taken to have been first written down during the twelfth century. They are principally distinguishable from the other types of Icelandic saga by the presence in them of fantasy, and by the important position within the development of their plots that fantastic episodes occupy. There is no attempt in these sagas at temporal or spatial realism; although the hero of a legendary saga might be a member of a Scandinavian royal family, he may well travel to exotic countries such as Russia, India, and Byzantium, as well as to mythical regions such as Giantland; furthermore, he may fight for booty as a viking in one episode, destroy monsters from the mythical past in another, and take up arms to safeguard the honour of a princess in a third.

Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards describe as "legendary fiction" all the stories which have the features just mentioned. They use this term because, they say, these sagas "set out to construct an image of human activity in the distant past; and that they are precisely fiction in the original sense of a thing

shaped or invented. However, we use the term legendary with reference not to sources but to the narrator's attitude of mind."³ Accepting that these stories treat of the distant past does not, of course, include the preconception that they are in any way primitive.

Since the nineteenth century, the legendary fiction of Iceland has been relegated to the position of an inferior literature, when compared with the great sagas of Icelanders, such as Njáls saga, Grettis saga, and Laxdoela saga. Margaret Schlauch asks, when writing about fantastic tales of courtly chivalry: "Why did these foreign products so completely supersede the older, far superior sagas in the favour of the people?"⁴ She gives as one of many possible reasons a change in audience-demand, caused by the economic distress and armed feuding of the thirteenth century. She says that "Icelanders may have welcomed the unreality and the imaginative fantasy of the lygisögur as a sort of intellectual narcotic which gave them release from unpleasant actuality."⁵

Einar Ól. Sveinsson agrees with Margaret Schlauch about the mediocrity of the legendary sagas. He notes that in Parcevals saga "the Holy Grail is reduced to next to no significance, so that the Icelanders never came to know one of the most important symbols in all

mediaeval literature." He adds that a good translation of this work, as well as of Tristans saga, "would have been worth all the rest". It was the translation of inferior literature that predominated however. Sveinsson says: "Here we find thrilling tales, full of dangers and adventures and supernatural episodes, but with singularly poorly delineated characters, mere glossy cardboard figures cut to a stereotyped pattern. This is a literature of amusement, of escape, of dreams, where everything invariably turns out well, where all reality goes by the board."

Sveinsson's critical approach is determined by his beliefs as to the social conditions that prevailed in thirteenth-century Iceland. And yet it is possible that he accepts the account of the age, as we have it in Sturlunga saga, a little unquestioningly. Of course it is a contemporary record written by men whose own families were deeply involved in the feuding, but it may be that for those very reasons our knowledge of the period cannot be complete. At any rate, as Margaret Schlauch herself points out, "so far as we know, prosperity does not necessarily ensure good literature, nor a financial depression cause its corruption." To say that the legendary sagas were not as good literature as the sagas of Icelanders is to impose upon them twentieth-century

ideas of what constitutes good literature. Hermann Pálsson and Edwards have pointed out that legendary fiction was taken seriously by the Icelanders⁶, and that it remained popular long after the miseries of the Sturlung age had been forgotten.

At the beginning of his story⁷, Helgi Thórisson is on a trading voyage, selling butter and bacon to the Lapps. The party lands on a wooded shore, and Helgi wanders further inland than the others. He goes deep into the wood, and gets lost when a heavy mist comes down. As night falls, he meets twelve women, one of whom is lovelier than the rest. She calls him by name, and says he may sleep with her if he chooses. He asks her name, and she gives it as Ingibjörg, daughter of King Gudmund of Glasir plains.⁸ Helgi sleeps with Ingibjörg for three nights, after which time they part. She gives him treasure, warning him to tell no-one how he came by it. Helgi is welcomed back by his men.

The following Christmas, a terrible gale springs up, and Helgi and his brother Thorstein go out to see whether their ship is securely moored. (This ship had been bought with part of Ingibjörg's treasure, while the rest is hidden on board.) Two riders now appear and steal Helgi away. Helgi's father, Thórir, appeals to King Ólaf Tryggvason to help him recover his son.

