

Miracles, Magic and Missionaries: The Supernatural in the Conversion *þættir*

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Most of us nowadays feel sceptical about miracles. Although the Roman Catholic Church affirms their continued occurrence and maintains the apologetic function of miracles as evidence for the 'reasonableness' of faith, most philosophers question that miracles can be used to justify religious belief, while acknowledging the theoretical possibility that they may happen (NCE 9, 666-7). David Hume's essay *On Miracles*, in which he attacks the value of miracles as evidence for God's existence, has had an enduring impact on our thinking: miracles, he claims, 'are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations' and show 'the usual propensity of mankind towards the marvellous' (Hume, 2000, 90). While miracles seem appropriate within particular literary genres, such as hagiography, most of us would agree that they are out of place in historical narrative and feel uncomfortable with medieval texts like Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* that so obviously work on different premises from ours. And, even within hagiography, the idea that miracles belong to the popular imagination, rather than to the sophisticated thinker, is widespread: in his *Legends of the Saints*, Hippolyte Delehaye (1998, 33-34) condemns 'people's blind attraction towards what is marvellous, the supernatural made concrete' and laments that 'the soul's mysterious commerce with God has to be translated into concrete effects if it is to make any impression on the people's mind'. Hagiographers like Gregory of Tours and James of Voragine, he complains, 'simply catered for popular taste': they privileged 'all that is marvellous and appealing to the senses' at the cost of authenticity (Delehaye, 1998, 60).

These sorts of attitudes have dominated critical thinking about the Old Icelandic narratives of conversion: the complete lack of miracles in Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók* is understood as a tribute to his critical capacities as historian, while later accounts of the conversion which abound in the marvellous – principally *Kristni saga* and the short stories in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* – are seen as untrustworthy. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson (1998, 36), for example, labels *Kristni saga* as 'uncritical history writing in the service of church and religion' and he condemns *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* as 'every inch as much a religious tract as *Kristni saga*'. Dag Strömbäck (1997, 23) is more emphatic in his disapproval of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*: 'Of this monument of bombast and rhetoric I shall say only that much of its material has been adopted by modern authors in what otherwise purport to be serious and scholarly accounts of the conversion'.

There are two points to be made about this. The first is that the presence or absence of miracles in a medieval text cannot be a reliable marker of its historical accuracy, since miracles, when authenticated by qualified witnesses, were accepted as historical events in the Middle Ages. The miraculous was, for the medieval Christian, an integral part of everyday life: although some theologians, like Gregory the Great, struggled with how contemporary miracles related to biblical miracles, no one doubted that miracles actually happened (Ward, 1982, 204-5; McCready, 1989, 7-16). It may seem obvious to us that medieval hagiographers like Gregory the Great or Bede are

intentionally borrowing miracle stories from other works or enhancing their meagre collection of 'facts' with literary parables, but some recent studies suggest that not all hagiographers from this early period routinely indulged in 'pious frauds' (Ward, 1982, 215; Stancliffe, 1983, 25-7; McCready, 1989, 175). Although appeals to eyewitnesses are sometimes literary inventions, this is by no means always the case, and witnesses who are high-ranking figures of their own time should be taken seriously. It is worth noting, then, when miracles in the Old Icelandic narratives are supported by named informants, especially when these can be identified from elsewhere. One miraculous incident in *Þorvalds þáttur ins víðfjörla*, for example, involving a bishop's immunity to fire, is carefully traced back to two men mentioned in other works (BSI, 72):

Þenna atburð segir Gunnlaugr munkr at hann heyrði segja sannorðan mann, Glúm Þorgilsson, en Glúmr hafði numit at þeim manni er Arnórr hét ok var kallaðr Arndisarson.

'The monk Gunnlaugr said that he heard a reliable man, Glúmr Þorgilsson, relate this event, and Glúmr had heard it from a man called Arnórr, known as son of Arndís'.

