

THE BIRTH OF ST. ÓLÁFR AND THE CHANGE OF RELIGION IN NORWAY.

By Gunnhild Røthe,
Department of Cultural Studies, University of Oslo.

Whether we view the change of religion in Norway in terms of a dramatic change or a long-term process, the rise of the cult of St. Óláfr seems to have played a key role. To the historian of religion it is therefore of great importance to understand the relation between the rise of the cult of St. Óláfr and the Old Norse religion.¹

Studying the change of religion in a contemporary perspective involves a series of theoretical and methodological challenges; studying this process in the past makes these challenges more complicated.² To be able to say or write anything about the change of religion in Norway in the early Middle Ages, we have to put together pieces of information drawn from different sources. Apart from the Latin literature describing the missionaries' effort to christianize the Nordic people, we have no contemporary texts describing how and why the change of religion came about.

Recent studies indicate that the process of religious change in the Nordic countries was a complex process (Nilsson 1992). If we focus on the ideological-political aspect of the traditional Old Norse religion and medieval Christianity, the change of religion must be perceived as a dramatic change (Steinsland 1989). If we consider the dynamics of religions in interaction, then the change of religion must be understood as a process of communication between the old and the new *siðr* with the aim of establishing meaning and identity, both for the individual and for society as a whole (Schjødt 1989).

We are able to characterise the cultural changes taking place in the years around 1000 A.D. as a change of religion owing to information in the Old Norse literature. Common to texts of different genres describing the Christianization of the Nordic countries is the active and often forceful role played by the missionary king in his heroic struggle to bring the new faith to his people. Due to this historiographical tradition, the death of the Viking king Óláfr Haraldsson at the battle of Stiklestad and the later *translatio* of his body, has traditionally been conceived of as the turning-point where the new religion finally succeeded in replacing the traditional one. From the historian of religion's point of view, this way of presenting the replacing of one religion with another is ideologically biased because it presents the change of religion from the point of view of the 'winners', in this case the Roman Catholic Church and the ruling king's side.

Do we have other sources that tell another story of the change of religion in general and the relation between the cult of St. Óláfr and the Old Norse religion in particular? Apart from the texts describing Óláfr Haraldsson as a historical person, the saga literature contain various stories where Óláfr Haraldsson is described as a person with superhuman qualities. Characteristic of these stories is the mixing of hagiographical, historical and mythical components. In the following I will discuss one of these "unhistorical" stories, the story describing the birth of St. Óláfr as a source for the history of religion. The six different versions of the story are commonly known as the *Óláfs þátr Geirstadahlfs* (the *þátr*).³

I will apply three different readings to the *þátr*. First, I will read it as part of the hagiographical tradition documenting Óláfr's holiness as a Christian saint. Secondly, I will point to the principle of *praefiguratio* which seems to be an important structuring principle in the

¹I prefer the term Old Norse religion to the more commonly used term pre-Christian religion because the latter makes it difficult to treat the change of religion as a dialectic process involving conflicts, communication and adaptation regarding the individual, social and political aspects of religion.

²For further discussion of the theoretical and methodological considerations regarding the study of the change of religion in the Nordic countries, see Bjerre Finnestad 1990.

³In the *Legendary Saga of St. Óláfr* (*Leg. saga*), the story of St. Óláfr's birth is told in chapter 2-6. The versions of the story in *Flateyjarbók*, *Bæjarbók*, *Bergsbók*, AM 61 fol. and AM 75 e fol. are printed in Johnsen and Helgason's edition of the *Separate saga of St. Óláfr* (*Separate saga*). For a comparative study of the different versions, see Heinrichs 1989. Heinrichs argues that AM 75 e fol. represents the original story, a story that in her opinion existed as an independent story (Heinrichs 1989:155).

description of the relationship between the Christian king and the heathen past. Thirdly, I will discuss how the *þáttir* can be used as a source for an interpretation of the change of religion in general and the relation between the cult of St. Óláfr and the Old Norse religion in particular.

THE TEXTS CALLED *ÓLÁFS ÞÁTTIR GEIRSTAÐAÁLFS*.

In spite of variations in the different versions of the *þáttir*, it presents a story of the birth of Óláfr that can be summarized as follows: The son of Guðröðar væðikonungz called Olafur digrbæinn or Gæirstaða alfr is presented as a king ruling over Viken and Vestfold. He dreams that a black ox comes from Gautland to the land he controls. The king calls for a *thing* assembly. Many people meet at the *thing*, and the king tells the people the meaning of his dream. He and his men are going to die. He therefore orders the people to build a mound in which he is going to be seated at a chair dressed as a king and equipped with the kingly regalia. Other people may also be buried in the same mound. He ends his speech by begging the people not to bring him offerings, which is ignored as the people start to bring him offerings in order to prevent crop failure and famine.

