

Myth and Religion in the Poetry of a Reluctant Convert

Diana Whaley

University of Newcastle upon Tyne

Introduction

Great exceptions - great expectations. As Wolfgang Lange pointed out, the Icelanders are the great exceptions (*die grosse Ausnahme*) to the rule that the Germanic peoples leave no direct accounts of their conversion to Christianity (1958, 13), and the uniqueness of their evidence gives it particular value. Among Icelandic skalds it is surely Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld who is most dramatically affected by the conversion. In a central scene in *Hallfreðar saga* ch. 6, which according to the saga chronology would be set c. 996, the hero conducts an antiphonal prosimetrum conversation with his new patron, the missionary king Óláfr Tryggvason. The skald's three *dróttkvætt* stanzas and two half-stanzas voice the difficulty with which he accepts the new religion, and are punctuated by prose comments from the king, who reacts at first with indignation, then with shades of grudging acceptance as the poet distances himself increasingly from the old gods. The verses (which I will refer to as the

Conversion verses) are, with one exception,¹ the only ones attributed to Hallfreðr that are squarely about religion. They are printed as Hallfreðr's *lausavísur* 6-10 in *Skjaldedigtning* (henceforth *Skj*),² and as vv. 9-13 in the Möðruvallabók ('M') version of *Hallfreðar saga*, and vv. 7-11 in the *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* ('O') version. The text reads as follows:³

9. Fyrr vas hitt,* es harra
Hliðskjalfar gat'k sjalfan
– skipt es á gumna giptu –
geðskjótan vel blóta.

It was different in former days, when *v.l. Hitt vas fyrr
I could worthily sacrifice to the mind-swift
– there is change in the fortunes of men –
Lord of Hliðskjölf [Óðinn] himself.

10. Qll hefr ætt til hylli
Óðins skipat ljóðum
(algildar man'k) aldar
(iðjur várra niðja);
en trauðr, því't vel Viðris
vald hugnaðisk skaldi,
legg'k á frumver Friggjar
fjón, því't Kristi þjónum.

The whole race of men to win
Óðinn's grace has wrought poems
(I recall the exquisite
works of my forebears);
but with sorrow, for well did
Viðrir's [Óðinn's] power please the poet,
do I conceive hate for the first husband of
Frigg [Óðinn], now I serve Christ.

11. Hœfum*, hólða reifir,
hrafnblóts goða nafni,
þess's ól við lof lýða
lóm, ór heiðnum dómi.

I am neutral, patron of heroes, *vv.ll. hœfum, hœfum
towards the name of the raven-rite's priest [Óðinn],
of him who repaid men's praise
with fraud, from heathen times.

12. Mér skyli Freyr ok Freyja
– fjörð lét'k qðul* Njarðar;
gröm við Grímnir –
gramr ok Þórr enn rammi.
Krist vil'k allrar ástar
– erum leið sonar reiði;
vald á frægt und foldar
feðr– einn ok goð kveðja.

Against me Freyr and Freyja
– last year I abandoned Njarðr's offspring; *mss adul, af
dul
let fiends ask mercy from Grímnir [Óðinn] –
will bear fury, and the mighty Þórr.
From Christ alone will I beg all love
– hateful to me is the son's anger;
he holds famous power under the
father of earth– and from God.

13. Sá's með Sygna ræsi
siðr, at blót eru kviðjuð;
verðum flest at forðask
fornhaldin skop norna.

It's the custom of the Sogn-men's
sovereign [Óláfr] that sacrifices are banned;
we must renounce many an
anciently held decree of norms.

Láta allir ýta
Óðins ætt* fyr róða;
verð'k ok* neyddr frá Njarðar*
niðjum Krist at biðja.

All mankind casts Óðinn's
clan to the ?winds;
and I am forced to leave Njarðr's *v.l.nu em'k; *v.l. Freyju
kin and pray to Christ.

¹ The 'last verse' of Hallfreðr, discussed below.

² *Skj* AI, 168-69, *Skj* BI, 158-59, also in *Skald* I, 86.

³ Text and translation are based on an edition which I am currently preparing. Textual problems of particular significance for the religious and mythological content of the verses, and for the question of authenticity, are discussed below. References to other skaldic and eddic poetry follow the conventions of *LP*. Skaldic texts can be found in *Skj* and *Skald* and eddic in *Edda*, ed. Neckel and Kuhn. In order to save space, page references to *Skj* are only given for brief fragments, not for longer and better-known poems.

A closer glance at one of these verses, v. 12, will serve to introduce the group as a whole. There is a striking balance between the two *helmingar*, in terms of both layout and content. In each case line 1 and (all or most of) line 4 together constitute a single clause, into which are intercalated two independent clauses, one in each of lines 2 and 3. The first *helmingr*, meanwhile, refers to two father-and-son pairs, Njörðr and Freyr (with Freyja) and Óðinn (Grímnir) and Þórr, who are matched by God and Christ in the second. The poet dreads the anger of both types of deity. But the balance is one of opposition, and the parallels are a foil to contrast as the skald abandons the old gods in the first *helmingr*, and in the second commits himself to the Christian God, the sole source of divine love.⁴ Ohlmarks calls this renunciation ‘den formelle *abjuratio*’ (1957, 492).

Collectively, the five verses enact a process of conversion very much like the one attributed to the whole Icelandic people in Ari’s *Íslendingabók* ch. 7 and elsewhere: confrontation between pagan and Christian factions, reluctance to abandon the old ways, and vilification of the heathen gods, all giving way at last to the realisation that a decisive choice has to be made. The whole world is in flux: *Skipt es á gumna giptu* ‘there is change in the fortunes of men’, v. 9; and in v. 13 it is hyperbolically ‘all mankind’ who reject Óðinn’s words. What is exceptional about these verses, however, is their intense subjectivity, expressed grammatically through first-person verbs and pronouns, and lexically especially through the ‘reluctance’ words *trauðr* v. 10, and *neyddr* v. 13. If they are what they seem, they are a powerful and precious record of mythological and religious thinking at the end of the first millennium. If not, they are a triumph of verbal artistry and historical imagination.

