

»SAINT ÓLÁFR'S SWORD. EINARR SKÚLASON'S *GEISLI* AND ITS TRONDHEIM PERFORMANCE AD 1153 - A TURNING POINT IN NORWEGO-ICELANDIC SCALDIC POETRY«

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In AD 1153 (or 1152)<sup>1</sup> the Icelandic scald Einarr Skúlason (born ca. 1090) performed in Christ Church Cathedral at Trondheim a great hagiographic praise poem of 71 strophes on St Óláfr (his *Óláfsárþpa*, commonly named *Geisli* 'sun-ray' after an image for St Óláfr in str. 1) - undoubtedly on occasion of the installation of the Norwegian archdiocese the year before. According to legend, a mystic odour filled the church while Einarr spoke. In the light of the ongoing quarrel over the investment of the clergy between the pope in Rome and the kingly powers in England, Germany and soon enough also in Norway it has been contended that *Geisli* was also meant as a 'political poem'<sup>2</sup> claiming Norwegian independence from Rome by pointing to Norway's famous kingly saint whose remnants lay buried in that very cathedral and whose sanctity - though acknowledged by Rome only in AD 1170 - had been proclaimed as early as AD 1031. And indeed, in *Geisli* Einarr establishes Óláfr both as *rex perpetuus Norvegiae* (as he was called later in the *Historia Norvegiae*) and as a Norwegian and »Scandinavian« and, for that matter, »international« saint. This he brings about by retelling not only Óláfr's kingly achievements (his *gesta*) and the miracles recorded immediately after his martyrdom at Stiklastaðir, but also by enlarging upon more recent miracles, a report of which had reached Norway shortly before, a fact that attested to the saint's continuing guardianship over the Northern countries and Christianity in general.

Both miracles (recorded in strophes 43-56 and placed conspicuously between two *stefstrophes*) broaden the geographic perspective of the poem and take us as far as the Byzantine Empire in the 12th century: One is about St Óláfr's sword *Hneitir*, and the other one is about his succour to the Varangian Guard of the emperor of Byzantium securing the Varangians' victory over a heathen army discouragingly superior to the Christians in numbers. In his *Heimskringla* (of ca. AD 1230) Snorri Sturluson places these two miracles as a sort of appendix at the end of *Haraldssonar saga* and *Hákonar saga herðibreiðs* and assigns them to »the days of Kirialax konung« - Kyrios Alexios I. Komnenos 1081-1118), and he names Eindriði ungi as the authority who brought them to Norway. In this he follows his kinsman Einarr, who had named Eindriði as his source. Eindriði returned from Byzantium

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<sup>1</sup> The exact date of the poem and of its performance at Trondheim remains insecure. Some date the event to AD 1152, the year of Cardinal Níkolás Breakspere's arrival to Niðarós (Trondheim) on occasion of the inauguration of the newly founded archdiocese at Trondheim and the investment of archbishop Jón Birgisson, others favour a date late in the following year and after the cardinal's departure, mostly on the ground that Einarr names the three kingly brothers Eysteinn, Sigurðr and Ingi as well as the archbishop, but not the papal envoy Níkolás. This, however, is not a very strong argument, because the decisive moment for the Norwegian church only came in the spring and summer of AD 1153, when a *þing* both of clergy and lay aristocracy was called at Niðarós and the cardinal managed to install church supremacy in most matters ecclesiastical, e.g. taking away from the laity the right to appoint bishops and priests. It is in this context that *Geisli* has its proper place.

<sup>2</sup> Wolfgang Lange, *Studien zur christlichen Dichtung der Nordgermanen 1000-1200* (Göttingen 1958; Palaestra, vol. 222), p. 142.

about AD 1150, *i.e.* shortly before Einarr shaped his *Geisli*.<sup>3</sup> The two miracles could thus be considered »brand-new« and »authentic«.

