

Völuspá and the Book of Revelation

Two of the most obvious questions facing a reader of *Völuspá* are when this poem was composed and whether or not its poet was heathen. In this essay I shall look for answers in the Book of Revelation. Naturally the poet's dates and religious status depend on each other, for Iceland began to lose its heathen religion in the years following conversion in AD 1000 and the volcanic action in *Völuspá* (st. 25, 34-5, 50) shows that the author of this work was probably an Icelander. *Völuspá* is a long sublime poem seemingly linked to this time, in which one or more sibyls relate the history of the creation, from its distant beginnings to the world's imminent end, through a series of visionary tableaux depicting Norse gods, giants, aspects of time and men. The gods in these visions make, regulate and then slowly lose their universe in an escalation of error which most commentators (McKinnell, 1994: 107-28) regard as a moral decline, given that Baldr's death half way through *Völuspá* (in st. 31-2) appears due to the growth of evil in Loki and then leads to the image of mortal sinners being punished in hell (st. 35-8). Other Old Norse-Icelandic Eddic poems do not focus on good and evil in the same way, and Ursula Dronke has made a subtle reading of Loki in Judas' role (1997: 55, 95-6); but if the poet of *Völuspá* was Christian, why does he or she show such respect for the gods of a heathen cult? If heathen, how do we explain the Christian cast of Baldr and the eschatology of the second half of this poem? Dronke, the greatest and most recent editor of *Völuspá*, is not alone in treating this poet as a heathen but with an awareness of Christian forms, including sibylline poems: such as the *Cantus Sibyllae*, part of the Christmas Office from the ninth to eleventh centuries in England; or the *Prophetiae Sibyllae magae*, a poem which was known in the ninth century in Alcuin's abbey of Tours, possibly therefore in (Viking) York. These sibylline texts show some likeness with *Völuspá*, although Dronke has shown the sibylline tradition on which the Icelandic poet relies to be essentially heathen and from Scandinavia (1992: 3-23; 1997: 93-104).

At the same time Dronke also refers to 'external effects (...) that could come from eschatological homilies or apocalyptic visions of sinners in hell' (1997: 93). These are of interest, for as their number grows after Baldr they become an internal framework and point to a well-known Christian source. It is the Revelation of St John which provides some more striking parallels, some of which have been recognized. In Dronke's text and translation (which I follow with my variants underlined>, the second half of *Völuspá* may be quoted as follows:

37.

Sal sá hún standa sólo fiarri,
Náströndo á, norðr horfa dyrr.
Fello eitrdropar inn um lífóra.
Sá er undinn salr orna hryggiom.

*A hall she saw standing remote from the sun
on Dead Body Shore. Its door looks north.
There fell drops of venom in through the roof vent.
That hall is woven of serpents' spines.*

38.

Sá hún þar vaða þunga strauma
menn meinsvara ok morðvarga,
oc þannz annars glepr eyrarúno.
þar saug Niðhögr ná framgengna,
sleit vargr vera. Vítóð er eun,
eða hvað?

*She saw there wading onerous streams
men perjured and wolfish murderers
and the one who seduces another's close-trusted wife.
There Malice Striker sucked corpses of the dead,
the wolf tore men. Do you still seek to know?
And what?*

39.

Austr sat in aldna í lárniði,
ok freddi þar Fenris kindir.
Verðr af þeim öllum einna nækkorr

*In the east she sat, the old one, in Iron Wood,
and bred there the broods of Fenrir.
There will come from them all one of that number*

tungls tíugari í trollz hamí.

to be a moon-snatcher in troll's skin.

40.

Fylliz fiörvi feigra manna,
rýðr ragna síðt rauðom dreyra.
Svört verðr sólskin af sumor eptir,
veðr öll válynd. Vitoð er enn,
eða hvat?

*It sates itself on the life-blood of fated men,
paints red the powers' homes with crimson gore.
Black become the sun's beams in the summers that follow,
weathers all treacherous. Do you still seek to know?
And what?*

There is then an image of the harping giant Eggþér, cockerels and a Cerberus-like dog named Garmr baying in a cave-mouth in expectation of the End.

44.

Bræðr muno beriaz ok at bönum verða[z],
muno systrungar sífiom spilla.
Hart er í heimi, hórdómr mikill,
skeggöld, skálmöld, — skildir ro klofnir —
vindöld, vargöld, áðr veröld steypiz.

