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SACRED KNOWLEDGE, KINGSHIP, AND CHRISTIANITY: MYTH AND  
CULTURAL CHANGE IN MEDIEVAL SCANDINAVIA

In his Saga Ólafs Tryggvasonar, the monk Odd Snorrason tells of King Olaf's encounter with the devil in human form. The fiend, worried over the waning of his influence and the growth of God's, takes on the form of an old, one-eyed man, with a hood down over his face, and comes at Christmastime to Augvaldness, where the king is celebrating the feast. He tells Olaf tales of many kings, among them the Augvald for whom the farm and headland are named. Augvald owned a cow, which he always kept with him, so he could drink its milk. When he died he and his cow were laid in separate mounds on the headland. When the man has spoken for a time, "þa girtiz konungr æ þui meirr a hans röpu." They talk far into the night. At last the bishop reminds the king that it is time to sleep, but "konungi þotti þo annars vannt er hann hafði annat sagt." The king eventually goes to sleep, and in the morning he asks after his guest, but the man is nowhere to be found. Olaf sends for his cooks, and asks if a man had come to them while they were preparing the feast. A cook replies that a man had indeed come, and belittled the food being prepared, and had taken him to a certain building where there were two sides of fat beef. The cook had put them in with the other meat. Olaf has the meat cast into the sea, saying "at sia diofull havi verit með asionu Óðins."<sup>1</sup>

Odd, a Benedictine monk at the monastery of Thingeyrar, wrote his saga in Latin c. 1190 A.D.; the Latin text is lost,

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but two versions of a thirteenth century Icelandic translation survive. He draws on a number of written sources, but he also makes free use of popular tales and legends which had grown up in the two hundred years since Olaf's death. The immediate source of the story of Odin's apparition is unknown, but the motif is traditional; the disguised Odin, the master of ancient wisdom, plays a central role in archaic Scandinavian myth.<sup>2</sup> In this paper I discuss changes in the significance of the disguised Odin and his lore in light of cultural changes in medieval Scandinavia, and how those changes affected the re-interpretation of the pagan mythic theme.

This study is inspired by Jacqueline Simpson's comment on Snorri Sturluson's version of Olaf's encounter with Odin; "this motif," she says, "probably originates in Odin's ancient role as god of the Underworld, of magic and esoteric lore, and of initiation rites; in later sources it becomes a mere framework for story-telling, riddle contests, and the like."<sup>3</sup> Two poems from the pre-Christian period which make use of this motif and pattern are preserved in the Elder Edda: Grímnismál and Vafþrúðnismál.<sup>4</sup> Taking the role of the disguised Odin in these poems as representative of his function in pagan myth, I propose to examine how Odd transformed those myths to meet the needs of a new religion, how other Christian authors in turn transformed Odd's story, and how those patterns of transformation appear in other Old Norse stories and poems.

Grímnismál includes many stanzas of mythological lore in a narrative frame; in the Edda it is further expanded with a prose introduction and conclusion. The prose is younger than the poem, but as an interpretation of the immediate situation of the poem it seems reliable. The introduction tells how a young king's son named Geirrod is fostered by a farmer, none other than Odin, and returns to claim his father's kingdom. Frigg slanders Geirrod to Odin, and tricks the king into believing he is to be visited by a magician, while Odin visits Geirrod to disprove the slander. As the poem begins Odin, in disguise and calling himself Grímnir, has been pinned between two fires for eight nights by the king. The fire burns so close to him that his mantle is singed. Agnar, Geirrod's son, brings Grímnir a drink, and the stranger rewards him with a



state of scholarship on this issue in a recent article, and proposes the following definition of sacral kingship in ancient Scandinavia: "a sacral king is one who is marked off from his fellow man by an aura of specialness which may or may not have its origin in more or less direct associations with the supernatural."<sup>8</sup>

As McTurk admits, the use of so many modifiers makes this definition less than precise; the vagueness is a reflection of the uncertain nature of the evidence concerning early Germanic kingship. Much of the material which implies the existence of sacral kingship in ancient Scandinavia is myth or legend; the king is sacred because he is marked off from his fellow man by the possession of numinous knowledge received from a divine figure. Although Fleck bases his interpretation of Grímnismál on an assumption about sacral kingship, his reasoning may be followed in reverse: in McTurk's terms, the narrative pattern Fleck identifies in Grímnismál, Rígsþula, and Hyndliljóð implies that the king is special in society because he is consecrated in myth.

