

Conversion Narratives: Form and Utility

Conversion narratives in hagiography and church history are most often studied with a historical aim, and by the methods of source criticism. The scholar attempts to garner from the narrative what is likely to be fact, setting aside whatever can be explained as genre constraints, narrative clichés, literary influences, and authorial bias. In so far as these factors are noticed, therefore, they must be overlooked in the quest for events "as they actually happened." This approach has important methodological implications, among them the increased prestige of the earliest texts, as closest to the events, and of authors who identify the sources of their information.¹ On the other hand, the scholar learns to distrust the testimony of highly imaginative and literary narratives.

The aim of this paper is the exact opposite of source criticism. My interest is not in the events, but in how they were imagined and represented. It is not conversion, but conversion narratives that I wish to analyze. If the facts about conversion are of any importance here, it is only as an influence, a contributing factor that may help to explain certain features of the story. Neither am I looking for any kind of earliest narrative or original myth of conversion from which all subsequent representations might be derived. It is the entire narrative tradition that concerns us here, early and late, and that being so, I intend to apply Lévi-Strauss's principle for the study of myth that all versions of a myth are equally valuable when it comes to interpreting the story.² A survey of conversion narratives would be quite beyond the scope of this paper, so I will discuss only a few archetypal cases in the tradition. Where Old Norse literature is concerned, I will restrict myself as much as possible to the most familiar texts: Ari's account of the conversion of Iceland in Íslendingabók, and the sagas of Hakon the Good, Olaf Tryggvason, and Saint Olaf in Heimskringla.

Defining Conversion

It has been pointed out in recent discussion that the word "conversion" is doubly ambiguous.³ In the first place it covers both the public act of changing religious allegiance (e.g. a ceremony that makes conversion official) and the wholly private experience that constitutes conversion itself. Secondly, we may speak of a conversion from the perspective of the agent who brings it about (e.g. a missionary's conversion of a tribe) and from that of the protagonist (e.g. Newman's conversion to Catholicism). The analysis of conversion narratives presented here will touch on all four uses of the word, since they all focus on the same basic reality, a change of religious belief, and only differ in point of view (introspective vs. objective; agent-centered vs. subject-centered). Together they make up a comprehensive and plausible range of variations in narrative technique.

If overstressed, the distinction between public and private conversion may bolster the belief that conversion can be a wholly private event with no social repercussions. I hope to demonstrate in the next few pages that every conversion story, no matter how individual and intimate, has an important political side.

The Types of Conversion Narrative

A. Individual conversion. This type is used to describe a character's change of mind in religious matters from a predominantly personal standpoint. It is characteristic of Late Antiquity, and for typical instances we need look no further than at Lucius's conversion to the cult of Isis in Book XI of Apuleius's Golden Ass and the famous scene in the Milan garden in Book VIII of Augustine's Confessions.⁴ There is a very strong implicit sense in accounts of this sort that the spiritual experience in itself is inexpressible, beyond words, and that the narrative record, no matter how searching, can only show it indirectly. The actions of the convert before, during, and after the decisive moment are presented as symptoms that suggest but do not represent the process of conversion (cf. in the Confessions, even though the episode in the Milan garden hinges on a vow to be continent, and thus on an easily

expressible act of the will, the constant references to symptomatic behavior on Augustine's part: "...si vulsi capillum, si percussi frontem, si consertis digitis amplexatus sum genu, quia volui, feci." VIII, 8; "Ego sub quadam fici arbore stravi me nescio quomodo et dimisi habenas lacrimis, et prorumperunt flumina oculorum meorum, acceptabile sacrificium tuum,..." VIII, 12; "Tum interiecto aut digito aut nescio quo alio signo codicem clausi et tranquillo iam vultu indicavi Alypio." VIII, 12.)⁵

The conversion is staged as a dialogue between the protagonist and his god. The rhetoric of the scene involves a prayer and an answer to it. The outcome is presented as an effect of divine grace and condescension.⁶ However, the political consequences of conversion are not forgotten. As priest of Isis, Lucius makes a brilliant career in rhetoric and law; his new faith provides him with patrons and supporters over the entire Mediterranean area. By becoming an orthodox Catholic, Augustine delivers a serious blow not only to the aristocratic pagans who had favored him in Italy, but to the Manichaeans and to the Arians who lobbied for influence in Milan. This aspect of conversion is expressed by a division of the narrative into private and public chapters. Lucius prays to Isis and sees her appear over the waves as he lies alone on the beach at Cenchreae. But Isis herself bids him attend her procession that same day, and it is in the course of that public pageant that Lucius regains human form and embraces officially the cult of the goddess. Augustine hears the divine message "Tolle et lege" in a solitary nook of the garden, but his formal adoption of Christianity is public, and immediately before his experience in the garden he has been told at length of the public profession of faith of the rhetorician Marius Victorinus, and its foreseeable political impact.

