

"Nú gef ek þik Óðni": Attitudes toward  
Odin in the Mythical-Heroic Sagas

Stephen A. Mitchell  
Harvard University

Introduction

We are accustomed to the view regularly expressed in the manifestly Christian works of Norse writers that the chief god of the pagans, Odin, should be understood as the chief of devils. Among the phrases commonly employed for this revisionist view of the old heathen god are such terms as höfðingi myrkranna (III:352)<sup>1</sup> and fjándi.<sup>2</sup> Typical of these Old Norse theophanies is the scene in which this seductive and diabolical old creature from the past focuses his attention on the possibility of snatching an apostate from among the faithful: clothed in a wide-brimmed hat to hide his single eye, he engages the hero in conversation, regaling him with stories of by-gone heroes. He then vanishes, but not before he has had an opportunity to attempt the further perversion of the listener's faith by means of some physical object, such as a bit of meat from a sacrifice to the pagan gods. So, for example, does this paradigm of the sly heathen deity behave in Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar.<sup>3</sup> Yet for all of its popularity in Norse sources in general, this is a theologically salubrious view of Odin rarely encountered in the so-called fornaldarsögur: in these sagas we are more likely to meet with an Odin who strikes us as being very much in keeping with the deity who might have appeared in some pre-Conversion prose version of the eddic poems.

A perplexing paradox is thus evidenced by these facts, since the Mythical-Heroic Sagas are among the manifestly youngest of Norse

<sup>1</sup> All references to the fornaldarsögur in this essay are to Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda, ed. Guðni Jónsson (1954; rpt. Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1981), 4 vols. Citations are given by volume and page number in parentheses in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, Editiones Arnarnagæense, Ser. A. (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1961), II:88.

<sup>3</sup> Snorri Sturluson, Heimskringla, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslensk fornrit, 26 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1961), I:312-14. The story, with accretions, is also told in Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta, II:86-88.

materials, and therefore presumably the most likely to have been imbued with a fundamentally Christian outlook, especially coming from a culture which almost uniquely expunged the names of the heathen gods from the days of the week during the Middle Ages (cf. Jóns saga helga, chap. 24). It is the task of the following essay to account for this odd state of affairs and to seek an answer to the puzzling question of why Odin "retains" to such a high degree his pagan status in this, one of the latest genres of saga literature. The issue is one encountered elsewhere in early Scandinavian literature in a slightly different format: its inverse is exhibited in Icelandic literature concerned with the heroes and heroines of the Saga Age, in which early pagan settlers in the hands of the sagamen become "noble heathens," as Lars Lönnroth has so aptly described them.<sup>4</sup>

One might reasonably expect the effects of interpretatio christiana on the Old Norse materials-- the routine ascription of the old gods to the realm of demons and devils-- to be commonplace in the Mythical-Heroic Sagas. It is an interpretation expressed in connection with the ancient Scandinavian gods already in the ninth century (Vita Anskarii auctore Rimberto, chap. 19) and a regular feature of the Christian perspective on the old gods through at least the fifteenth century.<sup>5</sup> But despite this fact, revisionist interpretations of the old gods are generally far less common and less radical in the fornaldarsögur than the changes in evidence elsewhere in saga literature: what this situation means and how it relates to our understanding of the literature of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Iceland (NB: not of the Scandinavian 'Heroic Age'

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<sup>4</sup> Lars Lönnroth, "The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas," Scandinavian Studies, 61 (1969), 1-29. On this topic, see also Gerd Wolfgang Weber's highly interesting "Irreligiosität und Heldenzeitalter. Zum Mythencharakter der altisländischen Literatur," in Speculum Norroenvm: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre, ed. Ursula Dronke et al (Odense: Odense University Press, 1981), pp. 474-505.

<sup>5</sup> Fredrik Paasche, Hedenskap og kristendom: Studier i norrøn middelalder (Oslo: H. Aschehoug og co., 1948), p. 17, mentions a case from Stockholm in 1484 in which a man confesses to having served "Odin" for seven years. Clearly he means Satan, but so thoroughly had the equation between the two been made that even at this relatively late date the apparent warlock could substitute the name of the indigenous god.

half a millenium or so earlier) is the focus of the following essay.