The second point is that, while miracles tell us little about the critical capacities of those that narrate them, they tell us much about what sort of meaning we are meant to read into the narrative. If Ari is interested primarily in the legal and political dimension of conversion, and depicts it accordingly, later writers approach the same events with a greater interest in the theological aspects of conversion, placing individual events in Icelandic history within the wider context of salvation history. Miracles, in the Middle Ages, can be understood as part of a sacramental view of the world: the whole order of creation, according to Augustine, was miraculous, but inherent within it (rather than opposed to it) were less familiar or rarer manifestations of God's power, designed to provoke wonder and thereby to 'inspire the soul, hitherto given up to things visible, to worship Him, the Invisible' (*De civ. Dei* 10.12). Miracles are signs (*signa*): they point to something beyond themselves and offer themselves to be read and interpreted exegetically in the same way as one reads biblical narrative. Speaking of the miracles in the Gospel of St John, Augustine compares them to beautifully formed letters within a manuscript which we need to 'read and understand': miracles 'have a tongue of their own', he says, and for each miracle we need to 'search out its depth. For it contains something interior, this at which we wonder on the outside' (*Tract. Joh.*, 24.2). Although developments in the twelfth century led to a greater distinction between that which was 'natural' and that which was properly 'miraculous', the Augustinian outlook persisted throughout the Middle Ages: the world was understood as analogy and symbol, and within it miracles were not isolated gestures, but vital signs of the relationship between God and humans.

Particularly relevant for the Icelandic accounts of conversion is the emphasis placed on the apologetic function of miracles in medieval writing: both Augustine and Gregory the Great emphasise that they were necessary 'in order that the world might come to believe': they testified to 'that one grand and saving miracle of Christ's Ascension' and were recorded in writing 'in order to produce faith' (*De civ. Dei* 22.8). Although contemporary miracles were of a lesser order than those of biblical times, they nevertheless served to strengthen and increase faith and they continued to play an important part in mission: in his *Morals on Job*, Gregory emphasises the role of 'the

brilliant miracles of preachers' in the conversion of the English and, in a letter to Augustine, he expresses his joy that 'the souls of the English are drawn by outward miracles to inward grace' (*Mor.* 27.11.21; *HE* I, 31; see McCready, 1989, 37; Wood, 2001, 262). Gregory also acknowledges the secondary role of miracles in securing protection for the apostles and this became a more important motif in later lives of missionaries, such as Alcuin's *Life of Willibrord* or Rimbert's *Life of Saint Ansgar*, perhaps as reassurance for those missionaries among their readers who found themselves in dangerous situations (McCready, 1989, 36; Wood, 2001, 262-4). Yet, for both Augustine and Gregory, the greatest miracle of all was not the 'physical' miracle, perceptible to the senses, but the 'spiritual' or inward miracle of conversion, which brought not bodies but souls back to life. As the Old Icelandic version of Gregory's *Dialogues* puts it (*HMS* I, 228):

Ef ver hvaggiom at osvneligom hlutom, þa er vist meiri iartein at leiþretta svnþgan manni ceningom oc bœna fultingi en at reisa up davþan lican, þvi at licamr scal devia i annat sinn en ond lifa ei oc ei.

'If we consider invisible things, then it is certainly a greater miracle to convert a sinful man by preaching and the aid of prayers than to raise up a dead body, because the body shall die again but the spirit live forever.'