The next part of the story consists of Hrani's dream. The king buried in the mound at Geirstad appears in a dream dreamt by Hrani, the foster-brother of Haraldr grænske. The dead king orders Hrani to break into his mound and take his ring, belt and sword. Hrani is to find Asta lying on the floor in great birth pains. After being credited the right to decide the child's name, Hrani is to help Asta deliver the child by putting the belt around her womb. The final part of the story is presented as a real event. Hrani obeys the orders given him in the dream and breaks into the mound as prescribed. The boy is born and Hrani pours water over him and gives him the name Óláfr. Later the boy is given the ring and the sword.

PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES.

How are we to interpret this story? What does it mean? If we choose to treat the *þáttir* according to traditional source criticism, as Baetke does, it is obvious that the modern scholar would define the *þáttir* as unhistorical. Baetke strongly criticizes the notion of sacral kingship in Old Norse religion, and argues that the *þáttir* cannot be used as a historical source documenting offerings to an Old Norse king named Óláfr, though it may in his opinion indicate that some sort of ancestor worship at graves took place (Baetke 1973:171).

But does this mean that we have to reject the *þáttir* as a source for the history of religion? The answer to this question is not absolute because it depends on our methodological considerations regarding saga literature as sources for the past and our theoretical and methodological point of departure when analyzing religion in a historical context. The historical knowledge does not lie hidden behind the texts, but is gained through contextualisation of information given in the texts.⁴ As a source the *þáttir* has no absolute meaning, but is given one by the scholar. Our image of Old Norse religion, medieval Christianity and their reciprocal relationship does not exist prior to our reading of the sources⁵. To be aware of the methodological implication of these presuppositions is especially important when studying Christianity in a historical setting.⁶

On the basis of these theoretical and methodological assumptions, I would claim that even though the *þáttir* cannot be used as a source in the sense of documenting specific events in the

⁴For methodological considerations regarding saga literature as historical sources, see Meulengracht Sørensen 1992.

⁵"there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization." (Smith 1982:Introduction xi.)

⁶"It is hardly pertinent in a historical study of Christianity to define Christianity as a fixed, conclusively delimited religion that is raised above history, country, people, and other religions, a transhistorical and trans-cultural entity against which all the various, concrete 'claimants' to Christianity can be measured." (Bjerre Finnestad 1990:262)

past, it can be used as a source for the history of religion in Norway in the way that it has multiple meanings depending on the scholar's contextualisation of the information given in the *þáttur*. As such, it is possible for the historian of religion to use the *þáttur* as a source for gaining knowledge of Old Norse religion, medieval Christianity and the interaction between these in the Middle Ages.

THE ÓLÁFS ÞÁTTUR GEIRSTAÐAÁLFS AS A SOURCE FOR THE HAGIOGRAPHICAL TRADITION OF ST.ÓLÁFR.

In the liturgical texts, the date of the martyr's death is celebrated as his *nasalium*,⁷ his birth as a saint. The meaning of the concept St. Óláfr's birth is thus ambiguous in that it may refer to his physical birth as Óláfr Haraldsson and to his death as a Viking king followed by his spiritual birth as St. Óláfr. This ambiguity is reflected in the naming of the heathen king in the various versions of the *þáttur*. In the *Leg. saga* version of the *þáttur* the heathen king is presented as "*Olafr digerbæinn eða Geirstaða alfr*" (*Leg. saga*:30). In the following description of Óláfr's birth, the heathen king is called *Olafr digri*, thus becoming identical to Óláfr Haraldsson who later in the saga is called *Olafr digri* (*Leg. saga*:60, 94, 98). The ambiguity regarding the king's identity makes it possible to read the story as part of the hagiographical tradition as well as a typological description of the death of the Viking king Óláfr Haraldsson.

If we choose to read the story as part of the hagiographical tradition, the story must be understood as a legend telling of the saint's miraculous birth. The main motivation for the *haugbrot* is to get hold of the belt that makes the coming saint's birth possible. What is focused on is the miraculous birth, which is to be interpreted as a sign of Óláfr Haraldsson's future life as a saint. In the *Leg. saga* a parallel sign is the light at night over the house where the boy is put in a hole in the ground by Asta's father, Gudbrand kula, who decides that the newborn boy must die, probably because of the shame his father has brought over Asta's family (*Leg. saga*: 34). This miracle story follows immediately after the story of Óláfr's birth in the *Leg. saga*.

