

The travel of a text in space and time: the Old Norse Translation of Ælfric's Homily *De falsis diis*

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The Old Norse translation of the homily *De falsis diis* by Ælfric is one of the texts on miscellaneous subjects contained in Codex AM 544 4to, the compilation better known as *Hauksbók*. This miscellany was given the title of *Heimlýsing og Helgýfræði* by Finnur Jónsson in his edition of *Hauksbók*.¹ In this heterogeneous treatise,² the Nordic anonymous version of the Anglo-Saxon homily is transformed into a chapter, introduced by the title *Um þat hvaðan otru hofst*, following a geographical and cosmological part. The strong influence of English homily writers on early Norse preaching has been shown by several scholars, such as J. C. Pope,³ J. Turville-Petre⁴ and M. Mc C. Gatch.⁵ The text, being the Norse version of an Anglo-Saxon homily,⁶ is a striking example of the close relation of early Norse literature to Old English texts.

In the original Old English work, Ælfric uses Latin sources such as *De Vera Religione* and *De Doctrina Christiana* by St. Augustine, *De Correctione Rusticorum* by Martin of Braga, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, XI, 23, by Rufinus.⁷ Roughly speaking, the homily is a shortened restatement of the Fathers' preaching on the subject. Ælfric also summarizes some biblical stories, e. g. the episode of Daniel in the lions' den, the

¹ *Hauksbók*, udg. av F. Jónsson og E. Jónsson efter Arnarnagnæanske Håndskrifter 371, 544 og 675 4°, København, 1892-1896, 156-164.

² The treatise is very heterogeneous and its editors (Jón Þorkelsson, in *Nokkur blöð úr Hauksbók*, Reykjavík, 1865, XIII-XV and Finnur Jónsson, in op. cit., CXVI-CXXIII), have pointed out a number of different Latin sources, such as Isidore's *Etymologiae*, Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* and many others. For the geographical and cosmological part, I have posited an anonymous summary in the vernacular made from *De Universo*, by Hrabanus Maurus, because of the order of enumeration of some phenomena, see M. Cristina Lombardi, 'Heimlýsing: un trattato geografico del medioevo islandese. L'opera e la sua tradizione manoscritta', in *Testi cosmografici, geografici ed odepóricos del medioevo germanico*, ed. D. Gottschall, Louvain-La-Neuve, 2005, 95-122.

³ *Homilies of Ælfric, a Supplementary Collection*, ed. by J. C. Pope, vol. II, London/New York, 1967, pp. 719-20, 724. D. Bethrum, in *The Homilies of Wulfstan*, Oxford, 1971, 2d ed., 335, argues that *De Universo*, lib. XV, cap. VI, could be a possible source of Ælfric's *De Falsis Diis* as far as the heathen gods are concerned.

⁴ M. Mc C. Gatch, 'The Achievement of Ælfric and his Colleagues in European Perspectives', in *The Old English Homily and its Backgrounds*, ed. P. E. Szarmach, State Univ. of New York, Albany, 1978, 43.

⁵ J. Turville-Petre, 'Sources of the Vernacular Homily in England, Norway and Iceland', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 75 (1960), 168-182.

⁶ There are elements in the Old Norse text which have been pointed out as evidence that Ælfric's homily was used, see J.C. Pope, op. cit., p. 723. Other elements in favour of this dependence are focused by Jón Helgason in his edition of *Hauksbók*, *Hauksbók, The Arnarnagnæan manuscripts 371 4to, 544 4to and 675 4to*, ed. Jón Helgason, Copenhagen, 1960, XIII. The Anglo-Saxon homily is thought to have been composed by Ælfric before 1002, when he became abbot of Eynsham.

⁷ J. C. Pope, op. cit., 713, 717.

worship of different idols by the Philistines, the great flood, etc., as examples of the punishment of idolatry. He also uses stories from the *Lives of Saints*, such as the account of St. Gregory the Thaumaturgist and Apollo's temple in the Alps.⁸ The author explores the allegorical sense of all these stories and comments on his sources, inspired mainly by St. Augustine.

The Old Norse translation further sums up a number of passages in its model, although it is not just a passive remake, if we carefully consider its omissions and amplifications.