The most urgent question, then, is, with what confidence can these verses be accepted as genuine? - defining ‘genuine’ or ‘authentic’ as having been composed by Hallfreðr at the close of the tenth century, though not necessarily in the circumstances described in the saga. Bjarni Einarsson finds them simply ‘too good to be true’ (1981, 218), ‘mjög hæginn grundvöllur ályktana um trúmálhugmyndir og sálarástand siðaskiptamannsins Hallfreðar’ (1961, 162). This question of authenticity is the principal focus of the following discussion, though the hope is also to demonstrate the interest of these verses, irrespective of their date and authorship. The discussion will cover mythological and religious content, style and metre (briefly), and circumstantial or contextual evidence.

Mythological & Religious Content

⁴ Textual problems in the verse are discussed below.

The pantheistic nature of Nordic heathendom is captured in v. 12a, already discussed, where no less than five gods are named in the space of four lines. All but Óðinn, referred to as *Grímnir*, are spoken of by their most familiar names: *Freyr*, *Freyja*, *Njörðr*, and *Þórr enn rammi*, the only one to receive an epithet. V. 13 contains a reference to *Njarðar / Freyju niðjum*.

All other references to individual deities in these verses are to Óðinn. The god is referred to by three *heiti* and three kennings. The *heiti* used are *Óðinn* (v. 10), *Viðrir* (v. 10), and *Grímnir* (v. 12), all of which are compatible with a date at the end of the tenth century.⁵ *Viðrir* appears in mostly skaldic sources, for instance *Rdr* 16, *Hfl* 1 and 3, and it is frequent as a determinant in certain types of military kennings. *Viðris kvæn* ‘Óðinn’s wife’ appears as a kenning for Frigg in *Lok* 26. *Grímnir* is less common, but occurs, of course, in *Grímnismál* (47 and 49). *Óðinn* is, curiously, the most suspect of these words, in terms of dating. According to Jan de Vries, no skald uses this name between c. 1000-1150, and it is rare before that period (1934, 11). However, instances of the name are abundant in poems of the Edda such as *Völuspá* and *Grímnismál*, including *Óðins hylli Grí* 51, cf. v. 10 above.

Óðinn is also referred to by the kennings *harri Hliðskjalfar* (v. 9), *frumver Friggjar* (v. 10), and *hrafnbólts goði* (v. 11), all of which are puzzling in some way. The antiquity of *frumver Friggjar* is supported by early references to Óðinn as the husband of Frigg, such as *Friggjar faðmbyggvir*, lit. ‘dweller in Frigg’s embrace’ in *Harkv* 12, c. 900. The precise mythological thinking behind the phrase is, however, somewhat elusive. Whether *frum* here implies ‘chief’ or chronologically first, the phrase is suggestive that Frigg has more than one partner. Although Frigg, as wife of the philandering Óðinn, had several rivals,⁶ she has no known husband other than Óðinn, though she is accused in *Lok* 26 of being a nymphomaniac (*æ vergjorn*) who took Vé(i) and Vili into her embrace (cf. *Ynglinga saga* ch. 3, *ÍF* 26, 12). If the phrase is to be taken strictly, therefore, it seems to encapsulate a rather esoteric mythological reference, which is perhaps more likely to date from the conversion period than later; and if the promiscuity of the goddess is the point, it is paralleled by Hjalti Skeggjason’s abusive couplet against Freyja (*Íslendingabók* ch. 7, *ÍF* 1, 15).

There is nothing like *hrafnbólts goði* ‘priest of the raven-sacrifice’ (v. 11) among known skaldic kennings, despite the wealth of expressions for ‘Óðinn’ in *Skáldskaparmál* ch. 10 (*Snorra Edda* pp. 88-92). The raven as an attribute of Óðinn is, of course, frequently mentioned in the older poetry (e.g. *hrafnáss*, *Haustl* 4 and Refr 2,2) as is his association with sacrifice, but reference to raven sacrifice as such is, to my knowledge, unique,⁷ and to use the word *goði*

⁵ Kuhn regarded *Viðrir* and *Grímnir* as typical of poetry from the oldest period (1942, 137).

⁶ Snorri in *Skáldskaparmál* ch. 9 cites from five poets to prove that Jörð is known as Óðinn’s wife (*Snorra Edda* pp. 89-90), while Frigg can, among other things, be called co-wife (*elja*) of Jörð, Rindr, Gunnlōð or Gerðr (ch. 28, *Snorra Edda* p. 110).

⁷ References to Óðinn, ravens and sacrifice seem to co-exist in v. 9 of Úlfr Uggason’s

‘priest’, which in any case is rare in the poetry, to denote a god seems somewhat eccentric. This is a small item, but a tantalising one. Do these phrases betray a pseudo-Hallfreðr at work, and if so is he careless with mythological detail, or is he, artfully and succinctly, euhemerising the Æsir as priests rather than gods, just as he emphasised their promiscuity in *frumver Friggjar*? Or on the other hand, is this the real Hallfreðr at work, making subtle reference to matters that are no longer fully understood?

The Óðinn kenning (*geðskjótan*) *harra Hliðskjalfar* ‘(mind-swift) Lord of Hliðskjölfr [Óðinn’s high seat]’ in v. 9 is one of Bjarni’s Einarsson’s main specific targets for suspicion (1961, 192, 1981, 218-19). The word *harri* seems to be an adoption from OE *h(e)arra* ‘lord’ (Hofmann 1955, 23-24). Its most common usage in OE poetry is in kennings for God as lord of heaven, and it is used that way in Icelandic poetry from the twelfth century onwards, including *Geisli* 19, which also contains the phrase *Fyrr vas hitt* (cf. v. 9/1 of the Conversion verses). Bjarni Einarsson thinks that that makes it an unlikely word in a tenth-century kenning for Óðinn, but what he does not mention is that Anglo-Saxon poets, and skalds such as Egill, Sigvatr and Arnórr, use it to refer to secular rulers. Surely it has become part of a lexical set referring to lordship which, like *gramr* or *dróttinn*, can be readily applied to pagan gods, human sovereigns or, after the Conversion, to Christian gods.⁸ An elusive poet called Þóralfr or Þorvaldr, for instance, in an undatable verse preserved only in *Snorra Edda*, uses the phrase *gramr Hliðskjalfar* presumably for Óðinn (*Skj* AI, 418, *Skj* BI, 385). I do not think, therefore, that we need assume a twelfth-century Christian model for *harri Hliðskjalfar*.

