Between Heaven and Hell: The Konungas ogur and the Emergence of the Idea of Purgatory

Giovanna Salvucci (University of Durham)

> Quivi perdei la vista e la parola; nel nome di Maria fini', e quivi caddi, e rimase la mia carne sola. (Dante Alighieri, Purgatorio V, 100-102)

The idea of purgatorial fire was the subject of much discussion among scholars and theologians during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Even if Purgatory was officially recognised by the Church at the Second Lyon Council in 1274, Christian thinkers as early as the second and third centuries had started to think that there might be a period between death and the final judgement, during which a soul could reach eternal salvation by means of a series of trials or punishments.¹

The fundamental elements of the idea of Purgatory could already be found in the Holy Scriptures. 2 Maccabees 12, 41-45 envisages the possibility of making atonement for one's sins and the importance of receiving spiritual help from those who live on after one's death. Matthew 12, 31-32 implies the possibility of being absolved in the afterlife. Above all, 1 Corinthians 3, 11-15 includes the idea of trial and purgation by fire, and of a proportionality between guilt and merit on the one side and punishment and reward on the other (Le Goff, 1996, 53). At the beginning of the third century Tertullian recognised the Bosom of Abraham (the resting-place of Lazarus's soul that is mentioned in Luke 16) as a place of intermediate reception for the souls of the just before they were admitted to Heaven (Tertvlliani Adversus Marcionem IV, 34). During the fourth and fifth centuries the possibility of purgatorial punishment for the atonement of sins was discussed by St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, Ambrosiaster, and by St. Augustine of Hippo (d. 430), who is considered by Le Goff to be the 'father of Purgatory'.

In his Confessions, The City of God and Enchiridion, Augustine emphasises the importance of prayers for the dead in speeding up their admittance to Heaven. He says that it is useless to pray for the wicked because they are doomed to eternal fire. But those who have been neither wholly good nor wholly evil in their earthly lives will have to endure the purgatorial fire (ignis purgatorius) between death and resurrection (Le Goff, 1996, 74-96; Binski, 26-27).

In the sixth century St. Gregory the Great (d. 604) made an important contribution to the understanding of Purgatory in his work *Dialogorum Libri IV*. He used anecdotes and visions in acknowledging the existence of a purgatorial fire for the venial sins of those who lead charitable lives. The *Dialogues* of St. Gregory were translated into Old Norse at the end of the twelfth century, and had an important

The most important study of the origins of the concept of Purgatory is *La naissance du Purgatoire*, by the French historiographer Jacques le Goff.

influence on the development of homiletic and hagiographic literature, and probably also on the spread in medieval Iceland of ideas connected with the fire of purgatory:²

Petrvs ait. Vita villda ek þat, hvart þvi ma rettliga trva, at hreinsonar elldr se eptir andlat. 39. Gregoriuvs dixit. (...). En þo ma þvi trva, at hreinsonar elldr se friðon fyrir nockvrar inar smæri synþir, þvi at drottinn mælir sva: 'Sa er mælir gvðlastan i gegn helgvm anda, þeim fyrirgefzt þat hvarki þessa heims ne annars.' I þesso atkvæði synir hann þat, at nockvrar synþir fyrirgefaz i þessom heimi ok nockvrar annars heims. (Heilagra Manna Søgur 1, 252, ll. 7-22)

In the corpus of Old Norse prose there are a few other occurrences of the word hreinsanareldr, corresponding to Latin ignis purgatorius, such as those in the Icelandic Homily Book. This dates from around 1200; its sources include the works of Augustine of Hippo and Gregory the Great (McDougall, 290):

peir scolo pat til hafa til synpa lavsnar oc verpléika vip gub. at peir poli vel hréinsonar eLd pan es gup leGr a heNdr péim her. oc brenir afpeim synpa sóttir. (Hómísl 29, 44r17-19)