B. Royal conversion. Here although the narrative is clearly focused on an individual convert, its significance depends entirely on the exalted position of the protagonist and on the unstated certainty that an entire nation will follow on his steps. The primary model for this type must be Eusebius's account of the vision of Constantine in the Vita Constantini,⁷

used later as paradigm for the conversions of barbarian monarchs: the baptism of Clovis as told by Gregory of Tours,⁸ the conversion of the Visigothic royal family in the version of Gregory the Great,⁹ Bede's account of the conversion of the Northumbrian Edwin.¹⁰ The identification of the ruler with his subjects is so strong in this narrative type that national conversion goes unmentioned, becoming part of the implicit meaning of the text.¹¹

The rhetorical situation is no longer prayer or dialogue; here the ruler, as representative of god (and therefore his subordinate), and as leader of his people, obeys a command from on high. God or his spokesman addresses him in the imperative: "τοῦτο γὰρ ἔκλεα"; "Mitis depone cella, Sigamber; adora quod incendisti, incende quod adorasti." (St. Remy to Clovis); "Memento, ut tertius, quod promisisti, facere ne differas, suscipiendo fidem eius, et praecepta seruando, qui te et a temporalibus aduersis eripiens, temporalis regni honore sublimauit;..." (Paulinus to Edwin). The accent here is no longer on grace, but on providence, on the divine purpose manifest in national history. As in type A, however, the narrative is fractured into private and public moments. Constantine sees the cross of light with his entire army, but its import is explained to him later in a dream.¹² The private struggle of Clovis with his wife's Catholicism comes before his public test of the Christian god's power on the battlefield, and before his public baptism.¹³ Gregory the Great invents a secret conversion to Catholicism of the Visigothic king Leovigild, the father of Hermangild and Recared, to counterbalance the public rejection of Arianism by his sons.¹⁴ Though the signum performed by the angel during his private conversation with Edwin is repeated later before the king by the missionary Paulinus, the Northumbrian only makes up his mind after a public assembly with his advisors and pagan high priests.¹⁵

Types C and D cover narratives of mass conversion.¹⁶ Although they are quite distinct, there is considerable overlap between them, far more than between A and B.

C. Missionary conversion. Here the slow, laborious conversion

of the common people, which is taken for granted in narratives of royal conversion, occupies the center of the stage. In relation to type B, C is the other side of the coin. The narrative standpoint, however, is not that of the new Christians; the story is told from the perspective of the agents of conversion, i.e. the priests who under the auspices of the state or the papacy brought the new faith to the heathen masses. If narratives of royal conversion are characteristic of Late Antiquity and the Migration Period, type C corresponds to the centuries that followed the Germanic invasion of Western Europe. Paradigms are numerous, though none has the classical status that makes the vision of Constantine the model for type B. One can point, however, to the vitae of Wilfrid, Boniface, Columba, and Gall among many others.¹⁷

The rhetoric of the narrative is determined by the displacement of the point of view from convert to agent. The protagonist is now the missionary, whose aim is to persuade. Theological argumentation, being beyond the reach of the intended public, is rarely used in the staging of these episodes, though the clergy of the period had clearly envisioned the use of such reasoning in the enterprise of conversion. In a letter of instruction to Boniface, bishop Daniel of Winchester gives his countryman advice on how to engage the pagans in religious disputation: "Then, when they have been compelled to learn that their gods had a beginning since some were begotten by others, they must be asked in the same way whether they believe that the world had a beginning or was always in existence without beginning. If it had a beginning, who created it? Certainly they can find no place where begotten gods could dwell before the universe was made." But Daniel does not assume that conversion can be carried out by such means alone, and soon makes an unmistakable reference to compulsion and violence: "This point is also to be made: if the gods are all-powerful, beneficent, and just, they not only reward their worshipers but punish those who reject them. If, then, they do this in temporal matters, how is it that they spare us Christians who are turning almost the whole earth away from their worship and overthrowing their idols?"¹⁸

Miracles, particularly healings, and the destruction of pagan idols and sanctuaries serve as the strongest arguments in the rhetoric of conversion used in missionary narratives.