*Brothers will fight and kill each other,
sisters' children will defile kinship.
It is harsh in the world, whoredom rife,
an axe age, a sword age — shields are riven —
a wind age, a wolf age, before the world
goes headlong.*

Mun engi maðr öðrom þyrna.

No man will have mercy on another.

45.

Leika Míms synir, en miðtuðr kyndiz
at en[ø] galla Giallarnorni.
Hátt blæsa Heimdalr — horn er á lopti —
mælir Óðinn við Míms höfuð.
Skelfr Yggdrasils askr standandi,
ymr it aldna tré en iönnun losnar.

*Mímr's sons sport, but fate's measure is lit
at the sound of the clear-ringing Clarion Horn.
Loud blows Heimdalr — the horn points to the sky—
Óðinn talks with Mímr's head.
Yggdrasill shivers, the ash, as it stands.
The old tree groans, and the giant slips free.*

Loki breaks free from his bonds and sails to Ásgarðr with a fleet of giants and other monsters all ready to destroy the Æsir. One by one the gods Freyr, Óðinn and Þórr step out to die in battle against Surtr the fire-demon, the wolf Fenrir and the World Serpent, although Víðarr avenges Óðinn on Fenrir and Þórr appears to kill the Serpent before he dies (st. 53) and the world sinks in flames (st. 54). The speaking sibyl promises more (st. 55):

56.

Sér hón upp koma öðro sinni
iðrð ór ægi iðiaðgræna.

*She sees come up a second time
earth out of ocean once again green.*

A new generation of Æsir find each other and their ancestors' artefacts on iðavellir, Baldr returns to make peace with his slayer Höðr and to dwell in *Hroptz sigtóptir* ('Hroptz's victory mounds', st. 59; cf. Rev 21:7: *qui vicerit, possidebit haec*), and the god Hœnir reemerges to pick out the twigs of (heathen) lots, while apparently the sons of Baldr and Höðr live together in the *vinðheim víðan* ('wide wind realm', st. 60). The scenery becomes ethereal:

61.

Sal sér hón standa sólo fegra,
gulli þakðan, á Gimlé.
Þar skolo dýggvar dróttir byggja
ok um aldrága ynðis nióta.

*A hall she sees standing, brighter than the sun,
roofed with gold, on Jewel Clearing.
There shall the worthy warrior bands dwell
and all their days of life enjoy delight.*

At this point the *Hauksbók* text of *Völuspá* has a couple of lines which Dronke leaves out of her main text. I shall come back to this stanza later:

H62.

Þá kemr inn ríki at regindómi,
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Then the Mighty One comes to the court of Judgement,

Þflugr, ofan, sá er öllu ræðr.

powerful, from above, He who rules all.

62.

Þar kemr inn dimmi dreki fljúgandi,
naðr fránn, neðan frá Niðafiðlóm.
Berr sér í fiððrom – flygr völr yfir –
Niðhöggr, náí. Nú mun hón sökkvaz.

*There comes the shadowy dragon flying,
glittering serpent, from below from Dark of the Moon Hills.
He carries in his pinions – he flies over the field –
Malice Striker, corpses. Now will she sink.*

Thus we have a parting image of Heaven and hell. With *Völuspá* a working assumption is often made that the Icelandic poet and his audience would treat Christianity in the second millennium as the natural sequel to their polytheism in the first; for them the year 1000, like the Day of Judgement, would mark the transition (McKinnell, 1994: 107). However, in order to date *Völuspá* more securely to c. 1000, we must first see how far Christians in Iceland feared this date as the coming of the End.

Just after this time there is evidence that this fear was widespread in England in a sermon of Wulfstan, recently ordained as bishop of London. In *Secundum Marcum* (?c. 1002), he says:

Nu sceal hit nyde yfelian swyðe, forðam þe hit nealæcð georne his timan, ealswa hit awriten is 7 gefyrn was gewitegod: *Post mille annos soluetur Satanas. Þusend geara 7 eac ma is nu agan syððan Crist was mid mannum on menniscan hiwe, 7 nu syndon Satanases bendas swyðe toslopena, 7 Antecristes tima is wel gehende, 7 by hit is on worulde a swa leng swa wacre.* (Bethurum 1952: 136-7 (V.40-47))

Now things must of necessity become very bad, because it is fast approaching his time, just as is written and was formerly prophesied: 'After a thousand years Satan will be let loose'. A thousand years and more has now passed since Christ was among men in human form, and now Satan's bonds are very frayed, and the time of Antichrist is very close, and so the longer the world goes on the worse it is.