One of the problems we meet consists in detecting and understanding the reason why precisely this homily was inserted in the Old Norse treatise and transformed into a chapter. Unfortunately, we do not know exactly either when the Old Norse translation was done or when it became a part of *Heimlýsing og helgifræði*. However both its editors assume that the homily belongs to that kind of vernacular prose, mainly preaching texts, that flourished in Scandinavia in the twelfth century.⁹ This homiletic activity was mostly based on translations from English or German materials and is supposed to have been produced as early as the beginning of the twelfth or even in the late eleventh century.¹⁰ Sermons and homilies were primarily designed to teach not only clerks, but also the laity. That is why they had to be delivered in the vernacular in order to spread the fundamentals of the new faith. Moreover many Norwegian and Icelandic collections of homilies seem to have been copied from earlier exemplars, as Joan Turville - Petre has shown.¹¹ The Old Norse version of Ælfric's *De falsis diis* may therefore have circulated independently before being inserted in the larger treatise where it now is. In a sense, being in *Heimlýsing og helgifræði*, it acquires a deeper and different meaning, as a subject within a wide range of knowledge, as is the case for a medieval encyclopaedia, which includes topics such as calculus, astronomy, geography, cosmology, etc. And yet if we compare it with the Old English original,¹² we can see that it is precisely the theoretical, theological and philosophical elements of the original that have been omitted, probably in order to avoid intellectual concepts and views that were too complicated.

The lapse of time between the composition of the homily and the presumed date of the Norse version, together with the different geographical area is partly responsible for the omissions and changes made in the target-text. Unlike the Old English homily, the Old Norse text is addressed to a newly converted audience which was not used to difficult or abstract ideas. The translator had not only to transfer it into another language, he also had to adapt his material to another social and historical environment. Probably the vernacular could not yet be a medium for theology and more intellectual aspects of religious doctrine in Scandinavia as it was in England at the time of Ælfric. This is shown by some differences that we find between the source-

⁸ Perhaps he uses Rufinus's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, see J. C. Pope, op. cit., 670-671.

⁹ J. Þorkelsson, op. cit., XVIII-XIX.

¹⁰ As M. Mc C. Gatch suggests (op. cit., 55) the first writing in a Scandinavian dialect of texts intended for preaching may have taken place in the Danelaw area in the eleventh century.

¹¹ Strong affinities in composition between Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies* and Norse Homilies have been found by Joan Turville-Petre, op. cit., 168-182.

¹² In the edition of *De Falsis Diis* by Pope, op. cit., 677-712.

and the target-text. For example, Ælfric takes up such ticklish issues as the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. We know that even in England, earlier vernacular homilists had avoided such problems.¹³ Similarly our Norse translator prefers to concentrate on simpler issues, treating them with clear and understandable exempla which can explain his main aim: the necessity to refuse heathen gods, given their nature as devils, and the absolute power of the Christian God as the Creator of all things.

As a matter of fact Ælfric, after the starting formula in Latin and in English, proceeds to present the absolute rule of the Christian God, soon after revealing the concept of the Trinity. Although it was a basic doctrine which a Christian ought to know, the part on the Holy Trinity is completely ignored by the Norse translation together with the question of the nature of Christ, born and not created by God. It also ignores the creation of *scinendan englas* 'the shining angels' which, in the Old English text, follows the description of the Holy Trinity, and simply starts to narrate the creation of man.

Ælfric deals more with scholarly elements because his audience was acquainted with this kind of question. His background was actually influenced by the cultural renaissance promoted by King Alfred and his circle more than a century before, who dealt with such subjects and paved the way for later scholars and homilists. However, philosophical and theological texts were treated in separate works by the Alfredian circle, while Ælfric in his homilies made simpler and more understandable syntheses of all that abstract knowledge in order to make theological questions more familiar to his audience. Scandinavian people, by contrast, did not have such a cultural basis and had to be taught and convinced by more sensational narratives which could appear in some way fabulous (their sense of exoticism has been pointed out by T.M. Andersson, among others).¹⁴

Anyway, it seems to me that the omission of the Holy Trinity was possibly due also to a danger lurking within the concept of the Trinity itself, namely that it might seem to be reintroducing a sort of polytheism, with three gods to be worshipped. In early Christian Scandinavia, where the memory of a number of heathen gods was still alive and the faith in one God quite recent, it could be risky to insist on the idea of the Trinity. Moreover some scholars suppose that a triad of deities was worshipped in late Germanic paganism. The omission of the creation of angels, which I have already mentioned, can be explained in a similar way: since the devils, who represent evil, can be several and manifold, the principle of good must be one and unique.

