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## **The Self-Made Gods**

**Euhemerism in the Works of Saxo Grammaticus and  
Snorri Sturluson**

**L'évhémérisme dans les œuvres de Saxo Grammaticus  
et de Snorri Sturluson**

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## Útdráttur

Í Gesta Danorum eftir Saxo Grammaticus ásamt Snorra-Eddu og Heimskringlu, þremur af mikilvægustu sagnaritum Norðurlanda frá upphafi 13. aldar, er notast við evhemerisma til að skýra trúarbrögð hinna heiðnu forfeðra. Grundvallarhugmynd evhemerismans er sú að guðir séu menn sem hafi þóst vera eða verið endurtúlkaðir sem guðir og þetta var eitt af helstu hugmyndum sem höfundar miðalda notuðu til að skilgerina heiðna trú. Í ritgerðinni er sýnt fram á sérkenni hins norræna evhemerisma sem er birtingarmynd hugmyndarinnar frá miðöldum sem snýr ekki að grísk-rómverskum guðum. Samanburður á verkum Saxo og ritum Snorra sýna að þrátt fyrir augljós líkindi við fyrstu sýn þjóna evhemerismar frásagnir þeirra gjörólíkum hugmyndafræðilegum tilgangi: Saxo leggur áherslu á sérstöðu danska konungsríkisins sem hann vill sýna sem sjálfstætt ríki en hjá Snorra er evhemerisminn hluti orðræðu um eðli konungvalds, takmarkanir þess og útbreiðslu. Ennfremur er rökstutt með hliðsjón af fjölmörgum miðaldatextum að evhemerísk aðferðarfræði felur ekki einungis í sér að manngera guði heldur felur hún einnig í sér algjöra endurgerð goðsagnakenndrar heimsfræði.

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# 1. Introduction: whose mythology?

## 1.1. The Scope of the Study

Þessi eru nöfn langfegða Ynglinga ok Breiðfirðinga:

I. Yngvi Tyrkjakonungr. II. Njörðr Svíakonungr. III. Freyr. IIII Fjölfnir, sá es dó at Friðfróða. [...] XXXVI. Gellir, faðir þeira Þorkels, fōður Brands, ok Þorgils, fōður míns, en ek heitik Ari.<sup>1</sup>

(These are the names of the male ancestors of the Ynglings and the people of Breiðafjörðr

I. Yngvi king of the Turks. II. Njörðr king of the Swedes. III. Freyr. IIII. Fjölfnir, who died at Frið-Fróði's. [...] XXXVI. Gellir, father of Þorkell – father of Brandr – and of Þorgill, my father, and I am called Ari.)<sup>2</sup>

*Íslendingabók* (c. 1130), one of the earliest known Icelandic works of literature written in the vernacular closes on this genealogy. Here, the author, Ari Þorgilsson, also known as Ari inn fróði (the Wise), connects himself with the Norwegian dynasty of the Ynglingar, and, at the same time, with two figures otherwise known to be Old Norse gods in sources such as Snorri's *Edda* and the *Poetic Edda*,<sup>3</sup> Njörðr and Freyr. If Ari also knew these two figures as gods of the pre-Christian Scandinavian pantheon, then this genealogy would be one of the earliest, and simplest expressions of the euhemeristic theory in Scandinavia. This theory, named after the ancient Greek author of the third century BCE, Euhemerus of Messene, could be summarized as the idea according to which the pagan gods were, in fact, wrongfully deified mortal kings. Or, as summarized by Syrithe Pugh in her introduction to one of the most recent monographs on Euhemerism:

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<sup>1</sup> Ari Þorgilsson, *Íslendingabók. Landnamabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, Íslenzk fornrit 1 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1986), 27-28.

<sup>2</sup> Ari Þorgilsson, *Íslendingabók, Kristni Saga: The Book of the Icelanders, the Story of the Conversion*, trans. Siân Grønlie (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2006), 14.

<sup>3</sup> Unless specified otherwise, all quotations from the *Poetic Edda* are from Ursula Dronke, ed. and trans., *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 2, *Mythological Poems*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). All quotations from Snorri's *Edda* are from Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, Viking Society for Northern Research (London: Oxford university press, 1982); Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál. 1. Introduction, Text and Notes*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, vol. 1, (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998); Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Háttatal*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2007); Snorri Sturluson, *The Uppsala Edda*, ed. Heimir Pálsson, trans. Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2012) depending on the section of the work quoted and the manuscript discussed. Snorri's quotations of Eddic stanzas are quoted from Snorri's *Edda* itself and not from Dronke's edition.

the idea that the Greek gods were actually men and women, who lived their lives among other men and women at some point in the past, and who ultimately died, as men and women always do, and were buried.<sup>4</sup>

These definitions are simplifications. They only roughly summarize Euhemerus' work and do not account for the different versions of the theory produced throughout antiquity and the medieval period. They are nonetheless convenient generalizations, and I will use them before I produce a more developed definition of the theory.<sup>5</sup> In this quote, Pugh specifically links euhemerism with Greek gods. She nevertheless recognizes in the same chapter that a similar theory applied to the gods from another religious tradition could also be labelled as euhemerism.<sup>6</sup> Significantly Pugh mentions Saxo Grammaticus and Snorri Sturluson as examples for non-Greco-Roman versions of the theories. To Pugh, applying euhemerism to a non-Greco-Roman mythology is reasonable but also an extension of the primary meaning of the word. Indeed, from its origin in ancient Greece and throughout its history in Rome and medieval Europe, euhemerism has been essentially used in relation to Greco-Roman religion which was, along with biblical depiction of polytheism, the main pagan tradition known in ancient Europe. In that regard the occurrence of this theory in 13<sup>th</sup> century Scandinavia is an original development of the theory. For the first time in medieval Christian Europe the theory was applied to gods which were neither Greek, Roman, nor from the Old Testament. As we will see this change of perspective was not only superficial. The medieval Scandinavian authors did not merely replace the names of classical deities by Old Norse theonyms but also used their own mythological tradition to produce original euhemeristic narratives.

This thesis is about these original Old Norse euhemeristic narratives. As we shall see, several euhemeristic narratives had been translated from Latin or European vernacular languages into Old Norse during the Middle Ages. These texts are important witnesses of the transmission and reception of the euhemeristic theory in Scandinavia. I will not study these translations for themselves but for their influence on the original Scandinavian works. Jacob Hobson remarked that the form of many Old Norse euhemeristic narratives remains relatively stable during the Middle Ages and did not significantly differ from the traditional medieval and biblical model.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Syrithe Pugh, "Introduction," in *Euhemerism and Its Uses. The Mortal Gods*, ed. Syrithe Pugh, Routledge Studies in Renaissance and Early Modern Worlds of Knowledge (London: Routledge, 20021), 1.

<sup>5</sup> See section 1.4.

<sup>6</sup> Pugh, "Introduction," 14.

<sup>7</sup> Jacob Hobson, "Euhemerism and the Veiling of History in Early Scandinavian Literature," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 116, no. 1 (January 2017): 43.

I agree with this statement in regard to the corpus he studied. Hobson, however, did not touch on the prologue to the *Edda* nor on the *Gesta Danorum* in his study, which, as I shall demonstrate, challenge the notion of an unoriginal Old Norse euhemerism which would merely reproduce its models with little modifications.

The identification of several Old Norse narratives as euhemeristic has been remarked of long, and generally came from Old Norse scholars themselves rather than from classicists. Many Old Norse scholars have used the term ‘euhemerism’ or related terms to characterize some passages found in medieval Scandinavian sources, mostly, the prose *Edda*, *Heimskringla*, and the *Gesta Danorum*.<sup>8</sup> Most often, modern scholars use the term to conveniently refer to the medieval description of the Old Norse gods as human beings. Yet, the notion that the concept of euhemerism may pertinently be applied to these passages is not unanimously accepted and while it was defended by some scholars as Jonas Wellendorf and Jacob Hobson,<sup>9</sup> others, such as Heinrich Beck and Jan Alexander Van Nahl, argued that the concept of analogy was better suited to speak of Snorri’s relation to Old Norse mythology.<sup>10</sup> However, in the absence of a clear specific definition of what is euhemerism, these discussions over the pertinence of this concept in Old Norse scholarship may be nothing else than semantical misunderstandings. In fact, the word euhemerism is used in Old Norse scholarship to define rather different types of narratives and, as I will show, not all of them relate in the same manner to the theory.

In this introduction, I will first identify the passages in the medieval Scandinavian sources which have been commonly labeled as euhemeristic. I will proceed in chronological order and summarize the scholarly discussion regarding the euhemeristic nature of these texts. I will then proceed to defend the idea that euhemerism is a relevant concept to characterize and study those passages. My defense of the concept of euhemerism will be divided into two parts. At first, I will use the word “euhemerism” in its simplest and most common definition, that is the idea

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<sup>8</sup> See for instance John Lindow, *Norse Mythology, a Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 22; Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenszk fornrit 26 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1941), xxxii; Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum, The History of the Danes*, ed. Karsten Friis-Jensen, trans. Peter Fisher, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1:xlíi-xlíiii; John Lindow, “Some Thoughts on Saxo’s Euhemerism,” in *Writing down the Myths* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 241-254; Hobson, “Euhemerism and the Veiling of History,” 24-44.

<sup>9</sup> Jonas Wellendorf, “Middelalderlige perspektiver på norrøn mytologi - allegorier og typologier,” *Edda: Nordisk Tidsskrift for Litteraturforskning* 113 (2011): 289-312; Hobson, “Euhemerism and the Veiling of History,” 24-44.

<sup>10</sup> See Heinrich Beck, “Snorri Sturlusons Mythologie: Euhemerismus oder Analogie,” in *Snorri Sturluson - Historiker, Dichter, Politiker*, ed. Heinrich Beck, Wilhelm Heizmann, and Jan Alexander Van Nahl, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 85 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 1-21; and Jan Alexander Van Nahl, *Snorri Sturlusons Mythologie und die Mittelalterliche Theologie*, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 81 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 84-88.

that the Old Norse gods were humans impersonating gods. I will show that the passages traditionally labelled as euhemeristic in the Old Norse sources do share common characteristics distinct from other types of discourse on Old Norse myths. For this purpose, I will in this introduction discuss how these narratives may be approached as myths and explain the different advantages provided by myth theory in their study. In this I will show how myth theory helps us to identify objective characteristics which allow us to classify Christian discourses on Old Norse myths into different sub-categories, euhemerism being one of them. I will then summarize the essential research questions addressed in this thesis. Then, I will discuss the different scholarly definitions of euhemerism, and the history of the concept from antiquity to the medieval period. I will end by evaluating how the different medieval Scandinavian sources relate to this concept.

## 1.2. The Sources

### 1.2.1. The *Gesta Danorum*

#### 1.2.1.1. Manuscript History

No complete medieval manuscript of the *Gesta Danorum* (*The Deeds of the Danes*) has survived to this day. Saxo's work is thus known through a modern edition from 1514, the *editio princeps* (**A**), three medieval fragments, a 17<sup>th</sup> century copy of a medieval fragment, a 14<sup>th</sup> century abbreviation known as the *Compendium Saxonis*, and quotations from the *Vetus chronica Sialandie* (c. 1300) as well as by the German humanist Albert Krantz. I will now list and describe these textual testimonies, starting with the medieval fragments:

**An** Copenhagen, Det Konglige Bibliotek, NKS 869 g 4°, parchment, four folios, c. 1200. Known as the Angers fragment, **An** was previously held in Angers and was first identified as a fragment of the *Gesta Danorum* in 1878. The text from **An** extends from I.3.1 to I.4.8.<sup>11</sup>

**BD** Copenhagen, Det Konglige Bibliotek, NKS 570 2°, parchment, two fragments from one folio and one folio, c. 1300. **BD** refers to three fragments from the same manuscript. NKS 570 2° I, A and B (**B**) are known as the Kall Rasmussen's fragment. They are two pieces from the same leaf. NKS 570 2° II (**D**) is known

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<sup>11</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, lii.

as the Lassen's fragment and is a complete leaf from the same manuscript as **B**. The two fragments are collectively referred to as **BD**. These fragments respectively extend from VI.5.5 to VI.5.17 and VII.1.2 to VII.2.3.<sup>12</sup>

- E** Copenhagen, Det Konglige Bibliotek NKS 570 2°, parchment, fragment from one folio, *c.* 1300. Known as the Plesner fragment (**E**) is part of the same collection as **BD** and thus has the same shelf mark but is from a different manuscript. The text from **E** extends from XIV.35.4 to XIV.36.4<sup>13</sup>
- C** Copenhagen, Det Konglige Bibliotek, GKS 2358, IV, 4°. Pages 3015 to 3017. **C** is the description and collation of the now lost Laverentzen's fragment (**C\***) copied *c.* 1690 by Otto Sperling in his *Commentarius de nummo Runico Rosencrantzii aliisque antiqvitatibus Septentr.* The text from **C** extends from VI.8.8 to VI.9.4 and from VI.9.19 to VII.1.7.<sup>14</sup>

The relation between the medieval fragments and the indirect textual tradition has been the subject of scholarly discussions. Ellen Jørgensen thought **BD** to be a fragment of the manuscript on which **A** was based. Her argumentation relied on the presence of two words corrections from the 15<sup>th</sup> century on the manuscript which were indeed corresponding to the choices of words of **A**.<sup>15</sup> As Friis-Jensen noted, the fragment is too small for the comparison to be conclusive. According to Friis-Jensen, **BD** also presents too many individual errors to be likely a fragment of the manuscript of **A**.<sup>16</sup> As Friis-Jensen noted, **An** contains sections of text which are not present in other versions of the *Gesta Danorum* but which nevertheless contain quotations from Valerius Maximus, Saxo's most important literary model. This fact makes it likely that the author at the origin of **An** is also the one at the origin of **A**.<sup>17</sup>

Beside these direct textual testimonies, the *Gesta Danorum* is also known through quotations and abbreviations in other texts. The oldest of these indirect testimonies is the *Vetus chronica Sialandie*<sup>18</sup> from the early 14<sup>th</sup> century. This chronicle quotes the *Gesta Danorum* XII.3.1 to

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<sup>12</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, liii-liv.

<sup>13</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, liv.

<sup>14</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, liv-lv.

<sup>15</sup> Ellen Jørgensen, "Chr. Pedersens Saxocodex," in *Et Saxoproblem. Angers-Fragmenterne og Christiern Pedersen*, ed. Victor Madsen (Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzels Forlag, 1930), 35-43.

<sup>16</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, liv.

<sup>17</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, liii.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Clarentius Gertz, ed., *Scriptores Minores Historiæ Danicæ Medii Ævi*, Selskabet for udgivelse af kilder til Dansk historie (G. E. C. Gad, 1918), 2:20-72.

XII.3.3,<sup>19</sup> XII.6.6,<sup>20</sup> XIV.40.12,<sup>21</sup> and XIV.40.1.<sup>22</sup> The author of the *Vetus chronica Sialandie* explicitly calls the work *Gesta Danorum* in all these quotations and even calls the author Saxo longus (Saxo the tall) in his second quotation of the work, thus making the *Vetus chronica Sialandie* the oldest medieval work to unquestionably connect the text of the *Gesta Danorum* with the name Saxo.

The *Gesta Danorum* was also known in the late Middle Ages through the *Compendium Saxonis*,<sup>23</sup> an abbreviation of Saxo's text from the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century which itself serves as an introduction for the *Chronica Jutensis* which starts when the *Gesta Danorum* starts and ends during the reign of Valdemar IV. The *Compendium Saxonis* is important for this discussion in regard to its relationship with Saxo's final work. Emil Rathsach argued in 1920 that the base version of the *Gesta Danorum* used for the *Compendium* was the manuscripts to which belonged **An** and that some of the margin additions in **An** were in fact from the author of the compendium himself.<sup>24</sup> The identification of the third hand's additions has been contradicted by Anders Leegaard Knudsen<sup>25</sup> and Karsten Friis-Jensen.<sup>26</sup> However, as Ivan Boserup argued, only the identification of the third hand as the author of the *Compendium* has been disproved, not the hypothesis of the *Compendium* deriving from the Angers Fragment's manuscript.<sup>27</sup> As Boserup showed, the reference marks of the margin additions in **An** display a sequence of clauses for Scioldus' life which is also found in the *Compendium*. This sequence seems to have been later disregarded by Saxo himself as it is found in a different order in **A**. If Friis-Jensen's stemma was exact, which he maintained in his 2015 edition without mentioning Boserup's contradiction, this similitude could only be explained as a coincidence for there is, in his conception, no direct link between **An** and the *Compendium Saxonis*. Hence, the author of the *Compendium Saxonis* would have disregarded the sequence of clauses of **x** and fortuitously recreated the same one which is also displayed in **An**. As Boserup noted, this

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<sup>19</sup> Gertz, *Scriptores minores historiae danicae*, 2:25-26.

<sup>20</sup> Gertz, *Scriptores minores historiae danicae*, 2:27.

<sup>21</sup> Gertz, *Scriptores minores historiae danicae*, 2:41.

<sup>22</sup> Gertz, *Scriptores minores historiae danicae*, 2:47-48. On my use of the *Gesta Danorum*'s book division in my quotation see next section, 1.2.1.2.

<sup>23</sup> Gertz, *Scriptores minores historiae danicae*, 1:216-439.

<sup>24</sup> Emil Rathsach, "Om den saakaldte 3. haand i Angersfragmentet af saxos Danmarkshistorie," *Aarbøger for Nordisk oldkyndighed og historie* 3, no. 10 (1920): 112-124.

<sup>25</sup> Anders Leegaard Knudsen, "Another Look at the so-Called Third Hand in the Angers Fragment of Saxo Grammaticus," *Cahier de L'institut du Moyen-Âge grec et latin*, no. 59 (1989): 359-365.

<sup>26</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, lix.

<sup>27</sup> Ivan Boserup, "The Angers Fragment and the Archetype of the Compendium Saxonis," *Renaissanceforum*, no. 3 (2007): 10-11.

similitude is unlikely to be a coincidence and is far more easily explained by a direct relationship between the *Compendium Saxonis* and **An**. Consequently, the *Compendium Saxonis* must be a summary based on an early stage of development of the work such as is visible in **An**. Thus, this text should be considered with great prudence in a discussion concerning the medieval reception of Saxo's work. I will thus treat the *editio princeps* as a faithful version of the *Gesta Danorum*.

Even though the *editio princeps* and the *Compendium Saxonis* are based on two distinct textual traditions, nearly all of the euhemeristic passages found in the *editio princeps* are also found in a shortened form in the *Compendium Saxonis*. Both the *Compendium Saxonis* and the *editio princeps* contain Saxo's first euhemeristic digression on the pseudo-gods and places it in the first book after the death of Gram.<sup>28</sup> Both of them also contain Saxo's second euhemeristic digression which they both place in book one after Hadingus' expedition in Gotland<sup>29</sup> as well as the narrative regarding Balderus and Høtherus in book three.<sup>30</sup> Only Saxo's third and shortest euhemeristic digression is not found in the *Compendium Saxonis*, which must not necessarily mean that this passage did not exist in the manuscript used by the author of the *Compendium Saxonis* as it could merely have been judged unimportant to the abbreviator. The *Compendium Saxonis* is also important as it also refers to the author of the *Gesta Danorum* as Saxo, whom he calls a "grammaticus", and a native of Sjælland.<sup>31</sup> Finally, the *Gesta Danorum* has also been quoted extensively by the German humanist from Hamburg, Albert Krantz (1450-1517) who claimed to quote the work verbatim in his *Chronica regnorum aquilonarium*<sup>32</sup> which had been published in Strasbourg in 1546 after Krantz's death. As did the author of the *Vetus chronica Sialandie* and the *Compendium Saxonis*, Krantz also referred to the author of the work as a certain Saxo.<sup>33</sup> As Friis-Jensen remarks, Krantz wrote this work between 1500 and 1504 and could not have been influenced by the Christiern Pedersen *editio princeps*.<sup>34</sup>

Beside these quotations and abbreviation, the original work of Saxo could have been easily wiped out of history if not for the modern Danish humanist, Christiern Pedersen (1480-1554).

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<sup>28</sup> Gertz, *Scriptores minores historiae Danicae*, 1: 222-223.

<sup>29</sup> Gertz, *Scriptores minores historiae Danicae*, 1: 224-225.

<sup>30</sup> Gertz, *Scriptores minores historiae Danicae*, 1: 239-245.

<sup>31</sup> Gertz, *Scriptores Minores Historiae Danicae*, 1: 216. I discuss the question of Saxo's identity in section 3.1.4.

<sup>32</sup> Albert Krantz, *Chronica Regnorum Aquilonarium. Daniae, Svetiae, Norvagiae*. (Strasbourg: Ioannis Schottus, 1546).

<sup>33</sup> Krantz, *Chronica Regnorum Aquilonarium*, 29. More on Krantz in Daniel Gotzen, "Krantz, Albert," in *Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle*, Brill, (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 979-980.

<sup>34</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, 2: lix-lx.

In 1512, Lage Urne, the bishop of Roskilde sent a letter to Christiern Pedersen, canon of Lund, and urged him to produce an edition of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*. According to Pedersen, a complete manuscript of the *Gesta Danorum* was such a precious rarity that no one in Denmark accepted to lend him one. Fortunately, the archbishop of Lund, Birger Gunnersen, agreed to lend him a manuscript he had found in his own district. Pedersen then edited the text and brought it to the Parisian printer Jodocus Badius Ascensius who printed the *editio princeps*, also referred to as the Paris edition (A), of the *Gesta Danorum* in 1514. The Paris edition remains to this day the only complete source for the *Gesta Danorum*. The lack of complete medieval manuscripts makes the study of the *Gesta Danorum* a rather uncertain subject regarding philological evidence to determine with exactitude the form of Saxo's final work (x).

### 1.2.1.2. Presentation of the Text

Saxo Grammaticus completed the *Gesta Danorum*, his only known work, c. 1208.<sup>35</sup> This massive work, divided in sixteen books and a preface, is self-described as an account of Denmark's history<sup>36</sup> and is written in Latin prosimetrum. The division of the *Gesta Danorum* into sixteen books is most likely original, and both the *editio princeps* and the *Compendium Saxonis* are divided into sixteen books. However, as Ivan Boserup and Thomas Riis note, the book division is not identical between these two versions of the works. As they argue, the two book divisions reflect two ideologies which correspond to two stages of development of the *Gesta Danorum*. The first book division, as attested in the *Compendium Saxonis* and in the Angers fragment, conveys a royal ideology and results from the influence of Saxo's first patron, Absalon. The second book division, as it is attested in the *editio princeps*, conveys an ecclesiastical ideology which would be the result of a revision of the work under the influence of Saxo's second patron, Anders Sunesen.<sup>37</sup> My object of study is Saxo's final work, which is the only version of the work known in its entirety, and which was the most well-known version of the work as is attested by the medieval fragments which all agree with the *editio princeps*

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<sup>35</sup> As Saxo states, his first patron, Absalon, died before he could finish the *Gesta Danorum*. As such Saxo dedicated his work to his second patron, Anders Sunesen. Hence, Saxo must have achieved the *Gesta Danorum* between 1201 and 1223 when Anders Sunesen was archbishop of Lund. Friis-Jensen narrowed this datation by noting that Saxo does not mention the Danish conquest of Estonia in 1219 but speak about Valdemar's expedition in northern Germany which could either refer to an expedition from 1208 or one from 1216. As Saxo is emphasizing Valdemar's dominance over the Elbe River it is plausible that he is referring specifically to the expedition of 1208 when Valdemar had a bridge built over the river. We may thus pinpoint the *Gesta Danorum* as being finished after 1208 and before 1219. See *Gesta Danorum*, xxxiii-xxxiv.

<sup>36</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, Pr.1.1-Pr.1.6.

<sup>37</sup> Ivan Boserup and Thomas Riis, "Saxos boginddelinger og deres ideologier," *Det Kongelige Biblioteks Samlinger* 51 (2012): 41-46.



with the exception of the Angers fragment. I will consider the book division of the *editio princeps* – which Friis-Jensen reproduced in his 2015 edition – as original and I will refer to every quotation from the *Gesta Danorum* according to this book, chapter, and paragraph division.

Saxo uses twenty-four different meters in his poetry which puts the *Gesta Danorum* in second place in term of verse variety among medieval authors, just behind Dudo's *Historia Normannorum*.<sup>38</sup> These sixteen books recount the history of Denmark through its kings from the legendary past of the kingdom to king Knut VI's expedition in Pomerania c. 1185. The *Gesta Danorum* is not the first Danish historiographical work. Saxo was preceded by the *Chronicon Roskildense* (The Roskilde Chronicle),<sup>39</sup> the *Chronicon Lethrense* (The Lejre Chronicle),<sup>40</sup> and Sven Aggesen's *Brevis Historia Regum Dacie* (Short History on the Kings of Denmark) (c. 1190).<sup>41</sup> But, with approximatively six hundred pages retelling the history of Denmark from its mythical past during the reign of Dan I and to the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the scope and length of the *Gesta Danorum* exceed by far those of the early works. The *Gesta Danorum* is by far the lengthiest work of medieval Danish history. The *Gesta Danorum* did not achieve wide popularity in the medieval era but the humanist Christiern Pedersen in 1514 offered a new life to the text. Because of its uniqueness compared to the shorter Danish histories, the *Gesta Danorum* became the unchallenged vulgate for the history of Denmark. In addition to being one of the only sources available, the *Gesta Danorum* proved to be suited for the tastes of the early modern period. Saxo's patriotic description of Danish history was appealing to the historians and humanists in the time of European states formation and of the birth of modern nationalism, especially Danish ones.<sup>42</sup> And even Erasmus, who did not generally look favorably upon medieval Latin,<sup>43</sup> praised the work in his *Ciceronianus* (1528),

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<sup>38</sup> Karsten Friis-Jensen, *Saxo Grammaticus as Latin Poet*, *Analecta Romana Instituti Danici*. Supplementum 14 (Rome: L'erma di Bretschneider, 1987), 53.

<sup>39</sup> Gertz, *Scriptores minores historiae Danicae*, 1:14-33.

<sup>40</sup> Gertz, *Scriptores minores historiae Danicae*, 1:43-53.

<sup>41</sup> Gertz, *Scriptores minores historiae Danicae*, 1:94-141. For brief descriptions of these early works see Lars Boje Mortensen, "Chronicon Lethrense (Chronicle of Lejre)," in *Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle*, ed. Graeme Dunphy, (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 1: 361-362; Lars Boje Mortensen, "Chronicon Roskildense (Chronicle of Roskilde)," in *Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle*, ed. Graeme Dunphy, (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 1:413; Lars Boje Mortensen, "Sven Aggesen [Sueno Aggonis]," in *Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle*, ed. Graeme Dunphy, (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 2:1403.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas Mohnike, "Danemark: Un Européen Danois, Saxo Grammaticus," *La Revue de La BNU*, no. 16 (November 1, 2017): 32-35; Karsten Friis-Jensen, "Humanism and Politics: The Paris Edition of Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*, 1514," *Analecta Romana Instituti Danici*, no. 17-18 (1989): 149-162.

<sup>43</sup> Terrence Tunberg, "The Latinity of Erasmus and Medieval Latin: Continuities and Discontinuities," *The Journal of Medieval Latin* 14 (2004): 147-148.

a dialogue which criticizes what the author considered to be excessive use of Cicero's Latin by humanists:

In Daniam malo quæ nobis dedit *Saxonem* Grammaticum qui suæ gentis historiam splendide magnificeque contexuit.

Nos: Probo vividum et ardens ingenium, orationem nusquam remissam aut dormitantem, tum miram verborum copiam, sententias crebras, et figurarum admirabilem varietatem; ut satis admirari non queam, unde illa aetate homini Dano tanta vis loquendi suppetierit, sed vix ulla in illo Ciceronis lineamenta reperias.<sup>44</sup>

(I'd rather go to Denmark for she has given to us Saxo Grammaticus who wrote a splendid history of that people.

No: I admire so much his lively and burning genius, his rapid, flowing speech, his wonderful wealth of words, his numerous aphorisms, his wonderful variety of figures that I cannot wonder enough where a Dane of that age got so great power of eloquence; yet you will find scarcely a trace of Cicero in him.)<sup>45</sup>

In terms of structure, the fourteenth book of the *Gesta Danorum* is significantly lengthier than the others and represents a little more than a quarter of the entire work alone. This book largely relates the deeds of Saxo's first patron, Archbishop Absalon of Lund, and his role in the Danish military expeditions against the pagan Wends in the southern Baltic. While Saxo is extremely praiseful toward Absalon, some scholars read his laudatory portrayal as excessive and willingly ironical.<sup>46</sup> I do not subscribe to this view but whether Saxo was a faithful admirer of Absalon, the fourteenth book of the *Gesta Danorum* undeniably remains the core of the work and was probably written first. Indeed, the first books, set in the remote past, portray ancient Danish heroes partaking in expeditions in the east Baltic area, and for this reason may have been influenced by Saxo's second patron, Anders Sunesen, who took part in the Baltic crusades in Estonia in 1219 during which he is even credited in patriotic legends as receiving the Danish flag, the Dannebrog, from God himself.<sup>47</sup> The influence of both Absalon and Anders Sunesen

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<sup>44</sup> Erasmus of Rotterdam, *Dialogus Ciceronianus: Sive de optimo genere dicendi* (Leyde: Joannis Maire, 1528), 175-176.

<sup>45</sup> Erasmus of Rotterdam, *Ciceronianus or a Dialogue on the Best Style of Speaking*, trans. Scott Izora, Columbia University Contributions to Education. Teachers College Series 21 (New York: Teachers college, Columbia University, 1908), 104.

<sup>46</sup> Birgit Sawyer, "Valdemar, Absalon and Saxo: Historiography and Politics in Medieval Denmark," *Revue belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 63, no. 4 (1895): 702-703.

<sup>47</sup> On this myth see Inga Adriansen, "The Danish National Flag as a Gift from God: A National-Religious Myth," *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 27, no. 2 (December 1, 2014): 277-298.

are certainly one of the main reasons why the text is largely about the conflict between Danes and pagan Balts. The Slavs, however, are not the sole enemies of the Danes in the *Gesta Danorum* and the work consistently represents the Holy Roman Empire as a threat to Danish independence, and more generally the influence of Germany as noxious to Danish society.<sup>48</sup>

### 1.2.1.3. The Place of Euhemerism in the *Gesta Danorum*

Karsten Friis-Jensen identified three “euhemeristic digressions” in the *Gesta Danorum*: I.5.2 to I.5.6, I.7.1 to I.7.3, and VI.5.3 to VI.5.5. In the first digression, the author establishes a typology of pseudo-gods. As he explains, three races of magicians deluded human beings into thinking they were gods. Those three kinds of magicians were giants, soothsayers, and the offspring of the first two categories, who although not as gifted in the arts of magic, conveyed the idea that the first two categories were gods. In the second digression, Saxo recounts how Othinus – Saxo’s Latinization of the Old Norse Óðinn – was revered by the kings of the northern part of the world but tricked by his wife and exiled from the company of the pseudo-gods. Finally, in the third digression, Saxo expresses more clearly the notion that magicians such as Othinus, Thoro and “a number of others”<sup>49</sup> are at the origin of pagan religion in Scandinavia. The author then pursues in explaining how their influence may be seen in the names of the days of the week and that these gods are different from the one of the Romans.<sup>50</sup> This is in these three passages that Saxo is the most interested in the nature of the pseudo-gods and their role in the birth of pagan religions. These pseudo-gods nonetheless appear in other parts of the *Gesta Danorum*, most notably in the third book where Saxo describes the struggles between Balderus – his Latinization of Baldr – which he understands as being a pseudo-god, and Høtherus, the Latinization of Høðr, which Saxo describes as a human prince.

The euhemeristic passages from the *Gesta Danorum* received less attention than those of Snorri. Most commentators nevertheless saw the connection between Saxo’s mythological passages and the euhemeristic theory. This subject has received the attention of Georges Dumézil who read the euhemeristic passages from Saxo through the lens of the study of Indo-European mythology.<sup>51</sup> Dumézil spoke very little of euhemerism *per se* but treated these narratives about

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<sup>48</sup> See for instance *Gesta Danorum* VI.8.7 where Saxo makes a parallel between German influence on Denmark and unmanliness. On this topic see also Lars Hermanson, “Friendship and Politics in Saxo Grammaticus’ *Gesta Danorum*,” *Revue belge de Philologie et d’histoire* 83, no. 2 (2005): 276.

<sup>49</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, VI.5.3.

<sup>50</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, VI.5.4.

<sup>51</sup> See for instance Georges Dumézil, *From Myth to Fiction. The Saga of Hadingus*, trans. Derek Coltman (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), 77-92.

the Norse gods as altered myths, and as such, as a mean to study Old Norse and Indo-European mythology. More recently, Saxo's euhemerism received particular attention from John Lindow,<sup>52</sup> André Muceniecks,<sup>53</sup> and Jonas Wellendorf.<sup>54</sup> Lindow, in the line of Dumézil, treated Saxo's euhemerism from the perspective of a scholar of myths, and studied it for the information the texts could provide regarding Scandinavian pre-Christian mythology.<sup>55</sup> In other words, his aim was to undo the euhemeristic method which Saxo applied to the myths and to retrieve their original mythological form. Unlike Dumézil and Lindow, Muceniecks and Wellendorf studied Saxo's euhemeristic passages in their relation to the whole of the *Gesta Danorum*. These authors are less interested in reconstructing Old Norse mythology than they are in comprehending how Saxo's euhemerism may fit his literary and ideological agenda.

Because of its subject, the *Gesta Danorum* shares similarities with many Old Norse sagas. Its emphasis on the life of the Danish kings makes it similar to the genre of the *konungasögur* (kings' sagas). Similar to Old Norse compilations of kings' lives such as *Heimskringla* or *Morkinskinna*, the *Gesta Danorum* is divided into books, which may correspond to the reign of specific kings. This division, however, is not systematic, and some books of the *Gesta Danorum* recount the reign of several kings, while the lives of some kings may be split between several books.<sup>56</sup> The books retelling the mythical past of Denmark, display several similarities with the *fornaldarsögur* (sagas of the past ages, or legendary sagas) as they contain many mentions of magic, paranormal phenomena, fantastic creatures, and reference to the pagan religions. These books are also characterized by their main figures who behave more like traditional heroes, fighting monsters and rescuing princesses, than kings ruling over their kingdom. As Ármann Jakobsson remarked, the legendary sagas may have not been considered to be their own subgenre of saga literature before the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Manuscripts from the 14<sup>th</sup> century do not group the legendary sagas together but associate them with kings' sagas and ancient history.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Lindow, "Some Thoughts on Saxo's," 241-254.

<sup>53</sup> André Muceniecks, *Saxo Grammaticus, Hierocratical: Conceptions and Danish Hegemony in the Thirteenth Century*, Carmen Monographs and Studies (Croydon: Arc humanities press, 2017), 53-66.

<sup>54</sup> Jonas Wellendorf, *Gods and Humans in Medieval Scandinavia: Retying the Bonds*, (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 71-83.

<sup>55</sup> John Lindow, "Myth Read as History: Odin in Snorri Sturluson's *Ynglinga Saga*," in *Myth a New Symposium*, ed. Gregory Allen Schrempf and William F Hansen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 107-123; Lindow, "Some Thoughts on Saxo's," 241-254.

<sup>56</sup> See for instance the story the reign of king Rørik which is spread between book three and four or the transition between books thirteen and fourteen which takes place during the life of king Eric Emune (Eric II).

<sup>57</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, "The Earliest Legendary Saga Manuscripts," in *The Legendary Sagas. Origins and Development*, ed. Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney, and Ármann Jakobsson (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2012), 21-32.

Saxo's composition follows a similar model where the stories from the legendary past are not a distinct class of narratives but belong to the category of historiographical writings.

Despite these similarities, and even if the use of Latin cannot alone exclude the *Gesta Danorum* from the saga genre,<sup>58</sup> Saxo's work can hardly be considered as a "Latin saga". One of the main differences between Saxo's work and a saga is its style of narration. The narrator of the sagas is generally supposed to be a neutral observer of the events unfolding in front of his eyes and rarely provides comments on what is happening.<sup>59</sup> Subjective comments from the narrator are rare enough to be noticed and are the subject of scholarly discussions when they do happen.<sup>60</sup> On the contrary, the narrator of the *Gesta Danorum* does not refrain from commenting on the action and often provides moralizing comments about the events and characters he is describing.

More than its relation to saga literature, it is certainly Saxo's depiction of Scandinavian mythology which has aroused most interest of Old Norse scholars. In that regard, many narratives from the *Gesta Danorum* have been viewed in older scholarship as particularly corrupted versions of Old Norse myths whose original forms could be partially retrieved through comparison with Old Norse and Indo-European myths. As Inge Skovgaard-Petersen noted: "Most of the [scholars] have been more interested in the history of Nordic heathendom than in Saxo's work".<sup>61</sup> In that respect, Saxo, even more than Snorri, has been read with great caution by scholars of myth. His use of Latin language, and its openly moralizing Christian perspective certainly raise suspicions regarding the faithfulness of his rendition of Old Norse myths. Despite the relatively more cautious attitude of scholars toward Saxo than toward Snorri, recent scholarship tends to emphasize that Saxo's as well as Snorri's, writings are learned

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<sup>58</sup> Ármann Jakobsson remarks that the kings' sagas are not all written in the same language in "Royal Biographies," in *A Companion to Old-Norse Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell publishing, 2005), 388.

<sup>59</sup> I insist here on the words "supposed to be". The saga authors had various techniques to influence the audience's judgement. For a discussion on this topic see Daniel Sävborg, "Style," in *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, ed. Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson (London: Routledge, 2017), 112-115.

<sup>60</sup> See for instance the scholarly discussion related to the narrator of *Gísla saga's* personal comment on Gísli's confession: Emily Lethbridge, "*Gísla Saga Súrssonar*: Textual Variation, Editorial Constructions, and Critical Interpretations," in *Creating the Medieval Saga: Versions, Variability, and Editorial Interpretations of Old Norse Saga Literature*, ed. Emily Lethbridge and Judy Quinn (Odense: Syddansk University Press, 2010), 142-143; Jeffrey Turco, "Gender, Violence, and the 'Enigma' of *Gísla Saga*," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 115, no. 3 (2016): 295-296.

<sup>61</sup> Inge Skovgaard-Petersen, "The Way to Byzantium. A Study in the First Three Books of Saxo's History of Denmark," in *Saxo Grammaticus, A Medieval Author Between Norse and Latin Culture*, ed. Karsten Friis-Jensen, (Danish Medieval History & Saxo Grammaticus, A symposium held in celebration of the 500th anniversary of the University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 1981), 121.

Christian appropriations of pagan motives.<sup>62</sup> Despite these recent efforts to compare Saxo to the Old Norse sources, the *Gesta Danorum* is still often overlooked within Old Norse scholarship. For instance, Jacob Hobson, in his recent article on euhemerism in early Scandinavian sources, did not mention Saxo despite the *Gesta Danorum* displaying some of the earliest examples of Scandinavian euhemerism.<sup>63</sup>

## 1.2.2. Snorri's *Edda*

### 1.2.2.1. Manuscript History

The prose *Edda*, or *Snorra Edda*, is preserved in eight manuscripts, all of them fragmentary to a certain degree. The four main manuscripts are:

- U** Uppsala, University Library Carolina Rediviva, DG 11 4to, parchment 56 leaves, first quarter of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, known as the Codex Upsaliensis. In addition to the *Edda*, **U** contains a genealogy of the Icelandic family of the Sturlungar to which belonged Snorri, a list of the Icelandic law speakers, including Snorri, and the second Icelandic grammatical treatise.
- R** Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, GKS 2367 4to, parchment, 55 leaves, first half the 14<sup>th</sup> century, known as the Codex Regius. In addition to the *Edda* the Codex Regius also contains the poems *Jómsvíkinga drápa* and *Málsháttakvæði*.
- W** Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, AM 242 fol, parchment and paper, 63 parchment leaves and 26 paper leaves, middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, “Codex Wormianus”. In addition to the *Edda* the Codex Wormianus also contains the four Icelandic grammatical treatises and the eddic poem *Rígsþula*.
- T** Utrecht, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Traj 1374, paper, c. 1595, known as Codex Trajectinus. Codex Trajectinus is believed to be the copy of a now lost manuscript.

Along with these four main manuscripts, three medieval fragments of the *Edda* survive:

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<sup>62</sup> See for instance Annette Lassen, “Saxo og Snorre som mytografer: Hedenskaben i *Gesta Danorum* og *Heimskringla*,” in *Saxo og Snorre*, ed. Jon Gunnar Jørgensen, Karsten Friis-Jensen, and Else Mundal (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010), 209-230.

<sup>63</sup> Hobson, “Euhemerism and the Veiling of History,” 24-44.

- H** Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, AM 756 4to, parchment, 18 leaves, 15<sup>th</sup> century.
- B** Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, AM 757 a 4to, parchment, 14 leaves, c. 1400. AM 757 a to also contains poetry, mostly poems about saints.
- C** Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, AM 748 II 4to, parchment, 13 leaves, c. 1400. In addition to a fragment of the *Edda* AM 748 II 4to also contains genealogies.

**R** is the most complete of these manuscripts and only misses one leaf from the beginning of the prologue. **W** presents a text close to **R** but has a longer prologue and misses the first chapter of *Gylfaginning*. **U** is the oldest of the manuscripts. Its version of the *Edda* is significantly shorter than the one found in **R** and **W**. **T** presents a text close to **R** and is believed to be the copy of a 13<sup>th</sup> century manuscript now lost.

Haukur Þorgeirsson recently compared the different stemmas proposed for the *Edda*.<sup>64</sup> He compared the stemmas from Willem van Eeden,<sup>65</sup> Richard Constant Boer,<sup>66</sup> and Finnur Jónsson.<sup>67</sup> I have reproduced the three of them here:

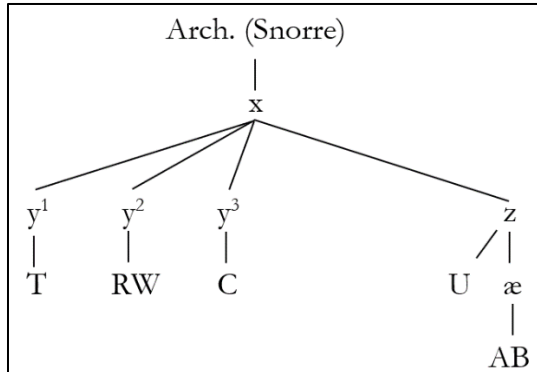


Figure 1: Willem van Eeden's stemma

<sup>64</sup> Haukur Þorgeirsson, "A Stemmatic Analysis of the *Prose Edda*," *Saga-Book* 41 (2017): 49-70.

<sup>65</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *De Codex Trajectinus van de Snorra Edda*, ed. Willem van Eeden (Leiden: E. Ijdo, 1913), cxxvi.

<sup>66</sup> Richard Constant Boer, "Studier over *Snorra Edda*," *Aarbøger for Nordisk oldkyndighed og Historie* 3, no. 14 (1924): 263.

<sup>67</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1931), xxxviii.

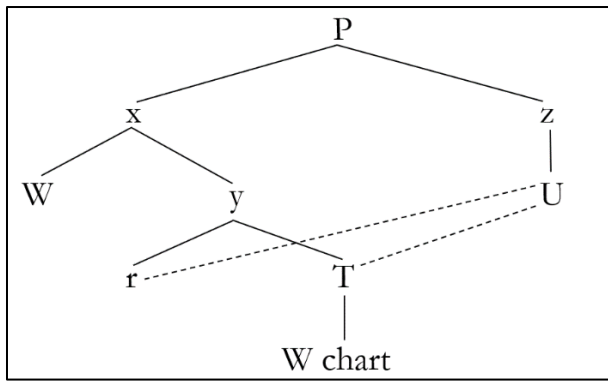


Figure 2: Richard Constant Boer's stemma

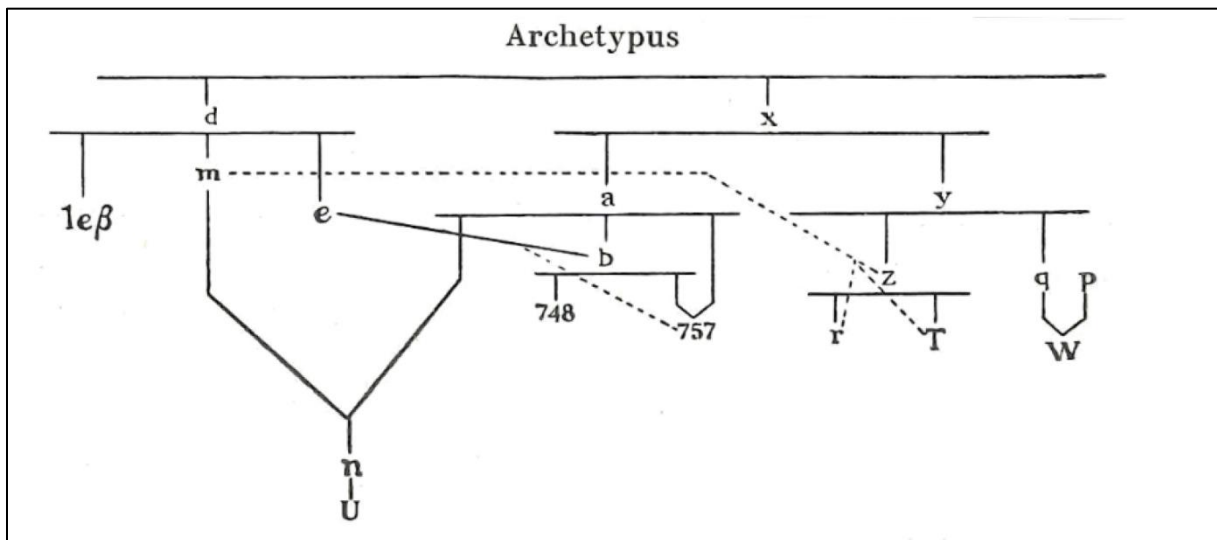


Figure 3: Finnur Jónsson's stemma

Eeden's stemma sorted the *Edda* manuscripts into two main groups, **U** and **RTW**. Boer included **A**, **B** and **C** to his stemma. According to his conclusions, the manuscripts may be divided into three main groups, **C**, **UAB** and **RTW**. Both Eeden and Boer identified **RT** as a subgroup within **RTW**. On the other hand, Finnur Jónsson identified two main groups, **RTWC** and **UAB**. In his stemma **RW**, rather than **RT**, is a subgroup of **RTW**. As Haukur remarked, Finnur's assumption regarding this subgroup is not supported by his own argumentation. On the contrary, Haukur, along with van Eeden and Boer, noted that **R** and **T** share several numerous errors and hence may be considered to be a subgroup within **RTW**.

One of the other major differences between Finnur Jónsson's and Boer's stemma is their placement of **C**. Finnur considered **C** to be part of the **RTW** group, but Boer placed it higher in the stemma as a group distinct from **RTW** and **UAB**. Haukur discussed this placement and came to the same conclusion as Boer. As he noted, in **W** the first chapter of *Gylfaginning* starts



with an introduction of King Gylfi, while it is not the case in **RT**. In **W** this introduction is out of place, as Gylfi has already been introduced in chapter one. This may be explained easily by the absence of chapter one in **U**. **RTW** must have had a common source which added chapter one. The scribe of **W** copied it faithfully while the common ancestor of **RT** revised the text by removing the superfluous second introduction. Haukur produced a simplified version of Boer's stemma, showing only the primary sources of each manuscript reproduced here:

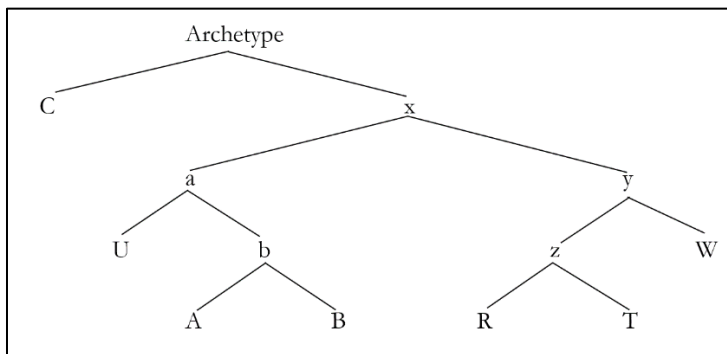


Figure 4: Haukur Þorgeirsson's stemma

Haukur's stemma, largely similar to Boer's is functioning. I agree with him that the classification of the manuscripts into the three main groups **C**, **UAB** and **RTW** is correct.

Naturally, the question regarding which of these groups is closest to the archetype has been debated among philologists. The idea that the version of **U** is older than the version of **RTW** has been defended by Eugen Mogk<sup>68</sup> as well as Friedrich Müller who believed that both **U** and **R** reflected the authorial version of the *Edda*.<sup>69</sup> Conversely, Finnur Jónsson argued for the originality of **RTW**.<sup>70</sup> Recently, Heimir Pálsson argued in the line of Müller that both versions of the *Edda* originated from Snorri, **U** likely being older. Heimir explained some divergences between the narrative part of the two versions as stemming from different oral retellings of the same myths.<sup>71</sup> These assertions have been contradicted by Daniel Sävborg who defended the

<sup>68</sup> Eugen Mogk, "Untersuchungen ueber die *Gylfaginning*," *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 6 (1879): 477-537.

<sup>69</sup> Friedrich Müller, *Untersuchungen zur Uppsala-Edda* (Dresden: Dietert, 1941), 146.

<sup>70</sup> Finnur Jónsson, "Edda Snorra Surlusonar: dens oprindelige form og sammensætning," *Aarbøger for nordisk oldkyndighed og historie* 13 (1898): 283-357.

<sup>71</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *The Uppsala Edda*, ed. Heimir Pálsson, trans. Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2012), cxvii.

priority of **RTW** and argued that the **U** version of the *Edda* was an abbreviation from a manuscript which belonged to the **RTW** family.<sup>72</sup>

As Sävborg noted, previous discussions on the topic often relied on subjective arguments such as the literary quality of the work. For instance, Finnur Jónsson argued that **RTW** was better and hence original, while Mogk thought that **U** was best, and therefore closer to the archetype. Müller thought that **RTW** was the best version, but that it was actually a proof for the originality of **U**. Müller's argument may be summarized as such "U hat den Fehler wohl aus der Urschrift der Gylfg übernommen; nur da ist seine Entstehung zu verstehen." (U has probably inherited the errors from the original of *Gylfaginning*, its origin can only be understood as such.)<sup>73</sup> As Sävborg notes: "To sum up: the Snorra Edda scholars do not agree which version was the best, and they anyway do not agree if that indicates it is older or younger."<sup>74</sup>

In order to address this question more objectively, Sävborg applied to the *Edda* a method which has been previously used by Sven B.F. Jansson on *Eiríks saga rauða*.<sup>75</sup> Jansson compared the version of the saga from Skálholtsbók and the one from Hauksbók. The Hauksbók version was known to be the work of three different hands. Jansson noted that in the Hauksbók version, two of the hands wrote a text which was similar to the Skálholtsbók version, while the third one wrote in a more concise style. His conclusion was that the differences between the Skálholtsbók and Hauksbók versions were due to Haukr's shortening of his source.

Sävborg observed that the **U** version of the *Edda* was also written in two distinctive styles, one of them was particularly concise while the other was more descriptive. He also found that these two distinctive styles were distributed between several blocks of texts. The blocks of text written in the descriptive style closely resembled **R**, while the parts written in the more concise style were significantly shorter than it. As the descriptive style is common to the two versions of the *Edda*, Sävborg concluded that it is the style of the archetype. The two distinctive styles show that **U** must be the copy of a manuscript which has been written by two different hands,

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<sup>72</sup> Daniel Sävborg, "Blockbildningen i Codex Upsaliensis. En ny metod att lösa frågan om *Snorra Eddas* ursprungsversion," *Maal og Minne* 104, no. 1 (2012): 12-53; Daniel Sävborg, "*Snorra Edda* and the *Uppsala Edda*," in *Snorri Surluson - Historiker, Dichter, Politiker*, ed. Heinrich Beck, Heizmann Wilhelm, and Jan Alexander Van Nahl, *Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 85 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 247-266; Daniel Sävborg, "The **U** Version of *Snorra Edda*," *The Retrospective Methods Network Newsletter*, no. 8 (2014): 29-32.

<sup>73</sup> Müller, *Untersuchungen zur Uppsala-Edda*, 27

<sup>74</sup> Sävborg, "*Snorra Edda* and," 252.

<sup>75</sup> Sven B.F. Jansson, *Sagorna om Vinland 1. Handskrifterna till Erik den Rödes Saga*, *Stockholm Studies in Scandinavian Philology* 5 (Lund: Håkan Ohlssons boktryckeri, 1944).

as Hauksbók. One of these hands reduced its model in order to gain time and space while the other one was faithful to the original. I find Sävborg's method and conclusion particularly convincing. His explanation contradicts Heimir Pálsson's claim that **U** was Snorri's older authorial version.

The *Edda* prologue is one of the parts of the text which differs the most from manuscript to manuscript. It is also the part of the *Edda* where euhemerism is discussed the most extensively. **R T U** and **W** contain the prologue to the *Edda* but only **U** and **W** preserved the beginning of the text. The prologue of **U** is partly abridged as other parts of this manuscript, but the prologue of **W** contains passages not present in **R, U** and **T**. These passages are most often considered to be interpolations as they are peculiar to **W** and their references to biblical and learned classical culture are unlike the rest of the prologue. I agree with Faulkes' reconstruction of the prologue to the *Edda* which excludes the long passages unique to **W**.<sup>76</sup> This is not to say that the prologue of **W** should be excluded from this study, on the contrary, it is a precious witness of the evolution of euhemeristic thought in Iceland during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries.

#### 1.2.2.2. Presentation of the Text

The prose *Edda* is divided into a prologue, *Gylfaginning* (the beguiling of Gylfi), *Skaldskaparmál* (the language of poetry) and *Háttatal* (the list of verse forms). The prose *Edda* is without doubt the work of Old Norse literature which received the most scholarly attention next to the poetic *Edda*. The narrator of the prose *Edda* claims to retell ancient Scandinavian stories and as such the *Edda* earned the reputation to be a sort of Old Norse equivalent to the works of Homer, Hesiod, and Ovid. The main difference between the prose *Edda* and those ancient Greek and Latin works is that the *Edda* is not the work of a pagan who believed in the myth he recounted, but of a Christian whose reading of these stories is not literal but relies on different Christian methods of interpretation of pagan myths, amongst which comes euhemerism.

Snorri presents the retelling of Old Norse myths only as a means to an end, the teaching of Old Norse court poetry which indeed relies heavily on reference to the native Scandinavian mythology. The narrator explains the Norse myths in *Gylfaginning* by means of a dialogue between the Swedish king Gylfi and the disguised pseudo-gods. He then continues to discuss

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<sup>76</sup> Anthony Faulkes, "The Prologue to Snorra Edda. An Attempt at Reconstruction," *Gripla*, no. 3 (1979): 204-213.

myths in the *Skaldskaparmál* which takes the form of a dialogue between Ægir, god of the sea, and Bragi, god of poetry, who explains many *kenningar* (periphrases), and *heiti* (poetic synonyms), essential to compose skaldic poetry. The final section, *Háttatal*, is a poem in praise of both King Hákon Hákonarson and his coregent, Jarl Skúli, in which Snorri uses many different verse forms in order to illustrate their use.

The title *Edda* is enigmatic. This word could mean great grandmother and seems to be used with this meaning in the *Edda* itself: “Snor heitir sonar kván. Sværa heitir vers móðir. ‹Heitir ok móðir,› amma, þriðja edda”<sup>77</sup> (A son’s wife is called *snor*. A husband’s mother is called *sværa*. There are also the terms mother, grandmother, thirdly *edda*.)<sup>78</sup> This appellation could indeed be suitable for a compilation of old stories. Other theories are the connections with the words *oðr* (song) or Oddi, where Snorri was brought up.<sup>79</sup> Another popular theory is the connection the Latin *edo* the first-person present indicative of the verb *edo* meaning among other things “to publish”. It is indeed very possible that an Old Norse speaker could construct the Old Norse word *edda* from the Latin *edo* as the Old Norse *kredda* (belief, superstition) does derive from the Latin *credo* (creed, literally “I believe”) through the Old English *creda*. It is thus perfectly plausible that *edda* is a learned neologism meaning “I publish”. Andrea de Leeuw van Weenen proposed another interpretation based on the similarity between *kredda* and *credo*. As he puts it:

If we create the equation *kredda* = *kristin trú*, or with an abbreviation *kredda* = *kr. trú*, removal of the letters *kr* produces *edda* = *trú*. In this way *edda* signifies a summary of non-Christian belief, a definition that accords well with the mythological part of the Snorra-Edda.<sup>80</sup>

I find this explanation unnecessarily convoluted compared to the simple and effective hypothesis of *edda* being modeled from *edo* on the model of *kredda*. Regardless of its meaning, the word *edda* is associated to this work from early on and is most likely the original title of the work. The word *edda* became so tightly connected with Snorri’s work and Old Norse poetry and mythology that it was later also applied to the so called *Poetic edda* a compilation of Old Norse poems. This compilation itself gave its name to the whole genre of *eddic* poetry, a modern appellation which groups together poems written in different verse forms including *fornyrðislag*

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<sup>77</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skaldskaparmál. 1*, 108.

<sup>78</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Anthony Faulkes (London: Everyman, 1987), 153.

<sup>79</sup> Sivert N. Hagen, “On the Origin of the Term Edda.,” *Modern Language Notes* 19, no. 5 (May 1904): 127.

<sup>80</sup> Andrea de Leeuw van Weenen, “Another Interpretation of the Word Edda,” *Gripla* 23 (2012): 375-380.

(old story metre) and *ljóðahátttr* (song form) and which is generally opposed to the more complex court poetry known as skaldic poetry composed in meters of which *dróttkvætt* (court meter) was the most prestigious.

### 1.2.2.3. The Place of Euhemerism in the *Edda*

Euhemerism is present in three of the four sections of the *Edda*: in the prologue, in the *Skaldskaparmál* and to a lesser extent in *Gylfaginning*. It is not found in the last book of the *Edda*, *Háttatal*. The prologue displays a comprehensive account of the origin of pagan religion in which euhemerism plays a major role. Significantly the prologue of the *Edda* exists in different manuscripts and its euhemeristic narrative may display significant dissimilarities from a manuscript to another thus making the theory not only vary from one author to another but even within the different versions of a single text. Several authors described *Gylfaginning* as the recounting of Old Norse myths within a euhemeristic framework.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, according to Snorri's narrative, King Gylfi, a Swedish king, is deluded by the tricks and lies of the Æsir, the pseudo-gods settling in Scandinavia. It is he who spread their stories after their encounter:

Því næst heyrði Gangleri dyni mikla hvern veg frá sér, ok leit út á hlið sér. Ok þá er hann sésk meir um, þá stendr hann úti á sléttum velli, sér þá ønga holl ok ønga borg. Gengr hann þá leið sína braut ok kemr heim í ríki sitt ok segir þau tíðindi er hann hefir sét ok heyrt. Ok eptir honum sagði hverr maðr qðrum þessar sǫgur.<sup>82</sup>

(Next Gangleri heard great noises in every direction from him, and he looked out to one side. And when he looked around further he found he was standing out on open ground, could see no hall and no castle. Then he went off on his way and came back to his kingdom and told of the events he had seen and heard about. And from his account these stories passed from one person to another.)<sup>83</sup>

In the *Edda* King Gylfi is thus one of the links in the chain of transmission of paganism from the pseudo-gods to the Scandinavian people. The euhemeristic account at the beginning of *Skaldskaparmál* takes the form of a warning for young poets to not read these stories literally and explains how Old Norse myths are in fact distorted accounts of the Trojan war.

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<sup>81</sup> Christopher Abram, "Gylfaginning and Early Medieval Conversion," *Saga-Book* 33 (2009), 5-24; Peter Orton, "Pagan Myth and Religion," in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory MacTurk (Malden: Blackwell publishing, 2005), 310.

<sup>82</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 54.

<sup>83</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 57.

Snorri's euhemerism in the *Edda* is the subject of an important scholarly discussion within the field of Old Norse studies as well as for euhemerism scholars. One of the founding studies on the topic is Klaus von See's *Mythos und Theologie im Skandinavischen Hochmittelalter* in which the author argued that the idea that humans may have godly ancestors had no existence in pre-Christian Scandinavia but is a product of Christian euhemeristic thought.<sup>84</sup> In the same book, von See argued that the prologue of the *Edda* was not an original part of the *Edda* and was not written by Snorri Sturluson as he considered the world view of the prologue to be too different to that of *Gylfaginning*. Von See's stance regarding the belief in the kings' divine ancestors relates to the debate regarding the question of divine, or sacral, kingship in medieval Scandinavia. Early scholarship generally viewed ancient Germanic and Scandinavian monarchies as based on the idea of sacral kingship, that is the idea that kings were perceived either as gods or descendants of the gods. Walter Baetke's book *Yngvi und Die Ynglinger: Eine quellenkritische Untersuchung über das nordische "Sakralkönigtum"* was one of the first studies critical of this idea.<sup>85</sup> In that line, von See saw every mention of monarch worship as later Christian influence. Most modern scholars recognize that Christian euhemeristic thought played a role in the description of pre-Christian kings in saga literature, yet not all of them consider, as von See, that Christian euhemerism alone may explain the description of sacred kings in Old Norse literature.<sup>86</sup>

Recent studies on Snorri's euhemerism include the works of Anthony Faulkes,<sup>87</sup> Jens Peter Schjødt,<sup>88</sup> Heinrich Beck,<sup>89</sup> Kevin Wanner,<sup>90</sup> Jacob Hobson<sup>91</sup> as well as Nickolas Roubekas.<sup>92</sup> One of the main elements of dissent in these discussions have been Snorri's intellectual background in writing the *Edda*. Unlike von See, most modern scholars see the prologue of the

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<sup>84</sup> Klaus Von See, *Mythos und Theologie im Skandinavischen Hochmittelalter*, Skandinavistische Arbeiten, Bd. 8 (Heidelberg: Winter, 1988), 76.

<sup>85</sup> Walter Baetke, *Yngvi und Die Ynglinger: Eine Quellenkritische Untersuchung über das Nordische "Sakralkönigtum"* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1964), 85.

<sup>86</sup> Jens Peter Schjødt, "Freyr and Fróði and Some Reflections on Euhemerism," in *Analecta Septentrionalia: Beiträge zur Nordgermanischen Kultur- und Literaturgeschichte*, ed. Wilhelm Heizmann, Klaus Bödl, and Heinrich Beck, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 65 (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 575; Rory McTurk, "Scandinavian Sacral Kingship Revisited," *Saga-Book* 24 (1994): 19-32.

<sup>87</sup> Anthony Faulkes, "Descent from the Gods," *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 11 (1978-1979): 92-125.

<sup>88</sup> Schjødt, "Freyr and Fróði," 567-579.

<sup>89</sup> Beck, "Snorri Sturlusons Mythologie: Euhemerismus oder Analogie," 1-21.

<sup>90</sup> Kevin Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda: The Conversion of Cultural Capital in Medieval Scandinavia*, Toronto Old Norse-Icelandic Series (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008). Especially chapter eight, 140-161.

<sup>91</sup> Hobson, "Euhemerism and the Veiling of History," 24-44.

<sup>92</sup> Nickolas P. Roubekas, *An Ancient Theory of Religion, Euhemerism from Antiquity to the Present*, Routledge Monographs in Classical Studies (New York: Routledge, 2017).

*Edda* as a genuine part of the original work. As von See claimed, the prologue presents pagan religion as originating in natural theology, that is the theological conclusion which may be reached through the use of the five senses and reason rather than revelation.<sup>93</sup> *Gylfaginning*, on the other hand, he argues, describes the pagan religion as originating through the dialogue between King Gylfi and the pseudo-gods rather than natural theology, and thus would be incompatible with the views expressed in the prologue. Partly because of his position on the authorship of the prologue, von See rejects the identification of Snorri's *Edda* as euhemeristic. To him the prologue alone, which he does not believe to have been written by Snorri, is euhemeristic, but *Gylfaginning* may only be read as a euhemeristic work by improperly projecting the worldview of the prologue onto it.

Von See's conclusions are however far from being unanimously approved and have been the subject of criticism.<sup>94</sup> I need not to take position in this debate for now and will come back to it in a later chapter regarding Snorri's *Edda*.<sup>95</sup> It must be stressed that the criticism of the relevance of euhemerism as applied to the *Edda* is not just connected to the question of Snorri's authorship of the prologue. Commentators such as Heinrich Beck and Jan Van Nahl criticized the pertinence of the concept of euhemerism for studying Snorri's work even though they did not comment on the authorship of the prologue.<sup>96</sup> Unlike von See, these two authors did not argue that some passages traditionally described as euhemeristic were not the work of Snorri, but rather that they were not euhemeristic in the first place, and thus compatible with the rest of the *Edda*. To them, *Gylfaginning* as well as some passages from *Ynglinga saga* are more properly understood with the help of the concept of analogy rather than euhemerism. According to them, Snorri attempted to highlight similitudes between the Old Norse pagan narratives and the Christian faith, for instance, by stressing the fact that Óðinn had twelve companions, as Christ, or that Gylfi encounters a sort of pagan trinity under the personae of Hár, Jafnhár, and Þríði which literally mean High, Equally High, and Third.<sup>97</sup>

What do these reflections say about euhemerism in the *Edda*? The two principal passages of the *Edda* which treat euhemerism are the prologue and the end of the narrative part of

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<sup>93</sup> See section 4.3.

<sup>94</sup> See for instance Margaret Clunies Ross, "Mikill skynsemi er at rifja vandliga þat upp: A Response to Klaus Von See," *Saga-Book* 23 (1990-1993): 73-79.

<sup>95</sup> See section 4.3.

<sup>96</sup> Beck, "Snorri Sturlusons Mythologie: Euhemerismus oder Analogie," 12; Van Nahl, *Snorri Sturlusons Mythologie*, 132.

<sup>97</sup> Beck, "Snorri Sturlusons Mythologie: Euhemerismus oder Analogie," 14, 18.

*Skáldskaparmál*. The prologue is present in **U**, **R**, **T** and **W**. We cannot know whether it was present in **C**, **A** and **B**, for these manuscripts are too fragmentary and do not contain this passage. Equally, it is not possible to know for certain whether the prologue was a part of the archetype, as it may stem from a common ancestor of **UAB** and **RTW**. It is certain that the prologue was written during or before the first quarter of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, as it is present in **U**. With the exception of the prologues of **R** and **T** which are very close to each other, no major manuscripts have the same version of the prologue. The version of **U** is the shortest and represents 58% of **R**. **W** has the longest version and develops themes which are not present in **U** and **RT**.

**W** expands the theme of the rise of idolatry and provides a narrative where Zoroaster and then Saturn are the malevolent inventors of idolatry. All the major topics which are developed in **R** are also present in **U**. On the other hand, no topic particular to **W** against **R** is developed in **U**. Consequently, it seems likely that the prologue of **W** is the extension of a version close to **R**'s. Each of these prologues develops a similar euhemeristic narrative where false religions are said to originate first from the worship of nature and then from the deification of mortal men. All the prologues draw a connection between the city of Troy and Scandinavia.

Regarding *Skáldskaparmál*, **R**, **T**, and **W** are very similar. All of them contain the famous address to the young poet, where the author warns his audience that no Christian should believe literally in the stories discussed in this book. Instead of literal reading, the author gives us an interpretation of the Norse myths as distorted retellings of the Trojan war. For instance, the struggle between Þórr and the Miðgarðsormr is to be understood as based on the duel between Hector and Achilles. In the version of **U**, *Skáldskaparmál* contains no reference to the Trojan war, and hence, no interpretation of the Norse myths as distorted memories from past events. Instead, **U** provides us with the *Ættartala Sturlunga*, a genealogy of the Sturlungar family. This genealogy is much larger in scope than those contained in the prologue of the *Edda* and *Skáldskaparmál*. The *Ættartala Sturlunga* genealogically connects Hvam-Sturla's children, including Snorri, to Adam through Óðinn. For the part of the genealogy which goes from Priam to Óðinn, *Ættartala Sturlunga* provides the same genealogy as the prologue.

In conclusion, all four main manuscripts of the *Edda* contain some euhemeristic narratives. All four of them contain the prologue and its euhemeristic explanation of the origin of pagan religions. Only **RTW** contains the narrative part of *Skáldskaparmál* and its explanation of the Norse myths as deceptive accounts on the Trojan war. **U** has the *Ættartala Sturlunga* which



connects the Sturlungar to Adam and includes Trojan and Norse kings in their genealogy. It is noteworthy that in addition to the *Edda W* also contains the four grammatical treatises, including the third one where the author mentions that the poetic art known in the north is the same as the one which was practiced in Greece and Italy.

J þessi bok ma giorla skilia at ll er ein maalf listn, fva er romversker spekingar namv i athenf borg a grikk landi, ok fnero sian ilatinv mal, ok fa hlioa hattr ok skalld fkapar, er oinn ok arer afie men flvttv norr hingat, a er eir bygdv norr haalfv haimfnf, ok kendv monnum eff konar list a fina tvngv, fva sem eir hofv fkipat ok nvmi i fialfv afia landi, ar sem meftr var fegr ok rikdomr ok froleikr veralldarenar.<sup>98</sup>

(In this book it may be understood that it is all one art skill, that which wise Roman learned men in Athens in Greece, and translated into Latin language, and the use of meters and the poetical meters, which inn and other men from Asia brought here to the North, when they settled the northern half of the world and taught to men all these kinds of arts in their tongues, such as they had taken them and learned themselves in Asia, where the beauty and power and knowledge was the greatest in the world.)<sup>99</sup>

According to the author, inn and other men from Asia brought the art of poetry to the north. This idea is similar to Snorri’s narrative regarding the migration of the Esir from Asia to the north. As Margaret Clunies Ross remarked, the narrative from the grammatical treatise is more in line with traditional motives of *translatio studii*,<sup>100</sup> as it does not portray a migration directly from Asia to the north but emphasizes the connection of Norse poetry with Greek and Latin poetry.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Bjrn Magnsson Olsen, *Den tredje og fjarde grammatiske afhandling i Snorres Edda. Tilligemed de grammatiske afhandlingers prolog og to andre tilleg*, Udgivne for samfundet til udgivelse af gammel nordisk literatur 12 (Copenhagen: Fr. G. Knudtzons bogtrykkeri, 1884), 12.

<sup>99</sup> My translation.

<sup>100</sup> For the connection between this motive and euhemerism see section 5.7.

<sup>101</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 190-191.

### 1.2.3. *Heimskringla*

#### 1.2.3.1. Manuscript History

*Heimskringla* is preserved in six medieval parchment manuscripts, all of them fragmentary, here presented in chronological order:

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|----------------|---|
| <b>K</b>       | Reykjavík, Handritasafn, Lbs fragm 82, parchment, one leaf, c. 1260. Known as the “kringla leaf”.   |
| <b>39</b>      | Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, AM 39 fol., parchment, 43 leaves, c. 1300.  |
| <b>325VIII</b> | Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, AM 325 VIII 1 4to, parchment, 5 leaves, first quarter of the 14 <sup>th</sup> century.                                      |
| <b>325X</b>    | Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, AM 325 XI 1 4to, parchment, 4 leaves, first quarter of the 14 <sup>th</sup> century.  |
| <b>E</b>       | Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, AM 47 fol., parchment, 195 leaves, first quarter of the 14 <sup>th</sup> century. Known as “Eirspennill”.                   |
| <b>F</b>       | Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, AM 45 fol., parchment, 124 leaves, first quarter of the 14 <sup>th</sup> century. Known as “Codex Frisianus” or “Fríssbók”. |

Along with these medieval fragments, there are several modern paper copies of the work:

- |          |   |
|----------|---|
| <b>K</b> | The manuscript of K has been copied in:<br><br>Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, AM 35 fol., paper, 218 leaves, between 1685 and 1700.<br><br>Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, AM 36 fol., paper, 273 leaves, between 1675 and 1700.<br><br>Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, AM 63 fol., paper, 230 leaves, between 1685 and 1700.<br><br>Together, these three paper manuscripts contain the entirety of <i>Heimskringla</i> . |
|----------|---|

**G** Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, AM 42 fol., paper, 177 leaves, end the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

**J** Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, AM 37 fol., paper, 181 leaves, end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. **J1**.

Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, AM 38 fol., paper, 386 leaves, end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. **J2**.

These two paper manuscripts are copies of the Jöfraskinna manuscript which was destroyed in the 1728 Copenhagen fire.

These manuscripts have been traditionally separated into two groups. The x group is represented by the Kringla manuscript **K** while the y group is represented by the two paper copies of the Jöfraskinna manuscript **J1** and **J2**.

Because of the infamous 1728 Copenhagen fire, both **K** and **J** were destroyed, save for a fragment of **K**. This fragment, the “kringla leaf”, dates from around 1258-1264 and remains to this day the oldest testimony of *Heimskringla*. Fortunately, several modern paper transcripts of **K** and **J** have been made during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. **K** remains known chiefly through three paper manuscripts, AM 35, 36 and 63 fol. copied by Ásgeir Jónsson. Together, AM 35, 36 and 63 fol. contain the entirety of *Heimskringla*, each of them containing one third of the complete work. Along with Jöfraskinna another manuscript of the **J** group, Gullaskinna (**G**) was also lost in the fire but had been copied in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This copy has the shelf-mark AM 42 fol.

Here is the stemma proposed by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson and used by Diana Whaley. I have noted in bold the three manuscripts which contain the prologue and *Ynglinga saga*.

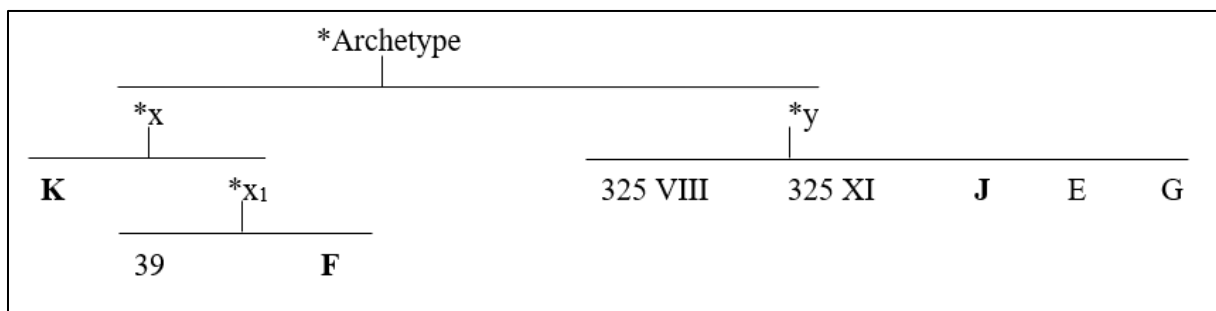


Figure 5: Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson’s stemma

The manuscripts of the x group are often considered the closest to the archetype. **K** especially is used as the chief manuscript in the modern editions. This view however has not been

unchallenged. Alan J. Berger has been particularly critical of this stemma. He argued that *Heimskringla* is not an original work, but an abbreviation of another compilation of kings' sagas found in the two 14<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts *Hulda-Hrokkinskinna* (**HHr**). **HHr** often presents longer versions of the episodes found in *Heimskringla*. **HHr** is usually believed to be based on both *Heimskringla* and *Morkinskinna*. Yet, according to Berger's theory the relation between the two works would be the opposite. This theory has the merit to explain in a simple way why *Heimskringla* manuscripts from both the **J** and the **K** groups share common readings with *Hulda-Hrokkinskinna*.<sup>102</sup> In this perspective *Jöfraskinna* would be the manuscript which is closer to *Heimskringla* archetype. Its longer and more verbose narrative would not be due to interpolations from other works, as commonly believed, but would rather mean that the manuscript had been less severely abbreviated than the other ones. If this theory is exact, then *Heimskringla* would be younger than previously thought, which would be critical to this thesis, as it would necessarily impact the dating of *Ynglinga saga*, which have no equivalent in *Fagrskinna* and *Morkinskinna*.

### 1.2.3.2. Presentation of the Text

*Heimskringla* is a compilation of sixteen kings' sagas. Its original medieval title is unknown. Its modern name *Heimskringla* comes from the first two words of the compilation: *Kringla heimsins*, literally "the circle of the world", which may be a Norse equivalent for the Latin *terrarum orbis*.<sup>103</sup> Despite its title, the work focuses mainly on the Scandinavian region and is essentially a history of the kings of Norway from the legendary Ynglingar kings to Magnus Erlingsson (1156-1184). *Heimskringla* received more scholarly attention than any other kings' saga. Because of the quality of its style and composition scholars treated *Heimskringla* as a "honorary saga of Icelanders",<sup>104</sup> but as Ármann Jakobsson discussed, *Heimskringla* also displays many similarities with other less appreciated sagas such as *Morkinskinna* (c. 1220) – another compilation of kings' sagas starting with the reign of Magnús the good and ending in 1155 with the death of Sigurðr Haraldsson – such as the inclusion of digressions and *þættir*.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Alan J. Berger, "Heimskringla Is an Abbreviation of Hulda-Hrokkinskinna," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 116 (2001), 65-69.

<sup>103</sup> For a discussion on Snorri's within traditional Latin geographies see Tatjana Jackson, "Some Call Europe, and Some Call Eneá": On the Origins of the Old Icelandic Learned Prehistory," *Miscellanea Geographica* 23, no. 3 (2019): 121-124.

<sup>104</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, "Inventing a Saga Form: The Development of the Kings' Sagas," ed. Fabrizio D Raschellà et al., *Filologia Germanica – Germanic Philology*, no. 4 (2012): 16.

<sup>105</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, "Inventing a Saga Form: The Development of the Kings' Sagas.", 17-18.

Modern editions and translations of *Heimskringla* are traditionally divided into three parts. The first one is composed of six sagas, from *Ynglinga saga* to *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (The Saga of Óláfr Tryggvason). This first part contains *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* (The Saga of Haraldr Fairhair), which retells the story of King Haraldr hárfagri the alleged unifier and first king of Norway.<sup>106</sup> The settlement of Iceland is described in this saga as resulting from Haraldr's reign, as chieftains supposedly having fled from Norway to Iceland to avoid Harald's tyranny. The second part of the collection consists of a single saga, *Óláfs saga helga* (the saga of saint Óláfr) which represents around one third of the whole work. It focuses on the reign of saint Óláfr (1015-1028) the national saint of Norway and the king who purportedly completed the conversion of Norway to Christianity. This saga is the last of the compilation to deal extensively with the question of paganism. *Óláfs saga helga* exists as well as a separate saga which was probably written before the author decided to integrate it in a broader compilation.<sup>107</sup> The third part of *Heimskringla* contains nine sagas from *Magnúss saga ins góða* (the saga of Magnúss the good) to *Magnúss saga Erlingssonar* (the saga of Magnús Erlingsson). This last part of the compilation does not deal extensively with the question of paganism. These sagas describe the events leading to the Norwegian civil war which started with the death of Sigurðr jórsalafari (1103-1130). The civil war shaped the Norwegian monarchy and was not totally over at the time of the composition of *Heimskringla*. The last saga of the compilation ends around the death of Eystein Meyla in 1177. The choice of this date to conclude the compilation could be explained by the popularity of *Sverris saga* (c. 1210) which starts at this point of Norwegian history. *Magnúss saga Erlingssonar* ends with these words:

Magnús konungr fór síðan út apr til Túnsbergs, ok varð hann allfrægr af sigri þessum, því at þat var allra manna mál, at Erlingr jarl væri brjóst ok forvista fyrir þeim feðgum, en eptir þat er Magnús konungr hafði fengit sig af svá styrkum flokki ok fjölmennum ok hafði haft minna lið, þótti þá svá öllum monnum sem hann mundi yfir alla ganga ok hann mundi þá vera því meiri hermaðr en jarl sem hann var yngri.<sup>108</sup>

(After this King Magnús travelled back out to Túnsberg, and he came to be very celebrated for this victory, for everyone said that Jarl Erlingr was the shield and organiser of the pair,

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<sup>106</sup> Ari Þorgilsson situates the discovery of Iceland during the reign of Haraldr hárfagri in 870. There is however no scientific consensus on the dates of Haraldr hárfagri's reign or even on the historical existence of this king. See *Íslendingabók*, 4.

<sup>107</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, "Royal Biographies.", 397.

<sup>108</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla III*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnason, Íslensk fornrit 28 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2002), 417. All citations from *Heimskringla* will be quoted from the Íslensk fornrit editions referred to as *Heimskringla I*, *Heimskringla II*, and *Heimskringla III*.

but after King Magnús had gained victory over such a powerful and numerous band when he had a smaller force, then it seemed to everyone as if he was going to overcome all, and he would then be as much greater a warrior than the jarl as he was a younger one.)<sup>109</sup>

These words may seem to show a sympathetic sentiment toward King Magnús (1161-1184) but probably did sound ironical for the medieval audience. The seemingly objective narrator does not tell us what will happen next, but the 13<sup>th</sup> century readers knew very well that Magnús would not “overcome all” but die less than a decade after having been defeated by King Sverrir. This last part of the saga, which depicts the beginning of the Norwegian civil war, was a politically sensitive topic, as *Heimskringla* was composed during the reign of King Hákon Hákonarson, grandson of king Sverrir. The question of succession and royal legitimacy remains a consistent subject of interest throughout the entire *Heimskringla*. As I will discuss, the euhemeristic narrative developed in the first chapters of *Ynglinga saga* seems to address the question of royal authority and its legitimacy, as it appears to be a narrative explaining the origin of the monarchic institution.

### 1.2.3.3. The place of Euhemerism in *Heimskringla*

Euhemerism appears only in the first saga of *Heimskringla*, *Ynglinga saga*, especially chapters two to ten. This saga recounts the life and death of the legendary ancestors of the Norwegian kings, the Ynglingar. For this purpose, Snorri bases his prose narrative on a poetic source, *Ynglingatal* (the enumeration of the Ynglingar) allegedly composed by Þjóðólfr ór Hvíni during the 10<sup>th</sup> century but unknown outside of *Heimskringla*.<sup>110</sup> Most chapters from chapter eleven follow a similar organization with a prose description of the life and death of a king, and then the quotation of one or two stanzas from *Ynglingatal* on which the prose narrative is based.

The first main character of this saga is the pseudo-god Óðinn and his companions, the Æsir, who traveled from Ásgarðr, in the center of the ecumene, and to Scandinavia in the north. On their way to the north the Æsir met the other family of Old Norse gods, the Vanir. One of them, Freyr, will become the dynastic ancestor of the Ynglingar kings and thus of the kings of Norway. Yet, Snorri, unlike Ari in the *Íslendingabók*, does not only present the pseudo-gods as

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<sup>109</sup> All translations of *Heimskringla* are quoted from the corresponding translation of Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes in Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, trans. Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes, 3 vols. (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2011-2015). As these translations indicate the page number of the Íslensk fornrit edition I will not add notes in addition to the note referring to the Old Norse edition.

<sup>110</sup> Edith Marold, “Þjóðólfr ór Hvíni (Þjóð),” in *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, ed. Diana Whaley, *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 1* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 1: 3-8.

dynastic ancestors but also explains how these characters gave birth to paganism in Scandinavia. Snorri's description of the pseudo-gods displays many of the characteristics of earlier euhemeristic writing and thus has been described as euhemerism by a multitude of scholars. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson remarks that some kind of euhemeristic thought may be perceived in the poem *Haleygjátal* which mentions that Óðinn and Skadi lived in "Mannheim".<sup>111</sup> As he notes, some passages from *Ynglingatal* refer to a filiation between the Ynglingar kings and the pagan gods, for instance the term "Freys afspringr"<sup>112</sup> (offspring of Freyr) is used to refer to the Ynglingar. Indeed, the idea that the gods were human beings may arouse naturally from the idea that they are the ancestors of human kings. Recently, Jacob Hobson wrote:

*Ynglinga saga's* euhemeristic narrative is fully conventional in both the formal structure of its narrative and the relationship that this narrative implies between the historical facts of a euhemerized king's life and the religious cult surrounding him after his death.<sup>113</sup>

**F** is the most complete of the remaining medieval manuscripts. It contains both the prologue and *Ynglinga saga*, which are the most essential parts concerning euhemerism. The prologue and *Ynglinga saga* are also preserved in the modern copies of **K** and **J** and we may hence presume it was part of the archetype. The part concerning euhemerism exists in both groups of manuscripts. Contrary to what we saw for the prose *Edda*, there is no significant variance between the different versions of the prologue and of *Ynglinga saga*. It is hence reasonable to assume that both the prologue and *Ynglinga saga* were part of the archetypes and have been rather faithfully rendered in the manuscript tradition.

### 1.3. Snorri's Authorship

#### 1.3.1. The *Edda*

The Icelandic chieftain Snorri Sturluson is generally believed to be the author of the *Edda* and *Heimskringla*. Many modern editions and translations of these works credit him as the author.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> *Heimskringla I*, xxxii.

<sup>112</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 40.

<sup>113</sup> Hobson, "Euhemerism and the Veiling of History," 43.

<sup>114</sup> See for instance Snorri Sturluson, *Edda, prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, Viking Society for Northern Research (London: Oxford university press, 1982); Snorri Sturluson, *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen, 1931); Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Anthony Faulkes (London: Everyman, 1987); Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslensk fornrit 26 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1941).

The subject of Snorri's authorship has been discussed in length on various occasions. A general trend seems to designate him as the author of these two works and sometimes of *Egils saga* as well.<sup>115</sup> Snorri's authorship of the *Edda* is so largely accepted that the name *Snorra Edda* became one of the canonical titles for the prose *Edda*. These assumptions are critical for this thesis and must be analyzed. Both works are essential texts regarding the development and significance of euhemerism in medieval Scandinavia. The *Edda* and *Heimskringla* share a common focus on the ancient Scandinavian history and folklore but often treat these topics in different manners. The euhemeristic narratives in the two works are in fact quite different from each other. Are these differences due to an evolution in the author's thought, or could they simply mean that the two works have different authors?

What arguments come to support the commonly admitted idea that Snorri is the author of the *Edda*? Several medieval sources mention Snorri Sturluson as an author, or at least a compiler. Two of the *Edda* manuscripts cite Snorri as the author of the work. He is mentioned twice in **U**, at the head of the prologue, where it is written: "Bók þessi heitir Edda. Hana hefir saman setta Snorri Sturluson eptir þeim hætti sem hér skipat"<sup>116</sup> (This book is named Edda. Snorri composed it as it is told here.) As well as at the beginning of *Háttatal*: "Háttatal, er Snorri Sturluson orti um Hákon konung ok Skúla hertuga."<sup>117</sup> (*Háttatal* which Snorri recited about King Hákon and Duke Skúli). And once in **W** in the preface to the third grammatical treatise: "Þviat vandara var þeim að tala, fem nv hafa ymifligar fręði þękr, enn vel ma nyta at hafa epter þeim heiti ok kenningar æigi lengra reknar enn fnoři lofar."<sup>118</sup> (Because it was more difficult to compose for them, as they did not have the various learned books, yet it is useful to use these *heiti* and kennings not longer than Snorri allows).<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> On this discussion see for instance Margaret Cormack, "Egils Saga, Heimskringla, and the Daughter of Eiríkr Blóðøx," *Alvíssmál* 10 (2001): 61-68; Haukur Þorgeirsson, "Snorri versus the Copyists. An Investigation of a Stylistic Trait in the Manuscript Traditions of *Egils Saga*, *Heimskringla* and the *Prose Edda*," *Saga Book* 38 (2014): 65-74; Ralph West, "Snorri Sturluson and *Egils Saga*: Statistic of Style," *Scandinavian Studies* 52, no. 2 (1980): 163-193.

<sup>116</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *The Uppsala Edda*, ed. Heimir Pálsson, trans. Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2012), 6.

<sup>117</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *The Uppsala Edda*, 262.

<sup>118</sup> Björn Magnússon Olsen, *Den tredje og fjerde grammatiske afhandling i Snorres Edda. Tilligemed de grammatiske afhandlingers prolog og to andre tillæg*, 155.

<sup>119</sup> My translation.



### 1.3.2. *Heimskringla*

Strictly speaking, *Heimskringla* is anonymous as no medieval manuscript of the work mentions Snorri's name,<sup>120</sup> and no medieval author explicitly named Snorri as the author of *Heimskringla*. Margaret Cormack even pointed out that it is Ari inn fróði rather than Snorri Sturluson who is mentioned as the source for the kings' lives in the Codex Frisianus.<sup>121</sup> The first explicit identifications of Snorri Sturluson as the author of *Heimskringla* appears in two modern Danish translations, one of Laurents Hanssøn from c. 1550,<sup>122</sup> and the one of Peder Claussøn from 1633, edited by the Danish polymath Ole Worm.<sup>123</sup> Hanssøn identified Snorri as the author in his translation where he ends his introduction with the words:

Her fylgir effter aff thenn merckelige saughe scriffore Aare prest i Jsslandh oc de szom hand fylger i Sauger andre wittige menn som staa i same fortalen Snorris Sturllis historiographi Noruegia.”<sup>124</sup>

(Here follows after, from the remarkable saga writings of Ari the priest in Iceland and those whose hand follows in the sagas of other wise men as it stands in the same prologue of Snorri Sturllis' historiographi Norvegiæ)

And then concludes his translation of the prologue with the sentence: “Her enndis fortalenn Snorris Sturlesenn udi Konninge boghen”<sup>125</sup> (Here ends Snorri Sturlesenn's prologue from the *Book of Kings*). Ole Worm's edition, for its part, mentions Snorri as the author and gives the title “Snorre Sturlesøns Fortale paa sin Chrønicke” (Snorre Sturlesøn's Introduction to his Chronicle) to the prologue.<sup>126</sup> In fact, Hanssøn's translation is at least partly responsible for the identification of Snorri as the author of *Heimskringla* in Ole Worm's edition. Indeed, Claussøn did not include the prologue in his own translation of *Heimskringla* and as such, Ole Worm included Hanssøn's translation of the prologue in his edition of Claussøn's translation.

Neither Hanssøn nor Ole Worm's edition offered any explanation for their attribution of the work to Snorri, and they seem to treat Snorri's authorship as an established fact. It had been

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<sup>120</sup> It was once hypothesized that a lost manuscript mentioned Snorri as the author, this view has been contradicted by Jon Gunnar Jørgensen “‘Snorre Sturlesøns fortale paa sin Chrønicke’: om kildene til opplysningen om Heimskringlas forfatter,” *Gripla*, no. 9 (1995): 45-62.

<sup>121</sup> Cormack, “*Egils Saga, Heimskringla, and the Daughter of Eiríkr Blóðøx.*”, 61-68.

<sup>122</sup> Laurents Hanssøn's translation is conserved in the paper manuscript AM 93 fol. in the Arnamaganean Institute of Copenhagen: <https://handrit.is/manuscript/view/en/AM02-0093/21#page/7v/mode/2up>.

<sup>123</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Norske Kongers Chronica*, trans. Friis Claussøn Peder (Copenhagen: Ole Worm, 1633).

<sup>124</sup> AM 93 fol., 6v.

<sup>125</sup> AM 93 fol., 7v.

<sup>126</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Norske Kongers Chronica*, 20.

posited that the two translators may have translated the work from a now lost manuscript which mentioned Snorri in its prologue but Jon Gunnar Jørgensen demonstrated that a textual analysis of Hanssøn's and Claussøn's text does not allow to determine whether the translators used the same manuscript, or even two manuscripts from the same textual tradition.<sup>127</sup> The fact that Claussøn did not translate the prologue would rather suggest that he was not aware of it and may have worked from a manuscript which did not include it. As Jørgensen noted, neither Hanssøn nor Claussøn mentioned Snorri in the main text, but only in their prefaces and commentaries. Furthermore, the source for the translators' attribution of the text to Snorri need not be the manuscript, or manuscripts, they used. Jørgensen postulated that the identification of Snorri as the author of *Heimskringla* ultimately came from their contact with the Norwegian lawman and humanist from Bergen, Jon Simonsson (1512-1575).<sup>128</sup>

Jørgensen hypothesized that Simonsson could have drawn his hypothesis regarding Snorri's authorship of *Heimskringla* from *Orkneyinga saga*<sup>129</sup> (c. 1230), and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*<sup>130</sup> (c. 1300), two texts in which the narrators mention Snorri Sturluson as a source on kings' lives. Snorri is referred to as a source on the life of King Magnús berfœttr (1093-1103) in *Orkneyinga saga*,<sup>131</sup> and on the life of King Óláfr Tryggvason (995-1000) in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*.<sup>132</sup> It is yet essential to note that neither of these mentions explicitly claim that Snorri composed *Heimskringla*, but merely that he was regarded as an author of kings' sagas. Alan J. Berger, for instance, noted that these allusions could refer to *Fagrskinna* rather than *Heimskringla* as they are found in passages which refer to events also found in *Fagrskinna*.<sup>133</sup>

Snorri is also mentioned in *Sturlunga saga* as an author as the text goes: “Nv tok at batna með þeim Snorra ok Sturlu, ok var Sturla löngrvm þa i Reykia-höllti ok lagði mikinn hvg aa at lata

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<sup>127</sup> Jon Gunnar Jørgensen, “„Snørre Sturlesøns fortale paa sin chrønিকে“. Om kildene til opplysningen om Heimskringlas forfatter,” *Gripla* 9 (1995): 49-54.

<sup>128</sup> Jørgensen, “„Snørre Sturlesøns fortale,”” 60

<sup>129</sup> Finnbogi Guðmundsson, ed., *Orkneyinga Saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit 34 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1965).

<sup>130</sup> Ólafur Halldórsson, ed., *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, vol. 2., (Copenhagen: Editiones Arnarnagnæanæ, 1958-1961).

<sup>131</sup> Finnbogi Guðmundsson, *Orkneyinga Saga*, 101.

<sup>132</sup> Ólafur Halldórsson, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, 2: 263; For the association between Snorri and the longest *Saga of Óláfr Tryggvasonar* see Sigurður Nordal, ed., *Flateyjarbók*, Flateyjarbókútgáfan, (Akraness: Flateyjarbókútgáfan, 1944), 1:535, 1:537, 1:547, 1:549.

<sup>133</sup> Alan J. Berger, “*Heimskringla* and the Compilations,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 114 (1999): 5-15.

rita sogv-bækr eptir bokvǫm þeim, er Snorri setti saman.”<sup>134</sup> (Now the situation improved between Snorri and Sturla, and Sturla was at Reykjaholt for a long time and set his mind to write history books after those books which Snorri had composed.) Once again, the identity of these books is unknown. Furthermore, the narrator uses the words “setja saman” (to put together) to refer to Snorri’s relation regarding these books. This expression is ambiguous; especially if we consider that the verb *rita* (to write) was used in the same sentence to refer to Sturla’s work. It is not clear whether the text refers to Snorri as an author or as a compiler.

These elements did not lead Jørgensen to doubt Snorri’s authorship, to him, the main point of contention was whether Hanssøn and Claussøn had access to a manuscript which mentioned Snorri, not the notion that the attribution of *Heimskringla* could be faulty. Recently, Patricia Pires Boulhosa expressed strong doubts regarding Snorri’s authorship and, more largely, concerning the relevance of ascribing one single individual author to medieval texts. As she stated:

Moreover, in the case of the seventeenth-century attribution to Snorri Sturluson made by Ole Worm, and the idea of *Heimskringla* itself, literary conventions are also of a great importance because of the time of Ole Worm's publication, anonymity was regarded with disdain and a text without an author was often viewed as a text without authority.<sup>135</sup>

Boulhosa also points out that Hanssøn did not state that Snorri is the author of the compilation, but only mentions his name as the author of a prologue which itself mentions Ari inn fróði as a source.<sup>136</sup> Boulhosa regards the research of a single author and of a single “true” version of the text, as misleading and incompatible with medieval authorial practices and wrote that:

These approaches are rooted in a long-established tradition of textual criticism and are common to all other sagas: in order to recognize their literary value, scholars have been analysing the sagas as texts individually written by single authors and not, as the mediaeval productions that they are, as products of a manuscript culture.<sup>137</sup>

Snorri is still often perceived as a plausible author for *Heimskringla* in part because of what is known of his life. He had a close connection to Norway and served King Hákon Hákonarson

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<sup>134</sup> Kristian Kålund, ed., *Sturlunga saga eftir membranen Króksfjarðarbók: udfyldt efter Reykjarfjarðarbók*, (Copenhagen: Det kongelige nordiske Oldskrift-selskab, 1906), 1:421.

<sup>135</sup> Patricia Pires Boulhosa, *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway, Mediaeval Sagas and Legal Texts*, The Northern World. North Europe and the Baltic c. 400-1700 A.D. Peoples, Economies and Cultures 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 20-21.