Wulfstan drew his quotation from Rev 20:7, the only time he cites the year 1000 as a date for the Apocalypse. He often speaks of the Last Days, so it is worth noting his reluctance to deal more with Revelation's doctrine of the thousand years.

His caution is the result of fourth-century Roman orthodoxy, which refused to endorse the date of 1000 for the Second Coming, or indeed any fixed date. A sketch of the ways in which Revelation was read over time will make Wulfstan's background clearer (Cohn, 1970; McGinn, 1998). The Book of Revelation is an ancient work probably written in c. 90 AD in Asia Minor by an author other than the Apostle to whom the title refers. The text starts out as a pastoral letter to seven churches around the Aegean. Thereafter John, resting on the isle of Patmos, is said to recount a divinely inspired vision in which the future Day of Judgement is revealed. This vision takes an often incoherent form, but keeps an obsessive eye on the Aegean churches whose low standards had earned them the letter. Seven churches; (Christ) the Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes; seven seals on the heavenly scroll which are broken by the Lamb to reveal the Last Days; seven angels blowing trumpets to reveal the means of the world's destruction; seven visions, through which the birth of Jesus and His combat with Satan are mystically portrayed with reference to the Devil as a 'Dragon' which the archangel Michael throws down to hell; seven bowls of plagues; and then the Whore of Babylon, astride the Beast whose seven heads were meant to recall the seven hills of Rome; then more visions. At the climax, in Rev. 20:1-3, the narrator says (appropriate text drawn from the *Revised English Bible*):

I saw an angel coming down from heaven with the key to the abyss and a great chain in his hand. ² He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent who is the Devil, or Satan, and chained him up for a thousand years: ³ he threw him into the abyss, shutting and sealing it over him, so that he might not seduce the nations again till the thousand years were ended. After that he must be let loose for a little while.

After reading these verses, in which the number 1000 makes such a striking counterpoint to the number seven, we might be justified in assuming that most Europeans of the late tenth century believed that the world would end in the year 1000.

Yet the Church, from the fourth century on, went so far as to discourage this type of numerology ('millenarianism' or 'chiliasm'). St Augustine and his followers encouraged a figurative or symbolic interpretation of the 1000 years in Rev. 20. The Revelation of John was conceived within a tradition of biblical prophecy of which the more important older instances are the Book of Daniel 11-13 (written at the time of a Greek-Syriac tyranny over Israel in c. 168 BC); St Paul's 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 and 2 Thessalonians 2 (c. 51 AD); and the 'Little Apocalypse' from Mark 13, Matt 24-5 and Luke 21 of the end of the first century. Taking these texts together, we see the Day of Judgement prophesied at an undisclosed time, after the blowing of a heavenly trumpet, the Lord's descent from heaven and the resurrection of the dead. To this orderly view of the future the lurid imagery of Revelation offers a dramatic contrast. Its combination of Judaic symbolism, Babylonian mythology and contemporary political reference make it, in McGinn's words, 'the most powerful apocalyptic work ever written' (1998: 14). In Revelation, within the time this work was written, the 'Whore of Babylon' was probably taken to be Rome, the persecutor of Christians everywhere; the Antichrist, or Beast, one of two, was Nero (ruled 54-68), or later Domitian (ruled 81-96); the thousand years was initially thought to refer to the kingdom of God on earth, which Jesus would inaugurate upon His Second Coming and in which He would live with the resurrected Saints, and at the end of which the souls of the unsaintly dead would be judged.

In due course, when the Second Coming did not arrive as hoped in the first or second century, Christians turned to the so-called Sibylline Books, of which fourteen survive, written by Jews and Christians with Classical models from the mid-second century onwards; and back to Revelation itself. Various types of chiliasm were read into Revelation. Bishops Papias (early second century) and Irenaeus, who ended as bishop of Lyons in Gaul 178-200, were prominent believers in the kingdom of a thousand years which had begun with Christ's birth. Another chiliast, Tertullian of Carthage (c. 160-c. 200), identified the force inhibiting or restraining the Antichrist, which is cited in 2 Thess. 2, with the Roman empire. The Roman presbyter Hippolytus, who died in 235, was concerned to show that the world would not end in c. 300. His contemporary, the Latin Syrian poet Commodian of the mid-third century, interpreted two Antichrists in Revelation, one of them a revived Nero, the other a Persian emperor. In the early fourth century the Roman convert Lucius Lactantius established this doctrine of two Antichrists followed by Jesus' 1000-year reign. The anti-Roman bias within these interpretations, however, began to change on the accession of the emperor Constantine I (ruled 306-37), who legalized Christianity in 324. Henceforth it would be less simple for chiliasts to identify the empire with Babylon, and more so to identify first the Roman emperor, then later the Vatican Papacy, with the Kingdom of God on earth to which Revelation refers in ch. 20. St Augustine, who inclined to chiliasm in his youth and yet rejected it after the Gothic sack of Rome in 410, confirmed in *De civitate Dei* that Rome henceforth stood for a spiritual, not earthly, city of God; the corollary was that literal readings of Revelation were to be abandoned; that the Second Coming might arrive at any moment, rather like one's own apprehension of grace; and that the struggle between Lamb and the Antichrist in Revelation should now be read as symbolic of the choice we all face between good and evil. But Augustine did not reject the ideas of Revelation entirely; in book 18, ch. 23, he quotes the *Cantus Sibyllae* ('Sibyl's song'), a poem which was translated from a Greek original (*Oracula sibyllina* VIII) and which consists of 27 acrostic verses on the Signs of Judgement (Dronke, 1992: 5-6).