These points have been worth making at length because they give us a context within which to place the miracles recorded in the conversion *þættir* in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*: this suggests that, rather than showing 'uncritical' or 'credulous' attitudes, miracles rightly belong to medieval accounts of mission and may be theologically sophisticated 'signs'. I now want to look at the layers of meaning that can be discerned in just one such miraculous incident: the story of how the missionary bishop Friðrekr converted the Icelander Koðrán by driving the incumbent spirit or devil out of a rock not far from his farm. This incident occurs in *Þorvalds þáttur ens víðfjrla*, a short story which exists in four different versions in the first recension of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (*AM* 61 fol.), *Flateyjarbók*, a separate paper manuscript (*AM* 552 ka 4to) and, in abbreviated form, *Kristni saga* (*BS* I, 7-8, 61-8, 93). Of these, only *Flateyjarbók* recounts Koðrán's conversion without the appending miracle. The authorship of the *þáttur* is unknown, although it is sometimes attributed to Gunnlaugr Leifsson, a Benedictine monk who lived at the monastery of Þingeyrar in the North of Iceland and died in 1208. Gunnlaugr is mentioned twice in the *þáttur*, once as the source for a miracle story, mentioned above, and once in an exemplary anecdote about the hermit Máni at Holt (*BS* I, 84). Some of the material must therefore derive from him, even if he was not responsible for its final shape. We know from a comment towards the end of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* (*F1b* I, 568) that Gunnlaugr composed a life of Óláfr Tryggvason in Latin, now lost, and it is possible that his account of Þorvaldr's mission was a preface to that of Óláfr: in *Flateyjarbók* (I, 300-2), there is an account of how Þorvaldr and Óláfr met in the East and discussed the conversion of Iceland. Gunnlaugr also wrote a Latin life of St Jón, which was later translated into Icelandic, compiled an account of some miracles performed by St Þorlákr, and composed a liturgical text about St Ambrose which has not survived (*BS* I, cclxxxiii-cxcxii; II, 243; *Biskupa sögur*, 1858-78, II, 77). Intriguingly, he also appears to have had an interest in vernacular poetry and English history: he is named

as translator of the *Prophecies of Merlin* or *Merlinuspá* inserted into the Old Icelandic *Breta sögur* (*Hauksbók*, 1892-6, 271-83).

Gunnlaugr was a highly educated cleric with a particular liking for Latin hagiographical texts, and the miracles in *Þorvalds þáttr* reflect this. Following the Gregorian pattern, two are closely connected with the conversion of individuals, Koðrán and Óláfr in Haukagil, and two others concern the protection of the missionaries from pagan attacks. Of these, one is interestingly related to an incident in Gregory's *Dialogues* (II.10; *HMS* I, 165-6, 209), where the devil causes an illusion of fire in a monastery kitchen. This story is probably the basis for a number of Icelandic folktales in which supernatural beings protect themselves from human interference by causing the illusion of fire in either a church or people's homes (*BS* I, clxxix). Oddly enough, though, it is the Christian God in the *þáttr* who causes the illusion of fire in a church, so as to confuse the pagans who have come there intending to burn it down themselves. The effect of attributing an illusion or *sjónhverfing* – especially one intended to deceive – to the Christian God is peculiar, and the only parallels I have come across are in the lives of Irish saints (*VSH*, I, clxix).

The conversion of Koðrán, father of the missionary Þorvaldr, comes from towards the beginning of Þorvaldr's mission and is carefully set up from the outset as an opportunity to contrast paganism and Christianity. Koðrán, we are told, observes Bishop Friðrekr holding the divine service and is intrigued by its difference from his own rites:

Eptir því sem mér gefr at skilja, eru mjök sundrleitir siðir várir, því at mér sjónisk at guð yðvarr mun gleðjask af ljósi því er várir guðar hræðask.

'According to how I understand it, our faiths are very different, because it seems to me that your God must rejoice in the light which our gods fear.'

He compares the Christian bishop to his own *spámaðr* or 'prophet', who lives in a rock near his farm and serves him in various ways, foretelling future events and giving him practical advice about farming. This 'prophet', however, is opposed to the new arrivals. Koðrán tells Þorvaldr:

Mispökkask þú honum mjök ok svá spámaðr þinn ok siðferði ykkart, ok afletr hann mik at veita ykkur nokkura viðsæming ok einna mest at taka ykkarn sið

'You displease him very much, as does your prophet and your faith, and he is against my showing you any honour and above all taking your faith.'