If we focus on the miracle making it possible for Asta to be delivered of the boy that was later to be a saint, we have chosen to read the *þáttur* as a miracle story belonging to the category of miracles told to have happened during the lifetime of Óláfr Haraldsson. It is interesting however to note that this way of reading the *þáttur* does not seem to fit with the official collection of miracles attributed to St. Óláfr. The story is not found in any of the manuscripts where St. Óláfr's miracles are written down (Lunde 1994). One reason for this may be that the story represents an image of Óláfr Haraldsson that is too mixed with elements of Old Norse religion to be acceptable to the Church.⁸

THE ÓLÁFS ÞÁTTUR GEIRSTAÐAÁLFS READ ACCORDING TO THE PRINCIPLE OF PRAEFIGURATIO.

If we read the story as a narrative composed according to the principle of *praefiguratio* or historical typology when applied to profane literature⁹, the heathen king Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr may be perceived as a *typus* prefiguring the later *antitypus*, the holy king.

Following the same principle of interpretation, the *haugbrot* may be conceived of as a motif invented by the author to create a link between the holy king and his predecessor. In this connection the *haugbrot* motif underlines the ambiguous relationship between St. Óláfr and the heathen past. The sword and the ring are symbols not only of the Christian king's authority and power, but also of power and authority in the heathen society (Steinsland 1991:168). To give

⁷In the Leofric Collectar from the middle of the 11 th century, the day of Óláfr's death, the 29th of July, is defined as his *natalium* meaning his birth as a saint (Storm 1891:159).

⁸The relationship between Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr and Óláfr Haraldsson as described in the *þáttur* is by Erich Hoffmann characterised as a folklore version of the clerical interpretation of Óláfr Tryggvason as the forerunner for Óláfr Haraldsson (Hoffmann 1975:76).

⁹For a discussion of this principle in relation to Nordic historiography, see Weber 1987.

away or to get a sword was a gesture imbued with symbolism.¹⁰ Due to the sword's great symbolic potential, it thus seems logical that the author has chosen this object as one of the heathen king's regalia.¹¹

Another reason for choosing the sword as one of the kingly regalia, may lie in the sword's pragmatic function as a weapon. It is with the help of the sword as a weapon that Óláfr Geirstadaálfr is beheaded. According to a typological interpretation, the motif can be understood as a prefiguring of the rules laid down in *Den eldre Gulatingslova* prescribing the offering of the king's crown at St. Óláfr's shrine (*Den eldre Gulatingslova* chap. 2). Just as the offering of the king's crown can be seen as a ritual authorizing the new king's position, the beheading and the placing back of Óláfr Geirstadaálfr's head can be understood as a way of expressing how Óláfr Haraldsson gets his legitimacy and authority from his heathen predecessor.

In the study of the *páttir* carried out by Anne Heinrichs (Heinrichs 1989), one of her main arguments is that the *páttir* must be explained as a cultural product growing out of the need to heal the loss of collective identity after the Christianization.¹² The *haugbrot* motif must then be interpreted as a means of healing the rupture between the old and the new religion in that it brought the new ideas of kingship into contact with the heathen past. The main function of the *haugbrot* motif is to show how the Christian king's identity and legitimacy are based in the heathen past.¹³ The relationship between St. Óláfr and the heathen ruler included both change and continuity. As shown by Anne Heinrichs, this is expressed in the splitting up of Óláfr Geirstadaálfr's identity into the '*stolmaðr*', representing the part of his heathen identity that had to be extinguished, and the '*draummaðr*', representing the part of his heathen identity that could be transformed into the Christian king's identity (Heinrichs 1989:95).

