

Oberlin

Digital Commons at Oberlin

Honors Papers

Student Work

1988

Survivals of Paganism in Christian Medieval Iceland as Evidenced by the Icelandic Family Sagas

Deborah Grossman
Oberlin College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/honors>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Grossman, Deborah, "Survivals of Paganism in Christian Medieval Iceland as Evidenced by the Icelandic Family Sagas" (1988). *Honors Papers*. 593.
<https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/honors/593>

This Thesis - Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at Digital Commons at Oberlin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Papers by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Oberlin. For more information, please contact megan.mitchell@oberlin.edu.

SURVIVALS OF PAGANISM IN CHRISTIAN MEDIEVAL ICELAND

As Evidenced by the Icelandic Family Sagas

BY

Deborah Grossman

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	i
1. GERMANIC PAGANISM	1
2. SCANDINAVIAN PAGANISM	11
3. THE CHRISTIANIZATION OF SCANDINAVIA	27
4. SCANDINAVIAN LITERATURE	42
5. THE ICELANDIC FAMILY SAGAS	55
6. CONCLUSION: THE IMPACT OF CHRISTIANITY ON ICELAND AND SURVIVALS OF PAGANISM	81
BIBLIOGRAPHY	90

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of the year 1000 A.D., the General Assembly of Iceland voted to convert to Christianity. The basis for this decision was political rather than religious, as it was to prevent civil dissension. This factor influenced the subsequent impact of Christianity on Icelandic society, and made possible the survival of numerous pagan practices and values. Contemporary literary sources, especially the Icelandic Family sagas, not only cover the conversion of Iceland, the ensuing conflicts and tensions between paganism and Christianity, and pagan survivals under Christianity, they also include many descriptions of pagan religion and pre-Christian society in Iceland.

A study of the Family sagas requires a knowledge of pre-Christian Germanic religion and society, of the conversion and Christianization of Scandinavia in general and Iceland in particular, and of the different forms of literature which have preserved this information. Background information on Germanic paganism is important for the study of Scandinavia paganism, as the two are closely related. Information on Germanic paganism comes mostly from Roman accounts, such as the Germania by Tacitus, and archeological evidence. A more specific study of Scandinavian paganism is necessary to understand pre-Christian society in Iceland, and to understand the conflicts which later arose between Christianity and paganism. The Poetic Edda is one

of the most important sources of information on Scandinavian paganism, as well as archeological discoveries.

The conversion and Christianization of Iceland was a process covering over 200 years, affecting all aspects of Icelandic society. Iceland was the last of the four Scandinavian countries to be converted, and it also produced most of the literature written in the Norse languages surviving from that time. These facts help to explain the frequent accounts in Icelandic literature of pagan religious practices and values, many of which evidently survived in Icelandic society well into Christian times. There are many contemporary written sources for the conversion and Christianization processes, from ecclesiastical records, to works by Icelandic historians, to less historical saga accounts.

A discussion of the various forms of Scandinavian literature is included here, with an emphasis on the Family sagas. Of special importance is the debt owed to Christianity for its introduction of the Roman alphabet, and the importance of Christian leaders in educating the population. However, the Icelanders quickly adopted the alphabet for use in writing secular works in the vernacular as well, including the Family sagas. The various debates concerning the historical validity of the sagas are covered as well. Next, the Icelandic Family sagas are each discussed individually. All of them contain at least some historical facts, as well as information on pagan religion and pre-Christian society. There is also some evidence of the

conflict between paganism and Christianity around the time of the conversion. The final chapter summarizes the impact of Christianity on Icelandic religious, social, and political institutions, focusing on the evidence of pagan survivals in these areas.

Pagan religion and Germanic social and moral codes were not eradicated by Christianity. Rather, Christianity adopted and adapted many aspects of pagan religion into its rituals and festivals. Many pagan and Christian values and customs were similar enough to fuse without any effort, while others simply continued to exist along side one another. The Family sagas, when cross-checked against more reliable historical sources, can provide an informative picture of paganism, the conversion, conflicts between Christianity and paganism, and the survival of pagan/Germanic concepts well after Christianity had been accepted.

CHAPTER 1: GERMANIC PAGANISM

Any study of Scandinavian paganism must begin with a study of continental Germanic paganism. There is not much textual information available, however, as the Germanic tribes left no written records. What we know of their religious beliefs and practices comes predominantly from Roman accounts, such as Germania by Tacitus,¹ and from archeology. The Bog People by P.V. Glob² provides archeological support for much of the material in Tacitus, as well as shedding new light on sacrificial practices.

Cornelius Tacitus lived from approximately 56 A.D. to 120 A.D. Very little is known about his private life, but a number of his literary works have survived. Germania was written in 98 A.D., although Tacitus probably drew on earlier sources such as Julius Caesar's Gallic War, and Pliny the Elder's German Wars, in addition to the experiences of soldiers and merchants of his own day. Overall, Germania has proved to be a reliable historical source, primarily as confirmed by archeological finds.

Archeology is useful, not only to prove the validity of Roman sources, but also as a first hand account of how the Germanic people lived and died. Houses, weapons, utensils, and carved images have all be discovered through excavation. The

1 Cornelius Tacitus, The Agricola and the Germania, trans. H. Mattingly and S.A. Handford (New York: Penguin Books, 1970), Germania.

2 P.V. Glob, The Bog People, trans. Rupert Bruce-Mitford (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973).

peat bogs of northern Europe are of particularly importance, as the acidic nature of bog water has made possible the preservation of entire human bodies, food, and clothing, as well as traditional grave goods.

P.V. Glob's fascinating work The Bog People provides detailed accounts of bog finds dating from c.100 B.C. to 500 A.D. These finds are mostly from bogs in Denmark, although similar finds have been made across northern Europe, notably in Central and West Germany, as well as in the southern Germanic areas of which Tacitus wrote. Glob discusses numerous bog burials and material finds, presenting evidence of both human and non-human sacrifice, the existence of idols, and burial practices and types of grave goods. This evidence has helped to prove the historical validity of the Germania.

Archeological and Roman sources are mostly concerned with continental Germanic tribes from c.400 B.C. to 600 A.D. By the first century B.C. these tribes had spread across most of modern-day Europe, reaching north into Scandinavia and south as far as Rome. Unfortunately, at this point the Germanic tribes did not keep written records, and the abundant Roman records from this era do not contain very much information on the social, political, and religious organization of the tribes. The Germania of Tacitus is a notable exception.

From these sources, modern historians can discern the major deities and religious practices of the Germanic tribes. There is information on the Germanic pantheon, sacrifice, worship, the priesthood, burial customs, supernatural beings, magic, and

belief in fate. However, there is no written evidence for a creation myth or for an eschatological myth.

The most important Germanic gods were Wôdan, Tyr, Donar, Nerthus, and Frija. Wôdan (Odin) was the god of wind, agriculture and the harvest, which were all seen as being connected. He was also god of the dead, god of war, and god of magic (especially as invoked in magic charms). Wôdan was portrayed as armed with a spear or javelin.³ Tacitus equates him with the Roman god Mercury, who was the messenger of the gods, and the god of eloquence, cleverness, and thievery. Although Mercury was not the chief god of the Romans, Tacitus considers Wôdan to be the chief god of the Germans. "Above all other gods," he states, "they worship Mercury, and count it no sin, on certain feast-days, to include human victims in the sacrifices offered to him."⁴

Tyr most likely pre-dated Wôdan throughout prehistoric Germanic Europe. Modern scholars suggest that Tyr was originally a god of the sky, although he is known as a war god by the first century A.D. Etymology and the evidence of place names are cited in support of this theory.⁵ Tacitus equated him with Mars, the

3 P.D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, Religion of the Teutons, trans. Bert J. Vos (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1902), p. 226; and Bertha S. Phillpotts, "Germanic Heathenism," in The Cambridge Medieval History, eds. H.M. Gwatkin and J.P. Whitney (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1913), Vol. II, p. 483.

4 Tacitus, Germania, Chapter 9.

5 Chantepie de la Saussaye, op.cit., pp. 244-245; Phillpotts, op.cit., p. 485.

Roman god of war.⁶ Sacrifices were also offered to Tyr, but only animal sacrifices. Donar (Thor) was the god of thunder and of physical strength, and was armed with an axe or a hammer. He was called Hercules by Tacitus.⁷ The Roman hero Hercules was a mortal who was deified. He was famous for his feats of strength. Donar was also content with animal sacrifices.

The goddess Nerthus was also very important. She was Mother Earth, the goddess of fertility. Every year she would journey forth in her chariot with a human consort. The arrival of her chariot brought a time of peace and feasting. At the end of her journey, the goddess returned to her secret lake in the sacred grove where slaves bathed her and were then drowned in sacrifice.⁸ Frija (Frea, Fricca), who was originally goddess of the sky and the wife of Tyr, later became a fertility goddess and the wife of Wôdan.⁹ Her symbol was the wild boar. Tacitus referred to her as the mother of the gods.¹⁰

In addition to the great gods and goddesses, the Germanic people believed in other beings who were greater than men, but less than gods, such as elves, dwarves, and giants.¹¹ Elves and dwarves could be kindly disposed to mortals, giving gifts, and helping people. However, they could also tease, deceive, and be

6 Tacitus, Germania, Chapter 9.

7 Tacitus, Germania, Chapters 3 and 9.

8 Tacitus, Germania, Chapter 40.

9 Chantepie de la Saussaye, op.cit., p. 275.

10 Tacitus, Germania, Chapter 45.

11 Chantepie de la Saussaye, op.cit., Ch. 16 and 17.

malicious and dangerous through such means as bewitchment and exchanging babies (changelings). Elves were usually beautiful, while dwarves were ugly and misshapen. Giants had huge bodies and superhuman strength, and they could be beautiful or they could be monsters. Giants were believed to be basically kind, wise, and trustworthy, although they could be terrible when angered.¹²

The religion of the Germanic tribes does not appear to have been one of personal relationships between man and god, although it may simply be that evidence of personal religion has not survived. Belief in fate (German wurth, "that which happens") as a force shaping one's destiny predominates. There is no evidence for the gods being in control of a person's life or death. However, the gods were often propitiated with sacrifices, whether in thanks or as an offering, indicating a belief in the gods' powers in other areas.¹³

Most sacrifices were of animals, but human sacrifice was also quite common. Sacrifice served numerous functions. In the autumn there were sacrifices for peace and plenty; at mid-winter for growth; and in the spring for victory in battle. In general, sacrifice was meant to ward off harmful influences and to promote fruitfulness of the soil. Animal sacrifices were followed by sacrificial feasts at which the animal was eaten. Human sacrifices were usually of slaves, outlaws, or prisoners of war; some appear to have been voluntary victims, possibly priests.

12 Chantepie de la Saussaye, op.cit., p. 329.

13 Phillpotts, op.cit., pp. 487 and 489.

These sacrifices could be made to appease a god who had been angered, as an offering before battle for good luck, or afterwards as thanks for victory. Lucien Musset refers to mass sacrifice by drowning of prisoners with their weapons after a victory among the Cimbri, and this has been confirmed by Danish archeology.¹⁴ Some human sacrifices may have been to promote fertility, peace, or simply the good will of the god or goddess. There were also sacrifices to Nerthus of inanimate objects such as wagons and draught animals, war canoes and gear to Tyr or Wôdan, food offerings for a good harvest or to thank a deity, and treasure such as bronze and silver vessels and valuable weapons.¹⁵ Most sacrifices took place within sacred groves, which were the primary place of worship.

The bogs, which now provide us with such excellent evidence, were once sacred places, sometimes within sacred groves, which were used for religious ceremonies and sacrificial deposits. In addition to finds of inanimate objects, the bogs have occasionally yielded up remarkably well-preserved human beings, who seem to have been sacrificial victims. Human sacrifice seems to have occurred mostly at mid to late winter. This can be determined by analysis of the food in the stomachs of a particular class of bog people. Some of the bog people are men who seem to have been more or less willing victims, and, according to Glob, were probably priests or special servants of a

14 Lucien Musset, The Germanic Invasions, trans. Edward and Columba James (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975), p. 13.

15 Glob, op.cit., pp. 101-102.

fertility deity.¹⁶ These men have delicate features and few calluses on their hands and feet, so they could not have been soldiers or peasants. They all seem to have eaten a similar last meal, probably ceremonial, of grains and flower seeds of early spring, which would not have been generally available at mid-winter when they met their deaths. They also died by similar methods, either by strangulation (with the rope noose left around their neck), or by having their throat slit. The noose may have symbolized the neck rings of the goddess. Numerous torcs and necklets, often twisted like rope, have been found in bogs, and these are similar to the neck rings carved on Mother Earth figures, which have also been found in bogs.

A recent article in The New York Times¹⁷ is concerned with the discovery of a bog man in Manchester, England who lived approximately 2,200 years ago. "Lindow Man," as he is called, is similar to bodies found in peat bogs in Denmark, considering the condition of his body and the manner of his death, except that he was a Celt, not a German. His throat had been cut, his windpipe had been crushed with a thong, his head had been bludgeoned, and his face had been held under water. However, he apparently was a willing victim who gave up his life to propitiate three of the Celtic gods. As with the Danish bog people, "Lindow Man" does not seem to have been a commoner or a soldier, as he had a healthy physique, no calluses on his hands and feet, and no scars

16 Glob, op.cit., pp. 26 and 115.

17 Malcolm W. Browne, "Bog Man Reveals Story of Brutal Ritual," The New York Times, 26 January 1988, Sec. Y, pp. 17 and 21.

or marks indicative of warfare. He also had a special last meal, in this case a burned bannock cake which was used in Druidic rituals.

This important find raises some tantalizing questions. Some of the researchers and archeologists studying it have hypothesized that "If the Denmark bodies are also those of Druids, the implication...is that Celts rather than Germans ruled Scandinavia in the second and third centuries BC. The Germans, in this view, may have been merely a subsidiary branch of the dominant Celtic society."¹⁸ They then suggest that because some Danish bog people were strangled in the same way as "Lindow Man," Druid authority may have extended to Scandinavia, the British Isles, France, and central Europe.

While there was no doubt contact between the Celts and Germans in the third century B.C., far more evidence is needed before the theory of Celtic domination of Scandinavia can be accepted. One Celtic find with similarities to Germanic finds is not enough to prove such a wide field of Druidic authority. There is also too little information available at this time on either Celtic or Germanic religion to determine their influence on each other.