At the beginning of the account, after a brief introduction, the Nordic version has the creation of Adam instead. Therefore man is given a more relevant position compared with the role he plays in Ælfric. The translator reduces a consistent part of his model to a causal clause, significantly underlining the causal relationship between our worship of God and His creation of man. While Ælfric presents it as a part of the creation of all things, without any particular emphasis on man, the Old Norse text reads:

¹³ P. E. Szarmach, 'The Vercelli homilies: Style and Structure', in *The Old English Homily and its background*, op. cit., 241-263.

¹⁴ T.M. Andersson, 'Exoticism in Early Iceland', in M. Dallapiazza, O. Hansen, P.M. Sorensen et al., *International Scandinavian and Medieval Studies in Memory of Gerd Wolfgang Weber*, Trieste, 2000, 19-28.

En hann eigum ver at lofa oc dyrka firi því at hann skop hinn fysta mann adam oc hans kono euan er ver ero aller fra komner.¹⁵

'We have to praise and worship Him because he created the first man Adam and his wife Eve, from whom we have all come'.

This quite anthropocentric view is not surprising in a cultural background where (as many sagas seem to point out, above all some *Íslendingasögur*, for instance *Hrafnkelssaga*), human qualities such as strength and courage are popular values, necessary if a chief wants to be respected and socially admired. It is obvious that the Nordic audience was more inclined to see human beings as the major concern of God. Here, anyway, the trust in man's ability to change his own destiny seems to emerge more than in other Old Germanic literary works, where the power of Fate and its passive acceptance are the core.¹⁶ In a sense the central role of Fate in the Germanic world and literature caused writers to identify Fate (*Wyrd*) with God and to transform it into a Christian concept. King Alfred says in his translation of Boethius: *Ac þæt þæt we Wyrd hataþ, þæt biþ godes weorc þæt he ælce dæg wyrcep*¹⁷ 'What we call *Wyrd* is really the work of God about which he is busy every day'. On the other hand, especially in Icelandic sagas, we often have examples of men capable of reversing a seemingly decided destiny by their intellectual skills and strength of temper. In the North, pagan gods were mainly considered as friends;¹⁸ they did not require any total subjection and were not almighty at all, since they would meet their Fate, just like men, and eventually be destroyed. The relationships between men and gods were based on private, individual and very utilitarian values, as many passages in different sagas show.¹⁹ Moreover we should not forget another widespread tradition, that of the so called *guðlausar* 'godless men' who believed only in their own strength.²⁰

That is why some of the extracts from Ælfric in the Nordic translation are linked with episodes from the Bible which are not present in the original. This is the function of the Red Sea episode, which the translator adds on his own initiative, where the sea opens and is changed into two enormous walls, letting the Jews safely pass through the water. That episode must have struck the imagination of Scandinavian people, convincing them of the superiority of the Christian God who was able to save a whole people, comparing with heathen gods who could usually protect and save only one hero at a time. This biblical story was evidence of the almighty God's power and at the same time appealed to the concrete and utilitarian religious mentality of Scandinavian people. Therefore in order to meet his audience's needs, the translator omitted the more learned materials and insisted on the submission of nature and its elements to God. His main concern was to illustrate in simpler terms the errors of paganism pointed out by Ælfric. Describing the heathens as worshippers of natural elements,

¹⁵ J. Þorkelsson, op. cit., 13.

¹⁶ Even in some Old Norse works, such as the *Edda* lays (especially those whose legends are of West Germanic origin) such as Sigurðr's cycle, Fate is the supreme power and man has to accept it without being able to change the course of the events.

¹⁷ B. Branston, *The Lost Gods of England*, London, 1957, 59.

¹⁸ For example, in *Hrafnkelssaga Freysgoða*, the heathen god Freyr is called *Hrafnkels vinr* 'Hrafnkell's friend'.

¹⁹ See e. g., R. Boyer, *Il Cristo dei Barbari*, Brescia, 1992, 124-126.