Accounts of type C have undergone the attraction of various literary genres: the adventure of Willibrord, shipwrecked on Fositesland, who kills the holy cattle of the god to feed his catechumens, is evocative of the Odyssey and the killing of the cattle of the sun.¹⁹ Far more common, however, is the representation of missionary activity in remote corners of Europe as part of a quest for martyrdom, an entertaining and edifying chapter in the vita of the agent of conversion. The Vita Anskarii is an excellent instance of this subtype.²⁰ A dominant topos found in all varieties of C is that of the providential and miraculous growth of the church: the missions as sowing of the Lord's seed in new fields, quest of the stray lamb, etc.

In texts of type C, the shift away from the perspective of the convert brings about an eclipse of the private moment of conversion. A genuine religious change is assumed to be taking place among the pagans, but the narrative shows only a series of public episodes in which they always appear as a crowd.

D. Forced conversion. Though violence plays a part in type C, in D it is the decisive factor. The agent of conversion here is a ruler, and he brings Christianity to the mass of his rebellious heathen subjects by what can only be called terrorist measures. Perhaps the archetype of this formula is to be found in Charlemagne's conversion of the Saxons. The brief references to it in Einhard's Vita Karoli and the account in Angilbert's "Carmen de conversione Saxonum" make the emperor himself the hero of the story and have little to say about his missionaries and administrators.²¹ A full-fledged instance in later times is Saxo's description, in Book XIV of the Gesta Danorum, of Valdemar's campaigns against the Wends, where the king is the protagonist in spite of the constant presence and collaboration of Absalon.²² Throughout narratives of this type there is much insistence on the providential role of the ruler, who strives to bring the gospel to a benighted nation. Though compulsion is

always the final argument, the campaign may begin with an attempt at persuasion. In many cases it is possible that the violence itself works in the story as a sort of argument: since the pagans are crushed, it is clear that the god of the Christians is more powerful than theirs.²³

However doubtful the church may have been as to the value of forced conversions, the writers of type-D narratives seem totally convinced of the validity of such royal endeavors. The heathens become Christians in that they allow themselves to be baptized, and though the sacrament would seem reduced to a mere ritual of submission, it is nevertheless believed to leave an indelible mark. In any case, the narrative does not imply a change of personal religious convictions among the victims of these missionary kings. The private reality of conversion has faded away entirely. The mission becomes, quite transparently, a display of royal power and an expansion of the territory within which that power is exercised. In so far as the episode can also be described as a victory over a sometimes very considerable enemy, the narrative tends to emphasize the strategies and tricks used by the Christians to win the battle, destroy the pagan temples, or convince the heathens that further resistance is useless. The scenes of confrontation between ruler and recalcitrant pagans that often constitute the core of type-D narratives make a conspicuous display of deliberate staging and theatricality.

The Types in West Norse Literature

The four types outlined above correspond to different stages in the Christianization of Western Europe; taken as a sequence, they may be said to match the growth of the new religion. It is therefore not surprising to discover that C and D are dominant in Norse accounts of conversion. This is the case everywhere else in Europe around 1200, for these types, and particularly D, reach the apex of their popularity and applicability in the twelfth century. It is important to remember, however, that at that time or shortly thereafter all four types were available to Icelanders and Norwegians as literary models. Indeed, all four have left traces of their influence, in spite of the marked preference for D.

Though Old Norse narrative is notoriously shy of introspection, type A can be identified here and there. It is not found as a fully developed episode except in the garden scene of Augustinus saga, a late thirteenth-century adaptation of an anonymous Latin vita that draws heavily on the Confessions. The behavior of Augustinus and Alippius is described in typically symptomatic terms:

Augustinus tok nu, þaa er hann heyrði þvilict tal Pontiani, at syta sarligha ok skammaz með hraeðiligum otta at þeirri villu, er hann hafði leingi blindat. (...) Ennit, augun, kinnr, litr ok mynd raddarenar syndu nu framarr hans hug en orðin, þau er hann bar fram. (...) Augustinus kastaði ser niðr undir einu fiktire ok leysti nu tauma treganum; flutu þaa fram aesiig tar af augunum.²⁴

The public/private disjunction in the episode is also conveyed clearly: the account of Victorinus's public profession of faith, which precedes and partially motivates Augustinus's own conversion, is given in full, and Augustinus's need for total isolation at the decisive moment is formulated pointedly:

En Alippius sat naer honum ok hugsaði þegiandi hann harmanda, þar til er milli asakanarorða feck Augustinus eigi halldit sik, spratt hann nu upp ok geck skiotliga brutt fra Alippio, því at honum þetti viðkvaemiligra at grata i þeim stað, er hann vaeri einn saman staddr.²⁵