Þorvaldr suggests that they set up a 'trial of strength' to test which of the two is more powerful: if the bishop can drive the 'prophet' from his home, Koðrán must accept baptism. For three days the bishop proceeds to the rock with prayer and psalmody, sprinkling it with consecrated water, and on the three following nights the 'prophet' appears to Koðrán in a dream: on the third occasion, he announces his intention to depart. Convinced by this that the Christian God is 'better' and 'stronger', Koðrán takes leave of the spirit *með styggð en engum blíðskap* 'with anger and on no friendly terms'. He is baptised together with his wife and household, with the exception of his son Ormr.

This story is one of many in which the coming of Christianity drives from the land the old pagan spirits which previously inhabited it; folktales of a similar kind have been recorded from all over Scandinavia. One of the earliest is the story in Oddr

Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (1932, 174-9), in which the trolls in Naumudalr are overheard plotting against Óláfr: they are driven away by the king and his bishop, who sprinkle the whole area with consecrated water. As has long been recognised, this is a reworking of an anecdote in Gregory's *Dialogues* (III. 7; *HMS* I, 222-4) in which a Jew overhears evil spirits conversing in a pagan temple; and particularly relevant to Koðrán's experience is another story from the *Dialogues* (II. 9; *HMS* I, 165, 209) about how some monks building a monastery were unable to move a stone because the devil was sitting on it: only when Benedict has prayed and made the sign of the cross over it can they continue with their work. In *Piðrandi þáttur* in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* (*BS* I, 125), the prophet Þórhallr awakes one morning to see that *margr hóll opnask ok hvert kykvendi býr sinn bagga, bæði smá ok stór, ok gera fardaga* ('many a mound is opening and every creature, great and small, is packing its bags and preparing to move on'): the emptying of the landscape heralds the coming of a new faith in the shape of the Icelandic missionaries Gizurr and Hjalti. Similar stories are told of the departure of gods from temples in *Þórhalls þáttur knapps* (*BS* I, 157-8) and *Harðar saga* (ÍF XIII, 51-2), where there is also a fear that, in leaving, the gods will harm those that have abandoned their worship – or even those who have not. In the story of Koðrán, the danger that his economic prosperity will dwindle is implied by the prophet's parting words: *Hugsa nú hværr þitt góz mun heðan af varðveita, svá dyggliga sem ek hefí áðr varðveitt* ('Now think about who will look after your goods as faithfully as I have done'). Any benefits to be gained from paganism will be withdrawn along with its gods.

Such stories convey something of the radical change to the landscape brought by Christianity – not only the pulling down of heathen temples and the building of Christian churches, but more significantly the de-sanctification of the natural world, the transference of power from trees, fountains and rocks to the proper human and ecclesiastical channels. Peter Brown (1981, 124-6) speaks of the 'hominization' of the cosmos in late Antiquity: the replacement of natural objects with human artefacts or relics and the presence of the human saint. *Nulla est enim religio in stagnum* ('There is no religion in a swamp'), declared the fifth-century bishop of Javols according to Gregory of Tours (*Liber conf.*, 749). For Christians, it was not just temples and idols that were the haunt of evil spirits; stretches of uninhabited land also needed to be claimed for Christianity (Howe 1997): desert saints like Anthony fought demons in the wilderness; Benedict, Martin and Boniface cut down trees; Cuthbert and Guthlac moved to uninhabited places in order to fight devils and win the land for Christ. We know from various laws, as well as from references in *Landnámabók* and other sagas that natural objects like waterfalls, groves and mounds were worshipped in Iceland during the heathen period (Turville-Petre, 1969, 233, 236-9; see ÍF I, 270-1, 273, 358; *Hauksbók*, 1892-6, 167; *Norges gamle Love*, 1847-95, II, 308). Perhaps this is why the missionary bishop Bjarnharðr, mentioned in *Hungrvaka* (*BS* II, 12), is reported to have consecrated not only man-made objects like churches, bells and bridges, but also springs, rivers and rocks. There are similar stories in *Guðmundar saga biskups* about how Guðmundr drove out the pre-Christian inhabitants of the land (*Biskupa sögur*, 1858-78, I, 560-1, 598-9). Superstitions rooted in the landscape, unlike official pagan cult, must have been difficult to eradicate. The story in *Þorvalds þáttur* makes it clear that natural objects are not an appropriate source of divine power: conversion to