References to Odin in the fornaldarsögur

Odin appears in nineteen of the fornaldarsögur contained in the Guðni Jónsson edition (see chart). Of these appearances, nine are 'significant,' a term I equate here with the idea that his action in the work has an impact on the plot of the saga. Typically, this sense is reflected in the sagas by the distinction between Odin's corporeal presence (within the framework of the tale) and mere references to him or to beliefs connected with him. The latter situation (i.e., strictly referential appearances) exists in eighteen of the sagas, Norna-Gests þáttur being the only work to lack such a reference. These referential or 'insignificant' appearances of Odin can, in turn, be sub-divided into several broad categories. Common among these views is Icelandic Euhemerism,<sup>6</sup> according to which the Æsir migrated to the North from Asia and had Odin as their king, a belief expressed in Sörla þáttur, Hversu Noregr byggðist, Sturlaugs saga Starfssama, and Bósa saga. The general concept of Odin as a progenitor is to be found in Ragnars saga loðbrókar where Óðins ættar, 'Odin's family,' is used of the Æsir, and is explicitly exploited in Völsunga saga (although his presence there is of great significance to the plot and is taken up below).

Several of the sagas contain comments on Odin which might well fall under the category of interpretatio christiana,<sup>7</sup> according to which he is now seen as a devil or demon. Thus, in Hrólfs saga kraka Odin is referred to as illr andi (I:92) and Böðvarr bjarki, in an apparent show of revisionist monotheistic attitudes, responds to the comment that the champions of Hrólfr kraki may spend the night in

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of this phenomenon, see Rudolf Schomerus, Die Religion der Nordgermanen im Spiegel christlicher Darstellung (Leipzig: Robert Noske, 1936), pp. 20-48. See also Andreas Heusler, "Die gelehrte Urgeschichte im isländischen Schriftum," in Kleine Schriften, ed. Stefan Sonderegger (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1969), II: 80-161 [originally published in 1908].

<sup>7</sup> See Herbert Acterberg, Interpretatio Christiana. Verkeidte Glaubensgestalten der Germanen auf deutschen Boden, Form und Geist, 19 (Leipzig: Hermann Eichblatt Verlag, 1930) for a discussion of the history and nature of this missionary tool. See also J.T. Addison, The Medieval Missionary: A Study of the Conversion of Northern Europe A.D. 500-1300, Studies in the World Mission of Christianity, 2 (New York: International Missionary Council, 1936).

Valhäll with the statement that he does not see Odin, but that if þat illa eitrvikendi should appear, "skylda ek kreista hann sem annan versta ok minnsta mýsling" (I:103-04). Although far less outspoken in their dismissal of the god, other saga characters too consider him a rög vættir (II:50) or höfðingja myrkjanna (III:352). Closely connected to these references are the specific denials of Odin and his might made by some of the saga heroes such as Ketill hængi (II:177) and Órvar-Oddr (II:268; II:331), although such denials as these and Böðvarr bjarki's do not seem to be intimately tied to Christian views, but rather to the hero's belief in his own strength.<sup>8</sup>

A large group of references to Odin come in contexts which suggest phraseological, as opposed to narratological, significance: the special relationship between Odin and such concepts as victory, death and battle only too naturally give rise to these items. Thus, for example, "hafði Óðinn honum sigri heitit" (I:157) and, especially, phrases such as gista Óðin (II:5; II:6; II:254; II:408) are well-exploited by the sagamen to tell us about the behavior or beliefs of the characters, but typically do not posit any special 'deeper' relationship between the text and Odin. Likewise, when the sagaman writes "ok láti svá Óðinn flein fljúga" (II:64), it seems unlikely that he is stating anything other than that the battle begins, albeit in a poetic fashion.

Finally, a smaller but still substantial number of references to Odin play on actual, or at least perceived, elements of the old religion. Among such allusions to Odin in the old faith are toasts (Óðins minni III:312; IV:337), the concept of hallowed ground ("hof...þat er helgat þór ok Óðni, Frigg ok Freyju" III:139), runes (I:160) and magic (III:163). Most common of these references is that of sacrifice, which occurs in no fewer than six sagas (Sögubrot af fornkonungum, Heiðreks saga, Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka, Órvar-Odds saga, Egils saga ok Ásmundar, Gautreks saga). The offerings to be sacrificed are for the most part either "given to Odin" (gefa I:355; II:30; III:339; IV:31) or "sacrificed to Odin" (blóta II:36; II:329), although they are also "delivered" (selja II:96) and "sent" (senda

<sup>8</sup> See especially Gerd Wolfgang Weber, "Irreligiosität und Heldenzeitalter," as well as Folke Ström, Den egna kraftens män: en studie i forntida irreligiositet, Göteborgs Högskolas Årsskrift, 54 (Göteborg: Elanders boktryckeri AB, 1948).