A group of intriguing phrases in these verses appear to refer to the old religion as a whole, and to encapsulate attitudes to it, though the exact intention, in terms of both denotation and connotation, is in some cases quite obscure. (*Ór*) *heiðnum dómi* in v. 11 is the most straightforward of these - so downright that one might wonder whether a neophyte would really refer to the faith he is discarding as ‘heathendom’,⁹ and the occurrence of the phrase in the *Gulapingslög* (see Fritzner, I, 753a) in reference to baptism might sow seeds of doubt, especially when there is another possible legal echo: *blót eru kviðjuð* in v. 13, cf. *blót er oss kviðjat* in *Gulapingslög* (pointed out by Bjarni Einarsson, 1961, 193). However, the fact that Sigvatr only two or three decades after Hallfreðr speaks of baptism as a rescue *ór heiðnum dómi* provides some measure of reassurance, and the phrase *heiðin goð* is used c. 961 in the impeccably heathen *Hák* 21.

Húsdrápa, but the exact interpretation of the verse is problematic.

⁸ On kingship terms in early skaldic expressions for God see, e.g., Paasche 1914, 54 and 68.

⁹ Cf. *kristindómr*, a loan from OE *crīstendōm*, which appears, as *kristin tumr*, on the early eleventh century runestone at Kuli, Norway (Abrams 1998, 111, citing Hagland). To examine the Conversion verses in the light of runic evidence would be rewarding, but space unfortunately does not permit here.

Verse 12, as already seen, refers to abandoning the ‘something of Njörðr’, which seems likely to stand for rejection of the pagan religion in general. Even if this is a secure assumption, what is the ‘something’? The reading in all mss – representing several branches of transmission – is *adul*, except that AM 61 fol. has the tempting reading *af dul* (*Njarðar*). ‘From the deceit (of Njörðr)’ would be a perfect phrase for a proselyte struggling manfully to shun the old gods. But perhaps this is precisely an illustration of the ‘too good to be true’ quality of these verses, and the 61 scribe might well have taken the opportunity to improve on the original from the Christian point of view. Given the weight of the ms. evidence, I think we have to make the best of the *adul* reading, but what does this mean? Normalisation to *ǫðul*, pl. of *aðal*, normally ‘nature, something inborn’ is preferred by Finnur Jónsson in *Skj* B and by Kock in *Skald*. This course, however, runs into semantic difficulties. The Cleasby-Vigfusson entry suggests ‘offspring’, a plausible meaning though one I am not able to parallel, and especially suitable as a reference to Njörðr as progenitor of Freyr and Freyja (cf. *Njarðar niðjum* in v. 13). The translation in *Skj* B has *Njords templer*, while the gloss in *LP*, s. v. *aðal*, is ‘*hjem, odel*’, as though the word was actually *óðal* ‘patrimony’. Even accepting this semantic sleight of hand, one would perhaps expect the sea-god Njörðr’s realm to be the sea, although to assume a looser ‘Njörðr’s realm’, referring metonymically to the old religion, is an attractive possibility. To read *adul* as actually being the word *óðal* is another route to the same conclusion, but it too involves sleight of hand, now in the form of normalisation which amounts to emendation, and this seems perverse when there are two viable readings already. The sad result of all of this is that it is not clear what this intriguing phrase actually means. I find the Cleasby-Vigfusson solution ‘offspring’ marginally preferable.

In v. 13 mankind is said to reject *Óðins ætt*. If this refers to the Æsir, it makes an admirable counterpart to *Njarðar / Freyju niðjum* in the same stanza, as well as to the putative *ǫðul Njarðar* in v. 12, if that phrase refers to the Vanir. But *Óðins ætt* is far from straightforward. The mss are not unanimous, but read: *ætt* 61, 53, 62, 557, Bb, 22, 325IX1b, *blót* Fl and *orð* M. Both *ætt* and *orð* make good sense: the poet abandons Óðinn’s kindred, or his words, but both of them produce superfluous (vocalic) alliteration. The Fl reading *blót* ‘sacrifice’ is metrically preferable, semantically straightforward, and is adopted in ÍF 8, 159, but it is exclusive to Fl and may well be influenced by *blót* in l. 2. Even the often conservative Kock felt obliged to emend to *sætt* (*Skald* I, 86).

Verðum flest at forðask / fornhaldin skǫp norna ‘we must renounce many an anciently-held decree of norms’ in v. 13 is textually unproblematic, but semantically somewhat enigmatic. The couplet itself, and the previous one about a ban on sacrifices, encourage the idea that the phrase *skǫp norna* refers not merely to fate (as seemingly in *Kml* 24 and *Fáfn* 44), but also to the ancient religion of the Æsir. This would be supported by the fact that the norms seem to represent the old religion in a *helmingr* from an unidentified poem attributed to

Eilífr Goðrúnarson:

Setbergs kveðja sitja
sunnar at Urðar brunni,
svá hefr ramr konungr remðan
Róms banda sik lönðum.

‘They say that he sits in the south by the spring of [the norm] Urð; thus has the strong King of Rome [God] strengthened himself with the lands of the gods’ (*Skj* AI, 152, *Skj* BI, 144).