²⁰ See, among others, R. Boyer, op. cit., 31.

animals or objects, the homily wants to show their attitude as false and blind, giving opposite examples where the power of the true God on all those elements is clearly revealed. In particular, the Old Norse text differs from the original in its use of biblical episodes which describe the same element, water: first as negative (with the great flood), then as positive (with the Red Sea account), but always according to the Lord's will. Interpolating this episode, the anonymous translator also aims to give a clear demonstration of man's dependence upon the Lord for everything he has. It may also be due to the need to impress his audience with marvellous stories, adapting the Old English text to the taste of his Scandinavian audience; this, as many scholars have demonstrated, was particularly concerned, as I have already mentioned, with miracles and wonders, connected with the *Lives of Saints*, the first genre of fabulous narrative they got used to.²¹ Moreover we should not forget that Scandinavian society had based its economical expansion on sea-trade and had developed a strong maritime culture: therefore, using this episode, he could suit not only the tastes but also a major concern of his audience: travelling safely by sea. By the way, at the end of twelfth century, a real menace from the sea actually plagued the northern coast of Iceland: some drifting icebergs were hindering ships from leaving or reaching the ports. The need for miracles was stronger than ever and, according to some scholars,²² that emergency brought about the first miracles attributed to local saints. In fact the problem was solved through a miracle by St. Þorlákr, the bishop of Skálaholt, who, after studying in France and in England, had been abbot of Þykkvibær and then bishop of Skálaholt between 1178 and 1193.²³

In the Norse text the emphasis seems also to have been shifted from interpretation to description. Moreover, by focusing on the two opposite functions of water - using a rhetorical device already present in Ælfric, but reinforced in the target-text - the translator arranges his materials so as to meet his audience's way of thinking in antithetical terms (good/heaven v. evil/hell, etc.). This passage results, oddly enough, in a more balanced account, compared with Ælfric's original.

Even though the two homilies may share similar aims, they differ stylistically so much as to result in totally different tones. Similarities of style are limited to occasional alliterations and rhymes (elements indicating a common appreciation of poetry as a means of appealing) or to the initial formula for addressing the audience. But the number of rhetorical effects is considerably greater in Ælfric. His use of rhetorical devices, such as anaphora, for example, does not seem to have any comparable correspondence in the Norse version, if we read for instance the introductory passages of in both texts. The translator consistently cuts and abbreviates his model; his preference for present participles (*radande, valdande, radande*)²⁴ rather than repetition of whole sentences is evident from the very beginning. Even Ælfric's typical pairs of adjectives referring to pagan deities (like *hetol and þrimlic*²⁵ for Jove, *swiðlic and wælhreow*²⁶ for Saturn), although preserved as pairs, show a clear verbal

21 T. M. Andersson, op. cit., 22.

22 Njörður Njarðvik, *Island i forntiden*, Stockholm, 1973, 89.

23 Ibid., 82.

24 J. Þorkelsson, op. cit., 13.

25 J. C. Pope, op. cit., 682.

26 Ibid., 682.

inadequacy in the Nordic version: for example, the same lexical units are repeated for different referents, as in *illr oc grimr*²⁷ for Jove, *org oc illr*²⁸ (here alliterating) for Venus.

Another element worth noticing is the traditional legal language which the Nordic homily seems to echo, when it uses alliterating synonyms, like, for instance: *i morðe oc i manndrape*, speaking about Mars;²⁹ this style corresponds to the poetic style characterizing many parts of Scandinavian law codes.³⁰

After a short account of creation, the homily presents a passage with the explanations of the names of weekdays. Ælfric prefers not to remind his audience of their common heathen Anglo-Saxon origin, avoiding mentioning that in Old English too the names of weekdays are translated loans based on heathen gods (Woden, Þunor, Frige): he must have been aware of what the English day-names stood for, but he chose not to mention them and blames the Danes only.

He explains the dedication of weekdays to pagan gods by referring only to their classical names, since he has already illustrated their Germanic (for Ælfric, Danish) counterparts and sees no need to repeat them, as the Old Norse text does. Actually concern for balance of thought and expression seems to be one of the main structural features in Ælfric's text. Only in mentioning Friday does he add the explanation of the Germanic name, which he had not included in the previous presentation of pagan deities.

