

»SAINT ÓLÁFR'S SWORD. EINARR SKÚLASON'S *GEISLI* AND ITS TRONDHEIM PERFORMANCE AD 1153 - A TURNING POINT IN NORWEGO-ICELANDIC SCALDIC POETRY«

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In AD 1153 (or 1152)¹ the Icelandic scald Einarr Skúlason (born ca. 1090) performed in Christ Church Cathedral at Trondheim a great hagiographic praise poem of 71 strophes on St Óláfr (his *Óláfsártaða*, commonly named *Geisli* 'sun-ray' after an image for St Óláfr in str. 1) - undoubtedly on occasion of the installation of the Norwegian archdiocese the year before. According to legend, a mystic odour filled the church while Einarr spoke. In the light of the ongoing quarrel over the investment of the clergy between the pope in Rome and the kingly powers in England, Germany and soon enough also in Norway it has been contended that *Geisli* was also meant as a 'political poem'² claiming Norwegian independence from Rome by pointing to Norway's famous kingly saint whose remnants lay buried in that very cathedral and whose sanctity - though acknowledged by Rome only in AD 1170 - had been proclaimed as early as AD 1031. And indeed, in *Geisli* Einarr establishes Óláfr both as *rex perpetuus Norvegiae* (as he was called later in the *Historia Norvegiae*) and as a Norwegian and »Scandinavian« and, for that matter, »international« saint. This he brings about by retelling not only Óláfr's kingly achievements (his *gesta*) and the miracles recorded immediately after his martyrdom at Stiklastaðir, but also by enlarging upon more recent miracles, a report of which had reached Norway shortly before, a fact that attested to the saint's continuing guardianship over the Northern countries and Christianity in general.

Both miracles (recorded in strophes 43-56 and placed conspicuously between two *stefstrophes*) broaden the geographic perspective of the poem and take us as far as the Byzantine Empire in the 12th century: One is about St Óláfr's sword *Hneitir*, and the other one is about his succour to the Varangian Guard of the emperor of Byzantium securing the Varangians' victory over a heathen army discouragingly superior to the Christians in numbers. In his *Heimskringla* (of ca. AD 1230) Snorri Sturluson places these two miracles as a sort of appendix at the end of *Haraldssonar saga* and *Hákonar saga herðibreiðs* and assigns them to »the days of Kirialax konung« - Kyrios Alexis (Alexios I. Komnenos 1081-1118), and he names Eindriði ungi as the authority who brought them to Norway. In this he follows his kinsman Einarr, who had named Eindriði as his source. Eindriði returned from Byzantium

¹ The exact date of the poem and of its performance at Trondheim remains insecure. Some date the event to AD 1152, the year of Cardinal Níkolás Breakspere's arrival to Niðarós (Trondheim) on occasion of the inauguration of the newly founded archdiocese at Trondheim and the investment of archbishop Jón Birgisson, others favour a date late in the following year and after the cardinal's departure, mostly on the ground that Einarr names the three kingly brothers Eysteinn, Sigurðr and Ingi as well as the archbishop, but not the papal envoy Níkolás. This, however, is not a very strong argument, because the decisive moment for the Norwegian church only came in the spring and summer of AD 1153, when a *þing* both of clergy and lay aristocracy was called at Niðarós and the cardinal managed to install church supremacy in most matters ecclesiastical, e.g. taking away from the laity the right to appoint bishops and priests. It is in this context that *Geisli* has its proper place.

² Wolfgang Lange, *Studien zur christlichen Dichtung der Nordgermanen 1000-1200* (Göttingen 1958; Palaestra, vol. 222), p. 142.

Mós frá k jarðar eisu
 allvald fyr hjör gjalda,
 (sléttik óð) þanns átti
 Óláfr (bragar tólum).
 Yfirskjöldungr lét jöfra
 oddhríðar þar síðan
 garðs of golli vörðu
 grand altári standa. (str. 50)

Vas, sem reyk af ríki
 - regn dreif stáls - í gegnum
 hjalm-Njörðungar harðan,
 heidingja lið, gingi.
 Halft fimta vann heimtan
 hundrað, brimis sunda,
 nýztan tír, þats næra,
 Norðmanna, val þorði. (str. 55)⁵

In (my) English translation:

At dawn - morning had come - the man missed his strong (*styrks*) devastator (*galla*) of the site (*borgar*) of the sword (*mundriða*) [devastator of the shield, i.e. the sword], embellished (*steindrar*) with gold (*roðins*). / The receiver of gold (*seim-þiggjandi*) saw (*þátti*) his (*sinn*) sword [the jaw-spike of the kin of the Fenrisúlfr] (*gylðis kindar gómsparra*) lie (*liggja*) afar from him (*sér fjarri*) on the field (*á sléttu grundu*). (str. 48)