Whatever its exact import, *skop norna* is clearly something to be left behind by the neophyte, and it probably contributes to the negative picture of things heathen. Elsewhere the norms’ duty of allotting fates shades off into a valkyrie-like role (e.g. *Snorra Edda* p. 40). They are cruel (*norn erum grim*, in the *Kveldúlfr* verse on the death of Þórolfr, *Skj* AI, 29, BI, 26), and ugly (*Sigsk* 7), which perhaps explains why ‘norn’, unlike valkyrie names, rarely functions as the base word to kennings for ‘woman’ (Meissner 1921, 409). Nevertheless, the adjective *fornhaldin* and the note of compulsion in *verðum* suggest that renunciation of *skop norna* is attended by painful nostalgia.

As well as mythological names and phrases, the verses contain somewhat more extended religious ideas. Divine power was a vital issue in the missionary period. Steinunn crows over Þórr’s superiority to Christ when the missionary Þangbrandr’s ship is wrecked (*Skj* AI, 135-36, BI, 127-28), while on the Christian side Skapti Þóroddsson praises the might of Christ (*máttir es munkar dróttins / mestr*) and his role as powerful (*ríkr*) creator of the whole world (*Skj* AI, 314, BI, 291). Eilífr Goðrúnarson, composer of a mighty *Þórsdrápa*, also commemorated the victory of Christianity in the lines cited above, presenting it directly as a territorial takeover, and highlighting strength by means of word-play in *ramr - remðan*. The emphasis on power or rule in the Conversion verses is fully in accord with this. The *vald* attributed to Christ and God in v. 12 is a clear counterpart to the statement in v. 10 that the poet is content with Óðinn’s *vald*. Divine power also inspires fear. As we saw, the skald in v. 12 fearfully anticipates the wrath of the pagan gods while flinching equally from the anger of the ‘son’ (*erum leið sonar reiði*).

Sacrifice is presented as the main ritual manifestation of Ásatrú, as the skald recalls sacrificing to Óðinn (*gat’k ... vel blóta*, v. 9, cf. Óðinn as *hrafnblóts goði* in v. 11).¹⁰ Again, these statements are counterbalanced, or in fact cancelled, by the Christian response. It is the custom of the Sogn-men’s sovereign that sacrifices are banned (*Sá’s með Sygna ræsi / siðr, at blót eru kviðjuð*, v. 13). Poetry is also seen as a form of devotion to the god (*Öll hefr ætt til hylli / Óðins skipat ljóðum ... aldar* ‘the whole race of men has wrought poems to win Óðinn’s grace’, v. 10), and part of the ancient and honourable

¹⁰ Ohlmarks sees *vel blóta* as a reference specifically to poetry, and *hrafnblót* as a kenning for ‘battle’, the offering of corpses to ravens; its ‘priest’ is hence Óðinn, god of battle (1957, 490-91).

roots of the old religion (*algildar man'k ... iðjur várra niðja* 'I recall the exquisite works of my forbears', also v. 10). But Óðinn is said to have repaid men's praise by nourishing fraud in v. 11 (*þess's ól við lof lýða / lóm*); and this is picked up in the reference to *dul Njarðar* 'the deceit of Njarðr' in the AM 61 version of v. 12. If there is a pseudo-Hallfreðr at work, using the famous skald's conversion as a platform for Christian didacticism, we might glimpse him here. Talk of deceit is the nearest these verses ever get to renouncing belief in the old gods, or perhaps, since treachery is an attribute of Satan, we could see it as a touch of demonisation. If so it might be akin to *líknisk gròm við Grímnir* 'let the *gròm* ask mercy from Grímnir [Óðinn]' (v. 12). *Gròm*, or *gramir*, seems elsewhere to refer to unspecified demons, as in the phrases *hafi þik gramir* (*Hárþ* 60) or *gramir hafi Gunnar* (*Brot* 11), so presumably the sense is 'demons may go on serving Óðinn, but I cannot'.

The two religions cannot ultimately be reconciled. The end of v. 10 makes it clear that one cannot serve Christ and Óðinn; and the end of v. 13 shows that worship of Christ entails rejecting Njarðr's / Freyja's kin and the *skop norna*.

The Christian content of these verses, already glimpsed above, is altogether more transparent, and there is no Christian doctrine of the kind that might be implausible in a composition by a recent convert: no sin or redemption, Crucifixion or Judgement.¹¹ The awesome power of God and Christ are coupled with their love in v. 12. Only two persons of the Trinity are mentioned, not the *eining sönur í þrennum greinum* of *Lilja* 1, and this accords with the absence of the Holy Spirit from other skaldic poetry from the early Christian period. The seeming reference to the son holding power under the father of Earth (*vald á frægt und foldar feðr*)¹² prompted an anxious exploration of possible Arianism by Hjelmqvist in 1908, from which he was only able to exonerate Hallfreðr by means of deft but rather implausible emendations; but other commentators have been untroubled by this. Hjelmqvist was also among those who noted that the idea of an angry god (*sonar reiði*) is paralleled in Psalm 2:11-12, and Bjarni Einarsson adds that vv. 7-8 of the same Psalm refer to the father-son relationship (1961: 191-92). This, Bjarni believes, is a sophisticated notion more plausible in a learned Christian saga-author than a neophyte. However, I am not convinced that the motifs of an angry God and of Christ holding power under God require a specific source, or are so sophisticated as to be unlikely in a missionary environment.¹³

Overall, then, the old religion of the north receives more, and more

¹¹ Unless Sigurður Skúlason is correct in interpreting *róða* in the phrase *láta fyr(ir) róða* (v. 13/6) as the first record of the word *róði* 'cross, crucifix', which he argues was grammatically either masculine or feminine, though the feminine *róða* prevailed (1931-32).

¹² There is some doubt as to whether *foldar* is to be construed with *feðr*, hence 'Father of earth' or with *vald*, hence 'power over the earth'.