The first miracle tells of a Swedish follower of King Óláfr in the battle at Stiklastaðir in AD 1030, who lost his sword and, after the king's fall, found Óláfr's sword *Hneitir* lying on the battlefield. He grabbed it, fought on with it and took it with him to Sweden, where the sword for several generations was handed down from father to son together with its history and the name of its kingly owner, until one kinsman took it with him to the Varangian Guard in Byzantium »in the days of Kirialax konungr« (Snorri Sturluson, *Hákonar s. herðibreiðs*, chp. XX). There, during an open air night watch, the sword disappeared for three consecutive nights from the warrior's side, while he would discover it in the morning lying afar from him on the field. This »event« (*atburðr*) was reported to the emperor who bought the sword and had it erected on the altar in St Óláfr's Church at Byzantium.

The second miracle, which in *Geisli* as well as in Snorri's *Heimskringla* and other sources follows the first one, tells how the emperor's army engaged in battle with a largely superior heathen force. First the emperor's Greek troops fled, then, after suffering heavy losses, his Frankish (*i. e.* German) and Flemish troops fled. Only then did his Varangian Guard - 300 Northmen against a heathen army outnumbering them by 60 : 1 - attack and, after calling upon St Óláfr, overcome the enemy and win a great victory - the famous battle of Stara Zagora in AD 1122.<sup>4</sup>

For reasons of space - not disregard - I only quote those strophes from Einarr's poem, which are immediately relevant to my argument (whose stepping stones are set in *italics*):

Misti maðr, es lýsti,  
- morginn vas þá - borgar  
styrks mundriða steindrar  
stýrsnjallr roðins galla.  
Þátti sinn á sléttri  
seimþiggjandi liggja  
grundu *gylðis kindar*  
*góm sparra sér fjarri.* (str. 48)

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, vol. III, Bjarni Aðalbjarnason gaf út (Íslenzk Fornrit XXVIII; Reykjavík 1951), 2nd ed. 1979, pp. 369-372; esp. p. 370f.: »Eindriði ungi var þá í Miklagarði, er þessir atburðir gerðusk. Sagði hann þessa sögu í Nöreg, svá sem Einarr Skúlason vátar í drápu þeiri, er hann orti um Ólaf konung inn helga, ok er þar kveðit um þenna atburð.« Snorri got the chronology wrong, since Alexis I Komnenos's reign ended in 1118 and not, when Eindriði was there. In order to establish the miracles as »historically true« he makes Eindriði an »eye-witness« or at least a contemporary of the events. For the purpose of this lecture it suffices to quote Snorri's and Einarr's version; questions of source criticism, chronology, etc. are left aside here. - For a discussion of Snorri's means of establishing historical reliability for his account of history, cf. Gerd Wolfgang Weber, »Snorri Sturlusons Verhältnis zu seinen Quellen und sein Mythos-Begriff,« in: Alois Wolf (ed.), *Snorri Sturluson. Kolloquium anlässlich der 750. Wiederkehr seines Todestages* (Tübingen, 1993), pp. 193-244; and the same, »*Intelligere historiam*. Typological perspectives of Nordic prehistory (in Snorri, Saxo, Widukind and others),« in: Kirsten Hastrup and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (eds.), *Tradition og historieskrivning* (Acta Jutlandica LXXIII: 2. Humanistisk serie 61; Aarhus 1987), pp. 95-141); esp. pp. 96 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Hkr.*, vol. III, p. 372, note 1.

Mós frá k jarðar eisu  
 allvald fyr hjör gjalda,  
 (sléttik óð) þanns átti  
 Óláfr (bragar tólum).  
 Yfirskjöldungr lét jöfra  
 oddhríðar þar síðan  
 garðs of gollu vörðu  
 grand altári standa. (str. 50)

Vas, sem reyk af ríki  
 - regn dreif stáls - í gegnum  
 hjalm-Njörðungar harðan,  
 heidungja líð, gingi.  
 Halft fimta vann heimtan  
 hundrað, brimis sunda,  
 nýztan tír, þats næra,  
 Norðmanna, val þorði. (str. 55)<sup>5</sup>