Christianity involves the abandonment of sacred places and the re-channelling of power through the Church and its representatives.

What sort of spirit Koðrán worships is difficult to say, and it is perhaps a composite figure: it has been variously labelled a *landvættir* ('land-spirit') like the rock-dwellers in *Þiðranda þáttur*, a *nisse* of the type found in Scandinavian folktales, an elf living in a mound, or a dead ancestor (these two are sometimes connected; see Turville-Petre, 1964, 230-31). *Kristni saga* calls it *ármaðr*, which in other written sources means 'steward', but which can also be a name for a guardian spirit (*ár*, 'plenty, abundance'), as in the Icelandic place-name *Ármannsfell*. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (2003, 162) suggests that it is an early type of nature spirit that later developed into elves and trolls and this seems a plausible account of its origins. The author of the *þáttur*, however, is less interested in giving an accurate picture of pagan belief than in pointing out the counterpoint to Christian belief: the spirit is presumably called *spámaðr* in order to create an equivalence with the human bishop and to draw a parallel between the two as the respective representatives of paganism and Christianity. Koðrán identifies Bishop Friðrekr as his son's 'prophet' (*yðvarn spámaðr*), from whom he receives his faith, but claims that his own prophet is a better source of power, since the bishop is *auðgætligr* ('easy to obtain' – perhaps because he is human) and *ekki aftmikill* ('not very strong'). He also notes that both sides are making the same, mutually incompatible, claims:

Eigi síðr skil ek þat með kappi miklu fylgja hvárir sínu máli; ok alla þá hluti sem þit segið af honum, slíkt it sama flytr hann af ykkr.

'I understand equally well that each pleads his cause with great vehemence; and all the things that you two say about him, he also says about you two.'

We are given a taste of this within the story: Þorvaldr describes the spirit to his father as *þinn fullkominn svikari* ('your complete deceiver'), but the spirit later describes the bishop to Koðrán as *þessi vándr svikari* ('this evil deceiver'). Words – which can conceal truth as well as reveal it – are not enough to decide the matter: only a demonstration of power can uncover in whose words Koðrán should place his trust.

For the Christian Þorvaldr, as one might expect, the 'prophet' is really a devil and this is clear from his opening statement:

Þessi er þik afletr at trúa á hann er þinn fullkominn svikari ok hann girnisk at draga þik með sér frá eilífu ljósi til óendiligrar myrkra.

'The one who dissuades you from believing in him is your complete deceiver and he desires to drag you with him from eternal light into unending darkness.'

This immediately brings to mind visions of hell in which sinners are literally dragged by devils into the abyss, *Duggals Leiðsla*, for example. Þorvaldr is also clear from the outset about the true purpose behind the devil's apparent helpfulness:

En ef þér sýnisk sem hann geri þér nokkuru góða hluti, þá gerir hann þat allt til þess at hann megi því auðvelligar þik fá svikit, ef þú trúir hann þér góðan ok nauðsynligan.

'But if it seems you as if he is doing you any good, then he does it all so that he may more easily manage to deceive you, if you believe him good and necessary to you.'

This is similar to what Saint Anthony says about the allegedly prophetic powers of devils: they announce things that will later happen only so that:

trvnaðr væri a festr þeira savgn sva sem nockuvrri forspá, ok eptir þat mætti þeir avðvelligar yfvir þeim valld hafva, er trvðv þeira falsi.