The next year, on the eighth day of Christmas, Helgi comes to King Ólaf's hall, together with two other men, both of whom are called Grím. These men give the king two beautiful drinking horns, also called Grím. As the king accepts the horns, the men tell him that they are a present from King Gudmund of Glasir plains, who desires King Ólaf's friendship in return. The king says nothing to this, but has the horns blessed by the bishop and filled with good ale. Now the horns are passed back to Helgi's companions, who are to take the first drink. They cannot touch the blessed horns, however, and disappear, taking Helgi with them. As they go out, they blow out the lights and kill three of the king's retainers. Afterwards, King Ólaf and his men drink unharmed from the two horns.

The following year, again on the eighth day of Christmas, three men approach the church where the King is attending Mass. One man remains at the church door while his companions depart; Helgi has been brought back blind. He tells King Ólaf that King Gudmund sent the two Gríms the previous winter in order to fool him, but the blessing of the horns was stronger than Gudmund's power. Helgi admits that he has liked nowhere better than Gudmund's court, with its richness and gaiety. King Ólaf is unimpressed, and asks simply, "Why are you

blind?" "Ingibjörg gouged out both my eyes when we parted," replies Helgi; "she said the women in Norway wouldn't enjoy my company for very long." He says that he has been returned to Norway because of King Ólaf's prayers. Helgi dies exactly a year after his return, while the Grim-hörns vanish when King Ólaf disappears from the Long Serpent.

It has long been recognized that one version of the probable mythical source for Helga þáttur Þórissonar is to be found in the first of Saxo's two Thorkillus stories, in Book Eight of his Danish History⁹. Saxo's Thorkillus, an Icelander, takes King Gorm of Denmark to the realm of King Geruthus (the giant Geirröð of Snorri's Edda). On the way, they are entertained by Geruthus' brother, Gudmundus, who rules over the desert kingdom of Permia. Though Gudmundus offers them their choice of food, drink, and his twelve daughters, Thorkillus advises them not to accept his hospitality on peril of being forced to remain in Permia for ever. Gudmundus, despairing of ever accomplishing his treachery, lets them continue their journey. Not far off is "a gloomy, neglected town, looking more like a cloud exhaling vapour". Frightened though they all are, they carry on to Geruthus' palace. "Inside the house was ruinous throughout, and filled with a violent and abominable reek. And it was seen to

teem with everything that could disgust the eye or the mind ... the flooring was covered with snakes ... and bloodless phantasmal monsters huddled on the iron seats." There is great treasure here, including a bracelet, a gold-tipped tusk, and a "vast elk-horn, laboriously decked with choice and flashing gems". Despite Thorkillus' good advice, three men lay their hands on this treasure. Instantly, it is metamorphosed, the horn and bracelet becoming snakes, while the tusk turns into a sword. The three men perish. On the way home, the party is again entertained by Gudmundus. One of the men, Buchi, embraces one of Gudmundus' daughters, and pays dearly for it; for as they are fording the river to leave Gudmundus' realm, Buchi is drowned. Parallels with Helga þátr Þórissonar are seen in the loss at one stroke of three men; the importance of the horn(s); a pile of treasure; the twelve women; the mist/smoke; the sexual promiscuity of Gudmund's daughter(s).

Thorkillus makes a second journey to Giantland, this time to the realm of King Útgarða-Loki. On their way, they stop at the cave of two giants, who give them fire and directions for the journey. Their cave echoes in its description the account of Geruthus' palace: "the entrance was hideous, the door-posts were decayed, the walls grimy with mould, the roof filthy, and the floor

swarming with snakes; all of which disgusted the eye as much as the mind."

The party finds King Útgarða-Loki living, like the other giants they had met, in a decayed and ruinous realm of darkness. His hall teems, like theirs, with snakes. It is to be noted that Thorkillus undertakes this second quest because King Gorm has been persuaded that souls are immortal: "so that he was constantly turning over in his mind the questions, to what abode he was to fare when the breath left his limbs, or what reward was earned by zealous adoration of the gods."