<sup>136</sup> Boulhosa, *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway*, 8-10.

<sup>137</sup> Boulhosa, *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway*, 23.

from whom he received the rank and *skutilsveinn*, literally “table boy” sometime translated as “cup bearer”, a title similar to the European rank of knight.<sup>138</sup> From 1220 Snorri came back in Iceland where he served the king’s interest. This cooperation has not been most profitable on the long term, as Snorri was killed in 1241 by Gizur Þorvaldsson at the instigation of King Hákon.<sup>139</sup> Hence, Snorri has been both an ally and an opponent of the monarchy. His work as a poet made him an important figure in the courtly society but his life as an ambitious and insubordinate magnate turned him into a victim of the king’s expansion into Iceland.<sup>140</sup> Of course, none of this can demonstrate alone that Snorri is the author of *Heimskringla* but merely suggests that Snorri is not the most unlikely choice.

It is indeed true that we should not placate our modern notions of authorship to medieval work. The name of the authors is generally not mentioned in the manuscript containing the sagas, which is in itself an indication that the Medieval Scandinavian conception of authorship was different than ours. Yet, the idea that a given work may be associated with a single known author was not entirely foreign to medieval Scandinavian people. Skaldic stanzas, for instance, are most often cited along with an author. In *Heimskringla* and in the *Edda* every skaldic stanza is quoted with an author, even when the said author is a semi-legendary figure, such as Bragi, or even a paranormal being such as a troll woman.<sup>141</sup> Still, it is true that most Old Norse prose narratives are anonymous. There are exceptions, such as Ari who mentions his own name at the end of *Íslendingabók*, or Karl Jónsson who mentioned his name in the prologue to *Sverris saga*<sup>142</sup> but this was not the norm. But the fact that Old Norse texts were generally anonymous does not mean that the question of their authorship is irrelevant. Similarly, the fact that every manuscript has a value of its own does not mean that looking for the archetype is a pointless quest. While discussing the stemma of the *Edda* Haukur Þorgeirsson produced several

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<sup>138</sup> This episode is recounted in the chapter 43 of *Íslendinga saga*, the main saga of the *Sturlunga saga* compilation. See Guðbrandur Vigfússon, ed., *Sturlunga Saga Including the Islendinga Saga of Lawman Sturla Thordsson and Other Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1878), 243-244; On the significance of this title see Helgi Þorláksson, ‘Snorri Sturluson the Aristocrat Becomes Lendr Maðr’, in *Snorri Sturluson and Reykholt. The Author and Magnate, His Life, Works and Environment at Reykholt in Iceland*. (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2018), 33-34.

<sup>139</sup> Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *Sturlunga Saga Including the Islendinga Saga of Lawman Sturla Thordsson and Other Works*, 393.

<sup>140</sup> See section 4.1. for the historical context of composition of the *Edda* and *Heimskringla*.

<sup>141</sup> For a reflection on Bragi as a deified poet see Margaret Clunies Ross, “Poet into Myth: Starkaðr and Bragi,” *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 2 (2006): 31-43.

<sup>142</sup> Karl Jónsson, *Sverris saga*, ed. Þorleifur Hauksson, *Íslenzk fornrit* 30 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2007), 3.

arguments in defense of the traditional stemmatic method.<sup>143</sup> Haukur refuted the arguments stating that stemmatic analysis reduce the intrinsic value of each manuscript. As he put it:

It is quite true that the medieval manuscripts contain different redactions, each of which is worthy of detailed study. But in no way does a stemmatic investigation detract from this. On the contrary, having a stemma assists us in understanding the source of the redactors and the novelty of each redaction.<sup>144</sup>

His arguments are of course as valid for *Heimskringla* as they are for the *Edda*. Like Haukur, I agree that Boulhosa's considerations regarding the value of every manuscript are perfectly legitimate, but do not invalidate at all the investigations in the manuscript history.

### 1.3.3. Elements Pointing in the Direction of a Common Authorship

Several recent studies have strengthened the hypothesis of Snorri's authorship for these works. In 1962, Peter Hallberg produced a statistical analysis of the vocabulary of *Egils saga*. Hallberg examined the recurrence of the words *en er* in place of the more common *ok er* in *Heimskringla* and *Egils saga*. Hallberg concluded that these two texts likely share a common author.<sup>145</sup> In 1980, Ralph West produced another study, refining Hallberg's method which confirmed his hypothesis and concluded that *Óláfs saga helga* and *Egils saga* have been written by the same author, which West believes to be Snorri.<sup>146</sup> Recently, Haukur Þorgeirsson produced yet another study using this method, this time including the *Edda*. Haukur concluded that the *Edda*, *Egils saga* and *Heimskringla* all share a significantly higher proportion of *en er* instead of *ok er* than other Old Norse texts.<sup>147</sup>

With these studies, one can confidently admit that the *Edda*, *Heimskringla* and *Egils saga* likely share a common author. To identify this author as Snorri Sturluson is nonetheless another matter, as no hard evidence supports Snorri's authorship for any of these texts. The *Edda* is generally the work the most confidently attributed to Snorri but it is nonetheless the one which displays the lowest percentage of *en er* in place of *ok er*. The *Edda* has a rate of 83% of *en er* which is in fact closer to *Þórðar saga kakala* (79%), *Þorgils saga skarða* (79%), and *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða* (76%) than it is to *Heimskringla* (94%). An interesting piece of data provided

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<sup>143</sup> Haukur Þorgeirsson, "A Stemmatic Analysis," 49-70.

<sup>144</sup> Haukur Þorgeirsson, "A Stemmatic Analysis," 52.

<sup>145</sup> Hallberg, *Snorri Sturluson och Egils saga Skallagrímssonar: ett försök till språklig författarbestämning*.

<sup>146</sup> West, "Snorri Sturluson and *Egils Saga*," 93.

<sup>147</sup> Haukur Þorgeirsson, "Snorri versus the Copyists," 65-74.

by these statistical studies is that *Fagrskinna* has a significantly lower percentage of *en er* (69%) than the texts ascribed to Snorri, which tend to contradict Berger's theory regarding Snorri's authorship of *Fagrskinna* instead of *Heimskringla*.

In conclusion, it seems plausible and more likely than not that *Heimskringla* and the *Edda* share a common author. As is most often the case for medieval works Snorri's authorship cannot be ascertained by any hard proof. Snorri Sturluson is nonetheless indeed a good candidate. His name has been cited in connection with the *Edda* since the Middle Ages, he was known in medieval tradition as a saga writer and his life is certainly compatible with the deep interest for Norwegian history and kingship ideology which are found in *Heimskringla*. The different statistical studies produced regarding *Heimskringla*, the *Edda* and *Egils saga* point in the direction of a common author, which certainly strengthens the idea that Snorri is the author of these works. Still, none of these studies can definitively prove Snorri's authorship. Their conclusions are measurable in terms of probability, not of certainty. For this reason, from now on I will refer to the author of the *Edda* and *Heimskringla* as Snorri, both for convenience and because I believe that Snorri is indeed responsible, at least to some degree, for the production of these two works. However, no point of my argumentation will rely solely on the identification of the author as Snorri, as this identification is not a proven fact.

## **1.4. Euhemerism and Mythology**

### **1.4.1. Euhemerism as Meta-mythology**

We saw that two trends exist in the study of euhemeristic narratives. Scholars such as Dumézil and Lindow, who study euhemerism for the information which it can provide regarding pre-Christian mythology, and scholars such as Mucenieck, Wellendorf and Hobson, who are primarily interested in euhemerism as a product of medieval Scandinavian thought. There is little doubt that information regarding Old Norse mythology may be 'retrieved' from euhemeristic narratives, yet this thesis is not one on pre-Christian mythology, but one on euhemerism itself. I am not treating euhemerism as an obstacle to overcome in order to access the 'original' Old Norse mythology, but as the object of study itself.

However, the fact that this study is not about pre-Christian Scandinavian mythology does not mean it is not about mythology at all. Frog categorized the medieval Christian euhemeristic narratives as mythology, and more specifically as meta-mythology, that is mythology about

mythology.<sup>148</sup> Frog is only incidentally concerned with euhemerism and did not provide a definition of the concept but expressed how euhemerism related to the concept of meta-mythology:

Like Kalevala, Snorri's so-called Edda advanced and advocated models of an 'othered' mythology. This was, however, an engagement in mythic discourse that targeted certain groups and networks, advocating the interpretation of the 'othered' mythology as heritage viewed through the Christian lens of euhemerism. Edda, or at least elements from it, seem to have been assimilated into the local meta-mythology.<sup>149</sup>

Frog distinguishes between two types of meta-mythology, emic and etic. Emic mythology is a mythological discourse on one's own mythology. For instance, the Bible contains passages explaining its own revelation as in Exodus 24:12-18, where it is described how Moses received the law on Mount Sinai. In Old Norse context, the framework of the *Völuspá* explains how certain myths were first told to Óðinn by a seeress. Etic meta-mythology, on the other hand, is a meta-mythological discourse regarding an othered mythology. Euhemerism belongs to this category as it is in essence a negation of a deity's godly nature. As I will argue, the concept of meta-mythology is especially pertinent and powerful to study euhemerism. The characterization of the euhemeristic passages of medieval Scandinavian literature as mythology is yet not self-evident and must be justified. I will, firstly, review previous scholarly works which also treated several Old Norse Christian narratives as myths and then discuss how some of the most well-known euhemeristic passages of Old Norse literature may also be studied as such. Finally, I will consider the different myth theories available to study them.

#### **1.4.2. Spells, Miracles, and the King: Old Norse Christian Narratives Read as Myths**

Stephen Mitchell,<sup>150</sup> and Thomas Foerster,<sup>151</sup> respectively studied medieval Scandinavian narratives of witchcraft and miracles. Both categorized them as myths. To Foerster "A legend

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<sup>148</sup> Frog, "Meta-Mythology and Academic Discourse Heritage," *RMN Newsletter* 10 (2015), 101. A similar idea is discussed by Bruce Lincoln who referred to some narratives as "myths about myth". See Bruce Lincoln's discussion on "myths about myth", *Theorizing Myth. Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 34-35

<sup>149</sup> Frog, "Meta-Mythology," 101.

<sup>150</sup> Stephen A. Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 117-145.

<sup>151</sup> Thomas Foerster, "Poppo's Ordeal and the Conversion of the Danes. The Transition of a Myth in Latin and Old Norse Historiography," *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 39 (2009): 28-45.

like that of Poppo's ordeal becomes a myth when it serves one certain purpose in a systemized historiographic account."<sup>152</sup> Mitchell, however, quotes Malinowski who argued that "Myth fulfills in primitive culture an indispensable function".<sup>153</sup> It is perhaps Nicolas Meylan, in his study of *Sverris saga*, who theorized more clearly how the concept of myth may be applied to medieval Christian narratives:

This definition [*Sverris saga* defined as a myth] draws attention to the relationship between the contents of the story and that story's audience(s). Thus, while a myth may 'permit itself more imaginative flights of fancy' by resorting, for example, to more than human actors or action, it nevertheless *claims* for itself great authority and truth, thus seeking to modify its audience's consciousness.<sup>154</sup>

To these authors a myth is a narrative with a function, and myth theory allows the scholar to understand the function of this narrative. In that regard Mitchell's and Foerster's understandings of myths are relatively similar to that of Robert Segal, one of the leading scholars on mythology, who defined myth through four characteristics:

- A myth is a story.
- A myth is about something significant.
- Its main figures must be personalities, often gods, humans, or animals.
- Its function is weighty.<sup>155</sup>

Neither Foerster nor Michell speak of euhemerism but their definition may very well be applied to the medieval Scandinavian euhemeristic narratives. This is particularly true for Foerster who understands myths as narratives whose nature is defined in relation to other narratives within a broader compilation. This is the case for the euhemeristic narratives written by Saxo and Snorri, all found within broader works. A similar vision is shared by Frog who perceives myth as the expression of interconnected tenets within a system of belief. The more a tenet is essential, or central, within a system, the more the story connected to it is defended as truthful by the community.<sup>156</sup> In this regard, to him, myth theory serves to assess the place of a certain narrative

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<sup>152</sup> Foerster, "Poppo's Ordeal," 29.

<sup>153</sup> Quoted by Mitchell from Bronislaw Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology*, New Science Series (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1926), 82.

<sup>154</sup> Nicolas Meylan, "King Sverrir's Mythic Landscapes," in *Landscapes and Myth in North-Western Europe*, ed. Matthias Egeler (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), 184-185.

<sup>155</sup> Robert Alan Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions 111 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4-6.

<sup>156</sup> Frog, "Meta-Mythology," 102-104.



within a given system of belief. Euhemerism, for instance, could be regarded as part of the Christian system of belief regarding pagan religions, and euhemeristic narratives would express in literary terms the belief in the falsehood of these religions as well as their relation to Christianity. A similar idea was expressed by William G. Doty, another leading scholar on myth whose works Frog uses in his own definition of myth. Doty noted that notions such as the divine right to rule of the monarch or that of “just war” were not drawn from rational arguments but from narratives.<sup>157</sup> As he states:

In supplying the root metaphors, the ruling images of a society, mythological language provides a coding mechanism by means of which the existentially apparent randomness of the cosmos can be stabilized. Myths provide the overarching conceptualities of a society by structuring its symbolic representations of reality [...] Myth expresses how we *feel* about reality, as opposed to what we know rationally.<sup>158</sup>

One of the underlying differences between Foerster’s and Frog’s approaches is their respective stance regarding the question of the function of myth. While Foerster and Mitchell insist that myths have function, Frog does not stress this aspect of myth. His understanding of myth owes much to that of Doty, who defined myth through no less than seventeen characteristics with hardly reference to the function of these narratives:

A mythological corpus consists of (1) a usually complex network of myths that are (2) culturally important, (3) imaginal (4) stories, conveying by means of (5) metaphoric and symbolic diction, (6) graphic imagery, and (7) emotional conviction and participation (8) the primal, foundational accounts (9) of aspects of the real, experienced world and (10) humankind’s roles and relative statuses within it.

Mythologies may (11) convey the political and moral values of a culture and (12) provide systems of interpreting (13) individual experience within a universal perspective, which may include (14) the intervention of supra-human entities as well as (15) aspects of the natural and cultural orders. Myths may be enacted or reflected in (16) rituals, ceremonies, and dramas, and (17) they may provide materials for secondary elaboration, the constituent mythemes (mythic units) having become merely images or reference points for a subsequent story, such as a folktale, historical legend, novella, or prophecy.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> William G. Doty, *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), 50-51.

<sup>158</sup> Doty, *Mythography*, 51.

<sup>159</sup> Doty, *Mythography*, 33-34.

In fact, Doty does not reject the idea that myth have a function but rather expresses cautious doubts regarding the essentialization of myth to a single function. As he states in the same volume:

Many of the monomythic definitions of the past that emphasized just one primary aspect of the nature or function of myth— that myths provide social cohesion, for example, or that they antedate scientific and philosophical reflection—have seriously hampered our view of the polyfunctionality of myths, even within one culture. Definitions operating with only one key function often are falsified so easily as to be useless to a subsequent generation.<sup>160</sup>

I believe Doty's reflection to be equally applicable to the Old Norse euhemeristic narratives. The *Gesta Danorum* and *Heimskringla* have often been described, between other things, as texts which serve a function, most often political or ideological. Yet, the variety of scholarly interpretations and disagreement regarding exactly what is the meaning or purpose of these texts shows that they cannot be easily reduced to a single function or meaning.<sup>161</sup>

Despite this divergence regarding the notion of function and its importance, Frog and Foerster's approaches are particularly useful for this study as they both understand myths as being parts of a network of other narratives which must not be read in isolation, as are the Old Norse euhemeristic narratives which are parts of broader works. In this line, the anthropologist and prehistorian Jean-Loïc Le Quellec recently quoted the pertinent words of Marcel Mauss,<sup>162</sup> who cautiously warned against two bad habits in the study of myths. First, reading them in isolation:

C'est une erreur que de prendre les mythes un par un, en les séparant de ce qui les a précédés et des formes qu'ils engendrèrent à leur tour. Ils forment un tout par rapport à leurs collectivités. Un mythe est une "maille" dans une "toile d'araignée", et non un article de dictionnaire.

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<sup>160</sup> Doty, *Mythography*, 37.

<sup>161</sup> See for instance Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla* (Oxford: University of California Press, 1991); Birgit Sawyer, *Heimskringla. An Interpretation*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 483 (Tempe: Arizona center for medieval and renaissance studies, 2015); Diana Whaley, *Heimskringla. An Introduction*, Viking Society for Northern Research Text Series 8 (Birmingham: University College London, 1991); Boserup and Riis, "Saxos boginddelinger," 27-47; Karsten Friis-Jensen, "Saxo Grammaticus' fortale og Snorre," in *Saxo og Snorre* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010), 93-111.

<sup>162</sup> Jean-Loïc Le Quellec, *La caverne originelle : art, mythes et premières humanités*, Collection "Sciences sociales du vivant" (Paris: La Découverte, 2022), 611.

(It is a mistake to take myths one by one, to part them from what preceded them and from the forms they generated in their turn. They form a whole in regard to their communities. A myth is a “mesh” in a “spider web”, not a dictionary entry.)<sup>163</sup>

And secondly, in another work, the tendency to compare them only in search for similarities: “Si on ne recherche pas en même temps et avec le plus grand soin les différences, on s’expose à prendre pour essentielles des ressemblances tout à fait fortuites.”<sup>164</sup> (If one does not look, at the same time and with the greatest care, at the differences, one takes the risk to regard fortuitous similarities as essential.)<sup>165</sup> Many of the similarities between Saxo’s and Snorri’s euhemeristic narratives are not exactly “fortuitous”. These similarities can be explained by the fact that the two authors were both exposed to a preexisting euhemeristic tradition. But these similarities should not be considered *a priori* as the most significant aspect of the two authors’ respective narratives. In fact, the differences between these narratives might be most significant. As Foerster demonstrated in his study of the story of Poppo’s ordeal, the same stories appear in various sources with different, and even divergent, political agendas and as such it is particularly useful to study the ideological divergence between texts. This approach is reminiscent of Bruce Lincoln’s concept of “rival narrators”. As he puts it:

Myths are not snapshot representations of stable taxonomies and hierarchies, as functionalists would have it. Rather, the relation between social order and the stories told about it is much looser and-as a result-considerably more dynamic, for this loose fit creates possibilities for rival narrators, who modify aspects of the established order as depicted in prior variants, with consequences that can be far-reaching if and when audiences come to perceive these innovative representations as reality. Skilled narrators can do this subtly or bluntly, in play or dead earnest, and everything in between. In so doing, they use instruments that most often assist in the reproduction of the sociotaxonomic order to recalibrate that order by introducing new categories, eliminating old ones, or revising both categories and the hierarchic orders in which they are organized.<sup>166</sup>

In this perspective the differences between the narratives of two “rival narrators” who both use similar motives from the same narrative tradition may be regarded as deliberate authorial choices, modifying a narrative, or selecting a variation in accordance with their own agenda.

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<sup>163</sup> Marcel Mauss, “Conceptions qui ont précédé la notion de matière,” in *Qu’est-ce que la matière? Histoire du concept et conception actuelle* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1945), 20. My translation.

<sup>164</sup> Marcel Mauss, *Œuvre*, vol. 1, *Les fonctions sociales du sacré* (Paris: Édition de Minuit, 1968), 398.

<sup>165</sup> My translation.

<sup>166</sup> Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 150.

Thus, making the comparison of their work a particularly efficient way to highlight their ideological stance. The works of Saxo and Snorri are an ideal ground to practice such a method. Both authors produced euhemeristic narratives displaying a number of similar motives from the Old Norse and European medieval tradition, but as I will show, their respective authorial choices resulted in ultimately extremely different narratives.

The ideological divergences between Saxo and Snorri have been remarked and discussed before. Annette Lassen, for instance, compares Saxo's and Snorri's respective portrayal of pagan religion and shows that although the two authors handle similar motives they arranged them in their own manners, as skilled narrators, advocating, for conflicting worldviews.<sup>167</sup> She remarks regarding *Ynglinga saga* "denne interesse for Odin er foranlediget af hans status som genealogisk ophav til ynglingeslægten" (This interest for Odin is caused by his status as the genealogical originator of the Yngling line.)<sup>168</sup> And in regard to the *Gesta Danorum* "interessen for Odin i Gesta Danorum er rettet mod hans gøren og laden over for det danske rige og de danske konger og ikke mod Odin som nogen selvstændig skikkelse" (the interest for Odin in the *Gesta Danorum* is directed toward his doings and actions before the Danish kingdom and the Danish kings and not toward Odin as some independent character).<sup>169</sup> While Snorri presents the Asian pseudo-gods as the ancestors of the Norwegian dynasty, Saxo depicts the Danish institutions as founded by the indigenous population of Denmark whilst the eastern pseudo-gods were essentially malevolent characters.

### 1.4.3. Theorizing Christian Old Norse Myths

As Bruce Lincoln famously stated, "myth is ideology in narrative form".<sup>170</sup> Lincoln's sentence is certainly true to a certain degree, but again, as Doty suggested, I believe we should be cautious in reading myths through only one lens. There is no reason to postulate *a priori* that every Scandinavian instance of euhemerism serves a similar purpose, or even that a single euhemeristic narrative may have only one function. As John S. Gentile noted, a single definition of myth is neither possible nor desirable.<sup>171</sup> The purpose of a definition of myth is less to put

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<sup>167</sup> Lassen, "Saxo og Snorre som," 209-230.

<sup>168</sup> Lassen, "Saxo og Snorre som," 211.

<sup>169</sup> Lassen, "Saxo og Snorre som," 212.

<sup>170</sup> Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 150.

<sup>171</sup> John S. Gentile, "Prologue: Defining Myth: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Storytelling and Myth," *Storytelling, Self, Society* 7, no. 2 (2011), 89.

labels on narratives than to allow us to treat myths as objects of scientific inquiry.<sup>172</sup> As such, a definition of myth is nothing else but the first step of a theory of myth. Rather than merely putting a label on a narrative, a definition allows us to assess how to study it. In this regard, it may be useful to think of myth not in a binary manner, as if a given narrative is either a myth or not a myth, but in a scalar fashion, as it was proposed by Marie-Laure Ryan in her definition of narrative.<sup>173</sup> Such definitions help to identify a set of ‘mythical characteristics’, that is to say, characteristics which contribute to the mythic nature of a given text. Some texts may display all or none of these characteristics, but many are less rigid, and may display some mythical qualities and lack others. Karen Bek-Pedersen addressed the question of the relevance of myth theory within the field of Old Norse studies and came to a conclusion similar to that of Gentile. Myth theories are necessary, but one must acknowledge their limits.<sup>174</sup> A single theory may not be pertinently used to study every aspect of myth. That is not to say that myth theories are ineffective or that one study should indiscriminately use them all but that it is essential to determine which theory or theories may be pertinently used in a particular discussion.

Robert Segal distinguishes two broad categories of myth theories: the theories according to which myth is related to scientific thought, meaning that its purpose is to explain the world, and the theories according to which myth serves another function.<sup>175</sup> The first category encompasses the work of scholars such as Edward Tylor, James Frazer, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. The nature of the link between myth and science is, however, not conceptualized in the same manner by all these authors. Tyler and Frazer deemed myth as a primitive counterpart to modern science. For them myth explains the world less efficiently than modern science thus rendering it obsolete. For Lévi-Strauss, myth still aims at explaining the world, however, its difference with modern science lays not in its lack of logical thinking but because it is the expression of a “different mode of scientific thought”, meaning that myth is different yet not inferior to modern science.

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<sup>172</sup> For a similar view regarding the scientific purpose of definition within the field of humanities see Jonne Arjoranta, “Game Definitions: A Wittgensteinian Approach,” *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 14, no. 1 (2014), <http://gamestudies.org/1401/articles/arjoranta>.

<sup>173</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, “Toward a Definition of Narrative,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 28-31.

<sup>174</sup> Karen Bek-Pedersen, “Myth and Theory: Where is the Point?,” in *Theorizing Old Norse Myth*, ed. Stefan Brink and Lisa Collinson, *Acta Scandinavica: Aberdeen Studies in the Scandinavian World* 7 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 33-46.

<sup>175</sup> See Segal, *Myth: a very short*, 11-35, 137-138; and Robert Alan Segal, “Myth,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. Robert A. Segal and Nickolas P. Roubekas, *The Wiley Blackwell Companions to Religion* (Croydon: Wiley Blackwell, 2021), 348-360.

According to the second category of myth theories, myths are essentially different from science. This does not necessarily mean that myths do not explain the world but that it is not their primary function. For Malinowski, for instance, the purpose of myth is to reconcile man with the world's unpleasant aspects as well as to express one's faith, moral doctrine, and worldview.

As Segal puts it:

Even more important than reconciling humans to physical unpleasanties is the role of myth in reconciling human to social unpleasanties: to the imposition of laws, customs, and institutions, none of them covered by Tylor or Frazer. Far from unalterable, these unpleasanties *can* be cast off. Myth helps ensure that they are not, by rooting them, too, in a hoary past, thereby conferring on them the clout of tradition.<sup>176</sup>

In this perspective myth does indeed provide an explanation for the world, but the function of this explanation is not to satisfy scientific curiosity but to help humans to live in the world as it is. A similar view is expressed by Doty who expressed this statement:

Myths convey the sorts of psychological and adaptational learning that enable us to live harmoniously within natural and cultural frameworks, that enable us to express and to be enriched by meanings and significances reaching considerably beyond the confines of the daily newspaper, reaching into the complex realms of morally pregnant realities that have no simple resolutions.<sup>177</sup>

Lincoln also perceived an element of commonality between myth and science but did not define myth through this aspect. As he stated, scholarship is “myth with footnotes”.<sup>178</sup> It is, however, clear that Lincoln does not perceive myth as a proto-scientific discourse. By calling modern scholarship “myth with footnotes” Lincoln does not claim that it is the prime function of myth to explain the world, but that science may incidentally convey “ideology in narrative form” while this characteristic is the main purpose of a mythic narrative. As such, for him myths are not primarily produced, accepted, or rejected on the ground of their explicative power, but because of their ideological implications.

Modern scholars tend to belong to the second category and ascribe to myth a primarily nonscientific function. Similarly, most Old Norse scholars view Saxo's and Snorri's main motivation in writing the *Gesta Danorum* and *Heimskringla* not to be primarily historical but

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<sup>176</sup> Segal, “Myth.”, 351.

<sup>177</sup> Doty, *Mythography*, 94.

<sup>178</sup> Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 209.

rather ideological and political. Yet, for some scholars such as Jacob Hobson, euhemerism is specifically related to history. To him, Old Norse euhemerism is inherited from biblical and classical literature and serves to read myth as history. According to him, Snorri uses euhemerism “because this interpretative practice is intrinsic to his understanding of the nature and origin of pagan mythology.”<sup>179</sup> In other words, according to Hobson, medieval Christians used pagan myths as historical sources for the sake of writing history. According to this view, Christian authors were not interested in myth *per se* but in the historical content which was hidden behind them. In this regard, Hobson is one of the few scholars to consider Old Norse euhemeristic discourse as being primarily scientific in nature. I believe Hobson is correct when he identifies euhemerism as an almost unavoidable tool for medieval scholars and authors to conceptualize ancient history. Euhemerism was deeply rooted in medieval Christian culture, and it is quite clear that both Saxo and Snorri had a genuine interest in history. Their respective works contain numerous historical anecdotes and learned details only incidentally useful for the plot and ideological meaning of the works. Yet, the authors’ sincere interest in history should not make us forget that medieval historiographies are essentially different from modern ones. As Lassen’s comparison showed, the authors’ representation of the pagan past was ideologically loaded. As such, while it is essential to acknowledge that these texts openly present themselves as historical works it is equally important to recognize the great disparity between modern and medieval historiographies. As Justin Lake noted:

Because the principal topics of medieval historiography were secular politics and the Church, and because the institutions that sponsored the production of history were themselves inextricably bound up in the ruling order, history was almost invariably political in its content and themes. This does not mean that history was ‘propaganda’ in any recognizable sense of that word, but it was an attempt to impose a particular understanding of the past on contemporaries and on posterity.<sup>180</sup>

Another major subject of division among myth theories is their stance in regard to a literal, as opposed to symbolical, reading of myth. The crucial question here is what the subject matter of a myth is. Here “Subject matter” is understood according to Robert Segal’s definition as the referent of the myth.<sup>181</sup> Scholars such as Tyler read myth literally: for them the subject matter

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<sup>179</sup> Hobson, “Euhemerism and the Veiling of History,” 44.

<sup>180</sup> Justin Lake, “Current Approaches to Medieval Historiography,” *History Compass* 13, no. 3 (March 2015): 97-98.

<sup>181</sup> Segal, *Myth: A Very Short*, 2.

of myth is what the narrative is literally about, for instance, the gods and their doings. On the other hand, for scholars such as Albert Camus and other existentialists, the meaning of myth is symbolic and refers to something other than its literal meaning. In the case of Camus, the human condition as exemplified by the struggle of Sisyphus.<sup>182</sup> Naturally, the scholars who see the function of myths as scientific also read myth literally. For them, the function of a myth is indistinguishable from its subject matter, that is an explanation of the world. The authors who perceive myths as nonscientific may read them either in a symbolic or a literal way.

It is not evident that a text or a myth can, or should, be reduced to one subject matter and it is not always possible to produce a decisive argument to identify with certainty the subject matter of a given myth. It is nonetheless possible to assess that some aspects of a myth are more meaningful than others. Existentialists and literalists may disagree on what is the main subject matter of the myth of Sisyphus, but all would agree that “whether it is possible to push a heavy boulder on top of a mountain” is not one of the subject matters of this myth. In that line we cannot affirm at this stage of the discussion that all euhemeristic narratives share exactly the same set of subject matters, but we may assert that all euhemeristic narratives are by definition about pagan religion and more specifically about pagan gods. This subject matter may coexist with others, but there is no serious reason to doubt that euhemeristic authors were really interested in the origin of pagan religions. In Old Norse context, the narratives usually qualified of euhemeristic are always literally about the pseudo-gods, and often, but not always, explicitly about the origin of paganism.

As such, myth theories may be parted into three broad categories:

- 1) The main function of myths is scientific in nature and their meaning is literal.
- 2) The main function of myths is not scientific in nature and their meaning is literal.
- 3) The main function of myths is not scientific in nature and their meaning is symbolic.

Old Norse euhemeristic narratives are generally studied through theories belonging to the second category as their main function is largely understood as ideological rather than historical, and their subject matter is seen as being literally about what they narrate: the pseudo-gods and their doings. An essential aspect of all these theories and definitions, including the second category, is that they define myths in relation to the society which produced and received

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<sup>182</sup> See for instance Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), 107-111.



them. In other words, a myth is not only defined as a particular form of narrative but also through the attitude its audience has toward it. This means that a narrative may function as a myth in a specific context but not in another. What is significant for a society is not necessarily for another one and the same narrative may function as a myth at a given time and lose its mythical function later. In fact, we are routinely confronted with motives and narratives which used to have, or have, a mythical function in a given context but are used for other purposes, for instance as entertainment when numerous mythical motives or entire narratives are used for movies, novels, or videogames.

This is where Frog's concept of meta-mythology becomes particularly useful to categorize euhemerism. His conception of etic and emic meta-mythology allows us to distinguish between mythological motives and narratives which lost their function and those who retained it. If virtually all medieval Christian discourses on pagan mythology are to some degree a criticism of paganism, not all of them are meta-mythology. Analogy, for instance, is the observation of correlations between the Christian scriptures and other texts. As Van Nahl<sup>183</sup> and Beck remarked, the pagan religion as explained in *Gylfaginning* and *Ynglinga saga* displays several similarities with the Christian faith, most notably the similarity between the figures of Hár, Jafnhár, and Þrīði in Snorri's *Edda* with the Christian Trinity. In this perspective, the pagan religion partakes, although incompletely and imperfectly, with the Christian truth. Beck noted the apparent irreconcilability between analogy and euhemerism when he stated:

Aus den wenigen Andeutungen dürfte schon klar sein, dass zwischen Euhemerismus und Analogie kaum Übereinkünfte möglich sind. Wenn Snorri dem Euhemerismus anhing, konnte er keine Analogie zwischen der überlieferten Mythologie und der christlichen Lehre vertreten haben – und umgekehrt!<sup>184</sup>

(It should be clear from these hints that euhemerism and analogy cannot be compatible. If Snorri adhered to euhemerism, he could not have drawn an analogy between traditional mythology and Christian teachings, and vice versa!)<sup>185</sup>

Indeed, it seems that Snorri cannot at the same time consider pagan religion to be a prefiguration of Christianity, as in analogy, and the result of faulty deification of men, as in euhemerism. There are, however, examples of both concepts in Snorri's *Edda*, *Ynglinga saga* as well as in

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<sup>183</sup> Jan Alexander Van Nahl, "The Skilled Narrator. Myth and Scholarship in the *Prose Edda*," *Scripta Islandica* 66 (2015): 123-141.

<sup>184</sup> Beck, "Snorri Sturlusons Mythologie.", 2.

<sup>185</sup> My translation.

the *Gesta Danorum*. Does it mean, as Klaus von See believes, that the euhemeristic passages of the *Edda* are from a different author than the one who wrote *Gylfaginning*? And if not, how can we reconcile these two visions?

I will illustrate the difference between analogy and euhemerism by comparing two passages from Snorri's *Edda*. First, Snorri's narrative regarding Baldr's death, and secondly, his description of the Trojan origin of the Norse gods in *Skáldskaparmál*. I will then examine how the notion of meta-mythology may highlight essential differences between them:

En þat er upphaf þessar sögu at Baldr inn góða dreymði drauma stóra ok hættliga um líf sitt. En er hann sagði Ásunum draumana þá báru þeir saman ráð sín, ok var þat gert at beiða griða Baldri fyrir alls konar háska, ok Frigg tók svardaga til þess at eira skyldu Baldri eldr ok vatn, járn ok alls konar málmr, steinar, jörðin, viðirnir, sóttirnar, dýrin, fuglarnir, eitr, ormar. En er þetta var gert ok vitat, þá var þat skemtun Baldrs ok Ásanna at hann skyldi standa upp á þingum en allir aðrir skyldu sumir skjóta á hann, sumir höggva til, sumir berja grjóti. En hvat sem at var gert, sakaði hann ekki, ok þótti þetta ǫllum mikill frami. En er þetta sá Loki Laufeyjarson þá líkaði honum illa er Baldr sakaði ekki. Hann gekk til Fensalar til Friggjar ok brá sér í konu líki. Þá spyr Frigg ef sú kona vissi hvat Æsir höfðusk at á þinginu. Hon sagði at allir skutu at Baldri, ok þat at hann sakaði ekki. Þá mælir Frigg:

“Eigi munu vápn eða viðir granda Baldri. Eiða hefi ek þegit af ǫllum þeim.” Þá spyr konan: “Hafa allir hlutir eiða unnit at eira Baldri?” Þá svarar Frigg: “Vex viðarteinungur einn fyrir vestan Valhǫll. Sá er mistilteinn kallaðr. Sá þótti mér ungr at krefja eiðsins.” Því næst hvarf konan á brut. En Loki tók mistiltein ok sleit upp ok gekk til þings. En Høðr stóð útarliga í mannhringinum þvíat hann var blindr. Þá mælir Loki við hann: “Hví skýtr þú ekki at Baldri?”

Hann svarar: “Þvíat ek sé eigi hvar Baldr er, ok þat annat at ek em vápnlauss.” Þá mælir Loki: “Gerðu þó í líking annarra manna ok veit Baldri sœmð sem aðrir menn. Ek mun vísa þér til hvar hann stendr. Skjót at honum vendi þessum.” Høðr tók mistiltein ok skaut at Baldri at tilvísun Loka. Flaug skotit í gognum hann ok fell hann dauðr til jarðar, ok hefir þat mest óhapp verit unnit með goðum ok mönnum. Þá er Baldr var fallinn þá fellusk ǫllum Ásum orðtøk ok svá hendr at taka til hans, ok sá hverr til annars, ok váru allir með einum hug til þess er unnit hafði verkit. En engi mátti hefna, þar var svá mikill griðastaðr. En þá er Æsirnir freistuðu at mæla þá var hitt þó fyrr at grátrinn kom upp svá at engi mátti ǫðrum

segja með orðunum frá sínum harmi. En Óðinn bar þeim mun verst þenna skaða sem hann kunni mesta skyn hversu mikil aftaka ok missa Ásunum var í fráfalli Baldrs.<sup>186</sup>

(And the beginning of this story is that Baldr the Good dreamed great dreams boding peril to his life. And when he told the Æsir the dreams they took counsel together and it was decided to request immunity for Baldr from all kinds of danger, and Frigg received solemn promises so that Baldr should not be harmed by fire and water, iron and all kinds of metal, stones, the earth, trees, diseases, the animals, the birds, poison, snakes. And when this was done and confirmed, then it became an entertainment for Baldr and the Æsir that he should stand up at assemblies and all the others should either shoot at him or strike at him or throw stones at him. But whatever they did he was unharmed, and they all thought this a great glory. But when Loki Laufeyiarson saw this he was not pleased that Baldr was unharmed. He went to Fensalir to Frigg and changed his appearance to that of a woman. Then Frigg asked this woman if she knew what the Æsir were doing at the assembly. She said that everyone was shooting at Baldr, and moreover that he was unharmed. Then said Frigg:

‘ “Weapons and wood will not hurt Baldr. I have received oaths from them all.” ‘Then the woman asked: “Have all things sworn oaths not to harm Baldr?” ‘Then Frigg replied: “There grows a shoot of a tree to the west of Valhall. It is called mistletoe. It seemed young to me to demand the oath from.” ‘Straight away the woman disappeared. And Loki took mistletoe and plucked it and went to the assembly. Hod was standing at the edge of the circle of people, for he was blind. Then Loki said to him: ‘ “Why are you not shooting at Baldr?” ‘He replied: “Because I cannot see where Baldr is, and secondly because I have no weapon.” ‘Then said Loki: “Follow other people’s example and do Baldr honour like other people. I will direct you to where he is standing. Shoot at him this stick.”

‘Hod took the mistletoe and shot at Baldr at Loki’s direction. The missile flew through him and he fell dead to the ground, and this was the unluckiest deed ever done among gods and men. When Baldr had fallen, then all the Æsir’s tongues failed them, as did their hands for lifting him up, and they all looked at each other and were all of one mind towards the one who had done the deed. But no one could take vengeance, it was a place of such sanctuary. When the Æsir tried to speak then what happened first was that weeping came out, so that none could tell another in words of his grief. But it was Odin who took this injury the

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<sup>186</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, Viking Society for Northern Research (London: Oxford university press, 1982), 45-46.

hardest in that he had the best idea what great deprivation and loss the death of Baldr would cause the Æsir.)<sup>187</sup>

And *Skáldskaparmál*:

En eigi skulu kristnir menn trúa á heiðin goð ok eigi á sannyndi þessar sagnar annan veg en svá sem hér finnsk í upphafi bókar er sagt er frá atburðum þeim er mannfólkit viltisk frá rétttri trú, ok þá næst frá Tyrkjum, hvernig Asiamenn þeir er Æsir eru kallaðir fólsum frá sagnir þær frá þeim tíðindum er gerðusk í Troju til þess at landfólkit skyldi trúa þá guð vera.

Priamus konungr í Troju var höfðingi mikill yfir öllum her Tyrkja ok hans synir váru tignastir af öllum her hans. Sá salr hinn ágæti er Æsir kölluðu Brimis sal eða bjórsal, þat var höll Priamus konungs. En þat er þeir gera langa frásögn of ragnrökr, þat er Trojumanna orrosta. Þat er frá sagt at Okubórr engdi oxahöfði ok dró at borði Miðgarðsorm, en ormrinn helt svá lífinu at hann sœktisk í hafit. Eptir þeim dæmum er þetta sagt er Ektor drap Volukrontem ágætan kappu at ás<j>ánda inum mikla Akille ok teygði hann svá at sér með höfði hins drepna þess er þeir jöfnuðu til oxans þess er Okubórr hafði höfuðit af.<sup>188</sup>

(Yet Christian people must not believe in heathen gods, nor in the truth of this account in any other than that which is presented at the beginning of this book, where it is told what happened when mankind went astray from the true faith, and after that about the Turks, how the people of Asia, known as the Æsir, distorted the accounts of the events that took place in Troy so that the people of the country would believe that they were gods.

King Priam in Troy was a great ruler over all the host of Turks, and his sons were the highest in rank in his whole host. That magnificent hall that the Æsir called Brimir's hall or beer-hall, was king Priam's hall. And whereas they give a long account of Ragnarok, this is the Trojan war. The story goes that Oku-Thor used an ox-head as bait and pulled the Midgard serpent up to the gunwale, but the serpent survived by sinking into the sea. This story is based on the one about how Hector killed the splendid hero Volucrontes while the great Achilles was looking on, and thus lured Achilles towards him with the head of the slain man whom they saw as corresponding to the ox which Thor had taken the head.)<sup>189</sup>

In the first case, the narrative uses pagan symbolism and imagery in order to construct a narrative reminiscent of Christian themes. The passage is not about pagan mythology but makes

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<sup>187</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Anthony Faulkes (London: Everyman, 1987), 48-49.

<sup>188</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál. 1*, 5-6.

<sup>189</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Anthony Faulkes (London: Everyman, 1987), 64-65.

use of it to build a narrative mirroring – or anticipating, according to the medieval authors – the death of Christ who died pierced by a spear and resurrected. In the second case the narrative is not a Christian reading of a pagan myth. Its subject matter is not Ragnarok understood as the end of time. Its subject matter is the origin of the pagan belief in Ragnarok. As such, unlike for the previous example, the subject matter of the passage is not an event, but a narrative. In this process, the story of Ragnarok is ‘demythicalized’. The pagan myth ceases to be understood as originating in religious revelation, be it an imperfect one. Instead, the former myth is entirely rejected outside of the realm of religion and into that of history. Throughout the third book of the *Gesta Danorum* Saxo applies a similar reading to the story of Baldr’s death, which he understood as a historical event.<sup>190</sup> Here, I agree with Margaret Clunies Ross who studied the myth of Baldr’s death in Saxo’s and Snorri’s texts and noted that “both Snorri and Saxo present a medieval fiction, one mythological, the other historicized.”<sup>191</sup>

In the case of myths read as history, these texts become like religious idols on the shelves of an art collector: they cease to be religious objects to become something else, history, art, or virtually any type of literary discourse. In the same manner, the mythological imagery of Old Norse paganism is, in this passage of *Skáldskaparmál*, not only uprooted from its original context but also desacralized. In short, the passage from *Skáldskaparmál* is *about* pagan mythology, whereas Snorri’s narrative regarding Baldr’s death is interpreting pagan mythology to implicitly give it a Christian meaning. To illustrate this difference, I propose this typological diagram of Christian discourses on Old Norse mythology:

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<sup>190</sup> See section 5.6.1.

<sup>191</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross, “Mythic Narrative in Saxo Grammaticus and Snorri Sturluson,” in *Saxo Grammaticus. Tra storiografia e letteratura*, I Convegno Di Classiconorrena (Rome: Il Calamo, 1992), 59.

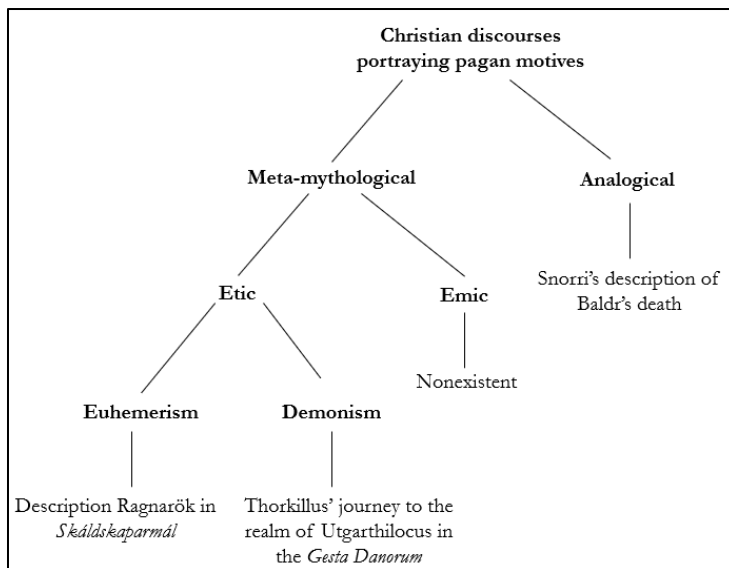


Figure 6: Typological diagram of Christian discourses on Old Norse mythology

I distinguish here between three subcategories of Christian discourses on Old Norse mythology. Only one of them, euhemerism, which is a type of etic meta-mythological discourse, is the subject of this study. Euhemerism is not the only type of etic meta-mythological discourse regarding Old Norse mythology. Demonism, which appears both in the *Gesta Danorum* and *Heimskringla*, is another example of etic meta-mythology. There is no example of Christian emic meta-mythological discourses on the Old Norse mythology as, in Christian context, the pagan myths are always othered to some degree. It is to be noted that euhemerism and demonism are perfectly compatible and often used together.<sup>192</sup>

This distinction between analogy and meta-mythology may be replaced within the discussion regarding the subject matter of myths. Narratives which function on the mode of analogy may have various subject matters depending on which aspect of Christian religion they intend to parallel. In the case of euhemeristic narratives, the subject matter, or one of the subject matters must be pagan religion and its origin. As such, before dwelling into the history of the theory, we may define euhemerism as a peculiar type of etic meta-mythology defined by two criteria; 1) its subject matter; the pre-Christian myth and religion, and 2) the nature of the characters described, human beings as opposed to demons as in the demonist theory. Analogy represents a different type of Christian discourse on Old Norse mythology. It is not meta-mythological, and it does not necessarily describe gods as human beings. In fact, in analogy the narrator is not

<sup>192</sup> David F. Johnson, "Euhemerisation versus Demonisation, the Pagan Gods and Ælfric's *De Falsiis Diis*," in *Pagans and Christians: The Interplay between Christian Latin and Traditional Germanic Cultures in Early Medieval Europe* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten Publishing, 1995), 37.

preoccupied by the nature of the pagan gods. His aim is not to show how this religion was born but how it may have conveyed a message sometime analogous to the Christian one. Euhemerism is a myth of origin, while analogy is not. Euhemerism is generally interested in describing events in that they inform us on the origin of certain narratives, analogy is interested in the meaning of those narratives.

As such, in the line of Margaret Clunies Ross, I disagree with Klaus von See's belief that the worldview of the prologue and that of *Gylfaginning* are mutually exclusive.<sup>193</sup> Similarly I disagree with Heinrich Beck's and Jan Van Nahl's conception that one should choose between analogy and euhemerism. Those two notions are not mutually exclusive but answer to two different types of questions. Furthermore, as I will argue, analogy, while present in the *Edda*, is not the essential aspect of *Gylfaginning*, a text, which is more easily understood as connected to the euhemeristic theory. In conclusion, four principles will guide my analysis of the medieval Scandinavian euhemeristic narratives:

1. Euhemeristic narratives proper are myths *about* myths. Their subject matter, understood in the sense of Robert Segal, are myths, pagan religions, and their origin. This subject matter is generally literally expressed in the narrative.
2. Euhemeristic narratives, as any myth, are connected to tenets within a system of belief. To understand these narratives is to understand what the underlying tenets behind them are.
3. Euhemeristic narratives are part of broader works and must not be read in isolation, but as narratives who serve the broader purposes of the works they are found in.
4. Euhemeristic narratives may be read as the works of "rival narrators" who drew from similar traditions for different purposes. To analyze these divergences allows us to highlight the ideological and esthetical orientations of those works.

As we shall see during this thesis, not all medieval Scandinavian narratives which are qualified as euhemeristic in the scholarship are "myths about myths". This does not mean that I shall not study them. Every narrative which is at least superficially euhemeristic, in the sense that they treat Old Norse deities as human pseudo-gods, qualify as an object of study in this thesis. However, I shall identify them and explain how different types of narratives labelled as "euhemerism" may be different. The consequence of the third principle of this study, according

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<sup>193</sup> Clunies Ross, "Mikill skynsemi er at rifja vandliga þat upp.", 73-79.

to which I shall treat euhemeristic narratives as part of broader works, is that I cannot immediately start to compare the euhemeristic passages from Saxo's and Snorri's works. First, it is essential to study these euhemeristic narratives within their respective work, to understand what the purpose of euhemerism within the *Gesta Danorum* is and within *Heimskringla* and the *Edda*. Only after that I shall compare the euhemerism of the two authors.

As such, the second chapter, after this introduction, considers the history of euhemerism from late antiquity and in the Middle Ages; the third chapter discusses euhemerism in the *Gesta Danorum*, the fourth chapter examines euhemerism in the *Edda* and in *Heimskringla*. Finally, in the last two chapters I will compare Saxo's and Snorri's euhemerism. The fifth chapter focuses on the pseudo-gods themselves comparing Saxo's and Snorri's common use of the figure of Odin, as well as other minor deities. In the fifth chapter, I focus on the two authors' euhemerization of mythical time and space.



## 2. Euhemerism, from Late Antiquity and up to the Middle Ages

### 2.1. Origin of the Theory

I have now defined what I understand by euhemerism, and how I will study euhemeristic narratives.<sup>1</sup> The next step of the discussion is to recall the history of the theory from late antiquity and up to the Middle Ages, how it was transmitted from Euhemerus to our medieval Scandinavian authors, and how the theory evolved in the course of its transmission.

Sixteen centuries separate Euhemerus of Messene, the originator of the theory, from Saxo and Snorri. The original work of Euhemerus was unavailable to the medieval Scandinavian authors who mostly relied on classical versions of the theory as well as medieval development of the theory. As such, medieval Scandinavian euhemerism cannot be understood without first addressing the history of the theory, its specific meanings and the variety of its use in ancient literature. As Nikolas Roubekas, one of the most prominent contemporary historians of euhemerism, stated:

Lastly, modern euhemerism maintains that every case of deified dead people constitutes euhemerism and should be treated as such. Considering however the nature of our sources, it becomes evident that what we are dealing with is not so much Euhemerus's euhemerism but, as it turns out, the reception of his theory already from antiquity onwards.<sup>2</sup>

Roubekas' statement is especially pertinent when applied to medieval euhemerism as our authors had a very limited and partial knowledge of the theory. I will now describe what the different textual sources for Euhemerus' narrative are. As I shall explain, ancient euhemeristic accounts may be sorted into two categories: Diodorian euhemerism, and Ennian euhemerism. Diodorian euhemeristic texts are written in Greek and were not translated in Latin until the translation of Poggio Bracciolini from 1472. As such this branch of the theory was inaccessible to our medieval authors and I will only summarize it. On the contrary, Ennian euhemeristic texts were written in Latin and transmitted in the work of Lactantius, one of the most influential Christian apologetic authors. As such Ennian euhemerism had been eminently influential in the transmission of the theory in the medieval Christian world. To begin, I will only summarize these euhemeristic accounts and then quote them in section 2.1.4 where I will discuss the Latin

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<sup>1</sup> See section 1.4.

<sup>2</sup> Roubekas, *An Ancient Theory of Religion*, 2.

euemeristic texts which were accessible to medieval authors. After this presentation I will specifically discuss, quote, and comment on, the euemeristic texts and passages which were available to medieval Scandinavian authors.<sup>3</sup>

Euhemerism takes its name from Euhemerus of Messene, a Greek author from the fourth century BCE who wrote *Ἐπερὰ Ἀναγραφή* (Sacred Inscription) known in Latin as *Sacra Historia* (Sacred History) and sometimes referred to in modern scholarship either as *Sacred Inscription* or *Sacred History*.<sup>4</sup> From this point I will refer to the work as the *Sacred Inscription*. In this work, Euhemerus developed a narrative in which the most well known aspect is the theory that several of the ancient Greek deities were in fact not gods, but human beings worshipped as gods. Euhemerus is not the first author to have produced a criticism of Greek mythology and religion. Not every aspect of his theory is strictly original, and some aspects of his work reminds of the theory of previous Greek authors such as Xenophanes, Hecataeus of Miletus, Palaephatus, Pausanias, Prodicus of Ceos, and Persaeus of Citium, to name some of them.<sup>5</sup> However, Euhemerus' *Sacred Inscription* is more than a mere repetition of previous works.

No manuscript of the *Sacred Inscription* survived to this day. The work was quoted in Greek by Diodorus Siculus (c. 90 BCE – 30 BCE) in the fifth and sixth books of his *Bibliotheca Historica* (Historical Library).<sup>6</sup> Although the fifth book of Diodorus' work is preserved, the sixth one was lost. Fortunately, it is partially known through quotations, also in Greek, from the second chapter of Eusebius of Caesarea's second book of the *Preparatio Evangelica* (c. 260 – 340).<sup>7</sup> The *Sacred Inscription* was also translated in Latin verses by Ennius and was known to Latin speakers as *Euhemerus sive Sacra Historia* (Euhemerus or the Sacred History). This is also lost but has been quoted by the Christian apologist Lactantius (c. 250 – 325) in the first book of his *Institutiones divinae* (The Divine Institutes). As remarked by Marek Winiarczyk, these translations and quotations cannot be considered as fragments from Euhemerus' work but

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<sup>3</sup> See sections 2.1.4, and 2.1.5.

<sup>4</sup> Marek Winiarczyk, *The "Sacred History" of Euhemerus of Messene*, trans. Witold Zbirohowski-Kościa, *Beiträge Zur Altertumskunde* 312 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 14.

<sup>5</sup> Roubekas, *An Ancient Theory of Religion*, 33-29.

<sup>6</sup> For the fifth book see Diodorus of Sicily, *Diodorus of Sicily*. Vol. 3, *Books IV (Continued) 59-VIII*, ed. and trans. Charles Henry Oldfather, The Loeb Classical Library 340 (London: William Heinemann, 1939), 91-327. For fragments of the sixth book see same volume pages 330-345. Diodorus' account of Euhemerus' work – which I will summarize – is found, for the fifth book in pages 215-228 and in pages 331-338.

<sup>7</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Evangelicae praeparationis libri XV. Ad codices manuscriptos deluo collatos recensuit anglice nunc primum reddidit notis et indicibus instruxit*, ed. and trans. Gifford E.H., 4 vols. (Oxford: Oxonii: e Typographeo academico, 1903). The first two volumes contain the Greek edition of the text while the third volume – divided in two books – contains an English translation. The fourth volume contains the notes and the index. The English translation of the quotation from Diodorus can be found in the third volume, book one, pages 65-66.

are likely to be altered version of the original to some degree.<sup>8</sup> These quotations convey slightly different versions of Euhemerus' narrative, and Lactantius essentially focuses on the second part of the narrative at the expense of the first. The general structure of the narrative, however, is coherent from an author to another.

We may therefore distinguish two families of classical euhemerism: the one inherited from Diodorus' commentaries, in Greek, and the one inherited from Ennius' translation in Latin. Only the Ennian branch of classical euhemerism, essentially known through Lactantius, may have influenced our authors. I will nonetheless summarize the characteristics of Diodorian euhemerism in order to give a sense of the variations which the theories underwent through the quill of different authors.

### **2.1.1. Diodorian Euhemerism**

According to the quotations of Diodorus and Eusebius the *Sacred Inscription* tells how Euhemerus, a friend of King Cassander of Macedon (355 BCE – 297 BCE) discovered two islands in the Indian Ocean: Panchaea and Hiera. Panchaea and Hiera are the homes of two kinds of societies. Hiera is governed by a king, who takes the best share of the wealth of the land for himself. On the other hand, the society of Panchaea is divided between three classes of citizens, the priests and craftsmen, the farmers, and the soldiers and herdsman. The priests represent the ruling class, they collect every resource produced on the island but, unlike the king of Hiera, redistribute them evenly among the citizens. The priests themselves, however, get a double share. The male inhabitants of Panchaea are warlike and use chariots in combats. The fact that the Panchaeans use war chariots is not anecdotal, as these vehicles were specifically used by the heroes of the Trojan war, which suggests that the Panchaeian society is archaic.

Unlike Hiera, which is entirely under the control of its king, Panchaea is the home of two distinct societies, as the city of Panara, found on the same island, is politically independent. Panara has no king and elects three magistrates every year. These magistrates rule on every matter except for capital offences for which they deliberately refer to the priests. Both Panchaea and Hiera are located on the edges of the world known to the Greeks. As Winiarczyk argues, Panchaea can be considered to be a representant of the *locus amoenus* (pleasant place) literary

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<sup>8</sup> Winiarczyk, *The "Sacred History,"* 13.

*topos*, as defined by Ernst Robert Curtius.<sup>9</sup> Typically the *locus amoenus* presents places of unusual natural abundance, where life is easier than in the “common” world.

The island of Panchaea is the home of a sanctuary dedicated to Zeus Triphylus. In this sanctuary is found a golden stele. It is on this stele that Euhemerus allegedly read the story of the pseudo-gods Uranus, Cronus, and Zeus. According to this narrative, Uranus was the first king as well as the first man to discover that heaven was the home of gods. Indeed, Uranus discovered that due to the regularity of their motion, planets and stars must be gods. Consequently, Uranus was also the first man to perform religious sacrifice for these gods. Because of his discovery he gained the name “Uranus” (Heaven). Uranus fathered Cronus, father of Zeus. This Zeus visited Panchaea, and there, had an altar built for his grand-father, Uranus, whom he declared to be a god. Zeus circled Earth five times and visited many places where he was himself honored as a god.

According to Diodorus, Euhemerus’ narrative is divided into two parts. The first resembles historiographical writings and describes the peculiar societies of Hieria and Panchaea. The second provides information concerning the origin of the belief in the gods. Diodorian euhemerism also draws a distinction between two kinds of gods, the heavenly gods, discovered by Uranus, and the earthly gods, who are human impostors. The fifth book of Diodorus contains information regarding the social organization of Hieria and Panchaea. The narrative regarding Euhemerus’ travel to these islands and the origin of religion is found in Eusebius’ quotation of the sixth book of Diodorus.<sup>10</sup>

### **2.1.2. Ennian Euhemerism**

I will now present the version of the theory as found in the Ennius–Lactantius quotations. Contrary to Diodorus, Lactantius does not refer to the social organization of Hieria and Panchaea. His narrative focuses on the second part of the theory, especially the passages regarding Zeus. The historical framework regarding the islands of Panchaea and Hieria is reduced to its bare minimum. Lactantius only specifies in the *Institutiones divinae* I.XI.33 that the information regarding the gods comes from an inscription carved on a column in the

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<sup>9</sup> Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Bollingen Series, 36 (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 192-202.

<sup>10</sup> C.L. Caspers, “Appendix: The Euhemerus Testimonia,” in *Euhemerism and Its Uses. The Mortal Gods*, ed. Syrithe Pugh, Routledge Studies in Renaissance and Early Modern Worlds of Knowledge (London: Routledge, 2021), 266-278.

sanctuary of “Triphylian Jupiter” in Panchaea but does not give further details regarding its location. The narrative regarding Caelus – the Latin version of Uranus – also differs in some instance from that of Diodorus. In his version, presented in I.XI.63, it was not Caelus but Jupiter (Zeus) who first erected an altar and performed sacrifices. It was also Zeus who named the sky Caelus, after his grandfather whereas it was named “ether” (aether) before. This apparently small difference has important consequences as it means that Lactantius, and presumably Ennius, did not make a distinction between earthly and heavenly gods. Scholars are divided on the question of which of these versions best reflect Euhemerus’ theory. Syrithe Pugh argues that Diodorus could likely have introduced this distinction in Euhemerus’ work as he himself does it elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> Roubekas considers that the distinction between earthly and heavenly gods is a genuine characteristic of Euhemerus’ euhemerism.<sup>12</sup> while Winiarczyk believes that the distinction was essentially due to Diodorus’ interpretation of Euhemerus’ work.<sup>13</sup>

It seems possible that Lactantius did not refer to the first branch because it was of no interest to him. The second branch proves to be a powerful intellectual tool in the hand of a Christian apologetic author: not only does it undermine the belief in the Greek gods, but it does it “from the inside” taking the argumentation from a Greek pre-Christian author rather than from biblical or patristic material. The first branch, however, is not designed to criticize pagan religion, and is generally read as presupposing the existence of the heavenly gods. For this discussion, it is not essential to identify which version of euhemerism is closer to Euhemerus’ but rather to identify which version of euhemerism could have been known by our authors. As neither Eusebius’ *Preparatio Evangelica* nor Diodorus *Bibliotheca historica* were translated in Latin before the 15<sup>th</sup> century, it is thus impossible that Saxo or Snorri had access to the narrative regarding Uranus’ discovery of the heavenly gods.

Another difference between the two works is that unlike Diodorus, Lactantius described Jupiter not only as a king but also as a cultural hero as according to book one chapter thirteen of the *Institutiones Divinae* it was Jupiter who first abolished the custom of cannibalism which was previously practiced by Ops and Saturn. It is unclear, however, whether Lactantius believes this claim to be true. It must be noted that Lactantius’ use of the theory is consistently organized

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<sup>11</sup> Pugh, “Introduction,” 5.

<sup>12</sup> Roubekas, *An Ancient Theory of Religion*, 19, 23-29

<sup>13</sup> Winiarczyk, *The “Sacred History,”* 28.

around the critique of polytheism, idolatry, and ruler cult, with a specific emphasis on the critique of Roman civil religion.

Diodorian and Ennian euhemerism agree on several points. First the form taken by Euhemerus' work. Both describe the *Sacred Inscription* as a narrative about the lives of Saturn and Jupiter, which Euhemerus allegedly gathered from a golden inscription written by Jupiter himself and which stands in the temple of Jupiter Triphylia. According to both traditions, this text explains the exploits of Jupiter and his subsequent deification which is perceived as the event at the origin of religion, or, at least, Greek polytheistic religion. In both cases Euhemerus put a special emphasis on the *antemortem* deification of the pseudo-gods, as Zeus is the main character. *Post mortem* deification nonetheless happened as well in the case of Uranus. This narrative regarding the origin of religious belief is intertwined with the description of a utopic island, home to a peculiar society with egalitarian aspects unlike the Greek monarchies contemporary to Euhemerus' own lifetime. Modern scholars disagree on whether the main part of Euhemerus' work was its narrative regarding the origin of religion or its political description of Panchaea and Hieria. Sylvie Honigman argued that the description of the societies of Hieria and Panchaea was not a core aspect of Euhemerus' work but was rather part of a conventional framework for historical writing.<sup>14</sup> Roubekas and Winiarczyk, on the other hand, reject the idea that one aspect of the work may serve as a mere frame story to the other.<sup>15</sup>

### **2.1.3. Political Significance of Euhemerus' Theory**

Like Roubekas I agree that it would be anachronical to distinguish too sharply between the religious and political aspects of Euhemerus' narrative, two notions which were interconnected in the Hellenistic period.<sup>16</sup> Uranus not only discovered the heavenly gods, but was also the first king in the world. Yet, even ancient authors may have remarked that Euhemerus' work was composed of two rather different sections. Diodorus himself discussed the two parts of Euhemerus' work in two different books of his *Bibliotheca Historica*. Indeed, the relation between the two aspects of Euhemerus' work is not self-evident and the religious part of Euhemerus' narrative has been the one receiving the most attention regarding its potential political meaning.

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<sup>14</sup> Sylvie Honigman, "Euhemerus of Messene and Plato's Atlantis," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 58, no. 1 (2009): 1-35.

<sup>15</sup> Roubekas, *An Ancient Theory of Religion*, 101; Winiarczyk, *The "Sacred History"*, 73.

<sup>16</sup> Roubekas, *An Ancient Theory of Religion*, 101.

Because of the relation it draws between kingship and deification, the work of Euhemerus has been read in relation to the trend of monarch deification around the time of Alexander the Great's life and during the Hellenistic period.<sup>17</sup> Although deification was mainly the apanage of kings, it occasionally touched other strata of the society. One famous case is of Philipp II of Macedon's physician, Menecrates who called himself Zeus and pretended to have supernatural abilities while his followers impersonated other Olympian gods. A habit which, as Athenaeus reports, Philipp II mocked when, during a banquet Philipp offered Menecrates incense and libation in place of food.<sup>18</sup>

As Winiarczyk remarks, none of Alexander's direct successors performed self-deification. The first Hellenistic king to do so was Ptolemy II (309-246 BCE). But because of the imprecise dating of the *Sacred Inscription*, it is impossible to know for sure whether Ptolemy's behavior influenced Euhemerus' writing.<sup>19</sup> It has been argued that Euhemerus was justifying ruler-cult and promoting it.<sup>20</sup> This, however, seems unlikely: it is important to note that nowhere in the available sources did Euhemerus argue that powerful kings could actually become gods. In the *Sacred Inscriptions*, Zeus is only said to be honored as a god. Euhemerus never refers to deification as anything else than the attitude of worshipers toward mortal humans. The process of deification is a social one and does not affect the nature of the worshipped individual. I am thus of the same opinion of Sylvie Honigman who argued against the notion that Euhemerus' work could be read as a promotion of the ruler cult when:

As a religious phenomenon deeply rooted in contemporary religious and social needs, ruler cult hardly needed justifications of this sort. This does not mean that the contemporary development of this cult was irrelevant to Euhemerus' theory, but the relation must be reversed: it was contemporary reality which validated the theory, according to the very principle that guided Thucydides' redaction of his *Archaeology*, and Plato's redaction of the Atlantis story. Since human nature was seen as constant, common sense, combined with the observation of contemporary reality, could safely be used as a pointer for reconstructing the past. Ruler cult in Euhemerus' days conformed two things. First, kings were deified

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<sup>17</sup> It is one of the main conclusions of Winiarczyk that Euhemerus' work is related to the notion of ruler deification. Winiarczyk, *The "Sacred History"*, 164. On this topic see also Franco De Angelis and Benjamin Garstad, "Euhemerus in Context," *Classical Antiquity* 25, no. 2 (October 1, 2006): 211-242.

<sup>18</sup> Henk. S. Versnel, *Coping with the Gods: Wayward Readings in Greek Theology*, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 173 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 439-444.

<sup>19</sup> Winiarczyk, *The "Sacred History"*, 64.

<sup>20</sup> Heinrich Dörrie, *Der Königskult des Antiochos von Kommagene im Lichte neuer Inschriftenfunde*, Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen. Philologisch- Historische Klasse 60 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964), 218-224.

independently of the fact they had demonstrated morally dubious behaviour either in their private affairs, or in their contest with the other Diadochi. Secondly, the grant of divine honours was never an arbitrary step, but came as a response to major benefactions.<sup>21</sup>

By contrast, Greek mythology contains narratives describing actual apotheosis, such as in the case of Herakles who – for the ancient Greeks – truly becomes a god.<sup>22</sup> Apotheosis may even be observed on historical rulers as it happened for Alexander the Great or the Roman statesmen Julius Caesar and Augustus.<sup>23</sup> Roman Latin speakers generally made a semantic distinction between eternal gods *deus* and human beings who became gods, *divus*. Both categories were nevertheless perceived as authentic divinities worthy of worship.<sup>24</sup> What Euhemerus describes is different, his pseudo-gods are not humans who became gods during their life or after their death, but mortal men who impersonated gods as if they were deities from birth. We must hence draw a distinction between two phenomena: on one hand the historical practice of a community to promote a human being to a divine status, which can be observed in Hellenistic monarchies or in the Roman Empire. In this case an individual is awarded a divine status but the community recognizes that this individual was born a mortal man. On the other hand, the fictional behavior of the pseudo-gods in euhemeristic narratives in which they impersonate god, in this case the pseudo-god is not believed to be a deified human, but to be an actual god from birth. The former implies that the worshipers are aware of the former humanity of the worshiped, the latter is based on either trickery or mistake.

As such, I reject the claim of Sylvie Honigman who argued that in euhemerism “sins were ascribed to the time when gods were still men, so that their deification could be seen as having taken place at a later stage.”<sup>25</sup> Euhemerus never stated that Zeus used to be a man and became a god. Greek mythology does not hold that Zeus was a human who became a god but that he

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<sup>21</sup> Honigman, “Euhemerus of Messene,” 29; For Albert Baumgarten’s argument see Albert I. Baumgarten, “Euhemerus’s Eternal Gods: or, how not to be Embarrassed by Greek Mythology,” in *Classical Studies in Honor of David Sohlberg*, ed. Ranon Katzoff, Yaakov Petroff, and David Schaps (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1996), 102.

<sup>22</sup> Philip Holt, “Herakles’ Apotheosis in Lost Greek Literature and Art,” *L’Antiquité Classique* 61, no. 1992 (1992): 38-59.

<sup>23</sup> On the relation of Roman divinization with mythological apotheosis see Michael Koortbojian, *The Divinization of Caesar and Augustus. Precedents, Consequences, Implications*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 15-24.

<sup>24</sup> On this topic see John Scheid, “Deus and Divus,” in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 443; and Koortbojian, *The Divinization of Caesar*, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Honigman, “Euhemerus of Messene,” 28.



has always been a god. In contrast, Euhemerus does not only reject the notion that Zeus was a god by birth, but argues that he was never a god at all.

As such, Euhemerus' work can only give a rather negative portrayal of ruler cult. In his narrative, Euhemerus tied the practice of monarch deification with deception rather than equating it with actual apotheosis. This is coherent with the fact that King Cassander, who is referred to in the *Sacred Inscription* as the patron of the expedition to Panchaea and Hiera, was one of the prominent ruler of this period who did not claim to be a god.<sup>26</sup> It would only be natural that king Cassander and his court were favorable to the production of works critical of the practice of ruler deification: a practice which was upheld by his rivals. Hence, I agree with Roubekas when he states that the *Sacred Inscription* cannot be interpreted as supporting the deification of Hellenistic monarchs. On the contrary, should this work have any political undertone, it would be better suited as a critique of the monarchs' pretension for divine honors.<sup>27</sup> Syrithe Pugh produced a similar argumentation and justly remarked that Euhemerus' work would be a singularly bad attempt at justifying ruler cult. Many pagan commentators of Euhemerus considered him as an atheist and a blasphemer of Zeus. Should Euhemerus have tried to justify ruler cult, the figures of Herakles or Asklepios, who indeed started their life as mortal men, would have been more suited than Zeus.<sup>28</sup>

#### **2.1.4. The Latin and Christian Tradition**

The most famous Latin author to have mentioned Euhemerus is certainly Augustine in the *City of God* (c. 420) VI.VII.1:

Nonne adtestati sunt Euhemero, qui omnes tales deos non fabulosa garrulitate, sed historica diligentia homines fuisse mortalesque conscripit ?<sup>29</sup>

(Surely, all this agrees with Euhemerus, who declared that all such gods were simply mortals and Euhemerus was more than a garrulous story-teller, he was a hard-working historian.)<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Roubekas, *An Ancient Theory of Religion*, 95.

<sup>27</sup> Roubekas, *An Ancient Theory of Religion*, 103-106.

<sup>28</sup> Pugh, "Introduction," 9-10.

<sup>29</sup> Saint Augustine, *La Cité de Dieu*, vol. 2, *Impuissance spirituelle du paganisme*, ed. G. Bardy, trans. G. Combès, vol. 2, Œuvres de Saint Augustin 34 (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1959), 78.

<sup>30</sup> Saint Augustine, *Saint Augustine the City of God. Books I-VII*, trans. Demetrius B. Zema and Gerald G. Walsh, *The Fathers of the Church a New Translation* 8 (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1950), 321.

And then he adds in VII.XXVII.1:

Et quae ad hanc pertinentia consequuntur, totam de hoc Euhemerus pandit historiam, quam Ennius in Latinum vertit eloquium ; unde quia plurima posuerunt, qui contra huius modi errores ante nos vel Graeco sermone vel Latino scripserunt, non in eo mihi placuit immorari.<sup>31</sup>

(Then, read the context. The whole story, as Euhemerus has shown, in a work which Ennius translated into Latin, is just a piece of history. This whole matter of the historical criticism of mythology has, in fact, been fully treated by both Latin and Greek authors, and I need not, therefore, linger on the subject.)<sup>32</sup>

Augustine's last sentence suggests that the theory of Euhemerus was still common knowledge in the fifth century. Although he refers only to Ennius, his statement regarding previous discussion on the matter might be a reference to the *Institutiones Divinae*.<sup>33</sup> As Roubekas remarks, given the importance of saint Augustine in Christian thoughts, his description on euhemerism must have remained a standard of truth for later Christian authors.<sup>34</sup>

To Augustine, Euhemerus is not as much the inventor of a theory, than he is a faithful source regarding the past. If other authors make similar observations, they may as well be included in the conversation. In this regard, it is important to not only consider medieval euhemerism as the transmission of Euhemerus' theory in the Middle Ages but also as the result of discussions and conflation by medieval authors of different sources regarding the human origins of the pagan gods.

This type of conflation between the theories of different authors is visible from early on. One of the earliest examples dates from before the Christian era and is found in the *De natura Deorum* I.118-119 of Cicero who mentioned Euhemerus alongside with Prodicus:

Quid, Prodicus Cius, qui ea quae prodessent hominum vitae deorum in numero habita esse dixit, quam tandem religionem reliquit ? Quid, qui aut fortis aut claros aut potentis viros tradunt post mortem ad deos pervenisse, eosque esse ipsos quos nos colere precari venerarique soleamus, nonne expertes sunt religionum omnium ? quae ratio maxime tractata ab Euhemero est, quem noster et interpretatus et secutus est praeter ceteros Ennius ;

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<sup>31</sup> Saint Augustine, *La Cité de Dieu*, 2:200.

<sup>32</sup> Saint Augustine, *Saint Augustine the City of God. Books I-VII*, 382.

<sup>33</sup> See Peter Garnsey argument according to which Augustine knew Lactantius' work "Lactantius and Augustine," in *Representations of Empire. Rome and the Mediterranean World*, ed. Alan K. Bowman et al., Proceedings of the British Academy 114 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 152-176.

<sup>34</sup> Roubekas, *An Ancient Theory of Religion*, 120.

ab Euhemero autem et mortes et sepulturae demonstrantur deorum ; utrum igitur hic confirmasse videtur religionem an penitus totam sustulisse ?

(Or Prodicus of Cos, who said that the gods were personifications of things beneficial to the life of man – pray what religion was left by his theory? Or those who teach that brave or famous or powerful men have been deified after death, and that it is these who are the real objects of the worship, prayers and adoration which we are accustomed to offer – are not they entirely devoid of all sense of religion? This theory was chiefly developed by Euhemerus, who was translated and imitated especially by our poet Ennius. Yet Euhemerus describes the death and burial of certain gods; are we then to think of him as upholding religion, or rather as utterly and entirely destroying it?)<sup>35</sup>

Prodicus' and Euhemerus' theories are broadly similar for Cicero and the main particularity of Euhemerus is his description of the tombs of the pseudo-gods. To him, Euhemerus' theory goes too far, as it not only destroys vain superstition but religion altogether. It is possible that this description of Euhemerus' thought was an inspiration for Minucius Felix (third century AD.), one of the first Christian apologists to mention Euhemerus and who wrote in his *Octavius* chapter 21:

Lege historicum scripta uel scripta sapientium: eadem mecum recognosces. Ob merita uirtutis aut muneris deos habitos Euhemerus exsequitur et eorum natales patrias sepulcra dinumerat et per prouincias monstrat, Dictaei Iouis et Apollinis Delphici et Phariae Isidis et Cereris Eleusinae. Prodicus adsumptos in deos loquitur qui errando inuentis nouis frugibus utilitati hominum profuerunt. In eandem sententiam et Persaeus philosophatur et adnectit inuentas fruges et frugum ipsarum repertores isdem nominibus, ut comicus sermo est « Venerem sine Libero et Cerere frigere ».<sup>36</sup>

(Read the works of the historians, or the writings of the philosophers, and you will come to the same conclusion as I. 'Euhemerus gives a list of persons who were accepted as gods because of their merits as courageous leaders or benefactors; he enumerates the days of which they were born and the places of their birth and burial, and points out, province by province, the local character of their cults, as of Dictatean Jupiter, Delphic Apollo, Pharian Isis, and Eleusinian Ceres. Prodicus declares that men were received among the gods who, in their wanderings, bestowed great blessings upon mankind by the discovery of new crops. The same line of argument is followed also by Persaeus who brings together under the same

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<sup>35</sup> Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, ed. E.H. Warmington, trans. H. Rackham, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933), 112-115.

<sup>36</sup> Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, Collection Des Universités de France (Paris: Les belles lettres, 1974), 32-33.

names the new crops and their discoverers, just as the comic poet says: “Venus pines away without Liber and Ceres.”)<sup>37</sup>

Minucius Felix describes the theory of Euhemerus and of Prodicus in a largely similar manner to Cicero, with Euhemerus’ mention of the tomb of the gods being his main point of concern. In this passage Minucius Felix also mentions Persaeus, another Greek author who is also mentioned in similar terms by Cicero in *De natura deorum* I.37-38:

At Persaeus eiusdem Zenonis auditor eos esse habitos deos a quibus aliqua magna utilitas ad vitae cultum esset inventa, ipsaque res utiles et salutare deorum esse vocabulis nuncupatas, ut ne hoc quidem diceret, illa inventa esse deorum, sed ipsa divina; quo quid absurdius quam aut res sordidas atque deformis deorum honore adficere aut homines iam morte deletos reponere in deos, quorum omnis cultus esset futurus in luctu?

(Persaeus, another pupil of Zeno, says that men have deified those persons who have made some discovery of special utility for civilization, and that useful and health-giving things have themselves been called by divine names; he did not even say that they were discoveries of the gods, but speaks of them as actually divine. But what could be more ridiculous than to award divine honours to things mean and ugly, or to give the rank of gods to men now dead and gone, whose worship could only take the form of lamentation?)<sup>38</sup>

Cicero’s and Minucius Felix’s account of Persaeus’ views evokes Lactantius’ account of Zeus who gave his grandfather’s name, Uranus, to the heaven, hence conflating the great man, and the concept, or object, worshiped. This relation between the name of the pseudo-god and the name of the object worshiped is a point of dissension between Lactantius and Minucius Felix. On one occasion, Minucius Felix described the deification of Saturn and stated that the pseudo-god was called “son of heaven” because he was virtuous or because of his sudden arrival in Italy, as he had fallen from the sky.<sup>39</sup> Lactantius explicitly contradicted this passage from the *Octavius* and explained that Zeus wanted to commemorate the name of his grandfather and thus named the sky after him.<sup>40</sup>

Another important source of information regarding the birth of pagan religion was naturally the Bible itself which contains, in the Book of Wisdom, a description of the birth of paganism and

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<sup>37</sup> Tertullian and Minucius Felix, *Tertullian Apologetical Works and Minucius Felix Octavius*, trans. Rudolf Arbesmann, Emily Joseph Daly, and Edwin A. Quain (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1950), 360-361.

<sup>38</sup> Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, 40-41.

<sup>39</sup> Minucius Felix 23.11-12.

<sup>40</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 87.

idolatry which, as in Diodorian euhemerism, is explained as two events in succession, first the veneration of nature, and then the deification of human beings:

For all people who were ignorant of God were foolish by nature; and they were unable from the good things that are seen to know the one who exists, nor did they recognize the artisan while paying heed to his works; but they supposed that either fire or wind or swift air, or the circle of the stars, or turbulent water, or the luminaries of heaven were the gods that rule the world. If through delight in the beauty of these things people assumed them to be gods, let them know how much better than these is their Lord, for the author of beauty created them. And if people were amazed at their power and working, let them perceive from them how much more powerful is the one who formed them. For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator. Yet these people are little to be blamed, for perhaps they go astray while seeking God and desiring to find him. For while they live among his works, they keep searching, and they trust in what they see, because the things that are seen are beautiful. Yet again, not even they are to be excused; for if they had the power to know so much that they could investigate the world, how did they fail to find sooner the Lord of these things? (Wisdom 13:1-19)

And then:

For a father, consumed with grief at an untimely bereavement, made an image of his child, who had been suddenly taken from him; he now honored as a god what was once a dead human being, and handed on to his dependents secret rites and initiations. Then the ungodly custom, grown strong with time, was kept as a law, and at the command of monarchs carved images were worshiped. When people could not honor monarchs in their presence, since they lived at a distance, they imagined their appearance far away, and made a visible image of the king whom they honored, so that by their zeal they might flatter the absent one as though present. (Wisdom 14:15-17)

It is noteworthy that the Book of Wisdom's original language is Greek and was likely produced by an author based in Alexandria.<sup>41</sup> The work is generally regarded as designed for the hellenophone Jewish community of Alexandria to give to their community the philosophical tools to answers to pagan arguments.<sup>42</sup> The text's similarity with Euhemerus' work may be due

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<sup>41</sup> It has been argued in the past that the Book of Wisdom may have been the Greek translation of a Hebrew or Aramean original. More modern scholarships tend to reject these claims in favor for an original Greek interpretation. Maurice Gilbert, *La Sagesse de Salomon, The Wisdom of Solomon. Recueil d'études, Collected Essays*, Analecta Biblica 189 (Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2011), 30.

<sup>42</sup> Gilbert, *La Sagesse de Salomon*, 43-44.

to an indirect influence of Euhemerus on its authors. Roubekas, supports the argumentation of David Winston according to whom the Book of Wisdom is not based of Euhemerus' work itself but on a later occurrence of the theory and points out the differences between the biblical book and Euhemerus' work.<sup>43</sup> Indeed the two texts do not attempt to explain the same phenomenon. Diodorian euhemerism distinguishes between the origin of two religious beliefs: the belief in the heavenly gods from the observation of heaven, and the belief in anthropomorphic gods, due to the deification of mortal men. In the Book of Wisdom, the two branches of euhemerism are the source of false beliefs. The Biblical narrative does not explain the origin of an erroneous religious belief as opposed to a true one but describes the origin of two distinct false religious beliefs: nature worship, which stems from the observation of heaven, and idolatry, which arose from ruler deification. In place of these two erroneous sets of beliefs the biblical narrative proposes a third way: the belief in a transcendent, unique, god. Jonas Wellendorf recently commented on the influence of the Book of Wisdom on Snorri's prologue to the *Edda*.<sup>44</sup> I will come back to this question in the part of the study about Snorri's *Edda*.<sup>45</sup>

As in Euhemerism, the Book of Wisdom connects deification of human beings with kingship rather than with euergetism.<sup>46</sup> Like Euhemerus' narrative the Book of Wisdom displays a twofold structure, which first depicts the birth of religious belief through the observation of heaven, and only then the emergence of the belief in anthropomorphic gods through the deification of mortal men. In verses 13-13 of the Book of Wisdom, the reasoning of the fowl men who worship nature is remarkably similar to that of Uranus in Euhemerus' work. The difference is not apparent as much in the narrative, as it is in the moral attitude of the narrator toward the characters. The similarity of this passage with Latin versions of euhemerism has been remarked in the 9<sup>th</sup> century by Raban Maur who pointed out the resemblance of this passage with the first book of Lactantius' *Institutiones Divinae*.<sup>47</sup>

An important difference between Euhemerus' euhemerism and its biblical counterpart is the Bible's focus on idolatry specifically. This matter is naturally important for Jews and Christians

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<sup>43</sup> Roubekas, *An Ancient Theory of Religion*, 131.

<sup>44</sup> Jonas Wellendorf, "Zoroaster, Saturn, and Óðinn: The Loss of Language and the Rise of Idolatry," in *The Performance of Christian and Pagan Storyworlds: Non-Canonical Chapters of the History of Nordic Medieval Literature*, ed. Lars Boje Mortensen, Tuomas M.S. Lehtonen, and Alexandra Bergholm, *Medieval Identities: Socio-Cultural Spaces 3* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 152.

<sup>45</sup> See section 4.3.

<sup>46</sup> Euergetism refers to the practice for wealthy patrons to dispend their benefactions upon a community, most often through ostentatious gifts, such as architectural constructions. On this topic see Paul Veynes' thesis *Le pain et le cirque : sociologie historique d'un pluralisme politique*, L'Univers historique (Paris: Seuil, 1976).

<sup>47</sup> Gilbert, *La Sagesse de Salomon*, 157.

alike as the interdiction to produce idols is the first of the Ten Commandments. A similar emphasis may be found in Lactantius' *Institutiones divinae* I.XV.1-4 immediately following his description of the theory of Euhemerus:

Quibus ex rebus cum constet illos homines, fuisse, non est obscurum qua ratione dii coeperint nominari. Si enim nulli reges ante Saturnum uel Uranum fuerunt propter hominum raritatem, qui agrestem uitam sine ullo rectore uiuebant, non est dubium quin illis temporibus homines regem ipsum totamque gentem mactare summis laudibus ac nouis honoribus coeperint, ut etiam deos appellarent, siue ob miraculum uirtutis – hoc uere putabant rudes adhuc et simplices – siue, ut fieri solet, in adulationem praesentis potentiae, siue ob beneficia quibus erant ad humanitatem compositi. Deinde ipsi reges cum cari fuissent his quorum uitam composuerant, magnum sui desiderium mortui reliquerunt. Itaque homines eorum simulacra finxerunt, ut haberent aliquod ex imaginum contemplatione solacium, progressique longius per amorem memoriam defunctorum colere coeperunt, ut et gratiam referre bene meritis uiderentur et successores eorum adlicerent ad bene imperandi cupiditatem.<sup>48</sup>

(That makes it clear that they were men; it is also clear why they began to be called gods. If there were no kings before Saturn or Uranus, because of the lack of population – life was rustic, and people lived without rulers – then no doubt that was the time when people began to honour a particular king and all his family with special adoration and new distinctions, to the point of actually calling them gods, either for their remarkable good qualities (an opinion which would be honestly held by people still rough and simple) or, as tends to be the case, in deference to their actual power, or because of their welcome promotion of civilisation. Since those kings were highly regarded by the people whose lives they had civilised, at their deaths a great yearning ensued for them. Hence the statues of them that people put up, so that by gazing at the likenesses they could find some consolation; taking it a bit further, out of their affection they began to cultivate a memory of the dead, partly to show their gratitude to men who had served them well and partly to spur their successors to a desire to be good rulers themselves.)<sup>49</sup>

This narrative, with its reference to Saturn and Uranus, and to idolatry as originating in the worship of kings' statues, shows influence of both Euhemerus' euhemerism and of the biblical narrative from the Book of Wisdom. In addition to this narrative, Lactantius produces another

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<sup>48</sup> Lactance, *Institutions Divines. Livre I*, ed. Pierre Monat, Sources Chrétiennes 326 (Paris: Les éditions du cerf, 1986), 152-154.

<sup>49</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 92.

explanation for the birth of pagan religions in the *Institutiones Divinae* II.XIII.9-13. Here the author not only addresses the question of Roman religion of paganism in general, but details that according to him it started in Egypt right after the Flood of Noah:

[P]rofulgi ad quaerendas sibi novas sedes huc atque illuc dispersi omnes insulas et orbem totum repleuerunt et a stirpe sanctae radices auulsi novos sibi mores atque instituta pro arbitrio condiderunt. Sed omnium primi qui Aegyptum occupauerant caelestia suspicere atque adorare coeperunt. Et quia neque domiciliis tegebantur propter aeris qualitatem nec ullis in ea regione nubibus subtexitur caelum, cursus siderum et effectus notauerunt, dum mea saepe uenerantes curiosius ac liberius intuentur. Postea deinde portentificas animalium figuras quas colerent commenti sunt quibusdam prodigiis inducti, quorum mox auctores aperiemus. Ceteri autem qui per terram dispersi fuerant, admirantes elementa mundi, caelum, solem, terram, mare, sine ullis imaginibus ac templis uenerabantur et his sacrificia in aperto celebrabant, donec processu temporum potentissimis regibus templa et simulacra fecerunt eaque uictimis et odoribus colere instituerunt. Sic aberrantes a notitia Dei gentes esse coeperunt. Errant igitur qui deorum cultus ab exordio rerum fuisse contendunt et priorem esse gentilitatem quam Dei religionem, quam putant posterius inuentam, quia fontem atque originem ueritatis ignorant. Nunc ad principium mundi reuertamur.<sup>50</sup>

([F]orced to it by need, and they spread this way and that, occupying every island and the whole earth; they lost contact with their original holy stock, and set up new ways of life for themselves and new institutions of their choice. Those who occupied Egypt were first to start gazing at the skies and worshipping what they saw there. Because they lived without roofs overhead, the climate being what it is, and because no clouds obscure the sky in those parts, they could mark the orbits of the stars and what they brought to pass; frequent worship increased the care and the scope of their watching. In due course, persuaded by certain portents whose actual authors we will reveal in a moment, they devised figures of animals for worship, to generate portents. The rest of them, once spread all over the earth, came to wonder at elements of the world, worshipping sky, sun, earth and sea, but without statues and temples, and they made sacrifice to them in the open, until in the process of time they made temples and statues for their most powerful kings and began to worship the statues with animal sacrifice and incense. Separation from knowledge of God thus began to produce the Gentiles. It is a mistake to claim that worship of gods has existed from the start of things, and that worship of God came only after pagan rites; it is only thought to be

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<sup>50</sup> Lactantius, *Institutions Divines: Livre II*, trans. Pierre Monat (Paris: Les éditions du cerf, 1987), 182-184.



a later invention because the fountainhead of truth was unknown. Let us now go back to the beginning of the world.)<sup>51</sup>

Here again Lactantius uses two typical euhemeristic themes: the worship of nature stemming from the observation of heaven, and the deification of powerful kings. As in classical euhemerism as well as in the Book of Wisdom, Lactantius connects deification with kingship rather than with euergetism. This time, however, Lactantius departs from the classical euhemeristic context of Panchaea but sets his narrative within a biblical framework. His aim is to reverse the accusation of pagans regarding the recent apparition of Christianity and to demonstrate the anteriority of monotheism over polytheism.<sup>52</sup> As in the Book of Wisdom, Lactantius does not make a distinction between true religion which arose from the observation of heaven, and false beliefs which emerged from ruler deification. In a Judeo-Christian perspective, polytheism, be it anthropomorphic or not, is false. The source for the knowledge of God is not primarily the observation of nature but revelation. As Gilbert puts it:

Israël n'avait pas besoin de raisonnement philosophique pour se convaincre de l'existence de Dieu. Guidé pas à pas au cours des siècles par le Seigneur, avec qui il a « coupé une Alliance », Israël perçoit peu à peu la suprématie absolue d'Adonaï, non seulement sur les autres peuples, les ennemis voisins et finalement tous les hommes, mais également sur les cosmos lui-même. De l'existence de Dieu, personne ne doute en Israël : comment pourrait-on hésiter sur la réalité du Dieu dont on fait si souvent l'expérience dans sa propre histoire ?

(Israel did not need philosophical reasoning to convince itself of God's existence. Guided step by step through the centuries by the Lord, with whom it had "cut a Covenant", Israel perceives gradually the absolute supremacy of Adonai, not only on the other peoples, the neighboring enemies and ultimately every men, but also on the cosmos itself. Nobody doubt of God's existence in Israel: how could one doubt of the reality of the God which they experienced so often in their own history?)<sup>53</sup>

While it is true that the revelation is seen as the primarily access to the knowledge of God, the observation of nature and philosophical reasoning has evidently not always been forbidden altogether in theology. We find, as early as in Augustine's texts, reference to the "book of

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<sup>51</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 159.

<sup>52</sup> Lactantius argues that the first pseudo-gods were born only shortly before the Trojan war and that, as such, the pagan religion is not ancient. Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 231-232.

<sup>53</sup> Gilbert, *La Sagesse de Salomon*, 11. My translation.

nature” as opposed to the “book of scriptures” as a way to understand God.<sup>54</sup> Still, one of the characteristics of early Christian euhemerism is the association between the observation of nature and the birth of idolatry.

Lactantius’ *Institutiones divinae* along with the Book of Wisdom are the most comprehensive sources of euhemeristic thought for early Christians. Both texts share common characteristics absent from Euhemerus’ version of the theory. The Book of Wisdom and the *Institutiones divinae* both present a distinction between the worship of nature and idolatry. This sort of distinction is an essential aspect of Euhemerus’ theory which makes a distinction between heavenly gods without human forms and anthropomorphic deities. But in Judeo-Christian euhemerism nature worship is as false as idolatry. Their euhemerism does not serve to explain the origin of two kinds of religiosities, one good and the other bad, but to explain the origin of two kinds of false religion belief. In that, Euhemerus’ euhemerism and its Judeo-Christian counterparts are indeed structurally similar. However, as myths they do not exactly have the same subject matter.<sup>55</sup> The subject matter of Euhemerus’ euhemerism is the birth of religion while the subject matter of Judeo-Christian euhemerism is the birth of false religions exclusively.

We may also note that despite its structural similarities with the work of Euhemerus the *Institutiones divinae* adds a new aspect to the twofold structure of traditional euhemeristic narratives. In Euhemerus’ narrative humanity ignores the existence of the gods before Uranus’ observations. In a Christian perspective, this affirmation is problematic, as God interacted with humanity since the beginning of times. Thus, in a Christian perspective there must be a point in time when humanity forsake God’s revealed religion and chose to follow a new one. To Lactantius, as he described in the *Institutiones divinae* II.XIII.7-9, the invention of new religion coincides with the division of mankind between Noah’s sons after the Flood:

Haec fuit prima gens quae Deum ignoravit, quoniam princeps eius et conditor cultum Dei a patre non accepit, melectus ab eo : itaque ignorantiam diuinitatis minoribus suis reliquit. Ab hac gente proximi quique populi multitudine increscente fluxerunt. Ipsius autem patris posterii Hebraei dicti : penes quos religio Dei resedit. Sed et ab his postea multiplicato in immensum numero cum eos angustiae locorum suorum capere non possent, tum

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<sup>54</sup> Even though Augustine is the main influence for medieval reflections on the “book of nature” the idea may be traced back to Origen. See Paul M. Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy. Creator and Creation in Early Christian Theology and Piety*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 318-322.

<sup>55</sup> See 1.4.1 for a discussion on the subject matter of myths.

adulescentes uel missi a parentibus uel sua sponte, cum rerum penuria cogeret, profugi ad quaerendas sibi nouas sedes huc atque illuc dispersi omnes insulas et orbem totum repleuerunt et a stirpe sanctae radices auulsi nouos sibi mores atque instituta pro arbitrio condiderunt.<sup>56</sup>

(These were the first people not to know God, because their leader and founder, after the curse upon him, did not follow his father in the worship of God, thus bequeathing to his descendants ignorance of the godhead. From this nation came all the neighbouring peoples in ever growing numbers. Noah's own descendants were called Hebrews: worship of God became their abiding thing. Later, even they multiplied beyond measure, and when their land became too small for them, the young men went off, on their parents' instructions or of their own accord, to look for new homes for themselves, forced to it by need, and they spread this way and that, occupying every island and the whole earth; they lost contact with their original holy stock, and set up new ways of life for themselves and new institutions of their choice.)<sup>57</sup>

Lactantius' explanation is twofold, the first people to forget God are the descendants of Ham, Noah's son. As Ham was rejected by his father he was not initiated in the religion, and consequently the people descending from him are ignorant of God's revelation. As Lactantius explains, new schisms occurred when the needs of the Hebrews led to them migrating outside their native land, thus forming new kinds of societies, and inventing new customs and religions. As we will see, this feature is characteristic of Christian euhemerism and is found in many medieval euhemeristic accounts.

## **2.1.5. Medieval Euhemerism**

### **2.1.5.1. Isidore of Seville**

This alliance of biblical and classical motives is one of the characteristics of the nascent medieval euhemerism. One of the most striking examples of this is Isidore of Seville's description of the origin of paganism in the *Etymologiae* VIII.XI.1-5:

Quos pagani deos asserunt, homines olim fuisse produntur, et pro uniuscuiusque vita vel meritis coli apud suos post mortem coeperunt, ut apud Aegyptum Isis, apud Cretam Iouis, apud Mauros Iuba, apud Latinos Faunus, apud Romanos Quirinus. Eodem quoque modo

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<sup>56</sup> Lactantius, *Institutions divines: Livre II*, 182.