IV:30) to him.<sup>9</sup> As we shall see, some of these references, more than any of the others discussed thus far, are thoroughly incorporated into the plots of their sagas and therefore also properly belong to the category of 'significant' references to Odin as well.

In addition, there are a few references to Odin which do not neatly fit any of the categories enumerated above: his appearance in two riddles in Heiðreks saga (II:50) and his connection with apparent "curses" (broadly speaking), either those he delivers himself (I:380-81; II:50-51) or those in which his name is used (gramr er yör Óðinn II:64; II:110).

An entirely different level of Odin-related activity is to be found in nine of the sagas: in these tales, Odin appears in the flesh, so to speak, and has an important influence on the course of the narrative. These corporeal intrusions into the world of humans can be divided into two categories: those in which Odin plays the part of the helper or donor figure and those in which he is a much more suspicious character whose actions, while perhaps no less manipulative, appear to have solely malicious intent. Rarely do these two categories overlap in the sagas, the only two instances being, arguably, Völsunga saga and Gautreks saga. Among his more positive appearances as a donor figure, I would include his offers of assistance to Hrólfr in Hrólfs saga kraka (I:74-76; I:91-92), his connections with the beginnings of the Völsung lineage and his continued assistance to them (I:111-12; I:149; I:151), the repetition of some of the same material in Norna-Gests þáttur (I:317-21), his somewhat useless assistance to Framarr in Ketils saga háenga (II:173), his multiple forms of aid in various disguises to Órvar-Oddr (II:279-301; II:327, 330), and his patronage and protection of Starkaör in Gautreks saga (IV:13-14; IV:29-30). Odin's less positive appearances in the fornaldarsögur include his withdrawal of support from Sigmundr in Völsunga saga (I:136-37), his manipulation of Freyja in Sörla þáttur which results in the curse of the two armies (I:367-70; I:377-78; I:380-81), his appearance as Gestumblindi in Heiðreks saga (II:36-51), his activities in Hálfs

<sup>9</sup> See Anatoly Liberman, "Germanic sendan 'To Make a Sacrifice'," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 77 (1978):473-88. If Liberman's view is correct, then this reference might take on a slightly different meaning.

saga ok Hálfrekk which lead to the promise of Víkarr a future sacrifice (II:95-96) and the fulfillment of that same promise in Gautreks saga (I:30-31).

The Nature of Odinic Appearances in the fornaldarsögur.

There is little doubt that some of the references outlined above are derived from rekindled literary and antiquarian interest in the old pagan gods, yet just as surely they cannot all, it seems to me, be explained as "modern" constructs based on partial knowledge of pre-Christian religion. Some of them are certainly to be accounted for as genuine relics from the time of Scandinavian heathenism which have lived on in one way or another in tradition. Characteristic of later, post-Conversion attitudes toward the Nordic Pantheon is a binary, "black-or-white" treatment: according to it, Odin is, on the one hand, regarded as a devil or (by the euhemists) as a wicked sorcerer who deceived people into believing that he was a god, or, on the other, as the most important of the ancient gods. Little middle ground between Christianity and heathenism is exhibited in the texts.<sup>10</sup> Unlike their Classical counterparts, the Germanic gods are basically untouched by scholarly reinterpretations which would view them as allegories or equate them physically with the stars and planets. Thus, whereas the tradition of moral, physical and historical reappraisal of the Graeco-Roman deities in the Middle Ages provided a moderating view of these gods,<sup>11</sup> the Scandinavian attitude toward the pagan past is on the whole either "negative" (i.e., they are presented as devils, demons, deceptive sorcerers and so on), or "positive" (i.e., they are treated with an antiquarian's dispassionate interest in the plots and motifs which [may] hearken back to pre-Christian Scandinavia). Two questions consequently arise in this context: firstly, to what extent can we judge the tradition-

<sup>10</sup> The same point is made in Peter Foote, "Observations on 'syncreticism' in early Icelandic Christianity," in Aurvandilstá: Norse Studies, ed. Michael Barnes et al (Odense: Odense University Press, 1984), pp. 84-100.