Grímnismál expresses the theme of sacral kingship through the motif of Odin in disguise. Grímnir is a stranger without family or social position. Only through suffering does he gain access to numinous knowledge; only through this knowledge can he reveal his identity as supreme sovereign. That this torture is at the hands of King Geirrod is significant; the cruelty of the king provokes his deposition and the succession of his son Agnar. The king's action stems from ignorance rather than spite, and it is this ignorance that causes the king's downfall, as Odin implies:

Grm. 52:1-3 Fiðló ec þér sagða, enn þú fát um mant  
of þic véla vinir.

Agnar is Geirrod's only son; though he will receive the kingdom on his father's death, he needs the mythological lore Grímnir provides before he can ascend the throne. The myth sends the message that the king is set apart from other men by his possession of numinous knowledge; Odin's use of such knowledge to shed his disguise is one way of expressing this theme.

Vaförúðismál makes the same point through a different narrative pattern. While this poem also contains the motif of Odin in disguise, Odin uses his knowledge to match wits with an old giant rather than to teach a young prince. The opening stanzas of the poem, in which Odin and Frigg discuss Odin's proposed journey to Vafthrudnir's hall, imply that Odin must prove his primacy in lore against the wisest of giants in order to maintain his sovereign status:

Vm. 3-4 'Fiðlð ec fór, fiðlð ec freistaða,  
fiðlð ec reynda regin;  
hitt vill ec vita, hvé Vaförúðnis  
salakynni sé.'

'Heill þú farir, heill þú aptr komir,  
heill þú á sinnom sér!  
æði þér dugi, hvars þú scalt, Aldaföðr,  
orðom mæla iðtun.'

But it is Gagnrad, the wandering stranger, who enters the giant's hall. He only takes a seat after he shows his possession of sacred lore. As in Grímnismál, Odin reveals his identity through an expression of numinous knowledge, and thereby regains his sovereign status. He asks Vafthrudnir a question to which only Odin knows the answer:

Vm. 54:4-6 'hvat mælti Óðinn, áðr á bál stigi,  
siálfr í eyra syni?'

Vafthrudnir simultaneously learns Odin's identity and loses his head, for he lacks the necessary wisdom:

Vm. 55 'Ey manni þat veit, hvat þú í árdaga  
sagóir í eyra syni;  
feigom munni mæltu ec mína forna stafi  
oc um ragna röc.  
Nú ec við Óðin deildac mína orðspeki,  
þú ert æ vísastr vera.'

Although the story is different, the message is the same; the expression of sacred knowledge by the disguised Odin marks the sovereign, in heaven or on earth.

Odd's story of the apparition of Odin draws on traditional sources other than Grímnismál and Vaförúðnismál. The function of the motif of Odin in disguise in those poems nevertheless offers a basis for an understanding of how Odd transformed his sources. Later in the saga, Odd himself provides an explanation of his story. The devil, he says, planned to keep Olaf awake all night, so that he would neglect divine service, and then to poison the king, so that he would die in mortal sin.<sup>9</sup> Simpson points out that the tale thus

makes an effective exemplum with a twofold moral: that one should not 'eat of the food offered to idols' (an idea readily applicable in the North, where sacred feasts were integral to the heathen cults), nor should one love tales of heathen kings and heroes, for these may turn the mind away from God's service.<sup>10</sup>

Odd tells two other stories of encounters between King Olaf and supernatural beings. In one, Olaf meets the devil in the guise of Thor; in the other, three trolls relate to one another their encounters with the king. These stories also have the character of moral exempla, which adds weight to Simpson's interpretation of the apparition of Odin.

Simpson's view of Odd's story is especially interesting in light of the narrative parallels with Grímnismál. The two morals of Odd's narrative are expressions of a single theme; Olaf is king by the grace of God, and God's power protects him from the schemes of the devil. The tales of kings and heroes are not to be shunned merely because they lack Christian content; they are as much a symbol of the competing pagan religion as is the sacrificial meat. The meat the stranger gives Olaf's cooks is in a separate building, an indication of its religious significance; Odd probably meant the building as a pagan hof, especially as he presents the ancient owner of the farmstead as an idolator, the worshipper of a cow. He also implies that there was some supernatural quality to the tales the stranger told the king; each tale seems to require another, and so Olaf fails to heed the warnings of the bishop and go to sleep. The significance of the knowledge Odin gives the king is inverted based on the Christian doctrine that the pagan gods

were demons; Odd's story is essentially a Christian re-interpretation of the pagan myths dealing with knowledge and kingship.