Another interesting point is the mention in both texts of only three Germanic gods: Þórr, Óðinn and Frigg. We may wonder why they do not explain that *týsdag* derives its name from Týr. Was Týr already forgotten among people and so unworthy to be mentioned by a preacher? The worshipping of a triad (Þórr, Óðinn and Frigg or Freyja) might be hypothesized, at least in late Germanic paganism, following the Roman model,³¹ so as to make it possible to avoid naming the Germanic counterpart of Mars, Týr. There is evidence from place-names that four heathen deities had actually been venerated in Anglo-Saxon England: Woden, Þunor, Tiw and Frig.³² Some scholars think that Týr was still remembered but no longer worshipped, and they argue that at the beginning of the Christian era he had probably changed from a sky god into a minor war god,³³ while the other three would have formed a mighty triad, composed of two gods (Father and Son) and a goddess (Frigg or Freyja).

In this passage, the Old Norse homily omits the fifth day of the week. Though the *Penitentials* forbid observing Thursday in honour of Jupiter or Þórr, this omission

²⁷ J. Þorkelsson, op. cit., 15.

²⁸ Ibid., 16.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Examples can be found in East and West Scandinavian legal texts, e. g. *Tjuvabalken* or *Fornåmesbalken*, among the Swedish *Landskapslagar*, in C.I. Ståhle and E.N. Tigerstedt, *Medeltidens och Reformationstidens litteratur*, I, Stockholm, 1968, 21-54.

³¹ On the tripartite scheme of deities as a model for different religions and mythologies, see G. Dumézil, *Les dieux des Germains*, Paris, 1959.

³² B. Branston (*The Lost Gods of England*, 29) gives some examples for each of them: *Woodnesborough*, near Sandwich, *Wornshill*, near Sittingbourne, *Thunores hlæw* (Thunor's mound) in Thanet, *Tuesley*, in Surrey, *Tyesmere*, in Worcestershire, *Freefolk*, which in the *Domesday Book* has the form *Frigfolk*.

³³ Ibid., p. 69.

does not seem to have been a deliberate omission of the name of Þórr. It rather appears to be a mistake made by the scribe. Instead it is quite important to point out some other significant passages where the Old Norse text differs from the English original.

Where Ælfric says about Mercurius: *and he is Oðon gehaten oðrum naman on Denisc,*³⁴ etc., the Old Norse text reads *Hinn flora dag gafo þeir mercurio. þann er ver kollum Oðenn.*³⁵ This first person plural 'whom we call Oðenn' provides a good evidence of the more tolerant feeling of Nordic people towards their heathen past, a sort of assumption of responsibility. In contrast with this, not only does Ælfric lay all the blame for the name-giving onto the Danes, but he also asserts that they are telling lies when they say that Jove/Þórr is the son of Mercurius/Oðinn:

Nu secgað þa Deniscan on heora gedwylde þæt se Iouis wære, þe hi Þór hátað, Mercuries sunu, þe hi Oðon hatað; ac hi nabbað na riht, for þam þe we rædað on bocum, ge on hæpenum ge on Cristenum, þæt se hetola Iouis to soðan wære Saturnes sunu and þa béc ne magon beon awægede þe þa ealdan hæðenan be him awriton þuss; and eac on martira þrowungum we gemetað swa awriten.³⁶

This passage, whose textual importance has been often underlined, is omitted in the Old Norse text. It is a later addition, probably by Ælfric himself³⁷, one of his many afterthoughts inserted at a later time, as is proved by the fact that it is present only in some manuscripts (R, S and T).³⁸

Therefore its omission in the Old Norse version may be due either to the manuscript from which it was copied not containing this passage (as in the case of C, L and W)³⁹ or to an intentional omission. Some scholars have pointed to R as the possible model of the Norse translation.⁴⁰ If this were true, the omission might be regarded as another attempt by the Scandinavian translator to avoid being too harsh with his pagan ancestors. We have to consider also the pre-eminence of Óðinn/Mercurius in the quite recent past of Scandinavia, as the god mirroring the most significant values on which Viking society had developed (sea-trade and travel). Another possible reason for leaving this passage out might derive from a minor concern about the authority of writings among Nordic people: this is quite evident if we compare their attitude towards them with the veneration paid to written sources in England for centuries after the Christianization.