Echoes of type A in original Norse compositions are slighter, but not wholly absent. They can be found, for example, in the sagas of Icelanders. We are told that Njal always spoke well of Christianity before it came to Iceland, and that he was given to meditating out loud by himself: "Hann fór opt frá þórum mórnum ok þulði, einn saman."²⁶ This is an unmistakably symptomatic remark which also incorporates the element of privacy. After staying in Denmark with a Christian partner, Gisli Sursson ceases to perform sacrifices. We are informed of this in a sentence that describes Gisli's social

behavior in general, with no particular emphasis on religion: "Ok líðr nú svá sumarit, ok kemr at vetrnöttum. Þat var þá margra manna síðr at fagna vetri í þann tíma ok hafa þá veizlur ok vetrnáttablót, en Gísli lét af blótum, síðan hann var í Vébjörgum í Danmörku, en hann helt þó sem áðr veizlum ok allri stórmennsku."²⁷ These brief indications are meant to betray the spiritual motions that lead Njal to baptism later on in the saga, and in the case of Gísli the private effects of his primesigning.

Type B is hardly represented in vernacular narrative, though the vision of Constantine was familiar in the North as elsewhere. A Norse version of the inventio crucis published by Unger collapses the public and private moments of Eusebius's account into a single private experience, presumably a dream, but presents a public element in that it mentions the reproduction and open display of the cross in the labarum:

Oc a einni nött syndiz honum maðr biatr yfirliz oc maelli við hann: "Constantine, hirt ægigi þu at ottaz, littu upp i himenenn." Oc se, þa leit hann upp til himens oc sa crossmarc Cristz a himne sva biart sem elldr vaeri; þar sa hann oc rituð þessi orð yfir: I þesso marki mantu sigr vega. Þa let Constantinus gera crossmarc af gulli i liking þess cross, er hann sa a himne, oc þann haði hann fyrir merki oc let bera fyrir líði sino a mot vikingom.²⁸

It might be argued that the well-known episode of Olaf Tryggvason's conversion by a hermit of the Scilly Islands is a native specimen of type B. However, there are good reasons against counting it as one. In the first place, the story is a transparent and rather mechanical borrowing from an anecdote about St. Benedict and the Gothic king Totila in the Dialogues of Gregory the Great, so it can hardly count as a Norse invention.²⁹ Far more significant is the total absence of any assumption that once Olaf becomes Christian, his people will follow suit. Olaf converts long

before he takes power over Norway, and later on, when he has done so and the narrative touches on his missionary efforts, what is shown is his often unsuccessful struggle with an unwilling and conservative people. No model could be more inadequate to describe Olaf's story than the Constantinian paradigm with its premise of "cujus regio, hujus religio."

Accounts of type C are most abundant in narratives of the conversion of Iceland: Kristni saga, the conversion chapters in Njála, and versions of this same material in the kings' sagas. These specimens of C appear to have undergone the attraction of vernacular sagas about romantic outlaws in the characterization of their unconventional brawling missionaries, Þorvaldr and Þangbrandr.

The conversion scenes in Heimskringla and other kings' sagas are mostly instances of D. In the next few pages I will attempt to analyze some of these episodes by comparing them to their general type and to some analogues, both as wholes [i.e. the entire narrative] and in detail [i.e. typical segments thereof]. But before we can deal with the many versions of D that characterize the kings' sagas, we must look closely at one conversion story that does not fit any of our four types.

The Conversion of Iceland

Scholars have justly emphasized the uniqueness of the national conversion described by Ari.⁵⁰ In it the collective change in religious allegiance takes place by legal arbitration, which effectively prevents us from placing the story in any of our categories. In the notes that follow I am not trying to dismiss or reduce the originality of this account, but only to point out some of its formal and thematic affinities.

i. In its narrative form the conversion of Iceland comes closest to stories of type B, which is, as we have seen, the most poorly represented in the Norse literary tradition. Here a man decides for a nation, and in order to do so he isolates himself for some time, breaking up the episode

into public and private moments. We are never told what Þorgeirr the Lawspeaker did under the cloak: he may have pondered the best interest of the country, consulted an oracle, engaged in shamanistic flight, or counted over the money paid him by Sif-u-Hallr.³¹ What matters is that before taking the fateful decision he chooses to withdraw from the bustle of the Althing, to cut himself off from human communication. This structural analogy does not prove a source relation between Ari's narrative and any stories of type B.

ii. The differences from B are at least as important as the similarities. Þorgeirr is chosen to proclaim the new law, and the crowd agrees beforehand to abide by his decision: this is perhaps the most important original element in the narrative. It replaces the assumption, characteristic of type B, that the people will follow their leader. There is also an absence of the miraculous; no Constantinian signum, no providential victory over heathen enemies.

iii. The matically, though not structurally, there is a marginal presence of type D in that all accounts make it clear that Olaf Tryggvason played an important part in the conversion. His envoys and missionaries had left the Icelanders in no doubt as to the king's desires and expectations.

iv. The narrative shares an important feature with the otherwise very different accounts of the conversion of Norway in the kings' sagas: the use of legal terminology and legal reasoning to justify the change of faith. This is the basic argument of the Lawspeaker: our country cannot function under two separate laws, so we must all share one law and one religion.³² To my knowledge, this element is not to be found elsewhere in conversion stories. I will say more about it in the next section.