¹³ I would therefore agree with Lange (1958, 36 n.1) that Hjelmqvist's 1908 discussion of v. 9 exaggerates Hallfreðr's Christian learning.

complex, coverage in these verses than Christianity, and it is viewed with a blend of nostalgia with denunciation and renunciation. The stance remains essentially polytheistic, in the sense that there is no outright statement of disbelief in the Æsir and Vanir, though there is a recognition that the perfidy of the old order must give way to the power and love of the new, and there may be hints of demonisation. If the verses are not genuine, they are a skilful and sensitive reconstruction of conversion mentality.

Style & Metre

Stylistic tests for authenticity are notoriously unreliable. Skaldic style and diction are conservative, and a skilful pastiche could in theory replicate the style of Hallfreðr or any other poet. There are Hallfreðr hallmarks, but none is both consistent enough within Hallfreðr's *œuvre* and rare enough outside it to tip the balance in arguments about authenticity. For example, unity and symmetry between two *helmingar* in a stanza, achieved by harmony of ideas, imagery, diction, or clause arrangement, or by syntactic links between *helmingar*, is distinctive of Hallfreðr, but it is far from unique to him, so this feature in the Conversion verses can only be used as supporting evidence. Further, where there are dissimilarities, they may be determined by difference of genre or topic as much as by difference of author or period. Some devices which appear in Hallfreðr's court poetry, such as the use of verbal extensions to kennings e.g. *hleyptimeiðr hlunnviggja* in *Óláfsdrápa* 5, or of echoic effects e.g. *sverði/sverðleikr* in *Óláfsdrápa* 8 and *norðra/norðr* in *Erfidrápa* 26, cf. also *Lvv.* 1, 11 and 14, are rare or non-occurring in the Conversion verses, but this is unlikely to be significant. One feature which is striking, however, is the similarity of emotional tenor between the Conversion verses and Hallfreðr's *Erfidrápa* (memorial poem) for Óláfr Tryggvason - a poem whose authenticity has never been questioned - where the skald not only laments a loss but portrays himself in an agonising dilemma, torn between belief and disbelief at the rumours that his liege lord escaped the battle of Svǫldr. He even complains about deceit on both occasions.

Metre is much more readily quantifiable than style, but again is difficult to use as a criterion for dating. Kari Gade, in a forthcoming article, adduces metrical evidence which encourages faith in a tenth-century dating for at least some of the verse in *Kormáks saga* and *Hallfreðar saga*. Unfortunately, though, the Conversion verses themselves show scarcely any of the archaic features, such as disyllabic hiatus constructions in words such as *áar* or *fíendr*, archaic name forms, or use of the expletive *of*, which might confirm a late tenth-century date; nor do they show any of the specific metrical types which would betray a later pastiche.

Cicumstantial & Contextual Evidence

In the attempt to understand these verses and form an opinion about their authenticity, I turn now to wider circumstantial and contextual evidence, especially that relating to the life and *œuvre* of Hallfreðr, and the manuscript preservation of the verses, with which I begin.

It is interesting how often mythological names have been mangled in transmission, for not only the phrases *harra Hliðskjalfar* and *frumver Friggjar*, but also *Njarðar* (twice) and *Grímnir* are affected.¹⁴ I am not certain what this tells us, other than that mythological and skaldic expertise were at low ebb among the mainly fourteenth-century scribes, and possibly that we should think in terms of a longer rather than shorter period of transmission for these verses. This seems reasonable in the light of their overall state of preservation. It is striking that two are isolated *helmingar*, and there are several textual cruces. If the verses were late fabrications one could expect them to be better preserved.

The manuscript transmission is vital in other ways, too. To read these 32 lines in *Skj*, printed in the ‘Hallfreðr’ section alongside his court poetry, encourages faith in their authenticity by implying a belief that the verses originated with the poet and pre-dated *Hallfreðar saga* by two centuries. The saga context, on the other hand, introduces the possibility that they are as much of an imaginative reconstruction as the prose. It is indeed disconcerting, if one is predisposed to accept the authenticity of the Conversion verses, to note that they are only preserved in *Hallfreðar saga*, not, for instance, in the Olaf sagas of Oddr Snorrason or Gunnlaugr Leifsson, or in *Heimskringla*, and not either in *Snorra Edda*. However, it is arguably only the ‘Óðinn’ kennings that could have earned the verses a place in *Snorra Edda*, and as we have seen, the particular kennings deployed are rather eccentric.

Bjarni Einarsson’s view of the skald sagas, as is well known, is that they are mainly fictional, drawing their love triangle plots ultimately from the Tristan story (1961, *passim*). He accordingly sees the occasional verses, *lausavísur*, in them as also likely to be later fabrications. But a number of studies, most recently Finlay 1995 and forthcoming articles from Finlay and Andersson, have undermined the claims of Romance influence and to some degree restored faith in the native origins of *Hallfreðar saga*. This does not necessarily imply historicity in the prose narrative or authenticity in the verses, but it does leave these questions more open. Moreover, the imperfect ‘fit’ between the Conversion verses and the surrounding prose (as when the king claims that v.

¹⁴ In 9/2 (normalised) *harraHliðskjalfar* is the reading only of M and 61, with the variants: *harra] herra* 62, *heṛa* Bb, 22; *-skialfar] -skialfan* 53, 557, Bb, 22, 325IX1b, Fl, *-skialfra* 62. In 10/7á *frumver Friggjar* is the reading of 61 and Fl, with the variants: *frumver] fa born vid* 53, 22, 325IX1b, Bb, *af bæn við* 557, *afvrm er* 62, *a lof* M; *friggjar] friggi* 557. In 12/2, *Njarðar* is the reading of M, 61, 62, and Fl, with the variants: *mærdar* 53, 557, 22, 325IX1b, *mærdar* Bb. In 12/3 *Grímnir* in M, 61, 62 and Fl has the variants: *grimmri* 53, *grimma* 557, *grimann* Bb, *grimman* 22, *grymman* 325IX1b – despite the mention of Freyr, Freyja and Þórr in the same *helmingr*. Finally, in 13/7 the majority reading *Njarðar* has the variants: *hiardar* 53, Bb, *Freyiu* M.