The second of Saxo's Thorkillus-journeys, that to the kingdom ruled by Útgarða-Loki, shows some similarity to (the first Thorkillus-story and to) the story of Eric the Far-travelled¹⁰. Eric, the son of Thránd of Thrándheim, vows to search throughout the world until he finds "the place known to heathens as Ódáinsakr" ("the field of the undead") and to Christians as "the meadows of the living", or "Paradise". Eric travels to Byzantium, where he is instructed in the Christian faith by the emperor. He and his companions are baptized before leaving Byzantium. The emperor tells him to travel south, for Paradise lies on the other side of India. Eric and his companions journey through India until they enter

a country of perpetual darkness. Emerging on the other side, they see a river, and on the other bank, a radiant country, full of flowers, and breathing "an abundance of honey".¹¹ A stone bridge spans the river, but the way is blocked by a vast dragon. Eric and one companion carry on, but the rest turn back, afraid. "Now the Norwegian Eric (the hero) drew his sword and held it in his right hand, while with his left he took the hand of his one companion. They pressed forward, and leapt into the dragon's mouth. And it looked to the Danish Eric (the hero's friend, as well as namesake) as though the dragon swallowed them both." The Danish Eric returns home, and tells of the fate met with by the hero and his companion. "But when the Norwegian Eric and his companion had leapt into the mouth of the dragon, it seemed to them as though they were going through smoke, and when they had passed through this, they saw a beautiful land ... The sun shone so that there could never be darkness, and there was no shadow." Eric has a vision of an angel, who asks him how he likes this place, and he replies better than anywhere else. He is told that, compared with Paradise, the place he is in is like a desert. Eric returns to Norway, which is still heathen, and tells his story. One day, he disappears, and the companion who entered the dragon with him tells the Norwegians that he has been taken away by the angel.

Saxo's Thorkillus can be seen as a "good" heathen; when his companions call on their gods to protect them, he invokes only "the god who created the universe"¹². After he has seen the underworld, Thorkillus is baptised, and dies a Christian. What the author of the story of Eric the Far-travelled has done with Saxo's myth is to make it uncompromisingly Christian. Eric sets out determined to discover the afterlife, but completely open-minded about whether that afterlife be the heathen's Ódainsakr or the Christian's Paradise. In fact, it is only after he has become a Christian that he is granted the vision. Jón Þórðarson, who wrote Eireks saga Viðförla into Flateyjarbók, shows that he was using this overtly Christian story for a definite purpose, because he says, in a postscript to the story, "and he who wrote this book set this story down first in it, because he wants every man to know that there is no true faith except in God".

Jón Þórðarson was responsible, of course, for the writing into Flateyjarbók of Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar and Óláfs saga ins Helga as well as Eireks saga Viðförla. It may well be, therefore, that he means by "no true faith" Scandinavian heathendom. We know from the stories in Saxo that the heathen Ódainsakr was connected with Giantland¹³. Heiðreks saga reveals an interesting

Icelandic modification of this tradition. "Gudmund was the name of a lord in Jötunheimar (Giantland); his dwelling place was at Grund, in the region of Glasisvellir. He was a mighty man, and wise, and so old were he and his people that their lives lasted through many generations of men. For this reason heathen men believed that in his realm must lie the Ódáinsakr, that region where sickness and old age depart from every man who enters it, and where no-one can die."¹⁴ Should the reader of Flateyjarbók, then, look for connections between the Ódáinsakr-story of Eric and the Gudmund-story of Helgi? There are, certainly, interesting similarities between them: in each, the hero leaves Norway and enters a wonderful, shining land, after passing through mist and darkness; each hero is to say that he likes this land better than any other, and each is to see this claim dismissed; both Helgi and Eric are given up for lost in Norway, but each returns to spend his last days there.