<sup>11</sup> On the various attitudes (Stoic, Neo-Platonic and so on) toward the Classical gods in the Middle Ages, see Jean Seznec, The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art, transl. Barbara F. Sessions (1953; rpt. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), especially pp. 11-147.

ality of a given reference and, secondly, irrespective of its origins, how do we account for the tolerance, fostering and use of Odin in the literature of a Christian society?

It is tempting to assume, as many generations of past scholars have, that all mythological components encountered in these 'sagas of antiquity' should be credited as factual, that somehow the indigenous religious tradition has maintained itself sufficiently well that we can rely on the testimony of texts written down three and four hundred years after the culture's conversion to a very jealous monotheistic religion. This is a most unlikely prospect, yet it was still necessary as recently as a decade ago to warn against the tendency to put too much reliance on the religious testimony of the Germanic Heldensage.<sup>12</sup> The relationship between the literary uses of Odin and the facts concerning the actual religious practices of the pagan Scandinavians is a convoluted, and often misunderstood, one, interpretations of which have generally been predicated on consistent over- or under-reliance on the fornaldarsögur as sources of reliable material.<sup>13</sup>

The wisest course to follow in this regard is undoubtedly the one already charted by Margaret Schlauch in 1934, who commented, "To be sure, the Christianity of Icelandic authors did not prevent them from having a keen interest in the deeds and pagan beliefs of their unregenerate ancestors, but that interest was already an antiquarian one."<sup>14</sup> Yet this cautionary advice, while surely correct, begs the question of how much faith we can justifiably place in the materials from the Mythical-Heroic Sagas. One factor which may be of use is the structural importance a supposedly traditional motif or narrative unit has: I have already alluded to this point above in discussing the bifurcation of Odinic materials in the sagas into 'significant' and 'insignificant' components. Ultimately, such factors play a decisive role in determining which element will be retained over another in a now-not-so-wholly traditional society.

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Klaus von See, Germanische Heldensage: Stoffe: Probleme: Methoden: eine Einführung, 2nd unrev. ed. (Wiesbaden: Athenaion, 1981 [1st ed. published 1971]), p. 52.

<sup>13</sup> Cf., for example, the observations cited in Schomerus, p. 58.

<sup>14</sup> Margaret Schlauch, Romance in Iceland (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1934), p. 18.

In the case of the 'significant' appearances of Odin the fornaldarsögur, it is not difficult to imagine that in most, if not all, cases, the part into which Odin is cast is sufficiently important to the text that it could not exist as such without his active participation. To take the case of Starkaðr and Víkarr as an example, one wonders what sort of sense Starkaðr's tragic situation would make if the Hött figure were reduced to just another Rurplestiltskin who deceitfully contracts with a mother for the life of her unborn child? (S 240 'Children unwittingly promised') Naturally Odin's part in Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka and Gautreks saga is based on this international motif, but the reduction of that part in these two sagas to something done by an elf, gnome or dwarf would hardly give us the Starkaðr tale to which we are accustomed. We are in a particularly advantageous position to credit this legend of Víkarr's sacrifice as being a reflex of ancient practice for the simple reason that in addition to other supporting literary evidence for such a custom (e.g., Hávamál), there exists a substantial, and growing, amount of archaeological support for the likelihood of such a practice (exs., findings from the bogs of Northern Europe, Gutnish picture stones).<sup>15</sup>

In some cases-- and I would certainly consider the promise and subsequent sacrifice of Víkarr as one-- we are undoubtedly correct in working from an assumption of the "essential correctness" of the cultural picture reflected in the episode, if not of all of its details. Such assumptions need proof, however, and in the case of Víkarr we are in the fortunate position of having such evidence. Other tales-- Völsunga saga, for example-- are likewise difficult to imagine without sporadic, but significant, Odinic theophanies. Here again, I should think that we are safe in basing our readings on the presumed presence of Odin in the story, a presence we could prove in part by recourse to the eddic poems.