In this way, the *haugbrot* motif on the one hand actualises the animosity between representatives for the old and the new religion, thereby stressing the hostility of the the Church against beliefs and rituals incompatible with Christianity. The animosity is expressed in the heathen king's warnings not to give in to heathen ritual practices since these will bring forth the demonic powers. If people start bringing offerings to dead persons, this will transform the dead into *trolls*:

" *Miok vggir ek at hallæri mikitt komi að landit. þa er wer erum hæygdír. ok sidan blótadir enn eptir þat trylldir.* " (*Separate saga*:720)

On the other hand, the *haugbrot* scene underlines the continuity between the heathen and the Christian era. Hrani is not breaking into the mound in order to destroy the dangerous *haugbu* by beheading him, a typical motif in other *haugbrot* descriptions in the saga literature. Hrani is undertaking the *haugbrot* and the beheading because he obeys the orders Óláfr Geirstadaálfr personally gives him:

" *Her er komenn Olafur konungr digri, oc villda ec, at þu færer sændifor mina. Oc þic væl ec til þess, at briota haug minn, þann er a Gæirstaðum er.* " (*Leg. saga*:32)

By placing the head back on the heathen king's body, he restores the king's identity and authority:

¹⁰The ritual of *sverðtaka*, symbolizing submission to the king, seems during the change of religion to have been mixed with the ritual symbolizing conversion, the baptism. Hallfredr is baptised with Óláfr Tryggvason as his godfather. As a gift confirming the ritual, he receives a sword (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* chap. 83).

¹¹According to the *páttir* in Flb., *Bæjarbók* and AM 75 e fol., the sword taken from Óláfr Geirstadaálfr's burial-mound is identical to Óláfr Haraldsson's sword *Bæsing* / *Hneiti*. This sword is described in the legendary tradition about St. Óláfr as a relic finally being placed over the altar in St Óláfr's Church in Miklagard (Hagland 1990).

¹²'Ein ganzes Volk verlor seine Identität, als man die neue Religion übernahm' (Heinrichs 1989:103).

¹³'Die Kirche brauchte den 'heiligen König'. Für den Nachweis seiner Heiligkeit konnte sie selber sorgen. Für den Nachweis der Legitimität des Königtums hatte man sich an die Volksgesetze zu halten und bis zum Heidentum zurückzugehen' (Heinrichs 1989:110).

"*Sei sidan aptr á bolinn oskackit ok þar liggr mikit víð at þu gorir þetta wél.*" (*Separate saga*:721).

The image of continuity could from a typological point of view be explained as a consequence of the medieval author's wish to produce a genealogical and historical background supporting Óláfr Haraldsson's claim to Norway as his *odal*.¹⁴ The directions given by Óláfr Geirstadaálfr regarding the *haugbrot*, prevent Svein jarl from getting hold of the three valuable objects. The *haugbrot* is thus acted out on behalf of Óláfr Haraldsson in order to prevent the Ladejarls from getting hold of objects that could be used to manifest their connection with the Ynglingefamily and thereby legitimize their right to rule over the areas this family controlled.

Another motif in the *þáttur*, the building of the mound, becomes meaningful when given a typological interpretation. Óláfr Geirstadaálfr's dream, the directions for the building of the mound and the warning not to give him offerings may be interpreted as the author's fabrications of heathen parallels to Óláfr's death and the cult of him as St. Óláfr. Read in this context, Óláfr Geirstadaálfr's dream prefigures Óláfr Haraldsson's dream before the battle at Stiklestad. Accordingly, the story of the burial of the heathen king at Geirstad and the *blot* directed to him is to be understood as a typological description of Óláfr Haraldsson's death and *translatio*. The building of the mound at a *nes* prefigures the building of the church housing St. Óláfr's relics¹⁵ and the *blot* to Óláfr Geirstadaálfr prefigures the offerings made at St. Óláfr's shrine.¹⁶

THE ÓLÁFS ÞÁTTUR GEIRSTADAÁLFS AS A SOURCE FOR AN INTERPRETATION OF THE CHANGE OF RELIGION.

A third way of reading the *þáttur* is to treat it as a source giving pieces of information indicating how cult practices and beliefs attached to the role of the heathen ruler through the *translatio* of Óláfr Haraldsson were transformed into a Christian setting. In this way it may be used as a source for an interpretation of the change of religion.

Besides the assumption that the change of religion caused a loss of cultural identity (Heinrichs 1989:103), I would stress the process of continuous redefining of Old Norse identity. One aspect of this redefining process consisted of the reciprocal relationship between medieval Christianity and Old Norse religion causing changes in both religions. Parts of the *forn síðr*, both rituals and myths, were reformulated in confrontation with Christian dogmas and rituals. Similarly, the 'conquering' religion incorporated and altered elements from the Old Norse religion.

The *þáttur* may be viewed as a literary product growing out of the process of redefining Old Norse cultural identity. In this sense the *þáttur* is a source for the historian of religion indicating how rituals and beliefs in the Old Norse religion were demonized or transformed during the change of religion. This implies that we regard elements in the *þáttur* as information relevant to the historian of religion's attempts to construct an image of the interaction between Old Norse religion and medieval Christianity. In the following I will discuss two motifs in the *þáttur* in order to discuss some aspects of this interaction. The first motif to be discussed is the *haugbrot*; the second the building of the mound and cult of the dead king.