'their announcements might be believed as if they were prophecies, and after that they might more easily have power over those who believed their falsehoods.' (HMS I, 72; compare Gregory's *Dialogues* IV.50).

In Koðrán's dreams, however, it takes some time for the identity of the devil to be revealed. On his first appearance, we are told that he appears *með daprligri ásjónu ok skjálftafullr sem af hræzlu* ('with a downcast face and shaking as if with fear'): he complains about the attempt to drive him from his home, but stresses that it is not doing him much harm. On his second appearance, we are given some more significant details:

Fyrr vas hann vanr at birtask honum með björtu ok blíðligu yfirliti ok ágætliga búinn. En nú var hann í svörtum ok herfíligum skinnstakki, dökkr ok illigr í ásjónu.

'Before he used to appear to him with a bright and joyful countenance and excellently arrayed. But now he was in a dark and wretched leather shirt, dark and hideous in appearance.'

He speaks with a sorrowful and shaking voice (*með sorgfullri ok skjálftanda raust*), but still insists that he will not flee. Only on his third appearance has the prophet's power to deceive entirely dissolved: for the first time, the narrative voice describes him as *sfandi* ('devil') and *sá inn illgjarni andi* ('that malignant spirit'), his fine clothes are soaked through and ripped to pieces, and his sorrowful plaints are replaced by outright whining and sobbing. The bishop, he rages, has condemned him to *bótlausan bruna* ('endless burning') and driven him and his family *langt í brot í auðn ok útleð* ('far away to wastelands and exile') – to the haunts of devils.

Medieval Christians knew, of course, that the devil sometimes masquerades as an angel of light (II Corinthians xi.14), and that discernment is required to perceive his true nature. In the *Life of Saint Martin* (HMS I, 563-4), the devil appears to the saint enveloped in light and *biatr ok blipre i alite* ('bright and joyful in appearance'): it is not until Martin makes the sign of the cross that his true nature is revealed and he disappears in a puff of smoke (*sva sem reyrcr*), leaving a terrible smell behind him. What is interesting about the reworking of this motif in *Þorvalds þátrr* is that the typically sudden revelation of the devil's identity is replaced by a more gradual process: the devil becomes progressively darker, uglier and more degraded, as Koðrán sees more clearly in the light of Christian faith. Building a sense of process or gradual enlightenment into a story type (the 'trial of strength') that commonly depicts the conversion of the individual as a dramatic moment is a clever innovation on the part of the writer. And it is not only the sense of process that is unusual, but also the fact that we experience it with Koðrán: the narrative voice does not label the spirit as a 'devil' until Koðrán himself has come to that conclusion.

There is more to this story, however, than the simple revelation: that pagan belief is a belief in the devil, because this devil is unusually crafty, as we discover from its very first speech. The missionaries, he tells Koðrán:

leita at reka mik brotu af bústað mínum, því at þeir steypðu vellanda vatni yfir mitt herbergi, svá at börn mín þola eigi lítila kvöl af þeim brennandi dropum er inn renna um þekjuna. En þó at slíkt skaði sjálfan mik eigi mjök, þá er allt at einu þungt at heyra þyt smábarna er þau cepa af bruna.' 'are trying to drive me away from my home, because they have poured boiling water over my house, so that my children suffer no little torment from the burning drops running through the roof. And although such things don't much hurt me, it is still hard to hear the cries of the little children as they scream because of the burning.'