I heard (*frák*) that the emperor (*allvald*, acc.c.i.) paid (*gjalda*, inf.) for (*fyr*) the sword (*hjör*), which had belonged to Óláfr (*þanns Óláfr átti*) with the fire (*eisu*) of the territory of the seagull (*mós jarðar*, viz. sea) [fire of the sea: gold]. I smoothen (*sléttik*) the poem (*óð*) with the tools (*tólum*) of poetry (*bragar*). / The overlord of the aristocracy (*Yfirskonungr jöfra*) let (*lét*) thereupon (*þar síðan*) raise (*standa*) on the gold-adorned altar (*of golli vörðu altári*) the sword [the demolisher (*grand*) of the shield (*odd-hríðar garðs* = sword-storm's fence)]. (str. 50)

The host of the heathens (*heidingja lið*) was (*vas*), as if (*sem*) the helmet-gods (*hjalm-njörðungar*) went forth (*gingi af ríki*) through (í *gegnum*) thick smoke (*harðan reyk*). Three hundred Northmen (*Halft fimta hundrað Norðmanna*), who (*þats*) dared (*þorði*) to feed (*næra*) the raven [the falcon (*val*) of the flood of the sword (*brimis sunda*) {the blood}], won (*vann*) great fame (*heimtan nýztan tír*). (str. 55)

⁵ I quote the text according to E. A. Kock's edition: *Den norsk-islandske skaldediktningen*, vol. I (Lund 1946), p. 216-217, which is more or less identical with the *Bergsbók* version in Fimur Jónsson's text in *Den norsk-islandske skaldedigtning. A. Tekst efter håndskrifterne*. Første bind (København 1912-1915), pp. 468-469.

St. Victor in Paris. Myth had become *mythologie moralisée*.⁸ - The Northern gods fighting against the giants had become human heroes fighting against demons. These, however, were nothing but hypostases of the eternal evil, the Devil himself. In that function they could thus well be understood as prefigurations of their descendants, the Christian dynasties of the North and their followers, who were supposed to act as *defensor pacis, defensor ecclesiae, miles Christianus* etc.

This new - euhemeristic - understanding of the mythical or pre-historical Northern gods furnished the Christian protagonists of the Age of the Crusades with a »historical perspective« that attested to the perseverance of ethical and moral qualities such as valor and brave determination to oppose the forces of evil, which the most eminent among their »pagan« forefathers had displayed earlier in time. This held especially true, if the Christian crusaders directly engaged in fighting against the demonic hosts of their own day: fiendish Wends and heathen Saracens or the Turkish tribes around the Black Sea, etc. In other words, the ancient gods fighting against the Fenrisúlfr may well prefigure the Christian heroes fighting against the heathens in the twelfth century, i.e. in the *Age of the Crusades*, when they either will embark on expeditions into as yet pagan countries in order to promote Christianity or else defend that Christianity against an assault from the heathen outside.⁹

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The report about the miraculous victory of 300 Northmen of the Varangian Guard over a host of heathens at Stara Zagora in AD 1122 with the help of a Scandinavian saint, who defends Christianity against the Devil, attracts well-known legendary elements:

When the Christian emperor hesitates to lead so few men against such a great army (*Hkr.*, p. 371) and the leader of the Varangians retorts that they would fight, »even if there were a burning fire ahead« (what nicely evokes the fires of Hell, of course), the emperor replies: *Heitið þér á inn helga Ólaf, konung yðam, til fulltings ok sigrs yðr!* (»Call upon Saint Ólafr, your king, for soccour and victory for yourselves!«, p. 372). The Varangians do this and thereupon attack, and the heathen king asks his men: *Hverr er sá hinn tiguligi maðr, er þar ríðr á þeim hvíta hesti fyrir liði þeira?* (»Who is this noble man riding in front of them on that white horse?«). As was to be expected, the answer is: *Eigi sjám vér þann* (»We do not see him.«). Riding on a white horse was a privilege granted to the pope.¹⁰

⁸ Cf. Peter Dronke, *Fabula. Explorations into the Uses of Myth in Medieval Platonism* (Köln/Leiden 1974; *Mittellateinische Studien und Texte*, 60); Ursula and Peter Dronke, »The Prologue of the Prose *Edda*: Explorations of a Latin Background,« in: *Sjötiú Ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni*, vol. I (Reykjavík 1977), pp. 153-176; Gerd Wolfgang Weber, »Euhemerismus,« in: H. Beck et al. (eds.), *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde, begründet von Johannes Hoops*, 2nd edition (considerably enlarged), vol. 8 (Berlin/New York, 1991), pp. 1-16.

⁹ For the first, cf. the *Profectio Danorum* and Saxo's account of Valdemar I's crusade against the Slavic tribes (Wends, Obotrites, etc.) on the south coast of the Baltic Sea (in his *Gesta Danorum*, Book XIV), for the latter cf. the perspective of, e.g., *Karlamagnús saga*.

¹⁰ Cf. Eike von Repgow's Low-German *Sachsenspiegel* (of ca.1220-35) on the relation between the two swords, the spiritual sword, and the worldly sword: »At a given time, the pope shall ride on a white horse, and the emperor shall hold the stirrup for him...«