In (my) English translation:

At dawn - morning had come - the man missed his strong (*styrks*) devastator (*galla*) of the site (*borgar*) of the sword (*mundriða*) [devastator of the shield, i.e. the sword], embellished (*steindrar*) with gold (*roðins*). / The receiver of gold (*seim-þiggjandi*) saw (*þátti*) his (*sinn*) sword [the jaw-spike of the kin of the Fenrisúlfr] (*gylðis kindar gómsparra*) lie (*liggja*) afar from him (*sér fjarri*) on the field (*á sléttu grundu*). (str. 48)

I heard (*frák*) that the emperor (*allvald*, acc.c.i.) paid (*gjalda*, inf.) for (*fyr*) the sword (*hjör*), which had belonged to Óláfr (*þanns Óláfr átti*) with the fire (*eisu*) of the territory of the seagull (*mós jarðar*, viz. sea) [fire of the sea: gold]. I smoothen (*sléttik*) the poem (*óð*) with the tools (*tólum*) of poetry (*bragar*). / The overlord of the aristocracy (*Yfirskjöldungr jöfra*) let (*lét*) thereupon (*þar síðan*) raise (*standa*) on the gold-adorned altar (*of gollu vörðu altári*) the sword [the demolisher (*grand*) of the shield (*odd-hríðar garðs* = sword-storm's fence)]. (str. 50)

The host of the heathens (*heidungja líð*) was (*vas*), as if (*sem*) the helmet-gods (*hjaln-njörðungar*) went forth (*gingi af ríki*) through (í *gegnum*) thick smoke (*harðan reyk*). Three hundred Northmen (*Halft fimta hundrað Norðmanna*), who (*þats*) dared (*þorði*) to feed (*næra*) the raven [the falcon (*val*) of the flood of the sword (*brimis sunda*) {the blood}], won (*vann*) great fame (*heimtan nýztan tír*). (str. 55)

<sup>5</sup> I quote the text according to E. A. Kock's edition: *Den norsk-isländska skaldediktningen*, vol. I (Lund 1946), p. 216-217, which is more or less identical with the *Bergsbók* version in Fimur Jónsson's text in *Den norsk-isländske skaldedigtning. A. Tekst efter håndskriftene. Første bind* (København 1912-1915), pp. 468-469.

The incorporation of these miracles into Einarr's praise poem and their emblematic character mark a major turning point in the history of Norwegeo-Icelandic scaldic poetry - for two reasons: In the first place, *Geisli*, for the first time, successfully introduces hagiography into a scaldic *drápa* and represents truly »religious poetry« by contents, purpose and social function; it marks the inauguration of an archbishopric and praises Óláfr the *saint* and not so much Óláfr the *king*. Secondly, Einarr is the first to re-introduce kennings that again draw on »pagan« Northern mythology into an entirely Christian and even »holy« context. This is important news, because, for a period of nearly 150 years, Icelandic scalds at the Norwegian court seemed to have avoided kennings of this type. Therefore, Einarr's initiative in more than one way asks for a historical as well as a hermeneutic explanation.

During the 11th century and the first half of the 12th century, mythological kennings are less conspicuous in scaldic poetry, because, after the conversion, poets and audience alike were *in want of a theory* that could provide a *new view* of the old gods - and a *new function* within the mental horizon of a by now Christian age. At the top of society - the courts of kings, jarls and other Norwegian aristocrates, where the new religion had established itself most thoroughly and most uncompromisingly, mythological kennings were associated with a worldview, whose heyday had lapsed.