Neither Tacitus nor Glob gives much evidence for the existence of a priestly caste. However, although there is no direct evidence for an organized priestly cast with distinct functions, there obviously were priests of some sort. Tacitus mentions priests and priestesses in conjunction with divination,

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 17.

the opening of assemblies, and with the worship of Nerthus.¹⁹ Divination was done by omens and lots, by the throwing of sticks, and by divining rods. According to Tacitus, the Germanic tribes also put great store in omens from the neighs and snorts of horses, and from the cries and flight of birds.²⁰

In addition to omens, the Germanic tribes also relied on their gods for aid in battle. Tacitus writes of the Germans carrying their god images into battle with them. These carved images were kept at other times in the sacred grove.²¹ At least one tribe, the Aestii, had faith in amulets. Tacitus writes that they wear "the device of a wild boar (Frijia's symbol), which stands them in stead of armor or human protection..."²²

Tacitus tells us little about Germanic burial customs, except that famous men were cremated on funeral pyres, often with their weapons and sometimes their horse.²³ A mound of turf was then raised, but no stone monuments. This fits well with the archeological record. In the Celtic Iron Age of northern Europe (fourth - first centuries B.C.) the dead were cremated on a pyre with few grave goods. Actual bird wings have sometimes been found in these burial mounds, perhaps indicating a belief that fire would free the soul to fly to the land of the dead.²⁴

19 Tacitus, Germania, Chapters 10, 11, and 40.

20 Tacitus, Germania, Ch. 10.

21 Tacitus, Germania, Ch. 7; and Glob, op.cit., pp. 124-127.

22 Tacitus, Germania, Ch. 45.

23 Tacitus, Germania, Ch. 27.

24 Glob, op.cit., pp. 100-101.

During the Roman Iron Age (first - fourth centuries A.D.), cremation was gradually replaced by inhumation with an increase in grave goods.²⁵ These grave goods included food, jewelry, knives, and coins or pieces of metal.

As has been shown, the combination of archeology and Roman sources can provide us with many details of Germanic paganism, although the Germanic tribes themselves left no written records. This information serves as a helpful background to a study of Scandinavia paganism, as there are many similarities between the two. The next chapter will discuss these similarities, and the differences, between Germanic and Scandinavian paganism.

²⁵ Glob, op.cit., pp. 93 and 102.

CHAPTER 2: SCANDINAVIAN PAGANISM

Contemporary primary sources for Scandinavian paganism of the fifth to tenth centuries are lacking, but there are numerous twelfth and thirteenth century sources which can be extremely helpful. These include redactions of oral traditions as well as fictitious stories based on historical events or personages. One of the most important thirteenth century redactions of Scandinavian mythology is The Poetic Edda,²⁶ which contains lays on the Norse creation myth, the gods, lesser deities, and beliefs about life after death.

In addition to the literary sources, archeology has proved helpful to the study of religion in early Scandinavia. The Road to Hel by H.R. Ellis²⁷ discusses burial customs as known from archeological evidence, also including information on the gods of the dead, abodes of the dead, and beliefs about death and life after death. This book is slightly outdated, and thus its information should be weighed against more recent archeological findings, as well as other literary interpretations. Even so, it can be useful for a general study. Scandinavian Archeology by H. Shetelig and H. Falk²⁸ is a much broader based study, outlining 10,000 years of Scandinavian history as known through archeology.

26 The Poetic Edda, trans. Lee M. Hollander (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1928).

27 Hilda R. Ellis, The Road to Hel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1943).

28 H. Shetelig and H. Falk, Scandinavian Archeology (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937).

The chapters covering more recent Scandinavian history include information on archeological finds such as burial sites, grave goods, and religious offerings. Overall, Shetelig and Falk are objective in their interpretations of the finds, and everything is well-documented and supported. The Bog People by P.V. Glob²⁹ is helpful in showing the continuity of continental Germanic traditions in Scandinavia.

The large body of surviving Norse literature provides us with much insight into early Scandinavian religion. Much of the Norse mythology is very similar, if not identical, to continental Germanic traditions, especially the major deities, forms of worship, and sacrifice. Differences do exist, however, and both contemporary literary sources and archeological studies are more numerous and informative for Scandinavian paganism than for continental Germanic paganism.

The Poetic Edda is a valuable collection as it gives us insight into Scandinavian pagan religion and mythology, including cosmogonical and eschatological myths which do not exist in written form for Germanic paganism. Chantepie de la Saussaye writes that "In Norse mythology alone do we find cosmogonical and eschatological views systematically developed,"³⁰ as compared with the continental Germanic tradition. According to the

29 P.V. Glob, The Bog People, trans. Rupert Bruce-Mitford (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973).

30 P.D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, The Religion of the Teutons, trans. Bert J. Vos (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1902), p.338.

Edda,³¹ the earth was created out of the chaos of the great void Ginnungagap. The well Hvergelmir in Niflheim fed eleven rivers which froze the hot world of Múspell. The melted drops became the Giant Ymir who begat the race of frost giants. Meanwhile, the cow Audhumla formed the first god, Búri, by licking a block of ice. Búri begat Bor, who in turn begat Odin, Vili, and Vé. These three brothers killed Ymir and created the earth from his body. This earth was comprised of three rings surrounded by an ocean. The outer ring was Utgard, home of giants, trolls, elves, and dwarves. Included in Utgard was the underground realm of Niflheim ruled by the goddess Hel. The middle ring was Midgard, the world of men. The inner-most circle was Asgard, home of the gods.

These three main worlds were held to have several connecting features, the most important one being the ash tree Yggdrasil.³² Yggdrasil was a symbol of the structure of the universe. It had three roots, one in each ring, and its branches covered the entire earth. In addition, Yggdrasil was the tree of fate; it was held to be in a state of continual slow destruction since the beginning of the world, symbolizing the eventual end of the earth. Under Yggdrasil were the wells of fate and wisdom. Midgard was surrounded by ocean, in which lived the Midgard serpent. Travel between the worlds was possible only to a few, requiring passage through or over water, a feat requiring great

31 The Poetic Edda, trans. Hollander: "Voluspa," pp. 2-16; "Vafthrúðnismál," pp. 48-60; "Grímnismál," pp. 63-74.

32 The Poetic Edda, trans. Hollander: "Voluspa," pp. 2-6, strophes 2, 11, 19.

endurance.

For a time, according to the Edda,³³ there would be peace and innocence in the world, but evil was not dead. This surviving evil would lead to Ragnarök, the end of the world, and the fate or doom of the gods. Gods would fight giants and each other, and the gods would lose. Primeval chaos would return and the earth would sink back into the sea. A three year long winter would follow, and then a new earth would rise, in which would live the few gods who had survived. A human man and woman would also have survived to repopulate the earth.

It is impossible to prove whether or not these myths have a basis in Germanic paganism, although the similarities of various elements, such as the pantheon, allow for the possibility. The continuance of Germanic paganism in Scandinavia is most obvious when considering the pantheon and other supernatural beings. A comparison of forms of worship and sacrifice also reveals a close relationship between Germanic and Scandinavian pagan religion.

The Scandinavian pagan pantheon included two sets of gods, the Vanir and the AEsir. The Vanir were more specialized gods of fertility, while the AEsir were more warlike.³⁴ Norse mythology tells of an ancient war between the two groups of gods in which the Vanir were victorious. Hostages were then exchanged to

33 The Poetic Edda, trans. Hollander: "Voluspa," pp. 11-15, strophes 36-56.

34 E.O.G. Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), p. 156. Hereafter abbreviated as MRN.

ensure continued peace.³⁵ In the opinion of Turville-Petre, this war among the gods was part of the creation myth and "it explains how gods who promoted such different interests as the Vanir and AEsir lived in friendship. More than this, it explains why the AEsir are gods, not only of chieftains and of war, but also of fertility and magic,"³⁶ as the war resulted in a fusion of cults.

The four highest gods were Odin and Thor of the AEsir, and Frey and Freyja of the Vanir. Of slightly lesser importance were Baldr and Loki, as well as Frigg, Aegir, Ran, Idun, and Volund, and many other minor gods and goddesses. Several of the old Germanic gods continued to be worshipped in parts of Scandinavia, although they were overshadowed by the newer gods. These old gods were Tyr, Ull, and Njord (Nerthus).

Odin was the king of the gods, and his main symbol was the spear, as well as the wolf and the raven. He was the god of war, death, the gallows, poetry, knowledge, and runes. Odin promoted strife and incited men to battle, and he was master of the valkyries who escorted fallen heroes to Odin's hall, Valhalla. He stole the gift of poetry from the giants, and he received wisdom and knowledge of runes by hanging on the gallows.³⁷ Odin was regarded as the ancestor of most of the royal families of Denmark and England. His cult was prominent in Denmark and Norway, while he was not worshipped much, if at all, in

35 The Poetic Edda, trans. Hollander: "Voluspa", pp. 5-6, strophes 13-17.

36 Turville-Petre, MRN, p. 160.

37 The Poetic Edda, trans. Hollander: "Hóvamól," pp. 42-43, strophes 139-146.

Iceland.³⁸

Icelanders preferred Thor. Whereas Odin was the god of royalty, Thor was the god of the common people.³⁹ He was the god of the sky, thunder and lightening, strength, and of produce of the soil. He was the guardian of the land and of law and order, and also the protector of gods and men against evil beings who represented chaos, such as giants, trolls, and dwarves. Thor was mentioned first when sacrificing to the gods, and carved images in the temples had Thor in the middle.⁴⁰ His symbol was an axe or a hammer.

Frey and Freyja were deities responsible for the fertility of crops, livestock, and human beings. Frey was the chief god of the Vanir. He took the place of the old Germanic Nerthus, Mother Earth, who was known as Njörd in Scandinavia. Like Nerthus, Frey toured the countryside in a chariot every autumn. Freyja was a goddess of fertility and sexuality, and birth and death. She was the Scandinavian equivalent of the Germanic Frija, the wife of Odin, and as such was a goddess of war and death, getting half of those slain in battle. Baldr was the sacrificial god, a martyr. He was pure and innocent, bright, good, and just. He was invulnerable to everything except mistletoe, which caused his death. He provided peace and good government. Loki was the god

38 B.S. Phillpotts, "Germanic Heathenism," in The Cambridge Medieval History, eds. H.M. Gwatkin and J.P. Whitney (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1913), Vol. 2, p. 483.

39 Ibid.; Chantepie de la Saussaye, op.cit., p. 237; Johannes Brondsted, The Vikings, trans. Kalle Skov (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1960), p. 272.

40 Phillpotts., op.cit., pp. 482 and 491.

of malice. He was descended from giants and often caused trouble for the gods because of his cunning and deceitfulness.

Among the other gods, several are prominent in the Eddic lays and other Norse literature, notably Aegir, the god of the sea; Ran, the goddess of the sea, who received those who drowned; Idun, who had the apples of youth which gave the gods immortality; and Volund, the smith, who forged special swords for heroes. Two important old gods were Tyr and Ull. Tyr was a Germanic sky god and war god who was displaced by Odin; he was not much known north of Denmark. Ull, on the other hand, was not much known south of Denmark. He, too, had originally been a sky god, later becoming known as a god of single combat, hunting, archery, and skis.⁴¹

Turville-Petre suggests that the Norse gods were to be propitiated with sacrifices, but not worshipped or loved.⁴² The general consensus of modern scholars is that none of the deities was supreme and all-powerful, although they could grant favors and take revenge. The supreme power was impersonal fate, which controlled the gods as well as men. The Scandinavian conception of fate was very similar to the Germanic idea of wurth, or "that which happens." In Old Norse, fate was known as sköp or örlög, meaning "things shaped" or "laid down of yore."

Closely connected with the workings of fate were lesser

⁴¹ Turville-Petre, MRN, p. 182.

⁴² E.O.G. Turville-Petre, Origins of Icelandic Literature (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), p. 49.

female deities such as *dísir*, valkyries and Norns.⁴³ The *dísir* had power over the forces of natural increase, and were responsible for the well-being of land and family. The valkyries, as mentioned above, were the handmaidens of Odin. They were responsible for choosing the slain from the battlefield who were to go to Valhalla. The Norns were three sisters who controlled fate. They represent a trinity of past, present, and future. The most important Norn was *Urðr*, whose name means "fate." The other two sisters were *Verðandi* (present) and *Skuld* (future) and were probably late additions.⁴⁴

In addition to valkyries and Norns, there were familiar or attendant spirits called *fylgjur* which were responsible for an individual or a family.⁴⁵ They often appeared in the dreams of the individual they protected, and were usually represented as animals. Other spirits dwelt in groves, mounds, and waterfalls, which were treated accordingly as holy places. The *landvaettir* were guardian spirits of the land. Norse pagans also believed in giants, elves, and dwarves. Most giants were believed to be enemies of the gods, although a few were held to be friendly. Elves, also, were usually evil. However, some people made sacrifices to elves for good fortune and restoration to health. Dwarves were wise and cunning, and could only be dealt with

43 Peter G. Foote and David M. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), p. 392.

44 Turville-Petre, MRN, p. 280.

45 *Ibid.*

through trickery.⁴⁶

Scandinavian pagans originally worshipped in sacred groves, as had the continental Germanic pagans. Eventually the roofed temple replaced the open groves.⁴⁷ These temples were called hofar (sing. hof), which means "house of sacrifice." Within the hof was an inner temple which housed the altar. Around the altar were carved images of the gods, usually three in number. This part of the sanctuary also contained a sacred arm ring. It was worn by the priest (goði) at legal assemblies, and oaths were sworn on it. There was also a bowl for sacrificial blood (hlautbowl) and a brush (hlaut-teinn) used to sprinkle the sacrificial blood on worshippers and on the temple itself.⁴⁸ For local, seasonal cult celebrations, the chieftain's farmhouse would double as a temple for communal religious observances.

There was private family worship as well, although there does not seem to have been personal, individual relations with the gods.⁴⁹ Archeology has presented evidence of small wooden and clay statues of gods, as well as private altars, in homes. Miniature images of silver and bone, probably worn as amulets, have also been found.⁵⁰

As with Germanic paganism, sacrifice seems to have been an important part of Scandinavian religion. There were three major

46 Ibid., p. 393.

47 Phillpotts, op.cit., p. 492.

48 Ibid.

49 Foote and Wilson, op.cit., p. 5.

50 Shetelig and Falk, op.cit., p. 421; Glob, op.cit., p. 113.

religious festivals yearly with sacrifices: in the autumn after the harvest, midwinter after the solstice, and at the beginning of the summer. All three were to promote security and fertility.⁵¹ There was also individual sacrifice for propitiation or divination, including sacrifice within the home to a family's guardian spirits.⁵²

Sacrifice usually involved lesser animals, especially sheep, and horses. The blood of the animal was gathered in the hlautbowl and then used to color the walls, stands, and worshippers. The flesh of the sacrificed animals was cooked for the sacrificial banquet at which toasts were drunk to Odin for victory and success of the king; and to Njord and Frey for peace and for a fruitful harvest. The participants also drank the bragafull, or chieftain's toast, and the cup of remembrance, toasts to dead kinsmen.

Human sacrifice, although not common, did exist in the form of burning, hanging, drowning, throwing victims over cliffs, and the bloody eagle. The bloody eagle was a particularly gruesome sacrifice to Odin, done on the battlefield, which entailed severing the ribs from the backbone of a prisoner of war, and then pulling out the lungs.⁵³ In addition to prisoners of war, criminals were sometimes sacrificed. The form of the sacrifice may have depended on the crime being punished, or the god to whom

51 Foote and Wilson, op.cit., p. 401.

52 Phillpotts, op.cit., pp. 487 and 489.

53 The Poetic Edda, trans. Hollander: "Reginismól," p. 260, strophe 26.

the offering was made.