Regarding the *haugbrot* motif, we have to investigate the possibility that the *haugbrot* story in some respect is based upon memories of actions that once took place and further that these actions had something to do with Old Norse rituals. As an archaeological phenomenon,

¹⁴For a discussion of Norway as *odal* in the hárfagri-family, see Krag 1989.

¹⁵According to *Heimskringla*, Óláfr Haraldsson promoted the building of Klemenskirken, the first church in which a shrine to him was placed (*Olafs saga hins helga*, chap. 53, 244).

¹⁶Interpreted in this context, Óláfr Geirstadaálfr is to be perceived as an example of a 'noble heathen'. This is especially evident in the versions of the *þáttur* where Óláfr Geirstadaálfr strongly warns people against taking part in the *blot* to him after his death: "*víð þat vara ek menn alla at zeigi take þau rad sem sumer menn þeir er blota þu menn andada er þeim þotti ser traust at medan lifde fyrer þui at eg zeila dauda menn ekki mega til gagnns*" (*Separate saga*:716).

haugbrot is well documented. Traces of *haugbrot* are known from several excavated mounds, the most famous being Oseberg, Gokstad and Grønhaug. Archaeological excavations at Borre have given some detailed information regarding how and when the mounds were broken into. The haugbrott in one of the mounds is C-14 dated to the period 870-1030. The excavation made it possible to measure the shafts running from the circumference of the mound to the centre. One of the shafts was 10 metres wide (Myhre 1994:71).

The haugbrott at Oseberg, Gokstad, Grønhaug and Borre show similar traits if we compare the resources in terms of manual work that were necessary to realize the *haugbrot*. All the shafts running to the centre of the mounds at Borre and into the burial-chambers at Oseberg, Gokstad and Grønhaug were so large that it must have taken several day's work to remove all the soil. This indicates that these *haugbrot* must have come about as an action supported or initiated by powerful persons.

The archaeological evidence proves that *haugbrot* actually took place, but they do not explain why some mounds were broken into. To reach a better understanding of the haugbrott, it is necessary to go beyond the archaeological sources. The phenomenon calls for various explanations (See Myhre 1994:73). Common to all possible explanations is the significance of the relationship between the living and the dead. The literal sources that throw light on the relationship between the living and the dead in the Old Norse religion indicate that although people were physically dead, some continued to play an active role in the community of the living. This fact must be of great relevance when trying to explain the *haugbrot* phenomenon (Brendalsmo and Røthe 1992).

In chapter 13 in *Nyere Gulatings kristenrett*, various ways of behaving and believing that are incompatible with Christianity are listed. People found guilty of different types of illegal behaviour characterised as "*vilsku and hæidenum atrunade*" (NgL II:308) were doomed to severe punishment. Some examples of these forbidden acts are:

"*Galdrar ok gærni(n)gar ok sá er kallar nokorn mann trolfridu spádommar ok at trua a landvættir at se i lundum æða haugum æða forsom svá ok uti sættor at spyria orlagaok þær er segia afhendes ser guð ok heilaga kirkju till þess at þær skollu i haugum finna æða adrar læiðir ríkir verða æða visir sva ok þær er fræista draugha upp at væickia æða haugbua.*" (NgL II:308)

One way of understanding the prohibition against the waking of the dead is to contextualise it by associating it with the earlier mentioned practice called *úitseta*. The aim of this ritual seems to be to get into spiritual contact with the dead in order to gain esoteric knowledge. In the *Frostatingslov*, the dead mentioned in connection with *úitseta*, have been demonised into *tröll*:

"...*úitsetu at vecia tröll upp oc fremia heidni með því.*" (NgL I:182)

Another way of reading the prohibition against the waking of the dead would be to interpret it as paragraphs forbidding necromantic rituals, including physical contact with the dead or objects taken from the graves. This interpretation implies a possible connection between the paragraphs forbidding the waking of the dead and *haugbrot* as an archaeological phenomenon. What is worth noticing in chapter 13 in *Nyere Gulatings kristenrett* is the connection made between finding something in the mounds and becoming powerful. Getting hold of objects or bones (?) in the mounds seems to be connected to the status of being powerful. This is the meaning of the haugbrott in the *þáttir* as well. The reason why the dead heathen king wants his mound to be broken is his wish to bring his name, and along with it his identity and personal qualities into the newborn boy's body. Considering the *haugbrot* motif from this point of view, the motivation for undertaking the haugbrott is to make the future king powerful.