Nu scaut ec af þui dómisogo þessi i þetti mál. at þat es styrking mikil þeim mænom er fyr vanhéilso verþa eþa mana missi. eþa fiárscapa. nu er slíct hréinsonar eldr her inan heims. oc brenir þat synþir at mænom þéim er sva verþa við sem iób. (HómÍsl 43, 70v32-35)

véit hver þa þegar sin hluta. hvárt han scal helvitis qualar hafa þér es aldrege scal þrióta, eþa scal han hafa hreinsonar eld necqueria stund. (...). Afþui nefni ec heldr enar smæri til þes at hreinsonar eldren megi af brena an enar stéorri, at þær éinar ma hreinsonar eldr en af taca, er hinar smæri synþir ero callaþar, en hinar eongar er hæfoþ synþir ó. (Hómísl 43, 71v15-21)

These examples show that the idea of purgatorial fire was certainly known in twelfthcentury Scandinavia, and not only among scholars, but also among the common people to whom the sermons were addressed.³

After St. Gregory, many scholars and theologians continued to discuss the concepts first put forward by the church fathers. The idea of Purgatory was given a strong impulse, among others, by Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1141), who recognised the existence of purgatorial punishment after death, and by St. Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153), whose sermons refer to purgatorial places in the afterlife (see Le Goff, 1996, 159-163). The works of Hugh of St. Victor and St. Bernard were widely known in medieval Scandinavia. The House of St. Victor had been founded by William of Champeaux as part of the emergence of the University of Paris, and almost from its beginnings it had a strong influence on the Norwegian church (France 292; Haug 185).

A few fragments of St. Gregory's Dialogues survive in: AM 677 4to, AM 921 IV 4to, NRA 71, 72, 72b, 76, 77 (Boyer, 241).

The word hreinsanareldr is also found in later works: Diplomatarium Islandicum (VI, p. 592, 1. 2); Elucidarius (p. 120, 1. 6); Hulda-Hrokkinskinna (I, p. 139, 1. 14); Postola Sögur (p. 271, 1. 21, where the word purgatorio is also recorded; p. 623, l. 31; p. 886, l. 15; p. 930, ll. 5-6); Mariu Saga (p. 102, 1. 13). The idea of Purgatory is also to be found in the visionary literature, one of the most popular genres in medieval writing: see Duggals Leizla (ch. 15), and Draumkvæde (stt. 30-36).

The second Norwegian archbishop, Eysteinn Erlendsson (d. 1188), went to St. Victor's in 1157, and stayed there for about four years before he could be consecrated. He was responsible for the foundation of the Victorine house of Elgiusetr, to which he had Haraldr harðráði's body translated for the sake of Haraldr's soul (see below).

The Rule of St. Augustine also spread to Iceland, and the monastery at Pykkvabær, founded in 1168, was only the first of five that adhered to it, the others being at Flatey (which moved to Helgafell in 1184), Saurbær (?), Viðey and Möðruvellir. The importance that the Augustinians attached to spreading the idea of Purgatory can be witnessed by their interest in acquiring the life of St. Nicholas of Tolentino (d. 1305), an Augustinian saint who was known for his connection to the purging souls and is found in Reykjahólabók.⁴

As for the Benedictines, they had been present in Norway since the foundation of Selja (outside Bergen) around 1100, and in Iceland since that of Þingeyrar in 1133; the other Benedictine houses in Iceland were Munkaþverá and Kirkjubær (Nyberg 415; Halldór Hermannsson xv). The Benedictines had also made a contribution to the spread of ideas about Purgatory, since it was the Benedictine-related monastery at Cluny that, by the second half of the eleventh century, established All Souls' Day for the commemoration of the dead (Le Goff. 1996, 104-142).

The writers of Heimskringla, Morkinskinna, Fagrskinna and Agrip af Nóregs konunga sögum were certainly involved in the cultural and religious environment in which the discussion about a third realm between Heaven and Hell was being developed. A number of passages in their texts imply an awareness of a period in which it will be necessary to make atonement for sins, and also of an intermediate time after death, i.e. the time that comes between death and the individual judgement of each soul, and between then and the Last Judgement.⁵

In Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar (ch. 28), Snorri reports a dream experienced by King Magnús góði that can provide evidence for changing ideas about the imagined geography of the Other World, and for the evolution of the idea of Purgatory, in Norway as in southern Europe. In Snorri's account of Magnús góði's dream, St. Óláfr offers his son two alternatives: he may choose whether to live a long and successful life, but commit a crime which it will be almost impossible for him to expiate, or to follow his father immediately (i.e. to die):

'Hvárn kost viltu, sonr minn, at fara nú með mér eða verða allra konunga ríkastr ok lifa lengi ok gera þann glæp, er þú fáir annathvárt bætt trautt eða eigi?' (Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar ch. 28)

In St. Óláfr's words to Magnús, it is implied that crimes may either be capable of being expiated or not (the basic element of the idea of Purgatory (2 Maccabees 12, 41-45)), and that the period of expiation required for them may vary according to their gravity (1 Corinthians 3, 11-15). In Magnús's case, if the potential crime can be expiated at all, it will be only with difficulty (trautt).

⁴ The saga of St. Nicholas of Tolentino has been recently edited and translated into Italian (Salvucci).

On the concept of 'intermediate time' see Le Goff (1988, 99-108), Vovelle (62-64), Schmitt (43).

The same idea is expressed in the verses of Einarr Skúlason quoted in Fsk (ch. 101, st. 272) and Haraldssona saga (st. 228), where it is said that Simon skálpr, who betrayed King Eysteinn Haraldsson, will get absolution for his grievous sin only after a long period of atonement;

Mun sás morði vanðisk margillr ok sveik stilli, síð af slíkum róðum

Símon skalpr of hjalpask. (Fsk ch. 101 p. 341 st. 272)

Einarr's stanza has been interpreted in slightly different ways by modern scholars. Guőbrandur Vigfússon (II, 270) for example, translates 'the wicked Simon Scalp, who betrayed him, will be long ere he is helped out of torment', and he adds in parenthesis that this means that he will be in Hell for ever. In Andersson and Gade's translation of Msk (404) we find: 'Wicked Simon skalpr (Sword-sheath), who made murder his trade and betrayed the king, will hardly obtain absolution for such actions', while Finlay (275) translates 'Simon skálpr, will but slowly / for such deeds get absolution.' I think that Guőbrandur Vigfússon's interpretation is self-contradictory, because if the author wanted to express the duration of the torment, it is possible to read in these verses another reference to the Purgatory: Símon skálpr will get absolution for his grievous sin, but it will be only after a long period of atonement in the Third Realm.

The medieval European cultural community was also familiar with the idea that 'intermediate time' might in some cases be quantified, and I think that Snorri's account of Haraldr harðráði's ritual of trimming Saint Óláfr's hair and nails before his

departure for England in 1066 shows knowledge of this concept.

In Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar (ch. 80) Snorri writes that King Haraldr opened the shrine of St. Óláfr, trimmed the saint's hair and nails, then locked it again and threw the key into the river Nio: thirty-five years had passed since St. Óláfr's death, the same number of years as his age when he died. This sentence reveals that the ritual of trimming the saint's hair and nails must have been performed quite regularly after the first occasions, which are attested by Snorri himself in Óláfs saga helga (ch. 244-245). Moreover, it may also be evidence for a peculiar notion of 'intermediate time' which is amazingly similar to the one that Dante will display in his Divine Comedy. Dante's entry into Purgatory is preceded by the Ante-Purgatory (Purgatorio, III-VIII), where the poet meets four types of penitents. These are: 1. the excommunicate; 2. the negligent (those who had postponed their repentance until the last moment, but who did repent before death); 3. the unabsolved (those who had delayed repentance, and met with death by violence, but died repentant, pardoning and pardoned); and 4. the negligent rulers (rulers who were virtuous, but negligent of salvation in life). Except for the excommunicate, all these souls must wait in the Ante-Purgatory for the same number of years as their age when they died, before they are admitted to Purgatory (Purgatorio, IV, 130-132; Pasquazi, 305). St. Óláfr could be argued to belong at least to the last two of these categories - the unabsolved and the negligent rulers - and Snorri's account may provide evidence that a similar notion was already spreading in Scandinavia at the time when Heimskringla was being written. Haraldr throws the key away because he knows that the hair and nails will not grow any more: it was probably believed that once St. Óláfr had 'lived' as a dead body for the same number of years as his existence in this world, he would have reached his final destiny in the other, or at

least that he would have entered Purgatory and would no longer need physical ministrations in this world.