<sup>57</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 158-159.

apud Athenas Minerva, apud Samum Iuno, apud Paphos Venus, apud Lemnos Vulcanus, apud Naxos Liber, apud Delos Apollo. In quorum etiam laudibus accesserunt et poetae, et compositis carminibus in caelum eos sustulerunt. Nam quorundam et inventions atrium cultu peperisse dicuntur, ut Aesculapio medicina, Vulcano fabrica. Ab actibus autem vocantur, ut Mercurius, quod mercibus praeest; Liber a libertate. Fuerunt etiam et quidam viri fortes aut urbium conditores, quibus mortuis homines, qui eos dilexerunt, simulacra finxerunt, ut haberent aliquod ex imaginum contemplatione solacium; paulatim hunc errorem persuadentibus daemonibus ita in posteris inrepsisse, ut quos illi pro sola nominis memoria honoraverunt, successores deos existimarent atque colerent. Simulacrorum usus exortus est, cum ex desiderio mortuorum constituerentur imagines vel effigies, tamquam in caelum receptis, pro quibus se in terris daemones colendi supposuerunt, et sibi sacrificari a deceptis et perdiditis persuaserunt.<sup>58</sup>

(Those who the pagans assert are gods are revealed to have once been humans, and after their death they began to be worshipped among their people because of the life and merit of each of them, as Isis in Egypt, Jupiter in Crete, Iuba among the Moors, Faunus among the Latins, and Quirinus among the Romans. It was the same with Minerva in Athens, Juno in Samos, Venus in Paphos, Vulcan in Lemnos, Liber in Naxos and Apollo in Delos. Poets joined in their praises of these and by the songs they composed carried them up to the sky. In their cults they are said to have brought about the discovery of certain arts: there is medicine by Aesculapius, forging by Vulcan. Further, they are named from their activities as Mercury (*Mercurius*), because he excels at commerce (*merx*), Liber (*Liber*) from Liberty (*libertas*). Again, there were certain powerful men, or founders of cities, for whom, after they had died, the people who had been fond of them made likenesses, so that they might have some solace from contemplating these images. However, at the urging of demons, this error gradually crept into later generations in such a way that those, whom people had honored only for the memory of their name, their successors deemed as gods and worshipped.

The use of Likenesses arose when, out of grief for the dead, images or effigies were set up, as if in place of those who had been received into heaven demons substituted themselves to be worshipped on earth, and persuaded deceived and lost people to make sacrifices to themselves.)<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Etymologie o origini*, ed. and trans. Angelo Valastro Canale, (Turin: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 2004), 1:672.

<sup>59</sup> Isidore of Seville, *The "Etymologies" of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 183-184.

Here, Isidore uses Lactantius alongside the Biblical narrative. His list of peoples and of their titular deities is almost identical to that found in the *Institutiones divinae* I.XV.8-9 and his reference to grief as the origin of idolatry is clearly connected to the account found in the Book of Wisdom.<sup>60</sup> To these two motives, Isidore adds yet another one: demons using statues to receive the worship of human beings. Demons were in fact already connected to paganism in the work of Lactantius, where they are told to have taught men to build idols.<sup>61</sup> We may note that contrary to Lactantius, Isidore of Seville does not speak of the loss of God's original religion.

Another characteristic of medieval euhemerism visible in this passage is its loss of polemical content. In this passage, Isidore refers to deifications of powerful men, as well as to *postmortem* deification arising from mourning. Isidore's explanation of the pagan gods is not strictly devoid of religious criticism, but the author is more interested in situating these characters within world history and explaining their contribution to civilization. We may also note that he uses euhemerism along with demonism and ascribes the birth of religious sacrifice to the demonic influence rather than to the pseudo-gods themselves. Most medieval euhemerist writings are of the same kind, either encyclopedic or historiographic. The work Ado of Vienne, Peter Comestor and Vincent of Beauvais are the most notable users of this theory in the European Middle Ages. In their writings the gods find a place among the great men of the past. Ado of Vienne is also remarkable for its use of euhemerism without reference to demonism, diminishing thus even more the polemical nature of euhemerism. Their deification is perceived less as the fruit of deception than the consequence of the natural admiration of the people for great men and heroes. Sez nec argues that:

our medieval compilers feel themselves indebted to all these great men; they also feel themselves their heirs. For civilization is a treasure which has been handed down through the centuries; and as no further distinction is made between the sacred and profane precursors of Christianity who first forged that treasure, it is at last possible for medieval man unreservedly and even with pride to claim the heritage of antiquity. In the twelfth century, cultivated men were already aware of the Greco-Roman origins of their culture.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> For a discussion on the sources of Isidore in this passage see Katherine Nell MacFarlane, "Isidore of Seville on the Pagan Gods (Origines VIII. 11)," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 70, no. 3 (1980): 1-40.

<sup>61</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 162.

<sup>62</sup> Jean Sez nec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods*, trans. Barbara F Sessions, Bollingen Series 38 (New York: Pantheon books, 1953), 18.

This break in the history of euhemerism has also been remarked by Paul Alphandéry who drew a distinction between two periods of Christian euhemerism: the apologetic writings and then the medieval euhemeristic works, written after the disappearance of paganism from Europe.<sup>63</sup> In the absence of a living pagan tradition, the apologetic tone of patristic euhemeristic writings became obsolete. Instead, its focus on ancient history and on the origin of important social institutions such as monarchy and religion made it a theory perfectly suitable for historical writings. As Jean Seznec noted: “euhemerism at a rather early date loses its polemic venom to become instead an auxiliary to historical research.”<sup>64</sup>

In medieval historiographical sources, the gods are the vector of civilization, and Seznec connects this idea with the notion of *translatio imperii et studii*.<sup>65</sup> In the medieval mind, euhemerism became connected with the notion that the pagans had a wisdom, and even spiritual intuition of their own. As Paul Alphandéry remarked:

[...] une enquête sur l'évhémérisme poursuivi jusqu'en ses conséquences les plus indirectes rejoindrait l'étude de ce que nous avons appelé plus haut la « tradition latérale » du moyen âge. Cette tradition n'est pas, en effet, seulement représentée par ceux qui, ni chrétiens, ni juifs, ont eu une intuition de la vérité chrétienne et l'ont annoncée — les sibylles et les prophètes « à côté » —, mais encore par ceux qui ont été « grands clercs » et ont transmis, maintenu d'âge en âge les connaissances, les « arts », la sagesse hermétique ou ésotérique, en un mot les « philosophes ».

([...] a research on euhemerism, pushed into its most indirect consequences would touch upon the study of what we called earlier the “lateral tradition” of the Middle Ages. Indeed, this tradition is not only represented by those who, neither Christians, nor Jews, had an intuition of the Christian truth and proclaimed it, the sibyls and the prophets “on the side,” but also by those who were “great clergymen” and transmitted, maintained from an era to another, the knowledge, the “arts”, the hermetic or esoteric wisdom, in one word the “philosophers”).<sup>66</sup>

As we shall see the association between euhemerism and the *translatio studii* is an essential characteristic of medieval Scandinavian euhemerism.

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<sup>63</sup> Paul Alphandéry, “L'Évhémérisme et les débuts de l'histoire des religions au moyen âge,” *Revue de l'histoire Des Religions*, no. 109 (1934): 5-6.

<sup>64</sup> Seznec, *The Survival*, 13.

<sup>65</sup> Seznec, *The Survival*, 18-19.

<sup>66</sup> Alphandéry, “L'Évhémérisme,” 27. My translation.

### 2.1.5.2. Martin of Braga's *De Correctione Rusticorum* and Its Translations

Another important source about the birth of pagan religions is the sermon *De falsis diis* (On the false gods) which was originally written in Old English by Ælfric in the late 10<sup>th</sup> century. *De falsis diis* was known in Scandinavia through the Old Norse translation found in the 14<sup>th</sup> century manuscript *Hauksbók* under the title *Um þat hvaðan ótrú hófst* (On how false belief originated).<sup>67</sup> It is likely that the text was already known in Scandinavia in the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century as Frankis demonstrated that passages from *Helgisaga Ólafs Haraldssonar* (Legendary Saga of Saint Olaf) have been influenced by the homily.<sup>68</sup> *De falsis diis* is designed as a systematic criticism of pagan religion. The first part of its narrative is structurally similar to that of the *Institutiones divinae*. It describes the initial ideal order instituted by God, followed by the fall of mankind and its forgetfulness of God's commands. I will quote here the Old Norse translation of the homily from the *Hauksbók*:

Þeir tóku til og létu gera stopul og griote sua hafan at þeir vildu með þui koma i himiriki. En þa sa Drottinn var mikileti þeira, og kom þar sialfr er þeir varo er þa gerning skildu gera, og uilti sua firir þeim at engi uissi huat annar sagðe eða gerði. En þeir menn voro tueir og siautigir. En af því eru nu sua margar tungur i þessum heimi. En þeir menn aller er þa voro vrðu sua vsattir at huerr þeira for a sins vegar. En su gerning fell oll niðr. Þa foro þeir til ymisi landa en [mannkyn] vox þa [æfar] og varð suikit af hinum sama diofli er Adam sueic fyrr, sua at þeir gerðu ser guð og sao eigi skynsemdar augum a varn Drottinn er þa skop. Sumir blotaðu sol, sumir, mana, sumir stiornur, sumir æld, sumir vatn, sumir iorð; firir þui blotaðu þeir hana at þar fœðist huatvetna við hana; firir þui vatn er alt mindi dœyia ef þat veri eigi; firir þui æld at hann er varmr við at sitia; en af þui sol og oll himin tungl at þaðan kemr lios alt i heim þenna. En þeir mattu þat uita, ef þeir vildi at þui hyggia at sa er einn Guð er þat alt skop monnum til hialpar.

(They set to and made a tower of stone so high that they wished to get to heaven with it. But then the Lord saw their pride, and came there himself where the people were who should do that work, and so misled them that no one knew what the other was saying or doing. And there were seventy-two men and for that reason there are now that many

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<sup>67</sup> The specific passage is found in AM 544 4to from the 4r line 7 to 8r line 12.

<sup>68</sup> John Frankis, *From Old English to Old Norse. A Study of Old English Texts Translated into Old Norse with An Edition of English and Norse Versions of Ælfric's "De Falsis Diis,"* Medium Ævum Monographs 33 (Oxford: The society for the study of medieval languages and literature, 2016), 95-108.

languages in this world. And all those men who were there became so quarrelsome that each of them went off on his own way. And that building completely fell down. Then they went to various lands, but mankind increased greatly and was betrayed by the same devil who had previously betrayed Adam, so that they made gods for themselves and did not look with understanding on our Lord who created them. Some worshipped the sun, some the moon, some fire, some water, some the earth: they worshipped the latter because everything whatever is nourished by it; water because everything would die without it, and fire because it is warm to sit by; and the sun and all the stars of the heavens because from them come all the light in this world. But they could have known, if they had cared to think about it, that he alone is God who created everything for the benefit of men.)<sup>69</sup>

In this passage as in Lactantius' work, the first stage of the euhemeristic narrative is not the discovery of the heavenly gods, but the end of the primitive ideal order where mankind was united in the worship of God, which the author of the homily connects to the episode of the tower of Babel as recounted in Genesis 11:1-9. Only then does the narrator speak of the apparition of nature worship. On this matter, *Um þat hvaðan ótrú hófst* is as unforgiving with paganism as was the Book of Wisdom and states that pagans could have realized the existence of a creator god "if they had cared to think about it". As in the biblical narrative, paganism comes from the absence of rational thinking. In this case the author nonetheless provides an explanation, if not an excuse, for the pagans' mistake as he states that they were "betrayed by the same devil who had previously betrayed Adam." (oc varð suikit af hinum sama diofli er Adam sueic fyrr.) Following the traditional euhemeristic pattern, the author discusses the question of the deification of human beings immediately after his demonstration about nature worship:

Enda fengu þeir enn meiri villudom, oc blotaðu menn þa er rikir oc ramir varo i þessum heimi siðan er þeir voro dauðir, oc hugðu þat at þeir mindu orka iammiclu [dádðir] sem þa er þeir voro kuikir. Maðr var sa einn mioc ríkr oc bio i cey nokorre, er het Saturnus, en hann Saturnus var illr maðr: hann drap sono sina alla, huern sem borenn var, oc gerði at mat ser oc at siðan.

(Moreover, they adopted a greater error and worshipped men who had been powerful and mighty in this world after they had died, and thought that they would be capable of equally great deeds as when they were alive. There was one very powerful man living in a certain

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<sup>69</sup> Frankis, *From Old English*, 129-131.



island who was called Saturn, and this Saturn was an evil man: he killed all his sons, each as he was born, and made them into his food and then ate them.)<sup>70</sup>

Then follows a description of the main heathen gods of the Greco-Roman pantheon. Among them Jupiter is identified with Þórr and Mercure with Óðinn. We may note that in this account euhemerism is solely characterized as *post-mortem* deification of powerful men.

### 2.1.5.3. The *Elucidarium* and its Old Norse Translation

Another kind of answer to the same question is found in the *Elucidarium* written in the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century by Honorius Augustodunensis which was itself translated into Old Norse in the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. This text takes the form of a dialogue between a student and a master which allows the author to explain basic principles, of Christian faith. In one of his many questions, the student enquires about the origin of pagan religion and specifically addresses the problem of how false religions could be born although everybody originally worshipped the one true God:

« 2.75 » <Discipvulus> Ef aller gofgoðv einn gvð i vpp have hvaðan hofs blot skyrgvða

<Magister> Risar gørðo stapvul havan þan er babel var kall[-]aðr en hann var hor sextvgv skeiða ok fiogora skeiða en skeið er stvndvm at længð fimtan faðmar en stvndvm xx istað þeim er nv er hin mikla bab[-]bilon istað þeim var fyrstr konvungr Nemroð þar reð siðan firir Dinsv hann let gøra likneskiv eftir feðr sinvm davðvm ensa het belvs ok bavð hann alþyð[y][-]rikis sins at gofga likneskivna Avk toko þar til døma aðrer uti fra Sva sem rvn verir blotoðv Romolv En kitar men þor ok [[238.XVIII:1r]] oden sem ritad er. Hræd[-]jsla gerði fyst goda fiolda j heime. En dioflar geingv inn j liknesken. og tældv lydenn j svórvm sinvm.

(« 2.75 » Disciple: If everybody worshipped one God in the beginning, how did idolatry arise?

Master: The giants built a high tower called Babel (Gen. 11:9), and it was 60 and 4 courses high. One course is sometimes 15 and sometimes 20 fathoms long. In this place Babylon the Great stands now. The first king was Nimrod (Gen. 10:8-10) Then Dinus ruled there. He had a statue made of his dead father, who was called Belus, and he ordered all the people of his kingdom to worship this statue. Others from abroad copied this example, such as the Romans who worshipped Romulus, and the Cretans who worshipped Thor and Odin, as is

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<sup>70</sup> Frankis, *From Old English*, 131-133.

written: Fear initially created the numerous gods in this world. But the devils entered the statue and deceived the people with their answers.)<sup>71</sup>

The master sees the kings' tyranny as the origin for idolatry. We must note that in this narrative, as in that of Lactantius, there is no period of transition between monotheism and idolatry, God's religion is not forgotten, it is merely replaced by another religious tradition. This narrative is like that of the Book of Wisdom but reverses the relation between the father and the son: in the Book of Wisdom the father built a statue in the memory of his deceased son, but it is the inverse in the *Elucidarius*. To this first explanation regarding the birth of idolatry, the *Elucidarius* adds a second, demonism, to explain the continuation of idolatry even after the death of the tyrannical kings. The phrasing shows that the author recognized that euhemerism and demonism did not answer to the same questions and that euhemerism alone could hardly explain how idolatry continued even after the death of the tyrannical kings who instituted it.<sup>72</sup> The narrative of *Elucidarius* resembles that of the Bible, the relationship, however, is inverted, as in this version of the story the son makes a statue of the father. The reason for the construction of the statue is also unclear. Was it built out of grief, as in the Bible? Or to ideologically enforce his family's right to rule? In any case, this narrative is structurally closer to Lactantius' euhemerism than it is to classical or biblical euhemerism as it lacks any reference to the first branch of the theory.

## 2.2. The Plurality of Medieval Euhemerism

As seen throughout this discussion, the term *euhemerism* has been used to refer to a variety of theories relating differently to Euhemerus' work. The most specific and complex of these definitions is the one developed by modern scholars in their effort to reconstruct Euhemerus' work. It can be defined as a twofold work, composed of the description of the peculiar societies of Hieria and Panchaea on one hand, and on the other hand the narrative regarding the so-called earthly gods. This narrative starts with Uranus' discovery of the heavenly gods and introductions of both religious sacrifice and monarchy. The second main character of this narrative is Zeus, Uranus' grandson, who deified his grandfather as well as himself. Zeus is a conqueror who circled Earth five times and began to be worshiped as a god in various places. As such, Euhemerus' euhemerism is as much concerned with deification *ante mortem* as it is

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<sup>71</sup> Evelyn Scherabon Firchow, ed., *The Old Norse Elucidarius*, Studies in German Literature, Linguistics and Culture (Drawer: Camden House, 1992), 70-71.

<sup>72</sup> On the topic see Annette Lassen, "The Tower of Babel and the Diffusion of World Languages and Religions," in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North. Research and Reception*, vol. 1, *From the Middle Ages to c. 1830*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), 105-118.

with deification postmortem. Deification is the product of political power rather than benefactions, as the pseudo-gods are rulers and conquerors rather than cultural heroes. Euhemerus' theory can be seen as a theory of the origin of Greek religion alone or as the origin of the belief in anthropomorphic gods as found in various, if not all, religious traditions. I believe that the reference to Zeus' frequent travels all around the world suggests that the pseudo-god must be seen as the originator of the belief in anthropomorphic gods in the whole world.

In modern scholarship, euhemerism is often used as a convenient term referring to the theory that religion originated from the deification of human beings. In this acceptance the term refers only to the second branch of euhemerism and does not include the narrative regarding the discovery of heavenly gods as part of the theory. Most often the word euhemerism is applied indiscriminately whether the process of deification is applied to kings or cultural heroes, or whether it happens post or *ante mortem*. The fact that euhemerism most often refers to this kind of theory, rendering only partially Euhemerus' narrative, is certainly due to the importance of Ennian euhemerism in the Christian tradition and in the modern reception of the theory. Euhemerism circulated in Europe mostly through references written by Christian apologists and theologians. These authors were specifically interested in the second branch of the theory which was a convenient intellectual tool to confront paganism. The first branch, however, remained of little interest for Christian apologists and nearly disappeared from theological and historical writing after Diodorus Siculus and Lactantius and was absent from Augustine's work and in Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*.

Medieval euhemerism has various sources. We ought not to be deceived by the modern name of the theory, "euhemerism". This conception of the theory as descending chiefly from the writings of Euhemerus does not accurately reflect the medieval reality. The most important sources for medieval euhemeristic narratives were Lactantius and the Bible. Lactantius drew heavily on the Latin translation of Euhemerus, but his understanding of the birth of pagan religions is largely shaped by the biblical narrative. The most visible sign of this biblical influence is Lactantius' focus on statue worship rather than on mere anthropomorphism as seen in Euhemerus' euhemerism. The biblical influence here is characterized by an explanation unknown in Euhemerus' account: the first idol as being originally a memorial for the deceased member of a royal family. This motive, which comes from the Book of Wisdom is found in the *Institutiones divinae*, in the *Etymologiae*, and in the Old Norse *Elucidarius*, but not in the Old Norse version of Ælfric's sermon, which draws upon the Book of Wisdom for its description of nature worship. However, the explanation for anthropomorphic religion is more like

Euhemerus' euhemerism, as it does not refer to idolatry and mentions a classical god's name, Saturn rather than Ninus. As Jacob Hobson pertinently remarked, it is the biblical tradition of euhemerism which had the most influence on medieval Scandinavian literature.<sup>73</sup>

### **2.3.Euhemerism as a Theory of Religion**

Roubekas studied euhemerism as an early form of theory of religion. This approach is especially important for this discussion, as to categorize euhemerism as a theory of religion amounts to claiming that euhemerism is meta mythology. Roubekas, however, specifically perceives euhemerism as a proto-scientific discourse which responds to the two criteria of modern theories of religion. Firstly, it should explain the origin of religion in general and, secondly it should explain the persistence of religion throughout human history. Modern theories of religion typically answer to both questions by claiming that religions fulfill a human need. Religions appear to fulfill that need and continue to exist because this need remains.

As Roubekas admits himself, whether Euhemerus' theory satisfies these two criteria is not evident. The second branch of the theory is interested in the birth of Greek religion in particular and hence does not propose an explanation for the systematic appearance of religion in human societies. To some degree, the first branch offers a more general insight into the problem. When he observed the heavens, Uranus did not discover the gods from the Greek pantheon, rather, he discerned the divine principle behind the order of the cosmos. We may admittedly understand that Euhemerus implied that his discovery led to the birth of the other religion as well, or that similar kinds of observations led to the same conclusions in other cultures.<sup>74</sup>

Theories of religion may fall into two broad categories: the "naturalistic theories" which perceive religions as human creations, and the "religionist theories" which postulate the existence of God or gods and explain religions as originating from the interaction between mankind and the divine.<sup>75</sup> In this perspective Roubekas sees Euhemerus' theory as falling in the religionist category, as Uranus did instore sacrifices after perceiving the existence of the heavenly gods.<sup>76</sup> However, it can be argued that in Euhemerus' narrative the direct interaction between gods and humans only accounts for the first branch of euhemerism, the birth of

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<sup>73</sup> Hobson, "Euhemerism and the Veiling of History," 26-27.

<sup>74</sup> Roubekas, *An Ancient Theory of Religion*, 28-29.

<sup>75</sup> Robert Alan Segal, "Theories of Religion," in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. John R. Hinnells (New York: Routledge, 2005),49-60.

<sup>76</sup> Roubekas, *An Ancient Theory of Religion*, 28.

religion, but not for his subsequent development. It is Zeus, indeed, who spread religion, not as a cult of the heavenly gods, but as a cult dedicated to himself and to his grandfather. As such, the second phase of Euhemerus' theory is not easy to categorize as either naturalistic or religionist. Zeus could not have organized ruler cult without the preexistence of the concept of god, yet no further contact with the heavenly gods occurs after the discovery of their existence. In fact, the gods could entirely disappear while Zeus ruler cult would perdure.

As such, Euhemerus did not produce a theory of religion in the traditional sense but provided two different answers to two different questions: a religionist answer to the question regarding the emergence of religion, and a naturalistic one to the question of its development and persistence. Euhemerus' theory does not account for the birth of religion as a unique phenomenon, but for the existence of two distinct kinds of religiosities. On one hand, the "true" religion, which results from direct contact with the divine, and on the other hand, false religions, which are explained as man-made constructions resulting from the deification of rulers. Euhemerus' euhemerism is not as much a theory of religion than it is a theory to distinguish between true and false religions.

This characteristic is not exclusive to Euhemerus' euhemerism alone but is shared by virtually all other instances of the theory. In fact, the Christian instances of euhemerism are exclusively about the origin of false religions. These Christian narratives, however, often follow a twofold structure as Euhemerus' euhemerism, and first explain the birth of nature worship and only then, the birth of the belief in anthropomorphic deities. The Book of Wisdom is one of the seminal works which propagate this kind of narrative in later Christian writings. To this twofold structure, the Christian authors sometime added a third preliminary stage, that of the loss of the primitive monotheistic religion revealed by God. As we saw with Lactantius, the *Elucidarius*, and Martin of Braga's homily, most ancient and early medieval authors explained this loss as a strict substitution of a religion by another. The reasons for this substitution are either tyrannical rulers who force people to worship them instead, as in the *Institutiones divinae*, or the apparition of new cultures, which according to the author of the *Elucidarius* and Martin of Braga, inevitably led to new religious traditions. As we shall see, among Scandinavian euhemerists, only Snorri included this preliminary stage within his narrative, but he did it in an original fashion quite different from what can be seen in ancient and early medieval Christian euhemerism.

### 3. The *Gesta Danorum*

#### 3.1. Historical Context

##### 3.1.1. The Rivalry Between Hamburg-Bremen and Lund

When Saxo wrote the *Gesta Danorum*, the Danish church was independent under the authority of the archbishopric of Lund. Saxo's two patrons, Absalon, and then Anders Sunesen, had both been archbishops of Lund respectively from 1178 to 1201 and from 1201 to 1228. This situation was relatively new, as the Danish Church had been under the authority of the Hamburg-Bremen archbishopric until 1103 and Absalon, was only the third archbishop of Lund after Asser (1104-1137) and Eskil (1138-1177).<sup>1</sup> One of the greatest dangers for Danish ecclesiastic independency came from the inside; the various candidates for the Danish thrones sought the support of the Holy Roman Emperor. The biggest political turmoil of this period was the civil war which followed the death of King Niels (1104-1134). In 1131, the son of King Niels, Magnus the Strong (1106-1134), murdered the duke Knud Lavard (1096-1131) as the latter was a relative to King Niels and a potential, and popular, candidate for the throne.

As a civil war ensued, King Niels accepted to subordinate Denmark to the Holy Roman Empire in exchange for its support. In order to secure the independency of his church, Asser sided with the rebels who eventually won and put Eric II (1134-1137) on the throne.<sup>2</sup> A similar situation occurred under the ministry of Asser's successor, Eskil, when another civil war for the throne occurred, from which Knud Lavard's son, Valdemar I, emerged victorious. I will return to this conflict regarding the rule of the Valdemar kings and the consolidation of royal power later.

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<sup>1</sup> Aksel E. Christensen, "Archbishop Asser, the Emperor and the Pope: The First Archbishop of Lund and His Struggle for the Independence of the Nordic Church," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 1, no. 1-4 (January 1976): 25-42.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Schwarz Lausten, *A Church History of Denmark*, trans. Frederick H. Cryer (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 28.

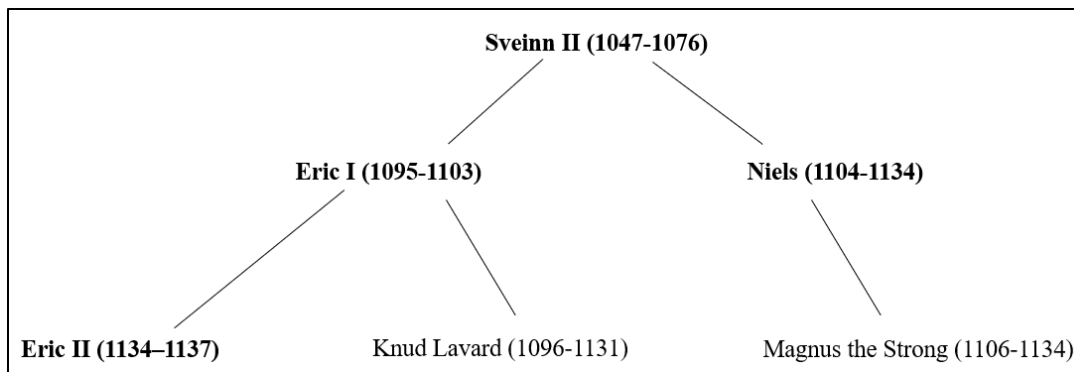


Figure 7: Genealogical tree of the Danish kings, in bold with dates of reign, and contenders to the throne prior to the Danish civil war. Note that the three kings between Sveinn II and Eric I, all of them sons of Sveinn II, are not included.

As a member of the entourage of the archbishops of Lund, Saxo was evidently an ardent defender of the autonomy of his church. As such, in parallel to the diplomatic and military plays of the kings, emperors, and bishops, Saxo fought an ideological battle to bring legitimacy to the autonomy of the young Lund archbishopric. In that perspective the question of Denmark's conversion to Christianity was essential. The most important medieval work about the conversion of Scandinavia was Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae Pontificum* (The deeds of the archbishops of Hamburg) written c. 1070.<sup>3</sup> This text presented the archbishopric of Hamburg as the converter of the Scandinavians, and thus provided an ideological basis for the inclusion of the newly converted Scandinavia within the metropolitan province of Hamburg-Bremen which was otherwise lacking suffragans.<sup>4</sup> To fight this conception of history, the *Gesta Danorum* often minimizes the role of the German missionaries in the conversion of Denmark. Instead, Saxo emphasized the active role the Danes played in their own conversion.<sup>5</sup> As such Adam of Bremen was for Saxo an important source, as well as an opponent, who promoted a narrative incompatible with his own agenda.<sup>6</sup>

Saxo's hostility toward Germany appears in many instances of the *Gesta Danorum* in which, Saxo portrayed the German Empire as an eternal enemy of the Danish kingdom, incessantly

<sup>3</sup> Adam of Bremen, *Adam von Bremen, Hamburgische Kirchengeschichte*, ed. Bernhard Schmeidler, (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1917).

<sup>4</sup> Peter Sawyer, "The Organization of the Church in Scandinavia after the Missionary Phase," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 12/13 (1989 1988): 481.

<sup>5</sup> For Saxo's representation of paganism and conversion see section 3.3.

<sup>6</sup> Jules Piet, "Religious Conversions in Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* and in Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*: A Comparative Approach," in *Adam of Bremen's Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, ed. Grzegorz Bartusik, Radosław Biskup, and Jakub Morawiec (London: Routledge, 2022), 130-145.

trying to subjugate it since time immemorial. In this regard, Saxo frequently uses xenophobic anti-German clichés such as in VI.8.7.<sup>7</sup>

Well after Lund's independence, the Wendish crusades became the occasion for a new kind of dispute between the two archdioceses which both laid claims over land of the Wends, in present-days north-eastern Germany. A papal bull from 1127 attests that the island of Rügen is under Lund's rule. Yet, another bull from 1159 states that all lands from the Elbe River and to the Peen River along their banks and to the Baltic depend on the Hamburg-Bremen church, apparently including Rügen.<sup>8</sup> Later, when the Danes took control over the island in 1168 or 1169 Pope Alexander III entrusted the governance of the island to Absalon, the bishop of Roskilde at the time.<sup>9</sup> As such, in the *Gesta Danorum* the two aims of affirming Lund's status as an independent entity, and its domination over the Baltic region, often intertwined and supported each other, just as Hamburg's domination over Scandinavia also served to confirm its dignity as a metropolitan see.<sup>10</sup> I will return to the question of the Nordic crusade in part 3.1.3.

### **3.1.2. The Archbishopric of Lund and the Consolidation of Royal Power**

In the preface Saxo states the *Gesta Danorum* was first intended to be dedicated to the archbishop of Lund, Absalon, who died in 1201 before Saxo finished the work.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the *Gesta Danorum* is dedicated to Anders Sunesen who became archbishop after Absalon in 1201 until his death in 1228. The predecessor of Saxo's patron was Archbishop Eskil who had a conflictual relationship with King Valdemar I (1154-1182), father of King Valdemar II the Victorious (1202-1241), son of the former and the reigning king at the time when Saxo wrote the *Gesta Danorum*. Valdemar I had become king after he emerged as the only surviving candidate among those who fought in the Danish civil war following the abdication of the grandson of King Eric I Eric Lamb (1137-1146). Archbishop Eskil was a friend of Bernard of Clairvaux (died 1153), a proponent of the Gregorian model, and, as such, a defender of the

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<sup>7</sup> I discuss this passage in 6.6.

<sup>8</sup> Ane L. Bysted et al., *Jerusalem in the North, Denmark and the Baltic Crusades, 1100-1522*, trans. Sarah Pedersen and Frederik Pedersen, *Outremer, Studies in the Crusades and the Latin East 1* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 61.

<sup>9</sup> Bysted et al., *Jerusalem in the North*, 73-74.

<sup>10</sup> Sawyer, "The Organization of," 481.

<sup>11</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, Pr.1.2.



Church's right in the face of secular power.<sup>12</sup> As such, the bishop was weary of the Church's freedom and hostile to the increase of royal power at the expense of the Church. His conflict with royal power came to its height after the papal election of 1159, when two popes were elected, Alexander III, who won most of the votes, and Victor IV who had the support of the Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa. Valdemar I, along with Absalon, then bishop of Roskilde and member of the influential Hvide family, sided with Victor IV, while archbishop Eskil naturally followed Alexander III, the defender of the Church's freedom. Because of this, King Valdemar forced Eskil into exile. In 1170, Valdemar and Alexander came to an arrangement and the pope ordered Eskil to return to Denmark to canonize Knud Lavard, Valdemar's father, and to anoint Valdemar's eldest son, Knud – later known as Knud IV when he became sole king of Denmark after his father's death in 1182 – as his co-regent, thus enforcing and legitimizing the power of the Valdemar dynasty.<sup>13</sup> A few years later, in 1177, Eskil resigned from his position as archbishop and nominated Absalon as his successor. As Mia Münster-Swendsen suggests, it is possible that Eskil had been forced to resign from his position and had little choice over his successor.<sup>14</sup> The power of the Valdemar and Hvide clans emerged significantly reinforced from this struggle and the reign of Valdemar I and the episcopate of Absalon initiated an era of cooperation between the Church and royal power. Absalon was essentially interested in secular affairs and took part in the governance of the country, especially during the reign of the young Knud VI. Absalon personally took part in the Nordic crusade against the pagan Wends (see next part) and his portrayal in the *Gesta Danorum* is much more the description of a political and military leader than it is of a churchman.

Anders Sunesen, Absalon's successor and Saxo's second sponsor was also a member of the Hvide clan. During his time as archbishop, Anders Sunesen favored a strong cooperation between king and Church. Like Absalon, Anders Sunesen personally took part in the crusades, this time in Estonia. He was also an author and an intellectual to a greater extent than Absalon<sup>15</sup> and he is known for his theological treatise, the *Hexaameron*, dealing with the Genesis and using the notion of *Imitatio Christi* which is crucial in crusading ideology. Anders Sunesen was

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<sup>12</sup> Mia Münster-Swendsen, "History, Politics and Canon Law: The Resignation of Archbishop Eskil of Lund," in *The Use of Canon Law in Ecclesiastical Administration, 1000–1234*, ed. Melodie H. Eichbauer and Danica Summerlin, *Medieval Law and Its Practice* 26 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 52-53.

<sup>13</sup> Schwarz Lausten, *A Church History*, 29-33; Münster-Swendsen, "History, Politics and," 53-54

<sup>14</sup> Münster-Swendsen, "History, Politics and," 66-68.

<sup>15</sup> Torben K. Nielsen, "The Missionary Man: Archbishop Anders Sunesen and the Baltic Crusade, 1206–21," in *Crusade and Conversion on the Baltic Frontier 1150–1500*, ed. Alan V. Murray (London: Routledge, 2001), 99-100.

educated in France, England and Italy, and had taught theology. His theological treatise shows not only a good knowledge of the contemporary theoretical discourses but also personal and original views.<sup>16</sup>

Saxo wrote a work in support of the policies of two of his patrons, favoring the cooperation between Church and king and the positive influence of these church leaders over the Danish kingdom.<sup>17</sup> Birgit Sawyer argued that Saxo's praise of Absalon was so exaggerated that it may be intended as mockery, and that Saxo implicitly criticized Absalon for his lack of involvement in Church affairs.<sup>18</sup> It is nonetheless beyond doubt that Saxo considered Absalon as the most efficient Danish leader of his time: as the author recounts Denmark became a vassal of the German empire because of the weakness of Valdemar I, and regained its independence due to Absalon.<sup>19</sup>

### **3.1.3. The Northern Crusades: The Relations Between Pagans and Christians in the Baltic Region**

#### **3.1.3.1. Denmark and the Baltic Crusades**

When Saxo wrote the *Gesta Danorum* all Scandinavian kingdom had been Christian for at least two hundred years. However, Denmark was at this time in contact with an exogenous form of paganism: this proximity with pagan neighbors lead to increasingly violent confrontations, culminating into what is commonly labelled as the Baltic, or northern, crusades. Under the reign of King Eric II, the Danes reacted against the attacks from pirates based on the southern Baltic coastal region with a military expedition which resulted in the sack of the island of Rügen around 1136.<sup>20</sup> Later, under the reign of Valdemar I the island was assaulted a second time and surrendered to the Danes c. 1169.<sup>21</sup> Following this expedition, the pagan inhabitants of the island formally converted to Christianity and the region became part of the Danish episcopal see of Roskilde. Valdemar's successors, Knud VI and Valdemar II, exploited these successes

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<sup>16</sup> Ane L. Bysted, "Crusading Ideology and *Imitatio Christi* in Anders Sunesen, Bernard of Clairvaux and Innocent III," in *Les élites nordiques et l'Europe occidentale (XIIIe-XVe Siècle)*, Histoire ancienne et médiévale 94 (Paris: Publication de la Sorbonne, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> See for instance their work in the domain of lawmaking: Per Andersen and Helle Vogt, "Archbishops Absalon (1128-1201) and Anders Sunesen (d. 1228)," in *Law and the Christian Tradition in Scandinavia. The Writings of Great Nordic Jurists*, ed. Kjell Å Modéer and Helle Vogt (London: Routledge, 2020), 18-33.

<sup>18</sup> Sawyer, "Valdemar, Absalon and Saxo," 702-703.

<sup>19</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, xliiii-xliv.

<sup>20</sup> Bysted et al., *Jerusalem in the North*, 44.

<sup>21</sup> Bysted et al., *Jerusalem in the North*, 70.

and Denmark ultimately won sovereignty over a large part of Pomerania. Following the Danish crusades, the kings of Denmark gained the title of “king of the Wends”, which they kept until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>22</sup> long after Denmark lost any effective dominance over the region.

The series of conflicts between the Danes and to the Slavic people of the Baltic area are often labelled as crusades. We must note that there is no simple and universally accepted definition of what crusades were and that the definition of the concept of crusade is the subject of scholarly discussion. The crusades are often described as “military pilgrimage”,<sup>23</sup> but some historians deny that Urban II (1088-1099) ever considered the movement as a pilgrimage.<sup>24</sup> In anyway, while it is conceivable that the crusades to Jerusalem could be regarded as a form of pilgrimage to a holy city, it is not the case for the crusades to the South Baltic and Estonia. Most historians agree that the crusades may be characterized as military conflicts sanctioned by the ecclesiastical authorities which would grant the remission of sins to the participants. These remissions were similar to that of penance such as traditional pilgrimage. In the north, Bernard of Clairvaux preached for the war against the neighboring pagans.<sup>25</sup> These wars declared by Christians against their pagan neighbors were recognized as equally worthy of heavenly retribution as the expeditions to the Holy Land.<sup>26</sup>

Eskil, Absalon and Anders Sunesen were all promoters of and sometime active participants in the expeditions against the Wends and the Estonians. In the *Gesta Danorum* the Northern Crusades illustrates the cooperation between Absalon and Valdemar as both parties cooperated to increase their respective influence in the Baltic region. In the *Gesta Danorum* Saxo is favorable to the Danish intervention in the area and praises Absalon for his military exploits which led to the conversion of the Wends to Christianity. In this regard, Saxo consistently depicted the Wends as the enemies of the Danes. In the *Gesta Danorum*, Saxo described the paganism of the Wends and castigated them for their unholy practice. As we shall see, while Saxo explained Danish paganism with Euhemerism, he did not use this theory to explain Wendish euhemerism.

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<sup>22</sup> This title was dropped when Margrethe II acceded to the throne in 1972.

<sup>23</sup> Sylvia Schein, “Pilgrimage,” in *The Crusades: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Alan V. Murray, (Santa Barbara: ABC Clio, 2006), 3: 957-963.

<sup>24</sup> Janus Møller Jensen, “Peregrinatio sive expeditio: Why the First Crusade Was Not a Pilgrimage,” *Al-Masāq* 15, no. 2 (September 2003): 119-137.

<sup>25</sup> Bysted et al., *Jerusalem in the North*, 5-14.

<sup>26</sup> Bysted et al., *Jerusalem in the North*, 46.

### 3.1.3.2. Forging an Enemy?

The historical reality of the pagan character of the Wends has been subject to doubts. Medieval contemporary sources describe some of the Wendish rulers as Christians. In a letter from Pope Alexander III addressed to Absalon in 1169, the Pope described the Wends in terms that would characterize apostates or stubborn heretics rather than pagans.<sup>27</sup> Wends were to be brought back to Christianity, not evangelized. Modern historians such as Hal Koch have even argued that the Wends were in fact as Christian as the “crusaders” and that the religious aspect of the Northern Crusades were only a façade.<sup>28</sup> This question is particularly important for this discussion. If true, this assertion implies that Saxo has been guilty of a complete forgery when describing the Wendish expeditions. He would have consciously altered the historical facts to give the appearance of crusades to mere plundering.<sup>29</sup>

However, Saxo’s descriptions are unlikely to be forgeries for two reasons. As Ane L. Bysted and her co-authors have noted, Absalon mentioned in his testament “two goblets from the idolatrous images of the people of Rügen”. We may very well imagine that Absalon would have commissioned propaganda in a work such as the *Gesta Danorum*, but his own testament would be an odd place to display such political manipulation.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, Saxo’s description of the Slavic city is not only remarkably detailed but is also coherent with modern archeological finds. If Saxo’s depiction of Wendish paganism was an invention, we would need to explain how the author could be so well informed regarding the form of the pagan idol, which is not described in earlier sources. Indeed, Saxo accurately described a four faced idol, higher than a human being and bearing a horn. All these iconographic elements match actual Slavic pre-Christian art as displayed for instance, in the so called “Zbruch idol” found in Poland and dated back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The similarities between Saxo’s description and the archeological finds can hardly be coincidences. Saxo must have either seen them himself or heard an accurate description from an eyewitness. This witness may possibly be Absalon who, according to both German and Danish sources, was present during the desecration of the idols of Rügen.

Absalon and Saxo most likely did not invent the Wend’s paganism. Instead, the distortion of truth seems to be of another kind. Saxo depicted that the Wends used to be Christian, and that

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<sup>27</sup> Bysted et al., *Jerusalem in the North*, 73-74.

<sup>28</sup> Bysted et al., *Jerusalem in the North*, 53.

<sup>29</sup> Bysted et al., *Jerusalem in the North*, 55.

<sup>30</sup> Bysted et al., *Jerusalem in the North*, 55.

fellow Christians had the responsibility to bring these apostates back to the faith. As we shall see, Saxo's descriptions of pre-Christian Slavic religion are an essential aspect of the *Gesta Danorum*. It is nonetheless clear that Saxo's portrayal of the Wends was motivated by political concerns. As Tinna Damgaard-Sørensen discussed, the attitude of the Danes toward the Wends was not monolithic and Saxo's portrayal of the Wends as Denmark's archenemies was in line with Absalon and Valdemar's ambition to increase their own influence in the region.<sup>31</sup> They allow the author to portray the Danish kingdom, and the archbishopric of Lund as the religious converters of the Slavic people living on the shores of the Baltic Sea, thus serving the political agenda of Lund which claims sovereignty over this region.<sup>32</sup>

### 3.1.4. Saxo Grammaticus' Background

As is common for medieval authors, little is known about Saxo. The *Gesta Danorum* contains some information on its author, who introduces himself. Other information may be gathered from the rare documents from the time of composition of the *Gesta Danorum* which mention a certain Saxo. These sources give us little information and remain difficult to interpret. In fact, the same information has alternatively been read as a proof of Saxo being a cleric<sup>33</sup> or, on the contrary, a layman.<sup>34</sup>

The author of the *Gesta Danorum* does not mention his name in the text. The association between Saxo and the *Gesta Danorum* appeared for the first time in the *Compendium Saxonis*. The author calls himself "comitum suorum extremo",<sup>35</sup> "the least of his [Absalon's] entourage", this formula is a conventional expression of humility, common in medieval literature, and does not necessarily reflect the actual social status of the author. Several contemporary Danish sources mention a certain Saxo. It is not certain that these sources refer to the author of the *Gesta Danorum* or even to the same individual, nevertheless two of them are strongly pointing in the direction of Saxo Grammaticus. A certain Saxo is mentioned in another Danish work of

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<sup>31</sup> Tinna Damgaard-Sørensen, "Danes and Wends: A Study of the Danish Attitude towards the Wends," in *People and Places in Northern Europe 500-1600, Essays in Honour of Peter Hayes Sawyer*, ed. Ian N. Wood and Niels Lund (Woodbridge: The Boydell press, 1991), 182-186.

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion on Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* as a historical source on the Baltic people see Tomas Baranauskas, "Saxo Grammaticus on the Balts," in *Saxo and the Baltic Region. A Symposium*, ed. Tore Nyberg (Odense: University press of southern Denmark, 2004), 63-79.

<sup>33</sup> See for instance: Karsten Friis-Jensen, "Was Saxo a Canon of Lund?," *Cahier de l'institut du Moyen-Âge grec et latin*, no. 59 (1989): 331-357.

<sup>34</sup> See for instance: Curt Weibull, "Vem var Saxo? Ett diskussionsinlägg," *Historisk tidskrift* 13, no. 5 (1978): 88-96.

<sup>35</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, Pr.1.1.

history, the *Brevis historia regum Dacie* (c. 1190), by Sven Aggesen. Sven Aggesen wrote that he would not give a lengthy account of the story of King Sven Estridsen's sons for, according to Absalon, his *contubernalis* Saxo, already did it in a beautiful manner.<sup>36</sup> Sven refers to Saxo as his *contubernalis*, a word of multiple meanings which can be translated as "colleague". Saxo's name is quoted in relation with Absalon and is referred to as a skillful writer working on Danish history, which are two elements pointing in the direction of the author of the *Gesta Danorum*.

A Saxo is also remembered in Absalon's will,<sup>37</sup> he is there referred to as *clerico suo*, "his [Absalon's] cleric". This cleric is endowed with two and half marks of silver and is asked to restore two books to the abbey of Sorø in Zealand. It is notable that no other Saxo appears in Absalon's will. The archbishop had been generous and bequeathed various goods to many people and freed some of his serfs. We may assume that the author of such a work as the *Gesta Danorum*, largely devoted to praise Absalon's deeds, would be mentioned in his will. The author of the *Gesta Danorum* mentions Absalon's death in the preface to the text, which indicates that his patron died before him. We may thus infer that this Saxo is identical to the one mentioned by Sven Aggesen and the author of the *Gesta Danorum*.<sup>38</sup>

In these two texts Saxo receives two different epithets, *clerico* in Absalon's will and *contubernalis* in the *Brevis historia regum Dacie*. Their respective meanings have been the subjects of scholarly discussion. The importance of these two words is their significance concerning one of the most determinant aspects of Saxo's identity: was he a member of the clergy or a layman? These discussions have been summarized by Karsten Friis-Jensen in 1989 in an argumentation in favor of the identification of Saxo as a clergy man.<sup>39</sup> If the term *clericus*, "cleric", seems to refer by definition to a member of the clergy it has been argued it can also

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<sup>36</sup> Eric Christiansen, *The Works of Sven Aggesen, Twelfth-Century Danish Historian*, Viking Society for Northern Research 9 (Birmingham: University College London, 1992). 65.

<sup>37</sup> Only ninety-three Danish testaments from before 1450 remain to this day. The practice of testament writing might have been rarer in Denmark than in continental Europe, the destructions of the reformation period have also reduced the corpus. Absalon's testament from 1201 is the second oldest after bishop Sven of Aarhus' written in 1183. The simple fact that Absalon wrote a testament is an indicator of his appartenance to a milieu well integrated in the mainstream European culture. See Kristian Erslev, *Testamenter fra danmarks middelalder indtil 1450* (Copenhagen: Den Gyldendalske boghandel, 1901). And Elisabeth Mornet, "Le testament du chanoine Benechinus Henrici de Åhus, chantre de Lund, et la culture des clerics nordiques au XIVe Siècle," in *Les élites nordiques et l'Europe occidentale (XIIIe-XVe Siècle)*, Histoire Ancienne et Médiévale 94 (Paris: Publication de la Sorbonne, 2007).

<sup>38</sup> Friis-Jensen, "Was Saxo a Canon," 331-357.

<sup>39</sup> Friis-Jensen, "Was Saxo a Canon," 331-357.

mean a man of letters without any relation to the clergy.<sup>40</sup> *Contubernalis* on the other hand has a wide variety of meaning, its original sense in classical Latin is “tent mate” or “army companion” which would point toward a layman or even a soldier. However, in medieval Latin *Contubernalis* can also mean “colleague”, “friend”, “home mate” or “guest”. Martin Clarentius Gertz used this word’s first meaning as “army companion” to argue that Saxo was a retired army man rather than a priest.<sup>41</sup> However, Karsten Friis-Jensen remarked that contrary to what Clarentius Gertz argued, the word *Contubernalis* used as “war companion” was uncommon.<sup>42</sup> As Birgit Sawyer reasoned, the fact that Saxo was interested in secular topics such as warfare and sexual matters is not incompatible with 12<sup>th</sup> century Danish priesthood.<sup>43</sup> Absalon himself was indeed as much a warrior as he was a bishop.<sup>44</sup> I would add to Sawyer’s argument that the Bible itself can be a very good and rich source regarding military and sexual matter. Even the most dogmatic monk whose reading would not go beyond the holy scriptures and patristic writings would have some good theoretical knowledge on those questions. Furthermore, in his preface Saxo mentions that his family members were traditionally soldiers.<sup>45</sup> Both his grandfather and father served the king of Denmark in military matters, however Saxo does not mention that he used to be one as well but specifies that he will provide another kind of service to his king, an intellectual one. This statement, as Friis-Jensen wrote, points toward the identification of Saxo as a younger cadet son promised to an ecclesiastical career.<sup>46</sup>

Elisabeth Mornet pointed out that many canons of Lund were members of the nobility during the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>47</sup> A clerical carrier in Lund Archbishopric may have been perceived as a suitable choice for the sons of the Danish aristocratic families. Of course, the realities of the 14<sup>th</sup> century may not necessarily apply to Saxo’s time, more than a century earlier. It would nonetheless suit the identification of Saxo as coming from an aristocratic family, perhaps members of the royal *hird* whose younger son may be promised to an ecclesiastical career in a

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<sup>40</sup> For a discussion on the word “cleric” and its use to designate laymen see for instance the study of Martin Aurell regarding learned knights: Martin Aurell, *Le Chevalier Lettré* (Paris: Fayard, 2011).

<sup>41</sup> Martin Clarentius Gertz, *En ny text af Svends Aggesøns værker, genvunden paa Grundlag af codex Arnemagnæanus 33, 4 To*, Genvunden paa grundlag af codex Arnemagnæanus (Copenhagen: Det Kongl. Danske Videnskabernes Selskabs Forlag, 1915). 197.

<sup>42</sup> Friis-Jensen, “Was Saxo a Canon,” 335.

<sup>43</sup> Sawyer, “Valdemar, Absalon and Saxo,” 685-686.

<sup>44</sup> One of the most striking examples of Saxo’s characterization of Absalon as a warrior is found in *Gesta Danorum* XVI.5.1 where the bishop says: “Quod enim sacrificii genus scelestorum nece diuine potentie iocundius existimemus?” (What kind of sacrifice could we imagine more pleasing to the Almighty than the slaughter of blackguards?).

<sup>45</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, Pr.1.6.

<sup>46</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, xxxiii.

<sup>47</sup> Mornet, “Le testament du chanoine,” 203.

prestigious cathedral chapter. Saxo's impressive literary culture and knowledge of the classics might also be a sign of his relatively high social status.

It is likely that Saxo developed his knowledge while studying abroad, which implies the financial capacity to sustain a costly education. Although Saxo's nickname *grammaticus*, "the grammarian", or "the learned" appeared for the first time in the 14<sup>th</sup> century in the *Compendium Saxonis* it could be a fine hint regarding Saxo's function. It is generally accepted that this nickname has been attributed to Saxo because of his extensive knowledge of Latin and of classical literature. However, in medieval Latin *grammaticus* is, by extension, the name of the grammar teacher, that is to say the Latin teacher. This nickname may have been invented by the author of the *Compendium Saxonis* but the hypothesis remains interesting. Could Saxo Grammaticus be "Saxo the Latin teacher" as well as "Saxo the grammarian" or "Saxo the learned" equivalent to the Old Norse "inn fróði"? Latin was in the Middle Ages taught through the classics, this function would explain Saxo's huge knowledge in classical Latin as well with the unequal balance between profane and religious sources in the *Gesta Danorum* and would not contradict his identification as a member of the clergy. Another element which could support this hypothesis is the epithet of "magister" attached to the name Saxo in a charter from Absalon, a word which may indeed refer to a teacher. This theory remains highly hypothetical but is nevertheless interesting in that it can conciliate some of the views from both sides of the discussion.

#### 3.1.4.1. Saxo's education

Less central to this discussion, Saxo's education has yet been subject to many speculations. Scholars' hypotheses generally point toward France,<sup>48</sup> the specific location of Saxo's study in France remain however uncertain. Paris, Orléans and Reims are often cited among the possibilities. France has been considered because of Saxo's classicizing style, particularly common in French Latin. Karsten Friis-Jensen points toward Reims because of its poetic tradition, both Gautier of Châtillon, author of the *Alexandreis* (c. 1180) and Petrus Riga, the author of the *Biblia versificata*, worked or studied in Reims.<sup>49</sup> It is also notable that two members of the entourage of Guillaume aux blanches mains, archbishop of Reims from 1176

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<sup>48</sup> For a general account on medieval Scandinavian study stay in Paris see Ellen Jørgensen, "Nordiske studierejser i middelalderen. Nordboerne ved Universitetet i Paris fra det 13. aarhundredes begyndelse til det 15. aarhundredes midte.," *Historisk tidsskrift* 8, no. 5 (1914): 331-382.

<sup>49</sup> Friis-Jensen, *Saxo Grammaticus as Latin Poet*, 14-18.



to 1202 had contact with Denmark. Ralph Niger, the English chronicler who exchanged letters with archbishop Eskil of Lund and whose world chronicle is particularly well informed on Danish history.<sup>50</sup> And Pierre of Celle, abbot of Saint Rémi, who exchanged letters with Absalon.<sup>51</sup> Italy has rarely been considered as a place of study for Saxo, though the preface nevertheless mentions that Anders Sunesen went to Italy for educational purposes.<sup>52</sup> Those elements are in no way conclusive, and Karsten Friis-Jensen remains cautious in his conclusions. I agree with him when he states that nothing is certain regarding Saxo's study place, neither the city nor even the country.

## 3.2. The Sources of the *Gesta Danorum*

### 3.2.1. The Latin Heritage

A list of some of Saxo's indubitable sources has been established by Karsten Friis-Jensen. Karsten Friis-Jensen has listed Saxo's parallels and direct borrowings from Latin and medieval sources.<sup>53</sup> Those sources are for the most part classical Roman authors; among them Valerius Maximus appears as Saxo's main model. On the other hand, Saxo made only a few direct borrowings from medieval sources and even fewer from the Bible.<sup>54</sup> However, Saxo might have had many other sources which cannot be determined with certainty.

Saxo quoted at least two works which refer to the euhemeristic theory: The *Etymologiae* by Isidore of Seville and the *Institutiones Divinae* by Lactantius. Saxo quoted Lactantius only once, this quotation, however, is particularly interesting for this discussion, as Saxo specifically quoted a sentence from a passage where Lactantius discusses euhemerism. Friis-Jensen noted that the words "acuende uirtutis gratia" in book XVI.4.3 of the *Gesta Danorum* are a quotation from the following passage from Lactantius' *Institutiones divinae* book I.15.6:

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<sup>50</sup> Friis-Jensen, *Saxo Grammaticus as Latin Poet*, 17-18. On the connection between Ralph Niger and Denmark see Mia Münster-Swendsen, "Lost Chronicle or Elusive Informers? Some Thoughts on the Source of Ralph Niger's Reports from Twelfth-Century Denmark. The Scandinavian Connection," in *Historical and Intellectual Culture in the Long Twelfth Century*, ed. Mia Münster-Swendsen, Thomas K. Heebøll-Holm, and Sigbjørn Olsen Sønnesyn (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2016), 189-210.

<sup>51</sup> Friis-Jensen, *Saxo Grammaticus as Latin Poet*, 17-18.

<sup>52</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, Pr.1.2.

<sup>53</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, 1689-1702.

<sup>54</sup> According to Friis-Jensen Saxo's direct borrowings to medieval sources are only from seven authors, Bede, Bernard of Clairvaux, Dudo of Saint Quentin, John of Salisbury, Paulus Diaconus, Petrus Pictor and Walter of Châtillon. There are only three direct parallels to the Bible, from the Genesis, the Chronicles, and Isaiah. *Gesta Danorum*, 1702.

Atque in plerisque ciuitatibus intellegi potest acuendae uirtutis gratia aut quo libentius rei publicae causa periculum adiret optimus quisque, uirorum fortium memoriam honore deorum immortalium consecratam.<sup>55</sup>

(‘It can be seen in many communities that the memory of brave men was made into something holy by honouring them like immortal gods, either to sharpen people’s courage or to persuade all good citizens to take risks willingly for the sake of the community.’)<sup>56</sup>

This passage which Lactantius quoted from Cicero’s *De natura deorum* 3:50<sup>57</sup> is precisely about the deification of famous men. Significantly, Lactantius’ quotation is almost identical to the corresponding passage from *De natura deorum*, except for the word “acuendae” (sharpening) which in the *Gesta Danorum* replaces the word “augendae” found in the original sentence from the *De natura deorum*. We may thus know that Saxo quoted this passage from Lactantius and it is hence certain that Saxo had a direct knowledge of Lactantius’ euhemeristic views. The location of this quotation within the *Gesta Danorum* may also be significant. It is generally accepted that Saxo first wrote the fourteenth to sixteenth books of the *Gesta Danorum* which are dedicated to the life and legacy of his first patron, Absalon.<sup>58</sup> According to this theory, Saxo only redacted the first books at a later date, under the patronage of his second patron, Anders Sunesen. The Danish expeditions in Estonia during the lifetime of Anders Sunesen would have inspired the many references to this region in Saxo’s first books.<sup>59</sup> As such, this quotation, found in the final pages of the last book of the *Gesta Danorum* may indicate that Saxo was reading the *Institutiones divinae* around the time he started the redaction of the first books, dealing with the Old Norse gods. Although this chronology of redaction remains hypothetical, Friis-Jensen, as well as Annette Lassen, noted an influence of Lactantius on Saxo’s representation of the pagan religion.<sup>60</sup> In addition to these learned Christian works, Saxo also quoted the *Aeneid* at least fourteen times.<sup>61</sup> This text does not contain euhemerism, but it is the inspiration for the medieval narratives regarding the Trojan origins of the European

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<sup>55</sup> Lactantius, *Institutiones divinae. Livre I*, 154.

<sup>56</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 92-93.

<sup>57</sup> Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, ed. Otto Plasberg, Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana 1221 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1933), 137.

<sup>58</sup> Muceniecks, *Saxo Grammaticus: Hierocratical Conceptions*, 42.

<sup>59</sup> Nielsen, “The Missionary Man,” 95-117.

<sup>60</sup> Karsten Friis-Jensen, “Saxo og Det 12. århundredes renæssance.” (Viking og Hvidekrist. Et internationalt symposium på Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen: Reitzels Forlag, 2000), 93-111; Annette Lassen, *Odin på kristent pergament: en teksthistorisk studie* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanums Press, 2011), 216.

<sup>61</sup> Karsten Friis-Jensen, *Saxo og Vergil. En analyse af 1931-udgavens vergilspareller*, Opuscula Graecolatina (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 1975).

people and dynasties, a myth which is often associated with euhemerism in Old Norse sources as we shall see.

The other important source of Saxo regarding euhemerism may have been Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*. Anthony Faulkes has pointed out the influence of Isidore of Seville on Saxo's views regarding polytheist religions. Saxo quoted the *Etymologiae*, but not the passages where euhemerism is specifically discussed. This does not mean that Saxo was unaware of Isidore's passages regarding pagan religion, which were well known in medieval Scandinavia.<sup>62</sup>

As mentioned, Saxo almost never directly quotes medieval authors. However, this should not be taken as a lack of interest or knowledge concerning post-Roman literature. As with any medieval author, Saxo did not think of his writing language as "medieval Latin." His aim was to closely imitate the Latin of the ancients. His models were the classical authors of ancient Rome. Saxo would have had no interest in quoting medieval authors, mere reflections of the original Latin he aimed to imitate. Throughout the *Gesta Danorum* Saxo makes explicit references to three medieval historiographers: Dudo of Saint Quentin and Bede the Venerable in the first book,<sup>63</sup> and Paul the Deacon in the eighth book.<sup>64</sup> These three historiographers have been respectively interested in the history of the Normans, the English, and the Lombard people. As Friis-Jensen noted Saxo might have referred to those three nations because of their supposedly common origin with the Danish people.<sup>65</sup> Saxo might also have had many other sources which cannot be determined with certainty. Lars-Boje Mortensen argued for instance toward the identification of the *Historia regis Britanniae* by Geoffrey of Monmouth as one of Saxo's probable sources of inspiration.<sup>66</sup> The many similarities between the *Gesta Danorum* and the *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* made it clear that Saxo used Adam of Bremen.<sup>67</sup>

Among the three authors quoted by Saxo, two refer to the Scandinavian gods, Bede and Paul the Deacon. Bede the Venerable does not speak of pre-Christian religion, but quotes a genealogy which goes back to Woden.<sup>68</sup> Bede does not give any information regarding the

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<sup>62</sup> Faulkes, "Descent from the Gods," 92-125.

<sup>63</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, I.1.1.

<sup>64</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, VIII.13.2.

<sup>65</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, xli-xlii.

<sup>66</sup> Lars Boje-Mortensen, "Saxo og Geoffrey af Monmouth," *Renæssanceforum*, no. 3 (2007), [http://www.renaessanceforum.dk/rf\\_3\\_2007.htm](http://www.renaessanceforum.dk/rf_3_2007.htm).

<sup>67</sup> Piet, "Religious Conversions," 130-145.

<sup>68</sup> Bede, *Histoire ecclésiastique du peuple Anglais. Tome I (Livres I-II)*, trans. Pierre Monat and Philippe Robin, Sources chrétiennes 489 (Paris: Les éditions du cerf, 2005), 166.

identity of this Woden. It is difficult to assess whether this genealogy was connected to euhemeristic thought in Bede's mind as Bede generally avoided talking about pagan gods. For instance, he did not copy passages with gods' names when he copied passages from Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*, and he even avoided giving euhemeristic accounts of the myths as Isidore did.<sup>69</sup> It is nonetheless probable that Saxo would have identified this Woden with the Wotan found in Adam of Bremen's work. In the *Historia Langobardorum* I.9 Paul the Deacon's mentions Wotan and Frea as deified human beings, and Wotan as an equivalent to the Roman Mercure, and he states that the pseudo-god came from Greece:

Wotan sane, quem adiecta littera Godan dixerunt ipse, est qui apud Romanos Mercurius dicitur et ab universis Germaniae gentibus ut deus adoratur; qui non circa haec tempora, sed longe antierius, nec in Germania, sed in Grecia fuisse perhibetur.<sup>70</sup>

(Wotan indeed, whom by adding a letter they called Godan is he who among the Romans is called Mercury, and he is worshipped by all the people in Germany as a god, though he is deemed to have existed, not about these times, but long before, and not in Germany, but in Greece)<sup>71</sup>

As such, it is certain that Saxo was familiar with a text which connected Odin with Greece, which, as I shall discuss, may be one of the reasons why Saxo placed the Scandinavian pseudo-gods in Byzantium.

Dudo of Saint-Quentin mentions Greece not as the origin of Odin, but as that of the Danish people. For him the ethnonym of the Danes is connected to *Danaan* a Latin synonym of "Greek". Saxo mentions this hypothesis of Dudo in the first paragraph of the first book of the *Gesta Danorum* but seems to prefer another explanation, that the Danes are named after their first leader, Dan, which is also the first word of the work. As such, according to Saxo's explanation, the Danes are autochthonous, while Dudo located their origin outside of Denmark.

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<sup>69</sup> Jacques Elfassi, "L'occultation du paganisme dans la *Chronique mineure* de Bède le Vénérable," *Histoire et littérature de l'Europe du Nord Ouest*, no. 34 (2005): 63-69.

<sup>70</sup> Paul the Deacon, *Pauli historia Langobardorum*, ed. Georg Waitz, Monumenta Germaniae historica. Scriptores rerum Langobardorum et Italicarum saec. VI-IX 48 (Hannover: hahnsche buchhandlung, 1987), 59.

<sup>71</sup> Paul the Deacon, *History of the Langobards*, trans. William Dudley Foulke (Philadelphia: The Department of History. University of Pennsylvania, 1907), 18-19.

## 3.2.2. The Nordic Tradition

### 3.2.2.1. Icelandic Poetry

Saxo presents his work as a historical one and states in the preface:

Quibus scribendorum series subnixa non tam recenter conflata quam antiquitus edita cognoscatur, quia presens opus non nugacem sermonis luculentiam, sed fidelem uetustatis notitiam pollicetur.

(My chronicle, relying on these aids, should be recognized not as something freshly compiled but as the utterance of antiquity; this book is thereby guaranteed to give a faithful understanding of the past, not a frivolous glitter of style).<sup>72</sup>

To support this statement, Saxo mentions two sources regarding ancient Danish history. First, the ancient poems of the Danes which were supposedly engraved on runestones, and which he claimed to have rendered verse for verse.<sup>73</sup> A second of Saxo's alleged sources are the tales from the Icelanders, which he referred to as "Tylensium", that is, "men from Thule," a learned term used in the medieval period to describe various Nordic islands, including Iceland:

Nec Tylensium industria silentio oblitteranda. Qui cum ob nationam soli sterilitatem luxurie nutrimentis carentes officia continuae sobrietatis exerceant omniaque uite momenta ad excolendam alienorum operum notitiam conferre soleant, inopiam ingenio pensant. Cunctarum quippe nationum res gestas cognosse memorieque mandare uoluptatis loco reputant, non minoris glorie iudicantes alienas uirtutes dissere quam proprias exhibere.

(The diligence of the men of Iceland must not be shrouded in silence; since the barrenness of their native soil offers no support for self-indulgence, they practise a steady routine of temperance and devote all their time to improving our knowledge of others' deeds, compensating for poverty by their intelligence. They regard it a real pleasure to discover and commemorate the achievements of every nation; in their judgement it is just as elevating to discourse on the prowess of others as to display their own.)<sup>74</sup>

Icelandic historiography may be grateful to Saxo for these laudatory comments, especially when they are compared to Saxo's usual distaste for foreign influence in Danish society. The tenants of the hypothesis of a strictly Danish source material for the *Gesta Danorum* believed

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<sup>72</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, Pr.1.3.

<sup>73</sup> See the section 3.2.2 below for the quotation of this passage.

<sup>74</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, Pr.1.4.

that Saxo was purposely misleading his readers in those lines. Axel Olrik refuted these views and argued for the influence of foreign sources in the *Gesta Danorum*.<sup>75</sup> According to Olrik Saxo's informant, who was Icelandic, reported narratives from Norway. Olrik called these hypothetical narratives "skippersagaer". According to Olrik those so-called *skippersagaer* were sagas written in Norway about Viking expeditions. Those narratives would have been transmitted in the Icelandic tradition with few modifications to later become what are today known as the legendary sagas. One of Olrik's arguments for a Norwegian origin of Saxo's sources is the absence of any Icelandic toponym in Saxo's work. Bjarni Guðnason pertinently remarked that this absence of Icelandic toponyms cannot be proof of their Norwegian origin in any way; these stories take place before the settlement of Iceland and could not realistically display Icelandic toponyms.<sup>76</sup>

Bjarni Guðnason noted that Saxo mentions in XIV.36.2 an Icelandic scald named Arnoldus who could be Arnaldr Þorvaldsson, known in *Skáldatal* as a court poet of Valdemar I.<sup>77</sup> The ancient connections between the Nordic country were only reinforced by the ecclesiastical structure after the conversion. Lund was not only the head of the Danish church but also of the Norwegian and Icelandic ones, and as Bjarni Guðnason noted, seven Icelandic bishops had been consecrated there before 1153.<sup>78</sup> During their travels between Iceland, Norway, and Denmark, those churchmen were the means of knowledge circulation. Saxo's strategic position in Lund was perfectly suited to meet the various guests of the archbishops, and he could have heard the poetry of some Icelandic court scalds, as he seems to imply in the *Gesta Danorum*.

It is possible, in some instances, to pinpoint specific Old Norse works which may have inspired Saxo. *Eiríksdrápa* composed by Markús Skeggjason at the occasion of the creation of Lund's archbishopric was likely known and used by Saxo.<sup>79</sup> On the other hand, Saxo may also have been the source for some Iceland works such as *Knýtlinga saga*, who mentions "learned Danish sources," possibly a reference to Saxo's work.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Axel Olrik, *Kilderne til Saks Oldhistorie en literaturhistorisk undersøgelse*, vol.2, *Norrønne sagaer of Danske sagn*, (Copenhagen: Forlagt af universitetsboghandler G. E. C. GAD., 1894), 280-286.

<sup>76</sup> Bjarni Guðnason, "The Icelandic Sources of Saxo Grammaticus," in *Saxo Grammaticus, A Medieval Author Between Norse and Latin Culture*, (a Symposium Held in Celebration of the 500th Anniversary of the University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 1981), 85.

<sup>77</sup> Bjarni Guðnason, "The Icelandic Sources," 80.

<sup>78</sup> Bjarni Guðnason, "The Icelandic Sources," 80.

<sup>79</sup> Bjarni Guðnason, "The Icelandic Sources," 90.

<sup>80</sup> Bjarni Guðnason, "The Icelandic Sources," 91.

### 3.2.2.2. Runestones

Saxo does not explicitly claim to have read or used runestones as a source, but he certainly uses phrasing that would lead his reader to think so:

Uerumetiam maiorum acta patrii sermonis carminibus uulgata lingue sue literis saxis ac rupibus insculpenda curasse. Quorum uestigis ceu quibusdam antiquitatis uoluminibus inherens tenoremque ueris translationis passibus emulatus metra metris reddenda curauit[.]

(Not only that, but they saw that the letters of their own language were engraved on rocks and stones to retell those feats of their ancestors which had been made popular in the songs of their mother tongue. Adhering to the tracks of these verses, as if to some ancient volumes, and following the sense with the true steps of a translator, I have assiduously rendered one poem by another[.])<sup>81</sup>

If in this passage Saxo indeed claims to have used runestones, then this assertion is doubtful. Runestones' inscriptions, apart from a few exceptions, are short and highly codified texts which often commemorate a deceased relative or friend. They do not display texts similar to Saxo's lengthy poems or elaborate narratives. It is possible that Saxo refers to the runestones in order to continue his comparison of Denmark and ancient Rome. The Danish poetry, as he says, is similar to the "Romanus stilus" (Roman style), and runestones were certainly a nice equivalent to Roman monumentalism and epigraphy. Saxo's mention of runestones may be less a statement of his method as a historian than the testimony of a growing curiosity and interest for runes in Denmark during second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Absalon himself had a runestone raised close to the Åsum church in Scania,<sup>82</sup> and Saxo mentioned Valdemar's project to decrypt the so-called Runamo inscription. As Saxo reports it, this attempt was unsuccessful, and the inscription remained unintelligible.<sup>83</sup> This expedition had an unfortunate conclusion for the nascent science of runology, but was at least an example of intellectual honesty for, as we know today, the Runamo inscription is nothing but a geological phenomenon.<sup>84</sup> As we can see from this context,

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<sup>81</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, Pr.1.3.

<sup>82</sup> Tarrin Wills, "The Thirteenth-Century Runic Revival in Denmark and Iceland," *NOWELE. North-Western European Language Evolution* 69, no. 2 (September 29, 2016): 115.

<sup>83</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, Pr.2.5.

<sup>84</sup> On the belief that the Runamo geological phenomenon was a runic inscription see Robert Rix, "'Letters in a Strange Character': Runes, Rocks and Romanticism," *European Romantic Review* 16, no. 5 (December 2005): 594-606.

runes and runestones were perceived as a characteristic aspect of Danish culture and a source for ancient Danish lore.

Some runestones, however, did contain information which could have been useful to Saxo. The two Jelling stones cover events discussed by Saxo, the first being raised by Gorm the Old in memory of his wife, Þorvi, also known as Thyra in later sources. The second and most famous has been raised by Haraldr Blue Tooth in memory of his father, Gormr the Old and his mother, Þorvi. The stone commemorates Haraldr's own achievements as unifier of Denmark, conqueror of Norway and converter of the Danes. Yet, as argued by Gottskálk Jensson<sup>85</sup> and Friis-Jensen,<sup>86</sup> Saxo's account on Haraldr's reign does not mirror this version of the Jelling stone and it seems unlikely that Saxo used it as a source.

As it appears, Saxo used runestones as a convenient Norse equivalent to the medieval literary *topos* of the rediscovered manuscript.<sup>87</sup> A literary technique by which the author declares to have used ancient sources, which hence guarantee the authenticity of his narrative. Geoffrey of Monmouth, for instance, claimed to have found his material in an old book written in the "British tongue".<sup>88</sup> However, a reference to runestones rather than to old inaccessible books give a certain embodiment to Saxo's claim, as his alleged source is standing right in front of everybody, in the countryside.

### 3.2.3. Conclusion

It is possible to identify euhemeristic narratives among Saxo's sources. The most important is Lactantius *Insitutiones Divinae*, and to a lesser degree Paul the Deacon's *Historia Langobardorum*, which does not contain a fully-fledged euhemeristic narrative but depicts

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<sup>85</sup> Gottskálk Jensson, "Den Islandske kulturkapital i *Gesta Danorum* og *Heimskringla*," in *Saxo og Snorre* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010), 190.

<sup>86</sup> Friis-Jensen, "Saxo Grammaticus' Fortale," 100.

<sup>87</sup> For a discussion on this *topos* see Emmanuèle Baumgartner, "Du manuscrit trouvé au corps retrouvé," in *Le topos du manuscrit trouvé. Hommages à Christian Angelet*, ed. Jean Herman and Fernand Hallyn (Louvain: Éditions Peeters, 1999), 1-14. ; Christian Angelet, "Le topos du manuscrit trouvé: considérations historiques et typologiques," in *Le topos du manuscrit trouvé. Hommages à Christian Angelet*, ed. Jean Herman and Fernand Hallyn (Louvain: Éditions Peeters, 1999), xxxi-lvi.

<sup>88</sup> See the prologue to the *Historia regum Britanniae*: "Talia michi et de talibus multociens cogitanti optulit Walterus Oxenefordensis archidiaconus, uir in oratoria arte atque in exoticis hystoriis eruditus, quendam Britannici sermonis librum uetustissimum qui a Bruto primo rege Britonum usque ad Cadualadrum filium Caduallonis actus omnium continue et ex ordine perpuleris orationibus proponebat." (I frequently thought the matter over in this way until Walter archdeacon of Oxford, a man skilled in the rhetorical arts and in foreign histories, brought me a very old book in the British tongue, which set out in excellent style a continuous narrative of all their deeds from the first king of the Britons, Brutus, down to Cadualadrus, son of Caduallo.) Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, ed. Michael D. Reeve, trans. Neil Wright, *Arthurian Studies* 69 (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007), 4-5.



Wotan and Freyja as human beings. It is not inconceivable that Saxo may have encountered euhemeristic thought under the form of genealogies such as that of Ari inn fróði's genealogy in *Íslendingabók* or historiographies as in *Historia Norwegie* but there is no hard proof for that. The runestones, which Saxo likely never read anyway do not contain any hint of euhemeristic thought. As such, euhemeristic narratives found in the *Gesta Danorum* are most likely the result of both the reception of classical and medieval euhemerism, and Saxo's own authorial personality.

### **3.3. The Place of Paganism in the *Gesta Danorum***

#### **3.3.1. Paganism as a Thread**

According to Inge Skovgaard-Petersen, the *Gesta Danorum* is organized according to a fourfold structure.<sup>89</sup> According to this idea, the work is composed of two main parts, each of them divided into two sub parts. The principal axis of division, which separates the two main parts, is the conversion of Denmark to Christianity which happened in the tenth book. The pagan part is itself divided in two halves by the birth of Christ, which happened in the fifth book. The pivotal axis of the Christian part is the foundation of the archdiocese of Lund in XII.6.6. This structure allowed Saxo to draw ideologically significant parallels between the distant past and the historical period. The creation of Lund's archbishopric, for instance, becomes the historical equivalent to the birth of Christ. Like Karsten Friis-Jensen, I believe that the structure perceived by Inge Skovgaard-Petersen in the *Gesta Danorum* works too well to be the result of a coincidence and was consciously designed by Saxo.

Paganism does not disappear from the *Gesta Danorum* after the conversion of the Danes to Christianity but remains an important theme of the *Gesta Danorum* throughout the two halves of the work.<sup>90</sup> Instead, after the Danes became Christians, the attention shifted from the Danes' own pagan religion and to that of the Wends. From the point of view of modern historians, Danish paganism, and that of the Wends are two distinct religious traditions. They indeed involve different sets of gods, different practices and were practiced by different peoples. Furthermore, the Danish paganism described by Saxo ended during the 10<sup>th</sup> century, while Saxo's description of the Wends' paganism corresponds to religious practices from the 12<sup>th</sup> century. These distinctions, however, do not necessarily reflect the medieval attitude toward

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<sup>89</sup> Inge Skovgaard-Petersen, "Saxo, Historian of the Patria," *Mediaeval Scandinavia*, no. 2 (1960): 69-70

<sup>90</sup> Friis-Jensen, "Saxo og det 12.," 93-111.

pagan religions. As Freundeberg and Goetz argued, medieval Christians did not perceive the various pagan religions as being truly different entities. Medieval Christians had four categories to classify religions: themselves, the Jews, the Muslims, and the pagans. Generally, all forms of polytheism were indistinctively classified as paganism.<sup>91</sup> Yet, most modern commentators agree that Saxo indeed described Danish and Wendish paganisms as distinct religious traditions and favored the Danish paganism over the Wendish one.<sup>92</sup> As we shall see, euhemerism is one of the distinguishing elements between Saxo's treatment of Danish and Wendish paganisms.

Saxo's euhemeristic views are part of his larger considerations on mythology and the pagan past. His interest in paganism is ambivalent, and he often mentions heathen religion to castigate it, but he is nonetheless the first Christian Scandinavian author to give a lengthy account on the pagan gods. Contrary to other historians, such as Bede, Saxo did not ignore the pagan gods and gave them an important place in his work. In this regard, Saxo was innovative with respect to the Scandinavian historiographers of his time. Sven Aggesen, for instance, did not mention a single gods' name, though he also wrote about the pagan past of Denmark. As such, Saxo's inclusion of the Norse gods in his work was not the result of following literary convention with regard to the description of the pagan past, but a deliberate and original authorial choice.

The fourfold structure of the *Gesta Danorum*, as theorized by Skovgaard-Petersen, is efficient in explaining Saxo's portrayal of paganism. In accordance with this structure, the spiritual journey of the Danes is not merely a journey from paganism to Christianity, but also from converted to converters. The Danes' attitude toward paganism throughout the *Gesta Danorum* can be divided into two halves according to this structure. The first part, which covers the pagan period, can be divided between a time of unchallenged paganism until the eighth book and the beginning of Christian missionary efforts in Denmark, which was initiated after the subjugation of the Saxons by Charlemagne. The second period after the conversion to Christianity is also pivotally organized around a religious conflict. This meaningful symmetry between remote past and the 12<sup>th</sup> century is well illustrated in XIV.39.13, where Valdemar mentions Charlemagne just before the assault on Arkona.

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<sup>91</sup> Bele Freudenberg and Hans-Werner Goetz, "The Christian Perception of Heathens in the Early Middle Ages," *Millennium* 10, no. 1 (2013): 283; For another recent discussion on the topic see Alban Gautier, *Beowulf au paradis. Figures de bons païens dans l'Europe du Nord au Moyen Âge*, Histoire ancienne et médiévale 149 (Paris: édition de la sorbonne, 2017), 27.

<sup>92</sup> See for instance Wellendorf, *Gods and Humans*, 98.

Interrogatus, quonam id augurio deprehensum haberet, ex hoc potissimum augurari se dixit, quod Rugiani quondam a Karolo Cesare expugnati sanctumque Vitum Coruegiensem religiosa nece insignem tributis colere iussi, defuncto uictore libertatem reposcere cupientes seruitutem superstitione mutarunt, instituto domi simulacro, quod sancti Viti uocabulo censuerunt.

(Being asked what auspice had led him to understand this, he replied that his prediction stemmed particularly from the fact that, when Charlemagne had at one time taken Rügen by assault and commanded its inhabitants to pay tribute to St Vitus of Corvey, who had died an illustrious martyr's death, the islanders, anxious to claim back freedom after their vanquisher's decease, exchanged thralldom for superstition and erected within their community an effigy which they proposed to call St Vitus.)<sup>93</sup>

This is one of the four mentions of Charlemagne in the *Gesta Danorum*, and the only one after the conversion of Denmark. In this passage, Saxo draws a connection between the Danes' exploits and those of Charlemagne. Not only does Valdemar mention Charlemagne's military exploits, but he does so while replicating these exploits by conquering Rügen. We must note, however, that to Saxo the true successor of Charlemagne is certainly more Absalon than Valdemar. Saxo describes Absalon as the true figure of authority behind Valdemar. As such, the fourfold structure of the *Gesta Danorum* allows Absalon to appear as an ideal incarnation of both spiritual and temporal power as an archbishop of Lund, whose foundation is paralleled by the birth of Christ,<sup>94</sup> and as a conqueror and convertor whose exploits parallel those of Charlemagne. We may note the parallelism between the occurrence of Charlemagne and Absalon within the chronology of the *Gesta Danorum*: Charlemagne appeared in the eighth book, during the second half of the pagan part, while Absalon appears in the fourteenth book, during the second half of the Christian part. As I will discuss later, Friis-Jensen noted that the eighth book marks the end of paganism in Scandinavia and the opening to the new religion.<sup>95</sup> The fourteenth book, by contrast, marks the start of the crusading period, when the Danes ceased to be mere receivers of the Christian religion and took an active role in its propagation. As such, the pagan Wends, who are political and religious enemies allow Saxo to design with Absalon, an ideal Danish leader, a synthesis of secular and ecclesiastical rule who triumphs both over religious and political enemies. As Birgit Sawyer showed, Saxo consistently depicted

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<sup>93</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, XIV.39.13.

<sup>94</sup> Absalon became archbishop at the end of book xiv, but Saxo nonetheless refers to him as "maximus pontifex", (archbishop) as soon as in xi.12.4.

<sup>95</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, VIII.1.1. n.

good monarchs as those who were subservient to the Church, and this relation is nowhere truer than in the relation between Absalon and King Valdemar whose weakness is compensated by Absalon's strong leadership.<sup>96</sup>

I will now examine Saxo's depiction of paganism during two time periods: the pre-Christian Scandinavian paganism, and the Wendish paganism during the Baltic crusades. This broader examination will underline clear ideological underpinnings and authorial strategies in Saxo's work which could have appeared as insignificant details when focusing only on euhemerism and paganism, as it appears in the book three of the *Gesta Danorum*.

### 3.3.2. The Pre-Christian Danish Paganism

In this part I shall review Saxo's various descriptions of Scandinavian paganism. I will not yet touch on the specifically euhemeristic nature of these narratives. Saxo did not hide that his intention was to produce a glorious history for the Danish people, as is clearly stated in the first words of the preface to the *Gesta Danorum*:

Cum ceterae nationes rerum suarum titulis gloriari uoluptatemque ex maiorum recordatione percipere soleant, Danorum maximus pontifex Absalon patriam nostram, cuius illustrande maxima semper cupiditate flagrabat, eo claritatis et monumenti genere fraudari non passus mihi comitum suorum extremo ceteris operam abnuentibus res Danicas in historiam conferendi negocium intorsit[.]

(Because other nations are in the habit of vaunting the fame of their achievements, and joy in recollecting their ancestors Absalon archbishop of Denmark, I had always been fired with a passionate zeal to glorify our fatherland; he would not allow it to go without some noble document of this kind and, since everyone else refused the task the work of compiling a history of the Danes was thrown upon me, the least of his entourage.)<sup>97</sup>

One of Saxo's challenges was to offer to his 13<sup>th</sup> century Christian audience a positive image of the ancient Danes despite their disturbing lack of faith. Lars Boje Mortensen, summarized the available options for Saxo to treat Danish history:

- 1) To simply ignore the pagan past.

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<sup>96</sup> Sawyer, "Valdemar, Absalon and Saxo," 697.

<sup>97</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, Pr.1.1.

- 2) To minimize Denmark's isolation from the Roman world and Christianity. In other words, to pretend that Danes were in fact close relatives to the Roman and Christian world since long before the conversion.
- 3) To minimize the importance of the pagan past and focus mainly on the post conversion period.
- 4) To maximize the pagan past in its own right, without linking it to Latin civilization and to depict the Danes as displaying inherent qualities even in their pre-Christian past.<sup>98</sup>

The first option was not compatible with Saxo's aim of a grand history going back to the country's foundation. The second one was rather difficult to apply to Denmark which did not even border the Roman empire. Instead of stressing the inexistant proximity between the Danes and Romans, Saxo astutely counters the accusation of paganism against Scandinavians and reminds us that there is no shame to having been pagan, especially when even the clever Romans had once been pagan too:

Nec mirandum, si prodigialibus eorum portentis adducta barbaries in adulterine religionis cultum concesserit, cum Latinorum quoque prudentiam perlexerit talium quorundam diuinis honoribus celebrata mortalitas.

(It is not surprising that barbarians were drawn to their weird hocus-pocus and gave themselves up to the rites of a debased religion, since even the intelligent Romans were seduced into worshipping similar mortals with divine honours.)<sup>99</sup>

The third option proposed by Boje Mortensen was not suitable for Saxo's rather anti-imperial views. The fourth was hence the most suitable for Saxo's work, which displayed in the first books several authorial strategies to magnify the Danish pagan past as much as possible. The first Danish kings from Dan to Hadingus are depicted as valiant heroes and their religion, or lack of religion, plays little to no role in their stories.

There is, in fact, no reference to paganism in the *Gesta Danorum* before the first mentions of the pseudo-gods from I.5.2 to I.5.6. In this passage, Saxo produces a typology of the pseudo-gods, and divides them into three categories: the giants, the soothsayers, and the offspring of the first two who believed in the divine nature of their progenitors.<sup>100</sup> It is in I.7.1, during Saxo's

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<sup>98</sup> Lars Boje Mortensen, "Saxo Grammaticus' View of the Origin of the Danes and His Historiographical Models," *Cahier de l'institut du Moyen-Âge grec et latin*, no. 55 (1987): 169-183.

<sup>99</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, I.5.6.

<sup>100</sup> I will come back to this typology in more length in the part 5.1.1.

second digression on the Scandinavian gods that the author provides his first lengthy narrative regarding those pseudo-gods. For the moment, I will only summarize this narrative. Saxo recounts how the kings of the northern countries sent Othinus a golden statue in his effigy in order to honor his divinity. Othinus' wife, Frigga, wants to acquire the gold and jewelry of the statue, and for this purpose offers sexual favors to one of her servants to convince him to destroy the statue. Her plan works, and because of the dishonor brought upon her husband, Othinus has to exile himself. He is then replaced by a certain Mithothyn, who convinced the pagans to not only make offerings to the gods as a conglomerate, but to make offerings to each individual deity.<sup>101</sup> Othinus nonetheless comes back to the gods' society after the death of his wife and reconquers his throne, before banishing those who followed Mythothyn. This narrative is incontestably euhemeristic in the common acceptance of the word: it depicts the pagan gods as human beings revered as gods by gullible human beings. It is notable that Saxo introduces motives proper to Scandinavian literature and historiography. His mention of Uppsala is hardly innocent. Saxo likely bases his description of Uppsala as a headquarter of the gods on preexisting accounts, most likely that of Adam of Bremen from the *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* who described in IV.XXVI the temple of Uppsala as a high place of Nordic paganism:

Nobilissimum illa gens templum habet, quod Ubsola dicitur, non longe positum ab Sictona civitate [vel Birka]. In hoc templo, quod totum ex auro paratum est, statuas trium deorum veneratur populus, ita ut potentissimum eorum Thor in medio solium habeat triclinio ; hinc et inde locum possident Wodan et Fricco.<sup>102</sup>

(That folk has a very famous temple called Uppsala, situated not far from the city of Sigtuna and Björkö. In this temple, entirely decked out in gold, the people worship the statues of three gods in such wise that the mightiest of them, Thor, occupies a throne in the middle of the chamber; Wotan and Frikko have places on either side.)<sup>103</sup>

And he adds in IV.XXVII:

Solet quoque post novem annos communis omnium Sueoniae provinciarum sollempnitas in Ubsola celebrari. Ad quam videlicet sollempnitatem nulli prestatur immunitas. Reges et populi omnes et singuli sua dona transmittunt ad Ubsolam, et quod omni pena crudelius

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<sup>101</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, I.7.2.

<sup>102</sup> Bernhard Schmeidler, ed., *Adam von Bremen, Hamburgische Kirchengeschichte* (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1917), 257-258.

<sup>103</sup> Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, trans. Francis Joseph Tschan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 207.

est, illi, qui iam induerunt christianitatem, ab illis se redimunt cerimoniais. Sacrificium itaque tale est: ex omni animante, quod masculinum est, novem capita offeruntur, quorum sanguine deos [tales] placari mos est. Corpora autem suspenduntur in lucum, qui proximus est templo. Is enim lucus tam sacer est gentilibus, ut singulae arbores eius ex morte vel tabo immolatorum divinae credantur. Ibi etiam canes et equi pendent cum hominibus [...]<sup>104</sup>

(It is customary also to solemnize in Uppsala, at nine-year intervals, a general feast of all the provinces of Sweden. From attendance at this festival no one is exempted Kings and people all and singly send their gifts to Uppsala and, what is more distressing than any kind of punishment, those who have already adopted Christianity redeem themselves through these ceremonies. The sacrifice is of this nature: of every living thing that is male, they offer nine heads with the blood of which it is customary to placate gods of this sort. The bodies they hang in the sacred grove that adjoins the temple. Now this grove is so sacred in the eyes of the heathen that each and every tree in it is believed divine because of the death or putrefaction of the victims. Even dogs and horses hang there with men.)<sup>105</sup>

Adam of Bremen's description could hardly be more negative. And he does not even claim to describe a tradition of the past but a contemporary practice. This is for Saxo the perfect occasion to present the Swedes as the true pagans of Scandinavia. As Anders Winroth, Lukas Gabriel Grzybowski, and Henrik Janson among others, argued, Adam of Bremen's description of Uppsala was probably written in order to discredit the missionary efforts not initiated by Hamburg-Bremen in Sweden.<sup>106</sup> Other scholars such as Stefan Brink and Olof Sundqvist argue that Uppsala likely had been an important center of power in Viking times.<sup>107</sup>

As I have noted, Saxo often acted as a rival narrator against Adam of Bremen.<sup>108</sup> It is nonetheless easy to understand why Saxo would retain, and even expand on Adam's account of pagan worship in Sweden. These accounts allow Saxo to depict paganism as a Swedish phenomenon, which touched Danish society only incidentally. Another German author,

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<sup>104</sup> Adam of Bremen, *Hamburgische Kirchengeschichte*, 259-260.

<sup>105</sup> Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, 208.

<sup>106</sup> Anders Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia, Vikings, Merchants, and Missionaries in the Remaking of Northern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 148; Lukas Gabriel Grzybowski, "O Paganismo Escandinavo entre a percepção e a imaginação: a *Vita Anskarii* de Rimbert e as *Gesta Hammaburgensis* de Adam de Bremen," *História Revista* 24, no. 1 (2019): 135-154; Henrik Janson, "Adam of Bremen and the Conversion of Scandinavia," in *Christianizing People and Converting Individuals*, ed. Guyda Armstrong and Ian N. Wood, *International Medieval Research* 7 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 83-88.

<sup>107</sup> Stefan Brink, "Uppsala — in Myth and Reality," in *Theorizing Old Norse Myth*, ed. Stefan Brink and Lisa Collinson (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), 175-194; Olof Sundqvist, *Freyr's Offspring, Rulers and Religion in Ancient Svea Society*, *Historia Religionum* 21 (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2002), 140.

<sup>108</sup> See part 3.1.1.

Thietmar of Merseburg, wrote an account of a similar kind *c.* 1015, in his chronicle, however, the sacrifices take place at Lejre in Denmark.<sup>109</sup> It is uncertain whether Saxo had access to Thietmar's chronicle, but one may conceive that Saxo would have discarded accounts of pagan sacrifice in Denmark if he had had knowledge of them.

Saxo once again mentions the pseudo-gods in the third book of the *Gesta Danorum*. In this book, Saxo provides a lengthy narrative on the struggle between the human king Høtherus and the pseudo-god Balderus, son of Othinus. The two men started their dispute over the princess Nanna. The princess was initially promised to Høtherus, but Balderus fell deeply in love with her after he saw her bathing. Because of Balderus' supernatural strength, Gevarus, Nanna's father, did not dare to refuse his daughter to the pseudo-gods. After many peripeties Høtherus ultimately triumphs over Balderus and kills the pseudo-god. This euhemeristic narrative leads to a second one. Othinus seeks to avenge his son and consults a seer who foretells that he will beget a son with the Ruthenian princess Rinda to avenge Balderus. The narrator ironically comments that:

At Othinus, quamquam deorum precipuus haberetur, diunos tamen et aruspices ceterosque, quos exquisitis prescientie studiis uigere compererat, super exequenda filii ultione sollicitat. Plerunque enim humane opis indiga est imperfecta diuinitas.

(Now although Odin was regarded as chief among the gods, he would approach seers, soothsayers, and others whom he had discovered strong in the finest arts of prediction, with a view to prosecuting vengeance for his son. Divinity is not always so perfect that it can dispense with human aid.)<sup>110</sup>

After several unsuccessful attempts to change appearance and personality to woo the princess, Othinus turns himself into an old nurse to be alone with her and rape her. As the seer foretold, the pseudo-god indeed begets a son to avenge Balderus: Bo. Because of his shameful conduct, the assembly of the pseudo-gods once again banishes Othinus and replace him with Ollerus.<sup>111</sup> Ultimately, the gods nonetheless take pity on Othinus and reinstall him as their chief. Saxo suggests there that Othinus may have bought his position and once again makes an ironic comment on the pseudo-god in III.4.11: "Quos si quanti emerit rogas, illos consule, qui quanti diuinitas ueneat didicerunt. Mihi minus constare fateor." (If you ask me how much he paid,

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<sup>109</sup> Norbert Wagner, "Zur Neunzahl von Lejre und Uppsala," *Zeitschrift für Deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 109, no. 3 (1980): 202-208.

<sup>110</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, III.4.1.

<sup>111</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, III.4.9.



consult those who have found out the price of a godhead; I confess to having no reliable information myself.) After this point the human pseudo-gods play only a minor role in the *Gesta Danorum*. Saxo briefly mentions them once from VI.5.3 to VI.5.5, where he names Othinus and Thoro as the two main Danish pre-Christian deities and argues that those characters cannot be identical with the Roman pagan gods. Othinus continues to appear occasionally to help, or trick, the Danish heroes and kings as in VII.12.1, where he kills and then impersonates king Harald Hildestand's advisor. In IX.4.12 Othinus appears once again under the name Rostarus<sup>112</sup> and offers to heal Sigvard if he agrees to consecrate to him the men he killed during war, which Sigvard accepts. It is not clear whether the Othinus from this passage is supposed to be a human. If he were, this would suggest that his lifetime is unnaturally long, as he would have had to be alive both in book III, before the birth of Christ, mentioned in V.15.3, and in book IX, during the lifetime of Ragnar, a contemporary of Charlemagne according to Saxo. Jonas Wellendorf proposes the hypothesis that there are in fact several *Othini* and not just one throughout the *Gesta Danorum*.<sup>113</sup> This possibility is indeed warranted by the fact that in III.4.10 Othinus is banished and replaced by Ollerus, which the pseudo-gods chose to call Othinus. However, Othinus proposal to bargain for the soul of dead soldiers in IX.4.12 would suggest that this Othinus is in fact a sort of demon who impersonate Othinus.

Saxo used demonism to explain the pagan gods in an important narrative of the *Gesta Danorum*, the two journeys of Thorkillus. This narrative, which is the last of the *Gesta Danorum* to give an important role to the pagan gods, spans from VIII.14.2 to VIII.15.13. Thorkillus, a companion to King Gorm who is implied to be an Icelander, leads two expeditions to the north. On the first, Gorm successfully invokes the help of the god Utgartha-Loki (Vgarthilocus) against a storm. The second expedition is commissioned by Gorm, who wonders if the soul is immortal and sends Thorkillus to Utgartha-Loki for answers. As Friis-Jensen noted, these two journeys are comparable to the itinerancy of Aeneas in the *Aeneid*.<sup>114</sup> The journey is dangerous and many of Thorkillus' companions die. They ultimately find Utgartha-Loki who turns out not to be a powerful god as they thought, but rather a chained, powerless, old, and putrid giant. In Utgartha-Loki's place, the crew is assaulted by demons spitting venom, and Thorkillus' companions start to pray to these demons, who they consider to be their gods, for mercy. On

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<sup>112</sup> Although Saxo does not mention Othinus in this passage, Othinus had previously used the alias Roster when he tried to seduce Rinda in III.4.2.

<sup>113</sup> Wellendorf, *Gods and Humans*, 79.