Due to the *haugbrot*, these immaterial qualities are ritually transferred from Óláfr Geirstadaálfr to the newborn baby by means of the material objects, that is the ring and the sword. In one version of the *þáttir* (AM 75 e fol.) we are told that when people heard that the ring and sword had been handed over to the boy, they believed that Óláfr Geirstadaálfr had been reborn in the boy's body:

"...ok er frændr Olafs ok margar heyrdu þetta þa trudu þeir þvi at ande Olafs digerbeins munde nu borenn i likam þessa Olafs til þess at hann mætte skirn taka enn þenna trunad braut hann siaflr raun miog nidr þa er hann uar kongr yfer Norege." (*Separate saga*:735).

I would suggest a literal reading of the text implying that the concept of the reborn¹⁷ king was produced through the renaming and handing over of the objects taken from his predecessor. Interpreted in this way, the *haugbrot* must be seen as part of a ritual undertaken to create a symbolic genealogy between the new ruler and his predecessor. If this assumption is right, it indicates that certain mounds served a wider purpose than that of being a burial place, which leads us to the second motif to be discussed, the building of the mound and the cult of the dead king.

Instead of reading the descriptions of the heathen king's death and apotheosis¹⁸ as textual compositions of heathen parallels to the cult of St. Óláfr, I will try to construct the meaning of the mound-building and the blot according to Old Norse cosmology. The *blot* starts as means of avoiding crop failure and famine caused by a cosmological imbalance which in our terms would be defined as an ecological crisis¹⁹. The way to react faced with this threatening situation consists of performing rituals including building a mound and deifying the dead king. The reason for bringing the dead king offerings is the belief that this could strengthen the land:

"...letv þeir blota hann af þvi at hann uar þeim harmdaudi en þeim þotti þat tignar mark." (*Separate saga*:726)

It is not directly stated where the offerings took place. Since the receiver of the offerings is defined as the dead king, it logically follows that the offerings took place at the mound, which may then be defined as a sacred place functioning as a centre for enactments of rituals.²⁰

Do we have other sources shedding light on mounds functioning as ritual places in Old Norse religion? We have no direct sources, but functions attributed to the mounds may be deduced from an analysis of literary and archaeological sources. Whether the texts used as sources are characterised as mythical, heroic, historical or legendary does not affect the result of the study because we are not looking for any documentation of specific rituals that once took place. The aim is to find some common traits regarding the mound as a ritual place.

The story of Volsungr's miraculous birth (*Volsunga saga* chap. 2) may be seen as a parallel to the story of Óláfr's birth. Just as Óláfr is born as a result of the interaction between the world of the human and the world of the deified king, Volsungr is born as a result of the gods' intervention in the heroes' world. The medium transferring the supernatural power from the gods to the queen takes the form of an apple. The centre for interaction between the realm of the supernatural and the heroic world is the mound that the king is sitting at.

The medieval laws constitute another category of sources that might shed some light on Old Norse rituals. In chapter 29 in *Den eldre Gulatingslova* it is stated:

"Blot er off oc kvíðiat at vér fcolom eigi blota heidit guð. ne hauga. ne horga."

¹⁷One way of dealing with the idea of Óláfr Haraldsson as the reborn Óláfr Geirstadaálfr was to integrate it into the Church's doctrine concerning baptism. In this way it was possible to define the idea as belonging to the demonic side of the cosmological order, from which a person was released through baptism.

¹⁸Apotheosis is defined as "the conferring, through official, ritual, or iconographic means, of the status of an immortal god upon a mortal person" (*Encyclopedia of Religion* 1:359).

¹⁹The concept refers to ecological imbalance caused by plagues and climatic changes.

²⁰Ritual is not an expression of or a response to 'the Sacred'; rather, something or someone is made sacred by ritual (the primary sense of *sacrificium*)" (Smith 1987:105).