Another basic concept of Purgatory was the importance of receiving spiritual help from these who live on after one's death: both Msk and Ágrip show an awareness of the importance of prayers for the dead as a means of hastening their admittance to Heaven when they relate Haraldr harðráði's burial. While Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar (ch. 99) writes only that Haraldr was interred in St. Mary's church, the church he himself had founded, Ágrip (ch. 42) and Msk state where King Haraldr is buried at the time of writing, i.e. at Elgjusetr:

(...) jarðaði lík hans í Máríukirkju í Niðarósi -en nú liggr hann á Elgjusetri- þvíat þat þótti fallit at hann fylgði kirkju þeiri er hann hafði látit gera, (...). (Ágrip ch. 42)

En ny ligr hann at Elgesetre, því at þat þotti fallit at hann fylgði þeiri kirkio er hann sialfr hafbi latit gera. (Msk p. 284, 9-11)

Elgiusetr, modern Elgeseter near Trondheim, was not in fact founded by Haraldr, but more than a century later by Archbishop Eysteinn, when he had St. Mary's church demolished and rebuilt at Elgeseter. The two sources attribute to Archbishop Eysteinn himself the initiative of transferring the body of Haraldr, and above all specify the motive for this translation:

En Eystein erkibyscvp let þangat føra hann hreinlifis Monnom vndir hendr. oc aflaþi til þar með mikilla eigna, oc a/kaþi mioc staþarins gøþi með þeim eignom er hann sialfr hafþi þangat gefit. (Msk 284, 11-15)

(...) en Eysteinn erkíbyskup lét þangat fara hreinlífismonnum undir hendr, ok aukaði með því þá eign aðra er hann sjálfr hafði þangat gefit. (Ágrip 42)

Even though on the surface the two sources seem more interested in the wealth of the Elgjusetr estate than in Haraldr's soul, they clearly convey another example of the evolution of the idea of Purgatory: if Haraldr's soul had been considered to be in Hell or in Heaven, it would have not needed any prayer or care from the monks. It was probably believed, therefore, that Haraldr's soul continued to need attention, and the monastery was considered a better place to do this, since it could ensure a greater number of 'special' masses for the dead. The practice of these masses, which developed in Europe in the period between the ninth and the eleventh century and was reorganised at the beginning of the thirteenth, was characterised by personal prayers for a particular soul, and it enabled churches and monasteries to increase their wealth very greatly (cf. Ariès, 180-181).

If the living could care for the souls of the departed through their prayers, proximity of burial to the shrine of a saint could certainly ensure protection and intercession for the dead person from that saint: the particular change of burial customs that took place in Europe between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, that gradually moved the burial places of important people from outside to inside the church, and later to positions inside the choir of the church, seems also to be witnessed in the Old Norse synoptic histories of the kings of Norway.

See Pesch (131), Nyberg (416), France (292).

⁷ Cf. Vovelle (74); Ariès (52-53, 88-90).

Óláfs saga helga (ch. 244) seems to confirm that until the end of the eleventh century, noble burials in Norway took place in churchyards and not inside churches, because King Óláfr's shrine was moved to Clemenskirkia only after he had been recognised as a true saint. However, there was probably no strong distinction of value between the interior of the church and the sacred space of the atrium around its walls (Ariès. 59). It is therefore difficult to know whether Óláfr kyrri, Hákon Magnússon. Olafr and Eysteinn Magnússon berfætts were buried inside or outside the church. because the sources only relate that they were buried at Kristskirkia in Nioaross. 8 The same is true of Harald gilli and his son Siguror, who are only said to be buried at Kristskirkja in Bergen. We are provided with more detailed information in the cases of Siguror Jórsalafari and Ingi Haraldsson gilla, who are both said to be buried at Hallvarös kirkia in Oslo, in the stone wall on the south side outside the choir. 10 The site fyrir vtan kor can be identified with the part of the churchyard around the apse of the church, just outside the east end of the choir (Lat. in exhedris ecclesiae). Ariès (59) shows that this part of the churchyard was used to accommodate honoured tombs at a time when it still seemed presumptuous to bury anyone inside the choir.