<sup>114</sup> Friis-Jensen, "Saxo og det 12.," 93-111.

the other hand, Thorkillus realizing his former gods were in fact awful monsters, starts to pray instead to the “god of the universe” and becomes a monotheist on his own before he had met any Christians. Only after his preliminary self-conversion to monotheism does Thorkillus go to Germany, where he is introduced to Christianity. Thorkillus then returned to Denmark to report to King Gorm the result of his expedition. The king could not bear to learn the awful truth about his god and died during Thorkillus’ tale.<sup>115</sup>

As Friis-Jensen argued, the whole eighth book of the *Gesta Danorum* is designed as a conclusion for the pagan period and as the pavement for the upcoming Christian times.<sup>116</sup> Soon after Thorkillus’ expedition, during the reign of Gorms’ son, Gotrik, Charlemagne subjugates and converts the Saxons to Christianity.<sup>117</sup> For the first time in its history, Denmark neighbors a Christian kingdom. Saxo can no longer rely on Danish isolation from Christianity to explain Danish paganism. His placement of Thorkillus’ stories just before Charlemagne’s invasion of Saxony is significant: it is not only under the influence of the bordering German Christianity that the Danes rejected their old gods, but also through their own research of truth.

King Gorm’s meditation on the immortality of the soul is not presented as having originated from Christian influences; rather, it is an example of natural theology, an approach to God based not on the revelation and the scriptures, but on the senses and reason.<sup>118</sup> Similarly, Thorkillus was converted to Christianity in Germany only after he experienced the falsehood of the pagan gods and “discovered” the monotheistic god, based on empirical observations. The German Christians were only responsible for the last part of Thorkillus’ conversion; the first step was personal.

Here, Saxo emphasizes as much as possible the indigenous process of conversion. Saxo acknowledges the fact that Christianity is only accessible through the scriptures, or indirectly through contact with Christians. However, he nonetheless reminds us pagans do not need to be in direct contact with Christianity to become monotheists, and that not all Danes were passive recipients of the Christian teaching, but at least some of them were active seekers of the truth. This whole story acts as a counternarrative to Adam of Bremen’s narratives regarding the conversion of Scandinavia. When Saxo highlights the personal aspect of religious conversion, he also undermines the notion that Scandinavia only became Christian because of German

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<sup>115</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, VIII.14.2-VIII.15.13.

<sup>116</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, VIII.1.1 note 1.

<sup>117</sup> Charlemagne’s conquest of Saxony spanned between 772 and 804.

<sup>118</sup> For a discussion on natural theology see section 4.3.2 and 4.3.3.

missionaries.<sup>119</sup> It is clear from this narrative that euhemerism was not Saxo's sole mode of interpretation of Nordic paganism.

In fact, throughout his works, Saxo is able to explain a single motif through different modes of interpretation. A particularly striking example of such a practice is his treatment of the motif of Thor's hammer. Saxo first mentioned Thor's hammer in III.2.10 during the episode of the conflict between Høtherus and Balderus. Here Saxo describes the pseudo-god Thoro as wielding an impressively powerful club (*clavis*). Yet, in VIII.14.5, in a passage regarding Thorkillus' expedition, Saxo offers another explanation for this hammer. Saxo describes how Thorkillus encountered monsters who guarded an island off the coast of Hålogaland. He notes that the biggest of these giants used a giant club (*fustis*). Saxo does not explicitly state that this monster is Thor, but two elements, besides the fact that the monster possesses a gigantic hammer, may lead to the following conclusion: in VIII.14.3 the narrator notes that "after a span of days they detected in the far distance the thundering din of a storm which sounded as if it were deluging rocks." (*Interiectis diebus eminus perstreptentem procelle fragorem perinde ac scopulos inundantis exaudiunt.*) And in VIII.14.4 Thorkillus expressed his belief that the island was guarded by deities, which suggests that the pagans believed these monsters to be gods. Since the monster is falsely identified as a god, possesses a giant club, and is connected to thunder, it is only natural to identify the monster with Thor, which is likely what Saxo intended. Finally, in the thirteenth book, Saxo explains how the ancient people of Scandinavia believed that thunder was caused by a hammer, and thus came up with their belief in Thor's hammer:

Cupiens enim antiquitas tonitruorum causas usitata rerum similitudine comprehendere, malleos, quibus coeli fragores cieri credebat, ingenti ere complexa fuerat, aptissime tante sonoritatis uim fabrilium specie imitandam existimans.

(Ancient folk, in their desire to understand the causes of thunder, using an analogy from everyday life had wrought from a mass of bronze hammers of the sort they believed were used to instigate those crashes in the heavens, since they supposed the best way of copying the violence of such loud noises was with a kind of blacksmith's tool.)<sup>120</sup>

As such, we can see that Saxo provided three different explanations for a singular mytheme from Old Norse mythology: one is euhemeristic, one is akin to demonism, and the last is naturalistic. This confirms that euhemerism may coexist with other forms of interpretation of

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<sup>119</sup> Piet, "Religious Conversions," 130-145.

<sup>120</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, XIII.5.5.

pagan religions, and that these different interpretations were not perceived by the medieval authors as antithetic. The fact that two texts usually attributed to the same author provide different explanations for paganism does not disprove the hypothesis of a common authorship. Euhemerism, demonism, and analogy do not act as mutually exclusive scientific theories, but as meaningful narratives which may be used in different contexts.

Euhemerism, as it identifies the pagan gods as mortal men, is naturally suited to address the origin of pagan religion, because at the time it was still possible for the human impostors to be alive. Saxo uses Euhemerism in this way and restricted his use of euhemerism to the first books of the *Gesta Danorum*. In later parts, the human pseudo-gods were better explained as immortal demons or other supernatural creatures. Yet, it is also the case that Saxo did not use euhemerism to explain the origin of every form of paganism. As I will now discuss, Saxo used a different and original theory to explain the paganism of the Wends. The difference in the way he treats these two kinds of paganism will allow us to better understand the purpose of euhemerism in Saxo's work.

### **3.3.3. The Baltic Paganism**

After the conversion period, the Danes encountered paganism once again during their military expeditions against the Wends. These events are of considerable importance to Saxo, who spent much of the fourteenth book describing them. This period also coincides with the lifetime of Absalon, Saxo's patron, who played a major role in these events. Some of the most crucial events of these military campaigns revolved around the capture of the Wendish Island of Rügen, now in northern Germany. The island was assaulted twice by the Danes. In XIV.1.6, Saxo described the first expedition, which was led by King Erik Emune. After a rapid victory, Erik forced the inhabitants of Arkona, the main fortress of Rügen, to convert to Christianity. However, Saxo notes that the inhabitants conserved their idol, which, he states, was falsely called Saint Vitus. According to Saxo, the idol's conservation of the idol led to a bad conversion:

Quo asseruato oppidani ueterem sacrorum morem penitus abrogari passi non sunt.

Primum itaque solenni ritu prolui iussi stagnum maiore pellende sitis quam initiande religionis ardore petentes sub specie sacrorum fessa obsidione corpora refecerunt. Datur Archonensibus pariter rerum diuinarum antistes, qui et eis cultioris uite formam prescriberet et noue religionis rudimenta contraderet. Sed post abscessum Erici cum antistite pulsa religio. Siquidem Archonenses abiecta obsidum charitate pristinum statue cultum repetentes, qua fide diuinum susceperint prodiderunt.

(However, now that this idol had been preserved, the townsfolk could not bear to have their ancient mode of ritual completely abolished.

First, then, ordered to undertake the solemn observance of baptism, they proceeded to the pool, keener to slake their thirst than to embark on a novel faith, and under the guise of a religious act refreshed their siege-weary bodies. In like manner the people of Arkona were given a holy priest to direct them to the pattern of a more refined existence and to impart the first precepts of the new religion. Nevertheless, following Erik's departure they threw out Christianity, priest and all. In fact the inhabitants of Arkona, renouncing affection for the hostages they had submitted, returned to their ancient totem cult, and with just the same sincerity they had shown in adopting God's worship, abandoned it.)<sup>121</sup>

The conversion of Arkona was a disaster, and Saxo's representation of the Wends drinking the baptismal water symbolizes their inability to comprehend Christian doctrine and to elevate themselves from earthly preoccupations to spiritual ones. This portrayal infantilizes the Wends and depicts them as unable to convert to Christianity without external assistance. This assistance came later, during the reign of King Valdemar, who launched a second expedition against the island and its fortress. In the *Gesta Danorum*, the second expedition is the most spectacular of the two and Saxo described it at length with colorful depictions of the assault on the fortress of Arkona. Saxo again presents the idol of saint Vitus worshipped in Arkona and explains its origin via Valdemar:

Ad cuius cultum contemptis Coruegiensibus pensionis summam transferre coeperunt, affirmantes domestico Vito contentos externo obsequi non oportere. Quamobrem Vitum ueniente sui solennis tempore eorum moenia turpaturum, a quibus tam similem monstro figuram acceperit. Merito namque eum ab his iniuriarum poenas exigere debere, qui uenerabilem eius memoriam sacrilego cultu complexi fuerunt.

(With contempt for the monks of Corvey, they started to transfer the amount they gave in tribute to this native cult, maintaining that they were quite satisfied with their local Vitus and were not obliged to render homage to a foreign equivalent. Therefore, said Valdemar, because the citizens had admitted him in a shape no better than that of a monster, the real St Vitus would cause a humiliating demolition of the walls when the time of his festival came round. Surely the saint must rightly exact vengeance for that insult on men who had recalled his revered memory with such sacrilegious worship.)<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, XIV.1.6-XIV.1.7.

<sup>122</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, XIV.39.13.

The origin of the religion of the inhabitants of Rügen is greed and the original purpose of the idol is to evade taxation. Again, Saxo describes the Wends as unable to convert to Christianity even when they had been exposed to it. This offers a stark contrast to his portrayal of the ancient Scandinavians, several of whom, such as Thorkillus, initiated their own conversion alone, without any preexisting knowledge of Christian revelation.

After the city surrendered, Saxo describes the destruction of the idol and states that a demon in the form of a black animal was seen escaping the city.<sup>123</sup> After idol's destruction, the Danes cut it into pieces and used the wood as fuel to cook their food.<sup>124</sup> This offers an interesting parallel to the Wends' previous use of baptismal water as a beverage: each of the contenders in this religious war turned the sacred objects of the other into an object of consumption. From Saxo's perspective the way the Wends treated baptismal water was a desecration, while the destruction of the idol of Arkona, restored the just order of things, as wood ceased to be treated as an object of worship and became a utility, which men could use for their needs.

### **3.3.4. The Purpose of Paganism**

Saxo speaks of two different kinds of paganism but only applies euhemerism to one of them: Scandinavian paganism. As I discussed earlier, euhemeristic narratives tend to be origin myths which explain how pagan religions appeared. It is indeed in this fashion that Saxo used euhemerism with regard to Scandinavian paganism, in relation to the earliest period of Danish paganism. However, Saxo also addressed the origin of Wendish religion but did not use euhemerism to explain it. Instead, Saxo produced a narrative according to which the Wends distorted Christian religion to fit their material interests. This idea is evidently beneficial to the interests of Absalon and Valdemar, as it represents the Wends as apostates that must be compelled back into the Christian community. It also depicts the Wends' spiritual journey as an inversion of that of the Danes. In Saxo's euhemeristic narrative, the active agents of paganism were the pseudo-gods, while the Danes were passive recipients of paganism, since they did not even resist it. After the pagan period, the Scandinavians became active agents of their own conversion. The Wends, on the contrary, were actively responsible for their own paganism, which they consciously invented themselves, but they became passive receivers of the Christian religion when they were not even resisting Christianization. As such, for Saxo,

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<sup>123</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, XIV.39.31-XIV.39.32.

<sup>124</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, XIV.39.34.

paganism is exogenous to Danish society: it is a foreign cultural trait that came from Byzantium and is primarily associated with Sweden in Scandinavia. On the contrary, Saxo depicts paganism as indigenous of Wendish society. Paganism rarely interests Saxo in and of itself, but as a prelude to conversion, either to the conversion of the Danes themselves or to the conversion of other people by the Danes. For Saxo, the pagan past and conversion are not only matters of patriotic pride for a glorious past, but they are also a way to address current issues. These narratives first served to contradict the political agenda defended by the *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae Pontificum* and second, to legitimize the Danes' own domination over other people.

In general, Saxo's depiction of the Scandinavian pseudo-gods is extremely negative. They are greedy, lustful, deceitful, and crave power. The worst of their sins is probably to have led humans to idolatry. As such, Saxo depicts paganism only through its negative aspects: idolatry, deification of mortal men, and bloody sacrifices. Contrary to Snorri, Saxo never accounts for an analogical reading of pagan myths, which could be considered imperfect perceptions of the Christian truth. To him, ancient Danes were not pagans because they were reluctant to accept the truth but because they did not have access to the truth. Significantly, Saxo represents paganism as entirely devoid of philosophical thought. In Saxo's representation, paganism does not come with a system of beliefs, or cosmological conceptions. The pagan religion is only characterized through the worship of false gods, be they gods or demons. From this perspective, for Saxo, there is no such thing as "pagan myths" as we understand them but only euhemerized historical tales.

## 4. The Prose *Edda* and *Heimskringla*

### 4.1. Historical Context

Much more is known about Snorri Sturluson than about Saxo Grammaticus. Snorri was an Icelandic lay chieftain from the prominent Sturlungar family. Snorri lived during the *sturlunga öld*, (the age of the Sturlungar) a period of unprecedented violence within Icelandic society caused by the strife for power among several prominent Icelandic families: the Sturlungar, to which Snorri belonged, the Haukdælir, the Ásbirningar, the Svínfellingar, and the Oddaverjar, to name but the most important. This Icelandic conflict was interwoven with Norwegian politics, and Snorri was an important character in the last stage of the Norwegian civil war, when King Hákon Hákonarson's coregent and father-in-law, Skúli Bárðarson, rebelled against the king to seize the crown for himself.

As one of the most influential Icelanders of his times, Snorri's life is recounted in the *Íslendinga saga* (first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century), which narrates the events of 13<sup>th</sup> century Iceland and was likely composed by Snorri's nephew, Sturla Þórðarson. Snorri achieved a high position in both the Icelandic and Norwegian societies. Born in Hvammur in 1179, Snorri became *lögsögumaðr* (law speaker) in 1215. He went to Norway in 1218 when he was invited by the young king, Hákon Hákonarson. Much of the power in Norway was in fact detained by the king co-regent and rival, Skúli, an influential member of the Birkibeinar faction. In Norway, Snorri was made *skutillsveinn*<sup>1</sup> and then, around 1220, he was made a *lenðr maðr*, (a landed man, a baron). According to *Íslendingasaga* chapter 43, in Norway, Hákon and Skúli planned to invade Iceland, but Snorri persuaded Skúli that this was the wrong course of action and suggested he uses his influence to convince the Icelanders to submit to the Norwegian king. Snorri's plan was ultimately approved by Hákon.<sup>2</sup> Snorri was closer to Skúli than he was to Hákon, and it is possible that he was made a jarl by Skúli in secret before he chose to return to Iceland, thus disobeying to King Hákon who ordered him to stay in Norway.<sup>3</sup> *Sturlunga saga* casts doubt on the possibility that Snorri was indeed made a jarl by Skúli, but it is likely that Snorri intended

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<sup>1</sup> See note 139 of chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *Sturlunga Saga*, 243-244.

<sup>3</sup> *Sturlunga saga* chapter 293.



to become Skúli's representative in Iceland should the duke become king in Norway.<sup>4</sup> Snorri's disobedience to Hákon led to his death, as the king ordered Snorri's son-in-law and rival, Gizurr Þorvaldsson, to send him back to Norway or kill him. According to the *Sturlunga saga* Gizurr did not really try to capture Snorri but ordered his men to kill him.<sup>5</sup>

Hákon and Skúli's dispute was one of the later developments of the so-called civil war era. The reasons behind the start of the war were multiple; personal enmities, dynastic quarrels, the impoverishment of the peasantry, and the will of different aristocratic groups to put a king who represented their interests on the thrones, are among the decisive factors.<sup>6</sup> The sagas, however, put particular emphasis on the dynastic aspect of the conflicts, which are essentially perceived as the struggle between rival claimants for the throne of Norway. It is indeed the death of King Sigurðr jórsalafari in 1130 and the rivalry between his successors that are traditionally identified as the first stage of the civil war era. King Sigurðr left behind two potential heirs, his son Magnús, and his putative brother, Haraldr gilli. Sigurðr had expressly designated Magnús as his successor, a vow which Haraldr swore to respect. Yet, Haraldr proved to be a popular man, and Magnús could not prevent him from becoming coruler of the kingdom. The two co-regents initially governed peacefully, but it was probably Magnús who started the conflict in an attempt to become the sole ruler of the country. Magnús was defeated, blinded, and castrated by Haraldr's men who then installed their leader as the sole ruler of the kingdom. However, the dynastic conflict resumed after Haraldr's death, when his three sons, Ingi, Sigurðr Munnr and the illegitimate Eysteinn also struggled for power. Ingi emerged victorious from this conflict but was killed shortly thereafter in 1161 in a battle against one of Sigurðr Munnr's sons, Hákon herdebrei. After Ingi's death, his followers joined Erlingr skakki, Ingi's half-brother, who supported his own son, Magnús, for the throne of Norway. Contrary to what was traditionally required from a king, Magnús was not a king's son. Through his mother however, he was Sigurðr Jórsalafari's grandson. Erlingr compensated for his son's shaky legitimacy by emphasizing the fact that he was the legitimate son of the legitimate daughter of a king. Furthermore, in 1163, he organized a coronation ceremony for Magnús, the first in

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<sup>4</sup> Helgi Þorláksson, "Snorri Sturluson, the Politician, and His Foreign Relations. The Norwegian, Orcadian and Götlandish Connections," in *Snorri Sturluson and Reykholt. The Author and Magnate, His Life, Works and Environment at Reykholt in Iceland*. (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2018), 103.

<sup>5</sup> *Sturlunga saga* chapter 299.

<sup>6</sup> Knut Helle, "The Norwegian Kingdom: Succession Disputes and Consolidation," in *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia. Volume 1: Prehistory to 1520*, ed. Knut Helle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 369-376.

Scandinavia.<sup>7</sup> The same year, a new law of succession was redacted. Ironically, the new law emphasized the right of the kings' sons to inherit, giving priority to the eldest son, and theoretically removing the possibility of joint rulership.<sup>8</sup>

Despite his efforts to stabilize the kingdom and to rationalize the process of the succession of power, Magnús faced the most violent stage of the civil war era (1130-1240) when a priest from the Faroe Islands, Sverrir, claimed to be the illegitimate son of Sigurðr Munnr and became the leader of the rebel faction of the Birkibeinar. Sverrir ultimately defeated Magnús and became king. Sverrir's reign (1151-1202) was marked by his will to put the Norwegian Church under his authority, which led to his excommunication in 1194. Sverrir's conflict with the Church led to the rise of another rebel faction, the Baglar led by the archbishop of Niðarós, Nikulás Árnason. Sverrir's son, Hákon succeeded his father in 1202 and reconciled with the Baglar and the Church, but he died soon after, in 1204. The young Guttormr, a grandson of King Sverrir, briefly succeeded Hákon, who was then considered to be heirless, but the infant king quickly died, and the Birkibeinar had to choose yet another king, Ingi Bárðarson, grandson of King Sigurðr Munnr through his mother. After Ingi's death, his half-brother Skúli Bárðarson became the de-facto ruler of the country and governed in the name of the newly discovered illegitimate child of King Hákon Sverrisson: Hákon Hákonarson. Hákon's reign (1217-1263) was marked by peace, only troubled by the failed rebellion of Skúli, which is traditionally perceived as the last conflict of the civil war era in Norway. Snorri ultimately became closer to Skúli than to Hákon. Some scholars such as Guðrún Nordal interpret the *Háttatal* section of Snorri's *Edda* – which presents itself as praise of both Hákon and Skúli – as actually being an eulogy of Skúli and a criticism of Hákon.<sup>9</sup> Kevin Wanner, however, remarked that Snorri attributed to Hákon the quality of being chosen by God to rule, which indeed weakens the idea that this poem could have been composed to undermine Hákon's legitimacy.<sup>10</sup> As I will discuss, I agree with Wanner on this matter, and I consider that the *Edda* is probably not as pro-Skúli as it is sometimes

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<sup>7</sup> Throughout the Middle Ages, coronation regularly served to compensate for the lack of legitimacy of certain kings. The sacred character it bestowed upon the king, turned the questioning of his legitimacy into a sacrilege. See for instance James Naus, *Framing the Capetian Miracle*, Manchester Medieval Studies 16 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 18.

<sup>8</sup> Helle, "The Norwegian Kingdom," 369-377.

<sup>9</sup> Guðrún Nordal, "Skáldið Snorri Sturluson," in *Snorrastefna, 25.-27. Júlí 1990*, ed. Úlfar Bragason (Reykjavík: Stofnun Sigurðar Nordals, 1992), 61.

<sup>10</sup> Kevin Wanner, "Háttatal and the Divine Legitimation of Kings," in *Eddic, Skaldic, and Beyond. Poetic Variety in Medieval Iceland & Norway*, ed. Martin Chase (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 75-86.

presented to be in scholarship. On the other hand, I will argue that *Heimskringla* conveys a political ideology favorable to Skúli.

## 4.2. Euhemerism in *Heimskringla*

### 4.2.1. Ancient History – Modern Fiction

Contrary to the *Gesta Danorum* *Heimskringla* does not address the question of paganism after the period of the conversion and only speaks of indigenous Scandinavian paganism. Snorri is interested in ancient Scandinavian paganism, which he describes either through the prism of euhemerism or demonism. Nearly all instances of euhemerism in *Heimskringla* are found in the first saga of the compilation, *Ynglinga saga*. While Saxo addressed the question of his sources, Snorri, in his prologue, described his historical method in a more specific way:

Á bók þessi lét ek rita fornar frásagnir um höfðingja þá, er ríki hafa haft á Norðrlöndum ok á danska tungu hafa mælt, svá sem ek hefir heyrt fróða menn segja, svá ok nokkurar kynslóðir þeira eptir því, sem mér hefir kennt verit, sumt þat, er finnsk í langfeðgatali, þar er konungar eða aðrir stórættaðir menn hafa rakit kyn sitt, en sumt er ritat eptir fornum kvæðum eða sǫguljóðum, er menn hafa haft til skemmtanar sér. En þótt vér vitim eigi sannendi á því, þá vitum vér dæmi til, at gamlir frœðimenn hafi slíkt fyrir satt haft. Þjóðólfr inn fróði ór Hvini var skáld Haralds konungs ins hárfagra. Hann orti kvæði um Rǫgnvald konungs heiðumhæra, þat er kallat Ynglingatal. [...] En þat er háttr skálda at lofa þann mest, er þá eru þeir fyrir, en engi myndi þat þora at segja sjálfum honum þau verk hans, er allir þeir, er heyrði, vissi, at hégomi væri ok skrök, ok svá sjálfr hann. Þat væri þá háð, en eigi lof.<sup>11</sup>

(In this book I have written old stories about those rulers who have held power in the Northern lands and have spoken the Scandinavian language, as I have heard them told by learned men, and some of their genealogies according to what I have been taught, some of which is found in the records of paternal descent in which kings and other men of high rank have traced their ancestry, and some is written according to old poems or narrative songs which people used to use for their entertainment. And although we do not know how true they are, we know of cases where learned men of old have taken such things to be true. Þjóðólfr inn fróði (the Learned) from Hvinir was a poet of King Haraldr inn hárfagri (the Fine-Haired). He composed a poem in honour of King Rǫgnvaldr heiðumhæri (Nobly Grey), which is called Ynglingatal. [...] It is indeed the habit of poets to praise most highly

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<sup>11</sup> Heimskringla I, 3-5.

the one in whose presence they are at the time, but no one would dare to tell him to his face about deeds of his which all who listened, as well as the man himself, knew were falsehoods and fictions. That would be mockery and not praise.)

As he stated, Snorri's historical method is based on two axes: trust in authoritative figures, especially in previous historiographers such as Ari inn fróði, as well as trust in poetry, which he deemed reliable because it was composed in a context that did not favor the composition of blatant lies. In *Ynglinga saga*, Snorri principally used poetry as a source and supported many of his prose narratives with poetic stanzas. As such, unlike for the *Gesta Danorum*, the work of Snorri allows us to see not only a euhemerized narrative but also the mythological source behind it. In other words, Snorri allows us to see the process of euhemerism and not only its final product. This poses the question of the relationship Snorri had with his sources.

The medieval distinction between fiction and historicity was different than ours. Some scholars argued that the modern distinction between history and fiction was inaccurate in Old Norse medieval context.<sup>12</sup> Medieval thought did distinguish history from literature, even if it did it so in a different manner than us. The *lygisögur*<sup>13</sup> (lie sagas), for instance, were distinguished from the other genres of sagas that aimed for a greater degree of historicity. Snorri's method for distinguishing between falsehood and truth, as he exposed it in the above quoted passage, is certainly not in accordance with modern historiographic standards, but it shows that Snorri was indeed preoccupied with truth and strived for it. Snorri wanted to produce true (*sannr*) narratives, and certifies that his sources are not fiction (*skrök*) or falsehood (*hégómi*). Snorri's explanation of his own method is, by medieval standards, convincing, and it has even been judged persuasive by modern historians. As Goeres remarked:

Snorri presses his readers, both medieval and modern, to accept skaldic verse as a true record of past events, a realm of memories verified both by the original audience and by subsequent generations. Snorri's argument is compelling and it is perhaps unsurprising that the historical veracity of skaldic verse has often been accepted by other saga authors and later scholars.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Brouhosa, *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway*, 2.

<sup>13</sup> On the topic see Matthew Driscoll, "Late Prose Fiction (Lygisögur)," in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell publishing, 2005), 190-204.

<sup>14</sup> Erin Michelle Goeres, *The Poetics of Commemoration. Skaldic Verse and Social Memory, c. 890-1070*, Oxford English Monographs (New York: Oxford university press, 2015), 6.

It must nevertheless be noted that Snorri only acknowledges his sources to assert their trustworthiness, never to question their reliability. Snorri only distinguishes between good and bad sources: a bad source is not worthy of attention, while a good one can be uncritically trusted. This is not to say that Snorri was not bound by a methodology or guiding principles. As Aron Gurevich wrote:

The author of a saga did not realize himself as such and considered his function to be that of 'putting together', 'writing down', but he never regarded himself as a sovereign creator.<sup>15</sup>

And he adds:

The myth was still part of a mode of perceiving reality through history. Consequently, the pedigree of the Norse kings which Snorri expounds in *Ynglinga saga* does not seem to [Snorri] fictitious. *Ynglingatal*, on which Snorri based his saga, was, according to him, as trustworthy a source as other poems of the skalds which he praised so much and quoted not only in order to embellish his narrative but also to corroborate it. At any rate, the idea that historical Swedish and Norwegian kings were descended from Ynglingar was in Snorri's mind a very serious and ideologically meaningful conception.<sup>16</sup>

Snorri understood his role as historian as that of a compiler and organizer of older material. He did not consider himself as someone who ought to judge the historical accuracy of older respectable poets and authors. However, one of Snorri's main alleged historical sources was skaldic poetry, whose cryptic and ambiguous nature forced its audience to make choices in regard to its interpretation. Let us look at his treatment of the fifth stanza from *Ynglingatal*:

Hitt vas fyrr,  
at fold ruðu  
sverðberendr  
sínnum dróttni,  
ok landherr  
af lífs vönum  
dreyrug vöpn  
dómalda bar,  
Þás árgjorn  
Jóta dolgi

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<sup>15</sup> Aron Y. Gurevich, "Saga and History, the 'Historical Conception' of Snorri Sturluson," *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 4 (1971): 42.

<sup>16</sup> Gurevich, "Saga and History," 49.

Svíá kind  
of sóa skyldi.

(Once it was / That weapon-bearers / With their ruler / Reddened the ground / Left Dómaldi  
/ Without life, / Their weapons bloody, / When the Svíar / Seeking good harvest / Offered  
up / The enemy of Jótar.)<sup>17</sup>

In *Ynglinga saga* Snorri interprets this stanza as describing the people sacrificing their king, Dómaldi, for good harvest. As Lars Lönnroth argued, it is dubious that Snorri's interpretation corresponds to the original meaning of the poem.<sup>18</sup> The whole narrative developed by Snorri about Dómaldi is problematic. The stanza from *Ynglingatal* is indeed about the violent death of Dómaldi, but it does not give any indication about a religious sacrifice. Here, Snorri produced a narrative which functions remarkably well with the rest of *Heimskringla*. Dómaldi's death, caused by a people who were blinded by superstition and false religion, would make him a pagan precursor to Saint Óláfr, who died as a martyr, killed by his own subjects. Furthermore, the name Dómaldi naturally evokes the word *dómr* (doom) to Snorri and his audience.<sup>19</sup> In this line, Snorri introduced into his narrative the idea that Dómaldi was doomed from the beginning when he states that "Dómaldi's stepmother brought misfortune on him with a spell" (Stjúpmóðir Dómalda lét síða at honum ógæfu.)<sup>20</sup>

#### 4.2.2. Snorri's Selective Approach to His Sources

Still, Snorri may, at times, express criticism toward his sources. See for instance these considerations on the life of Sigurðr jórsalafari:

En þó er miklu fleira óritat hans frægðarverka. Kæmr til þess ófræði vár ok þat annat, at vér viljum eigi setja á bœkr vitnilausar sǫgur. Þótt vér hafim heyrt ræður eða getit fleiri hluta, þá þykkir oss heðan í frá betra, at við sé aukit, et þetta sama þurfi ór at taka.<sup>21</sup>

(And yet there are many more of his famous achievements that have not been recorded. The reason for this is our ignorance, and this too, that we are unwilling to write down in books unattested stories. Though we have heard talk or mention of other things, still it

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<sup>17</sup> Heimskringla I, 32.

<sup>18</sup> Lars Lönnroth, "Dómaldi's Death and the Myth of Sacral Kingship," in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature, New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*, The Viking Collection 3 (Viborg: Odense University Press, 1986), 73-93.

<sup>19</sup> Lönnroth, "Dómaldi's Death," 81.

<sup>20</sup> Heimskringla I, 30.

<sup>21</sup> Heimskringla III, 118-119.

seems to us better from now on that material should be added than that the same should have to be removed.)

We may presume that Snorri allows himself to reject these stories because they were not written by authors he would consider to be serious historians and *fræðimenn*. From a modern perspective, these doubts about “unattested stories” may seem odd coming from an author who elsewhere blindly accepts the truthfulness of fantastic stories narrated by poets who are supposed to have lived two centuries before he was born. This remark is in fact quite representative of Snorri’s way of selecting and sorting his sources. To him, the credibility of a source relies less on its content than on the moral authority of its author.

As I argue, this is the distinction between good and bad historical sources which constitutes the core of Snorri’s historical method. Snorri has sometimes been considered a kind of rationalist,<sup>22</sup> skeptical of magic, miracles and more generally, paranormal phenomena.<sup>23</sup> See this passage by Theodore M. Andersson concerning Snorri’s treatment of the *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* by Oddr Snorrason:

A comparison of the two texts reveals rather clearly where Snorri chose to adhere to his source, where he chose to prune, and where to expand.

An overall comparison teaches us that Snorri’s economies are of two kinds, incidental omissions and omissions of whole sections or chapters. In the latter category, it emerges that Snorri sacrificed no fewer than twenty-five of Oddr’s chapters in something like their entirety. Not surprisingly, the most common exclusions have to do with the magical arts, prophecies, visions and miracles. This is a realm of experience for which Snorri’s aversion

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<sup>22</sup> See for instance, Bagge, *Society and Politics*, 208-231; On Bagge’s attitude toward Snorri’s alleged rationalism see Theodore M. Andersson, review of “Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla*”, by Sverre Bagge, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 99, no. 2 (1993): 279-281; More recently see Anthony Faulkes, “Snorri Sturluson: His Life and Work,” in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink, The Routledge Worlds (London: Routledge, 2008), 313.

<sup>23</sup> I agree with Ármann Jakobsson’s choice of words when he prefers the term *paranormal* over *supernatural*: “The term *paranormal* is fitting precisely because to the average reader it will not suggest the Middle Ages, and thus it cannot be taken for granted, dismissed as a traditional or conventional term that can be safely deployed without intense scrutiny. The word is also preferable to terms such as *supernatural*, more easily and more frequently connected with the Middle Ages, because it does not immediately establish the notion that the unknown phenomenon encountered is somehow above or beyond the world of the humans who encounter it.” Ármann Jakobsson, *The Troll inside You, Paranormal Activity in the Medieval North* (Punctum books, 2017), 22. Many phenomena described by Snorri are supernatural for the modern reader, but not for his medieval audience, which had a different conception of the laws of nature than us. These phenomena are paranormal for medieval people as for us, as they cannot be considered part of the normal realm of daily experiences. For instance, to see a werewolf is not necessarily a supernatural phenomenon for someone who believes that lycanthropy has a natural explanation. It is nonetheless a paranormal experience, as it is, hopefully, not a daily life experience.

is well known and the curtailment of which has earned for him the title of rationalist, a usable concept although dispute by Frederik Paasche and Hallvard Lie.<sup>24</sup>

It is true that Snorri did produce a saga of Óláfr Tryggvason that differed from that of Oddr Snorrason. It is also true that Snorri's version includes fewer episodes, which a modern audience would consider fantastic. But if Snorri were averse to the paranormal, we would also expect him to rationalize his poetic sources accordingly, and hence, eliminate paranormal occurrences from *Ynglingatal* in his *Ynglinga saga*. This saga is divided into fifty chapters. Thirty of them include poetry. The remaining twenty chapters are composed of prose only. Twenty-eight of the prosimetrum chapters contain one or two stanzas from *Ynglingatal*, one chapter contains a stanza from *Ragnarsdrápa* and one a stanza from *Háleygjatal*.

Thirteen chapters include paranormal phenomena in their prose part,<sup>25</sup> leaving thirty-seven chapters devoid of paranormal phenomena in the prose (see table below). Five chapters include paranormal phenomenon in their poetry, leaving twenty-five chapters without paranormal phenomenon in their poetry. Six chapters out of the twenty chapters devoid of poetry contain paranormal elements in their prose, leaving the fourteen others without paranormal phenomena in their prose. Seven of the prosimetrum chapters contain paranormal phenomena, which leaves twenty-three chapters without paranormal phenomenon in their prose.

These data show that 23% of the prosimetrum chapters include paranormal phenomena while the same is true for 30% of the prose only chapters. In the seven instances where poetry contains paranormal elements, Snorri removed them twice. In the twenty-five instances where poetry contains no paranormal elements, Snorri added some in his prose narrative five times. As such, contrary to common assumptions, Snorri, rarely “rationalizes” his source in *Ynglinga saga*, but on the contrary adds paranormal elements where his poetic source shows no trace of it.

Chap.	Number of stanzas	Poem quoted	Paranormal in prose	Paranormal in poetry	Paranormal in prose that is not in poetry	Paranormal in poetry that is not in prose	Parnormal in the <i>Historia Norwegie</i> equivalent
1	0		Yes				
2	0		No				
3	0		No				

<sup>24</sup> Theodore M. Andersson, “The Conversion of Norway According to Oddr Snorrason and Snorri Sturluson,” *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 10 (1977): 83-84.

<sup>25</sup> The definition of what is a paranormal phenomenon is of course not entirely objective. I have considered every occurrence of what a modern audience would qualify as “supernatural” events to be paranormal. I have not considered mere reports of paranormal events as being paranormal events as such.



4	0		Yes				
5	1	<i>Ragnar sdrápa</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
6	0		Yes				
7	0		Yes				
8	1	<i>Haleygj atal</i>	No	Yes	No	Yes	
9	0		No				
10	0		No				
11	1	<i>Yngling atal</i>	No	No	No	No	
12	1	<i>Yngling atal</i>	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
13	1	<i>Yngling atal</i>	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
14	1	<i>Yngling atal</i>	Yes	No	Yes	No	
15	1	<i>Yngling atal</i>	No	No	No	No	
16	1	<i>Yngling atal</i>	No	No	No	No	
17	1	<i>Yngling atal</i>	No	No	No	No	
18	2	<i>Yngling atal</i>	Yes	No	Yes	No	
19	1	<i>Yngling atal</i>	No	No	No	No	
20	1	<i>Yngling atal</i>	No	No	No	No	
21	2	<i>Yngling atal</i>	No	No	No	No	
22	0		Yes				
23	2	<i>Haleygj atal</i>	No	No	No	No	
24	1	<i>Yngling atal</i>	No	No	No	No	
25	2	<i>Yngling atal</i>	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
26	2	<i>Yngling atal</i>	No	No	No	No	
27	2	<i>Yngling atal</i>	No	No	No	No	
28	0		No				
29	2	<i>Yngling atal</i>	No	Yes	No	Yes	
30	0		No				
31	1	<i>Yngling atal</i>	No	No	No	No	
32	1	<i>Yngling atal</i>	No	No	No	No	
33	0		No				
34	0		Yes				

35	1	<i>Ynglingatal</i>	No	No	No	No	
36	0		No				
37	0		No				
38	0		No				
39	0		No				
40	2	<i>Ynglingatal</i>	No	No	No	No	
41	0		No				
42	0		No				
43	1	<i>Ynglingatal</i>	No	No	No	No	
44	1	<i>Ynglingatal</i>	No	No	No	No	
45	0		No				
46	1	<i>Ynglingatal</i>	Yes	No	Yes	No	
47	1	<i>Ynglingatal</i>	No	No	No	No	
48	2	<i>Ynglingatal</i>	No	No	No	No	
49	2	<i>Ynglingatal</i>	No	No	No	No	
50	1	<i>Ynglingatal</i>	No	No	No	No	

Chapters including poetry	30
Chapters including no poetry	20

Chapters with paranormal in poetry	5
Chapters with paranormal in poetry but not in prose	2
Chapters with paranormal in prose but not in poetry	4

Total of stanzas quoted from <i>Ragnarsdrápa</i>	1
Total of stanzas quoted from <i>Haleygjatal</i>	2
Total of stanzas quoted from <i>Ynglingatal</i>	27

% of chapters including poetry	60
% of chapters including no poetry	40

Chapters including paranormal in prose	13
Chapters including no paranormal in prose	37

Chapters including paranormal in poetry	5
Chapters including no paranormal in poetry	25

Chapters without poetry with paranormal	6
Chapters without poetry without paranormal	14

Chapters with poetry with paranormal	7
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Chapters with poetry without paranormal	23
% of poetry chapters including paranormal	23,33
% of prose chapters including paranormal	3
Chapters with paranormal in prose that is not in poetry	30
Chapters with paranormal in poetry that is not in prose	5
	2

Table 1: Table of paranormal within *Ynglingatal*, *Ynglinga saga*, and *Historia Norwegie*.

This demonstrates that Snorri does not attempt to remove the supernatural from his poetic sources and does not show a consistent disbelief in the paranormal. This is also true for his treatment of the pagan gods, which he describes as incredibly powerful individuals with paranormal abilities. See for instance this example from *Ynglinga saga*:

Þá kom [Gefjun] til Gylfa, ok gaf hann henni eitt plógslands. Þá fór hon í Jötunheima ok gat þar fjóra sonu við jötni nokkurum. Hon brá þeim í yxnalíki ok færði þá fyrir plóginn ok dró landit út á hafit ok vestr gegnt Óðinsey, ok er þat kǫlluð Selund.<sup>26</sup>

([Gefjun] came to Gylfi, and he gave her one ‘plough-land’. Then she went to Jötunheimar and had four sons with a certain giant. She changed them into the form of oxen and put them to the plough and hauled the land out into the sea and west to Óðinsey, and that is called Selund.)

Snorri even invents paranormal events that are not supported by his poetic source. One striking example is the story of King Aun. The poetic stanza goes as follows:

Knátti endr  
at Uppsolum  
ánasótt  
Aun of standa,  
ok þrálifr  
þiggja skyldi  
jóðs alað  
qðru sinni.  
Ok sveiðurs  
at sér hverfði  
mækis hlut

<sup>26</sup> Heimskringla I, 14.

enn mjóvara,  
es okhreins  
óttunga rjóðr  
lögðis odd  
liggjandi drakk.  
Máttit hárr  
hjarðar mæki  
austrkonungr  
upp of halda.<sup>27</sup>

(Long ago / it was old age / Aun had to face / at Uppsalar, / clinging to life, / on baby food  
/ he had to subsist / a second time. / And to himself / he turned the thinner / end of the /  
ox's sword / when, lying, the killer / of kindred drank / from the tip of the yoke- / reindeer's  
weapon. / The herd-sword / the hoary one, / the eastern king, / could not hold up.)

The prose narrative coming with the stanza borrows every element from the poetry. King Aun is indeed facing old age, drinking from a horn as a baby would and killing his kindred. However, nowhere in the stanza do we find an indication that Aun killed his sons by sacrificing them to Óðinn. Perhaps this comes from an oral tradition sufficiently well known to not be specified by the poet. Yet *Historia Norwegie* in IX.21-23 soberly states that:

Iste genuit Auchun, qui longo uetustatis senio IX annis ante obitum suum dense usum alimonie postponens lac tantum de cornu ut infans suxisse fertur. Auchun uero genuit Egil cognomento Vendilcraco.

(He became the father of Auchun, who, in the feebleness of a protracted old age, during the nine years before his death is said to have abandoned the consumption of solid food and only sucked milk from a horn, like a babe-in-arms. Auchun's son was Egil Vendilcraco)<sup>28</sup>

The author of *Historia Norwegie* does not seem to know Snorri's version of the story either. We might assume that he simply did not want to share this part of the story precisely because it seemed too unbelievable for him. But he reported, in IX.6, the story of Sveigðir's vanishing into a stone although he regarded this story as a fairy tale:

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<sup>27</sup> Heimskringla I, 50.

<sup>28</sup> Inger Ekrem and Lars Boje Mortensen, eds., *Historia Norwegie*, trans. Peter Fisher (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006), 76-77.

Cuius filius Swegthir nanum in petram persequitur nec redisse dicitur, quod pro certo fabulosum creditur.

(His son, Swegthir, is supposed to have pursued a dwarf into a stone and never to have returned, but this is plainly to be taken as a fairy-tale.)<sup>29</sup>

As such, we would expect the author of *Historia Norwegie* to also report the story of King Aun. In fact, Snorri's version of Aun's story is nowhere to be found, and it seems doubtful that the author of *Historia Norwegie* would have neglected such an important aspect of the story. Snorri's reference to pagan sacrifice might be motivated by the reference to Uppsala in the stanza. This place was commonly associated with the idea of pagan worship and bloody sacrifice during the Middle Ages.<sup>30</sup> The association between parricide and sacrifice would have inspired the narrative where the king sacrifices his own sons.

However, I argue that it is mainly the content of the stanza itself which led Snorri to construct this narrative. More specifically, his interpretation stems from his interpretation of the word *ǫttunga* found in the thirteenth verse of the stanza. The word *ǫttunga* or *áttunga* (nominative: *áttungr*), is generally understood as “kinsman” or “kindred” but can also designate a division of the country.<sup>31</sup> The homonymy between the two words is probably behind Snorri's idea of King Aun naming the districts of Uppsala according to the number of his sacrificed sons.

Snorri's construction of a narrative in relation to this stanza is illuminating with regard to his method. In this case, and I will argue, in most cases, Snorri does not invent narratives from of nothing, but rather interprets, sometimes to an extreme point, his sources. His method of interpretation, however, can hardly be qualified as rationalization. On the contrary, the narrative he develops is rather fantastic: pagan sacrifices are not necessarily paranormal, but their efficiency to prolong life certainly is.

If Snorri criticizes his sources, he is certainly not “rationalizing” them, as he even invents supernatural narratives himself. It is true, however, that Snorri accords a greater place to the supernatural in the sagas that take place in ancient times. Snorri seems to conceive of history as being divided into two substantially different parts; the distant past, where magic and miracles were a normal aspect of the world, and the present, where magic is nearly inexistent,

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<sup>29</sup> Ekrem and Mortensen, *Historia Norwegie*, 74-75.

<sup>30</sup> See section 3.3.2.

<sup>31</sup> For an overview on *attung* in medieval Sweden see Alf Ericsson, “Attungen: ett medeltida fastighetsmått” (Licentiate thesis, Uppsala, 2007). These two words are homonyms but not cognate.

and miracles are rare. This sentence pronounced by King Hrœkr, a pagan adversary of Saint Óláfr, is typical of this conception of world history:

„Ekki skil ek af, svá at mér hugfestisk þat, er þér segið frá Kristi. Þykki mér þat mart heldr ótrúligt, er þér segið. En þó hafa mǫrg dæmi orðit í forneskju.“<sup>32</sup>

(“I do not understand, so that it is fixed in my mind, what you say about Christ. Much of what you say seems to me rather incredible. Yet many things have happened in ancient times.”)

We may compare Hrœkr’s reasoning with that of Pindar’s in the *Tenth Pythian* as quoted by Paul Veyne in his essay on ancient Greek religious belief:

The daring Perseus, in old times, could easily go to them, to the fortunate ones. Athena was his guide, and he killed the Gorgon! On my part, nothing surprises me or seems unbelievable when the gods bring it to pass.<sup>33</sup>

In these two cases, the past is perceived as substantially different from the present: a heroic age where humanity had closer contacts to the divine. This world, however, has ended and gave place to the more mundane present times. Paul Veyne opposed this way of thinking with that of other authors such as Pausanias, who exercised what Veyne coined as the “doctrine of present things,” which is the idea that the laws of the world have always been the same: if magic does not exist now, it never existed.<sup>34</sup> Snorri, on the contrary does not deem it incoherent to ascribe certain phenomena to a certain time. This perception of past and present, as being essentially different, is incompatible with the notion of rationalization. As such, to Snorri, the marvelous is not in itself a criterion for falseness, especially when it takes place in ancient times. This position is not naïve, but in accordance with Christian thought. See for instance this passage from Augustine’s *City of God* I.XIV:

Haec quoque illi, cum quibus agimus, malunt inridere quam credere, qui tamen in suis litteris credunt Arionem Methymnaeum, nobilissimum citharistam, cum esset deiectus e navi, expectum delphini dorso et ad terras esse pervectum. Verum illud nostrum de Iona propheta incredibilius est. Plane incredibilius quia mirabilius, et mirabilius quia potentius.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *Heimskringla II*, 124. I discuss this question in more details in section 6.7.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination*, trans. Paula Wissing (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 28.

<sup>34</sup> Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe*, 13-14.

<sup>35</sup> Saint Augustine, *La cité de Dieu. De civitate Dei. Livres I-V*, Œuvres de Saint Augustin 33 (Paris: Institut d’Études Augustiniennes, 2014), 238, 240.

(Those with whom I am at issue will prefer to jest at, rather than to believe, these accounts; yet they will swallow the tale of Orion of Methymna, the celebrated harper, thrown overboard from a ship, then taken up on a dolphin's back and brought to shore. Our account of Jonas the Prophet is more incredible. It is more incredible because more wonderful. It is more wonderful because it reveals a greater power.)<sup>36</sup>

To Augustine, Christian's miracles do not invalidate pagan paranormal phenomena but surpass them. The relationship between pagan and Christian supernatural phenomena is a question of hierarchy rather than reality. In this perspective, any attempt to "rationalize" paranormal phenomena is absurd. On the contrary, the more impressive the miracle, the more its divine origin, and thus its reality, is apparent.

Theodore M. Andersson is certainly right to point out that Snorri did remove some narratives involving the paranormal from his *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*. This does not mean, however, that he removed these episodes because he did not believe in them. In the case of Óláfr's confrontation against trolls, Snorri merely stated that he would not focus on these stories:

Óláfr konungr kristnaði fjorð þann allan, ferr síðan leið sína suðr með landi, ok varð í þeiri ferð mart þat, er í frásögn er fært, er tröll ok illar véttir glettusk við menn hans ok stundum við hann sjálfan. En vér viljum heldr rita um þá atburði, er Óláfr konungr kristnaði Nóreg eða önnur þau lönd, er hann kristni á.<sup>37</sup>

(King Óláfr made the whole fiord Christian, afterwards going on his way south along the coast, and on that voyage many things happened that have been put into stories, when trolls and evil spirits played tricks on his men and sometimes on him himself. But we want rather to write about the events of King Óláfr Christianising Norway or the other countries that he introduced Christianity to.)

There is here no judgement with regard to the truthfulness of these narratives. Snorri chose to disregard them because in his work, he is primarily interested in the process of Christianization. Moreover, *Heimskringla* does not altogether suppress every occurrence of trolls and other paranormal beings. See for instance chapter 141 of *Óláfs saga helga* describing a fight between a Norwegian man and a she-troll.<sup>38</sup> The most decisive mark of Snorri's belief in both trolls and miracles is found in the chapter 179 of *Óláfs saga helga* where, among other miracles, the king chases trolls from their home via his prayers. Not only did Snorri report the miracles, but he

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<sup>36</sup> Saint Augustine, *Saint Augustine the City of God. Books I-VII*, 42.

<sup>37</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 328.

<sup>38</sup> *Heimskringla II*, 260-261.

also confirmed their trustworthiness by stating that they were reported by the reliable author Ari Þorgilsson:

Þessa grein konungdóms hans ritaði fyrst Ari prestur Þorgilsson inn fróði, er bæði var sannsögull, minnigr ok svá gamall maðr, at hann munði þá menn ok hafði sǫgur af haft, er þeir vǫru svá gamlir, at fyrir aldrs sakir máttu muna þessi tíðendi, svá sem hann hefir sjálfr sagt í sínum bókum ok nefnda þá menn til, er hann hafði fræði af numit.<sup>39</sup>

(This aspect of his kingship was first written down by the priest Ari Þorgilsson, who both was truthful, had a good memory, and lived to such an age that he remembered the people and had received accounts from them, who were old enough so that as far as their age was concerned they could remember these events, as he himself has said in his books, naming the people involved from whom he had got information.)

It is evident from these passages that Snorri cannot be considered a rationalist. As I argued above, a rationalist treatment of the sources would require entirely removing trolls from the narrative: either trolls exist, or they do not. Snorri explicitly expressed his trust in one of Saint Óláfr's miracles involving trolls. This trust, he stated, was based on the authority of the author reporting the facts in the first place, thus confirming that Snorri's main means of selecting his sources is the distinction between reliable and unreliable authors. A modern historian would be as suspicious of Þjóðólfr ór Hvínir's poetry as he would be of oral tales regarding the reign of Sigurðr Jórsalafari. But to Snorri, the Ynglingar genealogy is trustworthy, as it is reported by a prestigious and respected poet while some information reported about the reign of Sigurðr Jórsalafari, is not supported by any important author, and hence, is mere rumors. As Paul Veyne noted regarding ancient Greek historiographers: "The ancient historian believes first, his doubts are reserved for details in which he can no longer believe."<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Snorri may criticize specific aspects of his sources but never fathom the possibility that his entire source could be a literary construction. He may correct previous historians to make their writings fit his own system of beliefs, but he never rejects them in the realm of lies or fiction.

We may wonder why Snorri removed so many narratives about Óláfr Tryggvason fighting trolls if his choice was not based on a rational criticism toward his sources. The reason for this selection is unclear and may be due to various motives. It may be that Oddr Snorrason tried to promote a cult of Óláfr Tryggvason as a saint, while Snorri was not, and hence had no need to

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<sup>39</sup> *Heimskringla II*, 326.

<sup>40</sup> Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe*, 8.



describe his miracles.<sup>41</sup> In any case, it is sufficient for this discussion to have shown that Snorri was not rationalizing his source and that his treatment of mythology did not follow this course. It is clear that to him both pagan paranormal phenomena and Christian miracles were real. Both types of paranormal phenomena were equally useful to demonstrate the superiority of God and his saints over the pre-Christian religion of Scandinavia. As such, it is clear that Snorri's euhemerism is not grounded in rationalism, as it is not a criticism of marvelous elements of Old Norse mythology.

### 4.2.3. *Ynglinga Saga*

#### 4.2.3.1. *Ynglinga Saga and Ynglinga Tal*

*Ynglinga saga* is divided into fifty chapters and contains the life of thirty-two kings, starting with Njörðr and ending with Rögnvaldr. This focus on a series of kings rather than a single or a few rulers is an exception within *Heimskringla*. In fact, *Ynglinga saga* alone contains by itself roughly two-thirds of the kings of the compilation. Yet the saga is also one of the shortest and its narrative is simple and straightforward. Each reign is described quickly, and the emphasis is generally put on the death and burial of the ruler as much as on his life.<sup>42</sup> Nearly all the euhemeristic passages of *Heimskringla* are contained in *Ynglinga saga*. This saga retells the reign and death of the kings of the Ynglingar dynasty. According to *Heimskringla* these kings are the ancestors of all the Norwegian kings. *Ynglinga saga* is particularly interesting regarding the study of Snorri's euhemerism. It is one of the most developed euhemeristic narratives of Old Norse literature, and the author relies on poetic sources which he quotes extensively.<sup>43</sup>

The relationship between *Ynglinga saga* and *Ynglingatal* is complex and is the subject of ongoing scholarly discussions. One of the most controversial questions related to this discussion is that of the dating of *Ynglingatal*. While most scholars agree on dating the poem to the 9<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Haki Antonsson, "Salvation and Early Saga Writing in Iceland: Aspects of the Works of the Þingeyrar Monks and Their Associates," *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 8 (2012), 76.

<sup>42</sup> The attention given to burial places by the author has also been perceived by Torfi Tulinius as a hint that *Egils saga* and *Heimskringla* were the work of the same author. However, the emphasis put on death and funeral is inherited from *Ynglingatal* and is not necessarily Snorri's main interest in the poem. See Torfi Tulinius, "Le statut théologique d'Egill Skalla-Grímsson," in *Hugur, Mélanges d'histoire, de littérature et de mythologie offerts à Régis Boyer pour son 65e anniversaire*, ed. Claude Lecouteux and Olivier Gouchet (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1997), 279-288.

<sup>43</sup> We can compare Snorri's use of poetry in *Ynglinga saga* with Saxo's in the *Gesta Danorum*. Saxo stated that he quotes poetry in order to support his narrative; in fact, his poetry almost always serves as direct speeches, and hence is used as part of the narrative, not a proof for its authenticity. Snorri, for his part, actually uses poetic stanzas as proofs for his narrative.

century, some of them, most notoriously Claus Krag, date its composition to the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>44</sup> One of Krag's arguments in favor of a recent dating of the poem is that, according to him, *Ynglingatal* contains traces of euhemeristic thought, and thus, can only be of Christian origin.<sup>45</sup> Whether it is true, this assumption regarding euhemerism is critical for our discussion: is Snorri entirely responsible for the euhemerism within *Ynglinga saga* or did his source poem already contain euhemeristic elements?

The presence of euhemerism within the poem is only one of the anachronisms noticed by Krag. The core of his argument relies essentially on the influence of the medieval theory of the four elements on the poem, according to which earth is the primordial element from which, fire, water, and air, all emerge. As this theory is based on classical learning and was transmitted by the Church, its presence within the poem would show that *Ynglingatal* was composed in an intellectual Christian milieu.<sup>46</sup> As Krag notes, *Ynglingatal* contains the unusual kenning *Fornjóts sonr* (son of Fornjótr) as a kenning for fire. Krag connects this kenning with the narrative *Hversu Nóregr byggðisk* (How Norway was settled) found in the *Flateyjarbók* (end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century). In this text, Fornjótr is the primitive ancestor of the kings of Norway whose sons were Logi, Hlér, and Kari, and who respectively ruled over fire, the seas, and the wind. Krag understands the second compound of Fornjótr's name as being related to the word "jötun". Fornjótr's would hence mean "ancient jötunn," thus characterizing the king as a giant who is naturally connected to the mountains, and from there, to the element earth. Hence the foundation of Norway, whose initial kings were the three sons of an "ancient giant", each ruling over an element, would be analogous to the creation of the cosmos where air, fire, and water, emerged from earth. Thus, Krag concludes that the kenning *Fornjóts sonr* as meaning "fire" must belong to the same learned Christian tradition. In addition to the reference to Fornjótr, the motif of the four elements appears once more during the retelling of the deaths of the first four Ynglingar kings: Fjölfnir, Sveigðir, Vanlandi and Vísburr. These four kings' deaths are indeed related to the four elements: one drowned, one vanished in a rock, one was strangled, and one was burned to death, thus apparently confirming the idea that the four elements are an important motif of the *Ynglingatal*. According to Krag, these four kings were originally names for Óðinn and Freyr but have been euhemerized by the author of the poem. According to him, Vanlandi

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<sup>44</sup> For a summary of the different scholarly attitudes toward *Ynglingatal* see Goeres, *The Poetics of Commemoration*, 20-24.

<sup>45</sup> Claus Krag, *Ynglingatal og ynglingesaga: en studie i historiske kilder*, *Studia humaniora* 2 (Oslo: Rådet for humanistisk forskning, NAVF : Universitetsforlaget, 1991), 58-59.

<sup>46</sup> Krag, *Ynglingatal og ynglingesaga*, 57-58.

was based on Freyr, while the name of the other three kings were cognomens for Óðinn whom the poet reinterpreted as three different characters.<sup>47</sup> Finally, Krag argues that the description of King Aun's sacrifice of his children is an inversion of the Christian motif of the son who willingly sacrifice himself for his father.<sup>48</sup>

Krag's theory has received a lot of criticism. His interpretation of Fornjótr as a character connected to the earth element has been contradicted by the philologist Bjarne Fidjestøl who judged that *jótr* and *jötun* are not related, and that Fornjótr is never described as presiding over earth in the text.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, as Dagfinn Skre noted, even if the poem was influenced by the theory of the four elements, this could not necessarily be an anachronism in a poem composed in the 9<sup>th</sup> century at the court of a Norwegian petty king who was not totally isolated from European culture.<sup>50</sup> In this perspective, it is difficult to assess whether *Hversu Nóreggr byggðisk* is indeed based on the theory of the four elements. Krag's characterization of *Ynglingatal* as euhemeristic is also problematic and rests on weak grounds, as nothing in the poem itself indicates that these kings were worshiped as gods. Furthermore, the poem does not represent these characters are particularly similar to either Freyr or Óðinn.<sup>51</sup> Finally, Olof Sundqvist is right when he remarks that Krag's perception of the episode is based on the prose account from Snorri rather than on the poem: the sacrifice is only to be found in the prose, not in the poetry.<sup>52</sup>

I shall now return to Krag's claim that *Ynglingatal* contains traces of euhemerism. To him, euhemerism is limited to the first four kings, that is to the first four stanzas here presented together:

Varð framgengt,  
þars Fróði bjó,  
feigðarorð,  
es at Fjǫlni kom,  
ok sikling  
svigðis geira  
vágr vindlauss

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<sup>47</sup> Krag, *Ynglingatal og Ynglingesaga*, 62-66.

<sup>48</sup> Krag, *Ynglingatal og Ynglingesaga*, 67-70.

<sup>49</sup> Bjarne Fidjestøl, "Review of *Ynglingatal og Ynglingesaga*," *Maal og Minne*, 1994, 191-199.

<sup>50</sup> Dagfinn Skre, "The Dating of *Ynglingatal*," in *Kaupang in Skiringssal*, vol. 1, *Kaupang Excavation Project*, Norske Oldfunn 22 (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2007), 428.

<sup>51</sup> Sundqvist, *Freyr's Offspring*, 44, 162-168.

<sup>52</sup> Sundqvist, *Freyr's Offspring*, 45.

of viðá skyldi.<sup>53</sup>

(It befell / where Fróði lived, / the destiny / that dropped on Fjölñir, / and the prince / the pointed ox-spears' / windless wave / would destroy.)

En dagskjarr  
Durnis niðja  
salvqrðuðr  
Sveigði vélti,  
þás í stein  
enn stórgeði  
Dusla konr  
ept dvergi hljóp,  
ok salr bjartr  
þeira Sökmímis  
jötunbyggðr  
við jöfri gein.<sup>54</sup>

(And the day-shy / doorkeeper / of Durnir's tribe / tricked Sveigðir, / when into the stone / the spirited / kinsman of Dusli / ran after a dwarf, / and the bright hall / of Sökmimir's band, / settled by giants, / swallowed the king.)

En á vit  
Vilja bróður  
vitta véttr  
Vanlanda kom,  
þás trollkund  
of troða skyldi  
líðs grímhildr  
ljóna bága  
ok sá brann  
á beði Skútu  
menglotuðr,  
es mara kvalði.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 26.

<sup>54</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 28.

<sup>55</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 29.

(And to visit / Vili's brother / a witch's spell / sent Vanlandi / when troll-kind / trampled –  
/ ale-night's Hildir – / the enemy of men, / and he burned / on the bed of Skúta, / the  
necklace-waster / the nightmare smothered.)

Ok Vísburs  
vilja byrgi  
sævar niðr  
svelga knátti,  
þás meinþjóf  
markar öttu  
setrs verjendr  
á sinn fǫður,  
ok allvald  
í arinkjóli  
glóða garmr  
glymjandi beit.<sup>56</sup>

(And Vísburr's / vault of wishes / the sea's kinsman / swallowed up, / when the throne-  
defenders / the thieving scourge / of forests set / on their father; / and in his hearth-ship /  
the hound of embers, / growling, bit / the governor.)

There is nothing in these stanzas to indicate that these four kings are euhemerized versions of Freyr and Óðinn. The poem displays none of the common characteristics of euhemerism: the deification of the king is not described, and the poet never states that these kings were worshiped after their death. Furthermore, even Snorri, who uses euhemeristic theory earlier in *Ynglinga saga*, does not interpret these stanzas as euhemeristic narratives. Even if the first four Ynglingar kings were originally the product of the euhemerization of Freyr and Óðinn – which I find doubtful – this cannot be deduced from *Ynglingatal* alone, and Snorri was apparently unaware of this tradition or chose to dismiss it. In fact, all the euhemeristic passages of *Ynglinga saga* are found before the first quotation from *Ynglingatal* in chapter eleven.

It is unlikely that Snorri, or any other 13<sup>th</sup> century authors, considered *Ynglingatal* as depicting deified kings, but the poem nonetheless contains information that Snorri probably used to construct his euhemeristic narrative. In stanza eleven, that Snorri quoted in chapter twenty of *Ynglinga saga*, the poem refers to King Alrekr as “Frey's afspring” (Freyr's offspring). In the

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<sup>56</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 31.

seventeenth stanza, quoted in chapter twenty-six, the poet refers to King Egill as “Týs óttungr” which may be either translated as “kin of Týr” or as “kin of a god”, as Týr is commonly used as a *heiti* for gods in general. These two kennings suggest that the Ynglingar were perceived as the descendants of at least one god, Freyr. The idea of divine descent fits very well with euhemeristic narratives, because for a medieval Christian author, the idea that mortal men descend from gods was an excellent proof that these so-called gods were not deities but human beings. The motif of the descent from the gods is nevertheless non-exclusive to euhemerism and various religious traditions accept that real gods may beget mortal men.<sup>57</sup>

One could argue, however, that the fact that some of the Ynglingar descend from Freyr does not necessarily prove that they all do. Joan Turville-Petre even commented that “there is no *a priori* reason to suppose that the Swedish kings of *Ynglingatal* are a patrilinear succession.”<sup>58</sup> Indeed, the continuous patrilinear succession between the Ynglingar kings is only explicitly mentioned by Snorri. It seems unlikely, however, that characters of the poem are not a line of succession. Several mentions of family ties between the different characters strongly suggest that the poem is indeed a genealogy: stanza seven mentions *Yngvar þjóðar* (Yngvi’s nation), stanza twelve *Doglingr* (descendant of Dagr) and *Yngva rauð* (Yngvi’s blood), and stanza fifteen refers to *synir Yngva* (the sons of Yngvi), which leaves little doubt regarding the existence of a familial connection between these characters. The exact nature of this connection, however, remains unclear, but the simplest solution would be a patrilinear succession. At least, it is certain that medieval authors unanimously interpreted the poem in this way, as we may see in *Íslendingabók* as well as in *Historia Norwegie*.

In conclusion, *Ynglingatal* does not contain any explicit euhemerism, and the euhemeristic passages from *Ynglinga saga* are not found in chapters where the *Ynglingatal* is quoted. Yet, the idea that human beings descend from gods, which is quite clearly contained in the poem, is propitious to the production of euhemeristic narratives, as it could be used as proof that the said god was himself a human being. As we shall see, Snorri’s euhemerism in *Ynglinga saga* is

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<sup>57</sup> See for instance Julius Caesar’s claim to descend from Aphrodite. On this topic see Ernst Badian, “From the Iulii to Caesar,” in *A Companion to Julius Caesar*, ed. Miriam Griffin, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World. Ancient History (Chichester, U.K. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 11-22; and David Wardle, “Caesar and Religion,” in *A Companion to Julius Caesar*, ed. Miriam Griffin, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World. Ancient History (Chichester, U.K. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 100-111.

<sup>58</sup> Joan Turville-Petre, “On *Ynglingatal*,” *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 11 (1978-1979): 48-67, 61.

coherent with the information provided by *Ynglingatal* and shows that Snorri indeed at least partially used *Ynglingatal* as a historical source to construct his euhemeristic narrative.

#### 4.2.3.1. The role of *Ynglinga saga*

According to the third principle guiding the present study: “Euhemeristic narratives are part of wider works and must not be read in isolation, but as serving the broader purpose of the works they are found in.” As I shall discuss, *Ynglinga saga* displays many of the ideological inclinations also found in the latter part of the works and uses the euhemeristic narrative to support them. One of the most notable characteristics of the poem is its focus on the death of its characters, and the strange, sometimes ridiculous ways in which they die.

As Snorri himself remarked, the deaths and burial of the characters hold an important place in *Ynglingatal*.<sup>59</sup> Several of these deaths may seem abnormal or even ridiculous. We can cite for instance the ninth stanza where Dagr is killed with a pitchfork, or the first stanza where Fjölfnir drowns in beer. These strange deaths have been subject to various interpretations in scholarship. Some have seen them as mockery,<sup>60</sup> while some maintain that it is praise poetry.<sup>61</sup> Recently, Erin Michelle Goeres argued that the poem was about commemoration,<sup>62</sup> while John McKinnell hypothesized that the poem was about the dangers threatening the kings.<sup>63</sup> To Goeres, Snorri uses the genealogical character of *Ynglingatal* to bring legitimacy to the kings of Norway:

In *Heimskringla*, therefore, Snorri employs *Ynglingatal* as a genealogical piece, one in which the commemoration of ancestors provides a means of legitimizing their descendants’ right to rule. In this, the poem as it is presented in *Heimskringla* conforms to the model of other medieval genealogical traditions.<sup>64</sup>

This interpretation is in contradiction with that of Birgit Sawyer who reads *Ynglingatal* as a poem of mockery that was used by Snorri to criticize the Norwegian kings. One of these interpretations consists of seeing the saga as a criticism of the Norwegian monarchs, if not of the monarchy itself:

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<sup>59</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 4

<sup>60</sup> Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, “Dáið Þér Ynglinga?,” in *Sagnaþing Helgað Jónasi Kristjánssyni Sjötugum*, ed. Gísli Sigurðsson, Guðrún Kvaran, and Sigurgeir Steingrímsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1994), 761-768.

<sup>61</sup> Skre, “The Dating of *Ynglingatal*,” 407-412.

<sup>62</sup> Goeres, *The Poetics of Commemoration*, 16.

<sup>63</sup> John McKinnell, “*Ynglinga Saga*: A Minimal Interpretation,” *Scripta Islandica* 60 (2009), 24-48.

<sup>64</sup> Goeres, *The Poetics of Commemoration*, 22.

När Snorre Sturlason låter *Hkr* inledas med *Ynglingasagan*, antyder detta att han inte anser de norska kungarna värda att tas på allvar; sagan är en drift och ett förlöjligande av deras förfäder, som nästan samtliga går föga ärofyllda slut till mötes.<sup>65</sup>

(When Snorri Sturluson lets *Heimskringla* start with *Ynglinga saga*, it suggests that he does not consider the Norwegian kings to be worth taken seriously; the saga is a mockery and a derision of these ancestors, of which almost all had dishonorable ends.)

Richard North, like Sawyer, argues that *Ynglingatal* was indeed a satirical poem but considers its original meaning to have been modified by Snorri, who turned it into a eulogy.<sup>66</sup> As I will argue, Sawyer's position is untenable, and neither *Ynglinga saga* nor *Heimskringla* as a whole can be read as a radical criticism of the Norwegian royal dynasty on the contrary.

The struggle between the monarchy and the aristocracy of landed men has often been perceived as one of the major themes of *Heimskringla*. However, this view has been contradicted. Sverre Bagge, for instance, contended that the struggles of *Heimskringla* are better understood as oppositions between individuals than between social classes.<sup>67</sup> Diana Whaley pointed out the difficulties in looking for a general standpoint in favor of monarchy or aristocracy in *Heimskringla*. She argued, however, that the author's sympathy toward one side be clearer when looking at individual episodes.<sup>68</sup> These views are in accordance with modern historiographical takes which tend to contradict former perceptions of aristocracy and monarchy as two opposing powers. Monarchs and nobility often governed hand in hand, and aristocratic opposition to royal power were not so much attempts to undermine the power of kings as to influence it in certain directions.<sup>69</sup> Unlike for the other compilation of kings' sagas *Morkinskinna* (c. 1220), which scholars perceive as either pro or anti Norwegian monarchy,<sup>70</sup> the opinions on *Heimskringla*'s ideological stance tend to be a bit more homogeneous, and most

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<sup>65</sup> Birgit Sawyer, "Snorre Sturlasson som Balanskonstnär," *Collegium Medievale*, no. 23 (2010), 38.

<sup>66</sup> Richard North, "Kurzweilige Wahrheiten: Ari und das *Ynglingatal* in den Prologen der *Heimskringla*," in *Snorri Sturluson - Historiker, Dichter, Politiker*, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 85 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 171-216.

<sup>67</sup> Bagge, *Society and Politics*, 64-70.

<sup>68</sup> Whaley, *Heimskringla. An Introduction*, 98-100.

<sup>69</sup> Kim Bergquist, "Kings and Nobles on the Fringes of Christendom: A Comparative Perspective on Monarchy and Aristocracy in the European Middle Ages," in *The Routledge History of Monarchy*, ed. Elena Woodacre et al., The Routledge Histories (London: Routledge, 2019), 628-631.

<sup>70</sup> Ármann Jakobsson sees *Morkinskinna* as a pro-monarchical work, see for instance "The Individual and the Ideal: The Representation of Royalty in 'Morkinskinna,'" *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 99, no. 1 (2000): 85; Theodore M. Andersson, on the contrary sees *Morkinskinna* as advocating against the influence of the Norwegian king in Iceland, see "The Politics of Snorri Sturluson," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 93, no. 1 (1994): 58.



kings' sagas scholars see *Heimrkingla* as a work generally favorable to the Norwegian king.<sup>71</sup> These views are nonetheless sometimes challenged for instance by Magnús Fjalldal who recently argued that *Heimskringla* was an anti-monarchic work.<sup>72</sup> His argumentation relied heavily on Snorri's numerous depictions of violent acts perpetrated by the kings. In Magnús Fjalldal's view, these violent acts were shunned as evil behavior by the author, who described them only to denounce their cruelty. As atrocious as these acts may seem to the modern reader, one should not blindly assume that this sentiment was shared by the medieval audience. A significant portion of the violence inflicted by the two Óláfr was directed toward pagans, and sometimes even against devilish paranormal creatures such as demons and trolls.

Their violence is presented as one of the main factors in Norway's conversion to Christianity, which was evidently a crucial and positive event in the kingdom's history according to medieval Christians. The Middle Ages saw a great number of saint warriors such as Michael, George, Maurice, or the king of France, Saint Louis. The representations of these saints often served to legitimize the king's use of violence in order to safeguard peace or to promote the sanctified use of violence toward infidels in the crusades.<sup>73</sup> In *Heimskringla*, Snorri blurs the distinction between the political rebel and the pagan: pagans, wizards, and sacrificers are always rebel against the king's authority, and by extension, every rebel may be suspected of unholy behavior.<sup>74</sup> As the figures of the heathen and the rebel merge together, the two Óláfr become just kings as well as holy warriors. Their use of violence is justified twice, first by their political status as kings, and second by their function as holy defenders of the faith. As Kurt Villads Jensen discussed, waging war to spread Christianity was a legitimate option for Scandinavian monarchs,<sup>75</sup> and Scandinavia was one of the first areas where crusades were directed toward apostates in order to bring them back within the Church.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, *Heimskringla* also

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<sup>71</sup> For a summary of these discussions see Shami Ghosh, *Kings' Sagas and Norwegian History. Problems and Perspectives*, The Northern World. North Europe and the Baltic c. 400-1700 A.D. Peoples, Economies and Cultures 54 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 177-185. Shami Ghosh sees *Heimskringla* as rather pro-Norwegian work.

<sup>72</sup> Magnús Fjalldal, 'Beware of Norwegian Kings: *Heimskringla* as Propaganda', *Scandinavian Studies* 85, no. 4 (2013): 455-468.

<sup>73</sup> On this topic see Esther Dehoux, *Saints guerriers : Georges, Guillaume, Maurice et Michel dans la France médiévale (XIe-XIIIe siècles)*, Histoire (Rennes: Presses Universitaire de Rennes, 2014).

<sup>74</sup> The figure of Þórir Hundr is a good illustration of the merge between the pagan, the wizard, and the political rebel. Þórir, which was pagan, was one of the men who killed saint Óláfr at the battle of Stiklestad, the king's blows did not hurt him because of his magical armor conceived by a Finn wizard. *Heimskringla II*, 345, 383-384.

<sup>75</sup> Kurt Villads Jensen, "Martyrs, Total War, and Heavenly Horses: Scandinavia as Centre and Periphery in the Expansion of Medieval Christendom," in *Medieval Christianity in the North: New Studies*, ed. Kirsi Salonen, Kurt Villads Jensen, and Torstein Jørgensen, Acta Scandinavica: Aberdeen Studies in the Scandinavian World 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 89-120. See in particular pages 99-104.

<sup>76</sup> Villads Jensen, "Martyrs, Total War," 103.

describes the monarchs and their allies as the victims of cruel violence. This is the case of Hálfðan háleggr (long leg), son of Haraldr hárfagri, who was executed with the blood eagle method in *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*.<sup>77</sup> Hence, the portrayal of violence, being used by the king or his enemies, even when extreme, can hardly be seen as a testimony of the author's political stance with regard to monarchy.

It is nonetheless true that *Heimskringla* expresses some concern regarding the monarchy as a potentially alienating institution. Magnús Fjalldal quotes the famous speech of Einarr Eyjólfsson against paying a tribute to Saint Óláfr of which I will only quote the first half here:

„Því em ek fáræðinn um þetta mál, at engi hefir mik at kvatt. En ef ek skal segja mína ætlan, þá hygg ek, at sá myni til vera hérlandsmönnum at ganga eigi undir skattgjafar við Óláf konung ok allar álogur hér, þvílíkar sem hann hefir við menn í Nóregi. Ok munu vér eigi þat ófrelsi gera einum oss til handa, heldr bæði oss ok sonum várum ok allri ætt várri, þeiri er þetta land byggvir, ok mun ánauð sú aldrigi ganga eða hverfa af þessu landi. En þótt konungr sjá sé góðr maðr, sem ek trúi vel, at sé, þá mun þat fara heðan frá sem hingat til, þá er konungaskipti verðr, at þeir eru ójafnir, sumir góðir, en sumir illir.“<sup>78</sup>

(‘The reason I have had little to say about this business is that no one has called upon me to speak about it. But if I am to give my opinion, then I think that the course for us dwellers in this land is not to submit here to the taxes paid to King Óláfr and all the burdens such as he has imposed on people in Norway. And we shall be causing this deprivation of freedom not only to ourselves, rather both to ourselves and our sons and all our families that inhabit this land, and this bondage will never go away or disappear from this land. So though this king may be a good man, as I firmly trust that he is, yet it will happen from now on as it has before now, when there is a change of ruler, that they turn out differently, some well, some badly.’)

Einarr's speech does not criticize a particular king but speaks out against the monarchy as an institution. Einarr concedes that King Óláfr is a good king but he warns his compatriots that submitting to him would not merely result in a contract between themselves and Óláfr, but that their descendants would also be the subjects of future kings, who might be less benevolent than Óláfr. Indeed, this speech cannot be taken as the illustration of a personal opposition between

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<sup>77</sup> On this practice see Roberta Frank, “Viking Atrocity and Skaldic Verse: The Rite of the Blood-Eagle,” *The English Historical Review* 99, no. 391 (1984): 332-343, and Bjarni Einarsson's response: Bjarni Einarsson, “De Normannorum Atrocitate, or on the Execution of Royalty by the Aquiline Method,” *Saga Book* 22 (1986-1989): 79-97.

<sup>78</sup> *Heimskringla II*, 216.

individuals, as even Einarr likes and supports Óláfr. What he does not support, however, is the monarchic institution itself and the unpredictable risk of oppression that it would bring upon Iceland. Yet we may ask if Einarr, and by extension the author, are opposed to Norwegian monarchy in general, or simply to the Norwegian monarchy in Iceland.

The main characters of *Heimskringla* are Norwegian monarchs. Not all of them are good and benevolent rulers, but several of them are praiseworthy. One of the central characters of *Heimskringla* is the King Óláfr Haraldsson, who is clearly depicted as a saint.<sup>79</sup> The legitimacy of the king's rule over the Kingdom of Norway is never challenged and its association with sainthood and the upkeep of civil peace shows that Snorri recognized that the monarchy was beneficial in at least some ways. Nevertheless *Heimskringla* is not an apology of the Norwegian monarchy either, and even Óláfr Tryggvason is sometimes presented as having been too stark in his conversion effort.<sup>80</sup> Despite some criticism toward the actions of specific monarchs, Snorri depicts Norway as intimately connected to its kings. If Snorri was indeed anti-monarchist, why would he trace the descent of the kings from time immemorial? Why would he stress their noble origins? Why would he present them as the main actors of the conversion process and why would he give such an important role to the saint monarch Óláfr? Certainly, *Heimskringla* can hardly be read as an anti-monarchist pamphlet. However, as Einarr's speech shows, it is certainly a lucid depiction of the incompatibility between the medieval European model of monarchy, and the stateless society of the Icelandic commonwealth. This attitude is especially perceptible in the historico-mythical narrative according to which Iceland was founded because of Haraldr's tyrannical rule in Norway. This myth is reported laconically by Snorri in the nineteenth chapter of *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* where he states that: "Í þeim ófriði, er Haraldr konungr gekk til lands í Noregi, þá fundusk ok byggðusk útlönd, Færeyjar ok Íslands." (During the warfare by which King Haraldr gained territory in Norway, outlying countries, Faeroes and Iceland, were discovered and settled.)<sup>81</sup> Sverrir Jakobsson is certainly right when he reads this myth in relation with the Icelanders' uneasiness toward the Norwegian monarchy in the 13<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>82</sup> but this attitude is more easily perceptible in *Egils saga* than it

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<sup>79</sup> According to Birgit Sawyer, Snorri did not believe that Óláfr Haraldsson was depicted as a saint. This is dubious however. Snorri reports numerous miracles from Óláfr. Some of them are questioned or denied by sceptics but those unbelievers are always negative characters, to be taken as examples of bad faith rather than of cautious cartesian doubt.

<sup>80</sup> See for instance Óláfr's rudeness toward queen Sigríðr, in *Heimskringla I*, 310, or his contravention toward the rule of hospitality *Heimskringla I*, 311 which can remind of King Ingjaldr the Evil's behavior in *Ynglinga saga*.

<sup>81</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 118.

<sup>82</sup> Sverrir Jakobsson, "The Early Kings of Norway, the Issue of Agnatic Succession, and the Settlement of Iceland," *Viator* 47, no. 3 (September 2016): 171-188.

is in *Heimskringla*.<sup>83</sup> Bruce Lincoln goes too far when he reads *Heimskringla*'s portrayal of Haraldr as a king who "put a terrible system in place and set violent deeds in motion, usually to their own detriment as well as that of others."<sup>84</sup> Snorri's characterization of Haraldr's reign and of the Norwegian monarchy in general can hardly be characterized as solely negative. As I argue, the author characterizes Haraldr as the legitimate ruler of Norway, which he conquered himself, but he also describes the Icelanders as a people formed in opposition to monarchical power. The point of *Heimskringla* is less about whether the Norwegian monarchy is good or bad, but rather about the appropriate boundaries of this monarchy. Snorri unequivocally affirms that all of Norway should submit to the king, but he is more cautious regarding whether the king's power should extend to Iceland.

I believe that Snorri was at best uncomfortable with the idea that the Norwegian kings gain too much influence over Iceland, but most of *Heimskringla* takes place in Norway, and Snorri never questioned the legitimacy of the Norwegian kings as the rulers of Norway. This oscillation between criticism and validation of the kings' power in *Heimskringla* is in accordance with Snorri's own complex relationship with the Norwegian monarchy, which was at times a patron, and at others, a mortal enemy. But this may also be inherited from his Christian background. A similarly ambiguous attitude toward the monarchy may be found in the Bible, in the first book of Samuel, where God answers to the Hebrew people's plea to be governed by a king like other nations:

But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to govern us." Samuel prayed to the Lord, and the Lord said to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. Now then, listen to their voice; only – you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them." So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your

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<sup>83</sup> Sverrir Jakobsson, "The Early Kings of Norway," 186.

<sup>84</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Between History and Myth, Stories of Harald Fairhair and the Founding of the State* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 102-103.

daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.” But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, “No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.” When Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the Lord. The Lord said to Samuel, “Listen to their voice and set a king over them.” (1 Samuel 8)

God’s criticism of the monarchy is similar to that of Einarr, who emphasizes the frightening tyrannical powers that the king will have over his subjects. Both God and Einarr mention the permanency of the kings’ rule: once accepted, the rule of kings cannot be escaped. Marshall Sahlins and David Graeber also identified the inherent difficulty of getting rid of kings as one of the most fundamental characteristics of kingship.<sup>85</sup> The Bible criticizes monarchy as contrary to the correct natural, or rather supernatural order, according to which the people should be led solely by God through his prophets. Yet, at the same time, the Bible justifies the existence and perpetuation of the monarchy as being a God’s punishment over his stubborn people. This biblical narrative, as well as that of Snorri, may be read in accordance with Malinowski’s myth theory, according to which myths serves to justify the current state of affair. These narratives do not try to hide the harsh realities of what is monarchic power but present it as an unavoidable aspect of social life. Just as humankind fell from its idyllic primitive state because of its disobedience to God, the Hebrew people lost their initially fair political organization because they wished to have a king, which was contrary to what God advised, and the Norwegians must accept the king’s rule as it is his legitimate heirdom since the times of Haraldr Hárfagri.

As I show, in *Heimskringla*, Snorri uses the resources available to the saga writer to produce an ambiguous portrayal of the Norwegian monarchy. The ambiguity of the king’s figure is expressed from the beginning, in *Ynglinga saga*, where the first Norwegian monarchs may be ridiculous, frightening, or tyrannical. Like the author of the book of Samuel, Snorri is no more pro or anti-monarchy than the weather presenter is pro or anti-rain. Monarchs are a necessary aspect of Norwegian society who must be accepted whether we like it or not. As such,

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<sup>85</sup> David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins, *On Kings* (Chicago, Illinois: Hau Books, 2017), 1.

*Heimskringla* does not offer any conclusive answer in a hypothetical, and all too globalizing, discussion between pro and anti-monarchy. Instead, it looks at monarchy through specific situations and does not ponder on whether monarchic power should exist, but rather asks how it should be exercised and how one can interact with this power.

One other major theme of *Ynglinga saga* is sacral kingship, which was introduced with Njörðr and Freyr who, according to Snorri, were mistaken for gods. The idea that the Ynglingar kings could have been perceived as the holders of a sort of *mana* has been discussed.<sup>86</sup> This supernatural nature would have explained the prosperity associated with this lineage. Yet, in Snorri's narrative, it is not evident whether the peace of prosperity really came from the Ynglingar. As Snorri wrote, “Á hans dögum hófsk Fróðafriðr. Þá var ok ár um öll lönd. Kenndu Svíar þat Frey.”<sup>87</sup> (The peace of Fróði began in this time. There was prosperity throughout all lands. The Svíar attributed that to Freyr.) The peace of Fróði is also mentioned by Saxo in V.15.3, when he states that the peace during the reign of King Frothi was caused by the birth of Christ rather than by the rule of an emperor.<sup>88</sup> Here, Saxo makes a reference to the *Pax Augusta*, the alleged universal peace that occurred during the reign of Augustus, and which, according to the Christian tradition, was really due to God's intervention.<sup>89</sup> As such, the Swedes were of a common confusion between correlation and causation, the true cause of the peace of Freyr being God's intervention, and not the reign of Freyr, which merely happened to occur at the same time. They ascribed the peace to Freyr, just as the Danes ascribed it to Fróði, and the Romans to Augustus. In *Heimskringla*, the idea of a sacral kingship is not a reality but a pagan misconception. Thus, this notion is not the reason why Snorri emphasizes the genealogical link between the characters of the poem. The Norwegian kings do not acquire their legitimacy to rule through their descent from Freyr and none of the kings of *Heimskringla* refers to Freyr as their ancestor. Instead, it is the descent from Haraldr hárfagri that is often emphasized in the first sagas of the compilation. The descent from Haraldr brings legitimacy not because of his connection with the gods, or God, but because he is the first unifier of Norway. This descent from the first unifier is also the basis of Saint Óláfr's claim to Norway as he states:

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<sup>86</sup> For discussion on these topics see McTurk, “Scandinavian Sacral Kingship Revisited,” 19-32; and Sundqvist, *Freyr's Offspring*, 27-35.

<sup>87</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 24.

<sup>88</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, V.15.3.

<sup>89</sup> R. A. Markus, “The Roman History in Early Christian Historiography,” *The Downside Review* 81, no. 265 (1963), 343.

Nú skal því upp lúka fyrir yðr, er mér hefir mjök lengi í skapi verit, at ek ætla at heimta fõðurarf minn, ok mun ek hvártki koma á fund Danakonungs né Svíakonungs at biðja þá né einna muna um, þótt þeir hafi nú um hríð kallat sína eign þat, er var arfr Haralds hárfagra.<sup>90</sup>

(I shall make known to you what has been for a very long time in my mind, that I intend to claim my patrimony, and I go to see neither the king of the Danes nor the king of the Svíar to beg of them any favours, though they have now for a while declared what was the heritage from Haraldr hárfagri their own possession.)

However, the references to Haraldr hárfagri become rarer after Saint Óláfr's reign. Although the subsequent kings and pretenders continued to speak of their patrimony, they rarely invoked the name of Haraldr hárfagri but rather whoever was the previous king. Instead, the legitimacy of the rulers is often revealed, or confirmed, by miracles and apparitions of Saint Óláfr. As an intermediary between men and God, Óláfr is the true sacred king of *Heimskringla*. From his reign, the legitimacy to reign is no longer an affair solely of genealogical descent, but of divine approbation confirmed through the mediation of the patron saint of the country.

Then, if Snorri does not use the filiation with the Ynglingar and Freyr as a token of legitimacy, what purpose does the saga serve within *Heimskringla*? I believe that McKinnell is right to note that Snorri “accentuated” some of the preexisting themes in *Ynglingatal*.<sup>91</sup> McKinnell remarks that *Ynglingatal* depicts three main types of danger threatening the king: fraternal strife, external threat, and the loss of his inheritance. These three dangers are also the main threats faced by the Norwegian kings in the later sagas of the compilation. The parallels between the problems faced by the Ynglingar kings and those faced by later kings of the compilation are not only implicitly perceptible in the structure of the work but are also explained in the narrative as being the result of a curse. The curse happens in chapter fourteen of *Ynglinga saga* when the two disowned sons of King Vísbúrr reclaim their inheritance but face a refusal. Thus, the two sons ask for the help of a witch:

Þá var enn fengit at seið ok siðit til þess, at þeir skyldi mega drepa fõður sinn. Þá sagði Hulð vǫlva þeim, at hon myndi svá síða ok þat með, at ættvíg skyldi ávallt vera í ætt þeira

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<sup>90</sup> *Heimskringla II*, 44.

<sup>91</sup> McKinnell, “*Ynglinga Saga: A Minimal*,” 40.

Ynglinga síðan. Þeir játtu því. Eptir þat sǫmnuðu þeir liði ok kómu at Vísbur um nótt á óvart ok brenndu hann inni.<sup>92</sup>

(Then more black magic was brought into play, and a spell cast that would enable them to kill their father. Then the witch Hulð told them that she would bring this about by spells, and along with it that there would always be killing of kindred in the line of the Ynglingar after that. They agreed to this. After that they gathered a troop and took Vísbur by surprise at night and burned him in his house.)

Here, the two themes of inheritance and family strife are bound together, the bad gestion of inheritance being the main cause of family strife. The episode of Hulð's malediction thus acts as an etiological myth to explain the pervasive practice of parricide and family strife in later Norwegian history. This story which recounts how a king led his kingdom into turmoil because he poorly managed his inheritance would certainly remind Snorri's audience of the Norwegian civil war, which also began because of succession quarrels regarding King Sigurðr Jórsalafari's inheritance.

According to Snorri's depiction of these events, Sigurðr jórsalafari relied mostly on his own popularity to make the people accept his son, Magnús, as his successor, instead of his half-brother Haraldr gilli.<sup>93</sup> As such, the civil war era began because a son wanted to take back his lawful inheritance. Similarly, the second stage of the civil war was also initiated by a dispute between three brothers, the three sons of Haraldr gilli: Sigurðr Munnr, Eysteinn, and Ingi. After Ingi's death, his supporters rallied behind Magnús Erlingsson, grandson of Sigurðr jórsalafari. Magnús' claim was problematic as he was not the son of a king. However, his father, Erlingr skakki emphasized the fact that Magnús was the legitimate son of the legitimate daughter of a king:

„Ef Magnús er eigi svá til konungs tekinn sem forn siðr er til hér í landi, þá meguð þér af yðru valdi gefa homum kórónu, sem guðs lög eru til at smyrja konungs til veldis. En þótt ek sjá eigi konungr eða af konungaætt kominn, þá hafa þeir konungar nú verit flestir í váru minni, er eigi vissu jafnvel sem ek til laga eða landsréttar. En móðir Magnúss konungs er konungs dóttir ok dróttningar skilfengin. Magnús er ok dróttningar sonr ok eiginkonu sonr. En ef þér vilið gefa honum konungsvígslu, þá má engi hann taka síðan af konungdóminum at réttu. Eigi var Viljálmr bastardr konungs sonr, ok var hann vígðr ok kórónaðr til konungs

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<sup>92</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 30-31.

<sup>93</sup> See *Heimskringla III*, 266 for the oath between Magnús Sigurðarson and Haraldr gilli and page 278 for the division of the kingdom between the two men after King Sigurðr's death.



yfir Englandi, ok hefir síðan haldizk konungdómr í hans ætt á Englandi ok allir verit kórónaðir. Eigi var Sveinn Úlfsson í Danmörk konungs sonr, ok var hann þó þar kórónaðr konungr ok síðan synir hans ok hverr eptir annan þeira frænda kórónaðr konungr. Nú er hér í landi erkistóll. Er þat mikill vegr ok tígn lands várs. Aukum vér nú enn með góðum hlutum, hofum konung kórónaðan eigi síðr en enskir menn eða Danir.<sup>94</sup>

‘If Magnús has not been taken as king in accordance with what has been the ancient custom in this country, then you can use your power to give him a crown, in accordance with what God’s laws are for anointing a king to power. And though I am not a king nor descended from a kingly line, yet have most kings in our memory now been such as have not been as well acquainted with the statutes and laws of the land as I. For King Magnús’s mother is a legitimate daughter of a king and queen. Magnús is also son of a queen and son of a lawfully wedded wife. So if you are willing to grant him consecration as king, then no one will afterwards be able to deprive him of the kingdom lawfully. Viljálmr Bastard was not a king’s son, and he was consecrated and crowned king over England, and since then the kingdom has remained in his family in England and all of them have been crowned. Sveinn Úlfsson in Denmark was not a king’s son, and yet he was crowned king there and afterwards his sons and one after another of that family has been crowned king. There is now an archbishop’s see here in this country. That is a great glory and honour for our country. Let us enhance it further with good things, let us have a crowned king no less than English people or Danes.’

Erlingr states that his son is a legitimate child, which is a diplomatic way to remind without saying it that the other pretendents were born out of wedlock.<sup>95</sup> Thus Erlingr implicitly states that an illegitimate child, even the son of a king, has a shaky claim to the throne. This kind of reflection evidently fragilizes king Hákon Hákonarson’s position as he was himself born outside of wedlock. The second part of Erlingr’s argument does not directly undermine Hákon’s status but brings support to Jarl Skúli’s claim: Erlingr refers to William the Conqueror and Sveinn Úlfsson, who both became kings although they were not kings’ sons. Sveinn Úlfsson was indeed not a son of king but he was the grandson of Sveinn Forkbeard. William the Conqueror, on the

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<sup>94</sup> *Heimskringla III*, 396-397.

<sup>95</sup> See *Heimskringla III* 325-326 for Hákon herðibreiðr’s illegitimate birth, and 279 for Sigurðr Munnr’s birth from Haraldr gilli’s mistress Þóra. Snorri does not explicitly refer to Sigurðr Munnr’s birth as illegitimate, but clearly presents Þóra as a mistress of the king in 300-301. Erlingr’s reasoning may be criticized, as it is indeed true that his son descends from Sigurðr jórsalafari, but this king was himself an illegitimate son of Magnús berfœttr. It is unlikely, however, that Snorri intended these comments ironically. Throughout *Heimskringla*, Snorri shows sympathy for illegitimate and disowned sons. In *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, Snorri depicts Þjóðólfr ór Hvini as siding with the repudiated sons of King Haraldr. As he says: “For they would have willingly had a better maternal descent if you had let them have it.” See *Heimskringla I*, 128.

other hand, did not descend from any king of England and his claim to the throne came from the fact that King Edward the Confessor purportedly promised to make him his heir. In that, Snorri, through Erling's speech, presents a compelling argument favorable to the claim of pretenders who are not sons of kings, and thus, in favor of Jarl Skúli. As Sverrir Jakobsson argued, Norwegian texts such as *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium* (c. 1180), *Ágrip* (c. 1190), and *Historia Norwegie* (c. 1211) were usually proponents of a succession based on filiation, whether based on legitimate birth or not, and as such showed partisanship toward king Sverrir, who could not claim to be a legitimate son of a king.<sup>96</sup> On the contrary, Snorri produced a narrative against this view as he was a supporter a earl Skúli who, contrary to Hákon Hákonarson, was not a son of king at all.

As I will now argue, this ideological inclination is already perceptible in *Ynglinga saga*. It is striking that, in *Ynglinga saga*, Óðinn bequeathed his position as ruler to Njörðr, although the two characters do not share a blood relationship. As Marlene Ciklamini noted:

Óðinn, the god of war, is shown as the head of the Norse pantheon and the forger of an alliance with the Vanir, the gods of fertility. By a literary sleight of hand Snorri converts this alliance into such a tight relationship that an unanalytical listener or reader accepts the fact that after Óðinn's death, one of the Vanir, Njörðr, and not one Óðinn's many sons assumed the reign and after Njörðr's death his son Freyr became king. The thought of Óðinn's progeny does not obtrude itself onto the consciousness of the audience. The transmission of power from Óðinn to Njörðr and to Freyr appears normal.<sup>97</sup>

This transmission of power is never questioned, and the lack of family ties between the two individuals is not even mentioned, as if it were unproblematic. In a certain fashion it is the peaceful equivalent to the succession between king Edward and king William the Conqueror, which Snorri evoked through the speech of Erling. As such, Snorri portrays the succession between the Ynglingar as based both on patrilinear filiation but also other criteria. We must note that this transmission of power is the only representation of a succession not based on filiation in *Ynglinga saga* and is not directly supported by a stanza from *Ynglingatal*.

As Óðinn is also absent from the genealogies from *Íslendingabók* and *Historia Norwegie* we may assume that Snorri is likely the inventor of this symbolic relationship between Óðinn and the Ynglingar. Turville-Petre is perhaps right when she concedes that Snorri's inclusion of

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<sup>96</sup> Sverrir Jakobsson, "The Early Kings of Norway," 182-183.

<sup>97</sup> Marlene Ciklamini, "Ynglinga Saga: Its Function and Its Appeal," *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 8 (1975), 94.

Óðinn in the Ynglingar genealogy may be due to the influence of Anglo-Saxon genealogies where, in which Woden is regularly cited as the chief ancestor of the English kings.<sup>98</sup> The inclusion of Óðinn in *Ynglinga saga* may also be warranted by the poetic source as in the thirty-fifth stanza of the poem the Ynglingar line is called: “niðkvísl þróttar Þrós”<sup>99</sup> a kenning which may be literally translated as “the lineage of the Þrór of strength” where “Þrór” acts as a *heiti* for “god”. It is unclear who exactly is this “god of strength” but Þrór is a name for Óðinn according to the *Edda*.<sup>100</sup> It could thus be a reasonable interpretation for Snorri to understand this “þróttar Þrós” as an allusion to Óðinn, although it may not have been the initial intention of the poet.