Sacrifice could also involve food offerings, gold or other treasure, ceremonial carts, war gear, and ploughs.⁵⁴ There were many reasons for sacrifice, and they could occur on the public and the private level. Offerings could be made to propitiate a god, to ask a god for favors, as simply a personal gift to a particular god, or as part of one of the major festivals described above.

Literary and archeological sources also provide us with information on other elements of Scandinavian paganism, such as religious administration, burial customs, ancestor worship, and beliefs in life after death. There is very little, if any, information available on these topics for earlier Germanic paganism. This makes it impossible to determine whether these aspects of Scandinavian religion are continuations of Germanic paganism, or new and different developments.

Religious administration was different in each of the Scandinavian countries, although none of them had an organized priestly caste. In all four countries, political leaders also performed priestly functions.⁵⁵ In Sweden, the king was also the high priest. The king was expected to assure victory, good weather, and good harvest. In time of famine, the king might be sacrificed to Frey to end the famine. This was the supreme sacrifice. Religious administration in Norway and Denmark was on a more local, less centralized, level, with hersar (earls and

54 Glob, op.cit., pp. 102 and 128.

55 Phillpotts, op.cit., p. 491.

local chiefs) and petty kings administering the temples in their districts. Iceland had no king, nor any official nobility. Each of the most powerful land owners, or goðar, had control over his local temple, where he served as both chieftain and temple priest. Women played an important role in pagan Scandinavia.⁵⁶ They had legal and social rights, and also had some religious power. Their opinions were respected, and many were soothsayers, practicing prophecy and sorcery.

Archeology has provided us with a great deal of information on burial practices in early Scandinavia from approximately 500 B.C. to 1000 A.D.⁵⁷ During the period of Scandinavian history preceding this study (Iron Age, c. 500 B.C. to 400 A.D.), cremation was the most common way of disposing of the dead, as it was among continental Germanic tribes at that time. However, by the end of the Iron Age, Roman style burial began to predominate, especially in southern Scandinavia. This involved inhumation with grave goods, including a full meal, weapons, and treasure. Further north, in Norway and Sweden, grave mounds and memorial stones were added to graves.

Over the next 600 years (400 - 1000 A.D.), many changes occurred in burial customs. In general, burial became more elaborate in the fifth and sixth centuries, with larger grave mounds and richer grave goods. However, these were mostly burials of royalty and nobility. The first ship burials date

56 Turville-Petre, MRN, p. 261.

57 Ellis, op.cit., pp. 8-11; Shetelig and Falk, op.cit., pp. 277 and 284.

from c. 500 A.D. The first of these were simply rocks arranged in the outline of a ship, although these soon gave way to actual ships. Grave goods included treasure, weapons, cooking utensils and/or food, and domestic animals such as sheep, horses, dogs, pigs, or cattle. Ship burials may have been related to a belief in a land of the dead across the sea, requiring a journey to get there.⁵⁸ Most ship burials are found near water.

These elaborate graves gave way to much simpler graves in the seventh century. These graves were flatter, and we find the graves of common people as well as royalty. An indication of the difference in status is the presence of household utensils and farming tools in the graves, in comparison to the weapons and treasure found in the graves of nobility. During the Viking age, especially the eighth and ninth centuries, differences in customs become apparent in the Scandinavian countries. Denmark became more and more influenced by Christian burial customs. Graves there were very simple and poorly furnished with grave goods. Sweden and Norway during this period show evidence of both simple and elaborate burial. Cremation was once again practiced, although inhumation was still predominant. Burial in mounds was common to all Scandinavians regardless of social class, complete with grave goods of clothes, ornaments, weapons, tools, and domestic animals. Also, princely ship burials regained popularity. Iceland in the ninth and tenth centuries shows no evidence of cremation, and very few ship burials. The large mounds of Norway and Sweden gave way to low stone cairns in

⁵⁸ Ellis, op.cit., p. 44.

Iceland, and grave goods were limited to a single weapon for men, or a brooch or beads for women. Horses or dogs were occasionally included in the burial.

The various types of burial were related to a belief in life after death. This can be seen in the practice of burial in barrows, which served as homes for the dead, complete with grave goods such as food, treasure, weapons, and tools. Animals were also often included in burial, especially horses, symbolic of death and fertility, and dogs, companions of men. Occasionally human servants, or even wives, were sacrificed to accompany the dead person. The most common belief was of a future life spent by the spirit of the deceased in or near its burial place.⁵⁹ Although it left the body at death, a person's spirit could stay near the deceased person's family after death, often appearing as an animal. To prevent being bothered by this spirit, the dead person was carried out of the house by an unusual opening, such as a hole in the wall, so the soul could not find its way back, and the corpse was buried at a remote spot to banish the soul to a distance.⁶⁰

This belief in ghosts is related to ancestor worship. Private family sacrifices were made to the dead, and toasts were drunk to dead kinsmen at communal sacrificial feasts.⁶¹ Ellis goes so far as to suggest a cult of the dead in Scandinavia,

59 Phillpotts, op.cit., p. 493.

60 Ibid., p. 493.

61 Ibid., p. 487.

based on literary evidence.⁶²

In literature,⁶³ the howe, or burial mound, is perceived as a dwelling place for the dead and their treasure. However, literary sources also refer to two other-worlds, Valhalla and Hel. Valhalla, as mentioned above, is Odin's hall where warriors slain in battle are brought to make ready for the final conflict at Ragnarök.⁶⁴ Non-warriors end up in Hel, which is simply a land of the dead, not a place for punishment or retribution.⁶⁵

Beliefs about death and about life after death can be summed up very briefly. According to archeological evidence, cremation was an earlier form of burial, which later gave way to inhumation. Howes, or burial mounds, were very common. The types of grave goods imply some sort of belief in life after death, perhaps a future life spent by the deceased person in or near the burial place.⁶⁶ This theory helps to explain the practice of ancestor worship. Literature, such as the Edda and the sagas, describes two destinations for the dead. Odin's hall, Valhalla, has a "hall of the slain" for those felled in battle. Non-warriors have a place in Hel, which is simply an abode for the dead, not a place for punishment or retribution.

Much of Scandinavian paganism is similar, if not identical, to earlier Germanic paganism. Numerous beliefs and rituals

62 Ellis, op.cit., p. 119.

63 Ibid., p. 36.

64 Ibid., p. 66.

65 Ibid., p. 75.

66 Ibid., p. 493.

continued on in Scandinavia for several centuries after the continental Germanic tribes had been converted to Christianity. However, by the ninth century, Christianity had arrived in Denmark and gradually spread across Scandinavia, reaching Iceland in 1000 A.D. The conversion of Scandinavia to Christianity will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3: THE CHRISTIANIZATION OF SCANDINAVIA

The Christianization of Scandinavia was a lengthy process, the main part of which covered over 200 years, from the ninth through the eleventh centuries. Thanks to its location on the continent, Denmark had long been exposed to Christianity and was the first of the Scandinavian countries to be converted. Missionaries from England and Germany soon spread north into Norway and Sweden, and finally west to Iceland. The majority of the contemporary sources focus mostly on Denmark, Norway, and Iceland.

Adam of Bremen's History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen,⁶⁷ written between 1072 and 1075/6, is the main source of information for the Scandinavian Christian missions of the eleventh century. He wrote his History to demonstrate and defend the authority of the archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen over the Church in the north, and because of this some of his historical information contains errors and oversimplifications. There are two important sources for individual countries. The first of these is Islendingabók by Ari Thorgilsson,⁶⁸ written c. 1134, which describes the conversion of Iceland. Ari got his information from Teitr, the son of Bishop Isleif (d.1080) and grandson of Gizur the White, who was a leading member of the

⁶⁷ Adam of Bremen, History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen, trans. Francis J. Tschan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

⁶⁸ Ari Thorgilsson, Islendingabók, in Islandica, ed. and trans. Halldór Hermannsson (Ithaca: Cornell University Library, 1930), Vol. XX.

Christian party at time of the conversion. The second is "The Saga of Olaf Tryggvason," in Heimskringla,⁶⁹ written in the early thirteenth century by the Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson. This saga includes information on the conversion of Norway and also of Iceland. In addition to contemporary written sources, archeological evidence can be helpful in tracing the rise of Christianity in Scandinavia. H.E. Lidén discusses possible evidence of cult continuity in "From pagan sanctuary to Christian Church."⁷⁰ The article covers finds made at a site in Maere, Norway.

Histories of conversion are rare and not always completely reliable. Conversion is usually a subsidiary theme in works written for other purposes. The most detailed accounts of Scandinavian Christianization were written either at the end of the missionary period, such as Adam of Bremen, or long afterwards, such as the "Saga of Olaf Tryggvason" and Islendingabók. It is important to consider the purpose of the writer, as different writers often changed their emphasis, and distorted, elaborated, or expanded a story to serve their own purposes.⁷¹ Adam of Bremen wrote his History to demonstrate and defend the claim of his archbishopric to ecclesiastical authority

69 Snorri Sturluson, "The Saga of Oláf Tryggvason," in Heimskringla, trans. Lee M. Hollander (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), pp. 144-244.

70 Hans-Emil Lidén, "From Pagan Sanctuary to Christian Church," Norwegian Archeological Review, 2 (1969), 3-32.

71 Birgit Sawyer, "Scandinavian Conversion Histories," in The Christianization of Scandinavia, eds. Birgit Sawyer, Peter Sawyer, and Ian Wood (Alingsås, Sweden: Viktoria Bokförlag, 1987), p.88.

throughout the north. Ari wrote Islendingabók to give the main credit for the conversion of the Icelanders to his own family and friends. Also, the various accounts could be affected by events in the writer's own time. Icelanders tried to give themselves credit for their conversion, free from foreign influence, which should be seen against the backdrop of Iceland's growing dependence on Norway and the end of the Icelandic Republic.⁷² Snorri projected back into the past conflicts in his own time between local chieftains and the centralizing power of king and Church in his Heimskringla. For example, the account in Heimskringla of the enforced conversion of Norway reflects a criticism of the Norwegian kings of Snorri's time and their ecclesiastical supporters.⁷³ Finally, the conversion histories could oversimplify a story. For example, the task of Christianizing Scandinavia was carried out by many men. However, contemporary sources give credit, not to all the chieftains and rich landowners, but only to a small number of kings.⁷⁴

Birgit Sawyer states that "none of the medieval conversion 'histories' provide reliable information about the conversion of Scandinavia,"⁷⁵ as they were all produced to serve contemporary purposes in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and most of them were more or less dependent on Adam's account, which is not completely accurate or objective. It is necessary to be aware of

72 Ibid., p. 108.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid., p. 109.

the fact that a contemporary source is not necessarily a reliable source.

Before considering the information in the sources, it is helpful to discuss the difference between conversion and Christianization. It is primarily a distinction between conversion as a personal religious experience, which is a private matter, and Christianization as a "public" process with observable effects. Some of these effects include administrative changes, such as the creation of bishoprics and parishes, the establishment of tithes, and obligatory church attendance; legal changes; and the development of ritual, dogma, and new standards of personal morality.⁷⁶ Contemporary perceptions of conversion differed between those doing the converting and those being converted.⁷⁷ Missionaries and other Church officials often saw conversion as the acceptance of monastic vows; or, as with Adam of Bremen, the acceptance of the authority of a specific archbishopric. New converts, however, often viewed conversion as the acceptance of new rituals, especially baptism; or the rejection of old habits, such as eating horsemeat, exposure of infants, or cremation of the dead. Conversion could lead to the preservation of some old rituals and beliefs, if presented in new terms, and the rejection of others.

Conversion was a process, not a sudden and complete event.

⁷⁶ "The Meanings of Conversion," in The Christianization of Scandinavia, p. 1. Summary by the editors of discussions on this topic at the symposium.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Ian Wood⁷⁸ holds the view that the Christianization of Scandinavia was a social phenomenon. However, E.O.G. Turville-Petre⁷⁹ argues that conversion was of spiritual importance, and was not a social and cultural revolution, since so many traditions of pre-Christian Scandinavia continued to exist into the Christian age, especially in Iceland. There were indeed survivals of pagan traditions, but they are better understood as part of the social phenomenon of Christianization, with the adaptation of old practices and adoption of new ones. As Peter Hallberg notes, "the entire manner in which Christianity was introduced seems to indicate that religion was regarded essentially as a community affair rather than as a matter of personal conviction."⁸⁰

The continuance of pagan traditions demonstrates the flexibility of Scandinavian paganism, and its tolerance of other religious beliefs. Scandinavian civilization in the ninth and tenth centuries was very cosmopolitan owing to the foreign raids and travels of Vikings and merchants, and it was open to new ideas. In most countries, Christianity destroyed or overpowered the pre-Christian culture, but there was more of a symbiosis in Scandinavia.⁸¹ Turville-Petre points out that "the Norse

⁷⁸ Ian Wood, "The Meanings of Conversion," in The Christianization of Scandinavia, p. 22.

⁷⁹ E.O.G. Turville-Petre, Origins of Icelandic Literature (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), p. 69.

⁸⁰ Peter Hallberg, The Icelandic Saga, trans. Paul Schach (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), p. 13.

⁸¹ Lucien Musset, Les peuples scandinaves au moyen âge (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1951), p. 132.

hierarchy of gods was ever changing, as new gods came to live side-by-side with the older ones."⁸² This attitude made it possible for Scandinavians to accept Christ as a god, along with the pagan gods, before Christianity became the dominant religion in Scandinavia.

In addition to the adaptability of Scandinavian paganism, the very nature of the pagan religion facilitated the Christianization process. Scandinavian paganism had no clearly defined tenets or rules of conduct. There was also no all-powerful, supreme god; the supreme power was fate. The gods were to be propitiated with sacrifices, not worshipped or loved. Finally, the moral code of Scandinavian pagans was not connected with religious beliefs. A new god and new rituals could fit easily into such a religion. In addition, the certainty of life after death provided by Christianity was a powerful attraction, and Turville-Petre suggests that the doctrine of eternal punishment "was a powerful weapon in the hands of missionaries...Scandinavian pagans had nothing to rival it."⁸³

Missions were directed to pagan political or ethnic units, not to individuals. Missionaries set out to baptize the leaders first, either the king or powerful chieftains, and then to baptize the rest of the population. Their goal was to perform baptism as soon as possible, so as to get the convert under the "regimen pastoral," under which pastors could enforce rules of

⁸² Turville-Petre, Origins, p. 49.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 55.

Christian life.⁸⁴ The primary emphasis of missionaries was on creating new dioceses, not on personal conversion. A diocese could be established while the inhabitants of the area were still mostly pagan.⁸⁵

The first Scandinavian king to be baptized was Harald Klak of Denmark, in 826 at Mainz.⁸⁶ However, he was driven out of Denmark one year later and lived the rest of his life in exile, so his conversion did not affect Denmark. Horik I (died 854) and Horik II (died between 865 and 874) of Denmark were both Christian, according to Adam. He states that Bishop Ansgar made a Christian of Horik I, who then granted anyone in his kingdom the liberty to become a Christian if he wished,⁸⁷ while Horik II "accepted the Christian faith and by edict ordered all his people to become Christians."⁸⁸ However, although both kings had friendly relations with the Church, neither one was ever baptized.⁸⁹ By the time King Harald Gormsson was converted in 965, the Danes already accepted Christ as a god, although not as the only god. Harald worked to Christianize Denmark, and even

⁸⁴ "Missionary Methods," in The Christianization of Scandinavia, p. 8. Summary by the editors of discussions on this topic at the symposium.