Tyconius, a North African like Augustine (c. 330-90), further pursued Augustine's attack on apocalypticism with entirely figural readings in his *In Apocalypsim* (c. 385).

Together they founded the Roman view of the Last Days which has lasted until now, and which rejects any form of chiliasm or belief in the 1000-year reign of Christ. From the fifth century onwards, the doctrine of the thousand years was thrown out as a hindrance to the thief-in-the-night Second Coming which is disclosed in 1 Thess 5:2 and indicated more fully in Mark 13:33-7 and 2 Thess 2. So, for example, it was Augustine's orthodoxy which influenced Pope Gregory the Great when he wrote to King Æthelberht of Kent, at the outset of the Roman mission to England in 601, calmly telling him to expect the End of the world and the coming of the unending kingdom of the Saints (*Historia ecclesiastica* I.32). Chiliasm survived as a mystical variant of this doctrine, with the addition of an important fourth-century change: since Rome was now Christian and could be regarded as the embodiment of the thousand-year reign which begins with Jesus' birth, the date for the Second Coming could be fixed in the year 1000. This date for Doomsday can be read into Rev 20, if Satan's chaining there is held to take place at his failure to devour the infant Jesus in 0-1 AD earlier in Rev. 12:1-6; in this case, Satan's ascent from the abyss later in Rev. 20:3, 'for a little while' as the narrator says, would represent his role in Armageddon prior to the Day of Judgement in AD 1000.

This identifying of Babylon's destruction with the end (rather than the beginning) of the 1000-year reign marked an important shift in the way the Apocalypse was perceived. It could enable tenth-century chiliasts to join the more lurid imagery of Rev 12-17, in which the Whore of Babylon is destroyed at the start of Jesus' 1000-year reign, to the relatively more straightforward verses of Rev 20-22, in which John prophesies the end of the 1000 years, the uprising of Dragon, Gog and Magog, then God's final victory and the descent of the Heavenly City to earth for the souls of all the just. As two divine wars were made one in this way, one ferocious Armageddon was created to which all chiliasts could look forward at the end of the first millennium.

The question is whether or not this chiliasm formed part of the Christian preaching to which the poet of *Völuspá* was exposed. That he used public sermons for his picture of human infamy is clear enough in his image of hell in st. 38/1-6. In that they are punished after death, the Icelandic sinners of *Völuspá* resemble the murderers, whoremongers and liars (among others) in whose damnation John rejoices in Rev 21:8 (McKinnell, 1994: 123). The poet's immediate source may be a sermon performed in a literal translation from Old English: his phrase *menn meinsvara ok morðvarga* ('men perjured and wolfish murderers') appears to be modelled on the OE expression *mansworan and morþorwyrtan*, which survives not only in Wulfstan's *Sermo Lupi*, but also, in variant forms, in his *De fide catholica, Sermo de baptisate, De regula canonicorum* and *Sermo ad populum* (Bethurum, 1952: 163 (VII.130), 183 (VIIIc.158-60), 192 (Xa.11-12), 231 (XIII.93)). Witness, also, the *Völuspá*-poet's portrait of moral decline in st. 44. The family feud, fratricide and incest here recalls Wulfstan's expression *ne byrhð broðor öþrum* ('no brother will help another'); and there are similar phrases in *Secundum Marcum, Secundum Lucam* and *Sermo Lupi* (Bethurum, 1952: 140 (V.98-9), 125 (III.54-5), 263 (XX(EI).71)). The whoredom in *Völuspá*, like Loki's allegation that each god has been Freyja's *hór* ('bed-fellow') in *Lokasenna* 30, is particularly reminiscent of Wulfstan's language in his passage which includes perjurers in *Sermo Lupi* (c. 1014):

Her syndan mannsлагan 7 mægslagan 7 mæsserbanan 7 mynsterhatan; 7 her syndan mansworan 7 morþorwyrtan; and her syndan myltestran 7 bearnmyrðran 7 fule forelegene horingas manege.