Óðinn is neither the father of Njörðr nor of Freyr in any known tradition, but this problem could have been easily solved by producing a narrative where the Ynglingar descend from Freyr on the father’s side and from Óðinn on the mother’s side, in fact, this would have been the most logical conclusion from the scarce information given in *Ynglingatal*. The poetic sources allowed for such a genealogical construction as the wife of Fjölfnir, son of Freyr, is never mentioned, and Snorri thus had the possibility to have him married to a daughter or granddaughter of Óðinn. Furthermore, in the prologue to the *Edda*, Snorri described Óðinn as the father of Yngvi and thus as the ancestor of the Ynglingar, which proves that this filiation was not unthinkable, and that Snorri did not even feel the need to quote a source for such a claim.

Instead, in *Heimskringla*, Snorri described the smooth transmission of power between two unrelated characters, Óðinn and Freyr’s father, Njörðr. We must then conclude that Snorri’s description of the succession between Óðinn and Njörðr results from the deliberate intention to describe a transmission of power not based on genealogical connection. This narrative likely serves to reinforce Skúli’s claim to the throne. This intention is made even clearer when we compare the representation of this transmission of power with the other passage from *Heimskringla* about the succession of Haraldr gilli discussed above.

Snorri’s inclination to support Jarl Skúli instead of King Hákon is not only perceptible in *Heimskringla* but also in the last book of the *Edda*, *Háttatal*. *Háttatal* takes the form of a eulogy of both King Hákon and Jarl Skúli. It has long been remarked that the poem contains more praise for Skúli than for Hákon, and that the praise regarding the Jarl are generally more

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<sup>98</sup> Turville-Petre, “On *Ynglingatal*,” 63.

<sup>99</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 82.

<sup>100</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 22.

convincing.<sup>101</sup> Yet, as Kevin Wanner discussed, in the twelfth stanza of the poem Snorri states that God granted his grace and right to rule upon Hákon.<sup>102</sup> This praise is the only praise not replicated about Skúli. Like Heinz Klingenberg,<sup>103</sup> Wanner argues that Snorri, by emphasizing both men's relationships with previous kings, tries to evade the question of their respective legitimacy. It may be true that Snorri describes the two men as equally legitimate candidates to kingship when it comes to familial relation to kings, but Wanner is right to state that Snorri does not portray them as equally legitimate in every aspect: Snorri states that Hákon is anointed by God and obviously cannot reciprocate this praise for Skúli. The archbishop of Norway indeed recognized Hákon's right to rule and Snorri could hardly avoid reminding his reader of this fact, even if it is quite clear from *Háttatal* as well as from his later political decisions, that his personal preference went to the other party. As Wanner eloquently puts it: "We therefore find the poet in the awkward position of disagreeing, more or less openly, with God's judgment about who is the more worthy man."<sup>104</sup> This, however, does not equate to recognizing the king's eternal right to rule. As Wanner argues, God's grace, in an Augustinian theological framework is not granted based on the merit of the individual and may be withdrawn, as was the case for King Saul, whom God "regretted making king" (1 Sam 15:11). As such, Snorri's recognition of Hákon's divine right to rule was not necessarily in conflict with his personal preference for Skúli, and as Wanner states it:

Indeed, if Snorri subscribed at all to the connection that *Háttatal* 12 makes between grace and kingship, then he must have convinced himself that this hope had become a reality—that God had, in fact, regretted making Hákon king— when he sided with Skúli in the rebellion that would cost both men their lives.<sup>105</sup>

As such, *Háttatal* may show of Snorri's personal preference for Skúli but does not exactly undermine Hákon's legitimacy. On the other hand, the narratives from *Heimskringla* discussed above are more clearly part of an ideological discourse supporting Skúli's claim as a legitimate candidate to the Norwegian throne. This reading of *Ynglinga saga* helps to solve some of the perceived problems in the interpretation of the saga. *Ynglinga saga* provides a prestigious origin for the Norwegian kings but nonetheless portrays their ancestors as cursed and as having died

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<sup>101</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Háttatal*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2007), x-xii.

<sup>102</sup> Wanner, "Háttatal and the Divine," 75.

<sup>103</sup> Heinz Klingenberg, "Hommage für Skúli Bárðarson," ed. Hans Fix, *Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 18 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998), 57-96.

<sup>104</sup> Wanner, "Háttatal and the Divine," 81.

<sup>105</sup> Wanner, "Háttatal and the Divine," 86.

ridiculous deaths. This curious narrative has been alternately perceived as in favor or against the Norwegian monarchy. This text, however, does not position itself in a debate of this kind. It does not answer the question whether the Norwegian monarchy is good or bad but asks several questions with regard to whether patrilinear succession is the sole criterion to choose a king in times of trouble.

Snorri does not question the fact that patrilinear succession should be privileged in most cases; his questioning of patrilinear succession is to be read in the particular context of the rivalry between Skúli and Hákon. In that, I agree with Sverre Bagge's conclusion, which argued that the conflict between landowners and the kings in *Heimskringla* are portrayed as conflicts between individuals rather than class struggles.<sup>106</sup> Similarly, *Heimskringla* does not contain a criticism of the monarchy, but of individual kings and of some of the kings' specific ambitions, and in this way, it is less an anti-monarchy work than it is pro-Skúli. The euhemeristic narrative found in *Ynglinga saga* is part of this broader ideological discourse.

### 4.3. Euhemerism in the *Prose Edda*

As we have discussed in the introduction several scholars argued that the notion of euhemerism may be a pertinent concept to apply to Snorri's work. I believe this criticism often comes from an incomplete reading of Snorri's euhemerism and I will demonstrate how Snorri's narrative is best defined as euhemeristic.

This criticism comes from the field of Old Norse studies,<sup>107</sup> as well as from students of classical euhemerism. Roubekas voices one of the most open criticisms of Snorri's euhemerism in the *Edda* which he qualifies as far removed from the original theory:

Perhaps nowhere else can one encounter distorted euhemerism 'in all its glory' than Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*. A medieval text, the *Edda*—and particularly its Prologue—has been almost unanimously described as Snorri's euhemeristic explanation of the Nordic traditional gods. Indeed, the Prologue has many elements that resemble euhemerism; but, as I will show, euhemerism in this context is defined as the ante mortem deification of people who were sorcerers and powerful warriors.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Bagge, *Society and Politics*, 121.

<sup>107</sup> Heinrich Beck, "War Snorri Sturluson ein Euhemerist?," ed. Michael Dallapiazza, *Hesperides* 12 (2000): 61-72; and Beck, "Snorri Sturlusons Mythologie," 1-21; Van Nahl, *Snorri Sturlusons Mythologie*, 84-88.

<sup>108</sup> Roubekas, *An Ancient Theory of Religion*, 170.

And he adds:

Hence, the ancient theory of the origins of religion has largely been altered into a method and interpretative tool of cultural and historical endeavors that serve different agendas, just as it did in the early Christian period, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment.<sup>109</sup>

The bulk of Roubekas' argument is that in the *Edda*, Snorri is more concerned with the history of the Old Norse culture, language, and dynasties than he is with the birth of ancient Scandinavian religion. Yet, Roubekas himself noted earlier that religion and politics were intertwined in ancient society and that the religious aspect of Euhemerus' theory does not mean it does not have political implications.<sup>110</sup> Similarly, I argue that Snorri considers Old Norse pagan religion an important aspect of Old Norse culture, and that the birth and development of this religion that he explains through a euhemeristic narrative is an essential aspect of this prologue.

For this purpose, I will engage in a discussion regarding Snorri's philosophical and theological background, as it is perceptible in the prologue to the *Edda*. Snorri's learned Latin sources have already been the subject of numerous scholarly discussions. Ursula and Peter Dronke<sup>111</sup> as well as Anthony Faulkes have discussed this question in his recent discussion on Snorri's prologue to the *Edda*.<sup>112</sup> Like these authors, I will look for Snorri's influence in Christian culture rather than in pre-Christian religion. As Jeffrey Turco elegantly put it: "One might ask if it is not at least equally likely that 13<sup>th</sup> century Icelanders were similarly influenced by the religious tradition to which they actually adhered."<sup>113</sup> Similarly, I would like to consider Snorri not only as a product of his religious tradition, but also as a product of his time. Hence, I do not want to consider only the influence of patristic and biblical literature, but also of more recent intellectual trends that influenced the European intellectual milieu at the time where Snorri wrote.

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<sup>109</sup> Roubekas, *An Ancient Theory of Religion*, 173.

<sup>110</sup> Roubekas, *An Ancient Theory of Religion*, 101.

<sup>111</sup> Ursula Dronke and Peter Dronke, "The prologue of the prose *Edda*: Explorations of a Latin background", in *Sjötíu ritgerðir: helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni 20. júlí 1977*, Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1977.

<sup>112</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, xiv.

<sup>113</sup> Jeffrey Turco, "Net and Snares: the Loki of Snorri's *Edda* and the Christian Tradition," *History of Religions* 56, no. 2 (2016): 198-231.

### 4.3.1. The Twofold Structure of Snorri's Prologue

Roubekas argued that Snorri's narrative in the prologue to the *Edda* could hardly be considered to be focused on the question of the origin of religion as a general phenomenon. To Roubekas, Snorri's narrative regarding the journey of Þórr and Óðinn from Troy to Scandinavia seems as much, if not more, concerned with the origin of the Scandinavian kingdom, than with the origin of religion. Old Norse euhemerism would hence only superficially resemble Euhemerus' narrative. I argue that Roubekas' conclusions are largely due to the fact that he restricted his analysis of Snorri's prologue to the second half of the text, which is indeed often quoted as an example of euhemerism in Old Norse scholarship. As I will show, the prologue of Snorri's *Edda* appears to share remarkable structural similarities with Euhemerus' theory when read in its entirety. In this part, I will analyze the prologue to the *Edda* to highlight its resemblance to Euhemerus' narrative. I will extensively discuss the theological and philosophical background that may have led the author to give this structure, which resembles that of Euhemerus' narrative, to his prologue.

Snorri's argument in the prologue to the *Edda* may follow the three stages that we identified earlier in our study of Christian euhemerism: the loss of God's revelation, the worship of nature, and the deification of human beings. As I will show, these three stages may themselves be divided into substages. Let us start with the first stage:

Almáttigr guð skapaði himin ok jörð ok alla þá hluti er þeim fylgja, ok síðarst menn tvá er ættir eru frá komnar, Adam ok Evu, ok fjölgæðisk þeira kynslóð ok dreifðisk um heim allan. En er fram liðu stundir, þá ójafnaðisk mannfólkit: váru sumir góðir ok rétt trúaðir, en myklu fleiri snerusk eptir girndum heimsins ok óræktu guðs boðorð, ok fyrir því drekti guð heiminum í sjávangangi ok ǫllum kvikvendum heimsins nema þeim er í ǫrkinni váru með Nóa. Eptir Nóa flóð lifðu átta menn þeir er heiminn bygðu ok kómu frá þeim ættir, ok varð enn sem fyrr at þá er fjölmensk ok bygðisk veröldin þá var þat allr fjöldi mannfólksins er elskaði ágirni fjár ok metnaðar en afroektusk guðs hlýðni, ok svá mikit gerðisk af því at þeir vildu eigi nefna guð. En hvern mundi þá segja sonum þeira frá guðs stórmerkjum? Svá kom at þeir týndu guðs nafni ok víðast um veröldina fansk eigi sá maðr er deili kunni á skapara sínum.<sup>114</sup>

(Almighty God created heaven and earth and all things in them, and lastly two humans from whom generations are descended, Adam and Eve, and their stock multiplied and

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<sup>114</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 3.

spread over all the world. But as time passed mankind became diverse: some were good and orthodox in faith, but many more turned aside to follow the lusts of the world and neglected God's commandments, and so God drowned the world in a flood together with all creatures in the world except those who were in the ark with Noah. After Noah's flood there lived eight people who inhabited the world and from them generations have descended, and it happened just as before that as the world came to be peopled and settled it turned out to be the vast majority of mankind that cultivated desire for wealth and glory and neglected obedience to God, and this reached such a pass that they refused to mention the name of God. But who was there then to tell their children of the mysteries of God? So it happened that they forgot the name of God and in most parts of the world there was no one to be found who knew anything about his creator.)<sup>115</sup>

The first stage of Snorri's narrative resembles that of Lactantius', Martin of Braga's sermon, and the *Elucidarius* as it connects the loss of God's religion with the multiplication of individuals and societies. Jonas Wellendorf noted the influence of the Book of Wisdom, and argued that the prologue was written based on this model.<sup>116</sup> The influence of these biblical and early medieval sources is unquestionable but we must remark that Snorri's narrative contains original innovations unknown in the Bible and early medieval euhemerism. Unlike in these previous narratives, Snorri does not show false religion as an immediate replacement for original monotheism. Instead, the ancient men of Snorri's prologue forget God because they refuse to pronounce his name. As we shall see, this difference has consequences on the rest of the narrative. In the previous accounts, polytheism replaced the original monotheism without transition, and was thus a purely negative evolution. In Snorri's narrative, original monotheism is not replaced by another religion but forgotten. It is only after a stage of complete ignorance of the concept of God that humanity invents new religions:

Miðlaði hann ok spekina svá at þeir skilðu alla jarðliga hluti ok allar greinir þær er sjá mátti loptsins ok jarðarinnar. Þat hugsuðu þeir ok undruðusk hverju þat mundi gegna at jörðin ok dýrin ok fuglarnir höfðu saman eðli í sumum hltutum ok var þó ólíkt at hætti. Þat var eitt eðli at jörðin var grafin í hám fjalltindum ok spratt þar vatn upp ok þurfti þar eigi lengra at grafa til vaz en í djúpum dolum. Svá eru ok dýr ok fuglar, at jafnlangt er til blóðs í höfði ok fótum. Qnnur náttúra er sú jarðar at á hverju ári vex á jörðunni gras ok blóm ok á sama ári fellr þat allt ok fqlnar. Svá eru ok dýr ok fuglar, at þeim vex hár ok fjaðrar ok fellr af á hverju ári. Þat er hin þriðja náttúra jarðar þá er hon er opnuð ok grafin þá groer gras á þeiri

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<sup>115</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 1.

<sup>116</sup> Wellendorf, "Zoroaster, Saturn, and Óðinn," 152.



moldu er efst er á jörðunni. Björg ok steina þýddu þeir á móti tönnum ok beinum kvikvenda. Af þessu skilðu þeir svá at jörðin væri kyk ok hefði líf með nokkurum hætti, ok þat vissu þeir at hon var furðuliga gømul at aldartali ok máttug í eðli.<sup>117</sup>

(He also gave them a portion of wisdom so that they could understand all earthly things and the details of everything they could see in the sky and on earth. They pondered and were amazed at what it could mean that the earth and animals and birds had common characteristics in some things, though there was a difference of quality. One of the earth's characteristics was that when it was dug into high mountain tops, water sprang up there and there was no need to dig further for water there than in deep valleys. It is the same with animals and birds, that it is just as far to blood in the head as in the feet. It is a second property of the earth that every year there grows on the earth vegetation and flowers and the same year it all falls and fades. It is the same with animals and birds, that their hair and feathers grow and fall off every year. It is the third property of the earth, that when it is opened and dug, then vegetation grows on the soil which is uppermost on the earth. Rocks and stones thy thought of as equivalent to teeth and bones of living creatures. From this they reasoned that the earth was alive and had life after a certain fashion, and they realized that it was enormously old in count of years and mighty in nature.)<sup>118</sup>

As this passage describes it, mankind's first attempt to understand the world is a failure. Snorri describes how the first generation of men living after the Flood observed the world in an attempt to understand the ways of the cosmos. As Snorri recalls, men were not granted “andlig spekðin”<sup>119</sup> (spiritual wisdom),<sup>120</sup> but only “jarðligri skilningu”<sup>121</sup> (earthly understanding)<sup>122</sup>. For this reason, they did not attain the truth but invented a sort of pantheism, and thought that Earth itself was a deity. The second part of their reflection, however, is much more fruitful:

Þat sama spurðu þeir af gømlum frændum sínum at síðan er talið vāru mōrg hundruð vetra þā var in sama jōrð, sól ok himintungl. En gangr himintunglanna var ójafn, āttu sum lengra gang en sum skemra. Af þvīlíkum hlutum grunaði þā at nokkur mundi vera stjōrnari himintunglanna sá er stilla mundi gang þeira at vilja sínum, ok mundi sá vera ríkr mjōk ok máttugr; ok þess væntu þeir, ef hann réði fyrir hōfuðskepnunum, at hann mundi fyrr verit hafa en himintunglin; ok þat sá þeir, ef hann réði gang himintunglanna, at hann mundi ráða

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<sup>117</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 3.

<sup>118</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 1-2.

<sup>119</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 4.

<sup>120</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 2.

<sup>121</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 4.

<sup>122</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 2.

skini sólar ok dagg loptsins ok ávexti jarðarinnar er því fylgir, ok slíkt sama vindinum loptsins ok þar með stormi sævarins. Þá vissu þeir eigi hvar ríki hans var. Af því trúðu þeir at hann réð öllum hlutum á jörðu ok í lopti, himins ok himintunglum, sævarins ok veðranna. En til þess at heldr mætti frá segja eða í minni festa þá gáfu þeir nafn með sjálfum sér öllum hlutum ok hefir þessi átrúnaðr á marga lund breyzk svá sem þjóðirnar skiptusk ok tungurnar greindusk. En alla hluti skilðu þeir jarðligri skilningu þvíat þeim var eigi gefin andlig spekðin. Svá skilðu þeir at allir hlutir væri smíðaðir af nokkuru efni.<sup>123</sup>

(Similarly they learned from their elderly relatives that after many hundreds of years had been reckoned there was the same earth, sun and heavenly bodies. But the courses of the heavenly bodies were various, some had a longer course and some a shorter. From such things they thought it likely that there must be some controller of the heavenly bodies who must be very powerful and mighty; and they assumed, if he ruled over the elements, that he must have existed before the heavenly bodies; and they realized that if he ruled the course of the heavenly bodies, he must rule the shining of the sun and the dew of the sky and the produce of the earth which is dependent on it, and similarly the wind of the sky and with it the storm of the sea. But they did not know where his kingdom was. And so they believed that he rules all things on earth and in the sky, of heaven and the heavenly bodies, of the sea and the weathers. But so as to be better able to give an account of this and fix it in memory, they then gave a name among themselves to everything, and this religion has changed in many ways as nations became distinct and languages branched. But they understood everything with earthly understanding, for they were not granted spiritual wisdom. Thus they reasoned that everything was created out of some material.)<sup>124</sup>

In this passage, which immediately follows the previous one, humanity discovers a powerful entity that rules the cosmos. Even though the text never refers to this being as a god, the entity evidently resembles the Christian monotheistic and invisible transcendental god. As such, the prologue describes how humanity can reach religious truth not with the help of revelation but through the observation of nature. In other words, the ancient humanity of the prologue practices natural theology.<sup>125</sup> The godlike being is defined as more ancient than the world, governing the heavens, and through the heavens, the cycle of life on earth. Contrary to what was observed in the first passage, this time the conclusions of ancient humanity were partially correct, as they led to the discovery of the monotheistic God. The author nonetheless specifies:

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<sup>123</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 3-4.

<sup>124</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 2.

<sup>125</sup> See section 4.3.2. and 4.3.3.

“En alla hluti skilðu þeir jarðligri skilningu þvíat þeim var eigi gefin andlig spekðin. Svá skilðu at allir hlutir væri smíðaðir af nokkuru efni.”<sup>126</sup> (But they understood everything with earthly understanding, for they were not granted spiritual wisdom. Thus they reasoned that everything was created out of some material.)<sup>127</sup> As the last sentence shows, the underlying assumption of the narrator is that reason (i.e. earthly understanding) without revelation (i.e. spiritual wisdom) may lead to incorrect conclusions. In this case, the faulty conclusion is that everything is made out of some material, thus negating that the world was created *ex nihilo* as the Christian faith teaches.<sup>128</sup> As such, at the end of their enquiry, humanity reached three conclusions: the earth is a living being of extremely old age, an all-powerful god governs over the heavens, and everything was created out of some material. Only the second of these conclusions, which humanity reached with their earthly understanding alone, is correct according to a medieval Christian perspective.

It is only after these two stages of reflection that Snorri introduces the pseudo-gods and explains how Óðinn came from Turkey to the northern part of the world where he placed several of his sons as kings in Europe. Snorri, in this second part of the prologue, never states that Óðinn or his fellow men from Asia were deified by Scandinavian people but states that:

Ok sá tími fylgði ferð þeira at hvar sem þeir dvöldusk í lǫndum, þá var þar ár ok friðr góðr, ok trúðu allir at þeir væri þess ráðandi, þvíat þat sá ríkismenn at þeir vǫru ólíkir ǫðrum mǫnnum þeim er þeir höfðu sét at fegrð ok at viti.<sup>129</sup>

(Such was the success that attended their travels that in whatever country they stopped, there was then prosperity and good peace there, and everyone believed that they were responsible for it because the people who had power saw that they were unlike other people they had seen in beauty and wisdom.)<sup>130</sup>

This passage does not explicitly state that Óðinn and the Æsir were deified by the people they met, but it certainly implies it. This is especially perceptible when we consider that the narrator notes that the people ascribe the gift of “prosperity and peace” (ár ok friðr) to them, two gifts

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<sup>126</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 3.

<sup>127</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 2.

<sup>128</sup> Gunnar Harðarson noted that the U version of the *Edda* uses the words “skapat eða smíðat” which would thus imply that ancient mankind did not preclude the notion of creation altogether. I disagree with this statement, as regardless of the specific meaning of either “skapa” and “smíðat”, the following words “af nokkuru efni” makes it clear that matter preexisted to God’s shaping of the cosmos. See Gunnar Harðarson, “The Argument from Design in the Prologue to the *Prose Edda*,” *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 12 (2016): 71.

<sup>129</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 6.

<sup>130</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 4.

which medieval people considered to be God's gifts. In *Ynglinga saga*, the Svíar are said to ascribe "ár ok friðr" to Freyr, and I will come back to this notion in section 5.2.3., where I specifically treat the figure of Freyr. Despite the prologue's implication that the Æsir had been deified, this text actually puts very little emphasis on the process of deification of the human impostor. Similarly, in the prologue, Snorri mentions Gylfi's and Óðinn's encounter but does not explain the impact of their meeting on the origin of Old Norse religion. Snorri gives more information on these points in the following section of the *Edda*, *Gylfaginning*. In this section, Snorri imagines the conversation between Gylfi and the pseudo-gods, in which the Æsir deluded Gylfi into thinking that they were deities. As such *Gylfaginning* is a unique example of euhemerism in performance, not only referring to but also showing the tricks of the pseudo-gods. Snorri concludes *Gylfaginning* by explaining how Gylfi propagated all the stories he heard from the Æsir and how the Æsir themselves worked in order to maintain the illusion that they were gods:

Því næst heyrði Gangleri dyni mikla hvern veg frá sér, ok leit út á hlið sér. Ok þá er hann sésk meir um, þá stendr hann úti á sléttum velli, sér þá ønga höll ok ønga borg. Gengr hann þá leið sína braut ok kemr heim í ríki sitt ok segir þau tíðindi er hann hefir sét ok heyrt. Ok eptir honum sagði hverr maðr öðrum þessar sǫgur. En Æsir setjask þá á tal ok ráða ráðum sínum ok minnask á þessar frásagnir allar er honum váru sagðar, ok gefa nǫfn þessi hin sǫmu er áðr eru nefnd mǫnnum ok stöðum þeim er þar váru, til þess at þá er langar stundir liði at menn skyldu ekki ifask í at allir væri einir, þeir Æsir er nú var frá sagt ok þessir er þá váru þau sǫmu nǫfn gefin. Þar var þá Þórr kallaðr – ok er sá Ásaþórr hinn gamli, sá er Ǫkuþórr – ok honum eru kend þau stórvirki er Þórr (Ector) gerði í Troju. En þat hyggja menn at Tyrkir hafi sagt frá Ulixes ok hafi þeir hann kallað Loka, þvíat Tyrkir váru hans hinir mestu óvinir.<sup>131</sup>

(Next Gangleri heard great noises in every direction from him, and he looked out to one side. And when he looked around further he found he was standing out on open ground, could see no hall and no castle. Then he went off on his way and came back to his kingdom and told of the events he had seen and heard about. And from his account these stories passed from one person to another. But the Æsir sat down to discuss and hold a conference and went over all these stories that had been told him, and assigned those same names that were mentioned above to the people and places that were there [in Sweden], so that when long periods of time had passed men should not doubt that they were all the same, those

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<sup>131</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 54-55.

Æsir about whom stories were told above and those who were now given the same names. So someone there was given the name Thor – and this means the ancient Thor of the Æsir, that is Qku-Thor – and to him are attributed the exploits which Thor (Hec-tor) performed in Troy. And it is believed that the Turks told tales about Ulysses and that they gave him the name Loki, for the Turks were especially hostile to him.)<sup>132</sup>

Nowhere else in the Old Norse corpus is it so explicitly stated that the pseudo-gods took an active part in their own deification. Here, unlike in *Ynglinga saga*, not only do the pseudo-gods let the human believe in their divine nature, but they deliberately change their names to impersonate their ancestors and maintain the illusion that they are indeed gods.

In that sense, the prologue and *Gylfaginning* are complementary: they participate in the same euhemeristic narrative regarding the origin of Nordic paganism as the result from the encounter between Óðinn and Gylfi. Because this euhemeristic narrative implies that at one point in ancient history the pseudo-gods deluded the human beings, this encounter offers Snorri the perfect occasion to recount the Old Norse myths in the form of a dialogue. As such, *Gylfaginning* is not only compatible with a euhemeristic reading of the myths, but it relies on such a euhemeristic reading: it is a dialogue embedded in the euhemeristic framework displayed in the prologue. I would also add that even if one does not agree that the prologue is Snorri's work, the conclusion of *Gylfaginning* alone – which is also present in U<sup>133</sup> – where the narrator explains how the Æsir changed their names to impersonate their own ancestors is sufficient for understanding that this dialogue takes place within a euhemeristic framework. As such, both the prologue and *Gylfaginning* display strong euhemeristic traits. *Gylfaginning* is where the idea that the pagan gods were in fact human beings is more explicitly stated, but the prologue is the text which most closely resembles the structures of ancient euhemeristic narratives including that of Euhemerus. As the *Sacred Inscription*, the prologue is a twofold narrative in which men discover the existence of the gods who rule over the cosmos and only then are fooled into worshiping mortal men who use the concept of god for their own benefit. In Snorri's narrative, unlike in previous euhemeristic narratives, humanity does not discover two, but three different kinds of gods: the pantheistic one, the heavenly one, and the anthropomorphic pseudo-gods. The first of these gods, earth itself, is incompatible with Christian theology, for Christianity, as well as the other Abrahamic religions, conceive of a clear dichotomy between

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<sup>132</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 57-58.

<sup>133</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *The Uppsala Edda*, 86-87.

God the creator and God's creation.<sup>134</sup> Yet, the second god perceived by mankind is clearly analogous to the monotheistic Christian god. I will now discuss Snorri's description of the first two kinds of gods.

#### **4.3.2. The Structure of the Prologue Compared to Previous Euhemeristic Narratives**

As Gunnar Harðarson noted in his study of the prologue to the *Edda*, Old Norse scholars who studied the prologue fall into three categories: those for whom the main point of the prologue is the duality between an earth and a sky deity; those for whom the text is a demonstration in natural theology, showing how the knowledge of God could be reached through reason; and finally, those who focused their attention on the first part of the prologue and its microcosm-macrocosm reasoning.<sup>135</sup> Gunnar Harðarson, for his part, focused on the nature of the arguments used in the prologue, which he divided in two categories: the argument for the attributes and nature of the earth, and the argument for the ruler of the sky. I believe Gunnar is right to note that the prologue is structured through several distinct arguments. I would now like to compare and contrast the arguments of the prologue with those of the Book of Wisdom and of Lactantius, who also described the apparition of paganism.

As we shall see, Snorri's prologue is superficially similar to biblical, patristic, and early medieval euhemerism but also contains important structural differences from those sources. These differences do not tend to decrease the prologue's resemblance to Euhemerus' theory, but on the contrary, to increase it. I will start with the Book of Wisdom. Wellendorf noted that the humanity of the *Edda* used the "argument from design," or the discovery of God's existence through the observation of God's creation, and he equally noted that this argument is also used by mankind in the Book of Wisdom 13:1-9.<sup>136</sup> According to Wellendorf, Snorri's leniency toward idolatry is the same as which is displayed in the Book of Wisdom. It is certainly true that Snorri was aware of the Book of Wisdom's account on the origin of idolatry, but I disagree with Wellendorf when he states that the Book of Wisdom and Snorri's prologue share a similar clemency toward those who worshiped nature. To support his argument, Wellendorf quotes this remark from the Book of Wisdom: "Yet these people are little to be blamed, for perhaps they

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<sup>134</sup> For a recent discussion on the notion of creator and creation in Christian thought see the introduction to Paul M. Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy. Creator and Creation in Early Christian Theology and Piety*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1-17.

<sup>135</sup> Gunnar Harðarson, "The Argument from Design," 63.

<sup>136</sup> Wellendorf, "Zoroaster, Saturn, and Óðinn," 152.

go astray while seeking God and desiring to find him” (Wis 13:6).<sup>137</sup> But it is a partial quotation, which alters the sense of the passage: the narrator states that these people are perhaps looking for God, but concludes: “Yet again, not even they are to be excused; for if they had the power to know so much that they could investigate the world, how did they fail to find sooner the Lord of these things?” (Wis 13:8-9). The Book of Wisdom’s initial leniency toward nature worship is only a rhetorical tool in a dialectic demonstration whose aim is to refute and condemn paganism. As I will show, this is not the case in Snorri’s prologue, which actually displays a worldview that explains and justifies ancient paganism.

As we saw, one of the main differences between the Book of Wisdom and the prologue to the *Edda* is that the narrator of the Book of Wisdom believes that people should be able to discover the existence of God by observing the world yet, only tells the reader about people who failed to do so. On the contrary, the prologue to the *Edda* shows people whose observation of nature resulted in the discoveries of some truth along with some errors. In the Book of Wisdom like in the prologue, paganism appears after a failed attempt at natural theology. In the Book of Wisdom, the result of this attempt was that humanity started to worship God’s creation instead of God himself. In the prologue to the *Edda*, humans’ observations are divided into two categories: the observation of the earth and the observation of the heavens. Only the observation of the earth led men to completely incorrect conclusions. According to the prologue, the observation of the heavenly bodies did not lead humanity to idolatry but to the discovery of God’s existence. We must note that according to the narrator of the Book of Wisdom, the pagans should have been able to attain the knowledge of God’s existence if they had tried to. In this sense, the Book of Wisdom does not criticize the observation of nature itself but rather the bad conclusions of the pagans. It could thus seem that the prologue and the Book of Wisdom are in accordance with one another but portray two sides of the same coin, as Snorri portrays humans who succeeded at natural theology, while the Book of Wisdom portrays those who did not. The differences between the two narratives, however, do not stop there.

First, the two works differ on which argument for God’s existence may be inferred from the observation of nature. In fact, their arguments are at odds: for the narrator of the Book of Wisdom, mankind should perceive the beauty of creation and thus infer that this beauty finds its origin in an even more formidable creator (Wis 13:3-5). On the contrary, the men of the prologue to the *Edda* are not impressed by the beauty of the world, as this is not a feeling of

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<sup>137</sup> Wellendorf, “Zoroaster, Saturn, and Óðinn,” 153.

awe but a rational reflection on the irregularities of the movement of heaven which led them to the conclusion of God's existence. As the narrator states, the people remarked that "the courses of the heavenly bodies were various, some had a longer course and some a shorter."<sup>138</sup> (gangr himintunglanna var ójafn, áttu sum lengra gang en sum skemra.)<sup>139</sup> The conclusion that humanity should be able to reach according to the two texts is the same – the existence of God – but the two reasonings they should use are mutually exclusive.

Another important evolution from the narrative of the Book of Wisdom are the notions of "earthly understanding" and "spiritual wisdom." The narrator of the Book of Wisdom does not consider polytheism to come from an accurate use of human reason, nor does he consider pagans to have merely ignored that some truths are of a supernatural order. In fact, the narrator does not even consider a flawed use of human reason to be at the origin of polytheism: paganism appeared because some men were so impressed by the sensual beauties of the world that they started to worship the world instead of its creator. To him, the root of paganism is not flawed rational thinking; it is the absence of rational thinking. The narrator strongly insists on that point when he rhetorically asks whether the pagans could have been genuinely searching for God and merely mistaken in their conclusion. But he is implacable: had men looked for the truth, they would have found God.

We may note that Lactantius' *Institutiones divinae*'s conception of the relationship between faith and reason is similar to that of the Book of Wisdom. In I.II.5, Lactantius posits that no man observing the sky could ignore God:

Nemo est enim tam rudis, tam feris moribus quin oculos suos in caelum tollens, tametsi nesciat cuius Dei providentia regatur hoc omne quod cernitur, aliquam tamen esse intellegat ex ipsa rerum magnitudine, motu, dispositione, constantia, utilitate, pulchritudine, temperatione, nec posse fieri quin id quod mirabili ratione constat consilio maiore aliquo sit instructum.<sup>140</sup>

No one, however ignorant and savage, can lift his eyes to heaven and fail to see, for all that he may not know whose providence it is that controls all that he sees, that some providence is there, simply because of the size of it all and its movement, its shape and stability, its

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<sup>138</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 2.

<sup>139</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 3.

<sup>140</sup> Lactantius, *Institutions Divines: Livre I*, 44.



use, beauty and system: anything constructed with such wonderful reason must have been put in place by some superior power of deliberation.<sup>141</sup>

And, as he continues on in I.III.1, that the correct use of reason necessarily results in the conclusion that a unique, allpowerful creator god exists:

Nemo, qui quidem sapiat rationemque secum putet, non unum esse intellegat, qui et condiderit omnia et eadem qua condidit uirtute moderetur.<sup>142</sup>

No intelligent man who can do the sums would fail to see that there is only one, the God who founded it all in the first place and who now controls it with the same virtue with which he founded it.<sup>143</sup>

As in the Book of Wisdom the author insists on the beauty and harmony of the universe, as well as on the fact that a correct use of reason alone should have necessarily led humanity to the discovery of God. Similarly, according to the *Old Norse Elucidarius* the idea that the heavenly bodies stay in their tracks is a sign of God, not the inverse:

«1.21» *Discipulus Kennna scepnor Gop.*

Magister Etke gerþe Gop þat es eige kennne hann. Þuiat andlauser hluter ero oss dauþer. oc oscynsamer enn al-ler hluter lifa Gope oc kennna scapera sinn. Himinn kennner hann þuiat hann snvsc of valt efster boþorþe hans sem ritet es. Gop gerþe himna ískilningo. Sol oc tungl oc stionor kennna Gop þuiat þer huerva afstr avalt til staþa sinna þapan es þer falla. Sér oc vinndar kennna hannna hann þuiat þat geldr sem hann bvþr þa es þat glévpþe. Oll cvquende kennna Gop þuiat þau hal[-]da logom þeim es hann gaf þeim.

«1.21» Disciple: Do all creatures know God?

Master: God made nothing which does not know Him. Although lifeless things seem dead and not rational to us, nevertheless all things live for God and know their Creator. Heaven knows Him and forever turns according to His command, as is written: God made the heavens by wisdom (Pss. 135/136:5). The sun, moon, and stars know God because they stay in their track according to His will. The earth knows Him and produces vegetation and grass at the appropriate times. The rivers know God and they always return to their source. The sea and the winds know God and they stop at His command. The dead know Him and

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<sup>141</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 61.

<sup>142</sup> Lactantius, *Institutions Divines: Livre I*, 46.

<sup>143</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 61-62.

they rise at His will. Hell knows Him and it returns those it devoured as He commands. All animals know God and they observe the laws which He gave them.<sup>144</sup>

As we can see, Snorri's notion that humanity discovered God in the irregularities of the movement of the stars is peculiar among ancient and medieval Christian euhemeristic accounts. Even more peculiar is his stance regarding the origin of the pagan errors. In the second book of the *Institutiones divinae*, Lactantius gives a historical summary of the development of pagan religion. To him, as in the case of the prologue to the *Edda*, false beliefs started after the Flood. Lactantius describes how the sons of Noah, who were rejected by their father, wandered and forgot the religion of God. To Lactantius, as he states it in *Institutiones divinae* II.XIII.10, it is the humans who settled in Egypt who started to worship the stars:

Sed omnium primi qui Aegyptum occupauerant caelestia suspicere atque adorare coeperunt. Et quia neque domiciliis tegebantur proper aeris qualitatem nec ullis in ea regione nubibus subtexitur caelum, cursus siderum et effectus notauerunt, dum ea saepe uenerantes curiosius ac liberior intuentur.<sup>145</sup>

(Those who occupied Egypt were first to start gazing at the skies and worshipping what they saw there. Because they lived without roofs overhead, the climate being what it is, and because no clouds obscure the sky in those parts, they could mark the orbits of the stars and what they brought to pass; frequent worship increased the care and the scope of their watching.)<sup>146</sup>

Contrary to these texts, the prologue of the *Edda* does not describe people who observed nature and who failed to apply reason to their observations to conclude that God exists. In Snorri's account, human beings were created by God with the natural inclination to use their reason to inquire about the world: "Miðlaði hann ok spekina svá at þeir skilðu alla jarðliga hluti ok allar greinir þær er sjá mátti loptsins ok jarðarinnar."<sup>147</sup> (He also gave them a portion of wisdom so that they could understand all earthly things and the details of everything they could see in the sky and on earth.)<sup>148</sup> This conception is reminiscent of the first sentence of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: "All humans by nature desire to know".<sup>149</sup> As I will show in the sections 4.3.3, 4.3.4, and 4.3.5, Snorri's prologue to the *Edda* is indeed influenced by the 13<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>144</sup> Firchow, *The Old Norse Elucidarius*, 8-9.

<sup>145</sup> Lactantius, *Institutions Divines: Livre II*, 184.

<sup>146</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 159.

<sup>147</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 3.

<sup>148</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 1.

<sup>149</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. C.D.C. Reeves (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2016), 2.

rediscovery of Aristotelian thought. The origin of the ancients' mistake is not the absence of rational thinking but the lack of spiritual wisdom (andlig spekðin) i.e. revelation. Neither the Book of Wisdom, Lactantius nor the *Elucidarius* make this distinction between earthly and spiritual understanding.

Beside this difference in the mistake's origin it is also the nature of the pagan's mistakes that differs between these texts. To a certain degree the first error of the men from Snorri's prologue resembles that of the Book of Wisdom, as according to Snorri, ancient men concluded that Earth must be a living being reminiscent of the deification of nature found in the Book of Wisdom. In the prologue, however, the ancient men do not think that nature consists of many gods but rather they believe that nature is a single being from whom men can trace their ancestry and as such, their error is better defined as pantheism than polytheism. Their second mistake is having believed that "everything was created out of some material"<sup>150</sup> (allir hlutir væri smíðaðir af nokkuru efni)<sup>151</sup> thus negating the *ex-nihilo* creation essential to Christian doctrine.

As such, it is indeed clear that Snorri's prologue is influenced by texts such as the Book of Wisdom, the *Institutiones Divinae*, the *Elucidarius*, and the *Etymologiae*, but it is equally clear that Snorri understood the question of the origin of false religion in a way that is foreign to biblical and patristic literature. The main difference between these conceptions is that Snorri does not primarily characterize the mistakes of paganism as polytheism and idolatry. As I will discuss in the next part, his conception of paganism is rooted in the philosophical discussions of his time, in which the position between faith and reason held a central place.

Contrary to the previous Christian euhemeristic narratives, Snorri does not describe the development of pagan religion as a purely negative evolution spanning from the ideal primeval knowledge of God, to nature worship, and finally to idolatry. For him, the process goes from the ideal primeval knowledge of God to nature worship, but also to the rational rediscovery of God, and finally to the deification of human beings. As such, among these euhemeristic narratives, only Snorri describes the positive conclusions that humanity can draw through observing nature.

Hence, in the prologue, Snorri makes a distinction between three different kinds of deities: first, a personification of the earth that results from the observation of nature; second, a heavenly

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<sup>150</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 2.

<sup>151</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 4.

deity identical with the monotheistic god and that was discovered by examining the heavens; and third, anthropomorphic deities whose belief in stems from the faulty notion that some human beings are gods. In this sense, Snorri produces a categorization of deities that resembles that of Euhemerus: on the one hand, the deities are discovered through the observation of nature, and on the other hand, through the human impostors. As with Euhemerus' euhemerism, Snorri describes how the 'true' deity, the heavenly gods for Euhemerus and the monotheistic god for Snorri, may be discovered by observing the heavens. However, Snorri also describes the practice of natural theology which led humanity toward the incorrect conclusion of pantheism. As such, as shown on the table below, Snorri's euhemerism in the prologue effectively cumulates the properties of Euhemerus' euhemerism and of patristic euhemerism.

	POSITIVE NATURAL THEOLOGY	NEGATIVE NATURAL THEOLOGY	NEGATIVE HUMAN DEIFICATION
EUHEMERUS	X		X
BIBLICAL AND PATRISTIC		X	X
SNORRI'S PROLOGUE	X	X	X

Table 2: Characteristics of euhemeristic narratives

An essential consequence of this is that contrary to biblical and patristic euhemerism, Snorri's euhemerism is not only an etiological myth for the origin of pagan religions, but it is also modelled as a conversion narrative. As with the story of Thorkillus in the *Gesta Danorum*, Snorri's prologue recounts how pagan people could access spiritual elevation without the help of revelation. The humanity of Snorri's prologue to the *Edda* finds itself in a liminal position, between idolatry and monotheism. As Torfi Tulinius has discussed in length, these considerations regarding the religious status of pagans also play an essential role in *Egils saga*, which is often attributed to Snorri.<sup>152</sup> Torfi argues that Egill was deliberately designed as an ambiguous figure between paganism and christianism. The first indication and most concrete evidence of Egill's ambivalent status is his *prima signatio*. This rite, which was administered before baptism, did not equate to a proper conversion. The pagan who received the *signatio* had no obligation to conform to every rule of the Christian religion but had to relinquish pagan sacrifices. This rite made it possible for pagans to frequent and interact with Christians. As Torfi showed, this *prima signatio* is only one sign of Egill's status which is also confirmed

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<sup>152</sup> On the question of Snorri's authorship see 1.3.3.

throughout his life and even after his death, when the Viking poet was first buried in a mound and then later under the altar of a Church.<sup>153</sup>

Similarly, in *Heimskringla*, Snorri portrayed Haraldr hárfagri as neither completely pagan nor as Christian. Unlike Egill, Haraldr had no contact with Christian people and must have become a monotheist on his own. However, in *Egils saga*, there is no clear sign that Egill's spiritual evolution was chiefly caused by his contact with Christian people. Beside his *prima signatio*, no Christians attempted to convert Egill. As Torfi argued, one of the crucial steps in Egill's conversion was finding himself threatened by royal power in York. Danger and misfortune forced Egill to humble himself, and I agree with Torfi when he compares Egill's spiritual journey to that of Saint Paul.<sup>154</sup> In *Heimskringla*, Haraldr's spiritual journey is initially unrelated to his fortune or misfortune, as the king is merely described as possessing a natural knowledge of his creator. However, the king later undergoes a spiritual transformation caused by unfortunate events. In chapter twenty-five of *Haralds saga hárfagra*, Haraldr's wife, the sorceress Snæfríðr, dies, and her decaying body reveals that it was inhabited by a multitude of vermin, a common expression of demonic presence in Medieval literature. As the author notes: "Seig hon svá í ǫsku, en konungrinn steig til vizku ok hugði af heimsku, stýrði síða ríki sínu ok styrkðisk, gladdisk hann af þegnum sínum ok þegnar af honum, en ríkit af hváru tveggja." (Thus she descended to ashes, and the king ascended to wisdom and turned his mind from folly.)<sup>155</sup> Thus furthering Haraldr's advance toward truth.

This second step toward religious wisdom is not yet sufficient for making Haraldr a Christian. Snorri describes conversion as a progressive process with several stages, which allows for a diversity of pagan characters. In these narratives, the conversions to Christianity typically adhere to the following pattern: idolatry gives rise to monotheism or at least a religiosity without sacrifices, which itself gives rise to the Christian faith. On the contrary, the traditional Christian euhemeristic narratives follow the opposite pattern, as they tell the story of humanity's downfall from an ideal, forgotten, primitive religion to the worship of nature, and finally to idolatry proper. These two may tell different stories, but their respective patterns follow a linear model composed of the same stages and in which individuals only progress in one direction: either

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<sup>153</sup> Torfi Tulinius, *The Enigma of Egill. The Saga, the Viking Poet, and Snorri Sturluson*, trans. Victoria Cribb, *Islandica 57* (Ithaca: Cornell University Library, 2014), 100-103.

<sup>154</sup> Torfi Tulinius, *The Enigma of Egill. The Saga, the Viking Poet, and Snorri Sturluson*, 127-128.

<sup>155</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 127. It must be noted that this passage is an almost verbatim quotation from *Ágrip af Noregskonunga sögum* (c. 1190) chapter four: Bjarni Einarsson, ed., *Ágrip af Noregskonunga sögum. Fagrskinna - Noregs konunga tal*, Íslenzk fornrit 29 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1985), 6.

from mistake to truth or from truth to mistake. Snorri's euhemerism, on the other hand, is not linear but describes an initial downfall when humanity forgets God and deifies nature. This is followed by punctual progress with the rediscovery of God's existence and ultimately ends with another downfall with the deification of the human pseudo-gods.

In summary, a comparison between Snorri's euhemeristic narrative in the prologue and his biblical and Christian predecessors shows that Snorri's prologue stands out because of the mistakes it ascribes to the pagans as well as the positive conclusions ascribed to the reasoning of the pagans. As I will show in the following part, the difference between previous Christian euhemeristic narratives and that of Snorri may be partly explained by the intellectual context of 13<sup>th</sup> century Europe, in which the interaction between Aristotle's rediscovered philosophy and the Christian doctrine created an environment for intense theological and philosophical exchanges. Among these problems was Aristotle's demonstration of the eternity of the world.

### **4.3.3. An Empirical Approach to God**

As I have showed, in the prologue, Snorri described ancient humanity as using its senses and rational thinking to access a certain knowledge of God. In other words, ancient humanity practiced natural theology.<sup>156</sup> To support my claims, I will quote some sources which are more recent than Snorri's *Edda*, chiefly Thomas Aquinas' *Summa contra gentiles* (c. 1260). I am aware of the anachronism here, and I do not want to claim that Snorri's prologue could have been influenced by Aquinas. The writings of Aquinas, however, systematically explain ideas and concepts regarding natural theology. I do not quote Aquinas as one of Snorri's sources but as an author who discussed numerous ideas that were expressed before his time. In order to show which ideas were already the subject of scholarly discussions at the time Snorri wrote, I will refer to the condemnations of 1210. These condemnations were issued by the Parisian synod, which condemned several concepts found in the newly rediscovered Aristotelian philosophy. As Edward Grant commented, these condemnations show that Aristotle's thought was already influential at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century:

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<sup>156</sup> For extensive studies on medieval natural theology see Alexander W. Hall, *Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus, Natural Theology in the High Middle Ages*, Continuum Studies in Philosophy (London: Continuum, 2007); Russell Manning, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Edward Grant, *A History of Natural Philosophy from the Ancient World to the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

The Parisian Synod decreed, among other things, that “no lectures are to be held in Paris either publicly or privately using Aristotle’s books on natural philosophy or the commentaries, and we forbid all this under pain of excommunication.” The prohibition of 1210 is a good indication that Aristotle’s works on natural philosophy were readily available, for otherwise there would have been no need to ban public and private lectures on them. Although the University of Paris is not specifically mentioned in the decree, it is virtually certain that mention of public lectures is a reference to lectures at the university.<sup>157</sup>

Snorri clearly conceived of monotheism as a truth that can be reached through the use of reason alone. This is not only the case in the prologue to the *Edda* but also in *Heimskringla*, most notably in this passage from *Haralds saga hárfagra*:

„Þess strengi ek heit, ok því skýt ek til guðs, þess er mik skóp ok öllu ræðr, at aldri skal skera hár mitt né kemba, fyrr en ek hefi eignazk allan Nóreg með sköttum ok skyldum ok forráði, en deyja at öðrum kosti“<sup>158</sup>

(‘I make this vow and I call to witness the god who created me and governs all things, that my hair shall never be cut or combed until I have gained the whole of Norway with its taxes and dues and government or die in the attempt.’)

Here, the pagan King Haraldr is able to conceptualize the existence of the monotheistic God. We may note that Haraldr’s wording suggests that he understands God as a creator and not merely as an organizer of matter, as is the case in the prologue to the *Edda*. As Bruce Lincoln comments:

This phrasing is meant to convey a simple but profound faith: a natural religiosity that follows when innate reason reflects on the world’s wonders, as perceived by the senses, yielding and intuitive understanding of the supreme deity as creator and ruler of the cosmos, and recognition of oneself as a dependent part of his glorious creation.<sup>159</sup>

Yet, as the author continues, the power of natural theology must not be overestimated:

Even this is not yet the more perfect religiosity of faith in the salvific power of Christ, which requires revelation, scripture, the intervention of the church, and a transformation of the self through conversion. But it is a significant step toward faith, and these texts assert

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<sup>157</sup> Grant, *A History of Natural*, 143.

<sup>158</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 97.

<sup>159</sup> Lincoln, *Between History and Myth*, 5.

that a rudimentary religious truth was already present in Harald before he started the process of state formation.<sup>160</sup>

Indeed, Harald's honest quest for the truth never leads him to faith in Christ, his resurrection, or the trinity. This is not knowledge one can uncover through reason alone. This perception of reason as an important, yet insufficient means of accessing truth is an essential aspect of the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas as he expressed it in the *Summa contra gentiles*. Let us look at this passage for instance:

But there are some truths which the natural reason also is able to reach. Such are that God exists, that He is one, and the like. In fact, such truths about God have been proved demonstratively by the philosophers, guided by the light of the natural reason. (*Summa contra gentile* – SCG I.3.2)<sup>161</sup>

Aquinas nonetheless relativized the benefits of natural theology as being too slow and only accessible to a few. See the following passage of the *Summa contra gentiles*:

If the only way open to us for the knowledge of God were solely that of the reason, the human race would remain in the blackest shadows of ignorance. For then the knowledge of God, which especially renders men perfect and good, would come to be possessed only by a few, and these few would require a great deal of time in order to reach it. (SCG I.4.4.)<sup>162</sup>

Here, the theologian does not criticize reason because it could lead to incorrect conclusions, but chiefly because it is a harder, slower, and less accessible path to knowledge that would confine the knowledge of truth to an intellectual elite if it were the only way toward truth.<sup>163</sup> Thomas Aquinas considered some religious truths, such as the Trinity for instance, are not accessible to reason.<sup>164</sup> But while reason is less efficient than revelation to reach truth, in SCG.1.7, Thomas Aquinas explicitly refutes the idea that faith and reason could contradict each other.<sup>165</sup> Unlike Thomas Aquinas, Snorri does not only describe natural theology as a slower method for attaining certain religious truths, but also as a way that may lead humans to plain theological mistakes, such as the eternity of the world.

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<sup>160</sup> Lincoln, *Between History and Myth*, 6.

<sup>161</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles. Book One: God*, trans. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Doubleday, 1955), 63.

<sup>162</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles. Book One: God*, 67-68.

<sup>163</sup> For a discussion of these two quotations see Hall, *Thomas Aquinas and*, 1-27.

<sup>164</sup> Hall, *Thomas Aquinas and*, 36.

<sup>165</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles. Book One: God*, 74-75.



This attitude toward the relationship between faith and reason may be reminiscent of the so-called “doctrine of the double truth.” According to this doctrine, philosophy and theology could reach contradictory conclusions that would both be equally true. The fact that such a philosophical position was actually maintained by medieval philosophers has been the object of many discussions in modern scholarship. Siger of Brabant (died in 1284) has been one of the main thinkers associated with the doctrine of the double truth in modern historiography. Siger taught Aristotelian philosophy at the University of Paris during the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and asserted that he was explaining the doctrine of Aristotle, but that he did not agree with all of it. The Belgian theologian and historian of philosophy Pierre Mandonnet judged that this position may have been a façade and that Siger believed that both Aristotelian philosophy and Christian revelation were equally true.<sup>166</sup> In 1921, Étienne Gilson contradicted this idea and affirmed that nothing in the work of Siger indicated that he may have been a proponent of the double truth theory.<sup>167</sup>

In 1954, the Hungarian librarian Geza Sajó discovered the treatise of Boethius of Dacia *De aeternitate mundi* (On the eternity of the world), which, for the most part, consists of a rational demonstration of the eternity of the world by means of Aristotelian logic. Sajó saw in this treatise a proof that the doctrine of the double truth had indeed existed, and he argued that Boethius of Dacia maintained that the contradictory truths of philosophy and theology were equally true.<sup>168</sup> This position was later refuted by medieval scholars such as Fernand van Steenberghen. According to Steenberghen the treatise did not state that the positions of natural philosophy and of theology with regard to the eternity of the world were equally true, but, on the contrary, that there was no real contradiction between philosophy and theology.<sup>169</sup> As Steenberghen demonstrated, Boethius of Dacia did not try to show that two contradictory truths could coexist: he did precisely the inverse and argued that natural philosophy was not a suitable tool for studying non-natural phenomena such as creation, which results from divine intervention. Thus, within the particular context of natural philosophy, the world must be described as eternal, but God, however, transcends the natural order and can act against it.

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<sup>166</sup> Pierre Mandonnet, *Siger de Brabant et l'averôisme Latin au XIIIe siècle* (Louvain: Institut supérieur de philosophie de l'université, 1911), 163.

<sup>167</sup> Étienne Gilson, *Études de philosophie médiévale*, Publications de la faculté des lettres de l'Université de Strasbourg 3 (Strasbourg: Commission des publications de la faculté des lettres, 1921), 59.

<sup>168</sup> For the edition of this text see Géza Sajó, ed., *Un traité récemment découvert de Boèce de Dacie : De mundi Aeternitate. Texte inédit avec une introduction critique* (Akadémiai kiado Budapest, 1954). For his argument according to which this work is a testimony of the doctrine of the double truth's existence see pages 35 to 37.

<sup>169</sup> See Fernand Van Steenberghen, “Une légende tenace : La théorie de la double vérité,” in *Introduction à l'étude de La Philosophie Médiévale* (Louvain and Paris: Publications universitaires, 1974), 555-570.

Although his act of creation cannot be explained through natural science, it is nonetheless real, as taught by revelation.<sup>170</sup> As for today, virtually all medievalists think that neither Siger of Brabant, nor Boethius of Dacia taught the doctrine of double truth. The common opinion among historians of philosophy is summarized here by Luca Bianchi:

Aussi bien pour les ‘aristotéliens radicaux’ que pour Thomas [d’Aquin], il y a donc des arguments aboutissant à une conclusion fautive, en tant que contraire à la foi chrétienne, qui sont démonstratifs *secundum quid*. Déduisant rigoureusement les conséquences des prémisses dont ils procèdent, ces arguments sont logiquement corrects et donc *non* susceptibles d’être déclarés erronés ou sophistiques. Mais comme leurs prémisses ne sont que l’expression de l’expérience et de la raison humaine, ils ont une portée limitée : parfaitement légitimes dans leur propre domaine (c’est-à-dire à l’intérieur d’une ‘science’ philosophique particulière qui utilise ces prémisses comme des principes), ils ne sont pourtant valables que dans celui-ci.<sup>171</sup>

(As well as for “radical Aristotelians” as for Thomas [Aquinas], there are arguments which lead to a wrong conclusion, as they are contrary to the Christian faith, which are demonstrative *secundum quid*. Deducing rigorously the consequences of the premises from which they proceed, these arguments are logically correct and thus *not* susceptible to be declared erroneous or sophistic. But as their premises are merely the expression of human reason, they have a limited scope: perfectly legitimate in their own field (that is to say within a given philosophical ‘science’ which uses these premises as principles), and they are nonetheless valid only within this context.)<sup>172</sup>

The myth of the doctrine of the double truth, however, has medieval origins. In 1277, Étienne Tempier, the bishop of Paris, condemned 219 propositions which, he claimed, were maintained, and taught by natural philosophers at the University of Paris. Among them, the 90<sup>th</sup> article condemned the idea that the two conceptions of the creation of the world and its eternity could be considered equally true by philosophers.<sup>173</sup> The so-called doctrine of the double truth is hence the result of the misunderstanding of the thought of several medieval philosophers, first by commenters who thought, or feigned to think, that the philosophers described two mutually

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<sup>170</sup> For a summary on this discussion see Luca Bianchi, “From Pope Urban VIII to Bishop Étienne Tempier: The Strange History of the ‘Doctrine of Double Truth,’” *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 64, no. 1 (2017): 19.

<sup>171</sup> Luca Bianchi, *Pour une histoire de la “double vérité,”* Conférences Pierre Abélard 4 (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 2008), 93.

<sup>172</sup> My translation.

<sup>173</sup> David Piché, ed., *La condamnation parisienne de 1277* (Paris: Vrin, 1999), 106-107.

exclusive realities and argued that both of them were valid, when in fact the philosophers precisely pointed out the incompatibility between the two systems and noted that only one was true in absolutes. To make a modern comparison, we may think of Erwin Schrödinger's famous thought experiment about a cat held in a box containing a device which would kill the cat if it detected a quantum system in a certain state but would spare its life if it did not.<sup>174</sup> According to the principle of quantum superposition, defended by the school of Copenhagen interpretation, one of the most commonly taught interpretation of quantum mechanics, a quantum system could exist in several different states until observed: the cat would be both dead and alive at the same time as long as its state is not observed. Schrödinger's thought experiment was in fact a *reduction ad absurdum*: his aim was not to prove that a cat can be both alive and dead, but that the Copenhagen interpretation may be incorrect as it allowed the coexistence of two mutually exclusive realities. His thought experiment is nonetheless regularly misunderstood and described as showing that a cat may be both dead and alive according to the rules of quantum physics.<sup>175</sup> If Étienne Tempier did indeed, base his ninetieth article on Boethius' work,<sup>176</sup> then he must have also misunderstood, or deliberately misrepresented, a thought experiment as if it were a scientific demonstration.

At first glance, Snorri's account, in the prologue, appear to be based on the doctrine of double truth, or on the assumption that human reason is flawed. Yet, as Ursula and Peter Dronke noted,<sup>177</sup> the reason for mankind's failure to reach truth is not because its reason was flawed, as it was actually a gift from God as we saw in the previous section. The reason for the failure was that mankind was not given spiritual understanding. As such, Snorri's prologue shows a conception of the relationship between reason and revelation similar to the real point of the philosophers whose works were mistakenly taken as a defense of the doctrine of the double truth. For Snorri, as for them, reason is not flawed, but it is simply not the proper tool to study God and creation. This view has a startling consequence: it means that in the absence of

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<sup>174</sup> For Schrödinger's own explanation of the thought experiment see Erwin Schrödinger, "The Present Situation in Quantum Mechanics: A Translation of Schrödinger's 'Cat Paradox' Paper," trans. John D. Trimmer, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 124, no. 5 (1980): 328.

<sup>175</sup> On the misinterpretations of Schrödinger's thought experiment, see Egil Asprem, "How Schrödinger's Cat Became a Zombie. On the Epidemiology of Science-Based Representations in Popular and Religious Contexts," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 28 (2016): 113-140.

<sup>176</sup> Scholars such as Bianchi maintain that Tempier did target Boethius of Dacia, while others such as Malcolm de Mowbray argue that Tempier must have been in fact referring to other works. See Bianchi, "From Pope Urban VIII," 19; Malcolm De Mowbray, "The *de aeternitate mundi* of Boethius of Dacia and the Paris Condemnation of 1277," *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales* 73, no. 2 (2006): 253.

<sup>177</sup> Dronke and Dronke, "The Prologue of the Prose *Edda*: Explorations of a Latin Background," 156.

revelation, the pagans had no choice but to believe that the world was eternal. As Bianchi puts it:

Cela revient à dire (et en parlant d’Aristote l’on arrive à le suggérer) qu’un homme qui n’a pas accès à la révélation, un philosophe non chrétien qui élabore ses théories *sequens puram rationem naturalem* ne pourrait qu’accepter ces argumentations.<sup>178</sup>

(This means – and concerning Aristotle one may suggest it – that a man who has no access to revelation, a non-Christian philosopher who develops his theories *sequens puram rationem naturalem* could only agree with these argumentations.)<sup>179</sup>

In other words, pagans were right to be wrong, or in philosophical terms, they were entitled to a justified false belief.<sup>180</sup> As such, we may see how Snorri’s attitude toward paganism is different from those expressed in the Book of Wisdom, the *Institutiones divinae*, or Ælfric’s sermon. In these earlier Christian euhemeristic narratives, paganism was characterized as the absence of reason. For these authors, monotheism was evidence, and the pagans were not looking for truth in good faith, or they would not have been pagans. On the contrary, according to Snorri’s prologue, paganism is precisely the result of rational thinking. Not only did the pagans look for truth in good faith, but they hardly could have done better than what they did.

#### 4.3.4. The Prologue and the Eternity of the World

We have now established that according to Snorri’s prologue, some of the conceptions of the pagans were not due to a lack of rational thinking, but on the contrary were a necessary conclusion of rational thinking. I will now examine the nature of these conceptions and recontextualize them within medieval thought. When the narrator of the prologue states: “En alla hluti skilðu þeir jarðligri skilningu þvíat þeim var eigi gefin andlig spekðin. Svá skilðu at allir hlutir væri smíðaðir af nokkuru efni.”<sup>181</sup> (But they understood everything with earthly understanding, for they were not granted spiritual wisdom. Thus, they reasoned that everything was created out of some material.)<sup>182</sup> His choice of words suggests that, like Siger of Brabant and Boethius of Dacia, that he is also referring to the problem of the eternity of the world. The

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<sup>178</sup> Bianchi, *Pour Une Histoire de La “Double Vérité,”* 112-113.

<sup>179</sup> My translation.

<sup>180</sup> On the notion of justified false belief see Douglas Odegard, “Can a Justified Belief Be False?,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 3 (1976): 561-568; Michael Perrick, “Justification and False Belief: Gettier’s First Point,” *Open Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 4 (2016): 446-454.

<sup>181</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 3.

<sup>182</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 2.

first sentence states that human beings possessed earthly understanding, but lacked spiritual wisdom, and the second sentence explains the consequence of such an impairment: the pagans thought that everything was “shaped out of some material,” which implies that matter existed before God fashioned it to create the world. Several scholars discussed the nuances in the meaning of the Old Norse words related to creation, particularly *skapa* (shape) and *smíða* (create, build, forge, make). Ursula and Peter Dronke rejected Anne Holtsmark’s interpretation, according to which “smíðaðir af nokkuru efni” characterized an incorrect belief incompatible with the creation *ex nihilo*.<sup>183</sup> Dronke’s argument relied on the affirmation that God had given earthly understanding to humans. But this argument cannot stand: the text clearly puts the belief that “everything was made out of some material,” in relation to the affirmation that humans “lacked spiritual wisdom” and thus shows that this belief is indeed perceived as an incorrect one. This, however, does not mean that *smíða* is to always be understood as referring to creation out of preexisting matter, only that it is the case here. Recently, Jan Alexander Van Nahl showed that both words may be applied to creation *ex nihilo*, as well as to creation from preexisting material.<sup>184</sup> Grzegorz Bartusik convincingly argued that the Old Norse terminology for godly creation testified to ancient conceptions of God, or gods, acting as artisans rather than creators who did it *ex nihilo*. In a Christian context, however, these vocables that initially referred to worldly creators came to be applied to creation *ex nihilo*.<sup>185</sup> We may note that in the specific case of the *Edda* prologue, Snorri uses the verb *skapa* to refer to God’s creation of the world *ex nihilo*, and *smíða* for the mankind’s false belief regarding the creation of the world out of preexisting matter.

Regardless of the exact meaning of the verb *smíða*, Snorri’s sentence is rather clear: according to their erroneous conception, the people of ancient times thought that the world was shaped from a preexisting, eternal material. The word *svá*, which connects the two sentences, makes it clear that there is a causality between the use of reason without revelation and the belief in the eternity of the world. The false belief in the eternity of the world is not the consequence of faulty reasoning, but of lacking revelation. Despite their similarities with the prologue to the *Edda*, the works of Boethius of Dacia and Siger of Brabant are too recent to have possibly

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<sup>183</sup> Anne Holtsmark, *Studier i Snorres mytologi* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1964), 11; Dronke and Dronke, “The Prologue of the Prose Edda,” 171.

<sup>184</sup> Van Nahl, *Snorri Sturlusons Mythologie*, 119-123.

<sup>185</sup> Grzegorz Bartusik, “Himna Smidr: The Ancient Hebrew Conceptual Metaphor ‘God Is the Maker of Heaven’ in the Old Icelandic Language and Literature as a Marker of Christianization in Iceland,” *Scandia. Journal of Medieval Norse Studies* 3 (2020): 64-101.

influenced Snorri. There are indications, however, of the infiltration of similar ideas in Western medieval philosophy as early as the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The vectors for this circulation of knowledge were translators, such as James of Venice, who translated the *Physics* directly from the Greek during the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>186</sup> Another Aristotelian work, *De generatione et corruptione* has also been known in Europe since the 12<sup>th</sup> century. This work has been extensively quoted by members of the Salernitan school during the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Most notably, passages from this text are found in the commentary to the *Ysagoge de Arte*.<sup>187</sup> In this rather short work, Aristotle discusses the eternity of movement, the first unmoved mover, and the eternity of the world. Danielle Jacquart comments: “The commentaries attributed to Bartholomew and to Petrus Musandinus provide indubitable evidence that Latin versions of an Aristotelian corpus were consulted.”<sup>188</sup>

This early stage of the rediscovery of Aristotle’s work influenced two authors who wrote early enough for their thought to possibly have had an impact on Snorri: Amalric of Bena (died around 1205) and David of Dinant (died around 1210). David, influenced by Amalric, espoused a pantheistic philosophy which was nominally condemned during the 1210 Paris Synod.<sup>189</sup> Because of this prohibition, Dinant’s work remains relatively little known, but some of his ideas are preserved in the work of his detractors. In SCG 1.17, Thomas Aquinas, stated that David of Dinant maintained that God was identical to primal matter.<sup>190</sup> Similarly, during the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Nicolas of Cusa accused Dinant of having stated that “world is the visible God.”<sup>191</sup>

And in the *Tractatus naturalis*:

It is clear, therefore, that there is only one substance, not only of all bodies but also of all souls, and this substance is nothing other than God himself. And the substance from which all bodies come is called ‘matter’ (*hylê*), while the substance from which all souls come is called ‘reason’ or ‘mind’ (*racio sive mens*). It is therefore manifest that God is the reason of all souls, and the matter of all bodies.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Danielle Jacquart, “Aristotelian Thought in Salerno,” in *A History of Twelfth-Century Western Philosophy*, ed. Peter Dronke, trans. Jean Stewart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 407-428.

<sup>187</sup> Jacquart, “Aristotelian Thought,” 411-428.

<sup>188</sup> Jacquart, “Aristotelian Thought,” 426.

<sup>189</sup> Enzo Maccagnolo, “David of Dinant and the Beginnings of Aristotelianism in Paris,” in *A History of Twelfth-Century Western Philosophy*, ed. Peter Dronke, trans. Jonathan Hunt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 429-442; Steven Wynne, “An Intellectual Revolution: Thirteenth Century Translations of Aristotle and Counteraction of the Catholic Church,” *Oakland Journal* 26 (2016): 42-53.

<sup>190</sup> Maccagnolo, “David of Dinant and,” 436.

<sup>191</sup> Maccagnolo, “David of Dinant and,” 436.

<sup>192</sup> Maccagnolo, “David of Dinant and,” 440.

According to this text, David of Dinant's main problematic idea was pantheism rather than the eternity of the world, although the two issues may be connected, for if God were matter, then matter would be eternal. This error is also that of the people of ancient times, as described in the prologue to the *Edda* when they draw an analogy between Earth and a living being. This reasoning, which establishes an analogy between God and a living being, is found in David of Dinant's *De Affectu* in which he compared the world to the human body:

Since, therefore, man is the image of the universe, the sun corresponds to the heart; the spirit, which is in the heart and the arteries, to the fire and air; water to the blood, and earth to the solid limbs.<sup>193</sup>

This kind of analogical comparison between the world and the parts of the human body is also found in some Eddic poems, in which the world is said to be made of the corpse of the giant Ymir.<sup>194</sup> This myth may have encouraged Snorri to portray the pagans as having drawn an analogy between earth and a living being, but this can hardly have been his only source of inspiration. Indeed, the myth of Ymir precisely describes the earth as being made out of a dead body, while Snorri's insist on the analogy between earth and a living being, thus making it more akin to the philosophical views of David of Dinant. We may wonder why Snorri would ascribe the condemned views of a natural philosopher to ancient humanity. The Paris condemnation of 1210 shows that pantheism, among the other condemned articles, was perceived as being identical with Aristotelian philosophy. Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas demonstrated how David of Dinant's pantheism was not an accurate representation of Aristotelian philosophy.<sup>195</sup> As Emanuele Costa argued, David of Dinant's position was not exactly pantheism, but could be better defined as "panentheism," which is the notion that the world is contained in God. However, this is on the ground of pantheism that the writings of David of Dinant were condemned in 1210.<sup>196</sup> In 1220, neither Albert the Great nor Thomas Aquinas had demonstrated that the positions of David of Dinant were not those of Aristotle. Thus, for Snorri, pantheism must have been understood as a feature of Aristotelian philosophy and as such, a testimony of pre-Christian thought, meaning a use of reason without revelation.

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<sup>193</sup> Maccagnolo, "David of Dinant and," 439.

<sup>194</sup> For a discussion on these stanzas see section 6.5.

<sup>195</sup> Tristan Dagon, "David de Dinant. Sur le fragment <Hyle, Mens, Deus> des *Quaternuli*," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 40, no. 4 (2003): 419-422.

<sup>196</sup> Emanuele Costa, "David of Dinant and Negative Panentheism," *History of Philosophy & Logical Analysis* 25, no. 2 (October 24, 2022): 352-374.

### 4.3.5. Unmoved Mover: the God in Heaven

I will now comment on the other belief that Snorri ascribed to the pagans, the idea that a god governs the world but did not create it. Gunnar Harðarson comments that the identification of the all-powerful entity discovered by ancient mankind as the monotheistic creator God is problematic. As he states:

The identification of the governor of the stars with the Creator is in fact not present in the Prologue; it exists only in the mind of the (medieval Christian) reader, who assumes it without its being stated.<sup>197</sup>

It is true that the identification of the powerful entity of the prologue with the monotheistic Christian God is never explicit, but it is certainly implied intentionally. On the other hand, the narrator explicitly informs us that ancient mankind did not consider God a creator in the Christian sense of this notion. Put simply, the narrator wants the reader to understand that humanity reached the knowledge of God through reason, but he also wants to make clear that their conception of what God is was inexact.<sup>198</sup> However, the inaccuracy of their conception of God does not mean that they did not perceive God's existence. If a man saw a red cat at night and claims to have seen a grey cat, this does not negate him having seen a cat – he is merely mistaken about one of its attributes.

Snorri's remarks about the uneven course of the heavenly bodies may be a reference to the irregular movement of the planets, whose etymology means precisely “wandering bodies.” The problem of the irregular movement of the planets is easily solved in a heliocentric model in which the apparent backward movement of the planets results from the conjugation of the planets' motion with our own movement around the sun. To the vast majority of ancient and medieval people however, the central position of the earth in the cosmos was an undisputed fact.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Gunnar Harðarson, “The Argument from Design,” 76-77.

<sup>198</sup> As Grant notes, “God” and “prime mover” are synonyms in the text regarding cosmological discussions. Edward Grant, *Planets, Stars, and Orbs. The Medieval Cosmos, 1200-1687* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 517.

<sup>199</sup> Before Copernicus and Galileo, Aristarchus of Samos (died c. 230 BCE.) – a contemporary of Euhemerus – proposed a heliocentric model. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe (1546-1601) proposed an alternative model, which combined both Copernican and Ptolemaic systems and maintained the central position of the Earth in the Universe. At the same time, his compatriot Jon Jakobsen Venusin (1563-1608) was the proponent of a truly geocentric model. However, as Peter Andersen explains, Venusin's arguments were not based on empirical observations but on theological and esthetic considerations. See Peter Andersen, “Da Danmark begravede Tycho Brahe,” *Kvant* 28 (2017): 31.



As such, the seemingly unnatural motion of the planets was much more difficult to explain. During the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, there were two main schools of interpretation of the movements of heavenly bodies. One of them, which originated from the Hellenistic astronomer Ptolemy, is based on the idea of eccentric orbits and epicycle: planets do not only move around the earth but also describe another circle in their course. Another solution, based on Aristotle, held that planets move within spheres whose movement is itself altered by the movement of other homocentric spheres, thus producing an effect of irregular motion.<sup>200</sup> Aristotle's system was inefficient in simply explaining the apparent backward movement of the planet as this system did not accept that a planet could move contrary to its own motion.<sup>201</sup> To counter this problem, Aristotle added spheres to its system to explain the irregular movement of certain planets. These new spheres, however, should have impacted the movement of spheres below them, and so Aristotle had to implement counteracting spheres to neutralize the movement of the upper spheres.<sup>202</sup> Within the specific field of Aristotelian astronomy the cause for the movement of the heavenly bodies cannot be natural, as no object can naturally move in a circular motion if it is not itself moved by another mover that is moving in a circular motion. As this second mover itself would need to be moved in order to move, this would imply the existence of an infinite number of movers, which was not acceptable. Instead, the solution to this problem lies in the existence of a prime unmoved mover that does not possess a body and therefore cannot be moved and needs to move to cause movement. This conception was endorsed by Thomas Aquinas, and it is the first of his famous five ways to prove the existence of God.<sup>203</sup>

To Aquinas and other theologians, the existence of circular movement cannot have a natural origin, and thus must be moved by a soul or impetus, sometimes understood to be angels.<sup>204</sup> In the same line, every motion which cannot have a natural origin is perceived as a sign of the influence of an intellectual substance. As Aquinas put it in SCG.3.23.7, the irregular motion of planets shows that the movement of the heaven has a supernatural origin:

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<sup>200</sup> Grant, *Planets, Stars, and Orbs*, 271-279.

<sup>201</sup> Grant, *Planets, Stars, and Orbs*, 564.

<sup>202</sup> Edward Grant, "Celestial Motions in the Late Middle Ages," *Early Science and Medicine* 2, no. 2 (1997): 130-131.

<sup>203</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Volume 2, Existence and Nature of God: 1a. 2-11*, trans. Timothy McDermott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 12-15.

<sup>204</sup> James A. Weisheipl, "The Celestial Movers in Medieval Physics," *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 24, no. 2-3-4 (1961), 304-307.

Again, for every motion that is from a nature, as an active principle, if its approach to something be natural, then its removal from that objective must be unnatural and against nature. Thus, a heavy thing naturally moves downward, but for it to move in the opposite direction is against nature. Therefore, if the motion of the heavens were natural, since it tends westward naturally, it would return to the east in the manner of a thing that recedes from the west by a motion against nature. Now, this is impossible. In celestial motion there is nothing violent and against nature. So, it is impossible for the active principle of celestial motion to be a nature. Therefore, its active principle is some apprehensive power, and through understanding, as is clear from what was said earlier. So, a celestial body is moved by an intellectual substance.<sup>205</sup>

This reasoning is similar to that of the ancient humanity in Snorri's prologue of the *Edda* who also hypothesized that the existence of an almighty god could be inferred from the abnormalities in the heavenly movements. This kind of reasoning is not found in any of the sources for euhemeristic narratives previously discussed. This shows that Snorri's euhemeristic narrative in the prologue is not a mere reproduction of previous motifs, but it makes use of the modern intellectual development of his time, which were chiefly caused by the rediscovery of the Aristotelian corpus.

Snorri's prologue is the sole example of a Christian euhemeristic narrative that uses the first branch not only to describe the advent of nature worship but also the discovery of God's existence. In this perspective, Snorri's prologue is also unique in its treatment of reason and wisdom. Classical euhemeristic narratives saw paganism as originating from a lack of reason, or from the gullible nature of the pagans. As such, it represented pagans as people of bad faith who did not even attempt to look for the truth. On the contrary, Snorri distinguished between earthly and heavenly wisdom. This distinction allowed the author to present mankind as having used its earthly wisdom in a flawless way, yet having still reached incorrect conclusions because they did not possess heavenly wisdom. It is essential to note that Snorri did not believe in the so-called "doctrine of the double truth." The earthly understanding did not fail because it contradicted heavenly understanding, but because it is limited. For Snorri, as was also the case for Thomas Aquinas, human reason can only investigate natural phenomena, and creation is not one of them.

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<sup>205</sup> Thomas of Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles. Book Three: Providence*, trans. Vernon J. Bourke, (New York: Image Books, 1956), 1:91.

## 5. Saxo's and Snorri's Euhemerism

### 5.1. Greek Theory, Norse Gods

I have identified the instance of euhemerism in the works of Saxo and Snorri and discussed their significance within their respective works. I will now compare the euhemerism of these authors. This comparison will be structured around three main axes: the representation of Odin, their common association of the pseudo-gods with the east, and their representation of “minor deities” of the Old Norse pantheon.

First, I will comment on one of the most evident and essential commonalities between Saxo's and Snorri's euhemerism: their common use of the Old Norse gods. As we saw in the second chapter, previous ancient and medieval euhemeristic narratives were about Greco-Roman and biblical pagan gods. European Christian authors did not systematically distinguish between different kinds of paganism, and the category of *pagani* could cover a variety of practices.<sup>1</sup> James Palmer puts it into perspective with regard to the Carolingian period, and puts it this way: “Paganisms’ were thus not so much coherent rival religions to the Franks, as the antithesis of Christian practice itself.”<sup>2</sup> Additionally, he adds that “To define paganism in the Carolingian world was to define otherness, and by extension to promote ideal forms of Christendom.”<sup>3</sup> Such a broad and indiscriminating understanding of paganism may also be found in Old Norse sources. This is chiefly the case in Old Norse adaptations of European life of saints or romances. In these works, as in *Alexanders saga*, the names of Norse gods are usually used as translations for the names of Greco-Roman deities.<sup>4</sup> One of the first instances of euhemerism in Old Norse literature is the *Old Norse Elucidarius* in which paganism is discussed as a broad category of false human belief where the Old Norse gods are identified with their Greco-Roman counterparts.

Yet, Christian authors of the medieval North extensively used native Nordic mythology in their literary works. Not only did these gods have different names in their native tongues, but they

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<sup>1</sup> Gautier, *Beowulf au paradis*, 27.

<sup>2</sup> James Palmer, “Defining Paganism in the Carolingian World,” *Early Medieval Europe* 15, no. 4 (2007): 404.

<sup>3</sup> Palmer, “Defining Paganism,” 425.

<sup>4</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, “‘Er Saturnús er kallaðr en vér köllum Frey’ The Roman Spring of the Old Norse Gods,” in *Between Paganism and Christianity in the North*, ed. Leszek P. Slupecki and Jakub Morawiec (Rzeszow: Rzeszow University Press, 2009), 159-164.

were also the characters of narratives unknown in Greco-Roman or biblical literature. They were not organized according to the same hierarchy, as Þórr, gods of thunder is only subordinate to Óðinn in the Old Norse sources and is not the head of the pantheon as is the case for Jupiter, the Greco-Roman thunder god. These differences led Saxo to expressly deny that the Scandinavian gods and the Greco Roman ones were identical:

Quo euenit, ut legitima feriarum series apud nos eorundem nominibus censeatur, cum ipsis Latinorum ueteres siue a deorum suorum uocabulis siue a septeno planetarum numero nuncupationem singulatim adaptasse noscantur. Eos tamen, qui a nostris colebantur, non esse quos Romanorum uetustissimi Iouem Mercuriumque dixere, uel quibus Grecia Latiumque plenum superstitionis obsequium exsoluerunt, ex ipsa liquido feriarum appellatione colligitur. Ea enim, que apud nostros Thor uel Othini dies dicitur, apud illos Iouis uel Mercurii feria nuncupatur. Si ergo Thor Iouem, Othinum Mercurium iuxta designate interpretationis distinctionem accepimus manente nostrorum assertionem Iouem Mercurii filium extitisse conuincitur, apud quos Thor Othino genitus uulgari sententia perhibetur. Cum ergo Latini contrario opinionis tenore Mercurium Ioue editum asseuerent, restat, ut constante eorum affirmatione Thor alium quam Iouem, Othinum quoque Mercurio sentiamus extitisse diuersum.

(An outcome of this is that the days of the week, in their appointed series, we think of under the names of these ‘gods’, since the ancient Romans are known to have given them separate titles from the names of their deities or from the seven planets. One gathers plainly from this very nomenclature of days that the persons who were honoured by our people were not the same as those the earliest Romans called Jupiter and Mercury, or those whom Greece and Rome accorded all the homage of superstition. What we call Thor’s or Odin’s day is termed by them Jove’s or Mercury’s day. If we accept that Thor is Jupiter and Odin Mercury, following the change of the days’ designations, then it is clear proof that Jupiter was the son of Mercury, provided we abide by the assertions of our countrymen, whose common belief is that Thor was the child of Odin. As the Romans hold to the opposite opinion and maintain that Mercury was born of Jupiter, it follows that if their claim is undisputed, we must realize that Thor and Jupiter, Odin and Mercury are different personages.)<sup>5</sup>

In other words, these gods were not merely interchangeable characters strictly equivalent to the Greco-Roman gods. With regard to this issue Ármann Jakobsson remarks:

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<sup>5</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, VI.5.4.

“the equation between individual Graeco-Roman gods and individual Norse gods is far from clear. Saturn might be Freyr in one narrative but not in the others. Óðinn might be Mercury in one part of Hauksbók but in another, he is clearly Jupiter or Saturn.”<sup>6</sup>

One ought to ask, then, whether euhemerism can be similarly applied to the Norse gods as it has been applied to the Greek and Roman ones. As Roubekas remarked, we cannot study euhemerism without asking the question: “whose euhemerism?”<sup>7</sup> I believe it is important to complete this question with another one: “with regard to which kind of gods?”. As such, we avoid uncritically reenacting the medieval Christian religious categories that regarded polytheist religions as nothing but different facets of a broader “pagan” category.

In that sense, we cannot *a priori* treat Old Norse and Greek gods as interchangeable figureheads. It is thus necessary to address what an Old Norse god is in order to understand how euhemerism can affect them. Winiarczyk noted that some aspects of the common portrayal of the Norse gods could facilitate a euhemeristic interpretation of Old Norse myths and wrote: “It should be added that the application of Euhemeristic interpretation was made easy by certain aspects of Germanic myths, e.g. Odin as the wandering sorcerer or the mortality of gods.”<sup>8</sup> It is indeed true that in Snorri’s *Edda*, as well as in Eddic poetry, the gods are depicted as mortal characters. Óðinn is also portrayed as a wandering wizard in *Völsunga saga* chapter three.<sup>9</sup> Yet most texts which present Óðinn as a wandering sorcerer are also euhemeristic to some degree, and it is difficult to assess whether Óðinn was indeed a wandering sorcerer in pre-Christian myths.

Here lies one of the difficulties of studying Old Norse euhemerism: modern knowledge on the pre-Christian religion is extremely limited. Thus, instead of a dichotomy between the pre-Christian and the Christian portrayal of the gods, I prefer to address the issue of non-euhemerized versus euhemerized gods. This distinction does not take into account whether a given text is older than another, or whether one is of pagan origin and another one Christian. Several passages from Snorri’s *Edda*, for instance, depict the gods from an emic, or rather a pseudo-emic, perspective, neither euhemerized nor demonized. This does not change the fact that these passages were written by a Christian author. Emic and etic portrayals of the Old Norse gods could be produced at the same time, and sometimes by the same authors, as in the case of Snorri. As such, we cannot rule out the possibility that the depictions of euhemerized gods

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<sup>6</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, “Er Saturnús er kallaðr en vér köllum Frey,” 161.

<sup>7</sup> Roubekas, *An Ancient Theory of Religion*, 181.

<sup>8</sup> Winiarczyk, *The “Sacred History,”* 154.

<sup>9</sup> R. G. Finch, ed. and trans., *Völsunga Saga*, (London: Nelson, 1965), 82.

influenced their non-euhemerized portrayal rather than the inverse. Hence, I will not study these narratives in a diachronic way, as if the non-euhemerized gods were necessarily the pagan predecessors of the Christian euhemerized pseudo-gods. The euhemerized gods are for their part, by definition found in etic discourse on the Old Norse gods, which in the medieval European context always means a Christian author. The inverse, however, is not necessarily true, as the non-euhemerized portrayal of pagan gods may be the product of a Christian imitation of a pagan point of view.

## 5.2. What is a Norse God?

One possible approach for determining what is a Norse god is to compare these gods to the Greco-Roman ones and to identify their differences. Albert Heinrichs identified three essential characteristics of the Greek gods: immortality, anthropomorphism, and power.<sup>10</sup> Power and anthropomorphism also apply to the Norse gods. The Scandinavian gods are indeed anthropomorphic and powerful, albeit probably less so than the Greco-Roman ones. The substantive *regin* which may mean “powers” is used to designate the Nordic gods several times in *Völuspá*, for instance as in the sixth stanza: “Þá gengo regin ǫll á rokstóla[.]” (then the powers all strode to their thrones of fate[.])<sup>11</sup> But the exact meaning of this word is not clear. The word *regin*, hardly found outside poetry, is supposedly of the same root than the Gothic *ragin* (to rule) a word used in the Bible of Wulfila, a translation of the Bible in Gothic language conserved in manuscripts from the sixth century.<sup>12</sup> As noted by Petra Mikolić, the cognate word *rögn* is used twice in the Eddic poem *Atlakviða*: once in the compound *landarögnir* in stanza 12, and once by itself in stanza 34. In these two occurrences, the word’s meaning is probably closer to “ruler” than it is to “power”.<sup>13</sup> As such, one may wonder whether the “regin” referenced in the *Völuspá* is closer to “rulers” rather than “powerful ones.” The question of their immortality, however, is more problematic. Heinrichs reminds his reader that the Greek gods may die in

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<sup>10</sup> Albert Heinrichs, “What Is a Greek God?” in *The Gods of Ancient Greece*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer and Andrew Erskine, Edinburgh Leventis Studies 5 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 29-39.

<sup>11</sup> Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 2, *Mythological Poems*, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Albert Morey Sturtevant, “A Study of the Old Norse Word ‘Regin,’” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 15, no. 2 (1916): 252-253.

<sup>13</sup> Petra Mikolić, “The God-Semantic Field in Old Norse Prose and Poetry” (Oslo, University of Oslo, 2013), 42. For the stanzas, see Jónas Kristjánsson and Véstein Ólason, eds., *Eddukvæði*, vol. 2, Íslensk fornrit (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014), 375, 379. Note that the second stanza where the word appears is the stanza 35 according to the numbering of this edition.

certain occasions, but that these deities only die to come back to life again.<sup>14</sup> As such, their brief stays in the realm of the death “ultimately confirm the principle of divine immortality.”<sup>15</sup>

The mythological Old Norse corpus also depicts the death and resurrection of the god Baldr. The son of Óðinn dies and comes back to life when the world is reborn after Ragnarok. Yet, Baldr’s resurrection is an exception. In fact, alongside Höðr, he is the only god to live after Ragnarok.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, his resurrection was not granted at first, as, according to Snorri, Hel refused to release him unless every inhabitant of the world wept his death, which did not happen.<sup>17</sup> His reappearance after Ragnarok may be in fact a singular aspect of the more general rebirth of the cosmos, rather than this god’s personal triumph over death.

We may presume that the Norse gods cannot die of old age, as none of them did. Yet, the Norse gods, like their Greek counterparts, do not possess eternal youth by nature. The Greek gods consume ambrosia and nectar, while the Norse ones rely on Iðunn’s magic apples to escape old age. As Jenny Strauss Clay remarked, the ambrosia of the Greek gods does not provide immortality, which the gods already possess by themselves.<sup>18</sup> Both Greek and Norse mythology displays episodes in which the gods lose their access to their magical food, making their lives miserable. According to Hesiod, the privation of nectar and ambrosia is even used as a capital punishment among the Greek gods.<sup>19</sup> Without their respective magical foods, the natural condition of the Greek and Norse gods may be far from pleasant, and their inability to die of old age can swiftly turn into a curse.

Regarding power, Heinrichs notes that there is no etiological myth to explain why gods are powerful.<sup>20</sup> In that regard, the Greek gods resemble the monotheistic Abrahamic god, who possesses power by nature, without need to explain it further. In the poetic *Edda*, the power of the gods is also taken for granted. *Völuspá*, for instance, states:

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<sup>14</sup> A notable example is that of Dionysus who, as Diodorus of Sicily reports in the III.62 of the *Bibliotheca historica*, was killed at birth by Titans and then “grew” anew from his limbs which his mother, Demeter, had recovered. Diodorus of Sicily, *Diodorus of Sicily in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 2, *Book II (Continued)* 35 IV, 58, ed. and trans. Charles Henry Oldfather, The Loeb Classical Library 303 (London: William Heinemann, 1935), 285-289.

<sup>15</sup> Heinrichs, “What Is a Greek God?,” 30.

<sup>16</sup> The stanza 60 of *Völuspá* which recounts this event does not make clear whether Höðr also resurrected or merely survived Ragnarok.

<sup>17</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 48.

<sup>18</sup> Jenny Strauss Clay, “Immortal and Ageless Forever,” *The Classical Journal* 77, no. 2 (1981): 112-117.

<sup>19</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia*, trans. Glenn W. Most, Loeb Classical Library (London: Harvard University Press, 2006), 68-67.

<sup>20</sup> Heinrichs, “What Is a Greek God?,” 35-37.

Áðr Burs Synir  
Bióðom um ypðo  
Þeir er Miðgarðr  
Mæran skópo.

(Before Burr's sons / lifted up sea-shores, / They who moulded / Glorious Miðgarðr.)<sup>21</sup>

The Æsir are the creators of Earth and Miðgarðr, and the poem does not need to explain how they acquired such power. We may presume that the Norse gods, like the Greek gods were born powerful. In contrast, there are indeed etiological myths to explain the origin of some of the gods' specific abilities. Óðinn acquired his knowledge by sacrificing his eye, Þórr acquired his gears, including Mjöllnir and Meginjörð, his belt of power, from the dwarves, and Baldr only gained invincibility because every material in the world swore not to hurt him.

To some degree this is also true of the Greek gods. The Olympians acquired some of their supernatural abilities from magical weapons and tools. The thunder of Zeus and the invisibility cap of Hades, for instance, were forged by the Cyclops.<sup>22</sup> But these creations are not only the work of the Cyclops, and many of these creations were made in collaboration with the blacksmith god Hephaistos.<sup>23</sup> The Norse Gods, on the other hand, did not produce any of their supernatural artifacts themselves, and the Old Norse pantheon does not include a blacksmith god.<sup>24</sup> As such, the Æsir possess few of their abilities by virtue of nature and they do not even craft their own magical artifacts themselves. Their power is essentially exterior to them: exterior to their beings as individuals, but also exterior to their society, as they are the product of the dwarves rather than of the Æsir themselves. The supernatural superiority of the Norse gods is, at best, imperfect, and can be taken from them, as for instance in the episode of the theft of Iðunn's apples or of Þórr's hammer, which, in the latter case, endanger their status as masters of the cosmos.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ursula Dronke, ed. and trans., *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 2, *Mythological Poems*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 7-8.

<sup>22</sup> Robin Hard, *The Routledge Handbook of Greek Mythology. Partially Based on H.J. Rose's A Handbook of Greek Mythology* (Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 24.

<sup>23</sup> Simon Hornblower, Antony Spawforth, and Esther Edinow, eds., *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1:660-661.

<sup>24</sup> Völund, whose story is retold in the Eddic poem *Völundarkviða* is what would be the closest to an Old Norse equivalent to Hephaistos, but the smith – referred to as an *álfr* (elf) in stanzas 11 and 14 – does not produce any tools or weapons for the gods, which, he never met in the poem. See Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 2, *Mythological Poems*, 246-247.

<sup>25</sup> *Þrymskviða* has often been seen as a comic poem. For discussions see Margaret Clunies Ross, "Reading *Þrymskviða*," in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology* (London: Routledge, 2002), 177-194; John



It is perhaps in their anthropomorphism that the Norse gods are most like the Greek ones. Both families of gods are described as human in appearance. Yet the anthropomorphism of the Norse gods is not always a sign of their superiority. With the exception of Hephaistos, the Greek gods are proverbially beautiful, and their human form reflects their superiority and perfection.<sup>26</sup> By contrast, physical imperfection is more common among the Norse gods: Óðinn is one-eyed, Týr one-handed, Höðr is blind, and Njörðr is old, as well as allegedly unattractive. The Norse gods' physical flaws are not only proof of their imperfection but are also testimonies of their bodily weakness. Wounding a god remains a rare event in Greek mythology,<sup>27</sup> but it is relatively common in the Old Norse corpus, where some of the most famous gods are crippled. The bodies of the Old Norse gods are not only human in their aspect, but also in their fragility and corruptibility.

The role played by mutilation suffered by the Norse and Greek gods is also different from one mythology to another. In Greek mythology, Hephaistus became crippled after falling from Olympus. His nature as a crippled man is equated with his fall, albeit temporary, from the realm of gods.<sup>28</sup> On the contrary, in the Old Norse myths, gods' bodily failure is generally equated with the enhancement of their godly powers. This motif has been studied by Georges Dumézil who called it "mutilation qualifiante" (qualifying mutilation). Dumézil drew a parallel between two pairs of mythological characters found in two Indo-European mythologies: Óðinn and Týr in the Old Norse myths, and Horatius Cocles and Mucius in the mythical Roman history as it is recounted in Livy's *Ab urbe condita* (From the founding of the city).<sup>29</sup> The parallel is especially strong between Týr and Mucius, who both sacrificed their right hands to deceive their opponent and make them believe their false promises. As Dumézil admitted himself, the parallel between Óðinn and Horatius is weaker, as unlike Óðinn, Horatius does not sacrifice his eye, but is rather

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McKinnell, "Myth as Therapy: The Usefulness of Þrymskviða," in *Essays on Eddic Poetry*, ed. Donata Kick and John D. Shafer, Toronto Old Norse and Icelandic Series (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 200-220.

<sup>26</sup> Heinrichs, "What Is a Greek God?," 29.

<sup>27</sup> One example is the episode in which the Greek hero Diomedes injures Aphrodite and even causes her to bleed. This episode is recounted by Homer in the book five verse 330 ff of the *Iliad* and is also referenced in the book XIV 477-478 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. See Homer, *Iliad*, vol. 1, *Books 1-12*, ed. and trans. A. T. Murray and William F. Wyatt, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 230-231; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, vol. 2, *Books IX-XV*, ed. and trans. Frank Justus Miller, (London: William Heinemann, 1964), 334-335.

<sup>28</sup> The myth of Hephaistos' fall from Olympus and of his limping differ from one source to another. According to Homer, Hephaistos limped from birth, while other authors considered his limping a consequence from his fall of Olympus (*Iliad* I.590.) In Homer's version, Hera threw him from Olympus to hide his deformity, thus retaining the connection, although inversed, between his limp and his fall from the realm of the gods. See Hard, *The Routledge Handbook of Greek Mythology*, 177-180.

<sup>29</sup> The episode of Horatius Cocles is found in II.x. The episode of Mucius sacrificing his own hand is found in II.XII.13-14. Livy, *Livy in Fourteen Volumes*, vol. 1, *Books I and II*, ed. and trans. B. O. Foster, (London: William Heinemann, 1988), 248-253, 258-259.

half-blind from the beginning, and his supernatural abilities are overall different from those of Óðinn.<sup>30</sup> In fact, it is not even clear from Livy's work that Horatius is one-eyed at all. Beside his nickname "Cocles" which may mean "one-eyed", Livy does not state anything about Horatius' condition as a one-eyed individual. Regardless of its pertinence within the field of comparative mythology, as I will discuss, the concept of "mutilation qualifiante" remains a relevant approach to study the non-euhemerized Old Norse gods as they are depicted by Snorri.