11 is no improvement on v. 10) suggests that the verses were inherited by the prose author and not composed by him, though it does not rule out the possibility of a date in between Hallfreðr's lifetime and the compilation of the saga.¹⁵

The Conversion verses constitute five out of thirty-three verses in *Hallfreðar saga* ('M' version). If we could be certain that the others either were or were not authentic, this would at least be an indicator. But, as usual, certainty eludes us, and opinions have been divided, although in general scepticism has increased through time. The faith of Einar Ólafur Sveinsson (ÍF 8, 1931, lix-lx) contrasts with the atheism, as it were, of Bjarni Einarsson 1961, and although the metrical evidence adduced by Gade allows for a tenth-century dating, it does not prove it. The other verse in the saga which wrestles with religion, Hallfreðr's 'last verse', in which he speaks of his dread of Hell, is particularly problematic, but there is undoubtedly a possibility that it was composed late for inclusion in the 'O' redaction of the saga. Otherwise its absence from the 'M' redaction would be an inexplicable piece of carelessness. Moreover, we know that false attribution can even afflict formal encomium, since one of the *Óláfs drápur Tryggvasonar* has been recognised as a twelfth century product for a very long time, despite its attribution to Hallfreðr in Bergsbók (*Skj* AI, 573).

The preservation of *Hallfreðar saga* partially within *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta*, and its general kinship with the *konunga sögur*, in which we would have much higher expectations concerning verse authenticity, might inspire some faith in the verses, especially when, as is the case with the Conversion verses, they occur within the most Olaf-dominated part of the saga. On the other hand, the verses are presented as part of the action (*Þá kvað Hallfreðr visu...*) rather than in the manner of footnotes to authenticate the narrative (*Þetta sannar Hallfreðr..*). They are 'situational' rather than 'authenticating' (using the terminology of Whaley 1993), and poems cited in this manner are generally regarded as carrying less historical weight.

Overall, then, the context of the Conversion verses' preservation in *Hallfreðar saga* yields mixed messages about the likelihood of authenticity. I would estimate the factors pro and con to be of roughly equal weight.

As to the general likelihood that Hallfreðr would have composed verses about the Conversion, I would see this as strong. No one could deny that Hallfreðr was 'a real historical person, and a great poet' or that Hallfreðr's conversion is a 'historical fact' (Bjarni Einarsson 1981, 217 and 218). His devotion to the missionary king Óláfr Tryggvason is, for instance, attested from the twelfth century, when Hallar-Steinn says that Hallfreðr, *hróðar gjarn* composed a *drápa* for the king (*Rst* 34, *Skj* AI, 552, BI, 534; cf. *Ísldr* 12).

¹⁵ It appears highly likely that the verses were originally a sequence, even a unitary poem. Ohlmarks calls them *Goðavísur* (1957, 490); Sophie Krijn wondered whether they might be fragments of the lost *Uppreistardrápa* (1931, 126).

Óláfr is commemorated not only as Hallfreðr's patron but specifically as his godfather in Hallfreðr's *Erfiðrápa* for Óláfr, v. 26:

Hlautk þanns æztr vas einna
 – ek sanna þat – manna
 und niðbyrði Norðra
 norðr goðföður orðinn.

'I gained a godfather who was the greatest of all men in the north under the burden of Norðri's kin [dwarfs -> sky]. I vouch for that' (cf. v. 28).

The first preserved narratives of Hallfreðr's conversion appear in Oddr Snorrason's saga of Óláfr Tryggvason at the end of the twelfth century, and his biography is developed into a saga, with influences from all kinds of narratives including legends of Sigvatr,¹⁶ while his persona is clearly drawn in conformity with the emergent stereotype of the wilful and lovelorn skald. The theme of reluctant conversion is a *leitmotiv* throughout the saga. An accusation of continued paganism leads to bloodshed for which Hallfreðr has to atone by reluctantly maiming the recalcitrant heathen Þorleifr; he travels the perilous (*óhrein*) route to pagan Gautland, where his religious observance amounts to blowing in the shape of a cross over his drink but not praying much; he marries a pagan woman who is then baptised; he makes further reparation by composing a presumably religious poem, *Uppreistardrápa*; he is twice restrained from taking blood revenge by a posthumous visitation from Óláfr Tryggvason. Finally, on his death at sea, his body is washed up on the Holy Island of Iona, where it is buried and the treasures given him by King Óláfr are made into sacred objects. From the point when he meets Óláfr, then, Hallfreðr's whole turbulent career is punctuated, even dominated, by the influence of his sovereign and the new religion. But again the evidence is ambivalent, for it is not clear whether the verses about Hallfreðr's conversion belong to the historical kernel which inspired this rich development, or whether they are part of the later process of elaboration.

As a functionary skald whose career straddled the turn of the millennium, Hallfreðr composed for both pagan and Christian patrons. Nine *helmingar* ascribed to him in *Snorra Edda* are among the most pagan verses we have, presenting a jarl in a sacred marriage to Jörð – goddess and land. Despite problems with the traditional editorial ascription to a *Hákonardrápa* (e.g. Fidjestøl 1982, 102-3), Hákon - whose paganism was an integral part of his political identity, and whose propaganda machine was fed by sophisticated

¹⁶ Experiences in common between the two poets include these: A Christian king Óláfr (Tryggvason or Haraldsson) initially refuses to hear the skald's poem; at royal command Sigvatr uses material from *Uppreistarsaga*, the story of Creation, in a poem while Hallfreðr composes an *Uppreistardrápa*; both go on missions to Gautland; their royal patrons make posthumous appearances to them at the time of their deaths (see Bjarni Einarsson 1961, 207, 232 and references there).

pagan poems such as *Vellekla* – is the likeliest dedicatee. The remainder of Hallfreðr's court poetry is almost all for Óláfr Tryggvason, belonging either to the *Óláfsdrápa*, a catalogue of campaigns, or to the *Erfidrápa*, which centres on the tragic defeat at Svǫldr. According to *Hallfreðar saga*, the king only gave Hallfreðr's poetry a hearing with reluctance, presumably because he favoured too pagan a brew of Óðinn's mead, while Hallfreðr clearly feels a tension between his poetry and his change of religion (opening of ch. 6).