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<sup>15</sup> On the question of the genuineness of this episode vis-à-vis old Germanic religion, see, for example, Jan de Vries, Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte, 2nd rev. ed. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1956), I:406-28 and E.O.G. Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), pp. 251-62 and the literature cited there, but see also W. Ranisch, "Die Dichtung von Starkaðr," Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum, 72 (1935), 121, for a dissenting view.

As regards the 'insignificant' appearances of Odin in the fornaldarsögur, the inverse is by no means the obvious correct situation (i.e., the assumption of historical infidelity). It is true that structurally unimportant references to the pagan gods may be no more than a literary device used by authors to create a mood, not unlike the use, for example, of dialect features in the works of the American 'local colorists' of the nineteenth century (and perhaps with about the same degree of accuracy). Yet these 'insignificant' appearances deserve close scrutiny. Some of them, it would seem, are, as suggested earlier, very nearly stock resources of the language (the literary language, if not the spoken language). It would be incautious at best to infer too much from the occasional gista Óðin: such phrases may imply a knowledge of pre-Christian concepts of thanatology, or they may have been as etymologically meaningless to the average fourteenth-century Icelander as att slá ihjál is to the average Swede today. More troublesome still are those references which do not display even this phraseological continuity: what are we to make of the isolated reference to a temple dedicated to Odin? Surely such temples once existed, but does such a reference represent anything more than surmise on the sagaman's part? We cannot know, but erring on the side of conservative interpretation is obviously the most judicious route.

Thus, we seem to have arrived at a tripartition of Odinic appearances in the Mythical-Heroic Sagas: 1) those episodes which because of their structural significance to the narrative (especially where this importance can be supported by outside evidence), we consider "traditional" (i.e., as having been handed down from earlier periods), 2) culturally accurate, but structurally insignificant (and therefore "free-floating") references (e.g., gista Óðin), and 3) references which evoke a mood but lack special narrative significance or external support (e.g., hof...helgat...Óðni).

#### The Concept and Uses of Tradition

These three types of references reflect three different relations to "tradition," a mercurial concept at best. Although it is a much used term, one may justifiably ask what this notion of a tradition implies? It is clear that the term must mean more than the

old nineteenth-century view of a "survival,"<sup>16</sup> but must "tradition" be empirically true, that is, does it have to be a continuous phenomenon, or does it merely need to reflect an attitude? If we accept the latter view, then we might well accept most of the Odinic appearances in the fornaldarsögur as "traditional"; if, on the other hand, we demand some compliance on the part of the material with historical reality, then we necessarily disallow many of the appearances from participation in "the tradition," not because they are necessarily untrue, but because of our lack of knowledge.

Among anthropologists, the notion of tradition has sometimes become synonymous with the concept of culture itself.<sup>17</sup> The most useful set of definitions for our purposes are those developed by the Swedish ethnologist Sigurd Erixon, who distinguishes between four different kinds of tradition. Of special interest to the Medieval Icelandic situation is the distinction between 'genetic tradition,' "the transmission [of cultural elements] from generation to generation, from phase to phase," and 'literary tradition,' "a special sphere of 'material tradition' which derives from the art of writing."<sup>18</sup> To a large degree, the archaisms, or purported archaisms, found in the fornaldarsögur span both Erixon's 'genetic' and 'literary' traditions.<sup>19</sup> It is likely that the archaisms encountered in the Mythical-Heroic Sagas derive from both the oral and material (in which term, following Erixon, I include the literary texts) cultures: important well-springs for the synthetic narratives represented by the fornaldarsögur, both are utilized by the sagamen.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. E.B. Tylor, Primitive Culture (London: John Murray, 1871), 2 vols.

<sup>17</sup> See Melville J. Herskovits, Man and his Works: The Science of Cultural Anthropology (1947; rpt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> See the discussion of "tradition" in The International Dictionary of Regional European Ethnology and Folklore (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1960), I, and the literature cited there, as well as Robert Kellog, "Varieties of tradition in medieval literature," in Medieval Narrative: A Symposium, ed. Hans Bekker-Nielsen et al (Odense: Odense University Press, 1979), pp. 120-29.

<sup>19</sup> On "survivals" in the Mythical-Heroic Sagas, see Peter Buchholz, Vorzeitkunde: Mündliches Erzählen und Überlieferung im mittelalterlichen Skandinavien nach dem Zeugnis von Fornaldarsaga und eddischer Dichtung, Skandinavische Studien, 13 (Neumünster: Karl Wachholtz Verlag, 1980), pp. 112-21.