Ælfric's appeal to the authority of heathen as well as Christian writers is characteristic of his scholarly training. His great respect for books is often stated in sentences which constitute a kind of structural pattern in the organization of his text. Such sentences usually introduce some new narratives, marking the beginning of a

³⁴ J. C. Pope, op. cit., 684

³⁵ J. Porckelsson, op. cit. 17.

³⁶ J.C. Pope, op. cit., 684.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ R (Ms 178, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge), S (Hatton 116, Oxford Bodleian Library) and T (Hatton 117, Oxford Bodleian Library, revised by Wulfstan), *ibid.*, 673-674.

³⁹ W (Cotton Julius E. VII, Ms. British Library), L (University Library, Cambridge), *ibid.*, 676.

⁴⁰ It contains the name *Vena*, as in the Old Norse homily, for Venus, probably because *Venus* was regarded as masculine.

quotation from a new source. They function as uniting principles since homilies are often *collages* of several sources.⁴¹ At the same time they should convince the audience about the importance of what the homilist is going to say. In the Anglo-Saxon *De falsis diis*, we can find five introductions of this type, while in the Old Norse version only three of them are preserved. Although the third has an exact correspondence in the translation:

3 We rædað on þære béc þe is Liber Regum geháten þæt þa hæðenan ...⁴²

3 Ver hofum lesit a boc þeiri er heitir liber regum at þeir hinir heiðnu menn af lande...⁴³

it introduces a different episode: while in Ælfric it is followed by the story of the ark, in the Old Norse version it is followed by the episode of the Red Sea, which was probably considered more striking.

The careful attitude towards pagans that I have already mentioned, which seems to avoid too harsh a tone as well as any references that might seem too respectful, shows that in Scandinavia it was still a very delicate question to face. The ambiguity of the homilist is well exemplified by the following passage, whose meaning is completely reversed by the translator. Ælfric says:

Ac hi mihton tocnawan, gif hi cuðan þæt gescéad, þæt se is ána God þe hi ealle gesceop, us mannum to bryce, for his micclan gódnysse.⁴⁴

'But they could have known, if they had been able to make that distinction, that there is one God who created them all to help us men, out of His great goodness.'

In the exposition of man's relationship to the true God from Adam to the present time,⁴⁵ the Danes are in a sense compared with Philistines and Babylonians. However, besides the religious problem, Ælfric's severe attitude against them was perhaps influenced by the previous Viking attacks against England.

At this point, the variation in the Old Norse text is crucial because it transforms the meaning of the sentence into its opposite:

En þeir matu þat eigi uita ef þeir vildi at þui hyggia at sa er einn guð er þat alt skop monnum til hjalpar.⁴⁶

'But they could not know, if they wanted in this condition to understand that there is one God who created all to help men...'

This passage provides a good excuse to the Danes for being heathen and justifies them. Such an attitude is quite understandable, since among the Vikings attacking England in 994 there was also Óláfr Tryggvason, one of the first Christian Scandinavian kings, who was crowned only one year later, in 995.

We should further remember that Ælfric assumes as a fact that his audience is capable of understanding certain logical and deductive passages: in medieval

⁴¹ P. E. Szarmach, op. cit., 241, speaks about this kind of text as a *kompilationspredigt*.

⁴² J. C. Pope, op. cit., 688.

⁴³ J. Þorkelsson, op. cit., 17.

⁴⁴ J. C. Pope, op. cit., 681.

⁴⁵ Where, according to J. C. Pope, *ibid.*, Ælfric follows Martin of Braga's *De Correctione Rusticorum*.

⁴⁶ J. Þorkelsson, op. cit., 15.

theological works also the perception of a creator through the different creatures was based on rhetorical principles.

Here the spirit of the Scandinavian homily completely agrees with what Snorri Sturluson says in his *Edda*.⁴⁷ Snorri does not care so much about the heathens' mistakes. In fact he mirrors a more self-confident epoch, the first half of the thirteenth century, which was conscious of the importance of legends and myths belonging to Scandinavian past history and society. Instead, the Old Norse treatise does not deal with them, ignoring those stories and poems about heathen gods which certainly circulated, and preferring to draw on an English source.