The Old Norse corpus contains examples of "mutilations qualifiantes" which have not been discussed by Dumézil. One of these instances is that of Sif, whose hair were shorn by Loki. As a compensation for his mischief, Loki promised that he would replace the hair with a magical wig made of gold. For that purpose, the trickster god went to see the dwarves, who thus crafted the magical wig as well as Óðinn's spear, Gungnir. Dissatisfied with these two items, Loki wagered his own head on whether the dwarves could conceive three other items of the same quality. For that purpose, the dwarves conceived the magical ring Draupnir, which produces other golden rings, Freyr's mechanical boar, and Thor's hammer. With these wonderful creations the dwarves won the bet, and reclaimed Loki's head. The trickster god nevertheless objected that only his head, and not his neck was at stake, and that he could hence not be beheaded. Instead, as a punishment, the dwarves sew Loki's lips together.<sup>31</sup>

As Týr did, Loki put a body part at stake to gain something for the gods. Yet, the nature of their tricks is different. On the one hand, Týr's aim was to pretend that he was not ready to lose his hand and that the pledge was consequently a token of his honesty. Loki, on the other hand, never intended to lose his head and used a play of words to not honor his debt. We may also note the different motivations between the two gods' tricks: Týr acted to save the community, while Loki did it to save himself. In both cases the result, has nonetheless the aspect of a "qualifying mutilation" as the mutilated body part is connected to the god's abilities: the right hand used to swear oath by Týr, and the mouth used to deceive by Loki. The "qualifying mutilation" highlights the weakness of the gods not only because it reveals that their bodies may be wounded, but because it shows that the Old Norse gods must bargain to obtain what they want. They do not command to the world as masters but negotiate, and pay dearly for their power, safety, and goods.

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<sup>30</sup> See Georges Dumézil, "'Le Borgne' and 'Le Manchot': The State of the Problem," in *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity*, ed. Gerald James Larson, Scott Littleton, and Jaan Puhvel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 17-28.

<sup>31</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál. 1*, 42-43.

Beside the weakness of their body, the Old Norse gods are also often depicted as similar to human beings in regard to their behavior and psychology. The same was true for the Greco-Roman gods, and many Christian apologetic writings criticize them on the ground of their sinful behaviors and moral flaws.<sup>32</sup> The famous verses of Hjalti Skeggjason recorded in *Íslendingabók* are an example of such criticism in the Old Norse corpus:

Vil ek eigi goð geyja  
grey þykki mér Freyja.<sup>33</sup>

(I don't wish to bark at the gods: / It seems to me Freyja's a bitch.)<sup>34</sup>

Here, the Christian poet turns a positive attribute of Freyja, often characterized as attractive in non-euhemerized sources, into a criticism, and accuse her of sexual immorality. Similar criticisms are expressed in the Eddic poem *Lokasenna* where Loki insults nearly every god of the Old Norse pantheon, often by turning their qualities or divine characteristics as flaws. Njörðr, for instance, is said to have been used as a urinal by Hymir's daughters. It has been argued that Hymir's daughters are to be understood as rivers, who naturally flow into the sea of which Njörðr is the god of.<sup>35</sup> Hence, the author, through the voice of Loki, uses the typical language of mythology, made of metaphors and analogies, to humiliate the gods instead of praising them. As Hjalti, Loki also insults Freyja on the basis of her sexuality:

Þegi þú, Freyia  
þik kann ek fullgerva –  
era þér vamma vant.  
Ása ok álfa,  
er hér inni ero,  
hverr hefir þinn hór verit.

(Hold your tongue, Freyia / I'm fully familiar with you - / in you there's no shortage of sins. / Of the Æsir and elves / who are here indoors each one has been your bed-fellow.)<sup>36</sup>

And then:

Þegi þú, Freyia  
þú ert fordæða

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<sup>32</sup> See for instance Lactantius, *Institutions divines. Livre I*, 96-109.

<sup>33</sup> *Íslendingabók*, 15.

<sup>34</sup> Ari Þorgilsson, *Íslendingabók, Kristni Saga*, 8.

<sup>35</sup> John McKinnell, "Motivation in *Lokasenna*," *Saga-Book* 22 (1986-1989): 246-247.

<sup>36</sup> Dronke, *The Poetic Edda. Mythological Poems*, 339.

ok meini blandin mjök,  
síztik at bræðr þínom  
stóðo blíð regin,  
ok mundir þú þá, Freyia, frata!

(Hold your tongue, Freyia / you are a baleful witch / and much mixed with evil - / for beside your brother / the blithe powers surprised you and then, Freyia, you must have farted!)<sup>37</sup>

Loki's criticism of Freyja is centered around three accusations: having too many sexual partners, being incestuous, and practicing witchcraft. As we shall see, these points also appear in the euhemeristic treatment of Freyja. We may also note that Loki insults nearly every goddess on the basis of their sexuality. His degrading comments toward women are perhaps less due to their actual characteristics within mythology than they are the consequence of a misogynistic sexualization of women. Loki's insults toward Freyja seem nonetheless grounded in the actual characteristics of a goddess of sexuality and love as it was the case in *Íslendingabók*.

Loki does not limit his insults to the goddesses and even insults Óðinn himself. In one of these stanzas Loki describes Óðinn as a wizard mingling with humans:

En þik síða kóðo  
Sámseyio í,  
ok draptu á vétt sem vǫlor  
vitka líki  
fórtu verþiódð yfir,  
ok hugða ek þat args aðal.

(But you, they said, did sorcery on Sámsey / and tapped on a tub-lid like the shamaness. / In wizard's guise / you went over the world of men - / and that I thought an unmanly nature.)<sup>38</sup>

This portrayal of Óðinn is not euhemeristic, as it does not state that Óðinn was a human being, but nonetheless claim that he behaved like a man and lived among men. As Winiarczyk noted in the above quoted passage<sup>39</sup> the non-euhemerized portrayal of Óðinn already contains much of his euhemerized characteristics.

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<sup>37</sup> Dronke, *The Poetic Edda. Mythological Poems*, 340.

<sup>38</sup> Dronke, *The Poetic Edda. Mythological Poems*, 338.

<sup>39</sup> See section 5.1.

As I have shown here, it is often difficult to establish the exact difference between the non-euhemerized Old Norse gods, and their euhemerized counterparts. If euhemerism is indeed the theory according to which the gods were in fact human beings, the Old Norse gods seems to be a perfect target given their many similarities with mortal men. But then a question arises: what is left to euhemerize in them? Are not these gods already too human? I will address this question in the sixth chapter where I will discuss how Old Norse euhemerism does not only consist in a modification of the gods' themselves but also of the world in which they evolve. Before that, I will compare Saxo's and Snorri's treatment of the gods themselves.

### 5.3. Inventory of the Pseudo-gods Mentioned by Saxo and Snorri

The following table shows the occurrence of the euhemerized gods mentioned in the works of Saxo and Snorri. Each cell containing an "X" indicates that the corresponding pseudo-god appears at least once in a euhemerized form in the corresponding source.

	<i>Óðinn</i>	<i>Pórr</i>	<i>Freyr</i>	<i>Freyja</i>	<i>Frigg</i>	<i>Njörðr</i>	<i>Baldr</i>	<i>Ullr</i>	<i>Loki</i>	<i>Týr</i>
<i>Gesta Danorum</i>	X	X	X		X		X	X		
<i>Prose Edda</i>	X	X			X				X	
<i>Heimskringla</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			

Table 3: Representation of Old Norse gods in the euhemeristic sources.

As we can see, three of the major Nordic gods appear in all three works, Óðinn, Thor, and Frigg, and one does not appear at all, Týr, which is mentioned in poetry in the *Heimskringla* but never appears as a character. This visualization is yet somewhat misleading as it does not account for the importance that these pseudo-gods have in the sources. Thor, for instance, is an important character in Snorri's *Edda*, but is relatively unimportant in the *Gesta Danorum* and is only mentioned once *en passant* in *Heimskringla*. Similarly, Frigg has an important role in an episode of the *Gesta Danorum* but is mentioned only once in *Heimskringla* and is relatively unimportant in the euhemeristic passages of the *Edda*.

As such, I propose here a second version of the table where I removed the occurrences where the pseudo-gods did not take part in narratives but were merely mentioned by name:

	<i>Óðinn</i>	<i>Pórr</i>	<i>Freyr</i>	<i>Freyja</i>	<i>Frigg</i>	<i>Njörðr</i>	<i>Baldr</i>	<i>Ullr</i>	<i>Loki</i>	<i>Týr</i>
<i>Gesta Danorum</i>	X	X	X		X		X			
<i>Prose Edda</i>	X	X								
<i>Heimskringla</i>	X		X	X		X	X			

Table 4: Representation of Old Norse gods in the euhemeristic sources not taking into account gods only mentioned by name.

This second version of the table shows that Óðinn is in fact the only major gods of the mythological corpus to systematically appear as an important character in the euhemeristic narratives. Thor, who is one of the most important gods of the mythological corpus as known through Snorri's *Edda* and the poetic *Edda*, is surprisingly underrepresented in the euhemeristic sources considering his secondary role in the *Gesta Danorum*. Freyja and Njörðr are also underrepresented as these two gods appear both in Snorri's *Edda* and in the poetic *Edda* but are only found euhemerized in *Heimskringla*. As such, among the gods which are traditionally referred to as Vanir, only Freyr is mentioned by both Saxo and Snorri, as he is an important character of *Ynglinga saga* and a rather unimportant, but recurring character in the *Gesta Danorum*. In this categorization Loki and Ullr join Týr among the gods with no euhemeristic representations beside being mentioned. This absence is particularly striking in the case of Loki as this god is one of the most important of the Old Norse mythological corpus.

## 5.4. The Wizard Gods

### 5.4.1. Saxo's Typology of Magicians

As shown on the table above, one of the common points between the euhemeristic narratives of Saxo and Snorri is their common use of Óðinn as the most important pseudo-god. Both Saxo and Snorri characterize the pseudo-gods in general, and Óðinn especially, as magicians. Despite this apparent similarity, Saxo and Snorri describe the magicians in rather different terms. Saxo first introduces the pseudo-gods by producing a typology of magicians. To him all pseudo gods are magicians, *mathematici* in Latin, which may be divided into three subcategories:

Quorum summam opera perstricturus, ne publice existimationi contraria aut ueri fidem excedentia fidenter astruere uidear, nosse opere pretium est, triplex quondam mathematicorum genus inauditi generis miracula discretis exercuisse prestigiis.

Horum primi fuere monstruosi generis uiri, quos gigantes antiquitas nominauit, humane magnitudinis habitum eximia corporum granditate uincentes.

Secundi post hos primam physiculandi solertiam obtinentes artem possidere Phitonicam. Quid quantum superioribus habitu cessere corporeo, tantum uiuaci mentis ingenio prestiterunt. Hos inter gigantesque de rerum summa bellis certabatur assiduis, quoad magi uictores giganteum armis genus subigerent sibi que non solum regnandi ius, uerumetiam diuinitatis opinionem consciscerent. Horum utrique per summam ludificandorum oculorum

peritiam proprios alienosque uultus uariis rerum imaginibus adumbrare callebant illicibusque formis ueros obscurare conspectus.

Tertii uero generis homines ex alterna superiorum copula pullulantes auctorum suorum nature nec corporum magnitudine nec artium exercitio respondebant. His tamen apud delusas prestigiis mentes diuinitatis accessit opinio.<sup>40</sup>

(I intend to touch briefly on their activities, but, in case I should seem like a brash inventor of fantastic tales which strain men's credulity, it is worth telling you that at one time there were three amazing species of wizard, each practising their own miraculous illusions.

The first of these were fellows of monstrous size, whom the ancients called giants, far surpassing human beings in their extraordinary bodily stature. In second place were those who obtained the leading expertise in haruspicy and were masters of the Delphic art. Although they yielded precedence to the former in their frame, they nevertheless excelled them just as much in their brisk acuteness of intellect. Between these and the giants there were interminable battles for supremacy, until the soothsayers won an armed victory over the monster race and appropriated not only the right to rule but even the reputation of being gods. Both these types, being superlatively dexterous in deceiving the eye, were clever at counterfeiting different shapes for themselves and others, and concealing their true appearance under false guises. The third class, bred from an intermingling of the other two, reflected neither the physical size nor the magic arts of their parents. Nevertheless minds deluded by their legerdemain believed in their deity.)

These three categories are the giants (*gigantes*), those who obtained the skill of haruspicy (*solertia physiculandi*) and know the pythonic arts (*ars phytonica*) and, finally, the offspring of the first two groups. It is unclear to what degree this categorization is meant to reflect Old Norse myths. It is generally accepted that the first two categories are equivalent to the Old Norse *jǫtnar* and to the *Æsir*.<sup>41</sup> Friis-Jensen argued: “Among Saxo’s three classes of gods the two first no doubt reflect the distinction in Scandinavian mythology between Giants and *Æsir*; the third class cannot be identified, but it may refer to another group that fought with the *Æsir*, the *Vanir*.”<sup>42</sup> It seems indeed that Saxo’s description of the struggle between the first two categories correspond to the conflict between giants and gods as observed in the prose and poetic *Edda*. It is the conflict between the giants and the gods. His description of the first category as *gigantes*

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<sup>40</sup> *Gesta Danorum* I.5.2-5.

<sup>41</sup> Lassen, *Odin på kristent pergament*, 214.

<sup>42</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, I.5.2. note 1.

suits their identification with the Old Norse *jǫtnar* and his account on the second category who won the reputation to be gods shows that Saxo evidently identifies them with the Scandinavian pseudo-gods proper.

On the other hand, Friis-Jensen's assumption according to which the third category may represent the Vanir, as opposed to the *Æsir*, is not well supported by the text. As Saxo specifies it, the third category comes from the intermingling between the two previous and had no supernatural capacities but merely believed in the divine status of their progenitors. This information does not correspond at all with what can be read about the Vanir in other sources. Snorri, in the *Ynglinga saga*, depicts the Vanir as skilled magicians as, according to him, it is Freyja who taught *seiðr* to Óðinn. *Völuspá* also describes the Vanir as agents of magic in its twenty-fourth stanza where it says “knáttu vanir vígspá vǫllu sporna” (The Vanir were – by a war charm – live and kicking on the plain.) which associates them with magic.<sup>43</sup> But it is especially Saxo's description of the third group's genealogy which precludes their identification with the Vanir of the two Eddas where the Vanir are never described as the descendants of the *Æsir* and giants. In the absence of more information, it is difficult to assess what Saxo's third category is supposed to represent. It may be that Saxo's third category does not reflect any pre-Christian category of supernatural beings but explains the presence of pseudo-gods in Danish history well after the first generations of pseudo-gods should have died.

It is perhaps more pertinent to look at Saxo's Latin terminology than to attempt to enforce Old Norse concepts in his description. *Mathematicus*, *gigans*, and *ars pythonica*, are concepts found in the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville VIII.9.21-27.<sup>44</sup> Isidore groups all the agents of magic under the category of *magis* (magicians). There are various subcategories such as *maleficus* (evil doers), *hydromancius* (*hydromancers*), haruspices, etc. Among those subcategories are the *Pythonissae* who according to Isidore were named after Apollo Pythian because he was “the inventor of divination”. Isidore pursues his account with the *Genethliaci*, those who predict the life of individuals based on the twelve signs of heaven and the observation of the stars. Those *Genethliaci*, he states, used to be called *magis* but are now only referred to as *mathematici*. Hence the term *magus* has two meanings in the *Etymologiae*. It is first employed as an umbrella

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<sup>43</sup> On the association of Vanir with magic see John Lindow, “Vanir and *Æsir*,” in *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North; History and Structures*, vol. 3, *History and Structures: Conceptual Frameworks*, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020), 1037, 1049; Clive Tolley, “In Defense of the Vanir,” *The Retrospective Methods Network Newsletter* 2 (2011): 25.

<sup>44</sup> Isidore of Seville, *The “Etymologies” of Isidore of Seville*, 182-183.



category for any kind of magician, and secondly as a synonym for one of the subcategories of magicians, the *mathematicus*, meaning “astrologer”. We may thus see here how the term *mathematicus*, as a synonym to *magus* became the umbrella category for any kind of magicians in the *Gesta Danorum*. In addition, we may note that Augustine used this word with a similar meaning in his *Confessiones* VII.VI.<sup>45</sup>

The adjective “pythonicus”, which Saxo used to qualify the art mastered by the second category, generally means “prophetic” or “magical”. This word as well as the substantive “pythonissa” meaning “seeress” are found several times in the Old Testament where they are generally used within passages which condemn the consultation of seers and magicians. For instance, the witch of Endor whom king Saul consulted to communicate with the spirit of the prophet Samuel was labelled a “pythonissa” in 1 Chronicle 10:13.<sup>46</sup> Saxo seems to share this conception of divination as a practice closely connected to necromancy: in I.6.4, the giantess Harthgrepa, who had seduced the Danish hero Haddingus, revived a dead man in order to know the future. This connection is also found in the Old Norse tradition where Óðinn revives a völvá to consult her oracles. It is possible that the völvá of the *Völuspá* is also a revived seeress as it is suggested by the last words of the poem: “nú mun hon sökqvaz” (now she will sink), which could mean that the völvá is sinking under the soil, in her tomb. Sigurður Nordal expressed doubts regarding this interpretation and argued that the völvá was likely not sinking back in earth but rather in “her own witchery”.<sup>47</sup> It is difficult to settle on this question regarding the framework as *Völuspá* and I am inclined to think that the author willingly maintained the doubt regarding the state of the völvá. In any case, the example from the Bible and *Baldurs draumar* shows that the association between divination and necromancy was well known in the Middle Ages. It is perhaps significant, then, that, unlike Harthgrepa, Saxo’s Othinus never practices necromancy. In fact, contrary to what Saxo stated in his description of the pseudo-gods’ powers, Othinus does not even practice divination himself, but, as in some Old Norse sources such as the *Völuspá*, he rather consults oracles. In the *Gesta Danorum* III.4.1 Saxo even uses this motive to ironically remark that even the chief of the gods had to seek human help to know his future.

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<sup>45</sup> Saint Augustine, *St Augustine’s Confessions*, ed. and trans. William Watts, (London: William Heinemann, 1919), 1:358.

<sup>46</sup> For a discussion on these terms in biblical and patristic literature see Jean-Patrice Boudet, *Entre science et nigromance. Astrologie, divination et magie dans l’occident médiéval (XIIe-XVe Siècle)* (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2006), 205-206

<sup>47</sup> Sigurður Nordal, “Three Essays on *Völuspá*,” trans. Benedikt Benedikz and John McKinnell, *Saga-Book* 18 (1970-1973), 97-98.

The word *physiculandi*, for its part, is the genitive gerund form of the verb “*physiculo*”, (to divide the entrails of a sacrificial victim) which is most often spelled “*fissiculo*”. This verb is found twice – with the “*fissiculo*” spelling – in the *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* (On the Marriage of Philology and Mercury) of Martianus Capella, once in I.9 and the second time in II.151.<sup>48</sup> Contrary to what Saxo’s spelling suggests, this word has no connection with the Greek *φύσις* (nature) but is cognate with the Latin *fissio* (the act of splitting). As such, *mathematicus*, *ars pythonica*, and *physiculo* are all connected to the notion of divination. It seems however that Saxo likely uses *mathematicus* as a synonym of *magus* as he does not describe the giants as soothsayers, and specifically states that the third category does not master the arts of their parents.

Alongside this vocabulary related to divination, Saxo also uses the words related to the verb *ludificor* (to trick, to mock).<sup>49</sup> More than divination it is this aspect of the pseudo-gods’ magic which is the most commonly described in the *Gesta Danorum*. Saxo underlies the illusory nature of the gods’ power: their magical arts trick our senses more than they act upon the physical world. In the *Gesta Danorum* the pseudo-gods remain relatively weak outside of their ability to disguise themselves. The narrator sometimes utters ironic remarks regarding the pseudo-gods’ weakness in comparison to their pretention to godhood. See for instance this comment:

At Othinus, quamquam deorum precipuus haberetur, diunos tamen et aruspices ceterosque, quos exquisitis prescientie studiis uigere compererat, super exequenda filii ultione sollicitat. Plerunque enim humane opis indiga est imperfecta diuinitas.

(Now although Odin was regarded as chief among the gods, he would approach seers, soothsayers, and others whom he had discovered strong in the finest arts of prediction, with a view to prosecuting vengeance for his son. Divinity is not always so perfect that it can dispense with human aid.)<sup>50</sup>

This apparent weakness is nonetheless counterbalanced at times when the pseudo-gods demonstrate impressive supernatural powers such as in this passage where Othinus rides his horse over the sea:

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<sup>48</sup> Martianus Capella, *Martianus Capella*, ed. James Willis (Leipzig: BSB B. G. Teubner Verlagsgesellschaft, 1983), 6, 46.

<sup>49</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, III.2.5, VI.5.3.

<sup>50</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, III.4.1.

Et cum dicto relatum equo iuuenem pristino loco restituit. Tunc Hadingus amiculi eius rimas, sub quo trepidus delitebat, per summam rerum admirationem uisus perspicuitate traiciens animaduertit equinis freta patere uestigiis, prohibitusque rei inconcesse captare conspectum plenos stuporis oculos a terribili itinerum suorum contemplatione deflexit.

(With these words he set the young man on his horse and brought him back to the place where he had found him. Hadding hid trembling beneath his cloak, but in intense amazement kept casting keen glances through the slits and saw that the sea lay stretched out under the horse's hoofs; being forbidden to gaze, he turned his wondering eyes away from the terrible view of his journey.)<sup>51</sup>

Here Saxo does not explicitly identify the character as Othinus but describes him as “an aged man with only one eye”, a description which Saxo later identifies with Othinus in VII.10.6.

It is unclear whether Othinus belongs to the second or the third category of pseudo-gods. Kværndrup and Skovgaard-Petersen suggested that several different characters appear under the identity of Othinus, and that the most recent ones could be descendants from the first to appear in the *Gesta Danorum*. As such, the first Othinus would be of the second category while the later ones would belong to the third group of pseudo-gods.<sup>52</sup> Jonas Wellendorf for his part remarks that Othinus often relies on sooth-saying and may thus belong to the second category.<sup>53</sup> This would explain how Othinus could appear in Danish history both before the birth of Christ in book one and several centuries later in the later books. If this interpretation is true, then Saxo’s explanation of the enduring presence of Othinus in Scandinavian history is similar to what Snorri described in the prologue to the *Edda*, where the Æsir are the distant descendants of the original pseudo-gods of the same names which came from Troy.

Annette Lassen justly remarked that Saxo’s first description of the pagan gods corresponds neither fully to traditional euhemeristic accounts nor to demonist ones and is devoid of reference to idolatry or to the making of statues.<sup>54</sup> Not only Othinus rarely practices magic himself, but he is, at time, the enemy of the magicians. In the *Gesta Danorum* I.7.3 Othinus comes back from his exile and expels the magicians (magi) from the land. To the narrator of the *Gesta Danorum* Mithothyn and his magician followers were more closely connected to evil kind of

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<sup>51</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, I.6.9.

<sup>52</sup> Sigurd Kværndrup, *Tolv principper hos Saxo: En tolkning af danernes bedrifter*. (Copenhagen: Multivers, 1999), 126; Skovgaard-Petersen, “The Way to Byzantium,” 1

<sup>53</sup> Wellendorf, *Gods and Humans*, 75.

<sup>54</sup> Lassen, *Odin på kristent pergament*, 212.

magic than Othinus was. Indeed, Saxo implies that Mithothyn had a close connection with the demonic world, as his corpse emitted plagues, a problem which only stopped after the people unearthed his body to decapitate it and drove a stake in its breast.<sup>55</sup> Here, Othinus endorses the role of the just king, who fights off sorcerers and rebels and it is one of the rare instances of the *Gesta Danorum* where Othinus is depicted as a positive character. As we shall see, Óðinn is much more represented as a positive kingly figure in the works of Snorri while Saxo generally emphasizes the weakness of Othinus and of the other pseudo-gods. It is unclear why Othinus, in *Gesta Danorum* I.7.3 behaves like a good king while he does not elsewhere in the *Gesta Danorum*. Perhaps Saxo did not intend his audience to understand Othinus' actions as that of a king exacting justice on wrongdoers, but merely of a ruler avenging himself for past humiliations. I would also suggest that making Othinus as a powerful magician was already conceding more power to the pseudo-god than Saxo was willing to do.

#### 5.4.2. Snorri's Transmission of Magic

Contrary to Saxo, Snorri did not produce a typology of the magician but described the abilities of Óðinn who, in *Heimskringla*, is the chief of the gods and a powerful magician:

Óðinn skipti hǫmum. Lá þá búkrinn sem sofinn eða dauðr, en hann var þá fugl eða dýr, fiskr eða ormr ok fór á einni svipstund á fjarlæg lǫnd at sínum ørendum eða annara manna. Þat kunni hann enn at gera með orðum einum at slökkva eld ok kyrra sjá ok snúa vindum hverja leið, er hann vildi, ok hann átti skip, er Skíðblaðnir hét, er hann fór á yfir hǫf stór, en þat mátti vefja saman sem dúk. Óðinn hafði með sér hǫfuð Mímis, ok sagði þat honum mǫrg tíðendi ór ǫðrum heimum, en stundum vakði hann upp dauða menn ór jǫrðu eða settisk undir hanga. Fyrir því var hann kallaðr draugadróttin eða hangadróttin. Hann átti hrafna tvá, er hann hafði tamit við mál. Flugu þeir víða um lǫnd ok sǫgðu honum mǫrg tíðendi. Af þessum hlutum varð hann stórliga fróðr. Allar þessar íþróttir kenndi hann með rúnum ok ljóðum þeim, er galdrar heita. Fyrir því eru Æsir kallaðir galdrasmiðir. Óðinn kunni þá íþrótt, svá at mestr mátt fylgði, ok framði sjálfr, er seiðr heitir, en af því mátti hann vita ørlǫg manna ok óorðna hluti, svá ok at gera mǫnnum bana eða óhamingju eða vanheilendi, svá ok at taka frá mǫnnum vit eða afl ok gefa ǫðrum. En þessi fjölkynngi, er framið er, fylgir svá mikil ergi, at eigi þótti karlmǫmum skammlaust við at fara, ok var gyðjunum kennd sú íþrótt. Óðinn vissi um allt jarðfé, hvar fólgit var, ok hann kunni þau ljóð, er upp lausk fyrir honum jǫrðin ok björg ok steinar ok haugarnir, ok batt hann með

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<sup>55</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, I.7.2.

orðum einum þá, er fyrir bjoggu, ok gekk inn ok tók þar slíkt er hann vildi. Af þessum kröptum varð hann mjök frægr.<sup>56</sup>

(Óðinn changed shapes. Then his body lay as if it was asleep or dead, while he was a bird or an animal, a fish or a snake, and travelled in an instant to distant lands, on his own or other people's business. He also knew how to put out fire or calm the sea or turn the winds in any direction he wished with words alone, and he owned a ship called *Skíðblaðnir*, on which he sailed over high seas, but it could be folded together like a cloth. Óðinn kept Mímir's head by him, and it told him much news from other worlds, and sometimes he awakened the dead from the earth or sat himself under hanged men. Because of this he was called *draugadróttinn* ('lord of ghosts') or *hangadróttinn* ('lord of the hanged'). He had two ravens which he had trained to speak. They flew over distant countries and told him much news. From these things he became extremely wise. All these skills he taught along with runes and those songs that are called *galdrar* ('magic spells'). Because of this the Æsir are called *galdrasmiðir* ('magic makers'). Óðinn knew, and practised himself, the art which is accompanied by greatest power, called *seiðr* ('black magic'), and from it he could predict the fates of men and things that had not yet happened, and also cause men death or disaster or disease, and also take wit or strength from some and give it to others. But this magic, when it is practised, is accompanied by such great perversion that it was not considered without shame for a man to perform it, and the skill was taught to the goddesses. Óðinn knew about all the treasure of the earth, where it was hidden, and he knew songs which would make the earth and cliffs and rocks and grave-mounds open up before him, and with words alone he would bind those who were in them and go in and take from there whatever he wanted. He became very famous because of these powers.)

Snorri's description of the actual abilities of the magician is much more specific than that of Saxo. Despite his remarkable powers Óðinn is not the original magician but learned the magical arts from the Vanir goddess Freyja:

Dóttir Njarðar var Freyja. Hon var blótgyðja. Honn kenndi fyrst með Ásum seið, sem Vönum var títt.<sup>57</sup>

(Njörðr's daughter was Freyja. She was a sacrificial priestess. She was the first to teach the Æsir black magic, which was customary among the Vanir.)

Later, Óðinn became a teacher himself and taught this art to his priests in Sweden:

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<sup>56</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 18-19.

<sup>57</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 13.

En hann kenndi flestar íþróttir sínar blótgoðunum. Váru þeir næst honum um allan fróðleik ok fjölkynngi.<sup>58</sup>

(And he taught most of his skills to his sacrificial priests. They were next to him in all lore and magic.)

While Saxo writes about the magicians Snorri is less interested in the agents of magic but more in magic itself and its transmission. Parallel to the traditional motif of the *Translatio imperii et studii*, Snorri also describes a *Translatio magiae* where the practice of *seiðr* follows a chain of transmission from Vanaland to Sweden and from Sweden to Norway when the Ynglingar kings move there in chapter 43.<sup>59</sup> In *Ynglinga saga* the first apprentices of Óðinn were his *blótgoðar* (sacrificial priests). As such, Snorri draws a connection between magic and pagan religion. This connection is especially apparent when we compare these two passages from *Heimskringla*. First, the funeral of the sorceress Snæfríðr, Haraldr Hárfagri's wife:

Ok þegar er hon var hræð ór rekkjuni, þá slær ýldu ok óþefani ok hvers kyns illum fnyk af líkamanum. Var þá hvatat at báli, ok var hon brennd. Blánaði áðr allr líkaminn, ok ullu ór ormar ok eðlur, froskar ok þoddur ok alls kyns illyrmi.<sup>60</sup>

(And as soon as she was moved from the bed, then decay and foul stench and all kinds of foul smells sprang out of the corpse. Then a pyre was hastily built and she was burned. Before that the whole body went black and there swarmed out of it worms and adders, frogs and toads, and all kinds of nasty maggots.)

And secondly, the destruction of the idol of Þórr by saint Óláfr:

Þá rann upp sól, ok litu bændr allir til sólarinnar. En í því bili laust Kolbeinn svá goð þeira, svá at þat brast allt í sundr, ok hljópu þar út mýss, svá stórar sem kettir væri, ok eðlur ok ormar.<sup>61</sup>

(Then the sun rose, and all the farmers looked towards the sun. And at that moment Kolbeinn struck their god so that it broke all to pieces, and out of it ran mice, as big as if they were cats, and adders and snakes.)

We may note the identical vocabulary which the narrator uses to describe the noxious creatures coming from the sorceress' body and from Thor's idol. In *Heimskringla* paganism and sorcery

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<sup>58</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 19.

<sup>59</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 74-75.

<sup>60</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 127. This passage is immediately following the one quoted in 4.3.2 about Snæfríðr and it is also an almost exact quotation from *Ágrip* chapter 4.

<sup>61</sup> *Heimskringla II*, 189.

are not as much two distinct phenomena than they are the two facets of the same demoniac influence over an orderly society.

Saxo's and Snorri's pseudo-gods are magicians, but these two authors' conceptions of magic were different. Saxo treated magic as a quality inherent to the magician's persona while Snorri treated it as an art which could be taught and thus transmitted. As Stephen Mitchell noted, the distinction between magic as an acquired art and magic as inherited is well known by Africanists who call the first category "sorcerers" while the second is referred to as "witches".<sup>62</sup> As Mitchell argued, the Old Norse corpus present both sorcerers and witches. Freyja and her students are clear examples of sorceress and sorcerers, while Kotkell and his family from *Laxdæla saga* chapter 35 seem to be witches.<sup>63</sup> It is also notable that prior to his meeting with Freyja, Óðinn may be a witch, as he already knew some form of magic before his meeting with Freyja, as shown for instance by his treatment of Mímir's head. The text, however, never state whether Óðinn learned these skills or was just born with them. It is however clear that in *Heimskringla* magic is primarily taught or transmitted by other means than genealogical connections. Beside teaching, magic can also be attached to objects, and thus transmitted through mere commercial transactions. Such is the case in *Óláfs saga helga*, where Þórir hundr bought from the Sámi reindeer-skin coats which granted him invulnerability.<sup>64</sup> We must also note that although magic may be predominant within certain families, this does not necessarily mean that these characters are innate magicians. For instance, Rögnvaldr, the son Snæfríðr, "learned magic and became *seiðmaðr*" (hann nam fjölkyngi ok gerðist seiðmaðr) which must mean that his was not born with magic abilities although his mother was a sorceress.<sup>65</sup> As such, while the taste for magic practice seems to be indeed almost innate among the descendants of Snæfríðr (Rögnvaldr's grandson, Eyvindr kelda also became a magician), this art still needs to be learned. In that long chain of transmission Freyja is both the first named practitioner of *seiðr* and the primeval teacher of this kind of magic. It is certainly significant that Freyja is specifically associated to *seiðr*. As Meylan noted, *seiðr* more than any other kinds of magic is both seen as particularly powerful and condemned as immoral.<sup>66</sup> It is indeed the case in

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<sup>62</sup> Stephen A. Mitchell, "Magic as Acquired Art and the Ethnographic Value of the Sagas," in *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, The Northern Collection: Studies in Northern Civilization 14 (Viborg: University press of southern Denmark, 2003), 132.

<sup>63</sup> Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Laxdæla saga. Halldórs þættir Snorrasonar. Stúfs þáttur*, Íslensk fornrit 5 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1934), 95.

<sup>64</sup> *Heimskringla II*, 344-345.

<sup>65</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 138.

<sup>66</sup> Nicolas Meylan, *Magic and Kingship in Medieval Iceland: The Construction of a Discourse of Political Resistance*, Studies in Viking and Medieval Scandinavia 3 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 42-43.

*Heimskringla* that *seiðr* is consistently described as a magical art mastered by evil sorcerers and rebels to royal authority. Rögnvaldr réttilbeini, son of Haraldr hárfagri and Eyvindr kelda, grandson of Rögnvaldr were both *seiðmen* and enemies of the king. It is notable that the opposition between – good – kings and magicians is so fundamental that it transcends even the ties of kinship: Rögnvaldr was killed by his brother by the order of his own father<sup>67</sup> and Eyvindr was killed by his kinsman Óláfr Tryggvason.<sup>68</sup>

This distinction between magic as an acquired skill and magic as an innate ability plays a crucial role in Saxo's and Snorri's portrayal of the pseudo-gods. In the *Gesta Danorum* magic is essentially treated as the art of illusion and deception. As such, the pseudo-gods use their supernatural abilities to trick the sense of human beings and impersonate gods. As such, Saxo's pseudo-gods never teach their magical art but keep it for themselves as a tool of power over ordinary humans. By contrast the Snorri's pseudo-gods do not use magic to deceive human beings but to achieve exploits which earn them the admiration, and then the adoration, of their people. For instance, Snorri depicts the origin of the prayers toward Óðinn as such:

Þat var háttir hans, ef hann sendi menn sína til orrostu eða aðrar sendifarar, at hann lagði áðr hendr í höfuð þeim ok gaf þeim bjannak. Trúðu þeir, at þá myndi vel farask. Svá var ok um hans menn, hvar sem þeir urðu í nauðum staddir á sjá eða á landi, þá kǫlluðu þeir á nafn hans, ok þótti jafnan fá af því fró. Þar þóttusk þeir eiga allt traust, en hann var.<sup>69</sup>

(It was his custom, if he was sending his men into battle or on other missions, that he first laid his hands on their heads and gave them *bjannak*. They believed that then things would turn out well. It was also the case with his men that whenever they were in trouble on sea or on land, they called on his name, and always seemed to get help from that. They believed that all their security depended on him.)

And in a second time, after Óðinn's death:

Óðinn varð sótt dauðr í Svíþjóð. Ok er hann var at kominn dauða, lét hann marka sik geirsoddi ok eignaði sér alla vápn dauða menn. Sagði hann sik mundu fara í Goðheim. Ok fagna þar vinum sínum. Nú hugðu Svíar, at hann væri kominn í inn forna Ásgarðr ok myndi þar lifa at eilífu. Hófsk þá at nýju átrúnaðr við Óðin ok áheit. Opt þótti Svíum hann vitrask

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<sup>67</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 139.

<sup>68</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 312.

<sup>69</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 11.



sér, áðr stórar orrostur yrði. Gaf hann þá sumum sigr, en summum bauð hann til sín. Þótti hvárrtveggi kostur góður.<sup>70</sup>

(Óðinn died of sickness in Svíþjóð. And when he was on the point of death he had himself marked with the point of a spear and claimed as his own all men who were killed by weapons. He said he was going to go to Goðheimr and be reunited with his friends there. Now the Svíar believed that he had gone to the old Ásgarðr and would live there for ever. Then belief in Óðinn and invocation of him were renewed. The Svíar often thought he appeared to them before great battles were to take place. Then he gave victory to some of them, and others he summoned to himself. Both outcomes were considered good.)

Even after his death, it is the effectiveness of Óðinn's benefaction, or the belief that these benefactions are due to him, which allows his cult to remain. Snorri never explains what the cause for the apparitions of Óðinn is even after his death. It is possible that the author intended his audience to understand that the post-mortem exploits of Óðinn were the works of demon who took advantage of the religious practice created by Óðinn and used it for their own benefit. Demonism also appears in the *Gesta Danorum* where it is also the main mode of occurrence of the pagan gods after the death of the initial pseudo-gods.

*Ynglinga saga* describes the Vanir, and more specifically Freyja, as those who introduced this evil practice in the society of the gods and thus indirectly in the Norwegian society. In fact, *Ynglinga saga* generally conveys the idea that the Vanir society was especially corrupt as they were also practicing incest before their subjugation by the Æsir.<sup>71</sup> As such, the Vanir society represent the worst aspects of pre-Christian society: sorcery, paganism, and sexual deviancy. On the other hand, the Æsir, and chiefly Óðinn, represents the positive aspects of pre-Christian culture, heroism, nobleness, and poetry, as shown in this laudatory portrayal of Óðinn:

Hann var svá fagr ok gøfuligr álitum, þá er hann sat með sínum vinum, at öllum hló hugr við. En þá er hann var í her, þá sýndisk hann grimligr sínum óvinum. En þat bar til þess, at hann kunni þær íþróttir, at hann skipti litum ok líkjum á hverja lund, er hann vildi. Önnur var sú, at hann talaði svá snjallt ok slétt, at öllum, er á heryðu, þótti þat eina satt. Mælti hann allt hendingum, svá sem nú er þát kveðit, er skáldskapr heitir. Hann ok hofgoðar hans heita ljóðasmiðir, því at sú íþrótt hófsk af þeim í Norðrlöndum.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 22.

<sup>71</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 13.

<sup>72</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 17.

(He was so fair and noble in countenance, when he was sitting among his friends, that it rejoiced the hearts of all. But when he went to battle he appeared ferocious to his enemies. And the reason was that he had the faculty of changing complexion and form in whatever manner he chose. Another was that he spoke so eloquently and smoothly that everyone who heard thought that only what he said was true. Everything he said was in rhyme, like the way what is now called poetry is composed. He and his temple priests were called craftsmen of poems, for that art originated with them in the Northern lands.)

In this sense, the union between the Æsir and the Vanir is the union between two distinct aspects of the pre-Christian culture. When the two families merge, the result is the corruption of the Æsir, who then start to practice *seiðr*, but also the progress of the Vanir, who cease to practice incest. Once united, these two families form the pre-Christian culture as it was transmitted to the Scandinavians, with its positive and negative sides. In that regard, Snorri characterizes paganism as an aspect of the pre-Christian culture among others. The sorcerers and those who practice pagan sacrifices are the perpetuators of one aspect of pre-Christian culture but they do not represent its entirety. This dichotomy allows Snorri to distinguish between idolatrous pagans and good pagans. An example of good pagan is Haraldr hárfagri who became of monotheist by himself in the passage quoted above in 4.3.3.

On the first hand, Haraldr's reference to the god who created him and governs all things makes him is a blatant example of a good pagan with an intuition of the Christian truth. Most of the pre-Christian Ynglingar kings belong to the category of the good pagans and it is them who initiated the conversion of the country to Christianity. On the other hand, Jarl Hákon inn ríki and the other Jarls of Hlaðir are examples of staunchly polytheist rulers. Contrary to the Ynglingar kings, Jarl Hákon, is genealogically connected to Óðinn. As such, the original division of the pseudo-gods between Æsir and Vanir is replicated in historical times by the division between the kings, descendants of Freyr, and the Jarls of Hlaðir, descendants of Óðinn. However, the respective roles of the two lines are now inversed: the descendants of Freyr hold kingly power, while the descendants of Óðinn are rebellious pagans. The Ynglingar kings, as they unify Norway and repress paganism in the northern part of the country, mirror and replicate the original subjugation of the Vanir by the Æsir, as they submit the other half of the line, putting their unholy practices to an end.

This conflict between good and bad pagans, which takes place on the scale of the kingdom, also occurs on the smaller scale of the family unit. The bewitching of Haraldr hárfagri by Snæfríðr, reflects the initial introduction of *seiðr* among the Æsir by Freyja. As for Freyja, Snæfríðr's

influence extends far beyond her own persona, in place and in time. Because of her evil influence, the king neglected his duties as a ruler, and her descendants became enemies of royal power. As such, the introduction of Snæfríðr within the Ynglingar results in the creation of two parallel lines struggling against each other: the kings' line, representative of order, and the sorcerers' line who must be fought to safeguard order and unity. According to this reading, the war between the Æsir and Vanir is the matrix of many of the subsequent conflicts described in *Heimskringla*: familial, political, and religious. Both the stories of Freyja and that of Snæfríðr show a similar pattern for the diffusion of the practice of sorcery within society. In these two narratives the practice of magic is introduced within orderly society by a woman from a foreign society. As Matthias Teichert remarked, Snæfríðr does not utter a single word in the saga.<sup>73</sup> Her charms – in both senses of the word – are eminently sensual and do not come from words and language as in other instances of the Old Norse corpus.<sup>74</sup> Her bewitching of the king is initiated by a physical contact, and perpetuated by her physical beauty, which unnaturally continues even after her death. Like Freyja, whom Snorri called “fickle” (*marglynd*), and who committed incest, Snæfríðr is highly sexualized, and her magic is strongly connected to her sexuality and sex-appeal. Freyja and Snæfríðr are also similar as they both started as outsiders to the orderly societies of the Æsir and Norwegians. In both cases, the orderly society willingly brought the agent of magic to itself: The Æsir subjugated Freyja and the other Vanir, and Haraldr hárfagri willingly married the Sámi Snæfríðr. It is then from their newly acquired position that the two sorceresses spread magic within the orderly society. One of the differences between these two narratives is the role played by the Ynglingar and their descendants. In *Ynglinga saga*, the role of the sorceress is played by a Vanir, Freyja, the sister of Freyr, the namesake of the dynasty. On the contrary, in *Haralds saga hárfagra* the descendants of Freyr represent order against chaotic agents of magic.

In this perspective the history of the early Ynglingar kings is a history of continuous progress toward sainthood: first, the evolution from the primitive paganism of the Vanir to the more cultured and prestigious society of the Æsir, secondly from petty rulers to just pre-Christian kings such as Haraldr hárfagri, thirdly from paganism to Christianity, and finally from ordinary Christian kings to the sainthood of King Óláfr. The line of the Æsir may be the initiator of this

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<sup>73</sup> Matthias Teichert, “The Sorcerous Succubus from Samiland. Monstrous Womanhood and the Abject in the Snæfríðr Episode of *Haralds Saga Hárfagra*,” in *Bad Boys and Wicked Women. Antagonists and Troublemakers in Old Norse Literature*, ed. Daniela Hahn and Andreas Schmidt, Münchner Nordistische Studien 27 (Munich: Herbert Utz Verlag, 2016), 206.

<sup>74</sup> See for instance Hallbjörn curse in *Laxdæla saga* chapter 37.

progress, as they brought the first improvements in the Vanir society, but they themselves remain in a state of stagnation, if not of regression, until the point when their line becomes an obsolete remainder of the olden times as shown by the description of Jarl Hákon, a descendent of Óðinn:

Manna orvastr var Hákon jarl, en ina mestu óhamingju bar slíkr höfðingi til dánardægra síns. En þat bar mest til, er svá varð, at þá var sú tíð komin, at fyrirdæmask skyldi blótskaprinn ok blótmenninir, en í stað kom heilög trúa ok réttir siðir.<sup>75</sup>

(Jarl Hákon was the most generous of men, but this kind of ruler experienced the greatest misfortune until his dying day. And the chief cause of it happening like this was, that then the time had come for heathen worship and heathen worshippers to be condemned, and be replaced by the holy Faith and proper morals.)

As stated by Snorri, the reason for Jarl Hákon's downfall was not his lack of quality as a ruler, but his adherence to the old religion and his inability to adapt to a new age. It is significant that the Vanir, the worst elements among the pseudo-gods, are the ones who produced the most prestigious line. We may analyze this evolution as connected to traditional medieval conversion narratives who typically follow the biblical model of the conversion of Saint Paul, who went from a persecutor of Christians to a Christian himself. As Saxo remarks about the conversion of King Eric of Denmark: "Laudabilior enim est uita, cuius initium turpe speciosus finis abripit, quam cuius probabile exordium in culpas flagitiaque decurrit."<sup>76</sup> (A man's life is more praiseworthy when a bad opening is effaced by a glorious close rather than where, after a pleasing start, he runs downhill mischiefs and crimes.) Similarly, the origin of the Ynglingar as some of the staunchest pagans of old times allows Snorri to construct a conversion narrative, not on the scale of the individual but on that of a whole family line and of the history of a kingdom.

## 5.5. Othinus and Óðinn

### 5.5.1. Othinus' Golden Statue

The most important of the pseudo-gods both with Saxo and Snorri is Óðinn, which Saxo latinized as Othinus. As we saw in the previous part, both Saxo and Snorri characterize Óðinn

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<sup>75</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 299.

<sup>76</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, IX.6.1.

as a magician, but both authors also ascribe very different personalities to their respective Óðinn. In the *Gesta Danorum* Othinus is the main character of two episodes, his dispute with Frigga over a gold statue of himself in Book one, and the rape of the Ruthenian princess, Rinda in Book three. Let us look first at the this first narrative:

Ea tempestate cum Othinus quidam Europa tota falso diuinitatis titulo censeretur, apud Vpsalam tamen crebriorem diuersandi usum habetat eamque siue ob incolarum inertiam siue locorum amoenitatem singulari quadam habitationis consuetudine dignatur. Cuius numen Septentrionis reges propensiore cultu prosequi cupientes effigiem ipsius aureo complexi simulacro statuam sue dignationis indicem maxima cum religionis simultatione Bizantium transmiserunt. Cuius etiam brachiorum lineamenta confertissimo armillarum pondere perstringebant. Ille tanta sui celebritate gauisus mittentium charitatem cupide exosculatus est. Cuius coniunx Frigga, quo cultior progredi posset, aditis fabris aurum statue detrahendum curauit. Quibus Othinus suspendio consumptis statuam in crepidine collocauit, quam etiam mira artis industria ad humanos tactus uocalem reddidit. At nihilominus Frigga cultus sui nitorem diuinis mariti honoribus anteponebat uni familiarium se stupro subiecit, cuius ingenio simulacrum demolita aurum publice superstitioni consecratum ad priuati luxus instrumentum conuertit. Nec pensi duxit impudicitiam sectari, quo promptius auaritia frueretur. Indigna foemina, que numinis coniugio potiretur! Hoc loci quid aliud adiecerim quam tale numen hac coniuge dignum extitisse? Tanto quondam errore mortalium ludificabantur ingenia. Igitur Othinus gemina uxoris iniuria laceratus haut leuius imaginis sue quam thori lesione dolebat. Duplici itaque ruboris irritamento perstrictus plenum ingenui pudoris exilium carpsit eoque se contracti dedecoris sordes aboliturum putauit.

(At that time there was a man called Odin who was believed throughout Europe, though falsely, to be a god; he had the habit of staying more frequently than anywhere at Uppsala, particularly liking to live there either because of the inhabitants' torpor or the beauty of the countryside. The kings of the North, eager to honour his divinity with more enthusiastic worship, executed a representation of him in gold, the arms thickly encircled with heavy bracelets, and as an expression of their devotion sent it with the utmost show of piety to Byzantium. Delighting in his high celebrity, Odin avidly greeted the donors' affection. His wife, Frigg, desiring to walk abroad more bedizened, brought in smiths to strip the statue of its gold. Odin had them hanged and then, setting the image on a plinth, by a marvelous feat of workmanship even made it respond with a voice to human touch. Nevertheless, subordinating her husband's divine honours to the splendour of her own apparel, Frigg submitted herself to the lust of one of her servants; by his cunning she had the effigy

demolished and the gold which had been devoted to public idolatry she switched to her personal extravagance. This woman, unworthy of a deified consort, felt no scruples about pursuing unchastity, provided she could more speedily enjoy what she coveted! Need I add anything but to say that such a god deserved such a wife? Men's intelligence was once made ridiculous by extreme gullibility of this kind. Consequently Odin, wounded by both his wife's offences, grieved as heavily over the damage to his likeness as the trespass on his bed. Stung by this double embarrassment, he took to exile replete with an honest shame, thinking he would thereby obliterate the stain of his disgrace.)<sup>77</sup>

Saxo states that the kings of the North were particularly eager to celebrate Othinus' divinity and had a gold representation of the god made to send it to his residence in Byzantium as a gift.

Anyway, the second part of this sentence is highly interesting. Saxo situates the headquarters of the impostors in Byzantium. This eastern origin of the gods, which is a particularity of Scandinavian euhemerism, has been subjected to many scholarly debates regarding its signification.<sup>78</sup> There were several references to the eastern origin of the gods before Saxo, they referred to Turkey or Greece, indeed very close to Byzantium whose empire covered those two countries. Nevertheless, Saxo specifically mentioned Byzantium. It was not an insignificant choice of word nor a mere synonym for "Turkey" or "Greece". In fact, this element will be particularly important to understand Saxo's euhemerism.<sup>79</sup>

This account contains several traditional motives from apologetic accounts on the birth of idolatry. Because of these similarities, Annette Lassen commented that: "I de to lange fortællinger om Odin i *Gesta Danorum* er Saxos kristne polemik mod denne hedenske gud central." (In the two long stories about Odin in the *Gesta Danorum* Saxo's Christian polemic against the pagan gods is central.)<sup>80</sup> She saw in this narrative an illustration of Lactantius' theology: "Det er, som om Saxo med sine livagtige fortællinger illustrerer Laktants' teologiske pointer." (It is as if Saxo, with his lifelike stories, illustrates Lactantius' theological arguments.)<sup>81</sup> The similarities between this narrative and the work of Lactantius as well as with the biblical Book of Wisdom are important and have also been remarked by Karsten Friis-

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<sup>77</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, I.7.1.

<sup>78</sup> See for instance Faulkes, "Descent from the Gods.", 92-125; and, Skovgaard-Petersen, "The Way to Byzantium," 121-133; as well as the PhD thesis of the same author, *Da tidernes herre var Nær* (Copenhagen: Den danske historiske Forening, 1987). 81-86.

<sup>79</sup> For a lengthier discussion on the role of geography in euhemeristic narratives see chapter 6.

<sup>80</sup> Lassen, *Odin på kristent pergament*, 215. My translation.

<sup>81</sup> Lassen, *Odin på kristent pergament*, 216.

Jensen.<sup>82</sup> Wellendorf too noted that this narrative resemble those of saints destroying pagan idols.<sup>83</sup> It is true that Saxo uses several motives already found in Lactantius, but as I will show, Saxo put these motives to another use than a traditional criticism of paganism.

As many Christian tales regarding paganism, Saxo's narrative involves a sculpture which is destroyed. Camille Michael remarked "[t]o some extent iconoclasm and idolatry represented two sides of the same problem: to want to destroy a false image, one had to believe in its evil efficacy, its power over the self as well as the Other."<sup>84</sup> Typically, narratives of iconoclast saints, may show how the idols were inhabited by demons. Such narratives are found both in *Heimskringla*, when saint Óláfr destroys the statue of Thor, and in the *Gesta Danorum* when Absalon has the statue of Santovit put down. In both these narratives the statues contained animals which symbolized demonic presence. In the present narrative however, the statue plays an entirely different role. The Nordic kings did not make a representation of Othinus for themselves to worship but as a gift to Othinus. This statue is not an object of religious devotion and is never confused with Othinus himself.

Othinus' statue nonetheless possesses the aspect and one of the characteristics of the idols of traditional Christian narratives. It can produce sounds, a trait often ascribed to pagan idols as they would be inhabited by demons.<sup>85</sup> Yet, in Saxo's narrative this ability does not come from demons but is the result of craftsmanship. This statue belongs to the medieval tradition of automats not of the idol proper.<sup>86</sup> The literary motive of the automat may, at time, be connected with idolatry, but it is not the case here. The purpose of the voice was not to accentuate the likeliness of the statue with a living human being but to serve as an alarm against thieves. Similarly, the golden statue is not destroyed out of religious zeal, but to acquire its jewelry.

As such, this story is only superficially, albeit deliberately, linked with idolatry. Its main character, and main subject, is not the idolater, but the pseudo-god. Furthermore, Saxo's criticism of Othinus does not lie on him impersonating a god, which he does not in this narrative. Instead, Saxo's narrative is essentially a criticism of lust, greediness, and vanity.

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<sup>82</sup> Friis-Jensen, "Saxo og det 12.," 8-9.

<sup>83</sup> Wellendorf, *Gods and Humans*, 78-79.

<sup>84</sup> Camille Michael, *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-Making in Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), xxvii.

<sup>85</sup> For a discussion on idols speaking because of demonic possession see Michael, *The Gothic Idol*, 57-72.

<sup>86</sup> Michael, *The Gothic Idol*, 244-258.

### 5.5.2. Othinus and Rinda

Othinus is one of the main characters of a second narrative, that of Rinda's rape. This narrative follows Saxo's account of the war between Balderus and the Dane Høtherus which I discuss in more details in the part regarding the euhemeristic treatment of minor deities. This narrative takes place after Othinus' son, Balderus, was killed in war by the Dane Høtherus. A prophecy announced that Othinus would beget the avenger of Balderus with the Ruthenian princess Rinda. In this perspective Othinus goes to the court of the Ruthenian king and disguises himself as a soldier in order to gain the king's trust. Othinus quickly becomes a high ranked general and friend of the king but fails to gain Rinda's love. There follows a series of scenes of rejections from Rinda who refuses Othinus' advances whatever his disguise. But one day Rinda falls ill and Othinus, under the disguise of female physician, rapes the princess. As he states, Saxo cannot decide whether this version of the story is the true one or whether Rinda's father willingly allowed Othinus to rape his daughter in exchange for his good services.<sup>87</sup> Because of these deeds, Othinus is once again exiled from the society of the pseudo-gods and replaced by Ollerus.

As for the precedent episode discussed above, this narrative is also about unlawful sexual relationship. It is unclear what is reproached to Othinus by his fellow pseudo-gods. The *Gesta Danorum* mentions the "uaris detrimentis" (various lapses) of Othinus. The use of the plural suggests that the rape of Rinda was only one of the deeds reproached to Othinus. It may be that one of these shameful actions was to disguise himself as a woman, a transgression of the same kind than that of *seiðr* which undermines the character's manliness and contravenes to the social gender norms.

As predicted by the prophecy Rinda gives birth to a child. This is the only instance in the *Gesta Danorum* where a pseudo-god and an ordinary human produce a child together. Unlike as in Greek mythology, no known Old Norse myth describes a union between a mortal human and a deity. Yet the descent from pseudo-gods was valued and highlighted in genealogies such as that of the *Íslendingabók*, *Historia Norwegie*, and Snorri's *Edda*. In these texts the pseudo-gods are the prestigious ancestor of kings' dynasties and their presence in the genealogical tree is evidently a way to increase the prestige and legitimacy of their alleged descendants. On the contrary, the only union between an ordinary human and a pseudo-god found in the *Gesta*

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<sup>87</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, III.4.1-III.4.8.



*Danorum* is an aggression performed with the help of deception and treachery. Furthermore, the victim is not a Dane but a Ruthenian, and consequently the produce of the union, Bous, is not a Scandinavian prince but a Ruthenian warrior as stated later by Saxo.<sup>88</sup>

As the story continues, Bous does fulfill his destiny and kills Høtherus but is also killed in the confrontation. No child of Bous is mentioned, and the death of this character at a young age suggests that he had none. As such the *Gesta Danorum* precludes the idea that Othinus may be the dynastic ancestor of the Danish kings. In that, this episode subverts the original meaning of the Scandinavian genealogies including pseudo-gods. In those traditional genealogies, the pseudo-gods are the ancestors of kings, it is them who are at the origin of the institution of monarchy in Scandinavia. In Saxo's work, the union between ordinary humans and pseudo-gods has precisely the opposite effect: it is characterized by unlawful intercourse and its consequence is not the production of new kings but the death of existing ones! To Saxo, the contact with the pseudo-gods is not a vector of social order and prosperity, but on the contrary undermines it. As I shall discuss in more details in the following part concerning the minor pseudo-deities, this is not only true for Othinus but for all of Saxo's euhemerized gods.

We may also note that as discussed in section 3.3.2 regarding the motive of Thor's hammer Saxo's treatment of Othinus is not exclusively euhemeristic. In the ninth book of the *Gesta Danorum* his depiction of the god is more akin to demonism than it is to euhemerism:

Quibus ad summam usque desperationem proeuctis, dum uulneris immanitas adhibita fomentorum genera frustraretur, quidam stupenda magnitudine egri lectulum adire conspectus, si sibi illorum quos armis oppressurus foret animas dedicasset, protinus incolumitate gauisurum promittit. Nec nomine quidem suppresso Rostarum se dici subiunxit. Animaduertens autem Syuardus paruule promissionis impendio ingens comparari beneficium posse petitis cupide paruit.<sup>89</sup>

(When their efforts had proved completely hopeless since the terrific gash responded to none of their poultices, an amazingly tall person was observed to approach the sickbed; he guaranteed to Sigvard that he would immediately enjoy sound health provided he would consecrate to him the souls of those men he was to strike down in war. Nor did he remain anonymous, but went on to give his name as Roster. Realizing that he could gain a vast blessing at the price of one small promise, Sigvard gladly acceded to his request.)

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<sup>88</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, III.4.15.

<sup>89</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, IX.4.12.

As in Old Norse non-euhemerized narratives, Othinus is collecting the souls of dead warriors. However, there is no indication here that he does so in order to prepare for Ragnarok and his proposal to gift earthly goods against souls reminds of the motive of the pact with the devil.<sup>90</sup>

### 5.5.3. Óðinn in Snorri's Prologue to the *Edda* and in *Skáldskaparmál*

Óðinn is one of the main characters of the prologue to the *Edda* in which he is a descendant from King Priam of Troy through Priam's son, Thor. He is said to have many talents and to possess the gift of prophecy. This is because of this gift that Óðinn foresaw that he will prosper in the north, and thus migrated there. Throughout his journey toward Scandinavia, Óðinn goes through diverse regions where he installs some of his sons as kings. Óðinn's first son to reign over a Scandinavian region is Skjöld, who is said to rule over Jutland and whose descendants are the legendary Danish dynasty of the Skjöldungar. Óðinn himself settled in Sigtunir in Sweden, where he reproduces the legal and political system of his Trojan homeland. As the narrator states, Óðinn placed his son Sæmingr as ruler over Norway, and the Norwegian kings descend from him, and did the same in Sweden with another son, Yngvi, who is the ancestor of the Ynglingar kings.

Snorri gives another euhemeristic interpretation of the Old Norse god in *Skáldskaparmál*. This passage seldom speaks about Óðinn but is chiefly concerned about Þórr whose mythological persona is presented as a distorted memory of the Trojan hero, Hector. Snorri does not explicitly state whose classical hero was Óðinn but says that Pyrrhus, whose persona was mythologized as the Fenris wolf, killed Priam. As, in the Norse myth, Óðinn was killed by Fenrir it is thus clear that Snorri identified Óðinn with Priam in *Skáldskaparmál* while he did not in the prologue.

### 5.5.4. Óðinn in *Heimskringla*: the Foreign King

Contrary to Saxo, Snorri does not systematically use euhemerism alongside a moral criticism of the gods. His work is not entirely devoid of moralizing comments but those are lighter than Saxo's. We may note, for instance, his reflection on Freyja in chapter ten: "Freyja was rather fickle." But the pseudo-gods are also portrayed as the vectors of social improvements as when they outlawed incest which was previously practiced among the Vanir.<sup>91</sup> Óðinn remains the

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<sup>90</sup> On this topic see Wolfgang S. Seiferth, "The Concept of the Devil and the Myth of the Pact in Literature Prior to Goethe," *Monatshefte* 44, no. 6 (1952): 283-289.

<sup>91</sup> *Heimskringla* I, 13.

most important pseudo-god in Snorri's narrative. His portrayal is ambiguous as he is a powerful and inspiring leader, a charismatic poet, but also practices *seiðr* which Freyja taught him.

The reference to Óðinn's practice of *seiðr* may be a reproach, as, as the narrator states, it was shameful for men to practice such kind of magic. It is unclear, however, whether the reproach is directed to Óðinn himself or to later magicians. Ármann Jakobsson argued that as a god Óðinn is above the rules and social norms which apply to humans. He is a transcendent being and as such transcends the social norms of the mere mortals. He states: "A god who is queer is not queer."<sup>92</sup> In *Ynglinga saga* Óðinn is not a god but a king and a cultural hero but Ármann is certainly right to remark that in this text Óðinn seems to be more than human. Yet, the moral positioning of the narrator regarding Óðinn's practice of *seiðr* remains unclear. The narrator neither explicitly condemns nor approves the pseudo-god's behaviour.

In other parts of *Heimskringla* Snorri portrays the legitimate struggle of Norwegian kings against magicians. The ideal king, even his pagan iteration, such as Haraldr hárfagri, fights sorcerers but never practices magic himself. The good kings are indeed portrayed as above the social norms of humans, or at least making little case of them: Haraldr hárfagri used one of his sons to kill another one,<sup>93</sup> king Óláfr Tryggvason broke the laws of hospitality when he was the host of their pagan subjects,<sup>94</sup> and saint Óláfr tricked the pagan to destroy their idol.<sup>95</sup> But the aim of these transgressions was precisely to fight paganism and sorcery. These good kings do not feel bound to social norms as they are the agents of a higher power. Óðinn's transgressions are of another kind and his purpose is not to enforce God's order, on the contrary.

I would suggest that *Ynglinga saga* does indeed draw a connection between kingship and transgression but that this connection is the other way around. *Ynglinga saga* does not exactly portray Óðinn as transgressing because he is a king, but shows how his transgressions allows him to become a king. Óðinn, as a king and a quasi-divine figure is not only allowed to transgress social norms but is expected to do so. It is the act of transgression itself which contributes to put him above the rest of the society. For instance, Óðinn does not only indulge in *seiðr* because he can, but uses this kind of magic to access to a higher position in society and

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<sup>92</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, "Óðinn as Mother: The Old Norse Deviant Patriarch," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 126 (2011): 13.

<sup>93</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 138-139.

<sup>94</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 317-318.

<sup>95</sup> *Heimskringla II*, 188-190.

continues to use it to maintain his political power.<sup>96</sup> In that regard, Óðinn may fit the model of the “foreign king” as it was defined by Marshall Sahlins. Sahlins noted that many pre-modern cultures had the notion that the king was originally a foreigner. The foreign king is both a civilizer and a transgressor. As Sahlins noted: “A common counterpart of the fabled origins of the stranger-kings is their cultural superiority: just as in the Moctezuma text [A text written by Hernán Cortés about the Aztec ruler Moctezuma], they [the Aztecs] are (literally) the civilizers—they built cities.”<sup>97</sup> And, he adds: “The hero is often known as well for more sinister exploits such as fratricide, parricide, incest, or other crimes against common morality, which likewise puts him above and beyond ordinary society and proves he is stronger than it.”<sup>98</sup>

These descriptions, fits very well Óðinn, who is both a witch-king and a cultural hero. Yet, Óðinn still lacks one of the characteristics which Sahlins ascribed to the foreign king. According to Sahlins, the union between the foreign king and the indigenous people is sealed through a marriage between the king and an autochthonous woman. Before his conquests, Óðinn had married Frigg<sup>99</sup> and he does not marry a woman from the Vanir after their subjugation. The narrator implies that after the subjugation of the Vanir Njörðr had to divorce from his unnamed sister, as incest was prohibited among the Æsir. This would mean that a Vanir woman became available to an Æsir man, but we do not know whether this union was fulfilled and, in anyway, the text gives no information regarding a possible marriage of Óðinn with a Vanir woman. Later, after his conquest of Sweden, Óðinn marries Skaði, who had been previously married with Njörðr, presumably after he divorced his sister. The narrator specifies that Óðinn had many sons with Skaði, including Sæmingr, who is the ancestor of the jarls of Hlaðir. It is unclear, however, whether Skaði is a Swede, and thus, if her marriage with Óðinn is indeed of the type described by Sahlins.

By contrast, the euhemeristic narrative of Saxo is not at all in adequation with Sahlins’ observations. To Saxo the pseudo-gods are indeed foreigners, but they do not assume the role of kings in Scandinavia. On the contrary, Saxo’s Danish kings are always characterized as indigenous. Whereas Snorri’s narrative proper starts in Asia, the first words of Saxo’s first book

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<sup>96</sup> In *Heimskringla I*, 11-12 Óðinn uses his *bjannak* – a hapax which may mean “blessing” – to grant victory to his soldier, in *Heimskringla I*, 13 he uses his magic to turn Mímir’s head into a counsellor, in *Heimskringla I*, 16, he uses tricks and illusion to conquer land from Gylfi, and in *Heimskringla I*, 19-20, the narrator first explains what powers does *seiðr* grant to Óðinn and only then informs the audience that the practice of this art is shameful.

<sup>97</sup> Graeber and Sahlins, *On Kings*, 224.

<sup>98</sup> Graeber and Sahlins, *On Kings*, 227.

<sup>99</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 12.

are: “Dan igitur et Angul, a quibus Danorum coepit origo, patre Humblo procreati non solum conditores gentis nostre, uerumetiam rectores fuere.” (The Danes trace their beginnings from Dan and Angel, sons of Humli, who were not merely the founders of our race but its leaders also.)<sup>100</sup> in the same paragraph Saxo mentions Dudo of Saint Quentin’s statement who claimed that the Danes came from the Danaans, that is the Greeks: Quamquam Dudo, rerum Aquitanicarum scriptor, Danos a Danais ortos nuncupatosque recenseat. (Dudo however, who wrote a history of France, tells us that the Danes sprang from the Danaans and were named after them.) Indeed Saxo makes a reference to the *De moribus et actis primorum Normanniæ ducum* I.3: “Igitur Daci nuncupantur a suis Danai, vel Dani, glorianturque se ex Antenore progenitos ; qui, quondam Trojæ finibus depopulatis, mediis elapsus Achivis, Illyricos fines penetravit cum suis.” (Therefore, the Dacians call themselves Dananeans, or Danes, and take pride to be descendants of Antenor who, after depopulating the border of Troy, escaped with the Achaeans and entered the border of Illyria with his men.)<sup>101</sup>

Yet, Saxo quickly returns to his own narrative tracing the ancestry of the Danes from Dan. As Peter Andersen notes, the proximity of the names Adam and Dan is probably not a coincidence: Dan is the founder of the kingdom and nothing of importance existed before him.<sup>102</sup> Saxo’s foreign pseudo-gods do not regenerate the Danish political institutions from the outside, as with Snorri, but, on the contrary, undermine Danish society. As I shall discuss in the next part, the two authors’ stances on the role of the foreign pseudo-gods have an impact on their respective version of the “eastern origins” narrative as well as their conception of the *translatio imperii* movement.

## 5.6.Saxo’s and Snorri’s Minor Deities

### 5.6.1. Saxo’s Balderus: the Berserk

I will now discuss Saxo’s and Snorri description of deities other than Odin. As we shall see, these depictions follow the authors general authorial aims as we studied them. In the *Gesta Danorum* the only minor gods to have an important role beside Othinus and his wife Frigga is Othinus’ son, Balderus. In the *Heimskringla* and in the *Edda* the euhemerized Baldr is only

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<sup>100</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, I.1.1.

<sup>101</sup> Dudo of Saint-Quentin, *De moribus et actis primorum Normanniæ ducum*, ed. Jules Lair (Caen: Typ. F. Le Blanc-Hardel, imprimeur-libraire, 1865), 130. My translation.

<sup>102</sup> Peter Andersen, *Nordens gotiske storhedstid*, University of Southern Denmark Studies in History and Social Sciences 433 (Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2012), 26.

mentioned by name and does not play any role in the narratives. I will thus not compare Saxo's and Snorri's euhemerized version of the gods, but compare Saxo's Balderus with non-euhemerized occurrence of the god in Old Norse sources including Snorri's *Edda*. Balderus' conflict against the Danish king Høtherus is one of the main narratives of the third book of the work, the same book. Balderus is presented as a "demi-god" (semideus)<sup>103</sup> which suggests that Othinus conceived him with an ordinary woman. I will refer to him as a pseudo-god, as Balderus' shared heritage does not affect his behavior as a pseudo-god.

Balderus falls in love with the princess Nanna who is betrothed to her lover, the Danish king Høtherus. As Saxo specifies, Nanna had been seduced by the talents of Høtherus and not merely by his beauty.<sup>104</sup> On the contrary, Balderus, Othinus' son, has been aroused only by the sight of the princess: "Accidit autem, ut Othini filius Balderus Nanne corpus abluentis aspectu sollicitatus infinito amore corriperetur." (Now it happened that Balder, the son of Odin, stirred at the sight of Nanna's body as she was bathing and then gripped by an unbounded passion.)<sup>105</sup> Because of his lust for Nanna Høtherus decides to kill his rival, Balderus. Both Nanna and Gevarus, her father, wish to marry the princess to Høtherus. Yet Balderus is too powerful and Gevarus does not dare to refuse his marriage request. Indeed, the pseudo-god is immune to every material, including steel, and cannot be defeated in battle. Fortunately, Gevarus informs Høtherus that a magical sword, able to pierce Balderus' skin may be retrieved from the *satyrus* Miming.<sup>106</sup> Høtherus finds the sword and ultimately triumphs over Balderus. The pseudo-god does not immediately die from this wound but survives long enough to dream a dream prophesying his own death which ultimately happens three days later:

Quo feruente lectica se in aciem deferri iussit, ne intra tabernaculum obscura morte defungi uideretur. Postera nocte eidem Proserpina per quietem astare perspecta post triduum se eius complexu usuram denuntiat. Nec inane somnii presagium fuit. Nam Balderum elapso triduo nimius uulneris cruciatus absumpsit. Cuius corpus exercitus regio funere elatum facto colle condendum curauit.

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<sup>103</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, III.2.4.

<sup>104</sup> It is possible to see the influence of courtly culture in this positive representation of premarital love and depiction of Høtherus as a well-educated man. Marlen Ferrer argued that the absence of courtly literature in 13<sup>th</sup> century Denmark is not a proof of absence of courtly culture at all. According to her, the *Gesta Danorum* contains traces of courtly culture. Marlen Ferrer, "State Formation and Courtly Culture in the Scandinavian Kingdoms in the High Middle Ages," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 37, no. 1 (February 2012): 8-11.

<sup>105</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, III.2.3.

<sup>106</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, III.2.5.

(As the struggle raged he gave orders for his litter to be carried to the battle front, in case it should be thought he was dying unseen inside his tent. The following night the goddess of death appeared to him in a dream standing at his side, and declared that in three days' time she would clasp him in her arms. It was no idle vision, for, after three days had gone by, the acute pain of his injury brought his end.)<sup>107</sup>

This story is known in a non-euhemerized form in Snorri's *Edda*, as well as in the eddic poem *Baldrs draumar*. The relation between Saxo's and Snorri's versions of Baldr's myth has been the subject of many scholarly discussions. This discussion has initially been about the relation of these two narratives to the Old Norse pre-Christian myths. Some scholars, as Otto Höfler regarded the two narratives as based on different versions of the myth of Baldr, while others regarded Saxo's version as less truthful to the original myth than that of Snorri. Dumézil, for instance, regarded Saxo's version as an inversion of the Old Norse version with inclusions of material initially about Freyr.<sup>108</sup> Karen Bek-Pedersen compared the two Scandinavian narratives with Celtic myths, seeing similarities between Celtic material with both Saxo and Snorri, thus suggesting that both narratives came from the Indo-European mythical tradition.<sup>109</sup> More recently scholars such as Anatoly Liberman viewed the two narratives as equally removed from an original Old Norse myth.<sup>110</sup> Beyond the question of the relation between these two narratives, we may note that both authors use similar motives to suit their different narrative projects.

In both versions, Baldr receives sinister dreams predicting his death. In Snorri's narrative the dreams are prophetic and intervene way before Baldr's life is in danger. In Saxo's euhemerized version, the vision intervenes only after Balderus is mortally wounded. Both authors chose a chronology which suited their purpose. Snorri's version of Baldr's myth is built as a tragic tale and the appeal of the story comes from the tension between the certainty of the death, made evident by the dreams, and the vain efforts to avoid it. Saxo's narrative, on the other hand, is not tragic, and Balderus is not the main character but the antagonist. Høtherus' struggles would not be as heroic if the death of his enemy was foreseen from the beginning. On the contrary, the dreams serve the narrative better as a confirmation of Høtherus' final triumph.

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<sup>107</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, III.3.7.

<sup>108</sup> See Georges Dumézil, "Høtherus et Balderus à Otto Höfler, 1. Mai 1961," *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 83 (1962): 259-270.

<sup>109</sup> Karen Bek-Pedersen, "Oppositions and Cooperations in the Baldr Myth, with Irish and Welsh Parallels," *The Journal of Indo-European Studies* 34, no. 1-2 (2006): 5-26.

<sup>110</sup> Anatoly Liberman, "Some Controversial Aspects of the Myth of Baldr," *Alvíssmál* 11 (2004): 48-49.

Another motive used by both authors is that of Baldr's invulnerability. In the non-euhemerized account, Balderus is immune to every material because the gods wanted to protect him following his gruesome dreams. In the *Gesta Danorum*, Balderus' invulnerability has nothing to do with his bad dreams, which as we saw came only later, but is akin to the literary figure of the berserk. According to Snorri, Baldr is made invulnerable to every material in order to protect him against his death, which he foresaw in his dreams. In Saxo's narrative Balderus' invulnerability is used in relation to the Old Norse literary *topos* of the *berskerkir*'s immunity against traditional weapons. See for instance their description in *Heimskringla*: “[Óðins menn] drápu mannfólkit, en hvártki eldr né jarn orti á þá. Þat er kallaðr berserksgangr.”<sup>111</sup> ([Óðinn's men] killed the people, but neither fire nor iron took effect on them. That is called berserk fury.) In the *Gesta Danorum* Balderus' behaves like a typical berserk from the *Íslendinga sögur*: an abductor, using his supernatural strength to obtain whatever he wants, especially women.<sup>112</sup> More specifically, his behavior and fate may be compared to that of the berserk Björn blakki from the second chapter of *Gísla saga*. Björn also intimidated a family to force them to give him their daughter in marriage but was fortunately killed with the help of a magical sword, Grásida. As for the motive of Baldr's dreams, the two authors used the motive of his immunity in accordance with their authorial aims. In the *Gesta Danorum*, Balderus' bad dreams happens only at the end of his life, and thus could not be the cause of his immunity. Furthermore, to treat his universal immunity as a berserk's characteristic is well suited for his role as an antagonist.<sup>113</sup>

As in the two narratives about Othinus, Saxo uses the motive of lust. To qualify the god's feelings toward Nanna Saxo does not use the word *amor* alone, as he did to describe Nanna's feelings toward Høtherus,<sup>114</sup> but uses it alongside with substantives such as *libido*<sup>115</sup> or *stupri*<sup>116</sup> which qualify physical desire with a negative connotation related to perversity or debauchery. As it can be observed through these examples, Saxo uses sexual subjects in parallel with a moralistic discourse, a harsh criticism of sensual desire in contrast with a proper *amor* driven by virtues.

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<sup>111</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 17.

<sup>112</sup> See Benjamin Blaney, “The Berserk Suitor: The Literary Application of a Stereotyped Theme,” *Scandinavian Studies* 54, no. 4 (1982): 279-294.

<sup>113</sup> Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, eds., *Vestfirðinga sögur*, Íslensk fornrit 6 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1943), 6-11.

<sup>114</sup> Blaney, “The Berserk Suitor,” 144.

<sup>115</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, III.2.3.

<sup>116</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, III.4.7.



### 5.6.2. Thoro and Þórr: The traveller and the Brute

Þórr, as a euhemerized god, is an important character of the prologue to the *Edda* and is at least mentioned in the other euhemeristic works. As for Balderus, Saxo's portrayal of Þórr, whom he calls Thoro, contains elements which exist in the non-euhemerized portrayal of the god, but arranged in a different way. The thunder god is briefly mentioned during the battle between Balderus and Høtherus where he is seen crushing the armies of Høtherus with his club (*claua*). His supernatural strength should have granted victory to the sides of the pseudo-gods, but Balderus managed to cut off the shaft of Thoro's club:

Proinde uictoria ad superos concessisset, ni Høtherus inclinata suorum acie celerius aduolans clauam preciso manubrio inutilem reddidisset. Quo telo defecti diui subitem dedere fugam.<sup>117</sup>

(Consequently victory would have gone to the gods, had not Hother, whose line of men had bent inwards, flown forward nimbly and rendered the club useless by lopping off the haft. Immediately they were denied this weapon the deities fled.)

As in the Old Norse non-euhemerized portrayals of the god, Thor's strength is not as much innate than it is granted by its magical gears and the pseudo-god becomes immediately weaker after Høtherus chops off the shaft of his club. It is interesting that in this narrative Saxo provides an etiological myth to explain why the shaft of Þórr's hammer is short. This explanation, however, is entirely different from that found in the *Edda* where the defect is due to a default of fabrication due to Loki's sabotage.<sup>118</sup> Saxo's explanation is more suited for his narrative which is essentially about the downfall of the pseudo-gods.

Þórr is euhemerized both in the prologue to the *Edda* and in *Skáldskaparmál*. In the prologue Þórr is the grandson of king Priam through his daughter, Troan. In the prologue Þórr retains several of the characteristics of his mythological self, he is strong, a killer of monsters, and is married to Sif. Unlike Saxo, Snorri does not mention Þórr's most famous characteristic, his hammer. In the prologue Þórr is the distant ancestor of Óðinn, who is himself the ancestor of several European royal dynasties. The Þórr from *Skáldskaparmál* is also Trojan and related to Priam but is not the same character as the one from the prologue as in this text Snorri identifies him with the Trojan hero, Hector, son of Priam. This identification comes from the similarity

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<sup>117</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, III.2.10.

<sup>118</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*. 1, 42.

between the name of the Trojan hero and the epithet Öku-Þórr (Driving Þórr), one of the thunder god's names. All the other associations between classical heroes and Norse gods are made on the basis of their respective relation to Þórr. Óðinn, for instance, is the father of Þórr, and thus, must be the equivalent to Priam, who is the father of Hector. Achilles, who killed Hector, must then be the Miðgarðr serpent, who killed Þórr, etc. In *Skáldskaparmál* Snorri does not provide a specific explanation for how the Æsir moved from Troy to Scandinavia but identifies a certain Áli with Aeneas who escaped Troy and “achieved great deeds” while Hector's sons, Móði and Magni, conquered Phrygia:

En Móði ok Magni synir Okuþórs kvámu at krefja landa Ála eða Viðar. Hann er Eneas, hann kom braut af Troju ok vann síðan stór verk. Svá er ok sagt at synir Ektoris kómu til Frigialands ok settusk sjálfir í þat ríki, en ráku í braut Elenum.<sup>119</sup>

(And Oku-Thor's sons, Modi and Magni, came to claim lands from Ali or Vidar. The latter is Aeneas, he escaped from Troy and later achieved great deeds. Similarly it is also said that Hector's sons arrived in the land of Phrygia and established themselves in that kingdom, driving Helenus out.)<sup>120</sup>

As such Snorri's proposes two mutually incompatible portrayal of Þórr. Furthermore, the Þórr from the prologue and the one from *Skáldskaparmál* served different functions within their respective euhemeristic narratives. The Þórr from the prologue explains the genealogical connection between the Trojans and Óðinn, and thus between the Trojans and the Scandinavians. In that sense it really serves a political discourse connected to the notion of *origo gentis* and correspond to Nickolas Roubekas view according to which Old Norse euhemerism is a tool to interpret history.<sup>121</sup> On the other hand, the Þórr from *Skáldskaparmál* serves to explain how historical narratives were turned into myths and are thus part of a genuine attempt at producing a theory of the origin of myths.

### 5.6.3. Frø and Freyr: The Swedish God

Freyr is an important character of *Ynglinga saga*, a recurring character of the *Gesta Danorum*, but does not appear as a euhemerized pseudo-god in the *Edda*. Frø has several minor occurrences throughout the *Gesta Danorum*. Saxo depicts him as a god presiding over sacrifices in Sweden (*Gesta Danorum* I.8.12; III.2.13). In the first episode it is only mentioned that

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<sup>119</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*. 1, 6.

<sup>120</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 66.

<sup>121</sup> Roubekas, *An Ancient Theory of Religion*, 173.

Hadding performed religious sacrifice in his honor. In the second, it is said that Frø worsened the practice of sacrifice by allowing human sacrifice. He is identified as the ancestor of several Swedish heroes in VIII.3.11. Finally, in IX.4.1 the pseudo-god is described as killing the Norwegian king, Sigvarth and sending the wives of his kinsmen to a brothel. Of these four occurrences, three portray him in connection with Sweden and two with pagan sacrifices. These two characteristics are found elsewhere in the Old Norse descriptions of Freyr. In *Heimskringla* he is the ancestor of the Ynglingar, initially a Swedish dynasty and he is said to dwell in the city of Uppsala.<sup>122</sup> The last of these occurrences, where the pseudo-god sell women into prostitution may be connected to his reputation as a god of pleasure and fertility, as for instance in Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* IV.XXVI where he is said to preside over pleasure and to possess a "huge phallus" (inges priapo). His behavior may also remind that of the pagan tyrants from hagiographic tales who sent women saints to houses of prostitution.<sup>123</sup>

In *Ynglinga saga* Freyr is also connected to sexuality but to a lesser degree. He comes from the Vanir, and the narrator states that incest used to be lawful among them. The narrator only explicitly states that Njörðr was married to his sister and says nothing about whether Freyr and Freyja had been married prior to their assimilation to the Æsir. Beside this dubious origin, Freyr is not connected to sexuality. As for Saxo's Frø Freyr is connected to Sweden as Óðinn gave him Uppsalir as his home. We may note that among all of the gods' named above in this passage: Nóatún, Uppsalir, Himinbjörg, Þrúðvangr, and Breiðablik, only Uppsalir is a historical earthly place. Freyr's father, Njörðr succeeded Óðinn as a king, The Svíar, attributed supernatural abilities to Njörðr and believed that the prosperity of their land was due to him. They did not think of him as a god, however, and after his death merely burned him as a man. The belief in the supernatural powers of the rulers increased during the reign of Njörðr's son, Freyr. Freyr turned his home, Uppsalir, into an important religious and politic center and as such is credited as an essential force in the creation of the Swedish state:

Hann var vinsæll ok ársæll sem faðir hans. Freyr reisti at Uppsölum hof mikit ok setti þar hofuðstað sinn, lagði þar til allar skyldir sínar, lönð ok lausan eyri. Þá hófsk Uppsalaauðr ok hefir haldizk æ síðan.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> See for instance in *Heimskringla* where Snorri locates Freyr's dwelling at Uppsala. *Heimskringla I*, 16.

<sup>123</sup> On this motif see for instance Kathleen Kelly, *Performing Virginitiy and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages*, Routledge Research in Medieval Studies (London: Routledge, 2000), 42-44.

<sup>124</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 23-24.

(He was popular and blessed with good seasons, like his father. Freyr built a great temple at Uppsalar and made it his capital, directing to it all his taxes in land and movable property. This was the origin of the Uppsalaauðr ('Uppsala wealth') and it has continued ever since.)

As his father Freyr is connected with wealth and prosperity. Furthermore, it is during his reign that the peace of Fróði occurred:

Á hans dögum hófzk Fróðafriðr. Þá var ok ár um ǫll lönd. Kenndu Svíar þat Frey. Var hann því meirr dýrkaðr en ǫnnur goðin sem á hans dögum varð landsfólkit auðgara en fyrr af friðinum ok ári.<sup>125</sup>

(The peace of Fróði began in his time. There was prosperity throughout all lands. The Svíar attributed that to Freyr. As a result of peace and good harvests, he was the more honoured than other gods the more prosperous the people of the land became in his time than before.)

Snorri does not state it explicitly, but his wording implies that the peace is not due to Freyr but only mistakenly attributed to him by the Svíar. At this stage, the people only attributes to Freyr the same power that his father had. While the narrator uses the term “goð” (god) to refer to Freyr and Njörðr, at this stage the Svíar only honor them as powerful living ruler. This, however, changes after Freyr’s death:

Freyr tók sótt, en er at honum leið sóttin, leituðu menn sér ráðs ok létu fá menn til hans koma, en bjoggu haug mikinn ok létu dyr á ok þrjá glugga. En er Freyr var dauðr, báru þeir hann leyniliga í hauginn ok sǫgðu Svíum, at hann lifði, ok varðveittu hann þar þrjá vetr. En skatt ǫllum helltu þeir í hauginn, í einn glugg gullinu, en í annan silfrinu, í inn þriðja eirpenningum. Þá helzk ár ok fríðr.<sup>126</sup>

(Freyr caught an illness, and as the illness progressed people thought out what to do, and they let few people come to him, and built a great tomb and put a doorway and three windows in it. And when Freyr was dead they carried him secretly into the tomb and told the Svíar that he was still alive, and kept him there for three years. And they poured all the tribute into the mound, the gold through one window, the silver through the second, and copper coins through the third. Then prosperity and peace continued.)

Contrary to Njörðr, whose death was never put into doubt, the status of Freyr as a mortal being starts to become ambiguous. Some of the Svíar hid Freyr’s death and placed his body in a tomb which was disguised as a house with a doorway and windows. Because the general population

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<sup>125</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 24.

<sup>126</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 24.

do not know that Freyr is dead they continue to pay the taxes they paid during the lifetime of the pseudo-god and poured the money through the three openings. As the peace of Fróði continued, and as the Svíar thought this peace was due to Freyr, they did not suspect that their ruler within the house-tomb may be actually dead. The narrator does not specify for how long the Svíar believed that Freyr was alive, but this narrative acts as an explanation for the birth of religious sacrifices which are the offering of material goods to a supernatural being in order to benefit from his powers.

As Snorri presents it, the relation between the pagans and their gods was originally the same as between a people and its rulers – that is the collection of taxes in exchange for peace – but was transposed to dead individuals because the pagan people failed to understand that some of the benefactions which they attributed to their kings were in fact coming from the Christian God as was the peace of Fróði, and as such could not correctly explain why those benefactions perdured even after the death of their rulers. As such, Snorri provides some elements of answer to the difficult question of how the worship of the pseudo-gods continued even after their death. With his description of the tomb of Freyr, Snorri reproduces the classical euhemeristic assertion that the pagan temples are actually the tombs of the pseudo-gods.<sup>127</sup> On another note, his explanation as of why the people continued to worship the dead pseudo-gods, is original. Contrary to what is seen in the Bible or in Lactantius' work, Snorri does not state that the sacrifices are perpetuated by the tyranny of a ruler. Instead, the reason is that the people thought that some phenomena, which were in fact gifts from God, such as the peace of Fróði, were caused by the pseudo-gods. In that sense, Snorri describes the pagans as perceptive of God's work, but failing to identify their true origin. The connection between God's gifts and those attributed to Freyr is especially clear when we study the vocabulary used by Snorri to qualify Freyr's alleged gifts "ár ok friðr" (prosperity and peace). This formulation is reminiscent of a terminology usually associated to God in medieval Scandinavian documents. See for instance the opening words of the *Gulapingslög*:

“þat er upphaf laga varra at ver scolom luta austr oc biðia til hins helga Crist ars oc friðar.  
Oc þess at vér halldem lande varo bygðu. Oc lánar drotne narom heilum. Se hann vinr varr.  
En ver hans. En gud se allra varra vinr.”<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> On this motif see Winiarczyk, *The "Sacred History,"* 33-41.

<sup>128</sup> R. Keyser and P. A. Munch, eds., *Norges gamle love indtil 1387* (Christiania: Grøndahl, 1846), 1.

(That is the beginning of our laws that we should bow to the east and pray to the holy Christ for good harvest and peace; that we may retain our settled land and keep our liege lord in health. Let him be a friend to us, and we to him. And let God be a friend to all.)<sup>129</sup>

Here as in *Ynglinga saga* “Ár ok friðr” are the two goods which the community is supposed to ask for to a higher power. Erik Simensen argued the wording in the *Gulabingslög* shows of the pagan origin of the formula, previously attributed to Freyr.<sup>130</sup> The relation however may very well be reverse. As Simon Leboutteiller argued, the perception of a relation between the health of the kingdom and its sovereign is not an exclusively Scandinavian motive and belong to a Christian and biblical tradition.<sup>131</sup> As such, it is more likely that Snorri applied Christian motives to his portrayal of Freyr rather than the opposite, as Simensen supposed.

Furthermore, at the end of the same chapter, the narrator states that the Swedes called Freyr “veraldargoð” (god of the world). Gerd Wolfgang Weber argued that this term was actually a way to designate the Devil, in the manner that Saint Paul called him “deus huius saeculi” (god of this world) in Corinthian 4:4. But as Klaus von See justly argued, the Old Norse vocable is more likely translated as (god of the world) in the sense of chief god of the pantheon.<sup>132</sup> More simply, it may be literally understood as the god governing over the world. In that sense it is the exact Old Norse equivalent to the Latin “uniuersitatis deum” (god of the universe) found in the *Gesta Danorum* where it undeniably refers to the monotheistic god.<sup>133</sup>

As such Snorri depicts the pagans as having a conception that peace and prosperity are gifts from a higher power, and that this higher power is literally the god of the world. Freyr, as an incarnated god of the world, acts as a false Christ but not as an ante-Christ. There is nothing particularly evil about him, and the pagan Svíar do not worship demons through him. In fact, they do not even really worship Freyr. The object of their adoration is the source of the peace and prosperity. Their mistake is not as much that they worship false gods or demons, as do some later pagans of *Heimskringla*, but more that they fail to find God and are mistaken on the true identity of his incarnation.

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<sup>129</sup> Erik Simensen, ed. and trans., *The Older Gulathing Law*, (London: Routledge, 2021), 17.

<sup>130</sup> Simensen, *The Older Gulathing Law*, 17 n.

<sup>131</sup> Simon Leboutteiller, “Prosperity and Peace: Glorification of Rulers in Medieval Scandinavia,” in *Nordic Elites in Transformation*, vol. 3, c. 1050-1250, (New York: Routledge, 2021), 62-64.

<sup>132</sup> Klaus von See, “Snorri Sturluson and the Creation of a Norse Cultural Ideology,” *Saga-Book* 25 (2001): 377.

<sup>133</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, VIII.15.10.

#### 5.6.4. Frigga

Frigga is depicted alongside Othinus in I.71 in the passage quoted above in section 5.5.1. In this passage Frigga is described as a woman obsessed with jewelry and ready to use sex to corrupt her husband's servants to obtain what she wants. Here, the pseudo-goddess is only shown through her sinful inclinations, lust and greed. Unlike for the previous pseudo-gods' portrayal, there is no evident and specific correlation between Saxo's portrayal of Frigga and the non-euhemerized figure of Frigg. This portrayal may remind of several criticisms directed toward goddesses from the *Lokasenna* and is perhaps equally grounded in misogynistic medieval *topoi* rather than on specific characteristics of Frigga.

In summary, at the exception of the description of Frigga, Saxo's pseudo-gods possess the same identifying characteristics as their non-euhemerized counterparts: Othinus disguises himself, Balderus is invulnerable, Thoro has a hammer, and Freyr is associated to sexuality. All these characteristics, however, are used to criticize the pseudo-gods. Saxo's reproaches are either about the pseudo-gods moral conduct, or their inherent weakness. To produce this criticism Saxo, as the Latin apologetic authors, used the pagan myths themselves as in the *Lokasenna*.

#### 5.6.5. The absent ones: Loki and Týr

As we have seen, Saxo's and Snorri's pantheons of pseudo-gods contain common characters: Odin, Þórr and Freyr are some of the most important gods found in the euhemeristic sections of the *Gesta Danorum*, the *Edda*, and *Heimskringla*. These three gods also appear as important characters in non-euhemerized sources and their importance in Saxo's and Snorri's euhemeristic narratives is thus not surprising. Other gods, such as Heimdallr or Ullr are absent or nearly absent from the euhemeristic narratives, but these omissions are easily explainable by the relatively low importance of these gods in non-euhemerized sources. A notable exception is Loki who is one of the most important gods of both Snorri's *Edda* and of the *Poetic Edda* but only appears once in Old Norse euhemeristic texts, at the end of *Gylfaginning* where he is identified with Ulysses: "En þat hyggja menn at Tyrkir hafi sagt frá Ulixes ok hafi þeir hann kallat Loka, þvíat Tyrkir váru hans hinir mestu óvinir."<sup>134</sup> (And it is believed that the Turks told tales about Ulysses and that they gave him the name Loki, for the Turks were especially hostile

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<sup>134</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 55.

to him.)<sup>135</sup> This identification is in accordance with Loki's nature as a trickster and with his involvement with the fall of Ásgarðr which Snorri identified with Troy.

As we have seen, one of Saxo's most important narratives involves Balderus and his death.<sup>136</sup> According to Snorri's version of this myth Loki played an important role in the death of Baldr. He is nonetheless absent from the version of the story found in *Völuspá* and it is not clear whether Loki's involvement in the murder is an invention of Snorri. Saxo's version of the narrative could belong to a narrative tradition similar to that of the *Völuspá* where all the blame for Baldr's death falls on Höðr rather than on Loki. The omission of Loki by Snorri is more difficult to explain considering his importance in the *Edda*. This is especially true for the euhemeristic narrative of *Skáldskaparmál* which does not involve Loki although this narrative is explicitly an explanation for the myth of Ragnarok in which Loki plays an important role both in Snorri's version and in *Völuspá*. Furthermore, if we consider that Snorri identified Loki with Ulysses in *Gylfaginning*, it is odd that he does not do it again in *Skáldskaparmál*, especially if we consider that this identification works very well as Loki/Ulysses takes part in the destruction of Ásgarðr/Troy in both narratives.

We may note that to Snorri not every character from the Old Norse myths had to be based on a human being. To him, Surtr was based on the fire which destroyed Troy rather than on an individual.<sup>137</sup> But Surtr is still euhemerized in the sense that his pagan portrayal is perceived as distorted history, while Loki is not. As I shall argue, this omission may be due to the devilish nature of the Old Norse pseudo-god. Sophus Bugge was one of the first scholars to argue that Loki was a Norse adaptation of the Christian Devil and that his name directly came from that of Lucifer.<sup>138</sup> Recently, Kees Samplonius revived this explanation and pointed out to the many common points between Loki and Lucifer.<sup>139</sup> Not all of the similarities between the two characters are convincing, but some are, such as Loki's and Satan's similar eschatological fate as evil entities enchained until the end of the world. Samplonius also justly remarks that Snorri used about Loki a vocabulary usually found in relation with Satan such as "sá er flestu illu ræðr" (which is responsible for most evil). It is impossible to prove whether Loki was inspired

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<sup>135</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 58.

<sup>136</sup> See section 5.6.1.

<sup>137</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál. 1*, 6.

<sup>138</sup> Sophus Bugge, *Studier over de nordiske gude- og heltesagns oprindelse*. (Christiania: Alb. Cammermeyer, 1881), 10.

<sup>139</sup> Kees Samplonius, "The Background and Scope of *Völuspá*," in *The Nordic Apocalypse. Approaches to Völuspá and Nordic Days of Judgement*, ed. Terry Gunnell and Annette Lassen, Acta Scandinavica: Aberdeen Studies in the Scandinavian World 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 129-131.



by Lucifer from the beginning, but it seems clear that Christian writers considered him to be a figure analogous to the Christian Devil. As such, if Loki was perceived as a pagan version of Satan, he could hardly be euhemerized, as no medieval Christians would try to demonstrate that Satan was in fact a human being. As for Baldr, whose death resembles that of Jesus Christ, Snorri did not think that the origin of Loki was distorted history but rather that it was misunderstood religious revelation, or intuition. As such, the proper method to unveil the truth behind this character was not euhemerism, but analogy.<sup>140</sup>

This would also explain why neither Saxo nor Snorri mentions a euhemerized version of Týr. As for Loki, it is difficult to know whether Saxo knew the figure of Týr but it is certain that Snorri knew him. Týr is certainly not as important as Loki in the Old Norse mythological corpus, but he is the main character of a mythological narrative, which is more than most gods. In this narrative, found in *Gylfaginning*,<sup>141</sup> Týr sacrifices his right hand in order to trick the giant wolf Fenrir who is consequently bound until Ragnarok. Once again, this narrative is reminiscent of Christian themes, and Týr's sacrifice to bind the wolf reminds that of Jesus to bind Satan. This does not mean that Snorri considered that Loki, Týr and Fenrir, could only be understood under the light of analogy: he himself identified Fenrir with Pyrrhus in *Skáldskaparmál*, and Loki with Ulysses in *Gylfaginning*. But it is likely that he considered that specific myths which involved these characters were better understood by the mean of analogy than by historical distortions. This would explain why these two gods are seldom represented in his euhemeristic narratives.