The zeal of the two missionary kings, Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson inn helgi, and the demonization of the pagan gods during that first period after the conversion (in AD 1000)<sup>6</sup>, when Christianity was still new and »raw« (Latin *rudis*), i.e. in danger of being infested with all sorts of syncretisms, pagan superstition and old practices (*ffjölkyngi*), may have made the scalds, who in their majority belonged to the old intelligentsia that readily adopted the new learning, avoid references to their traditional inventory of mythological lore, since that would not have found the approval of their Christian lord and his clerical entourage, as long as Christian theory did not provide a *theory* by which this »lore« could be integrated into the Christian concept of salvation history, but necessarily had to be interpreted as a reference to the erroneous beliefs of a bygone age.<sup>7</sup>

By the middle of the 12th century, however, this theory was in supply. Together with *euhermerism* and its *historicizing reduction* of pagan mythology to unenlightened reports about pre-historic kings and heroes, *typology* provided a means of linking the pre-Christian history of the North to its Christian sequel and give it an eschatological perspective. Gods become heroes - heroes of a »mythical« past, where *mythical* no longer meant »true lore about Northern gods«, but instead referred to »human history«, a sense it had acquired in the neo-Platonist circles at continental and English centres of learning such as the Monastery of

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<sup>6</sup> AD 1000, the year of Iceland's acceptance of the new religion, conveniently falls between Denmark's earlier conversion under Harald Blátand and that of Sweden later in the 10th century, with Norway holding a middle position: ca. 995-1030.

<sup>7</sup> For this decline in the frequency of mythological kennings, cf. what E. O. G. Turville-Petre has to say on this in his *Scaldic Poetry* (Oxford 1976), p. lix, n. 1: »On the avoidance of heathen kennings in court poetry of the early Christian period see J. de Vries, *De skaldenkenningen met mythologischen inhoud*, 1934. Not all of de Vries's conclusions can be accepted.« Nevertheless, Turville-Petre's (and others's) argument that scalds like Gizurr Gullbráskald and Hofgarða-Refr, in their poetry (which is mostly *lausavísur*) continued to use »heathen« kennings (cf. his *Myth and Religion of the North* [London 1964], p. 16 and fn. 40-44), does not belie the general trend, but confirms it, rather, when it comes to »official« poetry designated for Norwegian audiences. - For the concept of *Christianitas imperfecta*, cf. my paper »*Intellegere historiam*. Typological perspectives...« (op. cit.), esp. p. 116 and fn. 80, p. 124 and fn. 96.

St. Victor in Paris. Myth had become *mythologie moralisée*.<sup>8</sup> - The Northern gods fighting against the giants had become human heroes fighting against demons. These, however, were nothing but hypostases of the eternal evil, the Devil himself. In that function they could thus well be understood as prefigurations of their descendants, the Christian dynasties of the North and their followers, who were supposed to act as *defensor pacis, defensor ecclesiae, miles Christianus* etc.

This new - euhemeristic - understanding of the mythical or pre-historical Northern gods furnished the Christian protagonists of the Age of the Crusades with a »historical perspective« that attested to the perseverance of ethical and moral qualities such as valor and brave determination to oppose the forces of evil, which the most eminent among their »pagan« forefathers had displayed earlier in time. This held especially true, if the Christian crusaders directly engaged in fighting against the demonic hosts of their own day: fiendish Wends and heathen Saracens or the Turkish tribes around the Black Sea, etc. In other words, the ancient gods fighting against the Fenrisúlfr may well prefigure the Christian heroes fighting against the heathens in the twelfth century, i.e. in the *Age of the Crusades*, when they either will embark on expeditions into as yet pagan countries in order to promote Christianity or else defend that Christianity against an assault from the heathen outside.<sup>9</sup>

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The report about the miraculous victory of 300 Northmen of the Varangian Guard over a host of heathens at Stara Zagora in AD 1122 with the help of a Scandinavian saint, who defends Christianity against the Devil, attracts well-known legendary elements:

