Old Norse Translations of Ælfric's *De falsis diis* and *De auguriis* in Hauksbók (Summary)

Donata Kick
(University of Durham)

The *Heimslýsing og Helgifrœði* section of *Hauksbók* (Codex AM 544 4to) contains two short pieces which are based on tenth-century Anglo-Saxon homilies. The first of these, entitled *Um þat hvaðan otru hofst*, is a translation of Ælfric's *De falsis diis*. The second, beginning *Hin helgi byskup er heitir Augustinus* is partly based on Ælfric's *De auguriis*. Both homilies showcase warnings against false beliefs, magic, and superstition. It has been suggested that the texts were probably not translated specifically for inclusion into *Hauksbók* and that the Old Norse versions could be much older than the manuscript collection in which they are contained; Old Norse translations of Old English homilies could have been made as early as the late eleventh century.[1]

My paper does not aim at providing an exhaustive discussion of the two homilies in *Hauksbók*; rather, I will focus on selected examples of false beliefs, magic, and superstition as found in both texts. I will show how the anonymous translator or translators used Ælfric's work, and how he carefully changed and adapted his material for a different audience situated in different cultural circumstances.

Ælfric's source author, Martin of Braga, makes it explicitly clear in his *De correctione rusticorum* that the classical gods are devils who assume the likeness of figures such as Jupiter. Ælfric on the other hand provides them with entirely human biographies in *De falsis diis*. While Ælfric states that the devil incited post-diluvian mankind first to worship the sun, the moon, the stars, and the earth, and then to select Saturn and his wicked kin as gods, there is no indication that the classical gods are themselves demons; they are simply wicked human beings. He is careful, however, to avoid references to the Anglo-Saxon deities in his homily, most likely because he is aware that this could be a risky topic.[2] Therefore, he avoids associating the Scandinavian or Anglo-Saxon gods with the Old English names for the days of the week. Interestingly enough, this is retained in an abbreviated revision of Ælfric's homily by Wulfstan found in manuscript Bodleian, Hatton 113. This homily, however, features a gloss in the Worcester 'tremulous' hand, which refers to *Þor unde Þornes dæg*.[3] The Old Norse version of the homily does not mention vernacular names for the weekdays either. This, however, is less surprising than in the Old English homily. The Scandinavian preacher's audience would most likely have been unaware of those names, as there was no need to name the weekdays prior to the arrival of Christianity.[4]

The Norse version of the homily does not condemn the pagan gods by demonising them either. In fact, as has been pointed out, the Norse translator assumes a certain degree of responsibility for his pagan past by changing Ælfric's wording

---

1 Gatch 55.

2 Lombardi, op. cit.

3 Bethurum 4, 103-04, 223.

4 I am grateful to Helgi Skúli Kjartansson for sharing his thoughts on this point in an e-mail to me.

from stating that Mercurius *is Oðon gehaten oðrum naman on Denisc* to *þann er ver kollum Oðen.*[5]

In addition to this, as N. M. Robinson has pointed out, Ælfric carefully distinguishes between the living Christian God, for whom he reserves the word *lifiende*, 'eternally living' and the pagan deities who are not only mortal but false and therefore can be destroyed. While an Anglo-Saxon audience would most likely have picked up on the identification of *lifiende* as 'eternally living', the Old Norse translator did not make the connection and, in fact, omitted all but three instances in which Ælfric uses the word; none of these instances show an awareness of Ælfric's specific use of the word.[6]

Ælfric's homily on auguries survives in full or in part in eight different manuscripts dating from the early eleventh to the late twelfth century, a fact which attests to the homily's popularity. It is included among a collection of Saints' Lives, which might seem odd at first sight, but could be explained by the fact that hagiography often serves for giving examples of perfect Christian living, especially if used in sermons for public delivery or private reading.[7] The homily is based on a Pseudo-Augustine piece now ascribed to Caesarius of Arles, as Förster has observed.[8]

The *Hauksbók* homily is on the whole a much abbreviated version which is only loosely based on Ælfric's text. There are a number of interesting ways in which the translator adapted his material for a different cultural and geographic context and for an audience which was not yet as firmly rooted in Christianity as that of Ælfric. His listeners could not be expected to have the same extent of theological knowledge that Ælfric could assume in his audience. The translator therefore leaves out much of Ælfric's theological discussion in favour of the simpler core message that superstitious practice is a sin which will lead to damnation unless it is repented and confessed.

One of the key themes is that one must not enquire about the state of one's own wellbeing or that of one's livestock by means of consulting a witch. While this practice is mentioned only once by Ælfric, the Norse version repeats this warning several times, adding that this is a grave sin which has to be repented and confessed.