Here there are slayers of men and slayers of kinsmen, slayers of mass-priests and haters of monasteries; and here there are perjurers and murderers, and here there are whores and child-murderers and many foul fornications. (Bethurum, 1952: 273 (XX(EI).161-4)

Wulfstan re-used and varied words, sentences and even paragraphs from one sermon to another; other preachers copied his style (Orchard, 1992). Here it seems that one of Wulfstan's imitators, possibly an Icelander translating into his own language, had caught the poet's ear in public meetings in Iceland.

This poet's acquaintance with the ideas, if not with the text, of Revelation continues in a way which matches its structure in broad outline. Above, st. 44 echoes not only Wulfstan but also Rev 13:7-8: our first parallel (McKinnell, 1994: 123). The ogress in *Völuspá* 39 breeding monsters, particularly a cosmic moon-swallowing wolf *i lárnvíði* ('in Iron Wood'), might recall the whore of Babylon mounted on her Beast within another sterile place (*desertum*) in Rev 17:1-6:

¹One of the seven angels who held the seven bowls came and spoke to me; 'Come,' he said, 'I will show you the verdict on the great whore, she who is enthroned over many waters. ²The kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and people the world over have made themselves drunk on the wine of her fornication.' ³He carried me in spirit into the wilderness, and I saw a woman mounted on a scarlet beast which was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. ⁴The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and decked out with gold and precious stones and pearls. In her hand she held a gold cup full of obscenities and the foulness of her fornication. ⁵Written on her forehead was a name with a secret meaning: 'Babylon the great, the mother of whores and of every obscenity on earth.' ⁶I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of God's people, and with the blood of those who had borne their testimony to Jesus.

The blood and darkness which follows in *Völuspá* 40 is also reminiscent of this grim scene. So far we have three parallels. John McKinnell has seen other allusions to the Christian Apocalypse in *Völuspá* 45-7 (1994: 124): the blowing of Heimdallr's horn in st. 45, a sign of Ragnarök, is like that of the first six of seven angels boding doom with their trumpets in Rev 8: 6-9 and 19; Loki bursts his chains in st. 46 and 55, while Satan is allowed to slip his bonds in Rev 20:7 (and in Wulfstan's *Secundum Marcum*, in Bethurum 1952: 136-7 (V.40-47)); possibly the image of dwarves leaving their mountains in st. 47 resembles that of the dead rising to face judgement in Rev 20:12-13. Of course, the last battle between good and evil is a theme common to *Völuspá* 47-53 and Rev 20: 8-10. But then the death of Baldr back in st. 31-2 appears Christ-like probably for the same reason. Given at least three centuries of trade with Christendom, the old *papar* and the relatively high number of Irish settlers in Iceland, it seems likely that some of these apocalyptic details entered Iceland paganism long before the composition of *Völuspá*: the poet may not have seen them as new.

Where it seems likely that he increased rather than renewed his religion's partial debt to Christianity, might be seen in three further points of comparison. Particularly in *Völuspá* 39 the image of *sat in aldna i lárnvíði* ('the old one sat in Iron Wood') resembles the poet's use of an (otherwise unattested) Norse mythologem to answer the *mulierem sedentem super bestiam coccineam* ('woman mounted on a scarlet beast') and *mater fornicationum et abominationum terrae* ('mother of whores and of every obscenity on earth'). Later, with the Norse world gone down in flames, the poet's image of the new earth rising from the sea in *Völuspá* 56 seems rather close, as McKinnell has shown (1994: 124), to John's vision of 'a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away' (Rev 21:1). In Icelandic terms, however, the earth's renewal in *Völuspá* is probably a heathen motif which stems from the seasonal rise and fall of the year and which is still plain to see in the self-sown acres of *Völuspá* 59 (Dronke 1997: 59-60, 94-6, 101). Thirdly, in st. 61-2, the end of this poem, two close parallels arise which cannot be put down to a coincidence of endings or apocalyptic commonplace. The first of these is the sibyl's vision of Gimlé, the hall more dazzling than than the sun where worthy warrior bands dwell for evermore (st. 61). As McKinnell notes, this would be a Christian commonplace, but for a parallel he notes in Rev 22:5 (1994: 125). Yet the verses in Rev 21:9-11 are closer:

'Come,' he said [Seventh Angel to St John], 'and I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.'¹⁰ So in the spirit he carried me away to a great and lofty mountain, and showed me Jerusalem, the Holy City, coming down out of heaven from God.¹¹ It shone with the glory of God: it had the radiance of some priceless jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.