When the Christian emperor hesitates to lead so few men against such a great army (*Hkr.*, p. 371) and the leader of the Varangians retorts that they would fight, »even if there were a burning fire ahead« (what nicely evokes the fires of Hell, of course), the emperor replies: *Heitið þér á inn helga Ólaf, konung yðam, til fulltings ok sigrs yðr!* (»Call upon Saint Ólaf, your king, for soccour and victory for yourselves!«, p. 372). The Varangians do this and thereupon attack, and the heathen king asks his men: *Hverr er sá hinn tíguligi maðr, er þar ríðr á þeim hvíta hesti fyrir líði þeira?* (»Who is this noble man riding in front of them on that white horse?«). As was to be expected, the answer is: *Eigi sjám vér þann* (»We do not see him.«). Riding on a white horse was a privilege granted to the pope.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Peter Dronke, *Fabula. Explorations into the Uses of Myth in Medieval Platonism* (Köln/Leiden 1974; *Mittellateinische Studien und Texte*, 60); Ursula and Peter Dronke, »The Prologue of the Prose Edda: Explorations of a Latin Background,« in: *Sjötiú Ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni*, vol. I (Reykjavík 1977), pp. 153-176; Gerd Wolfgang Weber, »Euhemerismus,« in: H. Beck et al. (eds.), *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde, begründet von Johannes Hoops*, 2nd edition (considerably enlarged), vol. 8 (Berlin/New York, 1991), pp. 1-16.

<sup>9</sup> For the first, cf. the *Profectio Danorum* and Saxo's account of Valdemar I's crusade against the Slavic tribes (Wends, Obotrites, etc.) on the south coast of the Baltic Sea (in his *Gesta Danorum*, Book XIV), for the latter cf. the perspective of, e.g., *Karlamagnús saga*.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Eike von Repgow's Low-German *Sachsenspiegel* (of ca.1220-35) on the relation between the two swords, the spiritual sword, and the worldly sword: »At a given time, the pope shall ride on a white horse, and the emperor shall hold the stirrup for him...«

The semiotics of the two miracles are clear: St Óláfr is the saint of the Varangian Guard in Byzantium. His sword is brought to Byzantium and is raised upright on the altar of the Varangians' church dedicated to St Óláfr. It is a relic - and at the same time an image of the Holy Cross. The Varangians overcome a heathen army vastly superior in numbers, and St Óláfr rides in front of them on a white horse. The heathen party is in the claws of the Devil. St Óláfr's sword represents both the spiritual sword of the Church and the worldly sword of the emperor of Byzantium. It is a perpetual symbol of victory over heathen armies and the evil powers of the Devil. Einarr calls it »the spike of the jaws of the kin of the Fenris-Wolf«: *Gylðis kindar gómsparri*. It is obvious that the »jaws of the wolf« are associated with the »Jaws of Hell«, which the Varangians with the help of St Óláfr force open just as Christ did at his resurrection. In 1968, Otto Gschwantler pointed to the parallel of Þórr fishing for the Miðgarðzormr and Christ hooking the Old Testament Leviathan. Recently, he adduced another analogue from Viking Age art and early medieval German literature: the fettering of the Fenrisúlfr and its Christian interpretation along similar lines.<sup>11</sup> He does not mention Einarr's kenning of AD 1153, however.

In the light of the new typological hermeneutics available in the 12th century, the eschatological victory over the Devil is prefigured by the victories of Christian crusaders over Saracens and heathens in general. In St Óláfr's and the Varangians' case, these victories were in turn »prefigured« by earlier victories of their mythic (i.e. pre-historic) ancestors of the Yngling dynasty (whom in pagan times the Scandinavian peoples had mistakenly regarded as »gods«) over the demonic forces of *their* day. With Einarr's kenning history comes full circle, since the Christian saint helps out his Byzantine »relative« against the heathens: The dynasty of Óláfr Haraldsson ultimately reached back to the old Yngling kings of Sweden and via them to the immigrant Æsir - the »men from Asia«, who had emigrated (in the first century B.C., as may be inferred from Snorri's relative chronology) from the area around Troy, viz. from the very territory of the Byzantine Empire.<sup>12</sup>

Einarr's use of the kenning *Gylðis kindar gómsparri* proudly asserts the validity of the ancient Scandinavian mythology as a reference to the ever renewed fight between mankind and the monsters of Hell, between humanity as represented by *virii fortes* and the Devil - or, in Augustinian terms, between the *civitas Dei* and the *civitas terrena*.