⁸⁵ Niels Refskou, "Missionary Aims," in The Christianization of Scandinavia, p. 22.

⁸⁶ Adam of Bremen, op.cit., p. 22.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 29.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 32.

⁸⁹ Peter Sawyer, "The Process of Scandinavian Christianization in the 10th and 11th Centuries," in The Christianization of Scandinavia, p. 68.

extended his efforts into Norway.⁹⁰

Less is known about the Christianization of Sweden, although Adam does mention Bishop Ansgar continuing on to Sweden from Denmark.⁹¹ Sweden had several independent rulers in the tenth and eleventh centuries, as well as numerous powerful individual landowners, some of whom were Christian. The first Swedish king to be converted was Erik (d. 994 or 995), but he reverted to paganism, so it was up to Erik's son Olof to begin the task of converting the Swedes. By the eleventh century, eastern Sweden was Christian, although north and west Sweden were still pagan.

In Norway, the main source of Christian influence was England. Olaf Tryggvason, king of Norway, was baptized in England in 996 before returning to Norway, and English missionaries visited Norway. Adam holds Olaf Tryggvason to be the first Christian in Norway.⁹² However, Christianity was tolerated, and even favored, by some Norwegians before Olaf, although he really began the Christianization of Norway. Snorri admits that some Norwegians had been converted before Olaf Tryggvason, but claims that they had not kept the faith. Many people had been baptized when Harald Gormsson, king of Denmark, had sent two earls to convert Norway; but when he died they "reverted to heathen sacrifices as before and as the people in the north of the land did."⁹³ Olaf had to reconvert them.

90 Snorri, op.cit., p. 195.

91 Adam of Bremen, op.cit., p. 22.

92 Ibid., p. 80.

93 Snorri Sturluson, op.cit., p. 195.

Christian influences in Norway before Olaf were due to previous Danish authority over southern Norway. Between approximately 1020 and 1060, Iceland was visited by numerous foreign missionary bishops, who were sent to make converts, establish churches, and ordain priests. Iceland was nominally part of the archdiocese of Bremen, so many of the missionaries were German. Musset notes that "the influence of Germany is preponderant in the origins of the Icelandic Church; however, the clergy is almost entirely native-born."⁹⁴ The first two native bishops, Isleif (bishop 1056-1080) and his son Gizur (bishop 1082-1118) were both educated and ordained in Germany.

According to Ari's account of the conversion of Iceland, the Norwegian King Olaf, son of Tryggvi, brought Christianity into Norway and Iceland.⁹⁵ Olaf sent the priest Thangbrand to Iceland. A few chieftains were baptized, but most were not. Three Icelanders, Gizur the White, Hjalti, and the priest Thormod tried next. They went to the Althing, the Icelandic General Assembly, in 1000 A.D. and asked the lawspeaker, Thorgeir, to present their case. Thorgeir, a pagan, spoke on the dangers of opposing parties and the need for one law and one religion, and emphasized the preservation of legal order and peace. Therefore the new law stated that all must become Christian and be baptized. Some heathen customs were retained for a few years, namely the practice of infanticide, eating horse flesh, and sacrifice to old gods if it was done in secret.

⁹⁴ Musset, op.cit., p. 130, (my translation).

⁹⁵ Ari Thorgilsson, op.cit., p. 64.

Ari over-emphasizes the role of Olaf Tryggvason in converting Norway and Iceland. Actually, Christianity reached Iceland through many channels: contact, especially by merchants, with the British Isles, with incompletely Christianized Norway, and possibly some contact with Germany. Adam claims that Iceland was converted in the time of Archbishop Adalbert (1043-72), when Adalbert consecrated Bishop Isleif in 1056.⁹⁶ For Adam, "conversion" was equal to the acceptance of the authority of the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen. He makes no mention of the role of Olaf Tryggvason in converting Iceland. Snorri does, however, in a version which is basically a summary of Ari's version. According to Snorri,⁹⁷ King Olaf sent Thangbrand to convert Iceland. Thangbrand returned, having been unsuccessful, and said that he considered it unlikely that Iceland would ever be Christian. Olaf then sent two Icelanders who were at his court, Gizur the White and Hjalti Skeggjason. They were successful; Christianity was adopted in Iceland by law; and all the people were baptized.

The seemingly easy conversion of Iceland is not really so surprising, considering the strong Christian influences imported by Icelandic travelers to Christian countries, and the presence in Iceland of Christian settlers. Pagan religious traditions were not as strong in Iceland as in Norway or Sweden.⁹⁸ Icelanders showed indifference to and open disregard of

96 Adam of Bremen, op.cit., p. 180.

97 Snorri Sturluson, op.cit., p. 209.

98 Turville-Petre, Origins, p. 68.

Christianity at first, as well as ignorance of its teachings. After the legal adoption of Christianity, chieftains observed the formalities of converting temples into churches, and of building new churches. The goðar and/or their sons took up holy orders, thereby retaining control of the religious cult. The scarcity of educated priests at first allowed for this continued secular control of religion.

The first Christian priests were mostly foreigners who did not own land, and who had a very low social status. Churches were privately owned by the goðar, and priests were hired by landowners, and placed under obligation to them, the same as any servant. At first, Scandinavian clergy dressed and lived like laymen. They had no special clerical garb, and they married and had families, ran their farms if they were independent, and carried weapons.⁹⁹

By the middle of the eleventh century, native priests were replacing the foreigners and the social status of priests began to rise. The first native bishop was Isleif, who served from 1056 to 1081. He was the son of Gizur the White, who had helped Olaf Tryggvason to convert Iceland. Isleif did not have much ecclesiastical or spiritual influence, but he was a great educator and he founded a school. Bishop Gizur, who served from 1082 to 1118, was the son of Isleif. He was a powerful bishop who placed the Church on a secure footing, and who instituted social and political reforms. Bishop Gizur established tithes in

⁹⁹ Peter Foote and David Wilson, The Viking Achievement (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), pp. 96-97.

Iceland in 1096, so the clergy finally had a fixed income, but they still were not free of secular control. By 1200, however, Christian priests were accepted as full members of Scandinavian society.¹⁰⁰

In Iceland, tithes, unlike tithes elsewhere, were not levied only on income, but on goods and land as well. This policy benefitted the chieftains who owned the churches, as one-quarter of the tithes went to the bishop, one-quarter to the poor, one-quarter to the priest, and one-quarter to the local church. A chieftain who owned a church received the portion which was designated for the priest, who was usually a family member or a priest he had hired, as well as the portion meant for the local church, which he owned.

Old traditions of secular landownership were adapted, so that land given to the Church for a local parish church remained under the legal control of the grantor and his heirs. After 1096, these families received extra wealth from tithes. Also, property given over to the Church was free from tithe, so chieftains dedicated property to saints, and hence to the Church, but kept the administration in their own hands, and in the hands of their heirs. Whereas on the continent, control of church offices was more important, in Iceland landownership was more important.¹⁰¹ The resulting secular control of church lands limited the power and wealth of the Icelandic Church. The

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁰¹ Jesse Byock, Feud in the Icelandic Saga (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 33.

conflict over control of church lands was not settled until the end of the thirteenth century, after Iceland's loss of independence to Norway in 1262-64.

Although the effect of Christianity on the political structure varied from country to country in Scandinavia, its effect on the majority of the population was the same. The effects of Christianity at the popular level which have left material evidence appear to lie mostly in changes in burial practices, and in places of worship.

Some Scandinavians seem to have attempted to associate their pagan ancestors with the new religion by building churches over pagan graves or near pagan burial mounds; also, bodies were translated from pagan graves to Christian graves.¹⁰² It is possible that a few churches were built on the site of pagan temples, although pagan temples seem to have been a late development in pre-Christian Icelandic religion, and seem to have been built in response to the influence of Christianity.¹⁰³ Missionaries do seem to have tried to build churches at pagan cult centers, in order to benefit from their existing reputation as holy places.

A possible example of this kind of continuity is the church at Maere, Norway.¹⁰⁴ According to written medieval sources, Maere was the religious center for inner Trøndelag.¹⁰⁵ The

102 Peter Sawyer, op.cit., p. 84.

103 Ibid., p. 86.

104 Lidén, op.cit., p. 3.

105 Ibid.

excavation of this site revealed a stone church built over a wooden church, which in turn may possibly have been superimposed upon an even older pagan building. There are Christian graves placed in line with the nave walls, facing east-west, while older graves face in different directions, some of them crossing under the walls of the wooden church. Within the building were found numerous gullgubbers, which are small rectangular pieces of thin gold foil stamped with the likeness of one or two human figures. Pieces with two figures are representations of a man and a woman. These were used as votive offerings to Frey, in his role as fertility god, and were found in or near post-holes. The post-holes may indicate the location of an old pagan altar or high-seat. This evidence suggests the possibility that there was a pagan building under the wooden church.

However, as mentioned above, in Icelandic paganism, the use of temple structures seems to have been a late development. Pagan cults were more often associated with groves, water, and hills. Some ceremonies were held indoors, especially in the houses of chieftains and rulers. As Adam of Bremen notes, Archbishop Unwan of Hamburg-Bremen (1013-29) ordered all pagan rites to be uprooted, and he had new churches built throughout the diocese at the sites of sacred groves which the "lowlanders frequented with foolish reverence."¹⁰⁶

The archeological record also provides us with information on burial customs. The grave goods which were common in pagan graves often continued after conversion. According to Else

¹⁰⁶ Adam of Bremen, op.cit., p. 87.

Roesdahl, "the choice of rites appears to some extent to have been a matter of local fashion or family tradition for some time after the official conversion."¹⁰⁷ Cemeteries changed as well, from pagan ones which were not enclosed, to Christian cemeteries surrounded by a ditch or wall. There are also more children's graves in Christian cemeteries, possibly due to the Christian view of children, specifically the prohibition of exposure of unwanted children.

Conversion and Christianization were gradual processes in Scandinavia in the ninth through the eleventh centuries. Historical, although occasionally inaccurate, sources outline these processes in varying degrees of detail, and from different perspectives. Cross-checks against contemporary sources from various countries can help to point out these inconsistencies, exaggerations, and errors. Archeology can prove useful by providing material evidence as a control for the written sources, as well as by helping to verify dates. In addition to these sources there are the Norse sagas, both historical and fictional, which can give us a more detailed account of the conflicts and compromises which Icelanders made between Scandinavian paganism and Christianity. These literary sources will be discussed in the following chapters.

¹⁰⁷ Else Roesdahl, "The Archeological Evidence for Conversion," in The Christianization of Scandinavia, p. 3.

CHAPTER 4: SCANDINAVIAN LITERATURE

Before looking at the sagas themselves, it is helpful to consider Scandinavian literature in general. The development of this literature owes a large debt to Christianity, notably for the introduction of the Roman alphabet, and its rapid dissemination by priests and church schools. Pre-Christian Scandinavia was able to leave written records in runes, but this was a limited medium. Runes were originally magical in nature, and even when later used for more mundane purposes, runes were still known to few people. The Roman alphabet was easier to use, and was quickly learned by large segments of the population and used for written records in both Latin and the vernacular. In continental Scandinavia, Latin predominated in writings, and was used mostly for religious texts. In Iceland, however, the vernacular was used for both sacred and secular literature.

Iceland was a small country, peopled for the most part by settlers of aristocratic background. Learning and writing was more widespread there than in other Scandinavia countries, and was not limited to clerical and religious groups. The Roman alphabet was adopted quickly by all Icelanders, and "Icelanders, both clergy and laymen, quickly began writing vernacular prose, often about secular matters, with almost no intermediary stage of learned Latin writing."¹⁰⁸ Peter Foote gives credit to the Christian church for its impact on Norse literature by pointing

¹⁰⁸ Jesse L. Byock, Feud in the Icelandic Saga (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 36.

out that Christian priests were the foundation of Icelandic literacy.¹⁰⁹ Christian priests were responsible for teaching the population how to read and write, although they did not affect what was written. As Margaret Arent so aptly noted, "those schooled under Holy Church were men of the world, secular in outlook and interests. They learned to write under monastic guidance, but what they wrote reflected their own life and culture, their nation's spirit, and their national language."¹¹⁰ Icelandic literature combined native modes and traditions with the new religion and culture, using the vernacular as its medium.

The nature of the Icelandic church contributed to the growth of Icelandic literature. The Icelandic Church was national in character, and was relatively tolerant and broadminded. The pagan past could be recorded because, as Foote observes, "heathen recognition and lore, as distinct from heathen practices, were not felt to be dangerous and could be cultivated with lively literary and antiquarian interest."¹¹¹ Pagan religion, legends, and traditions were recorded in several types of literature, each of which will be discussed below.

The most important mythological works are the Prose Edda and

¹⁰⁹ Peter Foote, "Observations on 'Syncretism' in Early Icelandic Christianity," in Aurvandilstá (Odense: Odense University Press, 1984), p. 87.

¹¹⁰ Laxdoela Saga, trans. A. Margaret Arent (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964), Introduction, p. xviii.

¹¹¹ Foote, "Secular attitudes in early Iceland," in Aurvandilstá, p. 32.

the Poetic Edda.¹¹² The Poetic Edda, often called the Elder Edda, was recorded c.1270, which actually makes it younger than the prose version, although the subject matter may be older. Linguistic and literary evidence suggests that some of the poetry dates from before the settlement of Iceland. The Poetic Edda contains mythological lays about gods, and heroic lays about men. The heroic lays are probably older than the mythological ones, as they use a form of poetry which is common to all Germanic tribes. These lays are both historical and legendary, and their dominant theme is that of loyalty, which served to typify virtues, vices, and failings. Characters in the heroic lays often have historical prototypes, although the stories are not always historically accurate. For example, non-contemporaries appear together, and large tribal movements or wars are portrayed as small family feuds. The mythological lays probably originated among Norwegians and Icelanders, rather than being common to all Germanic people. Although the stories about the gods resemble the heroic lays in form, their purpose was different. Mythological lays were meant to instruct the listener or reader in proper rules of conduct, as well as beliefs about gods, giants, and elves.

The Prose Edda, redacted by Snorri Sturluson in 1230, was a prose version of parts of the Poetic Edda.¹¹³ It was meant as a textbook of poetics, including instruction on many different

¹¹² E.O.G. Turville-Petre, The Origins of Icelandic Literature (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), pp. 7-16.

¹¹³ Stefán Einarsson, A History of Icelandic Literature (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1957), pp. 118-119.

poetic meters. In addition to a detailed section on mythology, this work also includes a section on skaldic diction and a metrical key. The contents of the mythological section are very similar to the material in the Poetic Edda. Snorri seems to have based this section on cult traditions, popular superstitions, and Eddic and skaldic poems.