John dwells for longer on the jewels and gold of his Heavenly City in Rev 21:18-21. But already it seems that the name Gimlé, in particular, shows a near-textual borrowing from Revelation into *Völuspá*. Without further ado, Dronke translates the elsewhere unattested *Gim-lé* as 'Fire-Lee' or 'Fire-shelter', 'Refuge from the Flames' (1997: 24, 152); but it seems more plausible to trace the elements of this word to OE *gimm* ('jewel') and *leah* ('used by English speakers to denote sites where settlements in forest clearings were flourishing when they arrived': Gelling, 1984: 198-207, at 199). Does Gimlé reflect the translation of a Last Days expression from English sermons into *Völuspá*? Then the dragon in st. 62, flying up *neðan frá Niðafjöllum* ('from below, from Dark of the Moon Hills'), looks rather like the Dragon in Revelation, of which it is implied that he will one day rise again from the abyss in Rev 20. The context in both texts is the Lord's Judgement of good and bad souls. But now these two stanzas become incomplete. Do we not have, with *ofan* ('from above') in the *Hauksbók* half-stanza known as H62, a symmetrical counterpoint to *neðan* in *Völuspá* 61? This verse seems to describe the Second Coming, the descent of the Supreme Judge from on high. Dronke treats these lines as added by a Christian (1997: 87); Gro Steinsland, as a heathen part of the original poem (1991: 335-48); McKinnell, as a heavily Christianized part of the first *Völuspá* (1994: 123-4). In the light, however, of the above ten correspondences between this poem and Revelation, McKinnell's view seems nearest to the truth. That is, H62, preserved by chance in *Hauksbók*, seems to be an integral part of *Völuspá* which fell out of the copying of the R-text from its exemplars (Codex Regius: for the stemma, see Dronke 1997: 65).

In short, it seems that the poet of *Völuspá* follows the course of Rev 16-21. What this text from Revelation shows, if truly borrowed into *Völuspá*, is that the Icelandic poet got at least half of his inspiration from Christian missionaries in Iceland. But he is a heathen by upbringing, as the rich mythology of *Völuspá* shows. No Christian-Judaic apocalyptic scheme could have sanctioned the objectivity of this divine theme in combination with the horror with which the human condition is here revealed. As has been noted, the poet of *Völuspá* sought to blend his own traditions with those of apocalyptic Christianity (Dronke, 1992; 1997: 93; McKinnell, 1994, 126). He treats the Norse gods with a certain care, detaching their errors from moral causes, presenting these as the unlucky but anticipated steps to Ragnarök: 'a gradual disaster, like the physical frailties of age' (Dronke, 1992: 15). In *Völuspá* 35-44, in contrast, he leaves it to mankind to reflect divine failures as a moral downfall. Men live in another dimension which the poet seems to have integrated with his heathen mythology out of deference to the Christian faith; like the authors of Revelation, he seems to know that human history can be expressed surreally through heathen gods and giants. It is impossible to know, however, how far this poet gave symbolic rather than literal meanings to these creatures. The less real the gods for him, the more likely it is that the poet of *Völuspá* believed himself to be Christian.

The first question was the date of this work. This also eludes proof, but the likelihood of *Völuspá*'s composition c. 1000 is strengthened by the poet's apparent use of Revelation, which by this time was understood to refer to Armageddon at the end of 1000 years. If Þangbrandr preached the apocalypse when he stayed in Iceland shortly before AD 1000, *Völuspá* itself is probably datable to that time. Þangbrandr was a German or Flemish court chaplain whom Óláfr Tryggvason sent to Iceland in c. 997. Although he is said to have converted some chieftains, Njáll among them, his violence led to failure on a wider scale, and about two years later he returned to King Óláfr empty-handed (Jakob, 1986: 14-18). Enough