It seems unlikely that the compromise between the two cultures, the 'inherited' and the 'composed,' presented any difficulty for the audience of the sagas. They had grown up hearing the exploits of these ancient heroes and were conditioned to expect certain events and specific details, but were also accustomed to the fluidity of such works. The minor accretions and deviations represented by (2) and (3) above— whether historically accurate or not— would hardly create a stir in an audience accustomed to 'unfixed' texts.

No aspect of the fornaldarsögur as a corpus has caused so much consternation as the odd relationship they bear to saga chronology: although elements of these narratives pre-date most of the better known Family Sagas, for example, the Mythical-Heroic Sagas appear in writing from a substantially later period. A number of reasons have been forwarded to account for this fact, as well as the less sophisticated style in which these works are written.<sup>20</sup> My own sense is that the unique features of the Mythical-Heroic Sagas are to be accounted for by antiquarian interests in the indigenous pagan heroic tradition and that this development rested in turn on certain socio-political conditions in Iceland. Throughout the past two hundred years, scholars have tended to make an amalgam of all Old Norse texts, melting the entire disparate collection into a single uniform "Old Norse" culture, regardless of age and provenance.<sup>21</sup> In many cases, the motivation for such an attitude has been understandable and the results good. While the use of the texts to elucidate a broader Northern European cultural and literary continuity is in certain respects laudable, one result of this action has been to tie the Mythical-Heroic Sagas in our minds to the ninth and tenth centuries, rather than the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The fact of the matter is, the Icelanders of the late Middle Ages were also looking backward, albeit at not so great a distance as we do today. Much has been made in recent years of the Germanic heroic tradition as a source of inspiration for different periods of modern

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<sup>20</sup> One of the most recent of these is Buchholz's notion that the aristocracy withdrew from the oral tradition after its manuscript needs were filled and that the fornaldarsögur are the result of this aristocratically unsupported art form. See Buchholz, p. 52.

<sup>21</sup> Obviously this 'unifying' trend is least true of the so-called "Icelandic School," which has favored treating each text individually, seeking to understand it in its own light.

Scandinavian literary history. Thus, for example, both Jöran Mjöberg and John Greenway have commented extensively on the influence of early Scandinavian materials on later Nordic literary consciousness.<sup>22</sup> What I am suggesting here is largely analogous to their comments on post-Reformation literature and its use of the past: the fourteenth century too had its dreams of an Heroic Age.

What then of the function of the texts? These tales do not, it seems to me, fill to the same degree the functions most anthropological field-workers would look for in a text:<sup>23</sup> our received texts function primarily neither as charters nor as censors. Yet it is equally unlikely that we can credit the fornaldarsögur as having been composed entirely for the purpose of entertainment.<sup>24</sup> It is a well-known fact that the medieval history of Iceland was harsh: economic, nutritional and epidemiological tribulations, coupled with a lack of political independence and other woes, ensured that the average man's lot was far from jovial.<sup>25</sup> This same lack of independence became increasingly true in the cultural realm as well.<sup>26</sup> In opposition to the stark reality so characteristic of the Family Sagas, the later fornaldarsögur brought their audiences a measure of relief-- psychological and emotional on a national scale-- and instead of the past as it was, told them of a past as it might have been, of that Teutonic 'Golden Age' which has haunted Northern Europe since Tacitus' Germania. The antithesis of the Mythical-Heroic Sagas is, in fact, not to be found in the Family Sagas, but rather in

<sup>22</sup> Jöran Mjöberg, Drömmen om sagatiden (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1967-68), 2 vols.; John L. Greenway, The Golden Horns: Mythic Imagination and the Nordic Past (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1977).

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, John Greenway, Literature among the Primitives (Hatboro, Pa.: Folklore Associates, Inc., 1964), especially chap. 7, "The Uses of Literature."

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Jürg Glauser, Isländische Märchensagas: Studien zur Prosaliteratur im spätmittelalterlichen Island, Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie, 12 (Basel und Frankfurt am Main: Helbing und Lichtenhahn, 1983), pp. 219-33.

<sup>25</sup> A convenient review of Icelandic conditions from the thirteenth through the sixteenth century is provided in Glauser, pp. 29-60.