All this is to suggest that Helga þáttur Þórissonar is a sophisticated piece of literature. Certainly, the complex treatment of the imagery of light and dark bears this out. The darkness associated with Ingibjörg and Gudmund is first encountered as a mist in which Helgi gets lost. The imagery re-appears in the storm the following Christmas, when Helgi is carried off by the two

riders; and again, the Christmas after that, in the dousing by the two Gríms of the candles in King Ólaf's hall. It culminates, of course, in Helgi's blindness, caused directly by Ingibjörg. On the other hand, we are not faced here with a consistently treated imagery of "light: dark" as "good: bad", as we should expect from naïve literature. Ingibjörg and her eleven women seem to be associated with some source of light, for Helgi is able to see them plainly, even though it is night and he is lost in a wood, and a thick mist has come down. He is able to distinguish clearly the many colours of their tents, riding gear, jugs and basins. Presumably, the light associated with Ingibjörg is the light that radiates through the shining Glasir plains. The ambivalence of this imagery of light is caught up in ambivalence of Glasir plains itself; although the home of the sinister Gudmund, and although the place where Helgi is blinded, it is nonetheless the place Helgi has like most of all.

Because of Ólaf's praying to God to recover Helgi, and because of the blessing of the Grím-horns by the bishop, it is evident that we are meant to see Helga þáttur Þórissonar as having Christian significance of some kind. It is to be noted that many of the central events in the story take place on the eighth day of Christmas. St Luke (2,21) says that on this day the

infant Christ was circumcised - "and he was given the name Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived." (Genesis 17, 1-15, describes the covenant made between God and Abraham: "I will fulfil my covenant between myself and you and your descendants after you, generation after generation ... As an everlasting possession I will give you and your descendants after you the land in which you now are aliens, all the land of Canaan ... For your part, you must keep my covenant ... Every male among you in every generation shall be circumcised on the eighth day ... thus shall my covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting covenant.")

To St Augustine, as is to be seen in his sermons on the psalms, the number eight, whenever it occurs, is to be interpreted as the symbol of our life in eternity. Noting this fact, Maren-Sofie Røstvig suggests that "this symbolism follows when the octave is seen as referring to the eighth age of bliss or again to that eighth day on which Christ rose from the dead, thus securing eternal life for man."¹⁵ Medieval tradition could make of this day, the eighth day of Christmas, a symbol of the Christian year, since it united Christ's birth and resurrection.

Professor Røstvig also notes, however, that in accordance with the doctrine of the creation of harmony from

discord, "the Fall is not merely annulled by the scheme of redemption, but out of the two is created a harmony superior to the one that was lost" (p. 47). For this reason, the Fall may also be associated with the eighth day (as against the eighth day of the Resurrection).

If Helga þátr Þórissonar contains elements of (especially Augustinian) numerology, then the tale must be read as an Everyman story. The four years of Helgi's life mentioned in the tale will represent his earthly existence - St Augustine draws a parallel between the four passions and humours - but this earthly life is to be seen as ordained and bound by the power of God's love, four being also the number of the Gospels. As Professor Røstvig notes (p. 63), "the fourfold nature of the world and of the divine scheme of redemption was a datum, an absolute truth contained in the Bible as interpreted by all the great authorities."

Helgi's exile in Glasir plains is ultimately a blinding experience, since a life devoted to earthly and material satisfaction deflects the soul's gaze away from eternity. Helgi is first carried off to Glasir plains, while he is out checking the safety of his ship and treasure. In his sermon on Psalm xi (noted by Professor Røstvig, p. 43) St Augustine says that the greed of the wicked "for this world's goods ... is like a wheel which repeats its circle every seven days and consequently

never arrives at the eighth day or the day of eternity, which forms the title of the Psalm" (commentary on v. 19). The psalm is, in fact, entitled "Unto the end, for the octave, a psalm for David". A similarly-headed psalm is, of course, Psalm vi: "Unto the end, in hymns for the octave, a psalm of David". Since the number eight is so important to Helga þáttur Þórissonar, it may well be that the "octave" psalms, vi and xi, contain the clue to the Christian message presented in the tale. In the light of Helgi's four years' "earthly life", and of the eighth day of Christmas as the day of Our Lord's circumcision, Psalm vi is particularly relevant. In commenting on verse 2, St Augustine talks of the "number four assigned to the body ... to the old man, to the Old Law", and links it to the "number three assigned to the soul". The Old Testament generations, "religious yet still carnal", are here explicitly associated with bodily circumcision, but St Augustine goes on to say that "since Our Lord's coming, however, we have passed from bodily circumcision to circumcision of the heart". It is at the Day of Judgement, which "we may safely interpret (as) the octave", that man passes from the body to the soul.