In a number of instances, the Norse version is more specific than the Old English text: Ælfric's relatively vague mention of offerings made at stones, trees, and wells, for example, is rendered as a specific example of women offering food to *landvættir* under flat stones. No mention is made of trees or wells, but the mention *landvættir* indicates an awareness of a specifically Icelandic belief.[9]

Whereas the translator of *De falsis diis* seems to take a certain degree of responsibility for his ancestors' foolish belief in false gods and thus avoids being too harsh with them, the homilist who adapted *De auguriis* is more rigorous in his criticism of superstitious practices than Ælfric. When discussing infanticide, Ælfric states that some women kill their offspring before or soon after birth in order to hide their adultery. The Norse version is more specific here: it only mentions the killing of unborn children and states that both the mother and father of the child – who dies

5 Pope 684; *Hauksbók* 159, line 13. Cf. Lombardi, op. cit.
6 Robinson, op. cit.
7 Schipper 2.
8 Förster, op. cit.
9 Clunies Ross, op. cit.

unbaptised – will be subject to eternal damnation, unless they repent and go to confession. Ælfric leaves out any mention of the child's father in this context and only condemns the mother.

On the other hand, the Norse version omits some examples found in Ælfric, probably because the translator did not think they were applicable in his own culture. References to auguries taken from birds dogs, horses, brewing, and sneezing are omitted.

While the Norse version of *De falsis diis* can be called a translation of Ælfric's homily, the version of *De auguriis* is much more of an adaptation of the Old English homily than a translation. It is heavily abbreviated, leaves out most of the theological discussion, changes the order of the examples, and adds a completely different ending which discusses the symbolic meaning of the different parts of Christ's cross. These changes make sense if we keep in mind that the homilist had to take into consideration the different cultural and theological situation of his audience.

Select Bibliography:

Bethurum, Dorothy, ed. *The Homilies of Wulfstan*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1957. Repr. Oxford UP, 1998.

Clunies Ross, Margaret. 'Land-Taking and Text-Making in Medieval Iceland'. In *Text and Territory: Geographical Imagination in the European Middle Ages*. Ed. Sylvia Tomasch and Sealy Gilles. Philadelphia, U of Pennsylvania P, 1998. 159-84.

Förster, Max. 'Altenglische Predigtquellen I: 2, Pseudo-Augustine und Ælfric.' *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 116 (1906): 301-14.

Gatch, M. McC. 'The Achievement of Ælfric and his Colleagues in European Perspectives'. In *The Old English Homily and its Backgrounds*. Ed. P. E. Szarmach. Albany: State Univ. of New York, 1978. 43-73.

Hauksbók. Udg. av F. Jónsson og E. Jónsson efter Arnamagnæanske Håndskrifter 371, 544 og 675 4°. København, 1892-1896. 156-164, 167-69.

Johnson, David. 'Euhemerisation Versus Demonisation: The Pagan Gods in Ælfric's *De Falsis Diis*.' In *Pagans and Christians*. Ed. Tette Hofstra, L. A. J. R. Houwen, and A. A. MacDonald. Germania Latina 2. Groningen: Forsten, 1995. 35-69.

Jón Helgasson. 'Introduction'. *Hauksbók*. Manuscripta Islandica V. Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1960. iii-xxxvii.

Lombardi, Maria Cristina. 'The travel of a text in space and time: the Old Norse Translation of Ælfric's homily *De Falsis Diis*.' In *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature; Sagas and the British Isles*. 2 vols. Preprint Papers of the 13th International Saga Conference. Durham and York, 6-12 August, 2006. Ed. John McKinnell, David Ashurst, and Donata Kick.

Pope, J. C., ed. *Homilies of Ælfric, a Supplementary Collection*. EETS OS 259; 260. London, Oxford UP, 1967-68.

Robinson, N. M. 'The Living God in Ælfric's *De falsis diis*'. In *Words and Wordsmiths: A Volume for H. L. Rogers*. Ed. Geraldine Barnes, John Gunn,

Sonya Jensen and Lee Jobling. Sydney: U of Sydney, Department of English, 1989.

Schipper, William. *A Critical Edition of Ælfric's 'De auguriis'*. Diss. U. of Alberta, Edmonton. Alberta, CA, 1981. 4 Microfiche. National Library of Canada. Canadian Theses 52928.

Skeat, W. W., ed. and trans. *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*. 2 Vols. EETS OS 76, 82 and 114. London: Oxford UP, 1881-1900.

Taylor, Arnold. '*Hauksbók* and Ælfric's *De Falsis Diis*'. *Leeds Studies in English* n.s. 3 (1969): 1-9.