survives about Þangbrandr to show that his style was the message, that he fought duels with pagans because he preached of Armageddon. In *Njáls saga* (ch. 100), while Þangbrandr prepares to sing mass one morning for St Michael (i.e. on 29 September), his host Hallr of Síða asks him about Michael; when Þangbrandr says that Michael weighs up good and evil deeds, Hallr asks to be put into the angel's protection. Michael is commemorated in this role on runic monuments in Sweden (Jansson, 1987); he was probably known elsewhere in Scandinavia as the protector and conveyor of souls. And yet what does that mean? Three of Michael's four instances in the bible concern his generalship in Armageddon (the exception is Jude 9): in Dan 10:13 and 12:1, Michael fights against the Antichrist from whom he protects man at the end of history; in Rev 12:7, when the war breaks out in heaven, Michael duels with Satan the dragon and throws him into the pit. Also in *Njáls saga* (ch. 102), when Þangbrandr hears Steinunn, a pagan diehard, claim that Þórr challenged Christ to a duel without answer, he says that he has heard (*heyrir*) that '*Þórr væri ekki nema mold ok aska, þegar guð vildi eigi, at hann lifði*' ('Þórr would be nothing but dust and ashes if God did not permit him to live': Einar Ól., 1954: 265). These words appear to refer the idea of God's 'restraining hand', which is known both in Revelation and in 2 Thess 2 (Boxall, 2002: 24). But this story is really about Þangbrandr's willingness to take on heathen opponents. Þangbrandr, probably from Saxony (as said in *Njáls saga*, ch. 100), could have learned to fight pagans from a text such as the *Libellus de Antichristo*, written as a letter to Queen Gerberga, sister of Emperor Otto I of Saxony, by Adso of Moutier-en-Der in c. 950. Adso says that Antichrist may be expected to call himself God and has already sent out Antiochus, Nero and Domitian as his ministers of evil (Sackur, 1898: 105-8; McGinn, 1998: 84):

Nunc quoque nostro tempore multos Antichristos nouimus esse. Quicumque enim siue laicus, siue canonicus siue monachus contra iustitiam uiuit et ordinis sui regulam impugnat et quod bonum est blasphematur, Antichristus est et minister Sathanae.

In our own time we know there are many Antichrists. Any layman, cleric, or monk, who lives in a way contrary to justice, who attacks the rule of his order of life, and blasphemes the good, he is an Antichrist, a minister of Satan.

In this light, one could be forgiven for thinking Þangbrandr's true purpose was to destroy Antichrists in Iceland while there was still time. Where *Völuspá* is concerned, it has long been noted that the poets of *Völuspá* (st. 48) and *Lokasenna* (st. 42) borrowed their notion of 'Muspell' (as a giant) from the word 'Muspilli', which appears to be a name for the Apocalypse in an Old High German fragment from c. 850 (Dronke, 1997: 146-7; cf. McGinn, 1998: 80-1). Perhaps, then, this name came into *Völuspá* from Þangbrandr. But it is unlikely that Þangbrandr had any deeper influence, as Sigurður Nordal took for granted when he identified the author of *Völuspá* with the poet Völu-Steinn (1978-9: 129-30). Þangbrandr sought confrontation, with Þórr cast as Christ's opponent as if he were the Beast or the Dragon. This is not how the poet of *Völuspá* sees Þórr, whose role with the Miðgarðsormr in this poem better recalls that of St Michael against the Dragon in Rev 12:7.

Some English influence in Iceland at this time may be discernable in the ditty for which Hjalti was outlawed from Althing in the same disastrous summer Þangbrandr was forced out of Iceland (Jakob, 1986: 15):

Vil ek eigi goð geyja; grey þykki mér Freyja.

I don't want to blaspheme the gods (! the gods to bark); Freyja seems a bitch to me.

I have tried to shed some light on the humour of this line elsewhere (2000: 1-6). Here it is enough to point out that Hjalti's portrait of Freyja as a bitch with dogs resembles an image

from *Sermo Lupi* (c. 1014), in which Wulfstan damns men who buy a female slave *7 við þa ane fylþe adreogað, an æfter oðrum, 7 ælc æfter oðrum, hundum gæliccast, þe for fylþe ne scrifað* ('and with that one woman carry out filth, one after the other, and each man after the other, most like dogs, that have no care for filth': Bethurum, 1952: 270). Hjalti's words show that he had learned the moral language of preachers; Ari says that he preached amazingly well (Jakob, 1986: 16). Both Þangbrandr and Hjalti bear witness to the translation of German and English sermons into Icelandic in Iceland before the turn of the millennium. But once again, neither Christian can have inspired the poet of *Völuspá*. As we have seen, this poet blends heathen mythology with the language of the Last Days without the slightest trace of antagonism.