But if Helgi's exile is to be seen like Israel's exile in Egypt, as a type of the Fall, then we must look at the commentary on Psalm vi for some insight as to the

nature of Helgi's blindness. Since it has been suggested that any understanding of the Christian message found in the tale depends on an appreciation of the numerological importance of the number eight, we must presumably search for the answer in St Augustine's commentary on verse eight of this psalm. Here we find: "This is the effect of blindness of heart: every man in such a state is shut out from God's interior light; yet while life lasts, the blindness is not absolute. For there is an exterior darkness reserved more especially to the Day of Judgment ... To be completely deprived of God - what does that denote if not total blindness?" In terms of the numerology associated with the number eight, Helgi disregards the "circumcision of the heart", his part of man's covenant with God. In return (see Genesis 17, 7, 8, 10, 11) he loses sight of Canaan. If it has been correct to suggest that there exists a close parallel between Helga þáttur Þórissonar and Eireks saga Víðförla, then the description of the land Eric finds, full of "an abundance of honey", becomes significant, when compared with the traditional description of Canaan as "flowing with milk and honey" (see, for example, Numbers 13, 28; 14, 8; Joshua 5, 8).

There remains to be found a biblical equivalent to Glasir plains, Jón Þórðarson's region of "no true faith". The Israelites were enslaved in Egypt (see for example

Exodus 2, 23-5), although they had first entered Egypt voluntarily (Genesis 47, 27), and were enslaved as a matter of political expediency (Exodus 1, 6-14). Perhaps a closer parallel to Helgi's forcible abduction to Glasir plains is to be found in the rape of the Israelites by the Babylonians (Ezekiel 17, 19). Babylon, too, was associated with darkness and blindness. (See, among many instances, Jeremiah 39, 7, Lamentations 3, 2, Ezekiel 12, 1-7. Compare, too, the inability of Nebuchadnezzar's wise men to tell the king his dream with Daniel's correct expounding of it, in Daniel 2. The Lord had granted Daniel a vision by night, and Daniel blesses Him: "he knows what lies in darkness and light has its dwelling with him.")

It has been pointed out above that the name of Glasir plains is ambivalent, being associated with both light and darkness, pleasure and pain. The eighth day, too, has been seen to be ambivalent, since it referred both to the Fall and to the Resurrection. Now, since exile in Glasir plains (or Babylon) - that is to say, the sin that blinds Helgi from sight of Canaan - is ambivalent, and since a link has been suggested between Helga þáttur Þórissonar and Eireks saga Víðförla, it should also follow that Eric's Canaan will have elements of Babylon. In MS AM 194 8vo (ed. K. Kálund as "Landafraedi" in Alfraedi Íslenzk) there

are references to the four rivers that flow from Paradise: Phison, Nile, Tigris, Euphrates. "The fourth river is called Euphrates; it rises under the Elding mountains, flows from Ermland and through Mesopotamia, where that city stands, which is called Babylon." The angel seen by Eric the Far-travelled tells him: "the place you see here is as a desert compared with Paradise, but that place is not far off, and the river you saw flows from there."