To Saxo, however, the death of Baldr was not an intuition of the Christian truth but a distorted historical event. As such if Saxo had been aware of any tradition regarding the involvement of Loki in Baldr's death he would probably have portrayed him as a historical figure rather than a pagan representation of the devil. It is nonetheless perhaps the case that Loki, as a morally ambiguous character, was unsuited for Saxo's rather Manichean portrayal of the pseudo-gods. If Loki is the enemy of the pseudo-gods and if the pseudo-gods are malevolent characters, would that not make him a positive figure? And if the pseudo-gods are consistently disturbed by this Satan-like character, does that not mean that these pagan deities are in fact enemies of the devil? As is stated by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, an enemy of the demons can hardly be a servant of demons himself:

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<sup>140</sup> On the distinction between these two methods see 1.5.1.

<sup>141</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 26-28.

Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand. If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? (Matthew 12:25-26)

Loki, as an enemy among the enemies, must have been a problematic figure and a hard one to place on the moral spectrum for Saxo who sought to vilify the pseudo-gods. A telling example of the difficulty to incorporate Loki within a Christian discourse is his portrayal in *Lokasenna*.<sup>142</sup> In this poem, Loki insults nearly every god, often in terms resembling that of Christian apologetic literature. As a result, the reader is uncertain about the moral positioning of the character and consequently of their own. Should they side with the pagan gods who are guilty of so many moral flaws, or with their perfidious devilish accuser? “The accuser” is in fact the etymological sense of the Hebrew word “שָׂטָן” (Satan). This word originally appeared in the Bible as denoting a function, that of an accuser or prosecutor, rather than a single character. In Revelation 12:10 the accuser is not identified as a specific character, but in Zecariah 3:1 it is stated that Satan is accusing, or opposing, the high priest Joshua.<sup>143</sup> In the *Lokasenna*, Loki endorses a similar role and his repeated accusations, uttered in a rude manner certainly highlight the flaws of the Norse gods but may also lead the audience to side with the accused rather than with the accuser. In that perspective the figure of Loki seems to be unfitted for a narrative such as the *Gesta Danorum* as it would unnecessarily complexify the portrayal of the pseudo-gods, who need not to be anything else than antagonists. This intention to treat the opposition between pseudo-gods and humans in a Manichean way is apparent in Saxo’s treatment of the figure Høtherus who he represented as a human rather than as a pseudo-god. Saxo could hardly tell the story of Balderus’ death without including his assassin, but he avoided to describe a pseudo-god harming another pseudo-god by turning Høtherus into a human.

### 5.6.6. Conclusion

In summary, both Saxo and Snorri depicted the pseudo-gods as magicians, and both authors focused on the figure of Odin. Their conception of the role of magic is nonetheless different as Saxo based his euhemeristic narrative on a “deception model” where magic serves to maintain the illusion of godhood while Snorri based his pseudo-gods on a “benevolent ruler model”

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<sup>142</sup> See the discussion of this poem in 5.2.

<sup>143</sup> For a discussion on the name Satan and its original meaning see Philip. C Almond, *The Devil: A New Biography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 15-19.

where magic serves to earn the admiration and veneration of ordinary humans. Saxo's portrayals of the pseudo gods are generally more developed than those of Snorri, who essentially limited his euhemerism to the figure of Odin, Freyr, and Freyja and only mentioned by name the other pseudo-gods. Snorri occasionally used the mythical attributes of the pagan gods to portray the pseudo-gods as when he refers to the two ravens of Odin but does it less systematically than Saxo who referred to Balderus' dreams and invulnerability, of Thoro's hammer, and of Freyr's sexuality. Snorri is more sympathetic toward the pseudo-gods. Several of them display positive characteristics and have a benefic influence on human society. On the contrary the pseudo-gods of Saxo are systematically malevolent characters. Significantly, Saxo does not describe Balderus' rival, Høtherus as a pseudo-god but as a human as if pseudo-gods could never be positive characters. Saxo portrays his pseudo-god as relatively weak beings, whose apparent strength is artificial or illusory. The pseudo-gods of Snorri, especially Óðinn, are still extremely powerful and their power remain close to what may be seen in non-euhemerized sources such as *Gylfaginning* or the eddic poems.

In anyway, neither Saxo's nor Snorri's pseudo-gods are "rationalized" and they often retain many of the supernatural abilities which they possess in mythological sources. Arguably, the most essential difference between the pseudo-gods of Saxo and those of Snorri are their relationship with ordinary human beings. The pseudo-gods of Snorri ultimately blend with human society while those of Saxo want to but cannot do the same because of the ordinary humans' resistance. These two distinct representations of the role played by the pseudo-gods in their relationship with ordinary human beings may be understood in relation to the respective issues faced by Denmark and Norway in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. As we saw the *Gesta Danorum* was written during the Baltic crusades, a time when Denmark was facing foreign enemies. To Saxo, the religious other, the pagan, the enemy troubling the right order of the Danish society is a foreigner coming from the east. Balderus, as a berserkr-like figure, immune to weapons and craving to kidnap a woman from the orderly society, is an archetype of the bad pagan. In the Old Norse sources, the berserkir are not foreigners in the sense that they are generally Scandinavian characters, but they are certainly outsiders in the sense that they are eternal wanderers, asocial beings who do not belong to any civilized community.<sup>144</sup> Like them, Balderus is an outsider who does not belong to the Danish community. His persona as a pseudo-

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<sup>144</sup> On the berserkr as an anti-social being see Mads Larsen, "Evolutionary Insights into a Maladapted Viking in *Gísla Saga*," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 120, no. 3 (July 1, 2021): 325.

god increases his foreignness as he and Othinus, fashion themselves as superior beings. In fact, the gap which supposedly separates the human society from that of the pseudo-gods is highlighted by Nanna herself, who claims that she cannot marry Balderus as it is not proper for a human to marry a godhead: “Que respondit nuptiis deum mortali sociari non posse, quod ingens nature discrimen copule commercium tollat.” (She answered that a god could not possibly wed a mortal, as the huge discrepancy in their natures would preclude any congruous union between them.)<sup>145</sup> This refusal is reminiscent of those of human princesses who refused to marry giants earlier in the work<sup>146</sup> or that of Hadding who initially turned down Harthgrepa’s advances on the ground that she was a giant while he was a human.<sup>147</sup> As that of the giants’, the sexual desire of the pseudo-gods toward humans are deemed unnatural, noxious and disturbing to the right order of things. As complete foreigners and total enemies, each of their incursions in the realm of humans be it violent or an attempt at concluding love alliances, is deemed as a foreign aggression. To Saxo, the enemy is easy to identify, it is not an insidious enemy from within, but a stranger who cannot be confused with the self or an ally.

On the contrary, the pseudo-gods of Snorri mingle with the human society. They teach their abilities to humans, and their descendants, the Ynglingar, marry themselves among humans. Their influence over Norwegian society is far from being exclusively negative, but they brought with them *seiðr*, one of the most dangerous evils, an art which is used to hurt the good order of the world throughout the whole of *Heimskringla*. From the beginning, *seiðr* is perceived as a practice which violates one of the most basic and fundamental rules of the social world for a medieval Christian, that of gender role and gender identity, as those men who practice *seiðr*, become unmanly. The *seiðr* also disturbs familial order, as it led king Haraldr to neglect his duties as a king, and later to have one of his own sons killed as he was a sorcerer. This disruption of the familial unit is also directly connected to the disruption of the wider political order, as the sorcerers are rebels and rebels often use the help of sorcerers to attain their goals. As such, the disorder created by *seiðr*, spread from the individual to the family and ultimately to the public life.

In *Heimskringla*, the sorcerers are not the complete foreigners which they are in the *Gesta Danorum* but the enemies which successfully infiltrated the Norwegian society, the fifth column. In this perspective, it is not surprising that the Finns are depicted in Norse sources as

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<sup>145</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, III.2.9.

<sup>146</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, I.4.8-I.4.9.

<sup>147</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, I.6.3-I.6.4.

the archetypal magicians. As they live in Norway but outside of Norwegians society, the Finns are as foreign as they are familiar to Norwegians. As for Saxo's representation of the pseudo-gods which was influenced by the worldview of the crusades, it is only natural that an Icelander who wrote from a Norwegian perspective, depicts political trouble as coming from within the society itself. To Snorri, the threats to order are not the incursions of foreign pagans, but the civil war, which recently came to a pause in Norway and was still ongoing in Iceland.

## **5.7. Old Norse Euhemerism, *Translatio Imperii*, *Translatio Studii*, and the Flight from Troy**

### **5.7.1. Against the *Translatio Imperii*: Saxo**

Both Saxo and Snorri locate the pseudo-gods in Asia Minor, either Byzantium or Troy. This connection is presumably one of the oldest characteristics of Scandinavian euhemerism as it appears in the genealogy of Ari inn fróði as found in *Íslendingabók*.<sup>148</sup> This feature is nonetheless absent from *Historia Norwegie* where Yngvi is king of the Swedes and where the author never mentions an older Trojan origin. In the *Gesta Danorum* the headquarters of the pseudo-gods is in Byzantium, but, as Saxo specifies, Othinus spends much of his time in Uppsala.<sup>149</sup> Because of the eastern origin of the pseudo-gods, Saxo's narrative may remind traditional medieval motives of *translatio imperii* and of the flight from Troy. Yet, in many regards, Saxo's narrative differs from these traditional motives. There is no actual migration, no reference to Troy, and no filiation between the migrants and a European people, but the similarities are striking, and Saxo does indeed produce a narrative in which people coming from Asia Minor have a significant impact on the ancient history of a European country. For this reason, I agree with André Muceniecks when he states that Saxo was most likely aware of the similarities between his own narrative and the traditional *translatio imperii* model.<sup>150</sup> But this must also mean that Saxo was aware of the differences between his narrative and the traditional *translatio imperii* model.<sup>151</sup> For this reason, these differences must be meaningful. I will first consider the choice of Saxo to refer to Byzantium instead of Troy.

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<sup>148</sup> See section 1.1.

<sup>149</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, I.7.1.

<sup>150</sup> Muceniecks, *Saxo Grammaticus: Hierocratical Conceptions*, 61.

<sup>151</sup> The traditional narrative of *translatio imperii* expresses the notion that political power from a country to another, generally westward. This motive traces its origin to the second chapter of the Book of Daniel where the King Nebuchadnezzar asks the prophet Daniel to interpret his dream about the destruction of a colossal statue made of

Saxo specifically locates the gods in Byzantium while Snorri uses the toponym *Tyrkland*, literally “the land of the Turks” which in Old Norse may refer to different regions, more or less well defined. The term was most commonly used to refer to Anatolia, which was gradually conquered by the Turks between the eleventh and 14<sup>th</sup> century. It is also used to refer to different regions of the Near East, both *Mariu saga* and *Hectors saga* refer to “Partiam en vér kǫllum Tyrklandi”<sup>152</sup> (Parthia which we call *Tyrkland*) without giving a clear explanation of the territory covered by these regions. Snorri, in the prologue to the *Edda*, is the only author to clearly identify *Tyrkland* as the region surrounding Troy but the author of the *Trójumanna saga* (c. 1250) uses the term *tyrkir* (Turks) to qualify Trojans. We may note that in the version of the prologue from U, Troy is identified with Rome: “þar var sett Rómaborg er vér kǫllum Tróju”. (There the City of Rome was situated, which we call Troy.)<sup>153</sup> This identification makes little sense as the previous paragraph makes clear that the city is in Asia which is indeed the location of Troy according to the pervasive classical and medieval tradition which the scribe of U could hardly ignore. It is difficult to explain such a careless mistake, especially when the association of the pseudo-gods and Troy with Asia is repeated later in the work. An explanation could be that the author used Rómaborg not to refer to Rome, but to the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, Constantinople. If this is true it would be the only example of such a choice of word in the Old Norse corpus, where Rómaborg is always used to refer to Rome while Constantinople is called Mikligarðr. Still, the association of Rome with Troy would be an even more peculiar oddity in the medieval corpus.

In *Heimskringla* Snorri does not locate Troy in *Tyrkland* but states that Óðinn own lands not far away from *Tyrkland*: “Fyrir sunnan fjallit er eigi langt til Tyrklands. Þar átti Óðinn eignir stórar.”<sup>154</sup> (To the south of the mountains it is not far to Tyrkland. There Óðinn had large possessions.) This location of Troy “not far away from *Tyrkland*” would be consistent with the traditional location of Troy in the west of Anatolia, a region still unconquered by the Turks in the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The connection of Óðinn with Greece is not strictly new and

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four metals. According to Daniel’s interpretation the different metals of the statue represent the kingdom which will come after that of Nebuchadnezzar.

<sup>152</sup> Agnete Loth, ed., *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*. Vol. 1, *Victors Saga ok Blávus, Valdimars Saga, Ectors Saga* (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1962), 81.

<sup>153</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *The Uppsala Edda*, 8-9.

<sup>154</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 14.

already appear in the *Historia gentis Langobardorum* by Paul the Deacon who states in Book one, chapter eight.<sup>155</sup>

It is certain that Saxo knew Paul the Deacon, as he mentioned him by name in the eighth book.<sup>156</sup> Significantly, Saxo mentions Paul the Deacon to refer to his narrative regarding the origin of the name “Langobard”, and this narrative is found in the *Historia gentis Langobardorum* immediately after Paul’s mention of Wotan’s Greek origin. Paul the Deacon is hence a good candidate as the originator of the association of Óðinn and Greece in Scandinavian sources. We may note, however, that the association of the pseudo-gods with Asia Minor is older than Saxo, as Ari already mentioned Yngvi *Tyrkjakonungr* (king of the Turks). In Old Norse the term *Tyrkjakonungr* was often used to speak of kings reigning in the Near East regardless of the time period or people designated. In AM 162 M fol. Óðinn is called *tyrkjakonungr* and is said to descend from Priam, king of the Trojans. In the *Trójumanna saga* the term is used to refer to the Trojans and their allies.<sup>157</sup> Inge Skovgaard-Petersen explained Saxo’s choice of Byzantium as a deliberate way to connect the Scandinavian pseudo-gods to Greece rather than to Troy. She remarks that Saxo’s explanation for the Byzantine origin of the Scandinavian pseudo-gods lays on his reference to Dudo of Saint Quentin’s *Historia Normannorum*, in which Dudo asserts that the Danes descend from the *Danai*, but as she pertinently noted, the well-read Saxo likely deliberately misrepresented Dudo’s argument, as it is clear from the *Historia Normannorum* that Dudo used *Danai* as meaning Trojan rather than Greek.<sup>158</sup> To Skovgaard-Petersen Saxo purposely chose a Greek origin to the Danish gods because of the common association of Greek culture with *scientia*.<sup>159</sup>

In the same line, Sigurd Kværndrup argued that Othinus had a positive influence on the Danish society as he taught Danes valuable lessons of military strategy and symbolized the old connection between Denmark and Greece.<sup>160</sup> Ivan Chekalov noted that the intended audience of Saxo would likely not have thought of Byzantium as “a sheer domain of legendary men.”<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> See the quotation of this passage in section 3.2.1.

<sup>156</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, VIII.13.2.

<sup>157</sup> Jonna Louis-Jensen, ed., *Trójumanna saga* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1963), 135.

<sup>158</sup> Skovgaard-Petersen, “The Way to Byzantium,” 121-133.

<sup>159</sup> Skovgaard-Petersen, “The Way to Byzantium,” 132.

<sup>160</sup> Sigurd Kværndrup, “The Composition of the *Gesta Danorum* and the Place of Geographic Relations in Its Worldview,” in *Saxo and the Baltic Region. A Symposium* (Odense: University press of southern Denmark, 2004), 28, 34.

<sup>161</sup> Ivan Chekalov, “The Seat of the Eddaic Gods in Byzantium as a Narrative Motif in Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum*,” in *Byzantium and Islam in Scandinavia, Acts of a Symposium at Uppsala University June 15-16 1996*, ed. Elisabeth Piltz, Studies in Mediterranean Archaeology (Jonsered: Paul Åströms Förlag, 1998), 118.

Unlike Troy, Byzantium was part of the contemporary world of Saxo, a place that many Scandinavians visited, not a purely legendary city of wonders. Chekalov is nonetheless of the same opinion as Skovgaard-Petersen's and Kværndrup and argues that this reference to Byzantium is related to the prestigious reputation of the city.<sup>162</sup> In fact Chekalov argues that Saxo's Othinus is a representation of legitimate kingly power in contrast to the usurpers Mitothin and Ollerus who are designed on the model of impostor kings such as king Sverrir.<sup>163</sup>

I believe Chekalov is right when he notes the similarities between Ollerus and Sverrir, but this does not mean that Othinus is a positive character, nonetheless. Recently Muceniecks proposed to see Saxo representation of the pseudo-gods as one aspect of Saxo's more general criticism of the east. Muceniecks remarks that this representation fits with the political orientation of his work in favor of Valdemar's and Absalon's military expeditions in the east.<sup>164</sup> Saxo uses the Byzantine pseudo-gods to paint a negative portrayal of the east, suiting his ideological agenda promoting the Danish political supremacy over the Baltic area. I wholeheartedly agree with Muceniecks when he notes, against Skovgaard-Petersen, Kværndrup, and Chekalov, that Saxo's representation of the pseudo-gods is not part of a positive representation of the east but of a negative one. This alone, however, does not explain why Saxo is referring to Byzantium instead of Troy.

Skovgaard-Petersen's, Kværndrup's, and Chekalov's argumentation is problematic as they want to see in Byzantium a positive symbol while Saxo never portrayed the Byzantine pseudo-gods as positive characters. Skovgaard-Petersen's claim that Saxo "maintained that the Danes grew wiser during their connection with the Æsir in Byzantium because they learned Greek *scientia*"<sup>165</sup> is not supported at all by the *Gesta Danorum*. The idea that Saxo Grammaticus was rather sympathetic toward the pagan Danes is often seen in scholarly discussions on Saxo. Some of these assumptions rely on Saxo's famous comment on the paganism of the Danes in the first book:

Nec mirandum, si prodigialibus eorum portentis adducta barbaries in adulterine religionis cultum concesserit, cum Latinorum quoque prudentiam perlexerit talium quorundam diuinis honoribus celebrata mortalitas.

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<sup>162</sup> Chekalov, "The Seat of the Eddaic Gods," 122.

<sup>163</sup> Chekalov, "The Seat of the Eddaic Gods," 120.

<sup>164</sup> Muceniecks, *Saxo Grammaticus: Hierocratical Conceptions*, 61-66.

<sup>165</sup> Skovgaard-Petersen, "The Way to Byzantium," 132.



(It is not surprising that barbarians were drawn to their weird hocus-pocus and gave themselves up to the rites of a debased religion, since even the intelligent Romans were seduced into worshipping similar mortals with divine honours.)<sup>166</sup>

I agree with Jonas Wellendorf when he quotes this passage and remarks that Saxo uses demonism to characterize the paganism of the Wends and only euhemerism regarding that of the Danes, which implicitly tend to paint the paganism of the Danes as less serious than that of the Wends.<sup>167</sup> Saxo's comment must nonetheless not be taken as leniency toward paganism *per se* – the author does not say anything positive about paganism – but most likely as an answer to derogatory attitudes toward Scandinavians for their late conversion to Christianity. In anyway, Saxo's pseudo-gods are not cultural heroes, they have little friendly contact with ordinary humans and do not share their *scientia* with them beside rare occurrences of Othinus giving military advice to Danish heroes.<sup>168</sup> Furthermore, the positive impact of these advice is compensated when Othinus betray these same Danish heroes.<sup>169</sup> Saxo does not grant any positive aspect to paganism and the positive pre-Christian Danish characters are precisely those who reject the influence of the pseudo-gods, or even fight them.

In fact, if Saxo's references to the Byzantine origin of the pseudo-gods were to be understood as a positive sign of the pseudo-gods' wisdom and prestige, this would be in contradiction with the rest of the *Gesta Danorum* which never portrays the pseudo-gods as wise and positive characters. On the contrary, if we assume that Saxo designed his work coherently, his reference to the Greek city must likely act as another sign of the pseudo-gods' wickedness. As such I argue that Saxo deliberately disregarded Troy as the origin of his pseudo-gods precisely because the symbolism of this legendary city was too positive. But if Saxo avoided to refer to Troy because of its positive symbolism, it must mean that Byzantium had a sufficiently negative connotations to suit his negative portrayal of the pseudo-gods.

Skovgaard-Peterson, Kværndrup, and Chekalov are certainly right to note that in some context Byzantium was a symbol of prestige, science, and political power as it was also the case in some sagas.<sup>170</sup> But the Byzantine world was also the object of negative prejudices on the part

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<sup>166</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, I.5.6.

<sup>167</sup> Wellendorf, *Gods and Humans*, 72.

<sup>168</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, VII.10.6.

<sup>169</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, VII.12.1-VII.12.2, VIII.4.9.

<sup>170</sup> On this topic see Sverrir Jakobsson, "The Schism That Never Was: Old Norse Views on Byzantium and Russia," *Byzantinoslavica - Revue internationale des études byzantines* 66 (2008): 173-188; Sverrir Jakobsson, "The Varangian Legend: Testimony from the Old Norse Sources," in *Byzantium and the Viking World*, ed. Fedir

of western Christians. For instance, the *Gesta Dei per Francos* written by Guibert of Nogent does not criticize Islam first, as one could expect from a crusade chronicle, but the Greek Christians:

Orientalium autem fides cum semper nutabunda constiterit et rerum molitione novarum mutabilis et vagabunda fuerit, semper a regula verae credulitatis exorbitans, ab antiquorum Patrum auctoritate descivit.<sup>171</sup>

(However, the faith of Easterners, which has never been stable, but has always been variable and unsteady, searching for novelty, always exceeding the bounds of true belief, finally deserted the authority of the early fathers.)<sup>172</sup>

This characterization of the Orthodox as bad Christians is expressed in even stronger terms in the *Letter of Prester John* whose most ancient version dates from 1165. This letter was allegedly written by the Prester John, a Christian priest and monarch who lived in a wonderful kingdom supposedly located to the east of the Muslim states. The letter of the priest John was supposedly addressed to the Byzantine emperor but was written in Latin, which suggests a Western target audience.<sup>173</sup> In his letter the narrator starts right away to demean the Byzantine emperor as he states:

Cum enim hominem nos esse cognoscamus, te Graeculi tui Deum esse existimant, cum te mortalem et humanae corruptioni subiacere cognoscamus.<sup>174</sup>

(For although we know that you are a man, your little Greeks hold you to be a god, while we recognise that you are mortal and subject to human corruption.)<sup>175</sup>

It is doubtful that any Western Christian authors literally thought that the byzantine emperor was worshiped as a god, but one can easily see how the schismatic and grandiloquent Byzantine emperor could be caricatured as a pseudo-god in western works of propaganda. It is unclear whether the letter of the Prester John was well known in Denmark at the time of Saxo's writing.

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Androsjtsjuk, Shepard Jonathan, and Monica White, *Studia Byzantina Upsaliensia* 16 (Uppsala Universitet, 2016), 345-362.

<sup>171</sup> Guibert of Nogent, *Guibert de Nogent, Dei gesta per francos et cinq autres textes*, ed. Richard. B. C. Huygens, *Corpus christianorum, continuatio mediaevalis* 127 (Turnhout: Typographi Brepols Editores Pontificii, 1996), 89.

<sup>172</sup> Guibert of Nogent, *The Deeds of God Through the Franks: A Translation of Guibert de Nogent's Gesta Dei per Francos*, trans. Robert Levine (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1997), 30.

<sup>173</sup> Keagan Brewer, *Prester John: The Legend and Its Sources*, *Crusade Texts in Translation* 27 (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015): 9.

<sup>174</sup> Brewer, *Prester John*, 46.

<sup>175</sup> Brewer, *Prester John*, 68.

The oldest known Danish translation of the letter is found on a manuscript from around 1500<sup>176</sup> and neither this version nor the other Scandinavian translations of the letter contain the passage where Prester John states that the Greek believe their emperor to be a god.<sup>177</sup> It is nevertheless entirely possible that Saxo could have read the Latin version of this letter. It is likely that Saxo's description of the pseudo-gods as grandiloquent rulers based in Byzantium belongs to a similar tradition of anti-Orthodox sentiment.

In that regard it may help to consider what Byzantium might have evoked to Saxo beside the prestige and reputation for wisdom of the Greek civilization. If we agree with the notion that Saxo most likely wrote the first books of the *Gesta Danorum* last, and that the work was completed around 1208, Saxo wrote his account on the Byzantine pseudo-gods only several years after the sack of Constantinople during the Fourth crusade in 1204. The sack of Constantinople constitutes one of the most tragic and spectacular culminations of the ongoing tensions between the western catholic Christianity and its eastern orthodox counterpart. Sverrir Jakobsson noted that Icelandic sources show very few examples of anti-Greek or anti-eastern sentiment which were otherwise rather common in the rest of Christendom. On the contrary the medieval Icelandic sources tend to present the emperor of Constantinople as one of the great leaders of Christianity.<sup>178</sup>

In that regard the Icelandic sources do not necessarily reflect the attitudes of Danish intellectuals who wrote from a different perspective. Saxo wrote the *Gesta Danorum* during the so-called Baltic crusades. These military expeditions were primarily directed toward pagan communities living on the shores of the eastern Baltic Sea, but also led to rivalry between Catholic crusaders and Russian Orthodox principalities to the east, who also desired to expand their influence in the region. The *Cronicon Lyvoniae*<sup>179</sup> written c. 1229 by Henry of Latvia testifies of the animosity from Catholic intellectuals toward eastern Christians which they portray as "sterile" Christians, unable, or unwilling, to convert pagans. Korben K. Nielsen remarks: "The further the German Church under the leadership of Bishop Albert of Riga pushed the borders of paganism to the north, the more confrontationally and dismissively Henry wrote of the

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<sup>176</sup> Brewer, *Prester John*, 318.

<sup>177</sup> For a synoptic edition of the Scandinavian translations see Allan Karker, ed., *Jon Præst, Presbyter Johannes'. brev til Emmanuel Komnenos. Synoptisk udgivet på Latin, Dansk og Svensk med indledning og kommentar af Allan Karker* (Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzels Boghandel, 1978).

<sup>178</sup> Sverrir Jakobsson, "The Schism," 187-188.

<sup>179</sup> Henry of Latvia, *Heinrici Chronicon Livoniae*, ed. Leonid Arbusow and Albert Bauer, *Rerum Germanicarum in Usus Scholarum Ex Monumentis Germaniae Historicis* (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1955).

Russians.”<sup>180</sup> We may note that this contempt, or even frank hostility was reciprocated, and that Orthodox Christians also portrayed Catholics as heretics.<sup>181</sup>

Along the same line, we may analyze the appearance of Byzantium in the *Gesta Danorum* and consider these appearance as symbolic references to Orthodox Christianity. First let us look again at the beginning of the episode where the Scandinavian kings send a golden statue to Othinus in Byzantium:

Cuius numen Septentrionis reges propensiore cultu prosequi cupientes effigiem ipsius aureo complexi simulacro statuam sue dignationis indicem maxima cum religionis simulatione Bizantium transmiserunt.

(The kings of the North, eager to honour his divinity with more enthusiastic worship, executed a representation of him in gold, the arms thickly encircled with heavy bracelets, and as an expression of their devotion sent it with the utmost show of piety to Byzantium.)<sup>182</sup>

The exchange of gifts between Byzantine emperors and Scandinavian travelers is a recurrent theme in saga literature. Traditionally, the sagas portrayed the Byzantine emperor as gifting precious items to Scandinavians visitors, thus conferring to them a share of his prestige and confirming his position of superiority. Saxo, however, reverses the traditional motive of the Byzantine emperor bestowing gifts to Scandinavian visitors. In his narrative it is the Nordic kings who offer a precious object to Othinus, who as a magnificent ruler living in Byzantium must have necessarily evoked the Byzantine emperor to a medieval audience. This does not mean that Saxo portrays the Scandinavian kings as superior to the Byzantine Othinus. On the contrary, the gift of the Scandinavian rulers takes the form of a religious offering, thus confirming the devotion of the kings for the pseudo-god. Saxo’s portrayal of the Scandinavian kings as worshiping the Byzantine Othinus is not baseless, as Sverrir Jakobsson noted, the Scandinavian kings recognized the precedence of the Byzantine emperor among Christian

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<sup>180</sup> Torben K. Nielsen, “Sterile Monsters? Russian and the Orthodox in the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia,” in *The Clash of Cultures on the Medieval Baltic Frontier*, ed. Alan V. Murray (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 228. On this topic see also Nils Blomkvist, *The Discovery of The Baltic: The Reception of A Catholic World-System In The European North (AD 1075-1225)*, The Northern World. North Europe and the Baltic c. 400-1700 A.D. Peoples, Economies and Cultures 15 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 508-509.

<sup>181</sup> Marie-Hélène Blanchet, “‘Schismatiques’ et ‘Hérétiques’ Les qualifications appliquées aux Latins à Byzance,” *MEFRIM* 126, no. 2 (2014): 239-250.

<sup>182</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, I.7.1.

monarchs.<sup>183</sup> Saxo thus conflates the reverence for a foreign and schismatic ruler with the paganism of old times.

If Othinus symbolizes eastern Christianity, it is easy to understand the symbolism behind the episode of the rape of Rinda. According to Saxo, Rinda is a Ruthenian, that is Russian, or Ukrainian princess. Othinus' rape of the Ruthenian princess, possibly with the approval of her own father, is certainly a symbolic representation of the Orthodox influence over the Russian principalities. As such Saxo does indeed produce a sort of *translatio* narrative, but he does not present the *translatio* as a positive phenomenon. For him, what is coming from the shores of the Mediterranean Sea is a schismatic Christian faith which spreads to Russian lands and threatens to obstruct the Danish influence in the Baltic area. In this perspective Saxo's literary approach is similar to Adam of Bremen's, if we agree with scholars such as Lukas Grzybowski or Henrik Janson who argue that Adam's representation of the temple of Uppsala is not a description of genuine pagan practice but a symbolic description of the English missionary influence in Sweden.<sup>184</sup> In a similar rhetorical strategy Saxo uses traditional literary motives of paganism not to describe an actual form of paganism, but what he perceives to be an equally threatening foreign enemy, eastern Orthodox Christianity.

Saxo thus acts as a rival narrator in regard to the European literary traditions of the Trojan origins of the European people, and to that of the *translatio imperii* and *translatio studii*. In fact, Saxo does not only modify these traditions but subverts their meaning since he uses them to express exactly the antithesis of their original sense. Wolfram R. Keller notes that: "the myth of Trojan origins promotes the concept of a coherent community with a common origin."<sup>185</sup> The myth of the Trojan origins typically creates a sense of community in relation to other related communities, past or present: we are just as prestigious as the Romans because we have the same prestigious ancestor. The national, or proto national, identities it supports belong to a wide network of equally valid national identities. On the contrary, Saxo depicted a Danish people unrelated to other European people except for the English who are descendants of Angul, brother of Dan, the founder of the Danish people according to Saxo.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Sverrir Jakobsson, "The Varangian Legend: Testimony from the Old Norse Sources," 350.

<sup>184</sup> Grzybowski, "O paganismo escandinavo," 135-154; Janson, "Adam of Bremen and the," 83-88.

<sup>185</sup> Wolfram R. Keller, *Selves & Nation. The Troy Story from Sicily to England in the Middle Ages*, Britannica et Americana 25 (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2008), 127.

<sup>186</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, I.1.1-I.1.2.

In fact, Saxo's depiction of the Danes and English as related may help us to understand why he did not want to connect the Danes with the Trojans. The kingdoms of England and Denmark had had common rulers under the reign of Knut the Great (died in 1035) and Harthacnut (died in 1042). With this common ancestry Saxo retrospectively fosters the Danish kings' legitimacy as kings of England. This suggests that Saxo considered that a common genealogical origin could be used to legitimate conquest and political domination. In that sense, if the Danes were to be descendants of the Trojans, then they would be related to the Romans. Unfortunately the current emperors of the Romans were the Holy Roman Emperors who had attempted to make vassals of the Danish kings. In the fourteenth book of the *Gesta Danorum* Saxo recounts how king Valdemar was fooled into submission by the German Emperor Frederick Barbarossa despite Absalon's good advice. Saxo is evidently troubled by this situation and insists on the fact that this submission did not bind Valdemar's successors.<sup>187</sup> As such Saxo distinguishes Danish identity from the Trojan one, which, while prestigious, could also serve to justify Danish submission to the Holy Roman Emperor. Lars Boje Mortensen is certainly right to see in Saxo's construction of Danish identity a disguised inferiority complex.<sup>188</sup> If Saxo felt that the Danish kings and the German emperors could be on equal standing, he could have depicted them as having a common origin without problem. But this was a delicate issue because the Danes were already in a difficult political position. Thus, Saxo turned a myth which expressed the pride of foreign origin and the notion that civilization came from elsewhere, into a narrative praising the resistance to foreign influences in accordance with his own ideological agenda.

### 5.7.2. Out of Tyrkland: Snorri's *Translatio Imperii*

By contrast, Snorri's narratives are more in line with traditional motives of the *translatio imperii* and of argument of Trojan origins since they actually describe the *translatio* of positive cultural aspects from Asia Minor to Scandinavia. Snorri explicitly refers to Troy in the *Edda* which he identifies as the homeland of the pseudo-gods. Snorri identifies Ásgarðr, with Troy both in the prologue and in *Skáldskaparmál*. The narrative of the Trojan war was well known in Iceland through several texts. *Trójumanna saga*, an Old Norse translation of the Latin *De Excidio Troiae* by the pseudo-Dares Phrygius is the longest Old Norse narrative on the Trojan war. The war is also referred to in *Rómverja saga* and in universal histories such as *Veralda*

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<sup>187</sup> *Gesta Danorum* XIV.28.14-XIV.28.16. See also Friis-Jensen summary of this problematic in *Gesta Danorum* xliii-xliv.

<sup>188</sup> Mortensen, "Saxo Grammaticus' View," 174.

*saga*.<sup>189</sup> Contrary to these texts, Snorri does not really narrate the Trojan war but draws a connection between the Trojans and the Scandinavian people, thus clearly producing a narrative of the “flight from Troy” type. Shami Ghosh notes that the desire to connect Scandinavia to Troy likely came from increasing contact with European learned historiographies.<sup>190</sup> Both *Trójumanna saga* and Snorri’s *Edda* also identify some Old Norse gods with Trojan characters but disagree with each other: in the prologue Snorri introduces Þórr, who according to him was the son of Munon a son of Priam otherwise unknown;<sup>191</sup> in *Skáldskaparmál*, however, Snorri identifies Þórr with the Trojan hero Hector, son of Priam, because of the similarity of his name with Öku-Þórr. In *Skáldskaparmál* Snorri does not explicitly state which classical hero Óðinn was, but notes that the Fenriswolf was Pyrrhus, who killed Priam.<sup>192</sup> In the Old Norse myths the Fenriswolf kills Óðinn, suggesting that Snorri identified Óðinn with Priam.

This identification does not exist in the prologue where Óðinn is not Þórr’s father but his distant descendant who left Turkey to travel north as he foresaw that he would prosper in the northern part of the world. Snorri specifies, however, that way before Óðinn, Þórr had travelled to the northern part of the world where he met his wife Sibil, also called Sif. Snorri presumably connected Þórr with the northern part of the world to account for his presence in the Old Norse myths although he had been dead for several centuries by the time Óðinn reached Scandinavia. This Óðinn, says Snorri, placed his sons at the head of various European lands: East Saxony, Westphalia, France, Denmark, Sweden, and Norway:

Þar setr Óðinn til lands gæzlu þrjá sonu sína; er einn nefndr Veggdegg, var hann ríkr konungr ok réð fyrir Austr Saxalandi; hans sonr var Vitrgils, hans synir váru þeir Vitta, faðir Heingests, ok Sigarr, faðir Svebdegg, er vér kǫllum Svipdag. Annarr son Óðins hét Beldegg, er vér kǫllum Baldr; hann átti þat land er nú heitir Vestfal. Hans son var Brandr, hans son Frioðigar, er vér kǫllum Fróða, hans son var Freovin, hans son Wigg, hans son Gevis, er vér kǫllum Gavi. Inn þriði son Óðins er nefndr Sigg, hans son Rerir. Þeir langfeðgar réðu þar fyrir er nú er kallat Frakland, ok er þaðan sú ætt komin er kǫlluð er Volsungar. Frá ǫllum þessum eru stórar ættir komnar ok margar. Þá byrjaði Óðinn ferð sína

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<sup>189</sup> On the significance of the Trojan war narrative for the medieval Scandinavian audience see Randi Eldevik, “What’s Hecuba to Them? Medieval Scandinavian Encounters with Classical Antiquity,” in *Scandinavia and Europe 800-1350. Contact, Conflict, and Coexistence*, ed. Jonathan Adams and Katherine Holman, Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe 4 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 345-354.

<sup>190</sup> Ghosh, *Kings’ Sagas and Norwegian*, 196.

<sup>191</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 8.

<sup>192</sup> The murder of Priam by Pyrrhus, also called Neoptolemus is recounted by Virgil *Aeneid* II 499-502. Virgil, *Virgile. Œuvres complètes*, ed. and trans. Jeanne Dion, Philippe Heuzé, and Alain Michel, Bibliothèque de la pléiade 603 (Paris: Gallimard, 2015), 328-329.

norðr ok kom í þat land er þeir kǫlluðu Reiðgotaland ok eignaðisk í því landi allt þat er hann vildi. Hann setti þar til landa son sinn er Skjǫldr hét, hans son hét Friðleifr; þaðan er sú ætt komin er Skjǫldungar heita, þat eru Danakonungar, ok þat heitir nú Jótland er þá var kallat Reiðgotaland.<sup>193</sup>

(There Odin put in charge of the country three of his sons; one's name was Veggdegg, he was a powerful king and ruled over East Saxony; his son was Vitrgils, his sons were Vitta, father of Hengest, and Sigar, father of Svebdegg, whom we call Svipdag. Odin's second son was called Beldegg, whom we call Baldr; he had the country that is now called Westphalia. His son was Brand, his son Friodigar, whom we call Frodi, his son was Freovin, his son Wigg, his son Gewis, whom we call Gavir. Odin's third son's name was Siggí, his son Rerir. This dynasty ruled over what is now called France, and from it is descended the family called the Volsungs. From all these people great family lines are descended. Then Odin set off north and came to a country that they called Reidgotaland and gained possession of all he wished in that land. He set over the area a son of his called Skiold; his son was called Fridleif. From them is descended the family called the Skioldungs; they are kings of Denmark, and what was then called Reidgotaland is now called Jutland.)<sup>194</sup>

This passage is typical of the traditional motive of the Trojan origins of the European people. His inclusion of a French dynasty among the descendants of Óðinn seems surprising, especially considering the fact that Snorri confirms his narrative by referring to the linguistic proximity between the descendants of the Æsir:

þeir Æsir tóku sér kvánfǫng þar innan lands, en sumir sonum sínum, ok urðu þessar ættir fjǫlmennar, at umb Saxland ok allt þaðan um norðrhálfur dreifðisk svá at þeira tunga, Asiamanna, var eigintunga um ǫll þessi lönd; ok þat þykkjask menn skynja mega af því at skrifuð eru langfeðga nǫfn þeira, at þau nǫfn hafa fylgt þessi tungu ok þeir Æsir hafa haft tunguna norðr hingat í heim, í Nóreg ok í Sviþjóð, í Danmǫrk ok í Saxland; ok í Englandi eru forn lands heiti eða staða heiti þau er skilja má at af annarri tungu eru gefin en þessi.<sup>195</sup>

(These Æsir found themselves marriages within the country there, and some of them for their sons too, and these families became extensive, so that throughout Saxony and from there all over the northern regions it spread so that their language, that of the men of Asia, became the mother tongue over all these lands. And people think they can deduce from the

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<sup>193</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 5-6.

<sup>194</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 4.

<sup>195</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 6.



records of the names of their ancestors that those names belonged to this language, and that the Æsir brought the language north to this part of the world, to Norway and to Sweden, to Denmark and to Saxony; and in England there are ancient names for regions and places which one can tell come from a different language from this one.)<sup>196</sup>

Snorri accurately remarks the linguistic proximity between several Germanic languages, but the spoken language of 13<sup>th</sup> century France could hardly have sounded familiar to an Icelander of the same period. It is possible that Snorri follows a different etymological reasoning here and connected the name Völsung to Valland the Old Norse name for Gaul. Another explanation is that there is a longstanding tradition in which the Turks and the Franks were both said to be descendants of the Trojans. This tradition comes back to the *Chronicle of Fredegar* and was still known in the thirteenth century as can be seen in the *Speculum Historiale* of Vincent of Beauvais:

Tempore Aoth ædificata est Troya, tempore Abdon capta est, post cuius euersionem multitudo magna fugiens, & in duos populos se diuidens, alia Franconem Priami regis Troyæ nepotem scilicet Hectoris filium, alia Turcum filium Troili Filij Priami secuta est; & inde tradunt quidam duos populos scilicet Francos & Turcos vsque hodie vocari.<sup>197</sup>

(Troy was built at the time of Aoth and captured at the time of Abdon, which was followed by the flee of many who were divided in two people, one from the grandson of king Priam of Troy, Franco son of Hector, the other from Turco, son of Troyas, son of Priam. And from there some people say that these people are still called Franks and Turks.)<sup>198</sup>

If Snorri was aware of this tradition, he nevertheless departed considerably from it since he mentions neither Turco nor Franco but a new line of descent from Priam through his daughter, Troan. This daughter of Priam, otherwise unknown, allows Snorri to introduce – or invent – a new genealogy found nowhere else. In this narrative, Snorri describes a genealogical connection between Óðinn and the Scandinavian kings' dynasties, whereas in *Ynglinga saga* the connection was at best symbolical: Freyr, not Óðinn, was the ancestor of the Ynglingar.<sup>199</sup> We may wonder why Snorri produced such a lengthy genealogy to connect Þórr to Óðinn, the first of his line to leave Tyrkland, while in traditional accounts about the flight from Troy the Trojans escape from their homeland immediately after the destruction of the city. There is no clue in the

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<sup>196</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 5.

<sup>197</sup> Vincent de Beauvais, *Speculum quadruplex sive speculum maius: Naturale / Doctrinale / Morale / Historiale*, (Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1965), 4:68.

<sup>198</sup> My translation.

<sup>199</sup> See section 4.2.3.

prologue to the *Edda* to understand this peculiarity, but *Ynglinga saga* can help answer in this query.

Elizabeth Ashman Rowe was the first to remark that in *Ynglinga saga* Snorri never mentions Troy.<sup>200</sup> Conversely, Snorri never explicitly identifies the Æsir with the Trojans in *Ynglinga saga*. He was however more specific regarding the location of Ásgarðr than in the *Edda*. He states: “To the east of Tanakvísl in Asia it was called Ásaland (Land of the Æsir) or Ásaheimr (World of the Æsir), and the capital city that was in the land they called Ásgarðr.” And in the fifth chapter he adds:

Fjallagarðr mikill gengr af landnorðri til útsuðrs. Sá skilr Svíþjóð ina miklu ok önnur ríki. Fyrir sunnan fjallit er eigi langt til Tyrklands. Þar átti Óðinn eignir stórar. Í þann tíma fóru Rómverjahöfðingjar víða um heiminn ok brutu undir sik allar þjóðir, en margir höfðingjar flýðu fyrir þeim ófriði af sínum eignum.<sup>201</sup>

(A great mountain range runs from the north-east to the south-west. It divides Svíþjóð in mikla from other realms. To the south of the mountains it is not far to Tyrkland (Land of Turks, Asia Minor). There Óðinn had large possessions. At that time the rulers of the Rómverjar (Romans) travelled widely around the world and conquered all nations, and many rulers fled their lands because of this aggression.)

Snorri states that their land is located east of the Don River, and that Óðinn possessed many lands in *Tyrkland*. These explanations are ambiguous and subject to interpretations. Even if Snorri does not mention Troy many scholars have identified the Ásgarðr of *Ynglinga saga* with Troy. Thomas MacMaster, for instance, took for granted that the city was identical with Troy but understood Snorri’s description as referring to the Kerch strait, in Crimea, instead of the Bosphorus, as the location of the city.<sup>202</sup> MacMaster is right to note that the shores of Anatolia were not yet settled by Turkish populations in the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and that “Tyrkland” is thus not a reference to the westmost part of this region. It is also true that the Kerch strait for its part was inhabited by Turkish populations in the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, in the Old Norse sources, the toponym *Tyrkland* was exclusively used to

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<sup>200</sup> Elizabeth A. Rowe, “Historical Invasions / Historiographical Interventions: Snorri Sturluson and the Battle of Stamford Bridge,” *Mediaevalia* 17 (1991): 160.

<sup>201</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 14.

<sup>202</sup> Thomas J. MacMaster, “The Origin of Origins: Trojans, Turks and the Birth of the Myth of Trojan Origins in the Medieval World,” *Atlantide La légende de Troie de l’antiquité tardive au Moyen Âge. Variations, innovations, modifications et réécritures*, no. 2 (2014): 10.

refer to either Anatolia or other regions of the Near East but never to Crimea.<sup>203</sup> As MacMaster remarks, Snorri's association of the Trojans with the Turks may originate from the literary tradition according to which both Franks and Turks were descendants of the Trojans.<sup>204</sup> This association between Turks and Trojans makes sense, since Snorri wrote at a time when Turkish populations occupied large part of Anatolia. The fact that the shores of the Aegean Sea were not under Turkish controls in the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century does not necessarily mean that Snorri could not apply the toponym *Tyrkland* to the whole of Anatolia. Furthermore, we may not assume that Snorri necessarily had a clear understanding of where the borders of the Turkish estates started and ended.

It is also important to note that *Ynglinga saga* is not set in the same time period as the beginning of the narrative from Snorri's prologue, which largely explains why the *Edda* refers to Troy while *Ynglinga saga* does not. In *Ynglinga saga* the Æsir are contemporaries of the Romans. Snorri, as any learned men from the medieval period would have known that the Romans are descendants of the Trojans, meanings that the Æsir of *Ynglinga saga* cannot be Trojans. Another hint regarding the chronology of *Ynglinga saga* is Snorri's mention of the peace of Frið-Fróði, that is the Frotho III of Saxo Grammaticus, who got his nickname from the period of peace which happened during his lifetime. The peace of Fróði is intended to be a Scandinavian equivalent to the peace of Augustus: a period of universal peace which happened during the life of Christ. According to Snorri, the peace of Fróði happened during the life of Freyr who succeeded to Óðinn as king of the Svíar. This means that Óðinn reigned during the first century BCE, which is around the time the Romans conquered large parts of the Mediterranean area. Snorri might have had in mind narratives regarding the travels of Julius Caesar as those of *Rómverja saga* where the Roman dictator visit the region where "Troy had stood" (Troea hafði staðit).<sup>205</sup> As well as the description of this same time period in the *Veraldar saga* written in the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century which describes the Romans as waging wars worldwide:

Á ofanverðri þeiri tíð váro iii höfðingar settir yfir Rómverja her. einn var Pompejus inn mikli, annarr Marcus Crassus, þriði var Julius Cesar. Pompejus Magnus fór í austrveg ok barðiz þar við marga konunga ok hafði jafnan sigr. hann skattgildi Gyðinga undir

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<sup>203</sup> See for instance *Mariu saga* where *Tyrkland* is identified with Parthia. Carl Richard Unger, ed., *Mariu saga: Legender om jomfru Maria og hendes jertegn: efter gamle haandskrifter* (Christiania: Brøgger & Christie, 1871), 140. For more instance examples of the word see the entry for *Tyrkland* on the Old Norse Prose dictionary: <https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php>.

<sup>204</sup> MacMaster, "The Origin of Origins," 3.

<sup>205</sup> Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, ed., *Rómverja Saga*, (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í Íslenskum fræðum, 2010), 2:374.

Rúmverja, ok margar aðrar þjóðir. Markus Crassus fór á Serkland með sinn her ok háði þar margar orrostur. Hann var þar handtekinn af Babilonis mönnum. Þeir drápu hann með því at þeir steyftu vellanda gulli í munn honum ok báðu hann þat hafa ærið er hann þyrsti ey ok ey til. Julius Cesar fór norðr um fjall ok háði margar orrostor við Saxa ok fór hann norðr á England. Tíu vetr var Julius Cesar fyrir norðan fjall ok skattgildi öll þau ríki undir Rúmverja er þar eru.<sup>206</sup>

(In their time there were three chieftains set over the army of the Romans. One was Pompey the great, the second was Marcus Crassus, the third was Julius Caesar. Pompey the Great went eastward and waged war against many kings and always get victory. He made the Jews as well as many other people tributaries of the Romans. Marcus Crassus went to Serkland (Persia) with his army and fought many battles there. He was there captured by Babylonians. They killed him by casting melted gold in his mouth and asked whether it was enough as he had been so thirsty for it. Julius Caesar went north across the mountain and fought many battles against the Saxons and went north to England. Julius Cesar was north of the mountain for ten winters an made tributaries all of the kingdoms which were there.)<sup>207</sup>

We may wonder why Snorri situated Óðinn's reign during this period and not during the time of the Trojan war as it is often the case in medieval literature. As Rowe notes, Snorri's mention of the Trojan war in the *Edda* and not in *Ynglinga saga* is deliberate and meaningful. Furthermore, Rowe remarks that the Old Norse story of the war between the Æsir and Vanir would fit in a work largely concerned with indigenous mythology such as the *Edda*, while the story of the Trojan war would fit in *Heimskringla* since it is a historical work.<sup>208</sup> Yet, Snorri did precisely the opposite, which is somewhat difficult to explain. Klaus von See argues that Snorri avoided to refer to Troy and depicted the Æsir as fleeing in front of the Romans as he was averse to the motive of the *translatio imperii*.<sup>209</sup> We may note that in the *Historia regum Britaniae* by Geoffrey of Monmouth the descendent of the Trojan Brutus also fight the Romans<sup>210</sup> but this conflict is hardly a rejection of the *translatio imperii per se*, since Geffroy's narrative depends on the translation of the Trojan hero from their homeland to England. If the

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<sup>206</sup> Konráð Gíslason, ed., *Fire og fyrretyve for en stor deel forhen utrykte prøver af oldnordisk sprog og litteratur* (Copenhagen: Forlagt af den Gyldendalske boghandling, 1860), 88.

<sup>207</sup> My translation.

<sup>208</sup> Rowe, "Historical Invasions," 162.

<sup>209</sup> Klaus von See, *Europa und der Norden im Mittelalter* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1999), 346.

<sup>210</sup> See for instance Brennius' and Belinus' war against Rome in book three and later conflict of king Arthur against the emperor Lucius. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, ed. Michael D. Reeve, trans. Neil Wright, Arthurian Studies 69 (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007).

prologue to the *Edda* and *Ynglinga saga* were indeed written by the same author, which I believe, von See's interpretation cannot stand, as the *Edda* clearly refers to the Trojans. Furthermore, while Snorri does not refer to Troy in *Ynglinga saga*, we will see that his narrative is nonetheless reminiscent of traditional *translatio imperii* motives. We must nevertheless explain why Snorri would not mention Troy and the Trojans in *Ynglinga saga* if he was not averse to the idea of a Trojan ancestry for the northern people.

It is possible that in the case of *Ynglinga saga*, Snorri felt bound by his main poetic source, *Ynglingatal*, as well as by the traditional learned medieval chronology. *Ynglingatal* enumerates twenty-seven names from Fjölnir to Rögnvaldr, son of Óláfr, son of Guðrøðr. According to *Historia Norwegie* Guðrøðr was the father of Halfdan the black, who was himself the father of king Haraldr hárfagri. Snorri draws on both traditions and describes Guðrøðr as the father of both Óláfr and Halfdan the black, thus making Rögnvaldr and Haraldr hárfagri cousins. As it was attested by a tradition going back at least to *Íslendingabók*, king Haraldr was king in 870 when Iceland was first discovered. It means, then, that twenty-seven generations separate the reign of Haraldr from the lifetime of Óðinn. In medieval Christian historiography, the Trojan war was generally considered to predate the birth of Christ of at least a thousand years. Saint Jerome, who translated Eusebius' *Chronicon*, placed the capture of Troy twelve centuries before the birth of Christ, during the time of the judges of Israel.<sup>211</sup> This chronology remained the standard throughout the Middle Ages in works such as the *Speculum historiale* of Vincent de Beauvais where the destruction of Troy is said in chapter 66 to have happened during the life of Abdon, the eleventh Judge of Israel.<sup>212</sup> In Scandinavia, *Trójumanna saga* situated the first events of the Greek myths during the time of Joshua, the successor of Moses as the leader of the Hebrew people<sup>213</sup> while *Veraldar saga* stated that the conflict happened shortly after the days of Moses or Joshua.<sup>214</sup> The chronology from the *Umbra Saxonis* (the shadow of Saxo) which was written in 1579 by the Danish humanist Petreius and is based both on Biblical history on and the chronology from the *Gesta Danorum* likewise pinpoints the events of the Trojan war about 1200 years before the birth of Christ, while Dan, the first Danish king supposedly lived

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<sup>211</sup> Saint Jerome, *Chronique : Continuation de la Chronique d'Eusèbe, Années 326-378. Suivie de Quatre Études sur les Chroniques et chronographies dans l'Antiquité Tardive (IVe-VIe Siècles)*, ed. Benoît Jeanjean and Bertrand Lançon (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2004), 72.

<sup>212</sup> Vincent de Beauvais, *Speculum quadruplex sive speculum maius*, 68; On this topic see Monique Paulmier-Foucart, *Vincent de Beauvais et le grand miroir du monde* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 94.

<sup>213</sup> Louis-Jensen, *Trójumanna Saga*, 1.

<sup>214</sup> Konráð Gíslason, *Fire og fyrretyve*, 86.

130 years later and Othinus almost seven centuries later during in the sixth century BCE.<sup>215</sup> In any-way, the twenty-seven generations of *Ynglingatal* are insufficient to fill the gap of thirteen centuries between the reign of Haraldr hárfagri and the capture of Troy. As a matter of comparison, the genealogy of Jesus Christ from the Gospel of Matthew accounts for twenty-seven generations between Jesus Christ and the first king of Israel, David, who reigned around 240 years after the capture of Troy according to Jerome's chronology. In this perspective the genealogy of *Ynglingatal* could not realistically cover even half of the time between Haraldr hárfagri and the capture of the Trojan city. In the prologue to *Heimskringla* Snorri described his historical method which essentially relies on using ancient poetic sources and the work of trusted learned men. In accordance Snorri systematically supports his narrative with poetic sources in *Ynglinga saga*. It was thus not possible for him to connect Óðinn or Freyr to Priam in this historical work as no genealogy of this sort existed in ancient Old Norse poetry.

On the other hand, Snorri was not bound by such constraints in the *Edda* which is not primarily a work of history. The narratives of *Ynglinga saga* and the *Edda* nevertheless assume a similar world chronology. In the prologue to the *Edda* Snorri produces a genealogy of twenty names between Priam and Óðinn who left Tyrkland for the north. In traditional "flight from Troy" narratives the flight is caused by the destruction of Troy and happens right after the death of Priam. Why would the Æsir remain in Tyrkland so long after the destruction of Troy? This does align with classical "flight from Troy" narratives, in which the author wants his people to have a direct connection with Troy. The most straightforward explanation for this oddity is that the author of the prologue to the *Edda* also had in mind a chronology similar to the one which may be inferred from *Ynglingatal*. For him, Scandinavian history started seemingly out of nowhere twenty generations before the 10<sup>th</sup> century, thus concluding that neither the Trojans or their descendants, arrived in the north immediately after the fall of Troy.

As such, the narrative of *Ynglinga saga* probably overlooks the Trojan ancestry of Óðinn because of a lack of poetic sources but can hardly be seen as a negation of the notion that the *Ynglingar* descend from the Trojans. It is not clear what the stance of the author of *Ynglinga saga* on this matter is, but his chronology is at least compatible with that of Snorri's *Edda* which explicitly mentions Troy. It is true that if Snorri had wanted to introduce the idea that his pseudo-gods where of Trojan descent, he could have done it without stating it explicitly. He

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<sup>215</sup> See the edition of this text by Peter Andersen in Andersen, *Nordens gotiske storhedstid*, 206-305. For the parts concerning Dan and Othinus see 278, 281-282.

could have, for instance, described Tyrkland as “the land where Troy once stood”, which would have been factually true within the framework of medieval learned culture. On the other hand, Snorri produced a narrative involving a war and the flight of people from Turkey to Europe, which likely evoked the classical motif of the flight from Troy to his audience.

This difference of chronology between the *Edda* and *Heimskringla* has implications for Snorri’s interpretation of Old Norse myths. In the *Edda* Snorri explains the Norse Myths as distortions of the Trojan war. In the *Edda* Snorri explicitly explained the connection between the characters of the *Iliad* and the Old Norse gods.<sup>216</sup> In *Heimskringla*, however, Snorri only refers to the pseudo-gods by their Old Norse names and does not suggest that these gods had different identities in other cultures. Snorri’s conception of the identity of the pseudo-gods in *Heimskringla* resonates with that of Saxo who explicitly denied that the Scandinavian gods could be identical with the Greco-Roman ones.

Even if Snorri does not refer to the Trojan war in *Heimskringla*, he nonetheless revisits the notion that some Old Norse myths were amplified memories of historical conflicts. His description of the war between the Æsir against the Vanir likely comes from this stanza from *Völuspá*:

24. Fleygði Óðinn  
ok í fólk um skaut –  
þat var enn fólkvíg  
fyrst í heimi.  
Brotinn var borðveg[g]r  
borgar ása.  
Knáttu vanir vígspá  
vǫllo sporna.

(Óðinn flung / and shot into the host - / it was war still, / the first in the world. / Torn was the timber wall / of the Æsir’s stronghold. / Vanir were – by a war charm – / live and kicking on the plain.)<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> The original *Iliad* was unknown in medieval Scandinavia as well as in the rest of western Europe. The narrative of the Trojan war had nonetheless been adapted in Latin and in the Vernacular tongues through translations of the *Ephemeris belli Troiani* by the pseudo-Dictys and the *De excidio Trojae historia* by the pseudo-Dares. The later was adapted in Old Norse as the *Trójumanna Saga* in the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. On this subject see Louis-Jensen, *Trójumanna Saga*, xi-xlii.

<sup>217</sup> Dronke, *The Poetic Edda. Mythological Poems*, 13.

Snorri's narrative about the war of the Æsir and the Vanir is often read as a euhemeristic reading of Old Norse mythology. But Rudolf Simek observes that in the Old Norse sources the Vanir are almost never referred to as a coherent group of gods distinct from the Æsir.<sup>218</sup> After surveying the Old Norse sources he concludes that the dichotomy between the Æsir and the Vanir is essentially a literary construction invented by Snorri. He also argues that the location of Vanaland at the fork of the Don results from typical medieval etymological reasoning and was possibly influenced by early medieval historiographies such as that of Regino of Prüm who located the Hungarians at the fork of the Don River.<sup>219</sup> Following Simek's argument, Frog and Jonathan Roper produced an analysis of the word *Vanir* in poetry ultimately confirming Simek's conclusion and shown that in poetry the word *Vanir* did not refer to a well-defined family or group of gods.<sup>220</sup> Other scholars, such as John Lindow<sup>221</sup> and Clive Tolley,<sup>222</sup> have defended the idea that the Vanir represent an actual pre-Christian category of deities. Lindow and Tolley present interesting arguments but Lindow himself admits that there is no evidence for a cult specifically dedicated to the Vanir gods. His argument according to which the first Swedish kings were connected to the Vanir relies on Christian medieval sources which do not prove that this association dated from pre-Christian times. I believe that Tolley is right when he postulates that there is a dichotomy between individuality and relationality in the Old Norse myths. He explains:

[...] to use terms established in anthropological research. Individuality is primarily a masculine virtue, based on the assertion of the individual and deploring anything that undermined the individual, such as penetration by a spear, or a penis (which leads on to the question of *ergi*, and the *seiðr* practised by the vanir – topics too wide for consideration here). Relationality, on the other hand, is more associated with a female perspective, and it defines a person in terms of their relations with others. Taking the other into oneself is part of relationality: this is, I suggest, represented in graphic form in the inability of the æsir to harm the vanir by sticking weapons into them.<sup>223</sup>

We may indeed observe such a dichotomy in the Old Norse sources, but it is not evident from the extant material that the Vanir are the best representatives of the relationality side. Tolley

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<sup>218</sup> Rudolf Simek, "The Vanir: An Obituary," *The Retrospective Methods Network Newsletter* 1 (2010): 10-19.

<sup>219</sup> Simek, "The Vanir: An Obituary," 16.

<sup>220</sup> Frog and Jonathan Roper, "Verses Versus the 'Vanir': Response to Simek's 'Vanir Obituary,'" *The Retrospective Methods Network Newsletter* 2 (2011): 29-37.

<sup>221</sup> Lindow, "Vanir and Æsir," 1033-1050.

<sup>222</sup> Tolley, "In Defense of the Vanir," 20-28.

<sup>223</sup> Tolley, "In Defense of the Vanir," 24.



postulates that *Völuspá* describes and contrasts the Vanir and the Æsir but this is only the case if we understand Vanir and Æsir in stanza twenty-four as referring to two categories of deities rather than being two synonyms for the gods. If the Vanir were to represent specifically feminine values, is it not odd that two thirds of them<sup>224</sup> are men? If we choose to read stanzas twenty-one and twenty-two as being the starting point of the battle described in stanzas twenty-three and twenty-four, then there is no indication whatsoever that Gullveig or Heiðr is to be identified with Freyja, as is often theorized. We may also note that while Freyja is practicing *seiðr*, the Vanir of stanza twenty-four of the *Völuspá* are using “war charm” (*víg-spá*) which may denote a different kind of magic, even though this is difficult to assess.

In anyway, stanza twenty-five describes the gods wondering who gave Óðr’s girl to the family (*ætt*) of the jötunn. If we consider that this stanza describes the events following stanza twenty-four, it seems reasonable to assume that Óðr’s girl was ceded to the family of the giant following a peace agreement, which would show that the gods were not at war with the Vanir but with giants, or giantesses. It could seem odd that if the enemies of the gods were indeed mainly women they would claim other women, as victory prizes. But then, would that not explain why Heiðr is said to be “angan illrar brúðar” (the lover of evil wives) in stanza twenty-two? It may be that the first war in the world, which the gods fought was one against specifically female giantesses whose homosexual desires disturbed not only the masculine society of the Æsir but social norms in general.

In any case, an Æsir versus Vanir war narrative is not the only plausible, nor the most evident, interpretation of the stanzas of *Völuspá*. I do not believe that *Völuspá* can be read as evidence of an Æsir and Vanir dichotomy in pre-Christian mythology except if analyzed retrospectively in light of Snorri’s writings. Therefore, I find Simek’s, Frog’s, and Roper’s studies convincing. I agree with them when they understand that modern conception of the Vanir as a distinct group of gods is largely due to Snorri.

A somewhat disturbing yet unavoidable consequence of the absence of the Vanir in pre-Christian mythology, is that the Æsir and Vanir dichotomy cannot exist either, which naturally opens the discussion on whether the Æsir were a medieval construction as well. This question has been the subject of a study by Frog, who, for similar reasons than for the Vanir, concludes

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<sup>224</sup> I understand the Vanir as being Njörðr, Freyr, and Freyja.

that the Æsir as a category were also a medieval construction.<sup>225</sup> He argues that, the vocable “Æsir”, just as “Vanir”, was not a name for a category of gods, but rather as a poetic synonym for gods used in specific contexts or to provide rhymes and alliterations.<sup>226</sup> Frog’s argument is compelling and it is clear that the distinction between Vanir and Æsir is nowhere more clearly formulated than in *Ynglinga saga* rather than in any Eddic poem.

The question thus arises: why did Snorri create those categories and what is the connection of this invention with his euhemeristic project. It is likely that Snorri’s account of the Æsir and Vanir war is based on the twenty-fourth stanza of *Völuspá*. Snorri would have understood the stanza as identifying two distinct categories of deities, the Æsir and the Vanir. But even if one agrees with Snorri that the twenty-fourth stanza implies an Æsir and Vanir dichotomy, it is nonetheless the case that the narrative from the stanza is quite different from that of *Ynglinga saga*. In *Völuspá* the Vanir are the attackers and the Æsir the defenders. In *Ynglinga saga*, both parties raid each other’s lands, but the Æsir are the ones who initiated the hostilities as is shown by the fourth chapter first sentence: “Óðinn fór með her á hendur Vǫnum, en þeir urðu vel við ok vǫrðu land sitt, ok hófðu ýmsir sigr. Herjuðu hvárir land annarra ok gerðu skaða”<sup>227</sup> (Óðinn went with an army against the Vanir, but they put up a good fight and defended their land, and victory went alternately to both sides.)

This reversal of the roles may be explained by Snorri’s learned culture and by his broader goal as an author. Following a typical medieval etymological reasonings, Snorri connected the Æsir to Asia and the Vanir to the Don River. However, the author needs both groups to arrive in Scandinavia eventually, the region of the world where they will be worshiped as gods. As such, it is only natural for the Æsir, who live farther away from Scandinavia, in Anatolia, to subjugate the Vanir, who inhabit Crimea, while they travel north. This explanation, however, is not entirely satisfying as Óðinn waged war against the Vanir before his land was attacked by the Romans, and before he decided to reach the northern part of the world. The fact that Æsir attack first, without any special reason, is nonetheless in accordance with Snorri’s portrayal of Óðinn and of the Æsir as a group of warriors and conquerors.

Representing the Æsir as the attackers similarly disagrees with their traditional association with the Trojans. As attackers the Æsir resemble more the Greeks than to the Trojans. Furthermore,

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<sup>225</sup> Frog, “The Æsir: an Obituary,” in *Res, artes et religio: Essays in Honour of Rudolf Simek*, ed. Sabine Heidi Walther et al. (Leeds: Kismet Press, 2021), 141-175.

<sup>226</sup> Frog, “The Æsir: an Obituary,” 149-152.

<sup>227</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 12.

while the Æsir of Snorri did indeed move from their homeland, Snorri's formulation is ambiguous regarding the actual reason behind this migration:

Í þann tíma fóru Rómverjarhöfðingjar víða um heiminn ok brutu undir sik allar þjóðir, en margir höfðingjar flýðu fyrir þeim ófriði af sínum eignum. En fyrir því at Óðinn var forspár ok fjölkunnigr, þá vissi hann, at hans afkvæmi myndi um norðrhálfu heimsins byggva. Þá setti hann bræðr sína, Vé ok Víli, yfir Ásgarð, en hann fór ok díar allir með honum ok mikit fólk annat.<sup>228</sup>

(At that time the rulers of the Rómverjar (Romans) travelled widely around the world and conquered all nations, and many rulers fled their lands because of this aggression. And because Óðinn had prophetic and magical powers, he knew that his descendants would inhabit the northern region of the world. Then he appointed his brothers, Vé and Víli, to rule Ásgarðr, while he, and all the gods with him and many other people, left.)

This account is certainly reminiscent of the traditional motive of the Trojans fleeing their homeland in front of a foreign invader. But in fact, Snorri only states that many rulers, not Óðinn, fled their homeland because of aggression. It is nowhere clearly stated that Óðinn was among these rulers who fled because of the invaders. Instead, Snorri provides another explanation: Óðinn had prophetic power and knew that his descendants would prosper in the north. In this manner, Snorri depicts Óðinn as an active character who decided when to start off his journey, unlike Aeneas and the other Trojan heroes whose journey started because of a defeat.

This representation is certainly in accordance with Snorri's portrayal of Óðinn as a nearly invincible warrior and leader. Thus, the Æsir represent a synthesis of both conquerors and of the noble migrant people. As MacMaster notes, in the sacralized Christian history, autochthony was not an enviable asset as it would tend to make one's people more akin to the biblical Canaanites than to the wandering Hebrews.<sup>229</sup> The reverse of the medal, however, is that in the traditional motif of the flight from Troy, the wandering people are characterized as the defeated. When Snorri introduced the idea that Óðinn's migration was due to prophecies rather than to a military defeat he is using motifs from in the Old Testament, where Moses is not chased away by the Egyptians but rather ordered by God to leave Egypt (Exodus 3:7-10) and to conquer the Promised land (Exodus 23:20-33). Snorri's Óðinn is thus not only built on the model of Aeneas,

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<sup>228</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 14.

<sup>229</sup> MacMaster, "The Origin of Origins," 11.

Brutus, and Trojan heroes, but also resembles Moses and Joshua, who are not only characterized as running from somewhere but are also conquerors with a clear objective of historical significance.

The similarity between Óðinn and Moses, and more broadly between the Æsir and the Hebrew people is even clearer in the prologue to the *Edda*. In the *Edda* Snorri does not mention the Roman conquests but only Óðinn's prophetic power. Furthermore, Snorri specifies that Óðinn and the Æsir "took with them many precious things"<sup>230</sup> (ok höfðu með sér marga gersemliga hluti).<sup>231</sup> This is reminiscent of the biblical description of the escape from Egypt when the Hebrew people took with them the riches of the Egyptians while leaving Egypt (Exodus 12:35-36). In Christian thought Augustine, in *De doctrina Christiana* II.XL.60 produced an allegorical reading of this episode where the despoliation of the Egyptians vessels and jewels symbolized how Christian people could appropriate for themselves certain aspects of the pagan culture.<sup>232</sup> Snorri thus combines and associates classical and biblical motives. By referring to the "many precious things" which the Æsir took with them, Snorri uses biblical motives to convey the meaning of a *translatio studii*, showing that the pseudo-gods imported their prestigious culture with them from Asia Minor to Scandinavia. A similar idea was expressed later in the *Third Grammatical Treatise*, likely written by Snorri's nephew, Óláfr Þórðarson hvítaskáld, where the author states that the Old Norse poetical art is derived from that of the Roman, itself derived from that of the Greeks, which Óðinn and the Æsir brought to the north.<sup>233</sup>

Both Saxo and Snorri associated the movements of the pseudo-gods with the movement of wealth between the Near East and Scandinavia. In Saxo's narrative the Nordic kings were sending gold away from Scandinavia to Byzantium, while with Snorri the pseudo-gods bring riches to the north. Both narratives, use the transfer of wealth as a meaningful literary motive which characterizes the relationship between the pseudo-gods and the Scandinavians. As a religious offering the transfer of gold described by Saxo highlights a relation of submission

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<sup>230</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 4.

<sup>231</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 5.

<sup>232</sup> Saint Augustine, *La Doctrine Chrétienne. De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. J. Martin, trans. Madeleine Moreau, Œuvres de Saint Augustin 11-2 (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 1997), 226; On this topic see Joel S. Allen, "The Despoliation of Egypt: Origen and Augustine - From Stolen Treasures to Saved Texts," in *Israel's Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. Thomas E. Levy, Thomas Schneider, and William H.C. Propp, Quantitative Methods in the Humanities and Social Sciences (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015), 347-356.

<sup>233</sup> On this topic see the introduction to the introduction to the *Fourth Grammatical Treatise* by Margaret Clunies Ross and Jonas Wellendorf: Margaret Clunies Ross and Jonas Wellendorf, eds., *The Fourth Grammatical Treatise* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research University College London, 2014), xviii.

detrimental to the Nordic kingdoms. Contrastingly Snorri described a neat enrichment of the Scandinavian society, denoting a beneficial relationship. As such, the authors' common use of the motive of gold and its movement allows their audience to immediately notice the position of the authors in regard to the foreign pseudo-gods.

## 6. Geographical and Chronological Euhemerism

### 6.1. Mikhail Bakhtin's Concept of Chronotope and Euhemerism

In this part I will discuss how Saxo's and Snorri's euhemerism relies less on a reinterpretation of the gods' nature than on the modification of the world in which they evolve. For that purpose, I will use the concept of chronotope, developed by the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. According to this concept, a narrative is not essentially understood as a sequence of events but as the construction of a fictional world which exist through two dimensions: time and space.<sup>1</sup> In a reflection about chivalric romance, Bakhtin developed the idea that the hero and the world which surrounds him are of the same type:

both the hero and the miraculous world in which he acts are of a piece, there is no separation between the two. This world is not, to be sure, his national homeland; it is everywhere equally "other" (but this "otherness" is not emphasized) – the hero moves from country to country, comes into contact with various masters, crosses various seas – but everywhere the world is one, it is filled with the same concept of glory, heroic deed and disgrace; throughout this world the hero is able to bring glory on himself and on others; everywhere the same names resound and are glorious.<sup>2</sup>

A knight, outside of his chivalric world is not the hero he is supposed to be, but an out of place character like, for example, Don Quixote acting as a wandering knight within the realistic framework of 17<sup>th</sup> century Spain. An Old Norse example of such a character is Gísli Súrsson who acts as a hero from Eddic poetry within the ordinary framework of Icelandic society.<sup>3</sup> The Old Norse sources tend to confirm that this idea is equally true regarding gods and that a god who retains his divine nature but visits our world is assured to be a disturbing figure. Old Norse examples of this principle are Þórr in *Gylfaginning* who frightens the farmers that sheltered him, or the Óðinn of the legendary sagas who alternatively helps and kills his heroic protégés.

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<sup>1</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press Slavic Series, no. 1 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84-85.

<sup>2</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 153-154.

<sup>3</sup> On Gísli Súrsson as a maladapted hero see for instance Larsen, "Evolutionary Insights," 302-325; David Clark, "Revisiting 'Gísli Saga': Sexual Themes and the Heroic Past," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 106, no. 4 (2007): 492-515.

As I have discussed earlier, the euhemerized gods of Saxo and Snorri remain extremely powerful characters.<sup>4</sup> In fact, in *Ynglinga saga* the human Óðinn is more powerful than many deities of the non-euhemerized sources. Nonetheless one of the powers he lacks is that of creation. While Óðinn is the co-creator of the world in *Gylfaginning*, in *Ynglinga saga* he is not, as this role is implicitly but obviously assumed by the monotheistic Christian God. As such, Óðinn and the other pseudo-gods, as powerful as they are, are themselves only creatures. The Christian authors do not deny the powerful nature of the pseudo-gods. They deny their transcendence, the idea that they may be distinct from the world, or that their world is different from ours.

Conversely the transposition of a narrative originating in an Old Norse pre-Christian conception of the world into a medieval Christian one implies a transition from one chronotope to another. The chronotope of medieval Christian narratives is contained in the broader chronotope of Christian worldview. As Joseph Harris<sup>5</sup> and Carl Phelpstead<sup>6</sup> argued, Christianity introduced a conception of historical time as a linear movement from past to future which it superimposed over the cyclical time of the year.<sup>7</sup> In the Christian perspective time and history are God's creations and human societies evolve within a preestablished timeframe between Creation and the end of world and time. As such, in the Christian chronology, events are not only situated relative to each other but also relative to common chronological landmarks: creation, incarnation, and judgement day. As we shall see, Saxo and Snorri produced chronotopes which contain multiple references to pagan concepts, but nevertheless operate with the Christian conception of the world.

The idea that the concept of euhemerism may not be applied only to characters but also to geographical locations in Old Norse sources has been discussed by Brent Landon Johnson<sup>8</sup> but his idea has received little subsequent attention in the field of Old Norse studies. It has recently been the subject of a book chapter written by Amanda Gerber on Boccaccio's treatment of

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<sup>4</sup> See sections 5.1 and 5.2.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Harris, "Saga as Historical Novel," in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*, ed. John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth, and Gerd Wolfgang Weber (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986), 194-195.

<sup>6</sup> Carl Phelpstead, "Time," in *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, ed. Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson (Arbingdon: Routledge, 2017), 190.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *Un autre Moyen Âge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 407-410.

<sup>8</sup> Brent Landon Johnson, "In Search of Vanaheimr" (Society for the advancement of Scandinavian studies 2013, UC Berkeley, May 3, 2013), [https://www.academia.edu/6700143/In\\_Search\\_of\\_Vanaheimr](https://www.academia.edu/6700143/In_Search_of_Vanaheimr).

classical mythology.<sup>9</sup> Following Bakhtin remarks about chivalric hero, we may also infer that the gods can only be gods in the mythological world designed for them. Both Saxo and Snorri begin their works with geographical descriptions. Saxo's description of Denmark and Scandinavia is too long to be quoted entirely, but here are some key passages for this discussion:

Tuo igitur ductu respectuque subnixus, quo cetera liquidius exequar, initium a patrie nostre situ descriptuque petere statui, speciosius singula perstricturus, si narrationis procursum competentia rebus loca permetiens ab eorum positione dicendorum inchoamenta deduxerit. Huius itaque regionis extima partim soli alterius confinio limitantur, partim propinqui maris fluctibus includuntur. Interna uero circumfusis ambit Oceanus, qui sinuosis interstitiorum anfractibus nunc in angustias freti contractioris euadens, nunc in latitudinem sinu diffusiore procurrens complures insulas creat. Quo fit, ut Dania mediis pelagi fluctibus intercisa paucas solidi continuique tractus partes habeat, quas tanta undarum interruptio pro uaria freti reflexioris obliquitate discriminat. Ex his Iutia granditatis inchoamentique ratione Danici regni principium tenet, que sicut positione prior ita situ porrectior Theutonice finibus admouetur. A cuius complexu fluminis Eydori interruatione discreta cum aliquanto latitudinis excremento septentrionem uersus in Norici freti littus excurrit. In hac sinus, qui Lymicus appellatur, ita piscibus frequens existit, ut non minus alimentorum indigenis quam ager omnis exoluere uideatur. [...]

Post Iutiam insula ad orientem uersus Fionia reperitur, quam a continenti angusti admodum equoris interiectus abrumpit. Hec sicut ab occasu Iutiam, ita ab ortu Sialandiam prospectat, conspicua necessariorum rerum ubertate laudanda. Que insula amoenitate cunctas nostre regionis prouincias antecedens medium Danie locum obtinere putatur, ab extime remotiois limite pari spaciorem intercapedine disparata. [...]

At quoniam regio hec Suetiam Noruagiamque tam uocis quam situs affinitate complectitur, earum quoque, sicut et Danie, partes ac climata memorabo. Que prouincie septentrionali polo subiecte Bootemque et Arcton respicientes ipsum frigentis zone paralellum ultima sui porrectione contingunt. Post quas humanis sedibus locum inusitata algoris seuitia non relinquit. Ex quibus Noruagia saxei situs deformitatem nature sortita discrimine rupibus infoecunda ac scopulis undique secus obsita glebarum uastitate tristes locorum salebras representat. In cuius parte extima ne noctu quidem diurnum sydus occultitur, ita ut continui solis presentia alternos horarum dedignata successus utriusque temporis pari luminis administratione deseruiat.

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<sup>9</sup> Amanda Gerber, "Grounding the Gods. Spreading Geographical Euhemerism from Servius to Boccaccio," in *Euhemerism and Its Uses. The Mortal Gods*, ed. Syrithe Pugh (London: Routledge, 2021), 103-125.



Ab huius latere occidentali insula, que Glacialis dicitur, magno circumfusa reperitur Oceano, obsolete admodum habitationis tellus rerumque ueri fidem excedentium et insolitorum euentuum miraculis predicanda. Illic fons est, qui fumigantis aque uitio natiuam rei cuiuslibet originem demolitur. [...] Huic etiam insule certis statutisque temporibus infinita glaciei aduoluitur moles. Que cum aduentans scabris primum cautibus illidi coeperit, perinde ac remugientibus scopulis fragose ex alto uoces ac uarii inusitate conclamationis strepitus audiuntur. Quamobrem animas ob nocentis uite culpam suppliciiis addictas illic algoris magnitudine delictorum pendere poenas existimatum est. [...]

Talibus, [gigantes] ut nostri autumant, subitam mirandamque nunc propinquitatis, nunc absentie potestatem comparendique ac subterlabendi uicissitudinem uersilis corporum status indulget, qui hodieque scrupeam inaccessamque solitudinem, cuius supra mentionem fecimus, incolere perhibentur. Eiusdem aditus horrendi generis periculis obsitus raro sui expertoribus incolumitatem regressumque concessit. Nunc stilum ad propositum transferam.

(Looking to your leadership and esteem, I have decided to begin, in order to accomplish the rest more smoothly, with the position and description of our father land; my details will be more lucid if, when I progress through this narrative, I have started by traversing the places to which the events belong, and stated their location. The edges of this region, then, are partly bounded by another land frontier, partly enclosed by the waves of the adjacent sea. The interior is washed and encircled by the Ocean, which sometimes through winding interspaces runs into the straits of a narrow fjord, in other places flows into a wider expanse to form a large number of islands within a spreading bay. This is why Denmark, cut through and through by the surrounding sea waters, has few unbroken stretches of solid ground; so much do the waves intervene to mark off different shapes, according to the angles made by the turning channels. Of these regions Jutland holds first place because of its greater size and superior position, for it begins the Danish kingdom and stretches farthest, right to the boundaries of Germany. From the River Eider, whose stream separates these two countries, it runs north, extending somewhat in width to the shore of the Norwegian Channel. Up here there is Limfjorden, teeming with so many fish that it seems to yield as much food to the natives as their whole soil. [...]

East of Jutland you find the island of Funen, cleft from the mainland by a fairly narrow strip of water. Eastward again lies Zealand, worthy of praise for its exceptional richness in the resources of life. This island is the most lovely of all our provinces and is considered to be the centre of Denmark, since the farthest limits of the region's circumference are equidistant from it. [...]

I shall record, besides the areas and climate of Denmark, those of Sweden and Norway, since the same geographic area embraces them, and because of their kindred languages. This region, lying beneath the northern heavens, faces Boötes and the Great and Lesser Bear; beyond its highest latitude, where it touches the Arctic zone, the extraordinary brutality of the temperature allows no human beings to settle. Of these countries Nature decided to give Norway an unpleasant, craggy terrain; it reveals nothing but a grim, barren, rock-strewn desert. In its farthest part the sun never withdraws its presence; not even at night; scorning alternate periods of day and night it apportions equal light to each.

To the west is Iceland, an island surrounded by vast Ocean, a land of meanish dwellings yet deserving proclamation for mysterious happenings beyond credibility. There is a spring here which by the virulence of its gaseous waters destroys the original nature of any object. [...] At certain definite times, too, an immense mass of ice drifts upon the island; immediately on its arrival, when it dashes into the rough coast, the cliffs can be heard re-echoing, as though a din of voices were roaring in weird cacophony from the deep. Hence a belief that wicked souls condemned to a torture of intense cold are paying their penalty there. [...]

Such creatures [giants], so our countrymen maintain, are today supposed to inhabit the rugged, inaccessible wastes which I mentioned above and be endowed with transmutable bodies, so that they have the incredible power of appearing and disappearing in turn, of being present and suddenly somewhere else. But entry to that land is beset with perils so horrific that a safe homecoming is seldom granted to those who adventure it. Now I shall address my pen to the task in hand.)<sup>10</sup>

And here is Snorri's shorter description of the world:

Kringla heimsins, sú er mannfólkit byggvir, er mjök vágskorin. Ganga hof stór ór útsjánum inn í jörðina. Er þat kunnigt, at haf gengr frá Nqrvasundum ok allt út til Jórsalalands. Af hafinu gengr langr hafsbötn til landnorðs, er heitir Svartahaf. Sá skilr heimsþriðjungana. Heitir fyrir austan Ásia, en fyrir vestan kalla sumir Európa, en sumir Eneá. En norðan at Svartahafi gengr Svíþjóð in mikla eða in kalda. Svíþjóð ina miklu kalla sumir menn eigi minni en Serkland it mikla, sumir jafna henni við Bláland it mikla. Inn nørðri hlutr Svíþjóðar liggr óbyggðr af frosti ok kulða, svá sem inn syðri hlutr Blálands er auðr af sólarbruna. Í Svíþjóð eru stórheruð mörq. Þar eru ok margs konar þjóðir ok margar tungur. Þar eru risar, ok þar eru dvergar, þar eru blámenn, ok þar eru margs konar undarligar þjóðir. Þar eru ok dýr ok drekar furðuliga stórir. Ór norðri frá fjöllum þeim, er fyrir útan eru byggð

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<sup>10</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, Pr.1.6.-3.1.

alla, fellr á um Svíþjóð, sú er at réttu heitir Tanais. Hon var forðum kǫlluð Tanakvísl eða Vanakvísl. Hon kǫmr til sjávar inn í Svartahaf. Í Vanakvíslum var þá kallat Vanaland eða Vanaheimr. Sú á skilir heimspriðjungana. Heitir fyrir austan Ásiá, en fyrir vestan Európa.<sup>11</sup>

(The disc of the world that mankind inhabits is very indented with bays. Large bodies of water run from the ocean into the land. It is known that a sea extends from Nǫrvasund (the Straits of Gibraltar) all the way to Jórsalaland (Palestine). From the sea a long gulf called Svartahaf (the Black Sea) extends to the north-east. It divides the world into thirds. To the east is the region called Asia, and the region to the west some call Europe, and some Enea. And from the north to Svartahaf extends Svíþjóð in mikla (Sweden the Great) or in kalda (the Cold). Some claim Svíþjóð in mikla to be no smaller than Serkland it mikla (Saracens-land the Great, north Africa), others compare it to Bláland it mikla (Blacks-land the Great, Africa). The northern part of Svíþjóð remains uninhabited because of frost and cold, just as the southern part of Bláland is empty because of the heat of the sun. In Svíþjóð there are many large uninhabited areas. There are also nations of many kinds and many languages. There are giants there and dwarves, there are black people there, and many kinds of strange nations. There are also amazingly large wild animals and dragons. From the north, from the mountains that are beyond all habitations, flows a river through Svíþjóð that is properly called Tanais (Don). It was formerly called Tanakvísl (fork of the Don) or Vanakvísl (fork of the Vanir). It reaches the sea in Svartahaf. The land within Vanakvíslir (delta of the Don) was then called Vanaland (Land of Vanir) or Vanaheimr (World of Vanir). This river separates the thirds of the world. The region to the east is called Asia, that to the west, Europe.)

The most remarkable difference between these two geographical descriptions is their scope. Saxo focuses on Scandinavia while Snorri describes the whole world as it is conceived by a 13<sup>th</sup> century author. Saxo's description is much more specific and follows closely the geography of Scandinavia, while Snorri's is schematical and follows learned medieval geographical models as it is described in the *Etymologiae* XIV.3-5. However, both authors agree about the remote north of Scandinavia, perceived as to be populated by abnormal people and supernatural creatures.

As discussed in part 5.7 both Saxo and Snorri locate the pseudo-gods outside of Scandinavia, either in Greece or Asia Minor. Saxo states it as much in the passage which I quoted in section

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<sup>11</sup> Heimsrkingla I, 9-10.

5.5.1, where the kings of the North send a golden statue to Othinus in Byzantium. In *Heimskringla* Snorri explains it in the second chapter of *Ynglinga saga*:

Fyrir austan Tanakvísl í Ásía var kallað Ásaland eða Ásaheimr, en höfuðborgin, er var í landinu, klluðu þeir Ásgarð. En í borginni var höfðingi sá, er Óðinn var kallaðr.<sup>12</sup>

(To the east of Tanakvísl in Asia it was called Ásaland (Land of the Æsir) or Ásaheimr (World of the Æsir), and the capital city that was in the land they called Ásgarðr. And in that town was the ruler who was called Óðinn. There was a great place of worship there.)

Saxo mentions Uppsala in the same paragraph as Byzantium but does not describe the travel of Othinus from one of these places to the other. Snorri, for his part, describes Óðinn's travel from *Tyrkland* to Sweden and his settlement there:

Óðinn tók sér bústað við Löginn, þar sem nú eru kallaðar fornu Sigtúnir, ok gerði þar mikit hof ok blót eptir siðvenju Ásanna. Hann eignaðisk þar lǫnd svá vítt sem hann lét heita Sigtúnir. Hann gaf bústaði hofgoðunum. Njorðr bjó í Nóatúnum, en Freyr at Uppsolum, Heimdallr at Himinbjörgum, Þórr á Þrúðvangi, Baldr á Breiðabliki. Öllum fekk hann þeim góða bólstaði.<sup>13</sup>

(Óðinn established his dwelling by Löginn at the place now called Old Sigtúnir, and built a large temple there and performed sacrifices according to the custom of the Æsir. He took possession of lands over the whole area that he gave the name Sigtúnir to. He gave dwelling places to the temple priests. Njorðr lived at Nóatún, Freyr at Uppsalar, Heimdallr at Himinbjörg, Þórr at Þrúðvangr, Baldr at Breiðablik. He provided them all with good residences.)

Snorri uses several toponyms from Old Norse cosmology such as Himinbjörg (heaven mountain), Þrúðvangr (field of power), Breiðablik (broad shine), as the dwelling places of Heimdallr, Þórr, and Baldr respectively. Snorri identified the mythical city of Ásgarðr with a place on earth, Troy, and he also identifies the dwelling of the gods as locations in Scandinavia. Himinbjörg, Þrúðvangr and Breiðablik are not actual toponyms and Snorri does not specify whether these places correspond to known Swedish places. Uppsalar, however, is identical with Uppsala and this mention of a real place alongside mythological places suggests that all these locations coexist on the same ordinary plane of existence. As such, in this sentence Snorri implicitly negates the existence of a separate world of the gods. Snorri does not mention the

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<sup>12</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 16.

traditional dwelling place of Óðinn, the Valhøll in this passage. He mentions it in chapter eight where Óðinn speaks of Valhøll as the dwelling place of the dead:

Svá setti hann, at alla dauða menn skyldi brenna ok bera á bál með þeim eign þeira. Sagði hann svá, at með þvílíkum auðæfum skyldi hverr koma til Valhallar sem hann hafði á bál, þess skyldi hann ok njóta, er hann sjálfr hafði í jörð grafit.<sup>14</sup>

(He ordained that all dead people must be burned and that their possessions should be laid on a pyre with them. He said that everyone should come to Valhøll with such wealth as he had on his pyre, and that each would also have the benefit of whatever he himself had buried in the earth.)

Contrary to the other worlds mentioned above, which were the home of specific gods, the Valhøll does not act as a god's abode but as the world of the dead. Later, when Óðinn is about to die, he informs his people that he will go to "Goðheimar", which can be translated as the "world of gods" or in the singular "world of god" to be "reunited with his friends."<sup>15</sup> In this context, Óðinn likely meant the world of the actual gods, or god, that is to say heaven. Yet, because the Swedes confuse the earthly pseudo-gods with actual gods, they understand Goðheimar as referring to a real place located on earth and infer that Óðinn went back to his homeland, Ásgarðr. This confusion perdures and is made apparent later in the narrative when an Ynglingar king, Sveigðir decides to look for Goðheimar and Óðinn. As the narrator states, his travels bring him to *Tyrkland* and *Svíþjóð in mikla*. Snorri recounts the encounter between Sveigðir and a dwarf in the eastern part of Svíþjóð:

Um kveldit eptir sólarfall, þá er Sveigðir gekk frá drykkju til svefnbúrs, sá hann til steinsins, at dvergr sat undir steininum. Sveigðir ok hans menn váru mjök drukknir ok runnu til steinsnins. Dvergrinn stóð í durum ok kallaði á Sveigði, það hann þar inn ganga, ef hann vildi Óðin hitta. Sveigðir hljóp í steininn, en steinninn lausks þegar aptr, ok kom Sveigðir aldri út.<sup>16</sup>

(In the evening after sunset, when Sveigðir left the drinking to go to his sleeping chamber, he looked towards the stone and saw a dwarf sitting under it. Sveigðir and his men were very drunk, and ran towards the stone. The dwarf stood in the doorway and called to

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<sup>14</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 20.

<sup>15</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 22.

<sup>16</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 27.

Sveigðir, telling him to go in there if he wanted to meet Óðinn. Sveigðir ran in, and the stone immediately closed behind him, and Sveigðir never came out.)

Once again, the narrator plays on the confusion between geographical locations and the afterlife. When the dwarf says that Sveigðir may “meet Óðinn” the king understand that he will reach the location of the god’s dwelling on earth. Instead, the dwarf certainly uses the expression to mean “to die”, as in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* for instance: “ok sýnisk mér nú líkast, at vér munum allir Óðin gista í kveld í Valhöllu.”<sup>17</sup> (I think it is likely that we shall all be Ódin’s guest in Valhöll this evening.).<sup>18</sup> Thus Sveigðir does succeed in his quest to find Óðinn, but not in the way he expected to.

Sveigðir did not realize that he reached his destination when he arrived in *Tyrkland*. This is due to his conflation of Goðheimr as the land of the gods and of the dead, and Goðheimr the Æsir’s place of origin.<sup>19</sup> As the narrator comments: “Nú hugðu Svíar, at hann væri kominn í inn forna Ásgarðr ok myndi þar lifa at eilífu.”<sup>20</sup> (the Svíar believed that he had gone to the old Ásgarðr and would live there for ever.) The phrasing suggests that the identification of Goðheimr – the world of the dead – and of Ásgarðr – the real Asian city – is due to the Swedes misinterpretation of Óðinn’s words rather than to a conscious act of trickery by the pseudo-god. Strictly speaking Óðinn likely speaks in good faith and truly believes that he will meet his deceased friends in the afterlife, in the world of the gods. In fact, in *Ynglinga saga*, Óðinn never explicitly impersonates a god and never claims that Goðheimr is identical with his homeland.

Because of this confusion Sveigðir is unable to fulfill both components of his oath at the same time. He nonetheless succeeds in meeting his god. A dwarf had told Sveigðir that if he would follow him inside a stone, he would meet Óðinn. Once again, the words are true but the interpretation is faulty: Sveigðir fails to grasp that to “meet Óðinn” merely means “to die”.<sup>21</sup> As such in *Ynglinga saga* the mythical Old Norse cosmology only exists in the mind of gullible characters.

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<sup>17</sup> Gabriel Turville-Petre, ed., *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1956), 5.

<sup>18</sup> My translation.

<sup>19</sup> For a similar interpretation see Karen Bek-Pedersen, “Sveigðir og dværgen i stenen,” *Chaos* 73 (2021): 199.

<sup>20</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 22.

<sup>21</sup> On the motive of dwarf, stones and the world of the dead see Andreas Nordberg, “The Grave as a Doorway to the Other World: Architectural Religious Symbolism in Iron Age Graves in Scandinavia,” *Temenos - Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 45, no. 1 (January 1, 2009), 44-45.

With the exception of Ásgarðr, every mythological location which Snorri includes in *Ynglinga saga* is rather unimportant in the Old Norse myths. Yet, while Snorri mentions unimportant places such as Breiðablik and Þrúðvangr he does not mention some of the most memorable mythological landmarks of the Old Norse cosmology which he described in the *Edda*: Yggdrasil, Bifröst, Muspell, and Niflheim. The absence of Niflheim may be explained because of its similarity with the Christian Hell which could have led Snorri to understand this place through analogy rather than euhemerism.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, we can hypothesize that Muspell, a world of fire may have been perceived as a pagan representation of Hell. In *Skáldskaparmál* the narrator states: “Þat kalla þeir Surtaloga er Troja brann.”<sup>23</sup> (What they call Surt’s fire was when Troy burned.)<sup>24</sup> If Surtr is the personification of fire rather than the euhemerization of a historical character, then his kingdom is also unlikely to be the mythical distortion of a real earthly place. These explanations, however, cannot stand for Yggdrasil and Bifröst, which have no evident Christian equivalents. Unlike the locations discussed already, Yggdrasil and Bifröst are not worlds but structural elements that connect different worlds. Snorri describes Yggdrasil in non-euhemeristic terms, in *Gylfaginning*:

þá segir Jafnhár: ‘Askinn er allra tréa mestur ok bestur. Limar hans dreifask yfir heim allan ok standa yfir himni. Þrjár røtr trésins halda því upp ok standa afar breitt. Ein er með Ásum, en önnur með hrímþursum, þar sem forðum var Ginnungagap. In þriðja stendr yfir Niflheimi, ok undir þeiri rót er Hvergelmir, en Níðhoggr gnagar neðan rótina. En undir þeiri rót er til hrímþursa horfir, þar er Mímis brunnur, er spekð ok mannvit er í fólgtit, ok heitir sá Mímir er á brunninn. Hann er fullr af vísindum fyrir því at hann drekkur ór brunninum af horninu Gjallarhorni. Þar kom Alföðr ok beiddisk eins drykkjar af brunninum, en hann fekk eigi fyrir en hann lagði auga sitt at veði. [...] Þriðja rót asksins stendr á himni, ok undir þeiri rót er brunnur sá er mjök er heilagur er heitir Urðar brunnur.’<sup>25</sup>

(Then said Just-as-high: ‘The ash is of all trees the biggest and best. Its branches spread out over all the world and extend across the sky. Three of the tree’s roots support it and extend very, very far. One is among the Æsir, the second among the frost-giants, where Ginnungagap once was. The third extends over Niflheim, and under that root is Hvergelmir, and Nidhogg gnaws the bottom of the root. But under the root that reaches towards the frost-giants, there is where Mimir’s well is, which has wisdom and intelligence contained

<sup>22</sup> For a similar explanation of the absence of Loki and Týr from euhemeristic sources see section 5.6.5.