As it turns out, composing for a Christian ruler does not present a major technical problem to the neophyte skald. Kennings containing pagan allusions are not altogether abandoned. The god-name *Týr*, for instance, forms the base word of warrior-kennings in *Óláfsdrápa* 9 and *Erfidrápa* 17, and wolves appear as the steeds of troll-wives in *Óláfsdrápa* 6. However, there is a slight decrease in such expressions, which forms part of – and helps to initiate – a wider trend which has been noted by several scholars (e.g. de Vries 1934, Fidjestøl 1993). My own view would be that expressions of this sort were already stereotyped and religiously void in much pre-Conversion poetry, and they certainly are here. In *Erfidrápa* 15, for example, *sléttan sylg Surts ættar* 'smooth drink of giants [poetry]' is immediately followed by the name of the missionary king Óláfr himself; and the reference to the sky as the 'burden of Norðri's kin' is juxtaposed with the word *goðfaðir* in v. 26 (above). It is inconceivable that the mythical allusion is a piece of defiance at this point, so it must mean that the idea of dwarfs holding up the sky was a mere poetic whimsy, not an article of faith to Hallfreðr.

Meanwhile, a moderate amount of Christian content is injected into the ancient form of the *drápa*. Hallfreðr does not praise Óláfr for the conversion of the northern lands, or for pagan-crushing crusades, but casts him twice as the bane of heathen sanctuaries, once in the kenning *hǫrgbrjótr* in *Óláfsdrápa* 3, and once in the adjective *végrimmr*, which is juxtaposed with Óláfr's enemies, the notoriously pagan Wends (*Vinðr*), in the alliterative scheme of v. 4a. In the *Erfi-drápa* Óláfr is commemorated as Hallfreðr's godfather (cited above), and there is a prayer for his soul in v. 29, which seems to launch a tradition continued by Sigvatr and others.¹⁷ In the same verse the exciting eschatological references to the sky splitting are a superb example of continuity between pagan Ragnarøk and Christian Doomsday, looking back to Eyvindr Skáldaspillir's *Hák* 20 as well as looking forward to, and influencing, Arnórr jarlaskáld in *Porfinnsdrápa* 24. By dint of skilful compromise, therefore, Hallfreðr produces resounding praise for rulers of both religious persuasions, rather like the craftsmen whose moulds could cast Thor's hammers and Christian crosses with equal ease. Nevertheless, the conversion was clearly an anxiety to a poet steeped in the pagan tradition living precisely at that period – a threat both to his

¹⁷ Fidjestøl prints the seven examples from court poetry in a useful survey of religious content (1993, 117-18).

long-cherished religion and to his livelihood – and it seems more likely than not that he would have composed stanzas about this major personal and public upheaval. In support of this is other poetry reflecting the power struggle between the old gods of the north and the new ones from the south, for instance the quatrain from Eilífr Guðrúnarson cited above.

Conclusion

The large and important question about the authenticity of the Conversion verses spawns a myriad of other questions about their content and context, and it would be unrealistic to pretend that certain answers can be given. The dating of *dróttkvætt* poetry is formidably difficult, especially given its conservatism, and the interpretation of specific details and of literary links often uncertain. For instance, does the fact that *ór heiðnum dómi* occurs in a verse by Sigvatr as well as in one of the Conversion verses encourage faith in the latter, or indicate one of the sources for pseudo-Hallfreðr's clever pastiche? The debate therefore has to draw evidence both from the verses themselves, and from their context. To me the strongest indicators against authenticity are the possible echoes of Christian law and the preservation of the verses only in *Hallfreðar saga*. It is easy to envisage the fabrication of verses as part of a general development of the Hallfreðr legend, which is so intimately bound up with that of Óláfr Tryggvason that *Hallfreðar saga* as a whole is as much a narrative of conversion and the tension between the two religions as it is a love story (cf. Mundal 1974, 119). In other cultures one could expect such forgeries to be more unequivocally anti-pagan, but this is not necessarily the case here. The saga appears fascinated by Hallfreðr's religious angst and rather indulgent towards it, so a verse forger could arguably have shared the same sensibility and have invented the verses in response to traditions about the poet who proved such a slippery catch to the monarch angling for new Christians.

On the other hand, it is beyond dispute that poetry played a major role in the pagan-Christian debate in the years around the millennium, and that the conversion affected the life and output of Hallfreðr more than any other skald known to us. It seems likely that he would compose about it, and if he did, it would be curious if the verses were lost and then replaced by fakes – excellent fakes, which show some general similarities with Hallfreðr's court poetry, especially the urgently personal tone, the wit, and the integration of *helmingar* within stanzas. The verses' poor state of preservation and the mismatch of prose and verse in *Hallfreðar saga* ch. 6 would argue for composition not later than the twelfth century – certainly not contemporary with the saga at the beginning of the thirteenth.

As to the verses themselves, my provisional view – and I will be grateful to have the opinions of others – is that there is no detail, metrical, stylistic, lexical or conceptual, which obliges us to look for a date outside the conversion period.

I would suggest that some of the more obscure pagan allusions encourage rather than discourage the assumption of authenticity. On the evidence of the trouble that later copyists had with names such as Grímnir and even Njǫrðr, and of the necessity for a *Snorra Edda*, knowledge of the old mythology declined substantially. The Christian doctrine embedded in the verses is elementary, and the emphasis on divine power is entirely in keeping with what we know about the conversion of the Nordic peoples. So too is the view of conversion as a ‘transfer of loyalty’, ‘a matter of shifting allegiance’ (Karras 1997, 101 and 105). The transfer is between gods, but it is also a consequence of a new earthly allegiance. Hallfreðr’s conversion takes place under duress from the *hǫlða reifir* apostrophised in v. 11. One can almost agree with Lange that ‘Hallfreds Christentum heisst Olaf’ (1958, 38). Meanwhile, Hallfreðr’s reluctance and ambivalence is the personal correlative of the conversion process in Scandinavia – ‘gradual, piecemeal, muddled and undisciplined’ (Fletcher 1997, 416), and it is in tune with material evidence of pagan-Christian continuity (e.g. Abrams 1998, 120-1).