Völuspá's eirenic heathen-Christian blend seems sure enough of itself to predate the duels and showdowns of the late 990s. What envoy of Tryggvason's in Iceland could have suffered the embodiment of pagan gods into the Christian Apocalypse? Adso again, in his *Libellus de Antichristo* of c. 950, lifted part of *Expositio in Thessalonicam II*, a commentary on 2 Thess 2 which was originally written before 853 by Bishop Haymo of Halberstadt, a pupil of Alcuin's now invested in Saxony:

'Qui aduersatur', id est contrarius est Christo Deo omnibus membris eius, 'et extollitur', id est in superbiã erigitur super omne quod dicitur Deus, id est supra omnes deos gentium, Herculem uidelicet, Apollinem, Iouem, Mercurium, quos pagani deos esse existimant. Super omnes istos deos extolletur Antichristus, quia maiorem et fortiorem se iis omnibus faciet: et non solum supra hos, sed etiam supra omne quod colitur, id est supra sanctam Trinitatem, quae solummodo colenda et adoranda est ab omni creatura sua. (Sackur, 1898: 105)

'He who rebels': that is, he who opposes Christ God in all his members; 'and is raised up': that is, he who is exalted in pride 'over all that is said to be god': that is, above all gods of the nations, for example Hercules, Apollo, Jupiter, Mercury, whom the pagans believe to be gods. Antichrist will be raised above all these gods, for he will make himself bigger and stronger than all of them: and not only over these, but also above everything that is worshipped, that is above the Holy Trinity, that which alone must be worshipped and adored by each and every one of its created things.

Through Haymo or Adso, in this way, any learned Ottonian missionary from the late ninth century onwards, or his native pupil, could have used this vindication of 2 Thess 2 to reclassify the northern Olympians, Þórr, Týr and Óðinn, as allies of Michael and the Lamb against Antichrist, the common enemy.

There was at least one missionary in Iceland in the early 980s, a certain Bishop Friðrekr, who preached to the heathen, according to Ari's *Íslendingabók* (Jakob, 1986: 18); the name shows him to be either a Saxon or Frank, probably the latter (McDougall, 1987-8: 187). There is no record of his preaching the Apocalypse in *Þórvalds þáttur Koðránssonar*, the thirteenth-century text which claims to tell his story. But Friðrekr, if a Frank, could not have been unaware of the chiliasm spreading across France a generation earlier. In his *Apologeticus* of c. 995, Abbo of Fleury-sur-Loire says that when he was a young man, presumably in the 960s, he heard a sermon about the End of the World in the cathedral in Paris, *quod statim finito mille annorum numero Antichristus adveniret, et non longa post tempore universale iudicium succederet* ('according to which, as soon as the number of a thousand years was completed, the Antichrist would come and the Last Judgement would follow in a brief time': 1853: 471-2). As we have seen in its rarity with Archbishop Wulfstan in c. 1002, this view ran counter to orthodoxy; in the same passage, Abbo says that his old abbot asked him at this time to take issue with another panic spreading in Lotharingia, that the End would occur when Good Friday coincided with the Annunciation on 25 March (as in 2005). There is evidence for the chiliastic subculture in England, France and Saxony, right across north-western Europe. It is hard to see how it was unknown to Bishop Friðrekr, through whom it could have passed on to his minder Þórvaldr and any number of other sympathetic heathens they met. Nor is it easy

to see how chiliasm did not spread to Iceland when Friðrekr and others like him made their first attempts to teach the *goðar* something of the Christian calendar.

To sum up, the two questions posed at the start of this essay are not so easily answered. With the dating of *Völuspá* we appear to be on firmer ground. With at least ten apparent allusions to Revelation, a work in which the doctrine of the thousand years forms such a climax, *Völuspá* can have its *terminus ad quem* set at AD 1000. At least its respect for Christianity seems to predate the coming of royal chaplains and evangelical activists; and if the poet set out to meet the new millennium with a masterpiece, he seems to have done so with the bulk of his new education well behind him. The other question is harder. The religion of the poet of *Völuspá* seems heathen to the extent that he perpetuates the *Æsir* without embarrassment in the new world order of st. 57-62. However, with H62 so apposite to the context of Judgement in these stanzas, the poet also seems happy to subordinate the new *Æsir* to *inn ríki* ('the Mighty One'), *sá er öllu ræðr* ('He who rules all'). If the poet were *blandinn í trú* like so many other Icelanders in the late tenth century, his use of Revelation might show that he took himself for a Christian.

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