The transition from burial outside to inside the choir is shown in *Msk*, as regards King Magnús's tomb:

Likit var jardath ath Kristkirkiu fyrir vtan kor enn nu er þath jnnan kors fyrir rume erkebyskups. (Msk p. 147, ll. 27-29)

According to Msk then King Magnús was buried outside the choir (fyrir utan kor) soon after his death (in the eleventh century), while 'now' (when Morkinskinna was written, i.e. in the thirteenth century), he lies inside the choir (enn nu er path jnnan kors). ¹¹ Until the thirteenth century, burial ad sanctos, i.e. anywhere inside a church in which one or more saints were buried, was a privilege allowed only to kings, bishops and abbots (Vovelle, 74). Later, when churches started to become crowded with tombs, the most coveted and expensive place became the choir, which had until then been kept vacant (Ariès, 52-53, 88-90).

The story of King Haraldr gilli's gifts to the Icelandic bishop Magnus Einarsson in Msk shows an awareness that the prayers that are necessary on a soul's behalf are proportional to the seriousness of the person's sins, and that intercession by the saints is needed to ensure a soul's benefit. King Haraldr gilli had blinded and emasculated his kinsman Magnus (Msk p. 401, Il. 20-22), and afterwards he had hanged Bishop Reinaldr (p. 401, Il. 27-31). Msk (p. 402, Il. 1-4) displays its strongly negative judgement, writing that this deed probably doomed Norway and caused God's wrath

Oláfr kyrni: Óláfs saga kyrra ch. 8; Msk p. 296, Il. 25-27; Fsk ch. 79; Ágrip ch.45; Theodrici Monachi Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium ch. 29. Hákon Magnússon: Magnúss saga berfættr ch. 2; Msk 298, Il. 29-30; Fsk ch. 80; Ágrip ch. 47. Óláfr Magnússon berfætts: Magnússona saga ch. 18; Msk p. 364, Il. 26-28; Fsk ch. 93; Ágrip ch. 52. Eysteinn Magnússon berfætts: Magnússona saga ch. 23; Msk p. 388 Il. 2-3; Fsk ch. 93.

⁹ <u>Harald gilli</u>: Fsk ch. 96 p.329; Magnúss saga blinda ok Haralds gilla ch. 16. <u>Sigurðr</u> Haraldsson: Haraldssona saga ch. 28; Msk p. 457 il. 30-31; Fsk ch. 99 p. 338.

Sigurőr Jórsalafari: Msk p. 400, ll. 11-13; Magnússona saga ch. 33; Fsk ch. 93. Ingi Haraldsson gilla: Hákonar saga herőibreiðs ch. 18.

Gade (171) interprets this clause as referring 'to the remodelling of Kristkirken that was closely connected with the new name of the archbishopric.'

and the excommunication of all who were implicated in it. Nonetheless, it afterwards seeks to counteract the heinous nature of this deed by introducing the story of King Haraldr's gifts to the Icelandic Bishop Magnús Einarsson. Msk's author writes that this passage has been included to illustrate King Haraldr's generosity (p. 405, ll. 15-16: i bessom lvt ma marca storleti Harallz konvngs), but his concern for the future of the king's soul seems to be the major point of it. Actually, Msk reports that once the bishop had come back to Iceland, he discussed with his advisers what should be done with the drinking vessel the king had given him, in order to ensure that Haraldr could benefit from it:

ba melti byscop. Anat rað vil ec taca. Gøra scal af calec her at staðnom. oc vil ec sva firir mela at hann nioti. Oc villda ec at þeir enir helgo menn allir er her er af helgom domom i þessi ine helgo kirkio leti konvng hvert sin niota, er ifir honom er messa syngin. (Msk p. 405, ll. 6-12)

In this passage Msk seems to quantify the king's sins, and at the same time to maintain that there was still a possibility of atoning for them: a simple donation would not be enough to make up for his sins, but the intercession of all the saints whose relics were in the church every time mass was sung over the chalice made from the king's drinking vessel seemed more appropriate. It also shows the idea that the prayers that are necessary on behalf of a soul are proportional to the seriousness of the person's sins.