The Conversion of Norway

The various scenes in the sagas of Hakon the Good, Olaf Tryggvason, and Saint Olaf where the kings seek to impose their religion on assemblies of peasants throughout

Norway are far more stereotyped than the Icelandic conversion and can be compared usefully with narratives of types C and D in the literature of the period. Most episodes in the kings' sagas belong clearly to D: conversion is presented as a royal achievement, there is much use of strategy and force, and the connection between religion and royal power is made explicit. The schematic character of these accounts can hardly be overlooked; it is manifest both in the larger narrative structures (where, for example, Olaf Tryggvason's clash with Jarnskeggi of Yrjar simply duplicates Saint Olaf's own confrontation with Dala-Guðbrandr)³³, and in the use of specific motifs. As a corpus, these stories are nevertheless distinctive in various ways and impossible to confuse with other instances of D.

i. They stress the ruler's struggle to convert his people, the subjects' unwillingness to change, and the monarch's occasional compromises and betrayals of Christianity (particularly in Hákonar saga góða). Not only will the people not follow on their master's steps, but there is a possibility that they will force him to recant and apostatize. One question that must be raised here concerns the function of this emphasis. What was the point, in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Norway and Iceland, of describing the precarious efforts of these missionary kings to Christianize their countries? With Christianity irreversibly victorious, why did the authors of these sagas not imitate their continental colleagues and provide records of unwavering faith and unchecked missionary progress? We might point to the possible influence of type-C narratives, which frequently report backslidings into paganism.

ii. They make constant use of legal terms and arguments. This trait is not general: it can be found in the Legendary Saga of Saint Olaf and above all in Heimskringla, but not in Oddr Snorrason's saga of Olaf Tryggvason. Snorri shows a strong preference for this manner of presentation: if there has to be a debate between the old faith and the new, he will present it as an argument about the keeping of the law. So, for example, at the Frostathing the pagan leader Ásbjörn of Meðalhús addresses Hakon the Good with a long speech

asking him not to break the laws he has himself promulgated. Legal phrasing is not hard to find: "Nú er þat vili várr ok samþykki bóndanna at halda þau lög, sem þú settir oss hér a Frostapíngi ok vér jatudum þér." (HSG, ch.15) This speech is one of the most impressive pieces of oratory to be found in Heimskringla,³⁴ and we may question Snorri's aim in making a pagan talk with the voice of law, which must have spoken so persuasively to his Icelandic public in the thirteenth century. When later Hakon, angry at having been forced to sacrifice by the people of Trondheim, threatens to return and raid the district, his counselor earl Sigurðr disagrees: "Sigurðr jarl bað konung gefa þroendum þetta ekki at sæk,..." (HSG, ch.18) The meetings at which kings try, with such mixed results, to foist Christianity on their people, are usually referred to as a þing. At Rogaland, some pagans attempt to speak against Olaf Tryggvason, who is demanding that the people change their religion: "...ok aetla til þess þrjá menn, þá er málsnjallastir váru í þeira flokki, at svara Olafi konungi á þinginu ok tala móti honum ok þat með, at þeir vilja eigi ganga undir ólög, þótt konungr bjóði þeim." (OST, ch.55) But they are struck dumb by some supernatural agency. At the Gulathing there is another reply by an eloquent heathen, Ólmóðr inn gamli, who tells Olaf Tryggvason that "Með því, konungr, at þú aetlar at pynda oss fraendr til slíkra hluta, at brjóta lög vár, ok brjóta oss undir þik með nokkurri nauðungu, þá munu vér í móti standa með öllu afli, ok fáir þeir sigr, er auðit verðr." (OST, ch.56) Olaf replies to him in an unusually diplomatic and conciliatory manner, asking: "Hvers vilid þér mik beiða til þess, at saett vár verði sem bezt?" (*ibid.*) In the course of yet another confrontation, this time at Maerin, the pagan chieftain Jarnskeggi of Yrjar uses the same arguments against the king: "Segir hann, at boendr vildu enn sem fyrr, at konungr bryti ekki lög a þeim." (OST, ch.68) In the sagas of Saint Olaf, it is the heathen leader Þórðr ístrumagi who suggests to the king the alternative solutions to the conflict: "...ok gerum þá annat hvárt, at verum sáttir um þetta mál eða höldum bardaga." (OSH, ch.112; cf.

the Legendary Saga, ch.36, with slightly different words but the same legal turn).