If we understand *haugr* as a burial-mound, the paragraph can be interpreted as a prohibition against offerings made at certain burial-mounds thus giving associations of the term *blothaugr* described in other sources as places where offerings took place?²¹

In some codexes of the law further prohibitions against the act of building a mound are stated:

" *Ad hann hledur haug, eda giorer hus, og kallar horg,.*" (AM 146 4^o) " *at han lædr hauga eda gerer i hus oc kallar horgh.*" (AM 78 4^o)²²

The main function of these statements seems to be to stop people from building houses or mounds in order to establish new ritual places. This interpretation can provide a basis for an interpretation of the building of the mound at Geirstad. The building of the mound²³ is the result of the king's advice to his people in a critical situation. The detailed prescriptions concerning the building of the mound may be understood as components of a ritual performed to avoid the threatening famine. The king is advising the people how and where to build the mound:

" *nu uil ek keggja rad þau fyrer alþydu at fiolmenni þat allt er nu er her komit verpi haug mikinn her fram j nesinu ok girde um þuert nesit fyrer ofan suo at æinge fenadr gangi þangat..*" (*Separate saga:716*)

Descriptions of building a mound in times of crisis are also found in other sources. In the story of Herlaugr and Hrollaugr, as told by Snorri (*Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, chap. 8), the building of a mound is performed as one way of dealing with a political crisis. Herlaugr and Hrollaugr are described as brothers ruling as kings in Namdalen. King Haraldr approaches their area as part of his military strategy to gain *einvaldsríki* in Norway. One of the kings commits suicide by allowing himself and eleven other men to be buried alive in a mound - a mound that has taken three years to build.

His brother Hrollaugr, however, chooses another way of reacting. He submits to Haraldr's authority. The petty king's subordination is described as a series of ritual gestures where the mound plays an important role as ritual centre. The authority to hold power over a certain geographical area, in this case Namdalen, is transferred from Hrollaugr to Haraldr when Hrollaugr's identity changes from king to jarl as a result of rituals taking place at the mound. The king's high seat is placed at the top of a mound. Thus the mound becomes the symbolic centre for the petty king's power.

" *Hrollaugr konungr fór upp á haug þann, er konungar váru vanir at sitja á, ok lét þar búa konungs háseti ok settisk þar í. Þá lét hann leggja dýnur á fótallinn, þar er jarlar váru vanir at sitja. Þá veltisk Hrollaugr konungr ór konungshásetinu ok t jarlssæti ok gaf sér sjálfr jarlsnafn.*" (*Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, chap. 8)

Snorri does not state explicitly that "*haug þann*" is identical to the mound where Herlaugr and his men are buried, but the way that the two mounds in the stories are put close to each other in the text makes this interpretation possible.²⁴ If this interpretation is plausible, it indicates that there existed a connection between the mound functioning as a burial place for the dead ruler and the mound functioning as a centre where rituals initiating the new ruler took place. During the process of Christianization, the meaning and functions of the mounds in the landscape were redefined. As a result, the religious-political power attributed to building of mounds was suppressed or even forbidden. Because the mounds were seen as parallels to the

²¹The term *blothaugr* is used in the story telling of Óláfr Haraldsson's superhuman power when stopping the heathens from making offerings at a mound. (*Separate saga:754*)

²²For a discussion of the different codexes, see introduction to *Den eldre Gulatingslova* ed. Eithun et al. 1994.

²³The term used in the different versions of the *þáttur isverpa haug* (*Fib.*, *Bæjarbók*, *Bergsbók*, *AM 75 e fol.*). In *Leg. saga* the term is *gera haug*, "*at haugr se gorr mikill æfir mic*" (*Leg. saga:30*)

²⁴Taranger interprets the statement differently: "den haug, som kongene pleiet å sitte på....ikke er den nye gravhaug, som Herlaug var gått inn i, men en annen haug..." (Taranger 1934-36:121)

Christian burials in the churchyard, that of being graves for the dead, all mounds were regarded as burial-mounds.

I would like to draw the reader's attention to another source indicating the building of a mound as a ritual action carried out in a critical situation caused by cosmological imbalance. Elements in Snorri's story of the cult of the dead Freyr in *Ynglingasaga* can be compared to the story of the *blot* to Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr. I do not intend to focus on Snorri's description of Freyr's burial as a source for gaining knowledge of Old Norse mythology, but rather on the historical-archaeological knowledge Snorri uses when he presents the Old Norse gods as historical kings. The building of the mound and the offerings given to the dead king are motivated in the same way as the building of the mound and the offerings brought to the dead king at Geirstad. In both cases the aim is to preserve the qualities of being *ársæll* inherent in the king's body.

A similar explanation of the importance of controlling the king's body is found in the texts telling of the death and burial of Hálfðan svartí. The connection between the king's physical body and the *ársæll* capability is stressed:

"En fyrir því skiptu þeir líkam hans, at þeir trúðu því, at ársæli hans myndi jafnan með hánum vera, hvárt sem hann væri lífs eða dauðr." ²⁵

The king's capability of being *ársæll* is ritually preserved by dividing his dead body in four parts and burying them in mounds located in different landscapes.