If twelfth-century fabrications, then, the Conversion verses represent a remarkably – implausibly? – good attempt to get inside the troubled head of a reluctant convert, and they can take their place alongside *Snorra Edda* as one of the most creative glances back over the great religious divide, though their value is diminished by our total ignorance of the time and milieu to which they belong. If genuine, the verses are a precious rarity, given ‘the unfortunate condition of near-sourcelessness’ (Abrams 1998, 109) which dogs the study of the Christianisation of the North, and they modify, though they do not overturn, the view that that process was ‘top-down’, instigated by rulers, everything to do with politics and with external manifestations of cultural identity and nothing to do with religious belief. They give unparalleled access to the intensity of the personal and professional dilemma which conversion posed to this millennium man.

References

- Abrams, Lesley. 1998. ‘History and Archaeology: the conversion of Scandinavia.’ In *Conversion and Christianity in the North Sea World*, ed. Barbara Crawford. St Andrews; 109-28.
- Andersson, Theodore M., forthcoming. ‘The Literary Context of the Skald Sagas: the Love Triangle’. In Poole, forthcoming.
- Bjarni Einarsson. 1961. *Skáldasögur : Um uppruna og eðli ástaskáldasagnanna fornu*. Reykjavík.
- Bjarni Einarsson. 1981. ‘The last hour of Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld as described in *Hallfreðarsaga*.’ *Proceedings of the Eighth Viking Congress*. Ed. Hans Bekker-Nielsen et al. Odense; pp. 217-221.
- Cleasby-Vigfusson: Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, rev. William Craigie, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*. Oxford, 1957.
- Edda. Die Lieder des Codex Regius*. I. Text, ed. Gustav Neckel, 3rd edn, rev. Hans Kuhn. Heidelberg 1962.
- Fidjestøl, Bjarne. 1982. *Det norrøne fyrstediktet*. Øvre Ervik.
- Fidjestøl, Bjarne. 1993. ‘The contribution of skaldic studies’. In *Viking Revaluations*, ed. Anthony Faulkes and Richard Perkins. London; 100-20.

- Finlay, Alison. 1995. 'Skalds, Troubadours and Sagas', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 24, 105-53.
- Finlay, Alison. Forthcoming. 'The European Context of the Poets' Sagas'. In Poole, forthcoming.
- Fletcher, Richard. 1997. *The Conversion of Europe*. London.
- Fritzner, Johann. 1886-96. *Ordbog over det gamle norske Sprog* I-III, 2nd edn. Oslo. Repr. 1954.
- Gade, Kari Ellen. Forthcoming. 'Age and authenticity of the *lausavísur* in the Skald Sagas'. In Poole, forthcoming.
- Hallfreðar saga*: In *Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit 8. Reykjavík 1939; pp. 133-200.
- Hallfreðar saga*, ed. Bjarni Einarsson. Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, Rit 15. Reykjavík 1977.
- Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk fornrit 26-28. Reykjavík 1941-51.
- Íslendingabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, Íslenzk fornrit 1. Reykjavík 1968; 1-28.
- Hjelmqvist, Theodor. 1908. 'Var Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld arian?' *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 24, 155-79.
- Hofmann, Dietrich. 1955. *Nordisch-Englische Lehnbeziehungen der Wikingerzeit*. København.
- Karras, Ruth Mazo. 1997. 'God and Man in Medieval Scandinavia: writing – and gendering – the Conversion' In *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages*, ed. James Muldoon. Gainesville, Florida; 100-14.
- Krijn, S. A. 1931. 'Halfred vandraedaskald'. *Neophilologus* 16, 46-55 and 121-31.
- Kuhn, Hans. 1942. 'Das nordgermanische Heidentum in den ersten christlichen Jahrhunderten.' *Zeitschrift für deutsche Altertumskunde* 79, 133-66.
- LP: Lexicon Poeticum Antiquæ Linguae Septentrionalis*, 2nd edn, rev. Finnur Jónsson. København 1931, repr. 1966.
- Lange, Wolfgang. 1958. *Studien zur christlichen Dichtung der Nordgermanen 1000-1200*. Göttingen.
- Meissner, Rudolf. 1921. *Die Kenningar der Skalden*. Bonn & Leipzig.
- Mundal, Else. 1974. *Fylgjemotiva i norrøn litteratur*. Oslo.
- Ohlmarks, Åke. 1957. *Tors skalder och Vite-Krists*. Stockholm.
- Paasche, Fr. 1914. *Kristendom og Kvad*. In his *Hedenskap og Kristendom*, 1948. Oslo.
- Poole, Russell G. (ed). *Text, Vocation and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*. Forthcoming.
- Sigurður Skúlason. 1931-32. 'At láta fyr(ir) róða.' *Acta Philologica Scandinavica* 6, 199-202.
- Skald: Den norsk-isländska skaldediktningen*, I, ed. Ernst A. Kock. Lund 1946.
- Skj: Den norsk-isländske skjaldedigtning*, AI, BI, ed. Finnur Jónsson, København 1912-15, repr. 1967-73.
- Snorra Edda: Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson. København 1931.
- Vries, J. de. 1934. *De skaldkenninger met mythologischen inhoud*. Haarlem.
- Whaley, Diana. 1993. 'Skalds and Situational Verses in Heimskringla'. In *Snorri Sturluson*, ed. Alois Wolf. ScriptOralia 51. Tübingen; pp. 245-66.