*Geisli* thus shows itself as an eminently political poem, as Lange contended: (1) It refers to Scandinavian history as an important part of salvation history: St Óláfr and his Varangians bring peace to the Byzantine Empire in AD 1122. (2) *Geisli* establishes the Norwegian church and the Norwegian saint as *defensores pacis* and *defensores Christianitatis* precisely in the days of the Second Crusade (1147-1149). This is no small claim. - In addition, *Geisli* marks a turning point in the history of scaldic poetry, since it signals a new understanding of the old »mythological lore«, on which the scaldic system of figurative speech depended: »If

<sup>11</sup> Otto Gschwantler, »Christus, Thor und die Midgardschlange,« in: H. Birkhan et al. (eds.), *Festschrift für Otto Höfler zum 65. Geburtstag* (Wien 1968), pp. 145-168; and the same, »Die Überwindung des Fenriswolves und ihr christliches Gegenstück bei Frau Ava,« in: Teresa Párolí (ed.), *Poetry in the Scandinavian Middle Ages. The Seventh International Saga Conference at Spoleto, 4-10 September 1983* (Spoleto 1990), pp. 509-534.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Hkr.*, *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 1-15, and Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*: Prologus, ed. Finnur Jónsson (København 1931), pp. 1-7. - Cf. further Weber, »Snorri Sturlusons Verhåitnis...« (as in fn. 3).

understood intelligently« (*skynsamliga upp tekin*), as Snorri put it,<sup>13</sup> viz. if euhemerized and historicized, this mythological lore shows itself to be part of that historical *continuum*, which in primeval feats such as the fettering of the Fenrisúlfr foreshadows the fulfillment of salvation history *in tempore*: Christ tearing apart the Jaws of Hell!<sup>14</sup>

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Audience and social function are necessary prerequisites of any poetry. Much more so of scaldic praise poems in a king's hall or in a Christian cathedral. Thus, Norwegian social reality and the connoisseurship of its leading circles contributed just as much to the perseverance and preservation of scaldic poetry as did art and excellence of its Icelandic poets. It is in this sense that I have used Norwego-Icelandic in the title for this talk. Einarr Skúlason's praise poem *Óláfsdrápa* is proof of an interplay between Icelandic art and its Norwegian 'audience', viz. the political and social reality, which by the time of the poem's performance in the year 1153 AD was also an *ecclesiastical* social reality represented by the universal - and at the same time Norwegian - Christian Church. The poem is an assertion of Nordic preeminence in the Age of the Crusades: *In hoc signo* - in the sign of St Óláfr's sword - which was brought to Byzantium as a relic, the Varangians (as Knights of the Holy Cross) overcame the heathen enemies of a Christian emperor. This secures for Norway an important role in salvation history and at the same time solves the problem of the two swords, which split medieval Christianity in Einarr's day: both the spiritual sword of the *sacerdotium* and the worldly sword of the *imperium* are in the case of St Óláfr's sword joined in one: the king is a saint, and the saint is king - *rex perpetuus Norwegiae*.

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<sup>13</sup> In his prologue to his *Óláfs saga hins helga, Hkr.*, vol. II, Bjarni Aðalbarnarson gaf út (ÍF XXVII; Reykjavík 1949; 2nd ed. 1979), pp.419-422. Cf. Weber, »Snorri Sturlusons Verhåltis...« (as in fn. 3), pp.201 ff.

<sup>14</sup> W. Lange (as in fn. 2, p. 123, n. 1) quotes Fritzner (vol. I, p. 625 f.) who adduces a Christian parallel to the Nordic myth of the fettering of the Fenrisúlfr: *Þá setti hann (Kristr) kross í munn honum ok kom með því yfir hann ok bauð oss með því sigmarki at verja djöflum ok ilum vættum.*