Other versions of Ólafs Saga Tryggvasonar incorporate variants of the story of Olaf's encounter with Odin. Snorri Sturluson includes a version of the saga in his Heimskringla; Odd's saga serves as Snorri's main source for his life of King Olaf, and from it Snorri draws the tale of Odin's apparition.<sup>11</sup> At first glance it seems reasonable to interpret the versions of Snorri and Odd alike, as Simpson does.<sup>12</sup> But Snorri makes a number of changes in the Saga Ólafs Tryggvasonar as he takes it from Odd; he omits a great deal, makes some additions, and rearranges elements of the narrative. Many of his omissions are of supernatural or miraculous encounters or events. Of Olaf's three encounters with heathen powers in Odd, the apparition of Odin is the only one Snorri chooses to retain; the details Snorri omits in that tale are precisely those that inform the motif of Odin in disguise with thematic significance in Odd. The apparition takes place, not during a religious festival, but at an unspecified time. The stranger brings two pieces of fat meat to the cooks, rather than the cooks to a separate building in which they find the meat. Snorri does not mention the Christian devil; Olaf encounters "Óðinn, sá er heiðnir menn höfðu lengi á trúat." The stranger's words no longer have a supernatural aura; while it still seems to the king that each word his guest says requires another, this does not keep the king from going to sleep. When the bishop advises Olaf to go to bed, the king does so.

Where Odd transforms the pagan mythic theme through inversion of the significance of Odin in disguise, Snorri transforms it through generalization, or loss of distinction of the motif. The conflict between paganism and Christianity ceases to motivate the tale; in Snorri the function of Odin in disguise loses its mythic connotations. The result of these changes is a shift in emphasis from the implications of the cautionary tale to the strength and character of the king.

One more version of Odin's apparition to Olaf exists in the late thirteenth century Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta (the Greater Saga), an anonymous compilation which draws on both

Snorri and Odd.<sup>13</sup> The version of the apparition of Odin in this text is in some ways closer to Odd, in others to Snorri. Like Odd, the Greater Saga reports the apparition takes place at a religious festival, in this case Easter. But like Snorri, it lacks the element of the separate building as the source of the stranger's meat, and the implication that the stranger's tales had supernatural significance is absent as well; Olaf heeds the bishop's warning and goes to sleep. The compiler of the Greater Saga identifies the stranger as the devil and retains Odd's explanation of the devil's motives.

The tale thus retains the quality of a moral exemplum, but it is a purely Christian theme, lacking the connotations of pagan mythic significance. The transformation of the pagan theme is the same as that reflected by Odd's version of the tale; the transformation of the significance of Odin in disguise is the same as that in Snorri.

The story of King Olaf's encounter with Odin, in its several versions, is but one example of the reworking of the pagan motif of Odin in disguise. Alvissmál, for example, is an Eddic poem from the Christian period which includes traditional stanzas of mythological lore in a narrative frame. Alvis the dwarf comes to take Thor's daughter in marriage, but Thor delays the dwarf until dawn by asking him a series of questions about mythological terms, and Alvis turns to stone. The poem lacks the motif of Odin in disguise, but that in itself is significant; the poet replaces the disguised Odin of his model with Thor, the god of the yeoman farmer. Thor's identity is initially masked, like Odin's in Vaförðunismál:

Alv. 5 'Hvat er þat recca er í ráðom telz  
flióðs ins fagrólóa?  
Fiarrafleina þic muno fáir kunna  
hverr hefir þic baugom borit?'

But Thor reveals himself before the contest of lore begins, rather than through the use of numinous knowledge, as in the pagan myths:

Alv. 6 'Vingþórr ec heiti --ec hefi víða ratað--  
sonr em ec Síðgrana;'



and reliance on mythological lore and wisdom is the dwarf's downfall, not his salvation:

Alv. 35 'f eino briósti ec sác aldregi  
 fleiri forna stafi;  
 miclom tálom ec qveð taldan þic:  
 uppi ertu, dvergr, um dagaór,  
 nú scínn sól í sali.'

In Vafþrúðnismál Odin demonstrates his superiority in ancient lore (fornir stafir); in Alvíssmál the same term is used for the knowledge which betrays the dwarf. The theme expressed by the re-worked disguise motif in Alvíssmál is the same as that expressed in Odd's narrative, but removed from the Christian context. The re-interpretation of the pagan theme is based on inversion of the significance of the pagan motif as in Odd, but here the inversion is independent of Christian doctrine.

The Nornagests þáttur in Flateyjarbók exhibits the same pattern of transformation as the version of the apparition of Odin in the Greater Saga: a generalization of the pagan motif in a Christian context.<sup>14</sup> An old man comes to the court of Olaf Tryggvason. He calls himself Gest, one of Odin's names, and is skilled in ancient tales. Olaf does not talk with the guest that evening, "þuiat hann gek þa skiott til aftanssaungs ok síðan til bordz ok þa til suefnns ok nada;" this is a clear contrast to the seductive words of the stranger in the tale of the apparition of Odin, intended to prevent the king from resting. Gest is heathen, but has been primesigned. After entertaining Olaf and his men with heroic lays and tales, Gest accepts baptism, lights a candle on which his life depends, and thus dies. The tale is Christian, but the motif of Odin in disguise has been transformed by generalization, to the extent that even the identification of the stranger with Odin is absent.