The story of Freyr's burial as well as the story of Hálfðan svartí's death can be explained as stories produced according to the principle of historical typology. ²⁶ In the case of Hálfðan svartí, the dividing of his dead body has a parallel in the treatment of the saints' bodies; in particular the royal saints' bodies. However, the explanations given for the wish to bury the king's body is not a Christian one. A saint's power to bring *ár ok fríð* was not due to personal qualities inherent in the saint's physical body, but to God's intercession expressed in the concepts *praesentia* and *potentia*.²⁷

Along with a reading of these stories with reference to historical typology, I propose a 'ritual' reading of the stories by focussing on the motivation given for the building of the mound and the cult of the person buried in it. The building of the king's mound must be understood as a ritual action aimed at preserving the powers located in the king's body. It follows from this that the apotheosis and cult of the dead king must be interpreted as a way of ritually preserving his capability of being *ársæll* in a critical situation:

"Ok var haug færð síðazst Ólafr konungr ok var hann flíotluga j lagidr hea sinum monnum með myklu fe ok eftir þat haugrinn aftr byrgdr. þa tok ok at letta manndaudnum sidan gerde u aran ok hallære var þa þat rað tekis at þeir blotudu Olaf konungs til árs ser ok kolludu hann Geirstada alf." (*Separate saga:717*)

The apotheosis of king Erik, as told by Rimbert, may also illustrate how a cultural crisis, in this case a consequence of a king's effort to Christianize the Swedes, is dealt with from the side of the heathens. The decision to start bringing offerings to the long-dead king is presented according to Rimbert's Christian world view. The advice to deify Erik is presented as the work of the heathen gods, which in terms of Christian cosmology belong to the world of the Devil.

Rimbert tells that when Ansgar arrived at Birka, he realized that the Devil had visited the people there. The Devil had deceived the king and the people by making them believe that a man had attended an assembly where the gods ruling over the land had been present. The gods objected to the introduction of a foreign god who would surpass them in dignity. If the people insisted in having more gods to relate to, they would prefer that the dead king Erik be defined as

²⁵*Fagrskinna:3*. A discussion of the different versions of the story of Hálfðan svartí's death and burial in the sources goes beyond the limits of this paper.

²⁶For this typological perspective on the stories, see Weber 1987.

²⁷Brown 1981, chap. 5 and 6.

one of them. The people believed in the devilish story, erected a temple to Erik, and started to bring him offerings as a god (Odelman 1986:53, 54).

If we strip the story of its Christian missionary polemic it tells how the Swedes reacted in a critical situation caused by the king's decision to Christianize his people. As a way of avoiding a religious crisis, which would threaten the whole cosmological balance, the people decided to deify a king that had died long ago. The apotheosis of king Erik may thus be viewed as an apotropaic ritual acted out to avoid a cultural crisis.

CONCLUSION.

The discussion of some of the motives in the *þáttur* indicate that the relationship between the cult of St. Óláfr and the Old Norse religion may partly be explained as a result of religious continuity, in that beliefs and rituals connected to the heathen ruler were brought into a Christian context. The *haugbrot* motif reflects how St. Óláfr's identity and legitimacy were sought in the heathen past. Information in the *þáttur*, regarding the building of the mound and the cult of the dead king may be interpreted as ritual actions taking place in times of cosmological imbalance due to political, ecological or religious instability. Compared to these actions, the rise of the cult of the Viking king Óláfr Haraldsson as St. Óláfr may be viewed as the consequence of a traditional reaction to a political and ecological crisis²⁸ by means of the *translatio* of the dead king's body. In this lies the paradox of Óláfr Haraldsson's life and death. It is only as a Christian saint he fulfills what seems to have been the ideal role of the heathen ruler; to maintain *ár ok frið* and thereby protect his land and people:

Bið Áleif,
at unni þér
(hann 's gods maðr)
grundar sinnar;
hann of getr
af goði sjölfum
ár ok frið
öllum monnum.

Glælongskviða 9 (Skj. B I:301).

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²⁸Here I am referring to the political crisis caused by the death of Cnut the powerful and to the unpopular rule by Svein and Alfiva. An indication of the connection people drew between the ecological and the political crisis is expressed in the name *Alfivupíð* denoting the famine striking the country around 1030.

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