Interestingly, in the medieval tradition of religious literature, Babylon, like Glasir plains, was ambivalent, since a new regenerate city had been built after the destruction of the old evil city. Ambivalent, too, is the paradise seen by Eric the Far-travelled; although a land of perpetual sunshine, it is only reached by passing through a region of darkness, and is, in fact, guarded by a dragon, which can obviously be read as a symbol of Death.¹⁶ Again, although this country appears to Eric as filled with flowers and honey, the angel describes it as like a desert, compared with Paradise. The description of the land seen by Eric, a land guarded by an enormous snake, embodies the same concept as the description of Babylon found in Konráðs saga Keisarasonar. Furthermore, the manuscript quoted earlier, MS AM 194 8vo, says: "in this part of the world is Babylon, the great and ancient city. Here Nabugodonosor held sway; but now it is deserted, so that men cannot pass by there by reason of the snakes and

all sorts of evil creatures."¹⁷

If Glasir plains are to be seen as Babylon, as a fallen Eden, then Ingibjörg must presumably be the representative of Babylon, the whore. In Revelation, which contains, after all, a vision of the Day of Judgement, John sees the whore as "mounted on a scarlet beast" and "clothed in purple and scarlet" (17, 3-4). Helgi sees Ingibjörg and her women riding on red horses and wearing red costumes. Ingibjörg's sexual promiscuity resembles the description of the sins of Babylon, which are seen in Revelation in sexual terms: "The kings of the earth have committed fornication with her" (17, 2).

Like Eric the Far-travelled, Helgi has been granted a vision of what he thinks is Paradise. But just as Eric's angel tells him, "the place you see here is as a desert compared with Paradise," so Helgi's paradise turns out to be Gudmund's desert kingdom. Knowing Helgi to be deceived, King Ólaf asks him, "Why are you blind?".

In Genesis the serpent promises Eve three things: immortality, clear spiritual insight, and the knowledge of good and evil. "And the serpent said unto the woman, 'Of course you will not die. God knows that as soon as you eat it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like gods knowing both good and evil'." As soon as

Adam and Eve had eaten the fruit, "the eyes of both of them were opened and they discovered that they were naked" (3, 4-7). Helgi tells King Ólaf, "Ingibjörg said she couldn't sleep with me without feeling uneasy whenever she touched my naked body."

Jón Þórðarson is presumably pointing a conventional Christian moral - that the irony of sin is that, instead of opening the eyes, it belittles and imprisons, and causes spiritual blindness, resulting in the inability to distinguish between good and evil, Heaven and Hell. In Revelation, John sees a vision of the souls of the righteous: "I saw what seemed a sea of glass shot with fire, and beside the sea of glass, holding the harps which God had given them, were those who had won the victory over the beast ... " (15, 2). (This sea of glass is, of course, that which surrounds the throne of God in Revelation.) Jerusalem, the Biblical antithesis of Babylon, is also seen in Revelation as built of "pure gold, bright as clear glass ... The streets of the city were of pure gold, like translucent glass" (21, 18-21). The outward similarity between Paradise, the sea of glass and fire, and Glasir plains, the "glassy" or "shining" plains, deludes the blinded Helgi. In biblical tradition, Heaven was not the only source of light; Satan shone too, as Lucifer.

Helga þáttur Þórissonar was written into Flateyjarbók

between two other short stories, Norna-Gests þáttur and one which we can call the guest's þáttur (Fl. I 375-6, §305), both of which appear to be connected with it. In both these other stories, a visitor arrives at King Ólaf's hall from the other-world of Scandinavian heathendom, and in both, Ólaf questions the visitor about the past, in the same way as Helgi, returned from the same world, is interrogated.

We are evidently meant to connect Norna-Gests þáttur with Helga þáttur Þórissonar, for we are told that the Norn-Gest arrives in the same year as "those men who were called Grím, and (who) were sent by Gudmund of Glasir plains". Norna-Gests þáttur, it should be noted, seems to be adapted from an original Ódin-myth, in which the god questioned the Norns, or Fates. In the guest's þáttur, Ódin is himself the visitor, and he tries to win power over King Ólaf by giving the king's cooks two sides of beef for the royal table, but these are thrown out by Ólaf, who recognizes Ódin. The two sides of beef in this story form a parallel to Gudmund's bribing offer of the two Grím-horns in Helga þáttur Þórissonar. The references and parallels within the two other tales to Helga þáttur Þórissonar suggest that the narrator considered that tale to be important to Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar.