The bishop is not, as far as we know, using boiling water, but consecrated water: the burning motif is borrowed from saints' lives like *Jacobs saga* or *Bartholomeus saga* (*PS*, 515, 745) in which the presence or prayers of a saint are said to burn devils. This probably derives from the idea of prayer as *fervens* 'boiling, burning' (Hill 1993). Yet the image of the little children crying out in pain is so vivid and the detail of water dripping through thatching on the roof is so imaginative that one can hardly help feeling sorry for this anguished father – and sympathy for the devil, as Milton knew, is a very dangerous thing indeed. This devil is all too aware of how to manipulate human feeling: after describing the torment of his 'little children', he goes on to argue that the rock is his 'rightful inheritance' (*minni eiginligri erfð*), and inherited property is something an earlier scene has established as a justifiable source of wealth in the human world. Next he tries the typically female trick of 'whetting', urging Koðrán to act 'like a man' (*mannliga*) and drive the missionaries away. Finally, he resorts to quoting the Scriptures: *Þú kallask maðr réttlátr ok trúlyndr, en þú hefir çmbúnat mér illu gott* ('You call yourself a righteous and faithful man, but you have repaid me with evil for good'). Some of these tricks are played by devils elsewhere, but rarely all at once, and it is clear that this devil is particularly dangerous, even to one well versed in the devil's arts. There is a lesson in this not just for the potential convert, like Koðrán, but also for a more established Christian audience. Appearances can be deceptive, words are untrustworthy, the Scriptures can be misused. Even the most natural and human emotions, like compassion, can play us false.

Finally, it is striking that this long and intense threefold encounter takes place entirely in a series of dreams: there is never, in the end, any externally observable evidence for the drama that has unfolded. Dreams, of course, could be used by the devil (Gregory warns the readers of his *Dialogues* against this), but the subjective nature of Koðrán's experience nonetheless deserves some attention. According to the modern definition of miracles by the Roman Catholic Church, they must be 'perceptible to the senses': Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus is a miracle because the internal experience can be deduced from its external results (*NCE* 9, 665-6). Following this definition, then, it could be argued that Koðrán's conversion is not really miraculous at all, since no one other than he himself can either confirm or deny the appearances of the 'prophet' in his dreams. One might contrast Fursey's vision of hell in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* (III.19), which leaves him with a visible burn, when a sinner from whom he once received clothing bumps into him. Perhaps this is why *Kristni saga* feels the need to add to its account of Koðrán's conversion the detail that the rock in which the spirit resided 'burst apart' (*brast í sundr*): like the spontaneous shattering of idols, this gives some concrete evidence that the devil has

left it and allows Koðrán reasonably to conclude that *ármaðr var sigraðr* ('the guardian spirit had been defeated'). In the *þáttur*, however, the three dreams could be understood as an externalisation of, or metaphor for, the internal process by which Koðrán's mind is cleared of error and infused with 'operative' or 'sanctifying' grace: this is why his declaration of Christian faith before the spirit's final departure is so important. Does Koðrán believe because the devil has been driven out, or is it driven out because he no longer believes in it? Perhaps these are just two sides of the same coin. Far from showing credulity on the part of its writer, this story conveys a sophisticated understanding of both the psychology of temptation and the theology of conversion – the internal and subjective process by which one moves from ignorance to knowledge, from error to truth, from spiritual darkness to the light of Christian faith.

I would like to finish by suggesting that this particular anecdote, like a number of other miracles, is not, in fact, intended as an addition to the historical record of conversion, except in as much as it tells us, as other sources also do, that Koðrán was converted to Christianity. Rather, it takes the 'fact' of Koðrán's conversion and offers an interpretation or commentary on it from a theological perspective: it tells us, in Augustine's words, how to 'read and understand' the inner miracle of conversion – it is more like an interlinear gloss rather than an addition to the main text. Koðrán's change of belief is understood not an isolated event, but as one of many signs that God is at work in Icelandic history, and it gives a clear message about the proper channels for divine power, the deception of pagan belief and the subtle dangers of demonic temptation. The spiritual transformation of conversion is laid bare to our eyes as, in an imaginative development, we experience through the series of dreams the gradual enlightenment of Koðrán's mind. I suspect that this writer would have labelled those who refuse to read beyond the bare facts of history as 'uncritical': for him, reading and understanding involves delving beneath the 'outside' of events to discover and communicate their 'interior' meaning.

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