Legalism is the one feature that these rather formulaic type-D episodes share with Ari's account of the conversion of Iceland. It may well be the West Norse contribution to the thematics of conversion.

iii. This willingness to let the pagans speak persuasively, and in the name of one of the highest values of Icelandic society, is only the clearest manifestation of a more general tendency to include in these narratives information that undermines the simple picture of Christian perfection and heathen evil that we expect in stories of this sort. This element of ambivalence is clearest in Snorri's work. He tells us that prosperity and good harvests returned to the land under earl Hakon (OST, ch.16), and that there were bad seasons under Saint Olaf (OSH, ch.106) which led the farmers to relapse into paganism and sacrifice to the gods for a good year. The missionary kings, and particularly Olaf Tryggvason, are shown persecuting and torturing the pagans in dreadful ways to bring about forced conversion (OST, chs.76, 80), and buying conversion by offering their subjects favor or positions at court (OST, chs.82, 83).

There is very little narratorial intervention to explain or justify such methods. When the pagan peasants at Raumaríki are defeated in battle by Saint Olaf, we read that they "varú bændir til batnaðar" (OSH, ch.114). Dala-Guðbrandr is credited with the ridiculous remark that his god cannot come out because it is raining (OSH, ch.112), and the cult of the image of Thor in the Dales is described so as to make its followers look foolish: the image is brought out, "En er þat sá boendr, þeir er á þinginu váru, þá hljópu þeir allir upp ok lutu því skrímsli." (OSH, ch.113) But there is a negligible amount of such Christian editorializing.

Though the thirteenth-century public would have been less critical of forced conversions than we are today, when it comes to analyzing the motives that lead individuals to adopt Christianity, Snorri seems to emphasize arbitrary

and wholly secular reasons that are unacceptable (cf. the conversion of the bandit Arnljótr Gellini, OSH, ch.215, where it is made clear that the man allows himself to be baptized only so as to fight on Saint Olaf's side at Stiklarstaðir: "Heyrt hefi ek getit Hvíta-Krists, en ekki er mér kunnigt um athöfn hans eða hvar hann raedur fyrir. Nú vil ek trúa því öllu, er þú segir mér. Vil ek fela á hendi þér allt mitt ráð.") Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Snorri uses material that makes it easy to interpret these royal missions as political confrontations, as a settling of accounts between royal authority and local leadership. This reductive reading is made possible by such episodes as the banquet at Hlaðir where Olaf Tryggvason tells the farmers that if he is to sacrifice with them for a good harvest, then he will use as his victims the most prominent men of the district (OST, ch.67).

A Type-D Motif: The Infested Idol

Scenes in which an idol is triumphantly destroyed by a Christian king or a missionary are abundant in narratives of types C and D. They belong to the set of particularly formulaic incidents that are easily duplicated and multiplied, especially in the more clerical redactions of the sagas. The schematism of these segments makes it easy to confuse their different manifestations with each other, and to overlook their particular meaning in the context of the narrative. Comparison with specific analogues allows us to read the segment more accurately and to place it within the range of possibilities left open by the general type. Let us look briefly at a subtype of this idol-wrecking segment: the variety in which the idol is shown to be infested either by common vermin or by demons. Our point of departure must be the episode in the Dales where Saint Olaf lets Kolbeinn sterki destroy the image of Thor. We are told that mice as big as cats, adders, and snakes came swarming out of the broken idol, to the terror of the pagan crowd (OSH, ch.113) At first glance this is an instance of Nordic rationalism: the incident is there to explain who consumes the food offered regularly to the god, and to underscore the