Snorri's Prose Edda is especially helpful for the study of skaldic poetry. This form of poetry seems to have originated in Scandinavia, mostly likely at the courts of kings, and was in use in Norway by the ninth century. Skaldic poets were educated men who often worked for a particular king, and the poetry reflects that. The poetry is descriptive rather than narrative, celebrating the deeds of the king or of the poet himself. One of the features of skaldic poetry is its use of kennings, or elaborate periphrastic metaphors, many of which allude to pagan mythology. Some kennings are simple, such as "battle wood" for shield, while others are less obvious, such as a ship being called a "horse of the land of Haki."¹¹⁴ Haki was a sea king, and "horse of the sea" is a common kenning for a ship. The elaborate meters, and elusive kennings found in skaldic poetry, are what prompted Snorri to write his famous Prose Edda, in which he preserved many examples of it.

Although it is tempting to accept skaldic poetry as historical, it is important to remember that all Scandinavian literature was written down after the conversion to Christianity, and significant changes may have been made in transmission. Much

¹¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 53-54.

of Scandinavian literature was composed during the period of Christianization, and it is impossible to tell if any of it is from the time before Christianity was known in Scandinavia; the attitudes revealed in the literature are not necessarily pre-Christian.¹¹⁵

The third genre of Norse literature to be discussed here is saga literature. There are many types of sagas, including Kings sagas, the Sagas of the Icelanders or Family sagas, and fornaldar sögur or mythological and heroic sagas. The fornaldar sögur, representing the oldest type of oral-literary form, contain heroic-mythical material which is of continental Germanic origin and may preserve early tribal memories of the heroic age of continental Scandinavia.¹¹⁶ Some of these sagas are included in the two versions of the Edda. The other two types of sagas contain a great deal of information on pagan customs and traditions, as well as the histories of Scandinavia countries and important people.

The Kings sagas are best known in the version known as Heimskringla, written by Snorri. These sagas cover the history of the kings of Norway and seem to be fairly accurate. The Family sagas, also known as the Sagas of the Icelanders, are concerned with the people and events of the settlement period of Iceland in the late ninth and early tenth centuries.

¹¹⁵ "The Effects of Conversion on Scandinavian Mentalité," in The Christianization of Scandinavia, eds. Birgit Sawyer, Peter Sawyer, and Ian Wood (Alingsås, Sweden: Viktoria Bokförlag, 1987), pp. 18-20. Summary by the editors of discussions on the topic at the symposium.

¹¹⁶ Einarsson, op.cit., pp. 122-123.

The origins of the Family sagas and their historical value are both subjects of debates which may never be solved to everyone's satisfaction. Most of Norse literature is of unknown authorship, with the exception of the Prose Edda and Heimskringla by Snorri, who may also have written Egils saga. Many scholars are now trying to determine the authorship of other sagas by studying vocabulary and style.¹¹⁷ The sagas are also undated, and attempts to establish a chronology of the works, usually through the use of linguistic criteria, is difficult and often unreliable. While it is possible to determine the dates for events in the sagas, it is not always possible to tell when the sagas were written down.

A view common to many scholars is that the Kings sagas preceded the Family sagas, with the Kings sagas being composed by writers employed at court. Many scholars posit a subcategory of saga literature called skald sagas which serve as a link between Kings sagas and Family sagas.¹¹⁸ Skald sagas concentrate on the role of fate in the life of an individual, as opposed to the biographical nature of Kings sagas and the chronicle style of Family sagas. If this view of skald sagas as a link is accurate, then it would help to explain the shift in subject matter in the sagas from Norwegian to Icelandic, and from royal biography to

¹¹⁷ Carol J. Clover, "Icelandic Family Sagas," in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide, eds. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 245.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 247.

community chronicle.¹¹⁹ However, this order is now being questioned as traditional dates for some sagas are reevaluated and sometimes changed. Carol J. Clover suggests that there may have been a pre-existing saga tradition in Iceland which then enabled Icelanders to write the Kings sagas; she disputes the claim that the Family sagas were a later development.¹²⁰

Another consideration in the discussion of saga origins is that of foreign influences. French medieval culture is one area of influence which has not received much consideration from scholars, due to the small amount of material evidence of its presence in Norse literature, as well as to the limited number of Old Norse translations of French literature. However, there is much circumstantial evidence in Norse literature of the familiarity of the Scandinavians with French literature and culture.¹²¹ In addition to the few extant translations of French literature in Scandinavia, similarities have been noted between skaldic and troubadour poetry, and between Norse and French prose romances. Similarities have also been noted between Norse and Celtic, especially Irish, literary forms. Possible influence by these two cultures have been noted, but not fully explored. As Clover notes, "the nature and extent of Celtic-Norse literary influence remains essentially mysterious,"¹²² while European influence in general may have been greater than originally

119 Ibid., p. 249.

120 Ibid.

121 Ibid., p. 250.

122 Ibid., p. 253.

thought or admitted by scholars, especially in the areas of medieval theology and historiography.¹²³

Closely connected with the debates over the origins of the sagas is the debate over their historical validity and accuracy. On the one hand, the emigrant status of the Icelandic settlers encouraged the preservation and continuation of oral traditions, especially genealogies. However, there was a gap of several hundred years between the events on which the oral tradition is based and the written recording of these events. Scholars have for many decades divided themselves into opposing schools, following either the free prose or the book prose theory. New theories which do not quite fit one of these two theories have made it more accurate to refer to an oral tradition school and an historical fiction school. As is obvious from these labels, the oral tradition school believes that the sagas in their written form are an accurate record of stories passed down orally for several hundred years; the historical fiction school prefers to see the sagas as the imaginative products of twelfth and thirteenth century authors making use of an idealized pagan past for the sake of their story.

Adherents of the oral tradition/free prose school believe that the sagas were probably written down fairly accurately, and are therefore historical in nature. Einarsson called sagas the "chronicle memories of a heroic heathen society."¹²⁴ Proposed evidence for the sagas as oral narratives includes traditional

¹²³ Ibid., p. 251.

¹²⁴ Einarsson, op.cit., p. 131.

plots, recurrent features such as motifs and themes, form and techniques derived from pre-literate traditions such as Eddic verse, and the presence of a style which is meant both to be read and recited.¹²⁵ Ongoing linguistic studies will hopefully help to date the sagas more accurately, and to establish the relative age of the material.

Recent scholars seem more inclined to follow the historical fiction/book prose theory, which views the sagas as purely written compositions by twelfth and thirteenth century authors, perhaps from oral traditions, but with modern influences. The Modern Icelandic school follows in this tradition, but almost completely ignores the possible oral background of the sagas. Hrafnkels saga, which has long been regarded as purely fictional by scholars, is no longer a good test case for the book prose school. Articles have been written by numerous scholars making a case for Hrafnkell as a historical person, suggesting that the saga may be from an oral tradition.¹²⁶

The sagas do contain many historical facts, and the genealogies in particular provide useful historical information of social and political importance. However, they also contain many simplifications and anachronisms, for example, attributing the actions of many to one man, usually a king; placing historical events in contemporary settings; or including such things as the knights and chivalry of the Arthurian legends. Halvdan Koht's opinion of the Icelanders is that "unconsciously

¹²⁵ Clover, op.cit., pp. 280-283.

¹²⁶ Ibid., pp. 243-244.

they conceived the events of the past in the spirit of the present."¹²⁷ While it is difficult to check the sagas against other sources, the genealogies and the reappearances of the same characters in different sagas point to at least some historical veracity.¹²⁸

The sagas contain detailed descriptions of everyday life, but are these descriptions of reality, or of an imaginative version of the pagan past? If they are of a reality, then which one: the settlement period, the writing period, some period in-between, or a combination of all of these?¹²⁹ The most common scholarly strategy has been to compare the sagas with more accepted historical works, such as bishops' sagas, Sturlunga saga, Islendingabók, and Landnámabók. There are problems with the reliability of these texts too, even though they are more contemporary to the events they portray than are the family sagas. It has been suggested that contemporary events may have been subject to stricter censorship. For example, infanticide is mentioned in the family sagas, but not in Sturlunga saga, although it was probably still practiced.¹³⁰ If the sagas are merely thirteenth century fiction, they must at some level reflect attitudes and events of the thirteenth century, even if they do not accurately reflect the ninth and tenth centuries.

¹²⁷ Halvdan Koht, The Old Norse Sagas (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1931), p. 123.

¹²⁸ Peter Hallberg, The Icelandic Saga, trans. Paul Schach (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), p. 50.

¹²⁹ Clover, op.cit., p. 254.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 255.

A second method which has often been used to determine the historical worth of the sagas is to look for examples in them of Christian ethics and ideas.¹³¹ However, Christian ethics and ideas often overlapped pagan ones, and there is usually no clear-cut distinction between pagan and Christian sentiments. There is very little material in the sagas of a specifically religious or moral nature, and even when there is, it is not usually possible to distinguish between pagan and Christian values. The sagas were secular narratives, which expressed minimal interest in God/gods, the afterlife, religious experience, or divine justice and order. The sagas make few overt references to religion and the Church, or to the politics so often connected with them. Loyalties were only of kinship, friendship, and choice; little thought was given to such things as heaven and hell.

The secular nature of the Family sagas is evident in the subject matter. They are stories of local landowners, most of whom were real people who lived in Iceland between approximately 870 and 1025. Not just the individuals are important, but also the community, the actions of neighbors, and public opinion. The prominent role of public opinion explains the importance of such elements as honor, typified by dying bravely, pride, and being remembered well by posterity. Fate and vengeance are also important elements in the sagas, notably as they affect the entire community.

As has been mentioned previously, some elements of the sagas are purely literary conventions, and not examples of pagan belief

131 Ibid., p. 266.

or practice. This is most noticeable when considering ideas on life after death. According to Hilda R. Ellis, ship burials, in literature, are not connected with the idea of life after death or of a journey to the land of the dead.¹³² On the other hand, there is literary mention of ships set on fire and then launched out to sea, although this does not seem to have occurred in actual practice. In her view, Valhalla also seems to be a literary convention which first appears in the mid-tenth century in poetry. It may have been a later development reflecting pre-conversion contact with the Christian world.¹³³

A brief mention should be made here of the influence of Christianity on Scandinavian mythology, as evidenced by the Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus.¹³⁴ Saxo, a Dane, was a learned man, possibly a churchman. He wrote his Danish History in the late twelfth century, devoting the first nine books to Scandinavian mythology and legends. Saxo perceives the gods as deified human beings, and he portrays them as mighty sorcerers. Like human kings, he thinks the gods lived in one spot and ruled there; hence Odin lived at Uppsala, which is why he was worshipped there.¹³⁵ Fate, all-important in so many Norse legends, is recognized by Saxo, as are the Norns who were so

132 Hilda R. Ellis, The Road to Hel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1943), p. 36.

133 "Pre-Christian Beliefs and Rites," in The Christianization of Scandinavia, p. 14. Summary by the editors of discussions on the topic at the symposium.

134 Saxo Grammaticus, The Danish History, trans. Oliver Elton (London: David Nutt, 1894), Books I-IX.

135 Ibid., p. 30.

closely involved in fate. However, Saxo reveals his classical education by equating the Norns with the Greco-Roman view of the fates as weavers, and stating that the "ancients were wont to consult the oracles of the Fates concerning the destinies of their children."¹³⁶ Saxo not only deflates the gods to mortal, albeit magical status, and equates all-powerful fate with an aspect of classical mythology. He also identifies mythical realms with real cities. Saxo believes that Utgard is an actual city in eastern Europe, and that Asgard is the city "Myklegard", better known as Byzantium or Constantinople.

Icelandic literature, and hence most Scandinavian literature, owes a debt to Christianity for the introduction of the Roman alphabet and its dissemination. The influence of Christianity on Scandinavian literacy and literature cannot be denied. It is still unclear, though, how much the Icelanders' acceptance of Christianity did or did not affect the subject matter which they wrote down after conversion. The debates over origins, dates, and historical veracity may never be concluded to the satisfaction of all. Even so, whether the sagas reflect tenth century or thirteenth century life, they undoubtedly contain historical truths from which we can learn a great deal. Careful cross-checking of the sagas with contemporary historical sources and genealogies can help to answer these questions.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 223.

CHAPTER 5: THE ICELANDIC FAMILY SAGAS

Although scholars no longer hold the opinion that the Family sagas are entirely historical in nature, they do agree that the sagas contain a great many historical facts. The Icelandic Family Sagas include examples of pagan worship and ritual, burial practices, beliefs in the supernatural, and the conflict between paganism and Christianity around the time of the conversion. Logically enough, the earlier sagas, such as Egils saga, Gísla saga, and Eyrbyggja saga, contain more pagan material and exhibit less Christian influence than do the later sagas. References to paganism in the later sagas, such as Laxdoela saga, Njals saga, and Hrafnkel Freysgodis saga, often seem to rely more on folklore and superstition, rather than actual religious practices. The sagas discussed below have been arranged roughly chronologically in an attempt to demonstrate this increase in Christian influence.

Most scholars now agree that the Family sagas were written by distinct authors, but it is almost impossible to discover the identities of these authors. One exception is Egils saga,¹³⁷ which was written between 1220 and 1225. Stylistic evidence, and the similarity of information between Egils saga and Heimskringla, points to Snorri as the author. The saga covers the period from the second half of ninth century to end of tenth century (860-1000), with the action mostly in Norway under Harald

¹³⁷ Egil's Saga, trans. Gwyn Jones (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1960).

Fairhair, as well as some in England, Sweden, Denmark, Frisia, Shetland, and the eastern Baltic.

Many scholars classify Egils saga as a skald saga, pointing out the large number of verses, sixty in all, and the three long poems, most of which do indeed seem to be by Egil. In addition, this saga is about a skald, Egil, and focuses on his life and destiny. The verses and the story itself prove to be fairly historical in nature, so much so that Gwyn Jones has stated that "more than any other saga Egil's Saga is an historian's saga."¹³⁸ Although the saga is historically inaccurate in the segments about England, with incorrect dates and kings, it gives an accurate history of Norway. Snorri expresses the political change in Norway, and the unification of Norway under Harald Fairhair, in terms of individuals, but he does not lose sight of the historical facts.

Snorri has also provided us with numerous examples of religion in pre-Christian Iceland, many of which have been confirmed by archeology and contemporary historical texts. In contrast to many other sagas, descriptions of religious rituals or beliefs in Egils saga are convincing and realistic, and do not appear to be merely token inclusions by a Christian writer.

Egils saga follows four generations of the Myramen, one of the settlement families of Iceland, from the birth of Kveldúlf's sons to the death of his grandson Egil. The first section of the saga covers the dealings of Thórólf Kveldúlfsson and King Harald Fairhair, resulting in Kveldúlf's family moving to Iceland. The

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 23.

next four sections give an account of Egil's boyhood and his viking adventures; his visit to York and his attempt at making peace with King Eirík; an account of his skaldship; and finally a description of Egil's old age and death.