Since Babylon, that is to say idolatry, was presumably represented by Ódin-worship in Scandinavia, we should read Helga þátr Þórissonar, like its two companion-pieces, as an exemplar dealing with Ólaf Tryggvason's battle against Ódin-worship. Interestingly, Snorri's Edda contains a list of the names used by Ódin when he went to visit Geirröð, who, it will be remembered, is Saxo's Geruthus, the brother of Gudmund. The first of these names is Grím (Grímr, "Masked One") which occurs four times in Helga þátr Þórissonar, while another is Helblindi, "One who blinds with death". Seen in the context of Ólaf Tryggvason's reign dedicated to destroying the cult of Ódin, Helga þátr Þórissonar can be shown to be organic to the Flateyjarbók version of Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar.

The imagery of light noted in the stories of Helgi Þórisson and Eric the Far-travelled is picked up in several of the legendary stories within Jón Þórðarson's account of the life of St Ólaf. At the saint's baptism, an onlooker says the word "light" three times, and it is after this that King Ólaf Tryggvason makes his prophecy about the child's future greatness.¹⁸ It may be, then, that one should regard Jón Þórðarson's work (Eireks saga Víðförla, Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar and Óláfs saga ins Helga) as one long "saga". I make this point very tentatively, as one certainly cannot base any claims of this

nature solely on the presence of light and dark imagery. (Indeed, light-dark conflicts are so common, both in Christian and non-Christian literature, that it might have been more remarkable if this imagery had not been used.) With this proviso in mind however, one more legendary story, from Óláfs saga ins Helga, might be mentioned here.

After the saint's death, he is invoked on one occasion by the Varangian Guard, who are fighting a losing battle against a blind heathen king, against odds of sixty to one (Fl. II 380-1, § 310). The blind enemy king asks, "Who is that princely man who rides on a white horse at the head of their army?" None of his men can see St Ólaf. The point of this miracle is, I think, clear, in terms of the imagery of light and insight, darkness and spiritual blindness, already met with: like Helgi Thórisson after his return and questioning, the heathen king gains spiritual insight when confronted with the power of God.

Jón Þórðarson apologises for his inclusion of St Ólaf's miracles within the saga, but says that they "greatly stir the mind". He asks the reader at this point always to beware, because "the enemy of mankind never ceases to conquer us every day, just as he once did in Paradise (Fl. II 391-2, § 326). It is clear that, while the two Ólaf-sagas are historical works dealing with the progress of Christianity

in Scandinavia, the legendary fiction within these sagas is at least partially concerned with Everyman's continuous struggle. Man's nature is towards sin and blindness; Helgi Thórisson sins and is returned, Eric the Far-travelled is given up for lost when he is swallowed by the dragon.

Einar Ól. Sveinsson¹⁹ admits to being disappointed in Bishop Páll Jónsson (died 1211) who heard from Archbishop Absalon of Denmark the following miraculous story. A priest saw a spider fall into a chalice of consecrated wine, and though he knew the wine to be poisoned, he did not dare throw it away. So, praying for God's protection, he drank the wine himself. He suffered no ill effects, and shortly afterwards, the spider came out of his little finger. Sveinsson says, "Because of his understandable willingness to learn from the man at whose hands he had received consecration, Páll's usual sound judgement seems to have been sufficiently weakened to make him believe this fable." It may be, of course, that Páll believed every word, but it is also possible that he used this story, not as a remarkable historical record, but, to quote Jón Þórðarson, in order to "stir the mind".

NOTES

1. I am grateful to Hermann Pálsson for his help and encouragement during the preparation of this paper.
2. For a discussion of such effects, see especially Hermann Pálsson and P. Edwards, Legendary Fiction in Medieval Iceland (Studia Islandica 30, 1971).
3. The use of the traditional term "legendary" with a new reference, as defined by Pálsson and Edwards in "Legendary Fiction ...", will be followed in this paper.
4. Margaret Schlauch, Romance in Iceland (1934). See especially pp. 7-11 for this paper.
5. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, The Age of the Sturlungs (Islandica 36, 1953), pp. 41-2.
6. Hermann Pálsson and P. Edwards, Hrolf Gautreksson: A Viking Romance (The New Saga Library Series I, 1971). See the introduction to that volume for some discussion of the critical reaction hoped-for by medieval Icelandic authors of legendary fiction.
7. Helga þáttur Þórissonar appears in Flateyjarbók (ed. Vigfusson and Unger, Christiania, 1860-1868), I, pp. 359-62. References are henceforth abbreviated to Fl. The story occurs as one of the þættir in Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar.
8. Glasir plains, Glæsisvellir, means "shining" or "glassy" plains. The verb glæsa means "polish,