<sup>23</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*. 1, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 66.

<sup>25</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 17.

in it, and the master of the well is called Mimir. [...] The third root of the ash extends to heaven, and beneath that root is a well which is very holy, called Weird's well.)<sup>26</sup>

Snorri describes here the three-dimensional cosmos. The first two roots delineate a horizontal plane, while the third root extends vertically, from the bottom of Niflheim and far up to heaven. Significantly, Snorri introduces Bifröst immediately after his description of Yggdrasil: “Hvern dag ríða Æsir þangat upp um Bifröst. Hon heitir ok Ásbrú.”<sup>27</sup> (Every day the Æsir ride there up over Bifröst. It is also called As-bridge.)<sup>28</sup> Snorri's description seems to imply that Bifröst is needed to connect the two axes of the tree, as the gods inhabit the first root while they use Bifröst to travel to Urðarbrunnr, located on the third branch. We may see here an illustration of Bakhtin's theory. The world as depicted in the *Edda* allows the gods to exist as transcendent beings. This world's design makes it possible for the gods to travel between otherwise unconnected spaces while other beings cannot do the same: giants cannot walk on Bifröst, and humans cannot reach rainbows. The ability to roam the whole Old Norse cosmos is perhaps one of the most important signs of the Old Norse gods' divine status since it confirms that the Old Norse deities do not belong to the world of humans and that they are the only ones who can freely travel between every locations of the cosmos. The ability to navigate the cosmos is a fundamental aspect of the transcendental nature to the gods. We may thus infer that Yggdrasil and Bifröst are absent from the euhemerized sources because they are the structuring skeleton of a chronotope which is specifically designed for the Old Norse deities to exist as gods.

The gods remain great travelers in the euhemerized chronotopes of Saxo and Snorri: Óðinn journeyed from the center of the world to its edges, in Scandinavia, and Saxo's Othinus regularly travels between Sweden and Byzantium. Yet, unlike their mythological counterparts, in these chronotopes, ordinary humans can also travel everywhere the gods go. *Ynglinga saga* demonstrates this through the travels of Sveigðir to Ásgarðr as discussed above. The *Gesta Danorum* illustrates as much through the accounts of Thorkillus' in the eighth book. In this narrative the legendary king Gorm, not to be confused with the historical Gorm the old, worries about the fate of his soul. To learn what happens after death he asks the Icelandic sailor Thorkillus to travel to the land of his god, Utgartha-Loki. It is unclear where the land of Utgartha-Loki is located, and Saxo is vague regarding the directions of Thorkillus' travel. He does mention however that the crew reached a sunless region, which would tend to locate

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<sup>26</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 17.

<sup>27</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 17.



Utgartha-Loki's land in the northernmost part of the world. The travels of Thorkillus are more marvelous than those of Sveigðir. Instead of real locations Thorkillus visits fantastic lands where he and his crew face various moral challenges, granting spiritual significance to the journey.<sup>29</sup> As Marlene Ciklamini notes, Thorkillus' expedition demonstrates that the giants' powers are limited and that they can only cause pain and death.<sup>30</sup> When Thorkillus ultimately attains the land of Utgartha-Loki he discovers that the deity is in fact a putrid and weak giant, chained within a dark cave. This revelation initiates Thorkillus' conversion who then stops to believe in the gods. On the contrary, king Gorm is unable to accept the truth about his god and dies. Both Saxo and Snorri highlight the absurdity of the search for God in this world, which only leads to the discovery of false gods, or death. Both authors formed a geography of the false gods on earth which Saxo locates in the east and north, and Snorri in the east. As I have discussed elsewhere, these narratives display not only superficial but also structural similarities with Þórr's journey to the land of giants.<sup>31</sup> Both narratives demonstrate the weakness of the heathen gods. In this case, however, the gods are not the travelers but the hosts. Jens Peter Schjødt notes that in the Old Norse context, the characters that travel from one world to another tend to go to the world of the dead rather than to the world of the gods.<sup>32</sup> In Saxo's account of Thorkillus, however, the line between the world of giants, of gods, and of the dead, is blurred: Utgartha-Loki is both a giant and a pagan deity, his stench reminds that of a corpse and his dark realm resembles the world of the dead. As with Sveigðir's journey, the quest of Thorkillus contains its own contradiction. Both adventurers want to find their gods, but what they ultimately discover is the falseness of their beliefs.

## 6.2. Deconstructing Old Norse Cosmology

As such, one consequence of euhemerism, which is common to Saxo and Snorri, is that their pseudo-gods inhabit the same world as ordinary humans. This, in fact, can be considered an essential feature of euhemerism as it is found in every occurrence of the theory: the pseudo-

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<sup>29</sup> On this topic see Séamus Mac Mathúna, "The Question of Irish Analogues in Old Norse-Icelandic Voyage Tales in the Fornaldarsögur and the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus," in *Between the Worlds: Contexts, Sources, and Analogues of Scandinavian Otherworld Journeys*, ed. Matthias Egeler and Wilhelm Heizmann, *Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 118 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 319-321.

<sup>30</sup> Marlene Ciklamini, "Journeys to the Giant-Kingdom," *Scandinavian Studies* 40, no. 2 (1968): 106.

<sup>31</sup> Piet, "Religious Conversions," 130-145.

<sup>32</sup> Jens Peter Schjødt, "Journeys to Other Worlds in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Mythology: Different Worlds – Different Purposes," in *Between the Worlds: Contexts, Sources, and Analogues of Scandinavian Otherworld Journeys*, ed. Matthias Egeler and Wilhelm Heizmann, *Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 118 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 23.

gods may remain powerful and even capable of supernatural capacities, but they are never otherworldly. I will now study how the euhemeristic narratives use concepts from the Old Norse cosmology into their narrative, and examine to what extent this them.

For this purpose, it is necessary to distinguish between the authors' various cosmological writings. Indeed, throughout his work Snorri describes the world in three different instances: in the prologue to the *Edda*, in *Gylfaginning* and in *Ynglinga saga*. None of these descriptions are identical to the others. The most peculiar of them is the one found in *Gylfaginning*. This description of the world, unlike the others, does not come from an unknown and seemingly neutral narrator, but is told by the three mysterious characters Hár, Jafnhár, and Þríði, who openly represents a pagan point of view. The description of the world as found in *Gylfaginning* is not euhemeristic in nature, it is not meant to unveil a historical truth behind the deceptive veil of myths, but rather be a genuine retelling of the pre-Christian cosmology.

This narrative, however, is enclosed within a euhemeristic framework, since the myths are narrated by the impostor Æsir themselves. In that respect, *Gylfaginning* represents euhemerism in performance. Its action takes place at the moment when the pseudo-gods trick the humans into believing in their fictional narratives.<sup>33</sup> As such, *Gylfaginning* offers unique insight into Snorri's perception of pagan beliefs and on they came about. In this text, Snorri interprets a large number of Eddic stanzas, texts he considers to be a "primary source" material for pre-Christian myths. Hence, Snorri's retelling of Old Norse mythology contains two layers. The first layer is Snorri's interpretation of the literal meaning of his poetic source which corresponds to the commentaries of Hár, Jafnhár, and Þríði which is merely an explanation from a (pseudo-)pagan point of view, and thus still conveys, among other things, the lies and errors or the pseudo-gods. The second layer is Snorri's unveiling of what he holds to be the kernel of truth behind these poems. Euhemerism is a product of this second layer of interpretation. As we shall see, reality is not as simple, and Snorri's subjectivity already plays a large part in the first layer of interpretation of his sources. Regardless, the comparison between the allegedly pagan cosmology of *Gylfaginning* with the euhemeristic narratives of *Heimskringla* and *Prose Edda* afford us unique insight into how the author constructs his euhemeristic narrative.

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<sup>33</sup> Arthur D Mosher discussed the role of the exchange between Gylfi and the Æsir as a fictional framework in which the Norse myths may be narrated: "The Story of Baldr's Death: The Inadequacy of Myth in the Light of Christian Faith," *Scandinavian Studies* 55, no. 4 (1983): 306; Vésteinn Ólason argued that this framework is intended to be a fictional one Vésteinn Ólason, "List og tvísæi í *Snorra Eddu*," *Gripla* 12 (2011): 41-5.

### 6.3. A Round Earth?

As with *Ynglinga saga*, *Gylfaginning* offers an opportunity to study Snorri's prose narrative alongside his poetic sources. But, unlike *Ynglingatal*, which is only known through its quotations in *Ynglinga saga*, most of the poetry quoted in *Gylfaginning* is preserved in the *Poetic Edda*. Thus, we are not only able to examine Snorri's quotations, but also his omissions and his authorial choices. In this relatively short text, Snorri quotes no less than sixty-three stanzas from various poems. Three poems are significantly more quoted than the others: *Völuspá* (twenty-six times), *Grímnismál* (eighteen times), and *Vafþrúðnismál* (nine times).

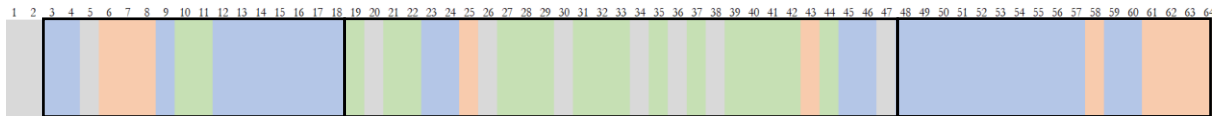


Figure 8: Origin of the poetic stanzas quoted in *Gylfaginning*. Each numbered column corresponds to a poetic quotation in *Gylfaginning*. Quotations from *Völuspá* are represented in blue, those from *Grímnismál* in green, those from *Vafþrúðnismál* in orange, and the other poems, in grey. The three rectangles correspond to three blocks of quotation: *Völuspá* is the most quoted poem in the first and last block while *Grímnismál* in the most quoted poem in the second block.

This table represents the distribution of these quotations in the text. Each stripe of color, numbered from 1 to 64 represent a poetic quotation from Snorri. Quotations from *Völuspá* are represented in blue, those from *Grímnismál* in green, those from *Vafþrúðnismál* in orange, and the other poems, in grey. These quotations can be divided into three main blocks, following what Snorri uses them for. From the third stanza to the eighteenth, the quotations help support Snorri's account of the creation and organization of the cosmos. Snorri uses stanzas nineteen through forty-seven to disclose different information about the Old Norse gods and their homes. And from the forty-eighth until the end, the stanzas are presented within a narrative describing Ragnarok and the subsequent rebirth of the world. *Völuspá* is the most quoted poem in the first and last block while *Grímnismál* is principally quoted in the second block. Quotations from *Vafþrúðnismál* are spread throughout the text with a small concentration at the end, where Snorri focuses on the rebirth of the world.

The less homogenous of these blocks is the first one, where the quotations from *Völuspá* are interrupted by one stanza from *Völuspá inn skamma*, three stanzas from *Vafþrúðnismál*, and two stanzas from *Grímnismál*. This is the part where Snorri describes the Old Norse cosmos, which he characterizes as being circular, surrounded by Miðgarðr, the land of giants and the ocean:

[jörðin] er kringlótt útan, ok þar útan um liggir hinn djúpi sjár, ok með þeiri sjávar ströndu gáfu þeir lönd til bygðar jötna ættum. En fyrir innan á jörðunni gerðu þeir borg umhverfis heim fyrir ófriði jötna, en til þeirar borgar höfðu þeir brár Ymis jötuns, ok kōlluðu þá borg Miðgarð.<sup>34</sup>

([the earth] is circular round the edge, and around it lies the deep sea, and along the shore of this sea they gave lands to live in to the races of the giants. But on the earth on the inner side they made a fortification round the world against the hostility of giants, and for the fortification they used the giant Ymir's eyelashes, and they called the fortification Midgard.)<sup>35</sup>

This description aligns with understandings of the Old Norse cosmos as being divided between Miðgarðr, in the middle, and Útgarðr, on the edges. This conception found many proponents in Old Norse scholarship. Kirsten Hastrup summarized this view as such:

The distinction between innihús and útihus and between innagarðs and útangarðs are both expressions of a concentric model; this model can be seen also to be operative in the proximate orientation in space. We should note here, however, that the concentric model of space operated on a more abstract level as well. In the cosmological mapping of the world the concentric model is expressed in the opposition between Miðgaðr as the cultivated, inhabited, central world, and Útgarðr as the uncultivated surrounding world of monsters and giants.<sup>36</sup>

This stance is also defended by John Lindow,<sup>37</sup> and more recently Ármann Jakobsson wrote about the geographical opposition between gods and giants:

And it seems to be equally logical that the gods should live together and be united while the giants can be found in all directions. While good is unified, evil is divided. While harmony can be found in a single place, discord is everywhere. And so, indeed, are the giants. They are in the East and in the North, on the shores and in the forest and in the mountains. To pin them down is to deny the giants their very chaotic essence.<sup>38</sup>

The giants are indeed said to come from nearly every direction which, as Ármann Jakobsson remarks, adds to their chaotic essence. Yet, this cannot exactly be taken as absolute proof for a

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<sup>34</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 12.

<sup>35</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 12.

<sup>36</sup> Kirsten Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland: An Anthropological Analysis of Structure and Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 60.

<sup>37</sup> Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, 302.

<sup>38</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, "Where Do the Giants Live," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 121 (2006), 110.

concentrically organized model of the cosmos. Kevin Wanner, and Lindow, who defends the idea that Old Norse cosmology is structured by the Útgarðr/Miðgarðr dichotomy, remarked that the word Útgarðr is only used once in the whole Old Norse corpus.<sup>39</sup> It is also remarkable that while Hár's description of the cosmos is reminiscent of traditional Old Norse concepts such as Miðgarðr and giants, it is structurally extremely similar to common medieval geographical models. As in the medieval TO maps based on the geography of Isidore of Seville in the *Etymologiae* XIV.III-V, the world of *Gylfaginning* is depicted as circular and surrounded by the ocean and monstrous people. Furthermore, Snorri's description is also reminiscent of the common medieval conception according to which monstrous people lived far from the center of the ecumene.<sup>40</sup>

However, despite the similarities between the model described by Hár and the medieval European one, Snorri's supports his description of the world by quoting from the fortieth and forty-first stanzas from the poem *Grímnismál* which read as:

[40] Ór Ymis holdi

var jörð of sköpuð,

en ór sveita sjár,

björg ór beinum,

baðmr ór hári,

en ór hausi himinn;

[41] En ór hans brám

gerðu blíð regin

Miðgarð manna sonum,

en ór hans heila

váru þau hin harðmóðgu

ský ǫll of sköpuð.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Wanner, "Off-Center: Considering Directional Valences in Norse Cosmography," 39; Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, 302; Lukas Rösli, "The Myth of Útgarðr - A Toponym as a Basis for an Old Norse System of Values?," *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 13 (2017), 211-27. In addition to pointing out the lack of source regarding Útgarðr in Old Norse sources, Rösli draws attention to the 20<sup>th</sup> century origin of this theory which was influenced by the völkisch and racist intellectual framework of the time.

<sup>40</sup> For a brief presentation of the TO model see David Woodward, "Reality, Symbolism, Time, and Space in Medieval World Maps," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 75, no. 4 (n.d.), 510-521. For a more detailed analysis of the climatic zones theory and of the monstrous people of medieval geographies see Rudolf Simek, *Heaven and Earth in the Middle Ages. The Physical World before Columbus*, trans. Angela Hall (Bury St Edmund: The Boydell Press, 1996), 68-69 and 82-97.

<sup>41</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 12. All poetic quotations from Snorri's *Edda* are directly quoted from Faulkes' edition rather than from Dronke's edition of the *Poetic Edda*. All translations of these stanzas are quoted from Faulkes translation.

(‘From Ymir’s flesh was earth created, and from blood sea; rocks of bones, trees of hair, and from his skull, the sky. And from his eyelashes the joyous gods made Midgard for men’s sons, and from his brains were those cruel clouds all created.’)<sup>42</sup>

These stanzas seem to support Snorri’s description of the Old Norse cosmos. We must nevertheless remember that Snorri mentions that the Old Norse cosmos is circular before quoting the stanzas. The reader, whose preconception is already shaped to believe that the world is circular would easily imagine that the main element of comparison between eyelashes and the fortress is their shape. After all, eyelashes are roughly semi-circular and surround the eye, which is also organized according to a concentric fashion: the pupil, in the center, surrounded by the iris, which is surrounded by the sclera.

However, Wanner remarks that nothing in the stanza indicates that the main element of comparison between the two objects is their shape.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, this comparison remains obscured without preconceiving the circular shape of Miðgarðr. It is interesting to note that Snorri used Ymir’s creation myth in his narrative, a myth which is never found in *Völuspá* which instead describes another creation story. To support his narrative regarding the creation of the world, Snorri quotes nine stanzas from four different poems, whereas in his description of Ragnarok, he only relies on *Völuspá*. I argue that Snorri had a special interest in the myth of Ymir’s creation and death, as this narrative served his description of the Old Norse cosmos as roughly similar to his own conception of the world. To prove this, I will now discuss *Völuspá*, emphasizing its geographical content in order to contrast it with Snorri’s narrative and shed light on his omissions and choices in his description of the Old Norse cosmos.

#### **6.4. The Iron Curtain: the West and East Dichotomy in *Völuspá***

The question of the age and religious nature of the Eddic poems is a notoriously problematic one. There is scholarly trend, however, to see these poems as having been transmitted orally before being written down in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>44</sup> The age of the oral composition and their relation to the preserved written versions is another debate. Linguistic analyses suggest that the

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<sup>42</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 13.

<sup>43</sup> Wanner, “Off-Center,” 42-44.

<sup>44</sup> For a general and recent discussion on eddic poetry and the dating of eddic poems see Terry Gunnell, “Eddic Poetry,” in *A Companion to Old-Norse Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Blackwell publishing, 2007), 82-100.

language used in these poems has been updated through their history.<sup>45</sup> However, as Preben Meulengracht Sørensen discusses this does not mean their matter is not ancient.<sup>46</sup>

For this discussion however, the question of their antiquity is less relevant than the question of their medieval Christian reception. What is relevant presently is that medieval Scandinavian authors treated these poems as being pre-Christian, and as valuable sources on the pagan religion of the north. This appear to be the case for Snorri, who extensively quoted these poems throughout his work in reference to the pagan past. The question is more complex regarding Saxo who exclusively wrote or quoted poetry in Latin. Saxo claims that he only translates poems originally composed in the native tongue of the Danes. This assertion is hard to verify, and frankly doubtful. Even Friis-Jensen, who believed in the Norse origin of these poems, remarks that Saxo's translations are marked by his own authorial persona.<sup>47</sup> It has been nonetheless remarked that at least one stanza quoted, or composed, by Saxo closely resembles the dialogue quoted by Snorri regarding the mismatch between Njörðr and Skaði.<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, the Old Norse equivalent of this stanza, is not known outside of Snorri's quotation, making it hard to trace its origin. I will return to the potential impact of Old Norse cosmology on Saxo's geography. For now, I will focus on the geographical references in the Eddic corpus, especially in *Völuspá*.

For this analysis I will apply a similar methodology to Kevin Wanner's for his analysis of the Old Norse corpus as a whole. In order to reconstruct the structure of the Old Norse mythical geography, Wanner studied the various references to the cardinal points found in the Old Norse corpus. Wanner's method helps situate mythical places in relation to each other. However, I do not want to assume that all Old Norse mythological sources describe a single world, unified and coherent. For this reason, and because it appears to be the main source of Snorri, I will, for now, only analyze the geography described in *Völuspá*, which contains many references to cardinal directions.

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<sup>45</sup> Bernt Ø. Thorvaldsen, "The Dating of Eddic Poetry," in *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry: Myths and Legends of Early Scandinavia*, ed. Carolyne Larrington, Judy Quinn, and Brittany Schorn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 88.

<sup>46</sup> Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, "Om eddadigtenes alder," in *Nordisk hedendom. Et symposium*, ed. Gro Steinsland (Odense: Odense University Press, 1991), 217-228.

<sup>47</sup> Karsten Friis-Jensen, "Saxo Grammaticus og fornaldarsagaerne," in *Fornaldarsagaerne: myter og virkelighed. studier i de oldislandske fornaldarsögur norðurlanda*, ed. Agneta Ney, Ármann Jakobsson, and Annette Lassen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2009), 67-77.

<sup>48</sup> Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics*, 9.

*Völuspá* is certainly one of the richest Eddic poems concerning information about the Old Norse cosmos. Paradoxically, a large portion of this information is not conveyed in the beginning, where the creation of the world is told, but at the end, as the destruction of the world unfolds during Ragnarok. Einar Haugen distinguishes between two categories of orientation found in Old Norse sources, “proximate” and “ultimate.” Proximate orientation is “based on celestial observations” whereas ultimate orientation is based “on social practices developed in land travel in Iceland.”<sup>49</sup> More recently, Tatjana Jackson notes that these two systems may interact and lead to counter intuitive descriptions according to our own system of spatial representation. For instance, in a passage of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* the Norwegian king is said to travel *vestr* from England to France.<sup>50</sup> The purpose of this analysis is hence not to draw a map according to our own geographical standard. It is to comprehend the relative positions of various Old Norse cosmological concepts within the particular system of Old Norse spatial orientation. The aim is to isolate the aspect of *Völuspá* cosmology which Snorri did not include in his own work. As Wanner, I will sort the stanzas according to the direction they refer to, starting with the south:

4. Áðr Burs synir  
 biððom um ypðo,  
 þeir er Miðgarðr  
 mæran skópo.  
 Sól skein sunnan  
 á salar steina –  
 þá var grund gróin  
 grœnum lauki.

(Before Burr’s sons, / lifted up sea-shores, / they who moulded / glorious Miðgarðr. / Sun shun from the south / on the stones of the mansion - / then the ground was covered / with the green leek’s growth.)<sup>51</sup>

5. Sól varp sunnan  
 sinni mána,  
 hendi inni hægri  
 um himiniður;  
 sól þat né vissi  
 hvar hón Sali átti,

<sup>49</sup> Einar Haugen, “The Semantic of Old Norse Orientation,” *Word* 13, no. 3 (1957), 452.

<sup>50</sup> Tatjana Jackson, “On the Old Norse System of Spatial Orientation,” *Saga Book* 25 (2001 1998), 72-82.

<sup>51</sup> Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 2, *Mythological Poems*, 7-8.



stiðrnor þat né visso  
hvar þær staði áttó,  
máni þat né vissi,  
hvat hann megins átti.

(Sun flung from the south, / - moon's partner in travel - / her right hand, / round the rim of the sky, / Sun did not know / where she had mansion / stars did not know / where they had stations / moon did not know / what might he had.)<sup>52</sup>

50. Surtr ferr sunnan  
með sviga lævi:  
skínn af sverði  
sól valtíva.  
Griótbjörg gnata,  
en gífr rata.  
Troða halir helveg,  
en himinn klofnar.

(Surtr moves from the south / with the scathe of branches: / there shines from his sword / the sun of Gods of the Slain. / Stones peaks clash / and trollwives take to the road. / Warriors tread the path from Hel, / and heaven breaks apart.)<sup>53</sup>

As Wanner notes, the perception of the south is ambivalent. It is associated with both the positive light of the sun, but also with Surtr, whose fire will burn the world during Ragnarok. It must also be noted that the fifth stanza speaks of *himinjǫður* (the edge of the sky) as being on the right hand of the sun, that is in the east if we assume that the sun is facing north, since his light is shines from the south.

Interestingly, other directions are not as ambivalent. Let us now turn to the stanzas associated with the east:

35. Á fellr austan  
um eitrdala,  
sǫxom ok sverðom,  
Slíðr heitir sú.

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<sup>52</sup> Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 2, *Mythological Poems*, 8.

<sup>53</sup> Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 2, *Mythological Poems*, 21.

(A river falls from the east, / through venom-cold dales, / with knives and swords: / Savage is its name.)<sup>54</sup>

39. Austr sat in aldna  
í Iárnviði  
ok fæddi þar  
Fenris kindir.  
Verðr af þeim ǫllom  
einna nøkkorr  
tungls tíugari  
í trollz hami.

(In the east she sat, the old one, / in Iron-Wood, / and bred there / the broods of Fenrir. / There will come from them all / one of that number / to be a moon snatcher / in troll's skin.)<sup>55</sup>

47. Hrymr ekr austan,  
hefiz lind fyrir.  
Snýsk Iǫrmungandr  
í iǫtunmóði.  
Ormr knýr unnir,  
en ari hlakkar –  
slítr nái neffǫlr.  
Naglfar losnar.

(Hrym drives from the east, / hoists his shield before him. / Mighty Wraith coils / in giant wrath. / The snakes flails the waves, / and the eagle exults - / pale-beaked rips corpses. / Nail Boat slips free.)<sup>56</sup>

48. Kióll ferr austan:  
koma muno Muspellz  
um lög lýðir  
en Loki stýrir.  
Fara fífls megir  
með freka allir –  
þeim er bróðir

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<sup>54</sup> Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 2, *Mythological Poems*, 16.

<sup>55</sup> Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 2, *Mythological Poems*, 17.

<sup>56</sup> Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 2, *Mythological Poems*, 20.

Býleipz í fõr.

(A ship moves from the east, / there shall come Muspell's / levies by water, / and Loki is pilot. / The giant's sons are journeying / all with the ravener - / Býleiptr's brother / keeps them company.)<sup>57</sup>

Unlike south, east has no positive aspect to counterbalance its negative sides. In this direction lie negative places such as *eitrdala* (poison valleys) and *Járnviði* (iron wood). More importantly, the worst enemies of the gods come from this direction during Ragnarok: Fenrir's kind, Hrymr, trolls, and Loki. Unfortunately for the gods, north is as well a place of great danger and sorrow:

36. Stóð fyr norðan

á Niðavøllum

salr ór gulli

Sindra ættar;

en annar stóð

á Ókólni

biórsalr iqtuns,

en sá Brimir heitir.

(There stood to the north, / on Dark of the Moon plains / the hall made of gold / of Sindri's race. / Yet another stood / on Never Cold, / the beer hall of giants / and he is named Brimir.)<sup>58</sup>

37. Sal sá hon standa

sólo fiarri,

Náströndu á,

norðr horfa dyrr.

Fello eitrdropar

inn um líóra.

Sá er undinn salr

orma hryggiom

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<sup>57</sup> Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 2, *Mythological Poems*, 20.

<sup>58</sup> Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 2, *Mythological Poems*, 16.

(A hall she saw standing, / remote from the sun; / on Dead Body Shore. / Its door looks north. / There fell drops of venom / in through the roof vent. / the hall is woven / of serpents' spines.)<sup>59</sup>

It is difficult to draw a judgement about the north from the thirty-sixth stanza, but the thirty-seventh one associates this direction with the negative aspect of death. While the stanza does not explicitly locate the nameless hall in the north, it states that it is located “sólu fjarri” (far from the sun) and that its doors face north. Considering the previous association between south and the sun we may presume that the hall is indeed located in the north. It is there connected with the negative aspects of death since it appears to be a place of afterlife sufferings for wicked men, as suggested by the reference to the falling poison drops, resembling Loki’s punishment, and the name of the beach on which it stands: *náströnd* (corpse beach).

Wanner remarks, west is remarkably absent from the Old Norse sources and *Völuspá* is not an exception despite the fact that it references every other cardinal direction at least twice. I agree with Wanner that this absence indicates that the gods and human perceived themselves as inhabiting the west. As he observes, the giants are never associated with the west. No giant comes from there, and no god goes there to find them. Conversely, why would Þórr consistently travel to the east to fight giants if those were to be found in every direction?<sup>60</sup> Wanner’s conclusions regarding the general Old Norse mythological corpus, also apply to the particular case of *Völuspá*. As Wanner, I do not believe that *Völuspá* can be read as a poem supporting a concentric cosmological model. On the contrary, everything suggests that the gods live on the west and are surrounded from the north, the south, and especially the east.

## **6.5.Snorri’s Circle: Construction of a Cosmos in *Gylfaginning***

### **6.5.1. The Shape of the Cosmos**

Yet, Snorri, who quotes most of the stanzas from *Völuspá* discussed above, produces a concentric cosmological model. How can we explain that? First, let us see which of these *Völuspá*’s stanzas Snorri cites: the fifty-first, the second half of the fifth, the forty-eighth, the forty-ninth, the fifty-first a second time, and the thirty-seventh. The fact that Snorri quotes the fifty-first stanza twice is informative. He first quoted it alongside with a prose account of the

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<sup>59</sup> Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 2, *Mythological Poems*, 17.

<sup>60</sup> Wanner, “Off-Center,” 48.

birth of the cosmos. For this first quotation, the information which Snorri extracted from the stanza, is the fact that Muspell is located in the south, which is contained in the first line: “Surtr ferr sunnan” (Surtr traveled from the south). He then quotes the same stanza a second time, but emphasizes with its content about Ragnarok. This shows that Snorri, as the modern critics, realizes that these stanzas contained valuable information regarding the Old Norse cosmology beyond Ragnarok. Yet the fifty-first stanza is the only stanza which Snorri quotes in such a way. Snorri does quote the second half of the fifth stanza, but not the part regarding the position of the sun in the south. On the other hand, Snorri quotes *Völuspá*’s sixty-first stanza which does not explicitly refer to the south, but which he interprets as a reference to this direction:

[61] Sal veit ek standa  
Sólu fegra  
Gulli betra  
á Gimlé.  
Þar skulu dyggvar  
dróttir byggja  
ok of aldrdaga  
ynðis njóta.<sup>61</sup>

(I know a hall standing fairer than the sun, better than gold, at Gimle. There shall virtuous men dwell, and for all ages enjoy delight.)<sup>62</sup>

Although the stanza does not mention the south, Snorri’s interpretation that the location called Gimlé is located in the south seems plausible. The association between the hall and the brightness of a sun indeed suggests a possible connection with the south. Furthermore, the first line of this stanza “Sal veit ek standa” is the same as the first line of stanza thirty-seven which Snorri also quotes and which refers to the hall on Náströnd which is explicitly located in the north.<sup>63</sup> It would then seem only natural to see Gimlé’s hall as the southern counterpart to Náströnd’s hall. The former is designated to punish the wicked, whereas the latter to the reward of noble men.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 20.

<sup>62</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 20.

<sup>63</sup> The two lines are slightly different in the Codex Regius version where stanza thirty-seven reads “Sal sá hon standa” while stanza sixty-two reads “Sál sér hon standa”.

<sup>64</sup> Wanner, “Off-Center,” 46. Wanner also remarks that Valkyries are called “drósir suðrænar” (ladies of southern origin) in *Völundarkviða*, which would suggest an association of the south with the positive aspect of death.

Snorri relies on *Völuspá* for his description of the east, north, and south. He accurately extracts information from this poem to comment on the dangers coming from these directions. Furthermore, his interpretation of stanzas thirty-seven and sixty-two as referring to two places of the afterlife seems correct. Yet, when it comes to the general representation of the cosmos, his prose commentary is at odds with the poem. Indeed, Snorri does not quote the first half of the fourth stanza of *Völuspá* although he does quote the second half in the beginning of *Gylfaginning*. This is surprising since this first half of the stanza offers a concise description of the creation of the world:

4. Áðr Burs synir  
bjǫðum um yppðo,  
þeir er Miðgarðr  
mæran skópo.

(Before Burr's sons / lifted up sea-shores / They who moulded / Glorious Miðgarðr.)<sup>65</sup>

It is perfectly possible that Snorri did not work from a version of the poem exactly similar to that of the Codex Regius, but his source likely contained entire stanzas, even if different ones. Furthermore, Snorri quoted the third and the fifth stanza and this shows he most likely knew this part of the poem and consciously rejected the second half of the fourth stanza. Then, why would Snorri choose to ignore this piece of information? Instead of this simple story regarding the creation of the world, Snorri developed a rather complex narrative involving the giant Ymir: his creation from the interaction between south and north, his death and the subsequent creation of the world from his body parts. To support this narrative Snorri quoted various poetic sources, including *Grímnismál*. Why did Snorri choose the version from *Grímnismál* over the one from *Völuspá*, the poem from which he draws most of his information regarding the cosmos?

### 6.5.2. Giant Wanted: Introducing Ymir's Myth in Snorri's Narrative

To answer this question let us see how Snorri introduced the story of the creation of the world from Ymir. He, naturally, started with the creation of Ymir, which, Snorri wrote, happened because of the interaction between the hot particles from Muspell and the drops from the rivers Élivágar. It is in relation to this account that Snorri quoted the fifty-first stanza of *Völuspá*, which refers to Surtr as coming from the south. Then, as Gylfi asks: "Hversu skipaðisk áðr en

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<sup>65</sup> Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 2, *Mythological Poems*, 7-8.

ættirnar yrði eða aukaðisk mannfólkit?”<sup>66</sup> (What were things like before generations came to be and the human race was multiplied?) Hár explains that the rivers called Élivágar flowed far from their source and froze as it was facing north of Ginnungagap while Muspell was facing south. Then the warmth of the south met the coldness of the north and from the melting of the ice Ymir, the ancestor of all giants, was created, whom, Hár specifies, the frost giants call Aurgelmir.<sup>67</sup> Hár supports this account by citing three stanzas, one from *Völuspá inn skamma*, an otherwise unknown text:

Eru vǫlur allar  
frá Viðólfi,  
vitkar allir  
frá Vilmeiði,  
en seiðberendr  
frá Svarthofða,  
allir jǫtnar  
frá Ymir Komnir.<sup>68</sup>

(All sibyls come from Vidolf, all wizards from Vilmeid, all sorcerers from Svarthofdi, all giants from Ymir come.)<sup>69</sup>

And then the thirtieth and thirty-first stanzas from *Vafþrúðnismál*:

[30] Hvaðan Aurgelmir kom  
Með jǫtna sonum  
Fyrst inn fróði jǫtunn:  
[31] “Þá er ór Élivágum  
stukku eitrdropar  
ok óx unz ór varð jǫtunn,  
þar eru órar ættir  
komnar allar saman;  
því er þat æ allt til atalt.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 9.

<sup>67</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 10.

<sup>68</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 10.

<sup>69</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 10.

<sup>70</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 10.

(Where Aurgelmir came from, together with the sons of giants, first, that wise giant: “When from Elivágar shot poison drops and grew until from them came a giant in whom our ancestries all converge: thus ever too terrible is all this.”)<sup>71</sup>

It is remarkable that these two poetic passages, which Hár quotes to support the same prose narrative, contradict each other. According to *Völuspá inn skamma* the ancestor of all giants is indeed Ymir, but *Vafþrúðnismál*, which is the only source to mention the creation from the Élivágar rivers, speaks of a giant called Aurgelmir. A contradiction which Snorri merely dodges by mentioning that Aurgelmir is the frost giants name for Ymir. Yet, another issue remains unaddressed by Snorri: none of these stanzas refers to the world of fire Múspell, crucial element of his narrative that is never mentioned in *Vafþrúðnismál*. This leaves Snorri with no choice but to quote *Völuspá*'s fifty-first stanza which mentions Múspell but has nothing to do with Ymir nor the creation of world.

Then, after telling the creation of Ymir, Snorri goes on to narrate his murder:

Synir Bors drápu Ymir jötun. En er hann fell, þá hjóp svá mikit blóð ór sárum hans at með því drektu þeir allri ætt hrímþursa, nema einn komsk undan með sínu hýski. Þann kalla jötnar Bergelmi. Hann fór upp á lúðr sinn ok kona hans ok helzk þar, ok eru af þeim komnar hrímþursa ættir.<sup>72</sup>

(Bors's sons killed the giant Ymir. And when he fell, so much blood flowed from his wounds that with it they drowned all the race of frost-giants, except that one escaped with his households. Giants call him Bergelmi. He went up on his ark with his wife and was preserved there, and from them are descended the families of frost giants.)<sup>73</sup>

He supports this narrative account with another stanza from *Vafþrúðnismál*:

[35] Ørófi vetra  
áðr væri jörð sköpuð,  
þá var Bergelmi borinn;  
þat ek fyrst of man  
er sá hinn fróði jötunn  
á var lúðr of lagiðr.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 10.

<sup>72</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 11.

<sup>73</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 11.

<sup>74</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 11.



(Countless winters before earth was created, then was Bergelmir born. That is the first I remember, when that wise giant was laid on a box.)<sup>75</sup>

Once again, nothing clearly connects this stanza with Ymir, and Snorri's interpretation of the word *lúðr* as referring to an ark, like in Noah's story, is at best dubious. Then, Snorri connects the second half of *Völuspá*'s fifth stanza, which refers to the primordial chaos in heaven, with yet another story related to Ymir. According to him this stanza refers to the creation of heaven from Ymir's skull and of the stars from particles coming from Muspell. This choice of stanza is puzzling since it does not refer to the creation or ordination of the cosmos, but on the contrary to its initial chaotic state. The second half of the following stanza would have been way better suited for his narrative:

[...] nótt ok niðjom  
nøfn um gáfo,  
morgin héto  
ok miðian dag,  
undorn ok aptan,  
árom at telia.

([...] to night and her offspring / [they] allotted names, / called them morning / and midday, / afternoon and evening, / to count in years.)<sup>76</sup>

Only then does Snorri quote the two stanzas from *Grímnismál* that refer explicitly to Ymir and the creation of the world from his body parts. As we can see, Snorri quotes five stanzas from three different sources in order to support his creation narrative. The part regarding the murder of Ymir and the creation of the world is well attested in the poetic sources. But there is no clear reference in eddic poetry to the first part of the story where Ymir is created. Furthermore, this creation myth seems to contradict the one clearly expressed in *Völuspá*'s fourth stanza. In this stanza, the sons of Burs, usually understood as the Æsir, lift the earth, probably from the water. This stanza does not explicitly refer to the sea, but this would explain why it "sank into the sea" (fold í mar) in stanza fifty-fifth and came "a second time" (qðru sinni) from it in the fifty-seventh one telling the rebirth of the world.

As remarked by Michael Witzel, the mythical creation of the world through the dismembering of a giant has several equivalents in Asia but remains an anomaly in Europe, as Eurasian

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<sup>75</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 11.

<sup>76</sup> Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 2, *Mythological Poems*, 8.

creation myths generally describe a creation from a primitive chaos or from water.<sup>77</sup> The stanza from *Völuspá* corresponds to a creation myth akin to the “out of chaos” group while the version found in Snorri’s prose, *Grímnismál*, and *Vafþrúðnismál* belongs to the “primordial giant” group. Witzel points out several remarkable parallels between the Old Norse version and Asian texts.<sup>78</sup> However, *Völuspá* shows no trace of such a myth. It is nevertheless interesting to note that the second line of the third stanza which Snorri quotes as “when nothing was” (þat er ekki var) reads as “when Ymir settled” (þar er Ymir byggði) in the version of the poem found in the Codex Regius and in Hauksbók. We may assume that Snorri would have quoted this version of the stanza, should he had known it, as it is better suited for his narrative. Hence it is likely that Snorri did not know this version of the poem, possibly because it did not exist at the time Snorri wrote the *Edda*, an opinion shared by Paul Schach.<sup>79</sup> Lars Lönnroth for his part argued that neither lines were meant to refer to a particular myth but to merely evoke the most ancient times.<sup>80</sup> According to him the creation narrative contained in *Völuspá*’s fourth stanza points toward an “ecumene like” world type where the inhabited earth is a roughly circular continent.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, if the world was created by raising land from the bottom of the sea, we can easily imagine it to be surrounded by the ocean. However, Lönnroth goes too far when he interprets the stanza as describing the creation of concentric cosmos organized on the miðgarðr/útgarðr model. Snorri probably did not interpret this stanza as supporting the concentric model, which would at least partly explain why he did not use it in *Gylfaginning*. On the contrary the stanzas from *Grímnismál* may be read as supporting this cosmological model. Indeed, stanza forty-one states: “En ór hans brám gerðu blíð regin Miðgarð manna sonum” (And from his eyelashes the joyous gods made Miðgarðr for the son of men), this, as we saw, may induce the idea that Miðgarðr is circular.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Michael Witzel, “Ymir in India, China - and Beyond,” ed. Pernille Hermann, Stephen A. Mitchell, and Jens Peter Schjødt, *Publications of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature* 3 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 363.

<sup>78</sup> The creation of Ymir from the interaction between ice and fire, which finds little support in the eddic stanzas, is strikingly similar to the birth of the Chinese giant Pangu, who was created from the interaction between Yin and Yang before being dismembered in order to create the world. Yet the creation from the interaction of two opposite elements is never found outside of Snorri’s prose.

<sup>79</sup> Paul Schach, “Some Thoughts on *Völuspá*,” in *Edda: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Robert J Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason, *University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies* 4 (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1983), 87.

<sup>80</sup> Lars Lönnroth, “The Founding of Midgardr (*Völuspá* 1-8),” in *The Poetic Edda. Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, ed. Carolyne Larrington and Paul Acker, trans. Paul Acker (New York: Routledge, 2002), 16.

<sup>81</sup> Lönnroth, “The Founding of Midgardr,” 12.

<sup>82</sup> See section 6.3.

It is also noteworthy that Snorri quoted these stanzas from *Grímnismál*, since *Vafþrúðnismál*, which he already quoted in this part of *Gylfaginning*, contain a stanza that starts with the same words than the fortieth stanza of *Grímnismál*. Yet *Vafþrúðnismál* does not include the second part of the stanza, and hence, does not reference to Miðgarðr. It seems, then, that Snorri's choices of poetic quotation regarding the creation of the cosmos were at least partially guided toward the goal to produce a creation narrative including a reference to Miðgarðr which would be understood as a circular structure. Remarkably, once Snorri concludes his narrative regarding Ymir's creation myth, he immediately comes back to quoting almost exclusively *Völuspá* until the end of his explanations regarding the creation and organization of the cosmos. Yet, he establishes a connection between Ymir's story and *Völuspá*. As Hár says:

Þar næst settusk guðin upp í sæti sín ok réttu dóma sína ok mintusk hvaðan dvergar höfðu kviknat í moldunni ok niðri í jörðunni svá sem maðkar í holdi. Dvergarnir höfðu skipazk fyrst ok tekit kviknum í holdi Ymis ok váru þá maðkar, en af atkvæði guðanna urðu þeir vitandi mannvits ok höfðu manns líki ok búa þó í jörðu ok í steinum. Moðsognir var dvergr ok annar Durinn. Svá segir í *Völuspá*:

Þá gengu regin ǫll  
á røkstóla,  
ginnheilug goð  
ok of þat gættusk  
at skyldi dverga  
drótt of skepja  
ór brimi blóðgu  
ok ór Bláins leggjum.  
Þar mannlíkum  
mǫrg of gerðusk  
dvergar í jörðu  
sem Durinn sagði.<sup>83</sup>

(Next the gods took their places on their thrones and instituted their court and discussed where the dwarfs had been generated from in the soil and down in the earth like maggots in flesh. The dwarf had taken shape first and acquired life in the flesh of Ymir and were then maggots but by decision of the gods they became conscious with intelligence and had

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<sup>83</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: prologue and Gylfaginning*, 15-16.

the shape of men though they live in the earth and in rocks. Modsgnir was a dwarf and the second was Durin. Thus it says in *Voluspá*:

Then went all the powers to their judgement seats,  
most holy gods, and deliberated upon this, that a  
troop of dwarfs should be created from bloody surf  
and from Blain's bones. There man-forms many were  
made, dwarfs in the earth as Durin said.)<sup>84</sup>

Here, Snorri interprets the stanza of *Völuspá* as describing the birth of dwarves in the earth, that is to say Ymir's flesh, as maggots would appear in meat. For that he implicitly accepts that the names Bláin, or Brimir, found in the stanza, is another alias for Ymir. This interpretation has been accepted by John Lindow among others,<sup>85</sup> but seems far from evident, especially considering the fact that *Völuspá* does not introduce Ymir at all in the version quoted by Snorri.

### 6.5.3. Choosing the Right Myth

As I show, Snorri's narrative regarding the creation of the Old Norse cosmos is the result of the merging of various poetic sources, which Snorri treated as describing a single coherent and unified "pagan" worldview. Nevertheless, a close examination of Snorri's sources demonstrates that several of them present different, if not incompatible, versions of Old Norse cosmology. By selecting and conflating stanzas from different sources Snorri ultimately succeeds in presenting an Old Norse cosmos roughly similar to his own medieval conception of the world; a circular ecumene surrounded by the ocean with wild and dangerous regions on its periphery. Snorri constructs this worldview by selecting certain stanzas from his source material and rejecting others. Additionally to *Völuspá*'s fourth stanza, we may mention this stanza from *Vafþrúðnismál*, which Snorri did not quote:

[16] Ífing heitir á  
er deilir með jötna sonum  
grund ok með goðum;  
opin renna  
hon skal um aldrdaga  
verðrat íss á á.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 16.

<sup>85</sup> Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, 82 and 88.

<sup>86</sup> Jónas Kristjánsson and Véstein Ólason, *Eddukvæði*, 358.

(Ifing the river is called, which divides the earth between the sons of giants and the gods; freely it will flow through all time, ice never forms on the river.)<sup>87</sup>

This stanza posits the idea that a single river separates the lands of the gods from those of the giants, inducing a straight east/west partition rather than a concentric model. Furthermore, the notion that this river is always flowing, and never frozen could explain why Loki needed a boat to invade the gods' land during Ragnarok. Of course, Snorri could not quote every eddic stanza in *Gylfaginning* and had to make choices. I do not presume that eddic poetry displays a "true" or "authentic" version of Old Norse cosmology, whereas Snorri would presents a corrupted or Christianized one. But I argue that Eddic poetry is not the emanation of a single coherent "Old Norse mythology". Snorri had to make choices in order to build his own narrative. This selection is only natural and necessary, it does not mean that Snorri "corrupted" his sources, but his choices speak to his own preconceptions and authorial aims. Whether Snorri's narrative is a faithful rendition of some pagan myths is not relevant for this discussion. What is significant is that he chose to produce this particular narrative and not another one among the various possibilities offered by the available eddic poetry.

What do Snorri's choices say about his intentions as an author? Perhaps Snorri simply found the story of Ymir more appealing than that of the Æsir raising the earth above the sea. Ymir's story allows Snorri to introduce two geographical conceptions which are important in his work: the general conception of a concentrically organized cosmos, and the idea that the north/south opposition is a structurally important axis in the organization of the world. This analysis of the pagan cosmology of *Gylfaginning* belongs to the first layer of Snorri's interpretation. It is not euhemeristic in nature since the author does not intend to unveil the truth behind the pagan lies but to explain the pagan worldview. Conversely, Snorri uses these concepts in a clearly euhemeristic manner in *Ynglinga saga*.

## **6.6. Upside-down: Rearranging the Cosmos in Saxo's and Snorri's Narratives**

As Wanner points out, the geographies displayed by Snorri in the prologue to the *Edda*, in *Gylfaginning*, and in *Ynglinga saga*, are not the same.<sup>88</sup> Naturally, the representation of the world as found in *Ynglinga saga* is different from the one of *Gylfaginning*. *Ynglinga saga*, set

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<sup>87</sup> Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 42.

<sup>88</sup> *Heimskringla I*, 6.

in a historical framework pretends to deliver an accurate representation of the world, whereas *Gylfaginning* may contain some discrepancies from the common medieval model, as it is supposed to be the product of a pagan mind. Yet, Wanner argues that the geography of *Ynglinga saga* does not conform either to that of the common European model. I would like to come back to this claim and see to what extant Snorri's model is original.

According to Wanner this passage describes “a division of the disc of the world into four wedges by lines radiating outward from the Black Sea – which serves here as a purely geographical hub, with no social, let alone soteriological, center being proposed by the text”.<sup>89</sup> Wanner rejects the interpretation offered by Tatjana Jackson according to which this passage describes a traditional medieval ecumene from a Nordic point of view. As Jackson notes, Snorri mentions twice that the earth is divided into thirds.<sup>90</sup> According to Wanner Svíþjóð in Mikla is given crucial importance and is represented as a separate region of the world. I would like to expand on and nuance this interpretation.

Despite Snorri's unusual description, I believe, like Jackson, that it is indeed important to note that the author mentions twice in the same paragraph that the world is divided into thirds “Sú á skilr heimsþriðjunga.” Snorri also identifies the Tanais as the border between Europe and Asia as in *Etymologiae* XIV.III.I and describes, without explicitly naming it, the Mediterranean Sea as going from the strait of Gibraltar to the Holy Land. It is true that Snorri's description of the world is unusual as he does not explicitly mention Africa as one of the three main regions of the ecumene. But this information is nevertheless implied by his description, as since he clearly states that the Tanais (the Don River) flows through (fellt um) Svíþjóð in Mikla and separates Europe from Asia. This indicates that Svíþjóð in Mikla is not an independent region from Asia and Europe but another kind of territory straddling over both Europe and Asia. The third region remains unnamed and is probably to be understood as Africa. This is also confirmed by the fact that Snorri compares the size of Svíþjóð in Mikla with that of Serkland in Mikla and Bláland in Mikla, that is to say, parts of Africa, but not the entire region.

The difference between Snorri's world description and the common medieval one may express a difference of perspective rather than a wholly different understanding of the world. Snorri mentions that the world is divided into three parts, and correctly describes the Don River as well as the Mediterranean Sea as two bodies of water acting as borders between regions. The

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<sup>89</sup> Wanner, “Off-Center,” 66.

<sup>90</sup> Jackson, “On the Old Norse,” 73-74.

fact that he does not mention the Nile may simply be due to the fact that this river does not appear later in his narrative. Snorri's tale essentially takes place in Europe and, to a lesser degree, Asia, but never in Africa, thus making this region less crucial to define. As Wanner notes, Snorri does not mention any city as the center of the world in *Ynglinga saga*, not even Troy as he does in *Gylfaginning*. However, he mentions the Black Sea as the intersection between the three regions and accurately describes it as an extension of the Mediterranean Sea, which, as he must have known, is bordered by the Holy Land and the Trojan region. The fact that Snorri's description is unconventional yet compatible with common medieval models is not a sign of his ignorance of learned geography. On the contrary Snorri could hardly mention the tripartite division of earth, naming two of its three borders without being familiar with this geographic model.

The description proposed by Snorri does not negate the borders set by the TO model but rather completes them with another model. This kind of conception, which focuses more on the north/south axis than on the division of the Ecumene, is typical of climatic zone theory as found in Macrobius' *Commentarium in Ciceronis Somnium Scipionis* (Commentary on Cicero's dream of Scipio) II.V.13-16, written in the fifth century. This theory explains that the world is divided in two frigid zones, located at the poles, two temperate zones, between the poles and the equator, and one torrid zone at the equator. Only the two temperate zones are supposed to be inhabitable by mankind.<sup>91</sup> Snorri's comments regarding the absence of life in the far north and in the remote south demonstrate an influence from Macrobius' theory.

Several aspects of this geographic description can be compared with the one from *Gylfaginning*: Snorri proposes a description of the world where the north/south axis is at least as important as the center/periphery dichotomy, present in the TO model. Just as Ymir is created from the interaction between north and south in *Gylfaginning*, the world of *Heimskringla* exists between these two cardinal points. The north exists as a region with an identity of its own. It ceases to be merely a tiny area far from civilization and splits between Europe and Asia. It is not surprising that for medieval Scandinavians the climatic zones theory should be an interesting concept. But most important for our discussion, is the change of value associated with the east which takes place in *Ynglinga saga*. It is remarkable that in *Ynglinga saga*, the east, the direction

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<sup>91</sup> Macrobius, *Commentaire au songe de Scipion*, vol. 2, *Livre II*, ed. and trans. Mireille Armisen-Marchetti, (Paris: Les belles lettres, 2003), 25-26.

primarily associated with giants, chaos and evil, in *Völuspá* and *Gylfaginning* is associated with the gods.

This change of perspective can only make sense in a specific spatial organization of the cosmos. The system of spatial organization described by Wanner does certainly not locate Scandinavia at the center of the world, but it does not assign any specific center to the world either. The geographical center of the world is not a relevant concept in this model, but west is nevertheless the symbolical center of the world as every other region is defined relative to Scandinavia, perceived to be located on the westernmost part of the world. In the TO model, Scandinavia is neither the symbolical, nor the geographical center of the world. It is in the vicinity of the most remote and uncivilized parts of the ecumene, as far from the center as it is possible to be. In this model the position of every region is determined relative to the Near East, perceived as the center of the world. In that regard, the Greek pseudo-gods are to the east of Scandinavia, but still near the center of the world. Hence, in *Ynglinga saga*, east, as defined relative to Scandinavia, has lost its negative value. The monstrous people and giant beasts described by Snorri live not to the east of Scandinavia, but to its north.

However, this relatively new positive value associated with the east is not shared by Saxo who writes:

Harum ortiuas partes Skriftinni incolunt. Que gens inusitatis assueta uehiculis montium inaccessa uenationis ardore sectatur locorumque complacitas sedes dispendio lubricae flexionis assequitur. Neque enim ulla adeo rupes prominet, quin ad eius fastigium callida cursus ambage perueniat. Primo siquidem uallium profunda relinquens scopulorum radices tortuosa giratione perlabitur sicque meatum crebre declinationis obliquitate perflectit, donec per sinuosos callium anfractus destinatum loci cacumen exsuperet. Eadem apud finitimos mercium loco quorundam animalium pellibus uti consueuit.

Suetia uero Daniam ab occasu Noruagiamque respiciens, a meridie et multa orientis parte uicino preteritur Oceano. Post quam ab ortu quoque multiplex diuerstitatis barbarice consortio reperitur.

(Within the eastern area of these countries live the Skriftinns. In their passion for hunting, these people habitually transport themselves in an unusual manner, having to trace slippery roundabout routes to reach the desired haunts in remote parts of the mountains. No cliff stands too high for them to surmount by some skillfully twisting run. For they glide out of the deep valleys by the feet of precipices, circling this way and that, frequently swerving in their course from a direct line until by these tortuous paths they achieve the destined



summit. They normally use certain animal skins instead of money to trade with their neighbors.

Western Sweden looks towards Denmark and Norway, but to the south and along much of its eastern side the Ocean adjoins it. Beyond, to the east, can be found a motley conglomeration of savage tribes.)<sup>92</sup>

Significantly Snorri and Saxo do not ascribe the same cardinal direction to the same people. While Sami people are characterized as northerners by Snorri, they are easterners in Saxo's narratives. This location is particularly since for Snorri writing, either from an Icelandic or a Norwegian point of view, the Sami would have been located to the east, while Saxo, from his Danish perspective should situate them to the north. The south, for Saxo, is also a direction associated with the Danes' enemies, since in the *Gesta Danorum* it is the place where the Germans, some of the worst enemies of the Danes, live. The *Gesta Danorum* contains several anti-German comments and as we saw, one of Saxo's main goals is to highlight the independence of Denmark in regard to both the Holy Roman Empire and the archbishopric of Bremen. Saxo, however, represents the enmity between Danes and Germans as a conflict more ancient than the Holy Roman Empire Germans, as shows this passage found in the sixth book of the *Gesta Danorum*, taking place around the birth of Christ:

Econtrario Ingellus proiectis maiorum exemplis in nouando mensarum ritu licentius sibi, quam mos patrius permittebat, indulgit. Postquam se enim Theutonie moribus permisit, effoeminate eius lasciuie succumbere non erubuit. Ex cuius sentina in patrie nostre fauces haud parua luxurie nutrimenta fluxerunt. Inde enim splendidiore mense, lautiores culine, sordida cocorum ministeria uarieque farciminum sordes manauere, inde licentioris cultus usurpatio a ritu patrio peregrinata est. Itaque regio nostra, que continentiam in se tanquam naturalem aluit, luxum a finitimis depoposcit. Cuius Ingellus illecebra captus iniurias beneficiis rependere erubescendum non duxit, neque illi misera parentis clades cum aliquo amaritudinis suspirio obuersata est.

(Not so Ingiald; he jettisoned the patterns of his ancestors and indulged in the alteration of table ceremonies more freely than hereditary practice allowed. After he had dabbled in Teuton fashions, he felt no shame in submitting to their unmasculine frivolities. Not a few epicurean nourishments poured from that drain down the throats of our countrymen. From them originated richer courses, more highly equipped kitchens, the contemptible labours of cooks, a variety of unsavoury sausages; from them we travelled away from our fathers'

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<sup>92</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, Pr.2.9-10.

usage and adopted a more dissolute form of dress. Our land, which had nurtured what you might call a natural continence, now demanded its neighbours' luxury. With its lure it won Ingiald, who thought it no blushing matter to repay wrongs with favours, nor considered his father's pitiful murder with any sigh of bitterness.)<sup>93</sup>

Even more ancient, Peter Andersen notes that if we understand king Dan, the first king of Denmark as being analogous to Adam, his German wife, Grytha, must be analogous to Eve who was responsible for the fall. Furthermore, the name Grytha may be reminiscent of *gráðr* (greed, hunger).<sup>94</sup>

The north is ambiguous in the *Gesta Danorum*. Saxo acknowledges that Denmark is located in the northern part of the world,<sup>95</sup> but Northern Scandinavia still remains, as with Snorri, a place associated with savagery and lack of civilization. He states in the preface:

Eadem a septentrione regionem ignoti situs ac nominis intuetur, humani cultus expertem, sed monstruose nouitatis populis abundantem, quam ab aduersis Noruagie partibus interflua pelagi separauit immensitas. Quod cum incerte nauigationis existat, perpaucis eam ingredientibus salutarem reditum tribuit.

(To the north it faces an undefined and nameless territory, lacking civilization and swarming with strange unhuman races, but a vast stretch of sea has separated this from the opposite shores of Norway. Since navigation there is hazardous, very few have set foot on it and enjoyed a safe return.)<sup>96</sup>

And, although he does not believe in it, Saxo seems to be aware of the tradition found in *Völuspá* according to which the north is a place for the punishment of the wicked dead:

Huic etiam insule certis statutisque temporibus infinita glaciei aduoluitur moles. Que cum aduentans scabris primum cautibus illidi coeperit, perinde ac remugientibus scopulis fragose ex alto uoces ac uarii inusitate conclamationis strepitus audiuntur. Quamobrem animas ob nocentis uite culpam suppliciiis addictas illic algoris magnitudine delictorum pendere poenas existimatum est.

(At certain definite times, too, an immense mass of ice drifts upon the island; immediately on its arrival, when it dashes into the rough coast, the cliffs can be heard re-echoing, as

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<sup>93</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, VI.8.7.

<sup>94</sup> Andersen, *Nordens gotiske storhedstid*, 25.

<sup>95</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, Pr 2.6.

<sup>96</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, Pr 2.8.

though a din of voices were roaring in weird cacophony from the deep. Hence a belief that wicked souls condemned to a torture of intense cold are paying their penalty there.)<sup>97</sup>

Saxo's geography is closer to the traditional views exposed in *Völuspá*. Like in *Völuspá*, north, east, and south, are ascribed with negative valence and categorized as places of savagery, or on the contrary, of unmanly decadence. The similarity between Saxo's worldview and that of *Völuspá* does not necessarily mean that the Danish author was aware of the eddic poem, but it testifies that the authors of both texts assumed a similar perspective. While Snorri's worldview takes place within the framework of the common learned medieval geography, placing the action of his narrative within a global geography, both the *Gesta Danorum* and *Völuspá* are centered on Scandinavia. To Saxo and to the author of the *Völuspá*, otherness is not defined in relation to the center of the medieval world, in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, but relative to Scandinavia.

Bearing this in mind, the location ascribed to the pseudo-gods by the two authors is significant. While both Saxo and Snorri situate them in the east, the valence associated with this location is not the same in the two works. Snorri's east is associated with civilization, wealth, and nobility. His narrative is reminiscent of the medieval motif of the *translatio imperii* and of the *translatio studii*. Saxo also uses these typical medieval motifs to portray his eastern pseudo-gods, but with the aim of criticizing them. He portrays them as decadent rulers corrupted by gold and lust who use their supernatural abilities against humans in general and the Danes in particular. In that the pseudo-gods of Saxo assume the role played by the giants in Old Norse sources. Othinus' and Balderus' attraction toward Nanna resembles that of the giants toward Freyja. Similarly, the war between Høtherus and Balderus may be based on the same tradition than the Old Norse account of Ragnarok. Lindow remarked that in the *Gesta Danorum* as in the Old Norse sources, the death of Baldr is connected with the defeat of the gods.<sup>98</sup> However, in the *Gesta Danorum*, the pseudo-gods, as a chaotic crowds of antagonists, assume the role held by the giants in the Old Norse Ragnarok. The geographical position of the pseudo-gods is adapted to their new role as antagonists. In fact, in the *Gesta Danorum*, the distinction between the giants and the gods, is not clear. Saxo classifies the giants as one of the three species of wizards worshiped as gods, and the giant Utgartha-Loki assumes the role of the chief pagan deity in the eighth book of the

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<sup>97</sup> *Gesta Danorum*, Pr 2.7.

<sup>98</sup> John Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance among the Gods: Baldr in Scandinavian Mythology* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 1997), 27.

work. Gods and giants, who fight each other in the Old Norse sources, are hardly distinguishable in the *Gesta Danorum*.

Saxo's narrative takes place in a geographical framework where Denmark is the symbolical center of the world and where east is not the direction toward Jerusalem, but toward the barbarous enemies of Denmark, beyond the Baltic Sea. The respective euhemeristic representation of the pseudo-gods of the two authors corresponds with the geographical frameworks in which they are inserted. In Saxo's narrative the pseudo-gods take the place previously played by the giants in Old Norse mythology. They threaten the Danish kingdom, and, as the giants with the gods, actively try to take the Danes' women for themselves. On the contrary, in Snorri's narrative the eastern origin of the gods serves to give them a positive value, as cultural heroes whose coming mostly brings positive cultural and societal innovations.

It is perhaps surprising that it is Saxo who wrote in Latin and was often characterized as deforming too much the Old Norse myths, who reenacts most closely the cosmography of eddic poetry. This is due to the fact that Saxo writes from an openly Dano-centric perspective which is essentially similar to the Scandinavian perspective of *Völuspá*, as defined by Wanner where north, east, and south, are inhabited by enemies. However, while the *Gesta Danorum* and *Völuspá* agree on the valence associated to these directions, they do not agree on their attitude towards the Scandinavian pagan-gods. *Völuspá* is told from a pagan, or at least pseudo-pagan, point of view in which the gods defend order. It is only normal in that perspective that they are mostly associated with the west, the place which the ancient Scandinavians consider to be theirs. For Saxo, writing from an ecclesiastical perspective, the pseudo-gods could hardly be depicted as positive characters, and as such they came from outside. Accordingly, Saxo's pseudo-gods play a role similar to that of the giants of Old Norse mythology, and it is perhaps for this reason that Saxo, in his typology of the pseudo-gods, states that the *mathematici* subjugated the giants: both categories are now represented as the same side.

Snorri's point of view is not as ethnocentric as these of the *Völuspá* and the *Gesta Danorum*. In the fashion of medieval Christian learned culture, Snorri understands the Near East as being both the symbolical and geographical center of the world. He uses the words related to the cardinal directions in relation to the Near East and understand Scandinavia to be located in the north. To him as well as for Ari inn fróði the east was not the direction where giants, or pagan tribes, come from but the direction towards Troy and Jerusalem, the direction which the faithful face during the mass and from which Christ will come at the end of time (Matthew 24:27). In

this worldview, the pseudo-gods as cultural heroes and prestigious founders of kingdoms could hardly be autochthonous but must have been easterners. This is certainly one of the reasons why Snorri so diligently used the poetic sources to describe a pagan representation of the world analogous to the medieval Christian one. Snorri could not understand the pseudo-gods as being anything else than easterners and the vocable *Æsir* found in the poetic sources to describe the gods would have removed all doubts. As such Snorri unravels the historical truth behind the eddic poems and forces his conceptions into them.

It must be clear that Saxo did not describe the east in a negative way because the evil pseudo-gods came from it but chose to place evil pseudo-gods in the east because it was a direction associated with a negative valence. As shown by *Íslendingabók*, the notion that the northern pseudo-gods came from the east predates both Saxo and Snorri. It is however unclear whether Saxo was aware of this tradition or arrived at a similar conclusion independently. I argue that whether he was aware of it, Saxo had the intellectual tools and ideological incentive to describe the pseudo-gods as easterners anyway. As a cleric whose patrons took parts in holy wars, Saxo was naturally prejudiced against pseudo-gods, and because of the crusades against easterners and the tensions between western and eastern Christianity, Saxo had a negative perception of the east which he imagined as a conglomerate of pagans and heretics. For this reason, the east must have been the ideal location for his evil pseudo-gods. But we may imagine that if Saxo had had, like Snorri, a more positive conception of the pseudo-gods he could have located their origin in Denmark.

Snorri, on the other hand, must have known the preexisting tradition according to which the pseudo-gods came from the east. It is perhaps the case that Ari inn fróði was also influenced by the term *Æsir* or merely sought to replicate the European narratives of the flight from Troy. But Snorri's praiseful description of the east need not be explained by the fact that Ari inn fróði described the pseudo-gods as coming from the east. Unlike Saxo, Snorri did not belong to a social milieu that took part in the eastern crusades. On the contrary, as an Icelander, Snorri belonged to a tradition in which the Eastern Roman Empire was a source of prestige and wealth. As such, he had no reason to depict the east in a negative manner and as such must have had a rather positive preconception of the eastern pseudo-gods. Furthermore, as Snorri defended the use of poetry at the court of the Norwegian king, his interest was not to criticize the Old Norse pagan heritage as poetry was so tightly connected to pagan references, but on the contrary to highlight its value, and it is certainly in this sense that his description of the travel of Óðinn to the north in the *Edda* is reminiscent of Moses taking the precious belongings of the Egyptians

with him. As such, to him the pseudo-gods were perfectly fitted to be Trojans, who had the common reputation to be cultural heroes and founders of states across Europe.

### **6.7. The Times They are a-Changin': Euhemerism and the Medieval Perception of History**

As they adapt Old Norse mythic geography, Saxo and Snorri also reinterpreted the mythic chronology. As we saw, while Saxo likely based his narrative of the struggle between Balderus and Høtherus on the story regarding Baldr's death and Ragnarok while Snorri most probably based his description of the war between Æsir and Vanir on the twenty-fourth stanza of *Völuspá* describing the "first war in the world". These two authors, however, changed the place of these events within the world's chronology. I agree with Sigurður Nordal's opinion that the *Völuspá* describes Baldr's death as a past event since this event is described with the past tense by the narrator.<sup>99</sup> Ragnarok however, is understood as a future event, as shown by the use of verbal constructions first in the present tense, and then the future tense from the forty-third stanza onward.<sup>100</sup> Contrastingly, Lindow argues that the death of Baldr should be considered a future event,<sup>101</sup> but we must note that Baldr's death is also recounted as a past event in Snorri's *Edda* although Snorri narrates Ragnarok in the future tense thus supporting to the idea that the present times are chronologically situated between the death of Baldr in the past and Ragnarok in the future. In that sense the Old Norse pagan present times are defined similarly to the Christian present times, which are between Christ's death and the apocalypse. Hence, Saxo's description of the death of Balderus as a past event conforms with the Old Norse sources. Saxo, however, blended the events regarding Baldr's death with the events regarding the downfall of the god, which were supposed to happen in the future. But Saxo's description of these events does not only differ in regard to their position within in time, but also in regard to their position relative to each other.

In the Old Norse sources, Ragnarok follows the death of Baldr and the birth of his avenger, Váli, Óðinn's and Rindr's son. In Saxo's account the death of Balderus and the birth of his avenger, which Saxo calls Bo, follows immediately after the defeat of the gods during their battle against Høtherus. As such, the last fight between a human and a pseudo-god is the duel between Høtherus and Bo where both warriors die in III.4.15. This point of the *Gesta Danorum*

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<sup>99</sup> Sigurður Nordal, "Three Essays on *Völuspá*," 100.

<sup>100</sup> Sigurður Nordal, "Three Essays on *Völuspá*," 96.

<sup>101</sup> Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, 40.

marks the end of the influence of the pseudo-gods on Danish society. After this point only Othinus is sometimes seen but resembles more a demon than a human impostor. As such, Saxo found a use for the myth of Ragnarok in his historical narrative. This myth, which portrays the pagan gods living in the future was evidently unsuited for his euhemeristic worldview in which the pagan gods were human impostors, and thus must have been dead for centuries. Ragnarok, as a myth about the defeat of the gods, precisely provided an explanation for the disappearance of the pseudo-gods' society from Danish society.

Snorri also included Ragnarok in his euhemeristic narrative in *Skáldskaparmál* where he identifies the major events of Ragnarok as being exaggerated retellings of specific parts of the Trojan war. Thus, both for Snorri and Saxo Ragnarok is a past event. Snorri understands Ragnarok as a past event for the same reasons as Saxo: the pseudo-gods died long ago, so Ragnarok could not take place in the future. His euhemerized version of Ragnarok serves less to explain the disappearance of the gods within a narrative than to exemplify the notion of euhemerism and the idea that pagan myths were historical events. His identification of Ragnarok as the Trojan war is the logical consequence of his identification of Ásgarðr with Troy. In addition to increasing the link between Scandinavian and classical culture, this identification allows Snorri's audience to pinpoint this event within world chronology.

In *Heimskringla*, Snorri does not speak of Ragnarok directly or indirectly. In fact, there is no explicit reference to this event outside of Snorri's *Edda* and *Völuspá*. He did however describe the war between the Æsir and the Vanir, which, as we saw, was based on the twenty-fourth stanza of the *Völuspá* which it called "first war in the world." As for Ragnarok, Snorri modified the place of this event within world chronology. While the pagan gods existed before mankind and could have waged the first war in the world, it was evidently not the case for the pseudo-gods, especially those of *Heimskringla* who lived during the first century BCE. Instead, Snorri used this conflict to explain how the fusion between the Æsir and the Vanir which he understood as two distinct categories of pseudo-gods. Because Snorri treats Ragnarok as a historical event that happened in the remote past, he could not use it in the same way as Saxo, as an explanation for the disappearance of the pseudo-gods from within human society. Instead, Snorri describes the pseudo-gods as dying natural deaths. Óðinn, Njörðr, and then Freyr, died a natural death and were never replaced. As discussed in 5.6.3 Snorri nonetheless explains somewhat why the pseudo-gods were not replaced by other impersonators: the Svíar believed that Freyr's benefaction continued even after his death. As such, there was no need to replace Freyr as a pseudo-god and his successors only inherited his function as a political leader.

As for their treatment of mythical space, Saxo and Snorri reworked mythical time in a way that did not allow the pseudo-gods to exist as transcendent beings. Neither of these two authors included in their euhemeristic narrative a creation myth. The pseudo-gods are only creatures and not creators. They are part of a world which they did not create. Thus, the authors adapt the non-linear mythic time to the linear and well bounded time of the historical chronicle. As Lindow points out, the Old Norse mythological sources hardly allow the audience to envisage a coherent linear chronology. Some events like the death of Ymir must be in the past, others like Ragnarok must be in the future but many others are neither in the past, future, nor even the present time as it is experienced by human beings.<sup>102</sup> It would have little sense to ask whether the events of *Þrymskviða* happened before or after those of *Hárbarðsljóð*. As Paul Veyne discusses, the mythical time has only a loose relationship to the historical time experienced by humanity:

[An ancient Greek] would have been no less astounded if someone, using time in its literal sense, told him that Hephaestus had just remarried or that Athena had aged a great deal lately. Then he would have realized that in his own eyes mythic time had only a vague analogy with daily temporality<sup>103</sup>

With their euhemeristic projects Saxo and Snorri broke this distinction between mythic time and the mundane time of history. The lives of the gods are not only enclosed within mundane history but are also forced to follow the same linear model which includes a definite beginning, and a definite end. All events can be situated in relation to each other. As such, the life of the pseudo-gods, however distantly situated in the past, is never conceptualized as an abstract conglomerate of events loosely connected to each other, but as a series of events rationally ordered in a single linear sequence.

This is not to say that the conception of time of Saxo and Snorri was the same as ours. Saxo's and Snorri's time is linear, ordered, but also changing in nature. Both Saxo and Snorri consider that the past is qualitatively different from the present and was a period of greater wonders. In the above quoted passage in which Saxo first introduces the pseudo-gods in I.5.2<sup>104</sup> the author recognizes that magicians existed in ancient times. In *Heimskringla*, in *Óláfs saga helga* Snorri

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<sup>102</sup> Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, 39-42.

<sup>103</sup> Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe*, 18.

<sup>104</sup> See section 5.4.1.



describes how the pagan king Hrærekr gave some credence to the marvelous stories about Jesus because the ancient past was indeed a time of wonder:

“Óláfr konungr svarar: „Nú er hátíð mikil haldin í minning þess, er Jesús Krístr sté til himna af jörðu. “Hrærekr konungr svarar: „Ekki skil ek af, svá at mér hugfestisk þat, er þér segið frá Krísti. Þykki mér þat mart heldr ótrúligt, er þér segið. En þó hafa mǫrg dæmi orðit í forneskju.””<sup>105</sup>

(King Óláfr replies: ‘Now a great festival is being kept today in memory of when Jesus Christ ascended into heaven from earth.’ King Hrærekr replies: ‘I do not understand, so that it is fixed in my mind, what you say about Christ. Much of what you say seems to me rather incredible. Yet many things have happened in ancient times.’)

For medieval Christian authors the ‘disenchantment of the world’ is one of the consequences of the advent of Christianity, which conquered the pagan world and its magic. See for instance the incipit of the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* from the *Canterbury Tales* where the friars are replacing the elves in the countryside:

In th’olde dayes of the kyng Arthour,  
Of which that Britons speken greet honour,  
Al was this land fulfild of fayereye.  
The elf-queene, with hir joly campaignye,  
Daunced ful ofte in many grene mede.  
This was the olde opinion, as I rede;  
I speke of manye hundred yeres ago.  
But now kan no man se none elves mo,  
For now the grete charitee and prayers  
Of lymytours and othere hooly freres,  
That serchen lond and every strem,  
As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem,  
Blessyngue halles, chambres, kichenes, boures,  
Citees, burghes, castels, hye toures,  
Thropes, bernes, shipnes, dayeryes –  
This maketh that ther ben no fayereyes.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> *Heimskringla II*, 124.

<sup>106</sup> Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer, New Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 116-117

(In the old days of king Arthur / Of which Britons speak with great honor, / All this land was full of fairies. / The elf queen, with her jolly company, / Danced very often in green meadow. / This was the old opinion, as I read; / I speak of many hundred years ago. / But now no man can see no elves no more, / For now the great charity and prayers / Of limiters and other holy friars, / That explore land and every stream, / As thick as mottes in the sunbeams, / Blessing halles, chambres, kitchens, bedrooms, / Cities, bourgs, castles, high towers, /villages, barns, cattle sheds, dairy farms, / This causes that there is no fairies anymore.)<sup>107</sup>

Snorri's worldviews are hence not only different from the Greek's but even opposite. The postulate for Greek euhemerism was that the laws of nature were immutable and eternal. Snorri's postulate, on the contrary, is that the world changed in nature. Pagan supernatural activities, frequent in the past, have been supplanted by divine supernatural activities, miracles, which themselves became rarer in the contemporary period.

Finally, I would like to remark on the impact of the form of literature in which myths are retold on the representation of time. Scholars such as Judy Quinn observe that eddic poems were affected by the nature of mythological times and do not follow a clear series of event.<sup>108</sup> But one can argue that the form of poetic compilation contributes itself to the creation of mythical time as it can depict a stable group of recurring characters and places but does not need to follow a rational sequence of events. Brian MacMahon notes that the time of *Völuspá* does not work in a linear fashion as in a saga.<sup>109</sup> This affirmation rings truer if we consider that mythical time does not only span over *Völuspá* but over several mythological poems. Eddic poetry as a genre was adapted to depict the gods as gods. As a corpus of texts, the mythological poems of the *Poetic Edda* consist in a series of loosely related narratives, giving their audience little that will help them chart a coherent chronology out of them. On the contrary, medieval euhemeristic narratives were written in accordance with the genre of the saga and of historical writing. They follow a linear chronological structure and allow the reader to pinpoint the events described not only relative to each other but within world chronology. Therefore, I argue that prose in general and historical writing in particular, contribute to the euhemerization of myths since the texts

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<sup>107</sup> My translation.

<sup>108</sup> Judy Quinn, "The Naming of Eddic Mythological Poems in Medieval Manuscripts," *Parergon* 8, no. 2 (1990): 97-115.

<sup>109</sup> Brian McMahon, "Remembrance of Things to Come. Memory and Prophecy in Old Norse Literature," *Medium Ævum* 89, no. 1 (2020), 147.

written in these formats can hardly preserve the loose structure of mythical time nor that of the mythical chronotope.

## 6.8. Conclusion

This discussion has shown that to humanize the pagan gods is not merely to make them mortal. Saxo and Snorri understood, at least implicitly, that mortality is not the only requirement for humanity. If we accept the notion that the myth of Ragnarok has pre-Christian roots, this conception was perhaps particularly palpable for Scandinavian authors who realized that even the pagans of old believed in the eventual death of their deities. We may wonder, thus, what the essential distinction between pagan gods and humans is. If humans cannot be merely defined as mortal gods, can they be explained as weaker mortal gods? But then, Snorri, and to a lesser extent Saxo, also described the pseudo-gods as powerful characters. This is especially true for the Óðinn of Snorri who is not less powerful than his mythological counterpart. As Diogenes of Sinope showed when he ironically claimed that a plucked chicken must be a man as it corresponded to Plato's definition of a human as a "featherless biped," human nature resists simplistic definitions.

Both Saxo and Snorri display the limitations of humans as an essential distinction between gods and humans. Humans are limited by the physical world in which they live, while the gods set the boundaries of the world they create. According to Snorri, the non-euhemerized Norse gods shaped this world, which they delimited through boundaries; the fortress of Miðgarðr encircles its horizontal extension, and Ymir's skull sets its vertical elevation. Furthermore, the gods possessed their own means of transportation to travel the world in ways unavailable to any other beings. The non-euhemerized Norse gods, however, were limited in time as even they will eventually die. But even then, their lifespan is directly connected to the lifetime of the world: their death coincides with the destruction of the world, and their rebirth with the renewal of the world. There is no clear distinction between the limit of the lifetime of the pagan gods and the lifetime of the world.

Against this pagan conception of the world and gods, both Saxo and Snorri assessed that the pseudo-gods, as powerful as they are, are part of the world and are limited in space and time. This process of limiting the pseudo-gods' existence within the boundaries of time and space is one the main aspects of their euhemeristic humanization. As such, euhemeristic narratives, while they are primarily about the pseudo-gods, also underlie a conception of human nature

according to which humans are defined as limited, created, beings. To medieval authors and scholars, men may have a special place among God's creatures, as stated in the Bible, but nonetheless remain part of creation. When Francis of Assisi in *Laudes creaturarum* (c. 1224) refers to Sun, Moon, and other elements of nature as brothers and sisters,<sup>110</sup> this is not a mere poetic effect; it testifies to the nearly genealogical relation which exists between mankind and its surrounding world, both created by the same heavenly father.

Claude Lévi-Strauss considered that myths were structured by meaningful opposites binaries which stemmed from empirical observable couples of opposites such as raw and cooked for instance.<sup>111</sup> It is certainly true that pairs of opposites play important roles in myths, including medieval ones. But in medieval Christian culture the underlying and most important of these oppositions is not between nature and culture, but between creator and creature. This dichotomy is not only different from the opposition between nature and culture, but it also nullifies it: in the "creator versus creature dichotomy" human beings and the world which surrounds them belong to the same realm of created beings as opposed to their uncreated creator. As Vincent Giraud argues, the concept of creation, largely unknown in classical Greek philosophy, and the distinction between creature and creator, as well as the distinction between being and nonbeing, which results from it, are a major innovation of Christian thought. To Giraud, this opposition shaped medieval philosophy to become one of its main characteristics.<sup>112</sup> I would add that this opposition shaped medieval philosophy because it shaped medieval mentalities entirely, and it consequently shaped medieval Christian myths.

As such, for the medieval Christian authors, the pagan gods were not only unsettling because they are not in accordance with monotheism, or because they are flawed individuals, but also because they belong to a worldview incompatible with that of Christian authors, a worldview not based on the opposition between creator and created. Giraud reminds us that according to Epicurean philosophy, the creation of the cosmos results from random encounters between atoms.<sup>113</sup> It is worth adding that for Epicureans, the gods themselves were also made of atoms.<sup>114</sup> This conception finds an almost exact parallel in *Gylfaginning* the primordial being

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<sup>110</sup> Francis of Assisi, *François d'Assise. Écrits*, ed. Kajetan Esser, trans. Théophile Desbonnets et al., Sources Chrétiennes 285 (Paris: Les éditions du cerf, 1981), 342-345.

<sup>111</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologiques. Le cru et le cuit* (Paris: Plon, 1964), 9.

<sup>112</sup> Vincent Giraud, *L'ordre de la création. D'Augustin à Nicolas de Cues*, Une histoire personnelle de la philosophie (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2019), 8-16, 175-176.

<sup>113</sup> Giraud, *L'ordre de la création*, 9.

<sup>114</sup> David Konstan, "Epicurus on the Gods," in *Epicurus and the Epicurean Tradition*, ed. Jeffrey Fish and Kirk R. Sanders (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 53-54.

Ymir is created from the accidental encounter of randomly moving particles. Whether the story of Ymir's creation is of actual pagan origin is of little importance; it testifies that Snorri conceived the pagan cosmos as creationless, as well as an essentially godless one. In his account Snorri provides several other sets of structuring binaries: cold and hot, wet and dry, up and down. None of these oppositions can be said to represent a being versus nonbeing dichotomy, contrary to the dichotomy found in Genesis, for instance, where light, created by God, is contrasted with the nothingness of uncreated darkness. Euhemeristic narratives resolve this incompatibility between the pagan and Christian worldviews. This is not to say that these narratives are syncretic. On the contrary, they restructure and submit the pagan worldview to the Christian one. They end the ambiguity of the nature of the pagan gods, which were neither true creators nor true creatures, placing them among the created.

An important conclusion of this discussion about the mythological chronotope is that euhemerism is not only a modification of preexisting myths but also a significant selection of myths. This aspect is particularly noticeable when studying the authors' treatment of the mythical chronotope, as both authors rejected the Old Norse myths regarding the creation of the world. To use the terminology of Lévi-Strauss, for medieval authors some myths were *bons à penser* (good to think with) while other were not. The Old Norse creation myths were in fact probably extremely "bad to think with" and this for two reasons at least. Firstly, creation myths are generally mutually exclusive: the world can only be created once. Secondly, the Old Norse creation myths as they appear in the eddic poems are extremely different from the Biblical creation narrative, and thus cannot be read as pre-Christian intuition, unlike Baldr's death for instance.

## 7. General Conclusion

While virtually every Old Norse scholar recognizes that the medieval Scandinavian sources contain some euhemeristic elements, medieval Scandinavian euhemerism has never been the object of extensive study before. This gap in the scholarship was especially problematic as medieval Scandinavian euhemerism differs significantly from other types of euhemerism. As such it was not certain whether the term “euhemerism” could be unproblematically applied to the Old Norse narratives where pagan gods are depicted as human beings, and whether previous scholarship on euhemerism could pertinently be applied to Medieval Scandinavia.

The most remarkable of the differences between Medieval Scandinavian euhemerism and other instances of the theory is that it is applied to a different set of gods. For the first time, a euhemeristic narrative was neither about the Greco-Roman gods, nor the biblical pagan gods. As I have shown, this difference is not only superficial. Old Norse euhemerism is not merely a classical euhemerism where the names of Jupiter, Mercury, and Venus have been replaced by Þórr, Óðinn, and Freyja. The specificities of the Old Norse gods led Scandinavian authors to produce original euhemeristic narratives. Saxo in particular does not treat the gods as interchangeable characters but used their individual characteristics, such as Baldr’s invulnerability, and gave them important roles within his narratives.

The fact that the euhemeristic narratives of these authors are different from the narratives of classical Greco-Roman euhemerism must not be taken as a proof that they are not truly euhemeristic. One of the main achievements of this study is to show that there is indeed a medieval Scandinavian euhemerism. Roubekas saw in Snorri’s euhemerism only a vague and superficial resemblance with the ancient theory while some Old Norse scholars, such as Heinrich Beck believes that Snorri’s reading of Old Norse mythology was chiefly analogical. Against the views of Beck, I have shown that Snorri uses both analogy and euhemerism in different places of his works for different purposes. Against Roubekas’ view I point out that Snorri’s prologue is a narrative which is extremely similar to ancient euhemerism in its structure. Like Euhemerus’ narrative, Snorri’s prologue follows a twofold structure which first describes how the concept of gods or god was discovered by humanity by observing nature, and secondly how this concept was used by some individuals to impersonate gods. In Snorri’s prologue to the *Edda*, this narrative is essentially designed to explain the origin of pagan

religions and especially pagan religion in the north. To a lesser degree, *Heimskringla* also shows some of the characteristics of ancient euhemeristic narratives. We may see a similar effort to explain the existence and origin of Scandinavian pagan religion in *Ynglinga saga*, where several passages address the birth of particular beliefs, such as *Valhöll*, and specific practices, such as religious sacrifices.

These observations, however, are not true in the case of the *Gesta Danorum*. The euhemeristic narratives of Saxo are almost never about the origin of pagan religion. The exception is Saxo's portrayal of Frø as the inventor of human sacrifice, but this minor occurrence is not representative of Saxo's euhemerism. Saxo states that the Scandinavian pseudo-gods were magicians and impostors but provides little explanation concerning how these characters came to be worshiped and how they shaped Scandinavian paganism. However, Saxo based one of his narratives on the likely preexisting Old Norse myth of Baldr's death and the events surrounding it. Saxo applies the euhemeristic method to a myth and interpreted the gods as being human beings. Yet, contrary to what Snorri does in *Skáldskaparmál*, Saxo does not explicitly state that the historical struggle between Høtherus and Balderus was the origin of Old Norse pagan myth. The notion that pagan myths were in fact historical events was a fact that Saxo took for granted. As such, he was not interested in explaining the theory of euhemerism but merely sought to use this method to incorporate narratives about the pagan gods in his historical work.

Snorri's euhemerism is explicit and serves to explain the origin of pagan religion, while Saxo's is implicit and does not serve a discourse on the origin of pagan religion. Snorri uses and modifies a preexisting theory while Saxo adapts it for his own purpose. It would be absurd, however, to refuse to refer to Saxo's narratives as "euhemeristic". Saxo's work is certainly different from that of Euhemerus and of his Christian successors: his is perhaps a superficial use of the theory reduced to its bare bones. But it is evident that Saxo's interpretation of the Old Norse myths stems from Euhemerus' theory, as is made clear by his knowledge of Lactantius *Institutiones divinae*. Furthermore, the *Gesta Danorum* shares with Euhemerus' theory its most remarkable characteristic: the idea that gods were in fact human beings. As such, the works of Saxo and Snorri allow us to identify at least two types of euhemerism: an explicit theoretical euhemerism as the one of Snorri, where the author explains the theory and advances arguments to defend it, and an implicit practical euhemerism like Saxo's in which the author does not explain the theory but uses it for his own purpose.

This distinction reveals that the term “euhemerism” is both necessary and yet all too broad. This is because this single vocable covers at least two distinct, but often overlapping, realities. On the one hand, the word “euhemerism” may define narratives through their genealogical connection to Euhemerus’ theory. According to this definition, all narratives which explain pagan gods as human beings, and who inherited this idea directly or indirectly from Euhemerus’ work, may be qualified as euhemeristic. On the other hand, euhemeristic narratives may be characterized by being structurally similar to Euhemerus’ work and its immediate successors. There is often a connection between these two realities: the works which are genealogically connected to Euhemerus’ *Sacred Inscriptions* are indeed more likely to inherit structural similarities from this text. But not every text genealogically connected to the *Sacred Inscriptions* displays strong similarities with it, and not every structural similarity between a euhemeristic text and the *Sacred Inscriptions* is necessarily due to a genealogical connection. For instance, it is undeniable that Snorri’s work has an indirect connection with Euhemerus’ *Sacred Inscriptions* but, as I have shown, it is not clear that the structural similarities between his narrative and original euhemerism may be chiefly explained by this connection.

Like all definitions, these definitions have limitations, but neither of them is by itself a misleading oversimplification. These two realities have an equally legitimate claim to be labelled as “euhemerism” and have indeed been labelled as such either in common language or in scholarship. What is misleading is to fail to recognize that the word “euhemerism” happens to characterize these distinct realities. It is thus more pertinent to think of “euhemerism” as a convenient umbrella category which encompasses at least two subcategories: structural euhemerism, and genealogical euhemerism. The medieval Scandinavian sources display examples of both structural euhemerism, as in the prologue to the *Edda*, and of genealogical euhemerism which is present in virtually all our sources because of the extremely strong indirect influence of Euhemerus’ on medieval Christian culture through authors such as Lactantius and Isidore of Seville.

It is never possible to prove a negative statement and it is thus difficult to assess with certainty whether our sources contain an example of a purely structural euhemerism which would mean a euhemeristic narrative entirely independent from Euhemerus’ theory and whose similarity with previous European euhemeristic narratives would be a pure coincidence. This possibility is nonetheless unlikely. In the case of Saxo, the connection of the *Gesta Danorum* with the euhemeristic tradition is beyond doubt, as the author quoted Lactantius’ *Institutiones divinae*. In the case of Snorri, where such a connection cannot be proved as easily, it remains highly



likely that the author had a knowledge of one or several euhemeristic sources and at least knew the biblical Book of Wisdom. As such, every instance of structural euhemerism found in the medieval Scandinavian corpus is also an example of genealogical euhemerism, but the inverse is not true. This observation which comes from the specific context of medieval Scandinavia must not lead us to draw general conclusions: constant conjunction does not always equate to correlation, and we may without problem conceive that a narrative could be structurally euhemeristic without having any genealogical connection to Euhemerus' work. Such a narrative could be unproblematically called euhemeristic if one acknowledges the distinction between genealogical and structural euhemerism.

As such, Roubekas' assertion that one should ask the question "whose euhemerism?" is indeed an essential aspect of any study on euhemerism. In fact, this question may be expanded to "euhemerism for what context?" Snorri applies euhemerism differently in *Heimskringla* and in the *Edda*, we may even note differences between the euhemerism of the prologue and that of *Skáldskaparmál* despite both texts being found in the same work. This fluidity of the theory from author to author, from work to work and even from chapter to chapter tends to verify one of my principal hypotheses and guiding lines: euhemeristic narratives are myths and act as such. As myths they are narratives of great flexibility which may be adapted to one context or another, serving one political discourse or its exact opposite. Like other myths, euhemeristic narratives are conveyors of ideology connected to tenets within systems of belief. For instance, virtually all European medieval euhemeristic narratives are part of a nebula of myths which deny the divine nature of the gods from other religious traditions. In that regard the medieval Scandinavian euhemeristic narratives are not different, and the euhemeristic passages of both Saxo and Snorri are negations of the divine nature of the Scandinavian pagan gods. This, however, is only one aspect of these narratives, and maybe not the most important, which also serves other tenets within other interconnected systems of belief.

Contrary to previous studies which essentially saw the formal similarities between Saxo's and Snorri's euhemeristic narratives, I have shown that these narratives convey different ideological discourses. In the fashion of mythemes within a myth, myths within a mythology take all their meaning once put in relation to other myths. For instance, the mytheme "Thor strike a giant's head" can be used in myths to convey very different meaning: showing the god's strength as in his fight against Hrungnir; or contrastingly demonstrating the god's weakness as in the episode involving Skrymir. No mytheme is intrinsically connected to a meaning, and the same goes for myths within mythologies. Most of the time Saxo's and Snorri's euhemeristic narratives are not

as ideologically incompatible, as the works of “rival narrators” would be as they are not even about the same things. The euhemeristic narratives of *Ynglinga saga*, for instance, are pieces within a complex political discourse regarding monarchy and political legitimacy, while the euhemeristic narratives of the *Gesta Danorum* are part of a broader discourse regarding Danish identity and independence from foreign political powers. In one place, however, the two authors are drastically opposed: in their respective description of the *translatio imperii* and *translatio studii* motives, both of which are connected to their euhemeristic narrative.

Another fruitful aspect of this work is the study of euhemeristic thought and its relation to space and time. This relation is accessible through the theoretical framework of Mikhail Bakhtin and his notion of the chronotope to Old Norse mythology. The notion of chronotope has often been applied in studies about the sagas but less so to mythological notions of time and space. As I have shown, the euhemerization of the Old Norse gods was not as much about changing the nature of the gods themselves as it was about altering the world in which these gods evolved. Both Saxo and Snorri reinterpreted geographical concepts from Old Norse myths to make them fit within the common learned medieval geography. In doing so, the authors undermined the transcendence of the pseudo-gods and grounded them to the same earthly existence as ordinary human beings. The chronotope in which the gods, or pseudo-gods evolve is largely connected to the literary genre at use: poetry implies a chronotope fitted for mythological time, while prose, and historical writing must necessarily situate events relative to each other's, thus imposing its structure upon mythological chronology. This discussion made particularly apparent the fact that euhemerism consists as much in the selection of myths within a corpus as in the modification of those myths. Not all myths were equally *bons à penser* for medieval authors.

The first and most important limitation of this study is its scope. I only consider the two major instances of euhemerism in the Scandinavian Middle Ages: Saxo, and Snorri. I mentioned and considered older, instances of Old Norse euhemerism, *Íslendingabók* and *Historia Norwegie*, for their importance in the history of the theory in Scandinavia, but I did not incorporate other minor instances of the theory in medieval Scandinavian sources such as in the *förnaldasögur* and various *þættir* where the Old Norse gods are explicitly and implicitly described as human beings. I expect that a study of these texts would unveil new uses of the theory, adapted to other contexts and to other literary genres. Furthermore, such an inquiry may allow us to see how the theory evolved between the 13<sup>th</sup> and the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries.

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**Jules PIET**

## **The Self-Made Gods**

### **Euhemerism in the Works of Saxo Grammaticus and Snorri Sturluson**

### **L'évhémérisme dans les œuvres de Saxo Grammaticus et de Snorri Sturluson**

#### **Résumé**

La *Gesta Danorum* de Saxo Grammaticus, ainsi que l'*Edda* et la *Heimskringla* de Snorri Sturluson, trois des plus importants textes du treizième siècle scandinave, ont recours à l'évhémérisme pour expliquer la religion de leurs ancêtres païens. Cette théorie selon laquelle les dieux païens étaient des imposteurs humains fut l'un des principaux outils des auteurs médiévaux pour traiter des religions païennes. Cette thèse montre les spécificités de l'évhémérisme scandinave. La comparaison de l'œuvre de Saxo et de celles de Snorri révèle que derrière une apparente similarité, leurs récits évhéméristes servent des visées idéologiques radicalement différentes : Saxo construit l'identité du royaume danois dont il veut affirmer l'indépendance, alors que Snorri produit un discours sur la nature du pouvoir royal, ses limites, et sa transmission. De plus l'étude du corpus médiéval révèle que la méthode évhémériste ne consiste pas seulement en une humanisation des dieux mais aussi en une reconstruction complète de la cosmologie mythique.

#### **Abstract**

Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*, as well as Snorri's *Edda* and *Heimskringla*, three of the most important texts of 13<sup>th</sup> century Scandinavia, use euhemerism to explain the religion of their pagan ancestors. This theory, according to which gods were human impostors, was one of the main tools that the medieval authors used to explain pagan religions. I show the specific features of Scandinavian euhemerism. A comparison of Saxo's works with those of Snorri reveals that behind an apparent similarity, their euhemeristic narratives serve radically different ideological agendas: Saxo constructs the identity of the Danish Kingdom, which he wants to depict as an independent kingdom, whereas Snorri produces a discourse on the nature of royal power, its limitations, and its transmission. Furthermore, the study of the medieval corpus reveals that the euhemerist method involves not only a humanization of the gods, but a complete reconstruction of mythic cosmology.