The texts I discuss in this essay are connected by their narrative patterns and their use of the motif of Odin in disguise, but they express disparate themes. Though seemingly unconnected, those themes are related to one another by a consistent pattern of transformations. The significance of the motifs of the disguised Odin and his lore in pagan myth is

subject to two transformations which I call inversion and generalization. The theme expressed by the narrative is subject to two transformations as well, which I term Christianization and secularization.

Odd's version of Olaf's encounter with Odin is an example of inversion of the significance of the motif coupled with Christianization of the theme; Nornagests þáttr and the version in the Greater Saga are examples of generalization and Christianization. Similarly, the version of Snorri exemplifies the operation of generalization and secularization on the pagan myth, Alvíssmál secularization and inversion. The way the myths are transformed is reminiscent of the transformations involved in cross-cultural transmission of myth. This is not surprising; the changes introduced by the coming of Christianity were such that the authors of the texts I discuss here were essentially members of different cultures. The transmission of the myth merely takes place over time rather than through space.

What constitutes Christian re-interpretation of pagan myth is a matter of terminology. I suggest that of the texts analyzed in this essay, only Odd's version of the apparition of Odin should be so considered, in the sense that it involves both Christianization and a sense of the mythic significance of the motif of Odin in disguise. Where that sense is absent, as in Snorri and the Greater Saga, or where the context is secular, as in Snorri and Alvíssmál, it is appropriate to speak not of Christian re-interpretation, but of some other process, if only to preserve the transformational distinctions outlined above. From the torture of Grimnir in the hall of King Geirroð to the baptism of Nornagest at the court of King Olaf, Odin the loremaster spans the boundary between the worlds of the pagan and the Christian, and the worlds of gods and men.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Oddr Snorrason, Saga Ólafs Tryggvasonar, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen, 1932), 131-4. All references in this paper are to the longer (A) version.

<sup>2</sup>For a summary of the use of the motif and the contexts in which it occurs, see Jan de Vries, Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte, 2nd ed. (Berlin, 1956), 2:80-1.

<sup>3</sup>Snorri Sturluson, Heimskringla: Part One, The Olaf Sagas, trans. Samuel Laing, rev. Jacqueline Simpson (London, 1964), 1:61 n. 1.

<sup>4</sup>The edition of the Edda referred to in this essay is Gustav Neckel, ed., Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern, 4th ed., rev. Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg, 1962), 1.

<sup>5</sup>This interpretation of the poem is challenged by Bo Ralph, "The Composition of the Grímnismál," Arkiv för nordisk filologi 87 (1972):115-8; he disregards the prose as secondary and of late origin. Ralph argues that the relationship between Odin and Geirroð is a hostile one from the start; he also conjectures that Agnar may not be Geirroð's son, but rather a rival. Neither interpretation would alter the analysis of Grímnismál presented in this paper.

<sup>6</sup>For a survey of previous scholarship on the poem, see Jan de Vries, Altnordische Literaturgeschichte, 2nd ed. (Berlin, 1964), 1:45-7.

<sup>7</sup>Jere Fleck, "Konr--Öttarr--Geirroór: A Knowledge Criterion for Succession to the Germanic Sacred Kingship," Scandinavian Studies 42 (1970):46.

<sup>8</sup>R.W. McTurk, "Sacral Kingship in Ancient Scandinavia: A Review of Some Recent Writings," Saga-Book of the Viking Society 19 (1976):156-7.

<sup>9</sup>Oddr Snorrason, 136.

<sup>10</sup>Jacqueline Simpson, "Olaf Tryggvason versus the Powers of Darkness," in The Witch Figure: Folklore Essays by a Group of Scholars in England Honouring the 75th Birthday of Katharine M. Briggs, ed. Venetia Newall (London, 1983), 173.

<sup>11</sup>Snorri Sturluson, Heimskringla, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslensk Fornrit 26-28 (Reykjavik, 1941-51), 1:312-4.

12 *ibid.*, The Olaf Sagas, 61 n. 1.

13 Ólafur Halldórsson, ed., Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta, Editiones Arnamagnæanae, Series A, vols. 1-2 (Copenhagen, 1958-61), 1:86-8.

14 G. Vigfússon and C.R. Unger, eds., Flateyjarbók (Christiania, 1860-8), 1:346-59.