If we consider the information on the heathen past which Ælfric's text provides, we can conclude that it is very scarce indeed. So why does the compiler of *Heimlýsing og helgifræði* insert precisely this homily into his treatise? His choice could be seen in the light of the hard struggles between chieftains and bishops which raged in Iceland in the late twelfth century, as *Biskupa sögur* narrate.⁴⁸ In that period the past was considered by Icelandic *bændr* as a positive time, opposed both to Christian knowledge and to ecclesiastical pretensions; for example, in *Þorlákssaga*, Jón Loftsson from Oddi tells bishop Þorlák Þorhallsson that he is absolutely convinced that the archbishop cannot be any better than his own ancestors, among whom he is proud to recall Sæmundr the wise.⁴⁹

The so-called twelfth century Renaissance⁵⁰, which in Iceland gave a strong impulse to literature, language, history, etc., also developed a strong interest in the older native myths, culminating in the prose *Edda*, in about 1225. *Kennings* are the most interesting examples of what M. Clunies Ross calls 'patterns of representation',⁵¹ where traditional materials are accepted and employed in a new Christian context. If we follow their evolution in late skaldic poetry, the steps of that process are clearly recognisable. Christian referents are not only indicated by *kennings* like *engla konung* for 'God', but, in the case of fourteenth century *Kátrinardrápa*, they are even designated by the names of minor pagan deities such as *Ná* or *Nanna*.⁵² However the task of integrating pagan and Christian elements, which appears to have been substantially accomplished at the literary level, still remains to be carried through, if Snorri, in *Skaldskaparmál*, feels bound to say:

Þeim er girnask at nema mál skáldskapar ok heyja sér orð fjölða með fornum heitum eða girnask þeir at kuma skilja þat er hult er kveðit þá skili hann þessa bók til froðleiks ok skemtunar. En ekki er at gleyma eða ósanna svá þessar frásagni, at taka ór skáldskapinu forna i kenningar, þær er hófuð skáldin hafa sér líka látit, en eigi skulu kristnir menn trúá á

⁴⁷ M. Clunies Ross, 'Medieval Iceland and the European Middle Ages', in M. Dallapiazza et al., op. cit., 118.

⁴⁸ *Þorlákssaga*, in *Byskupa sögur*, vol. I, utg. av G. Jónsson, Reykjavík, 1953, 116.

⁴⁹ Njörður Njarðvík, op. cit., 60-70, points out that this delicate political and social situation was also due to the rights over churches which the chieftains claimed from bishops because they had had those churches built on their own lands and at their own expense.

⁵⁰ M. Clunies Ross, op. cit., 115.

⁵¹ Ibid., 113.

⁵² See M. Cristina Lombardi, *Sviluppi della perifrasi scaldica in tre carmi cristiani del tardo medioevo islandese*, Univ. di Trento, 2004, 61-82.

heiðin goð ok eigi á sannyndi þessa sagna annan veg en svá sem hér finnsk í upphafi bókar.⁵³

On the one hand Scandinavian poets and intellectuals have to learn and use the old pagan lore which is preserved and concentrated in *kennings*, but on the other hand *kristnir menn* must not believe in their original meaning, as it is related to deceptive and false values.

Against such a cultural background, inserting the translation of *De falsis diis* into *Heimlýsing og helgifræði* seems to reveal a concern to avoid all the ambiguity connected with heathen gods in the imagination of Scandinavian people. Its real aim, besides clearly stating the falsity of the pagan thought, appears to be to side with the Church in the political conflict between temporal and ecclesiastical power.

It seems clear to me that this choice also originated in a need for close relationships with the rest of Europe, a need to stay in line with official ecclesiastical interpretations of history, religion, geography, etc. Of course, in Scandinavia they knew much more about heathen gods than the Anglo-Saxons did, but just as Ælfric pretends not to know the Anglo-Saxon names of weekdays, so the anonymous compiler of the Norse treatise prefers to insert a translated homily on the subject, written by a famous and celebrated official homily writer like Ælfric, thus avoiding questions which could still be very knotty. In fact, in the chapter describing the geography of earth, the whole of *Heimlýsing og helgifræði* points out that Scandinavia must be seen as a part of the Christian world, belonging to the Christian God's design like the rest of Europe.

⁵³

Snorra Edda, utg. av Finnur Jónsson, København, 1900, 74-75.