cause to shine", while glær is a poetical word for the sea. The word is presumably related etymologically to glær "glass".

For some discussion of Ingibjörg and Gudmund, as well as an analysis of folk-tale elements within Helga þáttur Þórissonar, see the introduction to Hermann Pálsson and P. Edwards' Gautreks Saga and other medieval tales (1968). Quotations in this paper from Helga þáttur Þórissonar are taken from the translation of the tale found in this volume.

9. Saxo Grammaticus, Historia Danica; quotations here are from the translation by Oliver Elton, The First Nine Books of the Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus (1894), pp. 348, 349, 353, 352.
10. Eireks saga Viðförla in Fl. I 29-36, §§ 1-5. So far as I know, no English translation of this story exists.
11. Text: sá þeir land fagrt með miklum bloma ok gnott hunangs (Fl. I 33, §3). See also § 4, p. 33: þa sa þeir fagrt land. grausin huit sem purpuri við sætum ilm ok myklum bloma ok flutv hunangs lækir um alla uegu landzins.
12. It is possible that monotheistic pagans were regarded as being in some sense more righteous than polytheists. See for example the account of the death of Thorkel Moon, quoted by Hermann Pálsson and P. Edwards, "Narrative Elements in the Icelandic Book of Settlements", Mosaic 4 (1970), p. 5.
13. It is probable that Saxo's Undersakr is to be identified with the Ódainsakr found in other sources.

14. C. Tolkien, The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise (1960), Appendix.
15. Maren-Sofie Røstvig, "Structure as prophecy: the influence of biblical exegesis upon theories of literary structure", in Silent Poetry, Essays in numerological analysis, ed. A. Fowler (1970), pp. 32-72; see p. 43.
16. The biblical archetype for this analysis is Jonah, who prays to God "from the belly of the fish": "out of the belly of Sheol I cried for help," 2, 1-2. (Biblical quotations in this paper are from The New English Bible, 1970.) This story was taken as a "type" of the Resurrection during the Middle Ages (see Matthew 12, 40: "Jonah was in the sea-monster's belly for three days and three nights, and in the same way the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the bowels of the earth.")

Christ is seen as the fulfilment of the prophecy given in Isaiah 9, 2: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light: light has dawned upon them, dwellers in a land as dark as death." (Eric and Helgi both pass through mist and darkness into light.)

Interpreting the dragon encountered by Eric as a symbol of death reveals an interesting collision of pagan and Christian traditions. (In terms of the mythology found in Saxo, e.g. lib. viii, cap. 14, the bridge to another world crossed by Eric - and guarded by the dragon - is the bridge to the land of the dead.)

17. Kålund dates this MS at 1387 - exactly contemporary with E. Munksgaard's dating of Flateyjarbók (1387-94) in his Om Flatøbogen og dens Historie (Copenhagen 1930). But this coincidence, though interesting, is not important, since these ideas were conventional.

The translations from this MS are taken from M. Schlauch, op.cit., pp. 76-7.

18. Fl. II 11, § 9. Considering the importance of the role of baptism in the three sagas written into Flateyjarbók by Jón Þórðarson, it is interesting to note that baptism was illumination to the early Church. (See for example J. A. MacCulloch, The Harrowing of Hell, pp. 248-9.)
19. Sveinsson, op.cit., p. 171 (notes to Chapter xiii). The story is taken from Maríu saga (ed. C.R.Unger, Christiania 1871), where it is said that Páll regularly told this story on St Mary's Day.