laughable powerlessness of such a deity.³⁵ Thor is merely a carved block of wood, unable to defend itself from mice and serpents. The contrast between these pages and Saxo's account of the destruction of the Wendish idol Suantovitus after Valdemar's capture of Arkona could not be more eloquent: those ordered to cut down the image are warned to be careful lest they be crushed in its fall, and after it has come down, "Daemon, in furvi animalis figura penetralibus excedere visus, subito se circumstantium luminibus abstulit." (Gesta Danorum XIV, xxxix, 32)³⁶ Saxo defers here to the less enlightened belief, common since Christian antiquity, that the idols of the heathen were inhabited by real and often quite powerful demons.³⁷ Still, his demon takes the likeness of a dark animal. Further comparison with a chapter from Ebbo's Vita Ottonis, a twelfth-century biography of the missionary bishop of Bamberg, where the flies that come buzzing out of a broken Pomeranian idol are explicitly identified as demons, suggests that the huge mice, adders, and snakes of the Norse narrative need not be interpreted as a purely rationalistic invention.³⁸ If we then stop to consider Snorri's account in Heimskringla of the rape of the sanctuary of the Permian god Jómali by some subjects of Saint Olaf (OSH, ch.133) and how the idol, in crashing to the ground, gives the alarm that alerts the keepers of the shrine and almost costs the Norsemen their lives, we may come to see the original description of the verminous Thor as balancing a rationalistic attack on idolatry with a strong residual fear of the powers inherent in pagan images.

NOTES

1. Recent applications of the method to Nordic conversions are J.A. Aðalsteinsson, Under the Cloak: The Acceptance of Christianity in Iceland with Particular Reference to the Religious Attitudes Prevailing at the Time (Uppsala, 1978), and G.A. Piebenga, "Fridrek, den første utenlandske misjonæren på Island. En undersøkelse av påliteligheten i de islandske tekstene som beretter om ham," Arkiv för nordisk filologi 99 (1984), 79-94.

2. C.Lévi-Strauss, Anthropologie structurale (Paris, 1958), 226-255; p.240: "La méthode nous débarrasse d'une difficulté qui a constitué jusqu'à présent un des principaux obstacles au progrès des études mythologiques, à savoir la recherche de la version authentique ou primitive. Nous proposons, au contraire, de définir chaque mythe par l'ensemble de toutes ses versions."
3. E.Walter, review of D.Strömbäck, The Conversion of Iceland in Medieval Scandinavia 10 (1977), 223-27, p.223, note 1; A.Rousselle, Du sanctuaire au thaumaturge: la guérison en Gaule au IVE siècle," Annales: économies-sociétés-civilisations 31 (1976), 108-1107, esp.p.1095.
4. On Lucius's conversion, see A.D.Nock, Conversion: the old and the new in religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo (Oxford, 1933), 138-55, and the more recent treatment in F.Solmsen, Isis Among the Greeks and Romans (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), 87-113. On Augustine see P.Brown, Augustine of Hippo (Berkeley, 1969), 101-14.
5. Augustinus, Confessiones, ed.M.Skutella, rev. H.Jürgens and W.Schaub (Stuttgart, 1969).
6. A full literary analysis of the Milan garden scene is provided in P.Courcelle, Les Confessions de saint Augustin dans la tradition littéraire. Antécédents et postérité (Paris, 1963), 91-197 ("Les descriptions de conversion").
7. Rather than the earlier and more authentic testimony of Lactantius, De mortibus persecutorum 44: "Commonitus est in quiete Constantinus ut caeleste signum dei notaret in scutis atque ita proelium committeret."
8. Libri historiarum X, II, 29-31.
9. Dialogorum Gregorii papae libri quatuor de miraculis patrum italicorum III, 31,
10. Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum II, 12-13.
11. S.C.Fanning, "Lombard Arianism Reconsidered," Speculum 56 (1981), 241-58, discusses historical errors induced by this common narrative premise.
12. A.Alföldi, "Hoc signo victor eris. Beiträge zur Geschichte der Bekehrung Konstantins des Großen." Pisciculi. Studien zur Religion und Kultur des Altertums Franz Dölger zum sechzigsten Geburtstag dargeboten, eds.Th.Klauser and