Egils saga contains numerous references to pagan religion and rituals, including worship and sacrifice, burial practices, and the power of runes. Christian influences are not readily apparent, with the exception of the practice of primesigning. This was the first step towards baptism and involved being signed with the cross. A pagan thus signed could then associate with Christians, which was especially important for merchants and those in the service of Christian chieftains. However, most pagans who were prime-signed continued to follow pagan religious practices.¹³⁹

The author refers to Gaular several times as the location of a most famous pagan head-temple. Important seasonal sacrifices were performed there, with autumn and summer sacrifices being specifically mentioned.¹⁴⁰ Another important temple was located at Atley. Sacrifices were made to the goddesses, followed by banquets and heavy drinking, with King Eirík and Queen Gunnhild in attendance.¹⁴¹

Old rites for preparing a body for burial are commonly mentioned, although the specific rites are never spelled out in Egils saga. The actual burial practices are described, however,

139 Peter Hallberg, The Icelandic Saga, trans. Paul Schach (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), p. 11.

140 Ibid., Ch. 2, p. 32; Ch. 49, p. 117.

141 Ibid., Ch. 44, p. 105.

including the practice of removing the dead person from the house through a hole in the wall, as Egil does with his father, Skallagrím. Egil then buries his father in a howe with his horse, his weapons, and his smith's tools. Previously, he had buried his brother Thórólf in a mound with his weapons and clothes, and with gold rings on his arms.¹⁴² Later in the saga, Egil's son Bōdvar drowns and is buried in the howe with Skallagrím.

Egil is so upset by Bōdvar's death that he locks himself in his bed-chamber and refuses to eat or drink. His daughter Thorgerd manages to trick him into eating, and then into composing a funeral-ode for Bōdvar and for another son, Gunnar, who had died a short while before. The poem contains many references to pagan gods, especially AEGir, god of the sea, and Rán, goddess of the sea. Egil blames these two deities for the death of Bōdvar, but acknowledges that he cannot take vengeance on them.¹⁴³

One aspect of paganism which is rarely alluded to in the sagas is the power of runes. As we know from Snorri's Edda, Odin gave the knowledge of runes to man, and thus their original function was magical.¹⁴⁴ Odin was also the god of poetry, so it is no surprise that runes and verse came to be joined together. Egil does use runes by themselves, as on one occasion when he helps to cure a sick woman by engraving runes and putting them

142 Ibid., Ch. 58, p. 153; Ch. 55, 131.

143 Ibid., Ch. 78, p. 206.

144 See Ch. 2, p. 15; Ch. 4, p. 42.

under her pillow.

He also uses them in verse form on a scorn-pole. Scorn-poles (niðstōng) consisted of a horse's head stuck on a pole which had verses derogating a certain person cut on it in runes. The horse's head could mean that the person scorned had the heart of the horse; it could have an obscene significance; or it could be meant to frighten away the landvaettir, the guardian spirits of the place. Whichever meaning it held, "to erect a scorn-pole was a mortal insult."¹⁴⁵ Archeological discoveries of wooden rune-staves support the veracity of nið verses as actual practice. Egil sets up a scorn-pole against King Eirík and Queen Gunnhild upon being banished from Norway. The verses he speaks beforehand, which give clear reference to pagan gods and other worldly beings, are among those which scholars attribute to Egil himself. They are as follows:

"Let gods so give quital,
Arraign my ransackers;
Great Ones lour grimly,
Drive King from his kingdom.
Let Freyr bring folk freedom;
Njörd work realm-riddance;
Thor make thought sicken
At sanctuary-spoiler." 146

"Lawbreaker not lawmaker
On long ways bids me languish;
Bride-murmurer, brothers' murderer,
Makes me outlaw (Hear me Land-Elf!)
His guilt stems all from Gunnhild,
Main axle of mine exile;
Yet, King, while young I countered
All venomed acts with vengeance!" 147

145 Ibid., p. 248, Note.

146 Ibid., Ch. 56, p. 145, Verse 28.

147 Ibid., Ch. 57, p. 147, Verse 29.

Egil then erects a scorn-pole with a formulary engraved on it in runes. He recites the formulary as he erects the scorn-pole and turns the horse's head landwards:

"I turn this scorn upon the landspirits which dwell in this land, so that they all fare wildering ways, and none light on or lie in his dwelling til they drive King Eirík and Gunnhild out of the land." 148

It is interesting to note that Eirík and Gunnhild were indeed driven out of Norway soon after by Eirík's brother Hákon, and departed and took up residence in England at York, although the author does not specifically attribute this sequence of events to the power of the scorn-poles.

Christianity is rarely mentioned in Egils saga, understandably, as the events of the saga took place before the conversion of Iceland. England, however, had been Christian for several centuries. Therefore, when Egil and Thórólf enter the war service of King Athelstan of England, "he requested Thórólf and his brother that they should have themselves primesigned, for this was a common custom of the time among traders and those who went on war-pay along with Christian men; for those who were primesigned held full communion with Christians and heathens too, yet kept to the faith which was most agreeable to them."149

Written at approximately the same time (c. 1225), Gísla saga150 reveals more Christian influence than does Egils saga,

148 Ibid., Ch. 57, p. 151.

149 Ibid., Ch. 50, p. 120.

150 The Saga of Gísli, trans. George Johnston (Toronto: J.M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., University of Toronto Press, 1959).

and fewer examples of paganism, although the events in the two sagas are roughly contemporary. The first part of the saga concerns Gísli's family in Norway and the events leading to their voyage to Iceland. The main theme of the saga centers around Gísli, son of whey-Thorbjorn, who is outlawed for manslaughter in 964. He had killed Thorgrím, the first husband of his sister Thórdís, after Thorgrím killed Gísli's close friend Vestein. He lives in hiding, helped by many people, until his enemies catch and kill him in 978. A number of other events in the saga, such as the slaying of Vestein by Thorgrím, the slaying of Thorgrím by Gísli, Gísli's outlawry, and the marriages of Gísli's sister Thórdís are all historical facts. This can be determined by cross-checking with historical sources such as Landnámabók and with other sagas.

Religion is not an important element in Gísli saga, although there are a few mentions of worship and burial practices. One festival which is mentioned is that of Winter Nights. This was a pagan festival in autumn involving the slaughtering of cattle, private cult celebrations at house parties, and fertility rites in honor of Frey, Freyja, and the dísir.¹⁵¹ Gísli, however, "no longer sacrificed since his stay at Viborg in Denmark,"¹⁵² leading us to conclude that he had come under Christian influence while in Denmark, although he had not converted. Thorgrím did hold an autumn feast to welcome winter, and made sacrifices to

151 Ibid., Ch. 10, p. 13; p. 73, Note.

152 Ibid., Ch. 10, p. 13.

Frey.¹⁵³ Descriptions of burials are no more detailed than those of festivals. Burial rites are performed "as the ways then were,"¹⁵⁴ and burial itself is described very simply, such as "they...lay Thorgrim in a boat. Now they heap up the mound according to the old ways."¹⁵⁵

One episode which scholars have often pointed to as evidence of Christian influence is that of Gísli's dream women. There are two of these women, one good, one bad. The bad one always tells him something which makes him feel worse than before, while the good one counsels him that "while [he] lived [he] should give up the old faith, and have nothing to do with magic or witchcraft, and deal kindly with the blind and the halt and the poor and the helpless."¹⁵⁶

Peter Foote notes that the dream women seem to have pagan or heroic origins. The good dream woman has the nature of a fylgja, a spirit attached to a family or individual, which appeared in female form. The bad dream woman has the nature of a valkyrie. Both were modified by the Christian idea of good and evil, expressed as good and bad "angels."¹⁵⁷ However, Stefán Einarsson sees the dream women as the personification of religious change, the one bringing "solace and Christian moralizing," the other

153 Ibid., Ch. 15, p. 21.

154 Ibid., Ch. 14, p. 18.

155 Ibid., Ch. 17, p. 25.

156 Ibid., Ch. 22, p. 33.

157 The Saga of Gísli, Essay by Peter Foote, p. 121.

"dark and gory, a personification of paganism."¹⁵⁸ This latter interpretation fits better with the overall treatment of religious material in the saga, notably the redactor's apparent lack of concrete familiarity with the details of pagan religion.

Scholars have also noted the lesser importance of kin in this saga. In the Germanic tradition, kin would come first, while Christianity stresses the importance of one's spouse. In this sense, Gísli's wife is more Christian than most saga women, as she stands by her husband before her kin. After his death, she goes to Rome, which may be a possible indication that this work was written or redacted by a Christian author.¹⁵⁹

Eyrbyggja saga¹⁶⁰, written c. 1240, provides us with "a wealth of glimpses of the 'antiquities' -- that is, the beliefs, the folkways, the traditions and manners -- of the Norsemen of the tenth and eleventh centuries,"¹⁶¹ including examples of temple rites, temple and sacrifice descriptions, the worship of Thor, the pagan conception of death, and descriptions of abodes of the dead. There are no pious reflections by the author, and Christianity is only mentioned for the sake of history.

This is the saga of the Thórsnessings, the people of Eyr, and the people of the Alptafjord. It is a chronicle of a

¹⁵⁸ Stefán Einarsson, A History of Icelandic Literature (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1957), p. 143.

¹⁵⁹ Einarsson, op.cit., p. 143.

¹⁶⁰ Eyrbyggja Saga, trans. Paul Schach and Lee M. Hollander (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959), Introduction, p. xiii.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., Introduction, p. xvi.

countryside and its inhabitants, their settlement in a new country, and their feuds about prestige and property. The two main characters are Arnkel and Snorri goði. The saga begins with Bjorn Ketilsson being banished by King Harald Fairhair. He is befriended by Thórólf Mostrarskegg and helped to leave Norway, at which time Bjorn travels to the Hebrides and then to Iceland. Thórólf is then banished by Harald for helping Bjorn, so Thórólf goes to Iceland as well. There he marries Unn, and they have a son, Thorstein. Arnkel, the son of Thórólf Lamefoot, is then introduced into the story, followed by Snorri. Snorri is the son of Thórdís, Gísli's sister, and Thorgrím, who is killed by Gísli. The action centers mostly around Arnkel and Snorri, who are in opposition. Snorri is eventually involved in killing Arnkel, but this does not harm his reputation, and Snorri later becomes a powerful and respected goði.

Thor is a prominent god in Eyrbyggja saga, on the personal and the public level. In Iceland, there was a judgement circle at the place of assembly where men were "condemned to be sacrificed", and there was a stone of Thor in the circle "...on which the backs of men selected for the sacrifice were broken; and the color of blood can still be seen on the stone."¹⁶² On a more personal level, Thórólf dedicates his son Stein to Thor, and names him Thorstein.¹⁶³ In addition, before leaving Norway, Thórólf sacrifices to Thor and asks his advice; he then dismantles his temple and takes it with him to Iceland, along

¹⁶² Ibid., Ch. 10, pp. 13 and 14.

¹⁶³ Ibid., Ch. 7, p. 9.

with some earth from under the pedestal on which the image of Thor had stood.¹⁶⁴ To determine where to land in Iceland "...Thórólf cast overboard the high-seat pillars which had stood in his temple. On one of them was carved a figure of Thor. He declared that he would settle in that place in Iceland where Thor caused the pillars to come ashore."¹⁶⁵

The description of the temple has been verified by archeological excavations, and the farm is still called Hofstaðir, or Temple Stead. According to the description, the temple contained an altar with ring for oaths, a sacrificial bowl and twig to sprinkle the blood of animals killed as an offering to the gods, and images of the gods arranged around the pedestal.¹⁶⁶ "Everyone was to pay a contribution to the temple, and they also had to accompany the temple priest to all assemblies, just as thingmen now must accompany their chieftains."¹⁶⁷ The priest (goði) had to maintain the temple at his own expense and hold the sacrificial banquets in it.

Eyrbyggja saga is not quite as specific about burial practices and rites for the dead. Helgafell, or Holy Mountain, is held in reverence by Thórólf, who believes that he and his kinsmen will enter it when they die, although Thórólf himself is later buried in a mound.¹⁶⁸ When Thórólf Lamefoot dies, his son

164 Ibid., Ch. 4, p. 4.

165 Ibid.

166 Ibid., Ch. 4, p. 5.

167 Ibid., Ch. 4, p. 6.

168 Ibid., Ch. 4, p. 6; Ch. 9, p. 11.

Arkel performs the rites for the dead, which involved closing the dead person's eyes, nostrils, and mouth; he wraps a cloth around Thórólf's head to prevent the "evil eye," and carries him out through a hole in the wall to prevent the ghost from re-entering the house.¹⁶⁹

There are several mentions of ghosts and hauntings in Eyrbyggja saga, two of which involve Thórólf Lamefoot, despite all of the precautions which are taken to avert them.¹⁷⁰ He begins haunting the area soon after his death. Sheep and cattle die if they come too near the grave, and a shepherd is found dead near the grave, so Arkel digs him up and buries him elsewhere. Thórólf stays quiet until after Arkel's death, at which point he begins haunting again. Thórodd Thorbrandsson and some men dig him up again - he is still undecayed - and burn him. A third haunting is seen, by the characters in the saga, as a good omen, rather than as dangerous. Farmer Thórodd Skattkaupandi and his men drown while out fishing, and then appear at the funeral feast. This is considered a good omen as "it was believed in those days that men who had perished at sea and then came to attend their funeral feast had been well received by Rán [goddess of the sea]."¹⁷¹

There is one very short chapter in this saga on the coming of Christianity to Iceland. The author of the saga remarks, possibly ironically, that "a great incentive toward the building

169 Ibid., Ch. 33, p. 69; Ibid., p. 69, Notes.

170 Ibid., Ch. 34, p. 70; Ch. 63, pp. 131-132.

171 Ibid., Ch. 55, p. 114.

of churches was that the priests promised that a person would provide room in the Kingdom of Heaven for as many as could find standing room in the church he built." Many churches were built, but there were not yet enough priests for all of them.¹⁷² The only other specific mention of Christianity involves Thránd, a follower of Snorri. Thránd was "thought to be a werewolf while he was still a pagan, but most men lost their troll nature when they were baptized."¹⁷³

Family sagas written after the mid-thirteenth century show much greater evidence of Christian influence, as well as the influence of continental literary forms. Sagas such as Laxdoela saga,¹⁷⁴ Njals saga,¹⁷⁵ and Hrafnkel Freysgodis saga¹⁷⁶ reveal more about the thirteenth century than the tenth century, as contemporary events are frequently projected back into the past by their redactors. These sagas seem to have been written by highly literate men who took great liberties in their use of oral tradition and written sources. As a result, these sagas are more fictitious than earlier sagas, and their chronologies and genealogies often do not accord with such sources as Landnámabók and Heimskringla.

¹⁷² Ibid., Ch. 49, p. 104.

¹⁷³ Ibid., Ch. 61, p. 128.

¹⁷⁴ Laxdoela Saga, trans. A. Margaret Arent (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964.)

¹⁷⁵ Njal's Saga, trans. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (New York: Penguin Books, 1960).

¹⁷⁶ Hrafnkel Freysgodi's Saga, in Four Icelandic Sagas, tr. Gwyn Jones (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1935), pp. 37-61.

Laxdoela saga was written c. 1244-1248, and the events in it cover approximately 150 years, from 892 to 1030. It contains many fictitious characters and events, and the chronology is unreliable. Laxdoela saga shows evidence of the infiltration of continental courtly romances, especially in its use of chivalric vocabulary, but it also contains examples of folk-lore, the old viking spirit, and the heroism of Eddic poems.