<sup>26</sup> Henry Goddard Leach, Angevin Britain and Scandinavia, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, 6 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921), p. 377.

the critical spirit of Ari and the chronicles and the grim realism of much of Sturlunga saga.

### Conclusion

Basing himself on Mircea Eliade's discussions of myth and ritual, Greenway writes of the uses of tradition: "The mythic past, then, is a kind of narrative past with an absolute beginning, and there is a simultaneity between the present event and its mythic origin, invoked through ritual or charm."<sup>27</sup> The religious and mystical qualities with which the materials of the fornaldarsögur were once imbued, and which once allowed this kind of simultaneity, must have been long since lost when the sagas were written down in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries: they were in effect part of a "broken myth."<sup>28</sup> I have elsewhere tried to demonstrate that the sagamen responsible for these works were hardly men working within a narrowly defined oral or literary tradition, but rather skilled antiquarians who were capable of accepting, selecting and editing the material they had to hand, elements of this broken, or displaced, myth.<sup>29</sup> Just as the Swedish intellectual establishment exploited the nation's 'Gothic past' during the age of the Empire, so too did Icelandic sagamen of the later periods take advantage of the grand Germanic legendary traditions in putting together their texts, although the motivations could not have been more dissimilar. Under the circumstances, the appearance of the old pagan gods was a tolerable, and even welcome, inclusion. And like the twentieth-century American poet T.S. Eliot, these men of letters knew that tradition "cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense... This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes

<sup>27</sup> Greenway, The Golden Horns, p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> See Greenway, The Golden Horns, p. 42.

<sup>29</sup> "The Sagaman and Oral Literature: The Icelandic Traditions of Hjárleifr inn kvensami and Geirmundr heljarskiinn," in Current Issues in Oral Literature Research: A Memorial for Milman Parry, ed. John Miles Foley (in press). An excellent presentation of the interplay between various aspects of saga communication and composition is provided in Lars Lönnroth, "New directions and old dimensions in saga research," Scandinavica, 19 (1980), 60.

a writer traditional."<sup>30</sup> That the narrative and cultural-historical tradition the late sagamen chose to exploit and develop was occasionally based on heathen theophanies was undoubtedly regarded by audience and composer alike as a small price to pay for the rich material thereby placed at their disposal.

<sup>30</sup>T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in Selected Essays: New Edition (1932; rpt. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950), p. 4. Although it should be noted that Eliot means the more-or-less fixed canon of notable European poets when he speaks of the "historical sense."

## Traits Found by Saga

Odin's Appearances in the fornaldarsögur:  
A Preliminary Typology

## I. 'Significant' theophanies

1. Odin as Helper / Honor Figure
2. Odin as Malicious Manipulator

## II. 'Insignificant' references

3. Odin as Progenitor
4. Odin as Devil / Demon
- a. References to Odin as Evil Spirit
- b. Specific Denial of Faith in Odin
5. Odin's Special Connection to:
  - a. Victory
  - b. Death
  - c. Battle
6. Odin in References to Religious Practices Associated with Him:
  - a. Sacrifices
  - b. Toasts
  - c. Hallowed Ground
  - d. Runes
  - e. Magic

## 7. Miscellaneous References to Odin

- a. Curse
- b. Riddles

Hrólf's saga kraka	1	4a	
Völungu saga	1 2 3	5a 5b	6d
Ragnars saga Loðbrókar	3	5b	
<u>Þáttur af Ragnars sonum</u>		5b	
Norna-Gests þáttur	1		
Söguþrot af fornkönungum		5a	6a
Sörla þáttur	2 3		7a
Heiðreks saga	2 4a	5b 5c 6a	7a 7b
Iversu Noregr bygðstí	3		
Hólfs saga ok Hálfarekka	2	5a	6a 7a
Ketil's saga háfengja	1	4b 5a	
Drvar-Odds saga	1	4b 5b	6a
Hrómundar saga Gripssonar		5b	
Sturlaug's saga Starfssama	3		6c
Óngu-Hrólf's saga			6e
Bösa saga	3		6b
Egils saga ok Ásmundar	4a	5a 5b	6a
Gautreks saga	1 2	5a 5b	6a
Þorstreks þáttur Þóbjarnsagns	4a		6b