- A.Rücker (München, 1939), 1-18.
13. Cf. the well-known analysis of Gregory's narrative into "Familienkapitel", "Alamannenkapitel", and "Taufkapitel" in W.von den Steinen, "Chlodwigs Übergang zum Christentum," Mitteilungen des Österreichischen Instituts für Geschichtsforschung XII, Ergänzungsband 1932, 417-501. The split between public and private conversion is backed up by historical considerations in G.Tessier, "La Conversion de Clovis et la christianisation des Francs," La conversione al cristianesimo nell'Europa dell'alto medioevo, Settimane di studio del centro italiano di studio sull'alto medioevo XIV (Spoleto, 1967), 149-89.
14. Dialogorum Gregorii papae libri quatuor III, 31: "Nam quia uera esset catholica fides agnuit (Leuuigildus), sed gentis suae timore perterritus ad hanc peruenire non meruit." See J.Fontaine, "Conversion et culture chez les Wisigoths d'Espagne," La conversione al cristianesimo (as in note 13), 87-147, esp.115-16.
15. N.K.Chadwick, "The Conversion of Northumbria: A Comparison of Sources," in K.Jackson, P.H.Blair et al., Celt and Saxon: Studies in the Early British Border (Cambridge, 1963), 138-66.
16. That modern religious criteria for conversion have little or nothing to do with the standards implicit in these narratives is made clear in H.Pinard de la Boullaye, "Conversion," Dictionnaire de spiritualité II (Paris, 1953), cols.2224-65, esp.2241-2 (on forced conversion) and 2242-3 (on mass conversions).
17. Cf. Eddius Stephanus, Vita Wilfridi episcopi 26 and 41; Jonas, Vitae Columbani abbatis discipulorumque eius 53; Willibald, Vita Bonifatii V, 16; Walafrid Strabo, Vita Galli I, 6.
18. Epistola 23 in Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus, ed.Tangl (MGH, Epistolae selectae); I quote here the translation of E.Emerton, The Letters of Saint Boniface (New York, 1940), 48-50.
19. Alcuin, Vita Willibrordi 10-11; Odyssey XII.
20. See Vita Anskarii auctore Rimberto 7.
21. Einhard, Vita Karoli 7-8; "Carmen" lines 40-75.

22. Saxo Grammaticus, Danorum regum heroumque historia. Books X-XVI, ed. and trans. E.Christensen (Oxford, 1981). Vol.3, 675-83.
23. In this respect type D shows some common ground with B (cf. Constantine at the Milvian bridge, Clovis and the Alamanni).
24. Heilagra manna sögur I, 132-33. These physical manifestations of emotion are translated literally from the source; e.g. the second sentence of the passage corresponds to the Latin "Plus loquebantur animum eius, frons, genae, oculi, color, modus vocis, quam verba quae promebat." [Vita D. Aur. Augustini episcopi Hipponensis auctore incerto. Ex antiquo codice nunc primum edidit Andr.Guil.Cramer (Kiel, 1832), p.28].
25. Heilagra manna sögur I, 133.
26. Brennu-Njáls saga, ed. E.O.Sveinsson, p.255.
27. Vestfirðinga sögur, eds. B. Þórólfsson and G.Jónsson, p.36.
28. Heilagra manna sögur I, 303.
29. D.Strömbäck, The Conversion of Iceland (London, 1975), 102-3; see also R.Boyer, "The Influence of Pope Gregory's Dialogues on Old Icelandic Literature," Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference, eds.P.Foote, H.Palsson, D.Slay (University of London, 1973), 1-27.
30. Hans Kuhn, "Das nordgermanische Heidentum in den ersten christlichen Jahrhunderten," Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum 79 (1942), 133-66, esp. 150-51, and "Das älteste Christentum Islands," ZfdA 100 (1971), 4-40, esp. 33-40.
31. K.Maurer, Die Bekehrung des norwegischen Stammes zum Christenthume I (München, 1855), 440-44; J.A.Ádalsteinsson, Under the Cloak, 103-23; D.Strömbäck, The Conversion of Iceland, 30-31.
32. Ádalsteinsson, Under the Cloak, 124-35; J.E.Knirk, Oratory in the Kings' Sagas (Oslo, 1981), 31-35, 127-37.
33. L.Lönnroth, "Studier i Olaf Tryggvasons saga," Samlaren 84 (1963), 54-94, esp. p.62.
34. H.Lie, Studier i Heimskringlas stil, Studier utgitt av Videnskaps akademi i Oslo, II. Historisk-Filosofisk klasse, 1936, no.5 (Oslo, 1937), 7-136, esp.91-92; Knirk, Oratory,

p.45.

35. In a note to Strömbäck, The Conversion of Iceland [p.105, note 1], P.Foote traces this motif back to an anecdote from Theodoret Latinized in Cassiodorus's Historia ecclesiastica tripartita. The episode is clearly of the rationalistic variety: it refers to the beliefs of pagans as "aniles fabulas" and uses a flippant quasi-Voltairean phrasing: "Erat enim habitatio soricum Aegyptiorum deus."
36. Saxonis Gesta Danorum I, eds. J.Oirik and H.Raeder (Copenhagen, 1931).
37. E.Bevan, Holy Images (London, 1940), 90-94. A Christian antitype in which an image of Christ or the Virgin, struck by an unbeliever, sheds blood or tears, is analyzed in L.Kretzenbacher, Das verletzte Kultbild, Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse. Jahrgang 1977, Heft 1 (München, 1977).
38. Ebbonis Vita Ottonis episcopi Babergensis III, 11.