This is a saga about the settlers and inhabitants of the Laxárdal, a valley on the western coast of Iceland. They are descended from Ketil Flatnose, who leaves Norway with his family at the beginning of the saga. Ketil settles in Scotland, but his children Unn and Bjorn settle in Iceland. The first part of the saga serves as an introduction to the main story, with numerous episodes about five generations of Unn's family. Kjartan, Unn's descendant, and Bolli, the son of a neighbor, are the two main characters, and they meet at the end of this first section.

Part two is the main theme, telling about the other side of Ketil's family. Guðrún is a descendant of Bjorn, Unn's brother. Kjartan, Bolli, and Guðrún form a love triangle. Kjartan courts Guðrún, but then leaves to be a retainer of the king of Norway. Bolli goes with him, but returns to Iceland and marries Guðrún. Kjartan returns and marries Hrefna. Gest, a seer, prophesies about two famous swords which will be involved in the deaths of Kjartan and Bolli. Sure enough, Bolli kills Kjartan with the sword Footbite, which has a curse on it such that it will "cause the death of that man in your family who would be the greatest

loss."¹⁷⁷ Kjartan does not have the sword Konungsnaut with him, a sword which carries a protective blessing. Kjartan's family then kills Bolli in vengeance. The third section involves revenge for Bolli's death, and Guðrún's fourth and final marriage.

Pagan references in Laxdoela saga fall more under the heading of folklore and superstition than actual religious practices, such as the belief in spirits and in magic. Naming children for a deceased father or relative was a common practice, although in Norse paganism it had a special religious significance. When the concubine of a character named Hoskuld gives birth to a son, Hoskuld names him Oláf, "since Oláf Feilan, his mother's brother, had died shortly before."¹⁷⁸ The basis of this practice was the belief that "in ancient Scandinavia, a person was thought to have a spiritual double that accompanied him throughout life. This fylgja (fetch) was sometimes visible to those with second sight...When a person died, his fylgja could be transferred to a new-born infant by giving the child the name of the deceased. The fylgja went with the name, and in this manner the deceased also gained some sort of immortality. It was generally hoped that the name would have the power to invest the child with the same qualities inherent in the former bearer of the name."¹⁷⁹ Personal and family guardian spirits are mentioned often in Laxdoela saga.

¹⁷⁷ The Laxdoela Saga, Ch. 30, p. 72.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., Ch. 13, p. 27.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 201-202, Note.

Belief in sorcery and the evil eye is evident in two chapters which concern a family of sorcerers headed by Kotkel. Kotkel and his relatives cause a great deal of trouble through their magic and are killed by their neighbors. They were captured by putting a skin bag over their heads so they would not be able to put the evil eye on anyone.¹⁸⁰ The redactor presents both the practice of sorcery, and a pre-Christian means of preventing the use of sorcery, without any editorial comments, indicating a continuence of these beliefs after the acceptance of Christianity in Iceland.¹⁸¹

Several chapters are devoted to the conversion of Iceland to Christianity. King Oláf Tryggvason of Norway uses force, persuasion, and hostages to get Iceland to convert. The actual conversion is greatly simplified: Gizur and Hjalti "preached the faith before the people, both and length and eloquently. Then all the people in Iceland accepted the faith."¹⁸² There is no mention of the lengthy discussion which actually took place, nor of the legal provisions which were agreed upon when the decision to accept Christianity was made. The author of Laxdoela saga does include a token acknowledgment of pagan resistance to Christianity in his explanation of particularly bad weather that

180 Ibid., Ch. 37 and 38, pp. 91-98; Ibid., p. 206, Note.

181 See also: The Story of Grettir the Strong, trans. Eiríkr Magnússon and William Morris (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1900). Sorcery and witchcraft, Ch. 81, 83, 85, 87; many references to elements of folklore and superstition, i.e., spirits, trolls, ghosts, runes. Also: Eyrbyggja Saga, op.cit., Ch. 15, 20; The Laxdoela Saga, op.cit., Ch. 35.

182 Ibid., Ch. 42, p. 110.

winter: "it's because of the king's new-fangled ideas and this new faith that the gods are angry."¹⁸³ The influence of Christianity on the saga is apparent at the end, when Guðrún ends up as a nun at the monastery of Helgafell. However, the overall motivation for the action in Laxdoela saga derives from the pagan values of honor and revenge, and the pagan idea of the over-riding power of fate.

Although it contains elements of historical fact, Njals saga is primarily a well-constructed work of fiction. It was written c. 1280, covering events which occurred between 960 and 1016, as well as thirteenth-century events and attitudes which are projected back into the saga. The burning of Njal, the main character, and his homestead was an historical event, and has been supported by archeological evidence from the excavation of the farmstead. However, a free use of written sources by the author has resulted in mistakes, distortions, inconsistent chronology, and outright creations, notably of some completely fictitious characters. The chronology of the saga is dictated by aesthetic demands, not by history, and genealogies do not always agree with Landnámabók and other historical sources.¹⁸⁴

The Germanic elements of honor, luck, and fate are present in Njals saga, although elements of pagan religion are missing. Remnants of paganism which continued under Christianity have been reduced to the realm of the supernatural, such as the belief in ghosts, prophecies, dreams, and portents. The saga has a

¹⁸³ Ibid., Ch. 40, p. 103.

¹⁸⁴ Njal's Saga, p. 375, Note.

definite Christian slant, and "it is only when Christianity and its effects begin to filter into the saga that Njal achieves peace with his own fate."¹⁸⁵ The Christian concepts of good and evil are important to the story, with evil being generated by the attempts of greedy and ambitious characters to gain wealth or power. This may be a projection of thirteenth century problems, as greed and power-lust were "potent causes of the civil disruption that racked Iceland in the thirteenth century and led to her loss of independence in 1262."¹⁸⁶

At the core of this saga is the tragedy of the influential farmer and sage, Njal Thorgeirsson. A feud started by a few people spreads, and eventually includes Njal's friend Gunnar, and then Njal and his four sons. The initial problems center around Gunnar, who helps his cousin Unn get her dowry back after her divorce from her first husband, Hrut. Unn makes a bad second marriage to Valgard, and her gratitude to Gunnar turns sour; hence Mord, son of Unn and Valgard, grows up to hate Gunnar. Mord is a deliberately evil character; Njal's sons are trapped by Mord's evil. Gunnar marries Hallgerd, Hrut's niece. Njal foresees nothing but trouble from this marriage. Hallgerd and Bergthora, Njal's wife, quarrel and start a killing match. It is finally stopped, but obviously bad feelings remain, although Njal and Gunnar are still friends. Hallgerd then steals food from the farmer Otkel and violence erupts again, as Njal tries to avert the tragedy he foresees. Meanwhile, Mord has been plotting

185 Ibid., Introduction, p. 16.

186 Ibid., Introduction, p. 26.

Gunnar's downfall and finally succeeds. Njal keeps trying to avert fate. He adopts Hoskuld, a relative of Gunnar, as his foster-son. Mord convinces the Njalssons to kill Hoskuld. Njal tries to give Flosi, the uncle of Hoskuld's wife Hildigunn, vergild, or money compensation for the deceased, but a peaceful settlement cannot be reached. Njal and his family are attacked and make a suicidal last stand inside the house, which is then burned. Njal's son-in-law Kari escapes. Mord sparks a fight between Flosi and Kari at the Althing. Kari takes revenge for Njal and his family by killing off those involved in the burning. His lust for revenge is finally sated, and he and Flosi are reconciled.

The inevitability of fate is the overriding factor in Njals saga. Njal's prescience does him no good, as it is impossible to avoid fate. Isolated events continue to spread into feuds, as the various characters strive to retain or regain their family's honor. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson claim that in the end, "it is the Christian virtues of self-sacrifice and humility that eventually stem the tide of evil, not the pagan virtues of heroism and pride."¹⁸⁷ In two separate episodes, we see Njal come to this realization for himself. First he states, while still a pagan, that in his opinion, "the new faith is much better; happy the man who receives it."¹⁸⁸ He converts soon after, and thus is able to comfort those with him in the burning house: "Put your faith in the mercy of God, for He will not let

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., Introduction, p. 27.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., Ch. 100, p. 217.

us burn both in this world and the next."¹⁸⁹ The feud finally ends when Flosi and Kari each go on a pilgrimage to Rome and receive absolution from the Pope, although the actual killings had stopped before either Flosi or Kari went on their pilgrimage. After this they are reconciled and live out their lives in peace.

However, despite Njal's final effort to comfort his family through Christian faith in the next life, and the penance and pilgrimage of Flosi and Kari, Christian values are not an important force in this saga. The tide of evil is never really stemmed, and it is pagan values which motivate the feuding and other actions in the saga. The pagan concept of fate is at the core of the tragedy of Njals saga.

Hrafnkel Freysgodis saga was written in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century. The events of the saga take place in the late ninth century in the time of King Harald Fairhair of Norway. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, this saga does seem to be based in historical fact, and is not simply a work of fiction.

The important characters in the saga are Sam and Eyvind, the sons of Bjarni; and Einar, the son of Thorbjorn, Bjarni's brother. Hrafnkel is fifteen years old when his family moves to Iceland. He soon gets his own farm and becomes a goði. After he has set up his household, Hrafnkel "made a great sacrifice and had a great temple built. Hrafnkel loved no other god more than Frey, and to him he gave the half of all his best treasures."¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., Ch. 129, p. 266.

¹⁹⁰ Hrafnkel Freysgodi's Saga, Ch. 2, p. 37.

Hrafnkel dedicates his favorite horse, Freyfaxi, to Frey and swears that he will kill any man who rides his horse without permission.

Einar goes to work for Hrafnkel, rides Freyfaxi, and is killed by Hrafnkel. Thorbjorn asks for payment for the slaying of his son. Hrafnkel, who is known for never paying compensation, makes a generous offer in this case. Thorbjorn refuses it, saying that he wants men to arbitrate between them; but Hrafnkel does not want this. Thorbjorn goes to his kinsmen for help in the lawsuit. Sam unwillingly takes the case, for the sake of kinship only. At the Althing, no one else will help Sam; all think it foolish of him to sue Hrafnkel. Finally, he gets help from some strangers from western Iceland who are at the Thing. Sam pleads the case well; Hrafnkel, who had stayed away at first, tries to get through the crowd now to plead his case, but cannot get through. Since he does not plead his case, he is outlawed.

Hrafnkel ignores the sentence of outlawry and is captured by Sam and his men, at which point Sam merely banishes him instead of killing him. Freyfaxi is killed to prevent further trouble, and Frey's temple is burnt. When Hrafnkel learns of this he declares, "I think it folly to believe in a god," gives up his faith in Frey, and stops sacrificing.¹⁹¹ Sam then takes over Hrafnkel's farm and godard, thereby assuming the religious and political control of the area.

Six years after these events, Sam's brother Eyvind, who has

¹⁹¹ Ibid., Ch. 16, p. 55.

been traveling abroad, returns and is waylaid and killed by Hrafnkel, who wants revenge for being brought down by Sam. He then attacks Sam and takes back his farm and godard. Sam moves back to his own farm, and makes only one feeble attempt to get back at Hrafnkel. There is no more fighting, and both men die of old age at their respective farms.

Whether or not Hrafnkel Freysgodis saga is based on historical facts, the redactor seems to have taken great pains to create an historical aura. The saga contains references to pagan religion and the pre-Christian political set-up, as well as to the pagan values of honor and revenge. However, elements such as the ease with which Hrafnkel gives up his belief in Frey, and the uneventful ending of the saga point to a Christian sagaman. The realistic pagan atmosphere of Egils saga is definitely missing in this saga.

The last saga to be discussed here is actually an historical saga, not a family saga. Much of Kristni saga,¹⁹² written by Sturla Thórðarson c. 1280, is based on works by Ari Thorgilsson, the first Icelandic historian. It is useful to include this saga, not only because its contents in one form or another are included in most of the Family sagas, but also because it provides insight into the conflict between paganism and Christianity at the time of conversion. It is written in a problem/solution style, presenting first the pagan belief to be overcome, and then the response of the missionary. The important

¹⁹² Sturla Thórðarson, Christne Saga, in Origines Islandicae, ed. & tr. Gudbrand Vigfusson and F. York Powell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), pp. 370-406.

characters are Bishop Frederick of Germany and Thorwald of Iceland, two of the first missionaries to Iceland; Thangbrand of Germany, the second missionary to Iceland; and Gizur the White and Hjalti, two Icelanders at the king's court in Norway.

The first hurdle is faced by Bishop Frederick. A character in the saga, Codran, believes his ancestors live in a stone, rather than a howe, and he worships the stone. Frederick sings over the stone until it bursts asunder, after which Codran decides that the Christian God must be mightier than the pagan gods, so he converts. Next, Frederick is faced with berserks, men with super-human strength, who are able to walk through fires unharmed. Frederick blesses a fire, and the berserks get burned when they tried to walk through it. Those watching are impressed, and many convert. Christianity gradually begins to spread throughout Iceland, until "in the Northlandmen's Quarter many men abandoned their sacrifices and broke their idols, and some would not pay temple-toll."¹⁹³

Not all the characters in the saga are presented as being happy with the rapid spread of Christianity. Initially, there is official opposition from the Althing, and "that summer [c.990] it was made law at the Althinge that Christian men's kinsmen should take action against them as blasphemers...because Christendom was then called a kin-shame or family disgrace."¹⁹⁴ However, this does not stop the missionaries, nor does it dissuade people from converting. Hall of Side and his people go to watch a Christian

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 379.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

service held by Thangbrand, another important missionary. They like the bells, incense, and priestly vestments of fine purple linen, so they are baptized.

Although there were many successful conversions, the text also points out that there were many holdouts for the old pagan religion and values as well. Some Icelanders were willing to convert, but still followed many of the pagan social customs, especially the tradition of feuding. Thorwald is an example of the continuing of this tradition. He had been baptized by Frederick when they were in Germany and they are now traveling together. Thorwald reveals his Germanic/heroic spirit when he kills two men who insult him. Frederick admonishes him, saying that "a Christian man should not seek to avenge himself, though he were hatefully reviled, but rather endure contumely and insult for God's sake."¹⁹⁵ They later part because Thorwald refuses to abandon the pagan ethics of honor and revenge.

A group of pagans, disturbed by Thangbrand's successes as a missionary, hire Charm-Hedin, a sorcerer, to make the earth give way under Thangbrand. The sorcery works, and a hole opens up under Thangbrand's horse and it disappears, but Thangbrand jumps to safety. Thangbrand finally returns to Norway and tells King Oláf that "there was no hope of Christendom being received there [in Iceland]."¹⁹⁶ Oláf then takes all of the Icelanders in Norway prisoner, stating that he will not release them unless Gizur the White and Hjalti can fulfill their promise to get

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 381.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 395.

Christendom accepted in Iceland.

Upon their arrival in Iceland, Gizur and Hjalte raise a church where harrows and sacrifices had been held. The pagans threaten to sacrifice two men from each Quarter to the gods to keep Christendom from spreading over the country. Gizur and the Christians say they will sacrifice the same number of men as the heathens, bringing about an impasse. They finally take their case to the Althing and leave the decision up to Thorgeir the law-speaker. He is a pagan, but he declares "that all men in Iceland should be baptized and believe in one God, but as to the exposure of children, and the eating of horse-flesh, the old law should hold; men might sacrifice in secret if they would, but should fall under the lesser outlawry if witnesses came forward against them."¹⁹⁷ These conditions were abolished some years later. The saga concludes with a brief description of Gizur the White's grandson Bishop Gizur, and of chieftains becoming clerics and priests as Christianity takes firm hold in Iceland.

Although the Family sagas are not as historical in nature as Kristni saga, they do contain a great deal of historical information. The Family sagas are especially useful for learning about Scandinavian pagan religion, specifically as it was practiced in Iceland; and many of them also show the conflict in Iceland between paganism and Christianity in the era immediately following the conversion. Cross-checking the sagas with contemporary historical sources, genealogies, archeological evidence, and other sagas can help scholars to distinguish

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 402.

between fact and fiction, and to determine whether the sagas represent life in the tenth or the thirteenth century.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION
THE IMPACT OF CHRISTIANITY ON ICELAND
AND SURVIVALS OF PAGANISM

The conversion of Scandinavia was more than simply a change of religion. It also caused changes in the social and political spheres, while at the same Christianity adopted and adapted many aspects of pagan religion and social values, resulting in pagan survivals at all levels of society. Historical sources, such as works by Ari, Snorri, and Adam of Bremen; sagas, especially Kings sagas and Family sagas; and archeological evidence all bear witness to the widespread impact of Christianity on Scandinavian society in general, and Iceland in particular. These sources also show evidence of pagan survivals in religious practices, popular beliefs, political systems, and social values in Iceland, and occasionally in other parts of Scandinavia.

Religious beliefs and practices were the areas of Icelandic culture affected the most obviously by Christianity. Christianity was not only a new set of beliefs, but also brought new rituals and forms of worship. The insistence of Christianity on only one God required the redefinition of the old gods as demons, although certain elements of popular religion were accepted and adapted under Christianity. Changes, both subtle and profound, can be seen in the nature of the priesthood and the growing importance of churches. Pagan rituals, such as burial practices and the worship of the older gods, often continued in

slightly changed form, hidden under Christian rituals.

The most important new idea was that of an exclusive God, which had a profound impact on the majority of the population. Paganism was tolerant of diversity, and of new gods. Scandinavian paganism had no all-powerful supreme god, so that Christ was originally accepted as simply another god among many. The Christians, however, were intolerant, insisting on one God, one set of rituals and one liturgical language, Latin, and allowing little room for local variation.¹⁹⁸ Pagan gods were reclassified as demons. Odin has been used as a name for the Devil down to modern times.¹⁹⁹ Christianity also brought in new forms of worship, the most obvious one being regular church attendance and religion as a public affair year round. Only the major pagan festivals had entailed public worship, while general sacrifices and propitiations were made on the individual and family levels. However, the first churches in Iceland were either converted temples or newly-built churches, all of which were owned by the families who had held religious and political control in pre-Christian times as goðar. This continuing control of the places of worship also affected the nature of the Christian priesthood.

198 Peter Sawyer, "The Process of Scandinavian Christianization in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries," in The Christianization of Scandinavia, eds. Birgit Sawyer, Peter Sawyer, and Ian Wood (Alingsås, Sweden: Viktoria Bokförlag, 1987), pp. 83-84.

199 Peter Foote, "Observations on 'Syncretism' in Early Icelandic Christianity," in Aurvandilstá (Odense: Odense University Press, 1984), p. 98.

There was an obvious change in the priesthood, as priests shifted from combining both secular and religious functions, to exercising a purely religious role. In pagan times, the heads of communities and households were also religious leaders. If the priest did his job successfully, then good weather and prosperity followed. Otherwise, the priest was blamed for bad times. Early Christian priests and missionaries were blamed in the same way, although Pope Gregory VII tried to stop that.²⁰⁰ The first Christian priests in Iceland were mostly foreigners who were in the employ of the goðar who owned the churches. These men had very little social status and no political power. Gradually, foreign priests were supplanted by native-born priests, most of whom were from the powerful ruling families.

The Church in Iceland was not like the continental Church. "All changes in ecclesiastical law, all new regulations regarding the clergy, had to be submitted to the legislative branch of the assembly (lögretta), where, like all other legal questions, they were decided by the goðar."²⁰¹ Clergy were subject to the same laws as the laity, and all judicial power was held by the laity in both secular and ecclesiastical matters. At least initially, the Icelandic priesthood was dependent on the secular powers. Eventually, however, the bishops began to assert their rights.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Peter G. Foote and David M. Wilson, The Viking Achievement (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), p. 94.

²⁰¹ Peter Hallberg, The Icelandic Saga, trans. Paul Schach (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), p. 14.

²⁰² Peter Sawyer, op.cit., p. 94.

This contributed greatly to the struggle between Church and state in Iceland.

As the Icelandic priesthood grew more established, it began to fight against secular control. The struggle for control of Church lands and the establishment of tithes has social, rather than religious, implications. Landownership was extremely important in pre-Christian Iceland, as was loyalty to one's goði. Under Christianity, churches became the centers for local communities, and the obligation to pay tithes reinforced the sense of communal responsibility, and attached it to the Church.²⁰³

The central place of churches was reflected by the customs of baptism and burial. "The development of both these rites is therefore an important element in the social impact of Christianity."²⁰⁴ However, names at baptism were still derived from the names of ancient gods, such as Thor and Odin. Burial also often involved the hedging of bets after conversion. A person would have a Christian burial, but with grave goods. Crosses and Thor's hammers have been discovered in the same grave.²⁰⁵ Other pagan symbols which are found in graves include miniature sickles, chairs, and spears. Sometimes, crosses in graves may not indicate conversion, but are simply meant to be

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ "Institutional Effects -- Church Organization and Law," in The Christianization of Scandinavia, pp. 15-16. Summary by the editors of discussions on this topic at the symposium.

²⁰⁵ Foote and Wilson, op.cit. p. 401.

decorative, or to acknowledge Christ as simply another god.²⁰⁶

The Christian concept of a life after death in either Heaven or Hell bore no resemblance to the pagan view of death. In pre-Christian Scandinavia, "immortality was conceived of in terms not of another life, but of fame; and the conception of Valhalla ... was purely a literary one that never seems to have had any great effect on popular belief."²⁰⁷ However, the presence of grave goods indicates a possible belief in life after death within the burial mound. The sagas contain numerous reference to burial practices involving mounds and grave goods, many of which imply some sort of life after death. In Eyrbyggja saga, as we have seen above, Thórólf believes that he and his kinsmen will enter Helgafell, or Holy Mountain, when they die. There are also references in several sagas to ghosts and personal spirits.

Christianity and paganism also clashed over the primarily social institutions of marriage and divorce.²⁰⁸ Germanic pagan marriage consisted of a union that was "contracted, sealed, and symbolized by sexual relations between the parties and dissoluble

206 "The Archeological Evidence for Conversion," in The Christianization of Scandinavia, p. 4. Summary by the editors of discussions on this topic at the symposium.

207 Njals saga, trans. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (New York: Penguin Books, 1960), Introduction, p. 20.

208 For a full discussion of this topic, and for changes in canon law concerning marriage and divorce in medieval Europe in the 10th - 13th centuries, see: James A. Brundage, Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Especially Ch. 4, pp. 135-145.

at will, at least for the man."²⁰⁹ This is the type of marriage which is most evident in the sagas, while both men and women in the sagas could easily divorce themselves from their spouse.²¹⁰ The Church stressed the importance of consent, and did not initially put much emphasis on sexual consummation to make marriage binding. The evidence of the sagas demonstrates the continuance of pagan marriage and divorce traditions well into the thirteenth century.

At the popular level, Christianity did not affect beliefs in magic and witchcraft, charms and amulets, or the importance of portents, omens, dreams, and visions.²¹¹ Egils saga includes examples of the pagan belief in the power of runes, both for medicinal purposes, and for cursing another person. After the conversion of Iceland, amulets were still used for protection or for medicinal purposes. However, instead of runes carved on wood, after conversion there were blessed stones, and wounds were cauterized in the shape of the cross. Christianity also compromised with paganism on more important issues, such as the acceptance of lot-casting as a means of recognizing the will of God.²¹²

²⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 135.

²¹⁰ See the following sagas: Eyrbyggja Saga, Ch. 14; The Laxdoela Saga, Ch. 16; Njal's Saga, Ch. 7.

²¹¹ Foote and Wilson, op.cit., p. 401.

²¹² "The Meanings of Conversion," in The Christianization of Scandinavia, p. 1. Summary by the editors of discussions on this topic at the symposium.

This was not the only compromise made by Christianity. Pagan religious festivals and practices were adopted and/or adapted by the Christian Church.²¹³ The mid-winter festival of Yule became equated with Christmas, and the custom of drinking in honor of the dead at the mid-winter festival was continued in the form of religious toasts and solemn libations. The summer solstice festival became the feast of St. John; and the autumn equinox festival became the feast of St. Michael.

Different concepts of loyalty underline the conflict between Christian and pagan values. The Germanic emphasis on honor, vengeance, and kinship was at odds with the Christian values of humility, forgiveness, and loyalty to the Church and the wider religious community. Christianity lessened the importance of family, and of loyalty of a warrior to his leader. Individual loyalty to Christ was stressed instead.²¹⁴ Scandinavia paganism did not have any systems or institutions which were at all similar to a purely religious priesthood, monasticism, or personal devotion to one god to the exclusion of loyalty to a human leader. Divided loyalties between the Church and one's family lessened the importance of family. This was directly related to a change in ideas about landownership, leading to the development of the concept of private ownership of land.²¹⁵

²¹³ P.D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, Les peuples scandinaves au moyen âge, trans. Bert J. Vos (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1902), p. 135.

²¹⁴ Foote and Wilson, op.cit., p. 5.

²¹⁵ Peter Sawyer, op.cit., pp. 83-84.

on pagan religion, clashes between paganism and Christianity, and pagan survivals under Christianity. Contemporary historical sources, as well as archeological evidence, can be used to verify events and practices described in the sagas. Christianity certainly affected all of this literature, as both the historical and more fictional works were written after the conversion of Iceland, and the authors were all Christian. Despite this problem, descriptions of pagan religious practices in the sagas are remarkably accurate, as proved by contemporary historical sources and archeology. Also, the accuracy of the accounts implies that knowledge of paganism continued well into the Christian era, reflecting the continuance of pagan practices and beliefs.

As was mentioned in Chapter 3, the Christianization of Scandinavia was a gradual process, continuing over several hundred years. Pagan beliefs and practices occasionally continued for a time after the conversion to Christianity; while some were adopted into, or adapted by, the Church. To say that Christianity replaced paganism in Iceland before the thirteenth century would be misleading. Religion, politics, and social and moral codes were intertwined in pagan Scandinavia. Christianity affected every level of the pagan society, resulting more in a synthesis of elements of both, rather than a complete displacement of one by the other.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

- Adam of Bremen. History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen. Trans. Francis J. Tschan. New York: Columbia University Press, 1959.
- Christne Saga. In Origines Islandicae. Eds. and Trans. Gudbrand Vigfusson and F. York Powell. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905, pp. 370-406.
- Egil's Saga. Trans. Gwyn Jones. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1960.
- Eyrbyggja Saga. Trans. Paul Schach and Lee M. Hollander. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959.
- Hrafnkel Freysgodi's Saga. In Four Icelandic Sagas. Trans. Gwyn Jones. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1935, pp. 37-61.
- Laxdoela Saga. Trans. A. Margaret Arent. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964.
- Njal's Saga. Trans. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson. New York: Penguin Books, 1960.
- The Poetic Edda. Trans. Lee M. Hollander. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1928.
- The Saga of Gisli. Trans. George Johnston. Toronto: J.M. Dent and Sons, Ltd, University of Toronto Press, 1963.
Notes and Essay by Peter Foote, pp. 93-134.
- Saxo Grammaticus. The Danish History. Trans. Oliver Elton. London: David Nutt, 1894, Books I-IX.
- The Story of Grettir the Strong. Trans. Eiríkr Magnússon and William Morris. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1900.
- Sturluson, Snorri. The Saga of Oláf Tryggvason. In Heimskringla. Trans. Lee M. Hollander. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964, pp. 144-244.
- Tacitus, Cornelius. The Agricola and the Germania. Trans. H. Mattingly and S.A. Handford. New York: Penguin Books, 1970. The Germania.
- Thorgilsson, Ari. Islendingabók. In Islandica. Ed. and Trans. Halldór Hermannsson. Ithaca: Cornell University Library, 1930. Vol. XX.

Archeological Sources

- Browne, Malcolm W. "Bog Man Reveals Story of Brutal Ritual." The New York Times, 26 January 1988, Sec. Y, pp. 17 and 21.
- Ellis, Hilda R. The Road to Hel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1943.
- Glob, P.V. The Bog People. Trans. Rupert Bruce-Mitford. New York: Ballantine Books, 1973.
- Lidén, Hans-Emil. "From Pagan Sanctuary to Christian Church." Norwegian Archeological Review, 2 (1969), 3-32.
- Shetelig, H. and H. Falk. Scandinavian Archeology. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937.

Secondary Sources - General

- Brondsted, Johannes. The Vikings. Trans. Kalle Skov. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1960.
- Chantepie de la Saussaye, P.D. The Religion of the Teutons. Trans. Bert J. Vos. Boston: Ginn and Co., 1902.
- Foote, Peter G. and David M. Wilson. The Viking Achievement. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970.
- Musset, Lucien. The Germanic Invasions. Trans. Edward and Columba James. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975.
- Musset, Lucien. Les peuples scandinaves au moyen âge. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1951.
- Phillpotts, B.S. "Germanic Heathenism." In The Cambridge Medieval History. Eds. H.M. Gwatkin and J.P. Whitney. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1913, pp. 480-496.
- Sawyer, Birgit, Peter Sawyer, and Ian Wood, eds. The Christianization of Scandinavia. Alingsås, Sweden: Viktoria Bokförlag, 1987.
- Turville-Petre, E.O.G. Myth and Religion of the North. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964.

Secondary Sources - Literary

- Byock, Jesse L. Feud in the Icelandic Saga. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

Secondary Sources - Literary, continued

- Brundage, James A. Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, Ch. 4, pp. 135-145.
- Clover, Carol J. "Icelandic Family Sagas." In Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide. Eds. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985, pp. 239-315.
- Einarsson, Stefán. A History of Icelandic Literature. New York: Johns Hopkins Press, 1957.
- Foote, Peter. Aurvandilstá. Odense: Odense University Press, 1984.
- Hallberg, Peter. The Icelandic Saga. Trans. Paul Schach. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962.
- Koht, Halvdan. The Old Norse Sagas. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1931.
- Phillpotts, B.S. Edda and Saga. London: Thornton Butterworth, Ltd., 1931.
- Turville-Petre, E.O.G. Origins of Icelandic Literature. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953.