The quantification of sins was institutionalized with the foundation of the Sacra Poenitentieria Apostolica in the second half of the twelfth century (Jørgensen, 19-20), and it turned into a real calculation in the course of the thirteenth century (Binski 25-26). When the concept of Purgatory made gradations of punishment possible, the threat of the afterlife was to become a powerful instrument for the Church that, usurping God's prerogatives, ascribed to itself the control of the afterlife (Le Goff, 1996, 107).

Dante Alighieri was to express severe criticism of this custom in his Divine Comedy, expecially in the stories of Guido and Bonconte da Montefeltro (D'Ovidio, 61). Actually, according to Dante, Guido da Montefeltro ended up in Hell, even if he had become a friar and was absolved of his last sin by the pope himself (Inferno, XXVII, 67-132); on the other hand, his son Bonconte is found in the Ante-Purgatory (Purgatorio, V, 85-129). Bonconte was killed while fighting against the Guelphs in the Battle of Campaldino (1289). Dante tells that Bonconte was pierced in the throat, and his soul was saved only because he pronounced the name of Mary in the moment he was dying. Even the devil, who was sure that he would be able to take the soul of the wicked ghibelline, is astonished to see that he is saved in hora mortis, and shouts to the angel who takes Bonconte's soul: 'O thou from heaven, why dost thou rob me?' Thou bearest away the eternal part of him, / For one poor little tear, that takes him from me' (Purgatorio, V, 105-107. Trans Longfellow). Despite ecclesiastical judgement then, that poor little tear was enough to save Bonconte, especially because he could benefit from the intercession of the Virgin Mary.

King Haraldr harðráði was certainly believed to be wicked enough to go straight to Hell, too. Adam of Bremen's Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum (III, 16) gives a very unfavourable portrait of him, describing him as a kind of enemy of Christianity. He writes that: 'King Harold surpassed all the madness of tyrants in his

savage wildness. Many churches were destroyed by that man; many Christians were tortured to death by him.' (Trans. Tschan 127-128).

King Haraldr died in 1066 during the Battle of Stamford Bridge, pierced in the throat just like Bonconte da Montefeltro. The sources write that on the very day and at the very hour in which Haraldr fell, his daughter Máría died in Orkney. This tradition, which must have had as strong an emotional impact as any of the many other anecdotes surrounding Haraldr's death, was probably very popular, because it is attested in Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar (ch. 98), Msk (p. 282), Fsk (ch. 72), and also in Orkneyinga saga (ch. 34). Snorri does not emphasise this event, but seems to regard it as his duty to report it. The other three sources also report people's attempt to explain it, writing that it was said that Máría and Haraldr shared the same life: Pat mæltu menn, at pau haft haft eins manns fjor bæði. (Fsk ch. 72). This explanation was evidently sufficiently clear to contemporary saga readers, but the passage is now quite obscure and difficult to interpret. Only Msk provides some interpretative clues, because is the only source that describes Máría: hon var oc allra qvena vitrost oc fribvst syndvm oc vinhollost. (Msk p. 282, 11. 4-5).

Msk's portait of Máría makes her a positive alter ego of her father: her wisdom and loyalty to her friends may counterbalance Haraldr's pride and recklessness, but most of all, her death may weigh against his sins when they reach the Other World together. Moreover, Máría's portrait echoes the numerous descriptions of her important namesake: her peculiar plea for her father's soul reminds us of the medieval faith in the intercession of the Virgin Mary, who was believed to defend sinners at the tribunal of Judgement (Vovelle, 127).

Just like the soul of Bonconte then, Haraldr's soul was probably considered to have been saved in hora mortis, thanks to the intercession of a Mária who looks very much like the Virgin: the following story of Haraldr's burial in Elgjusetr seems to confirm that the sources believed his soul to be in a place where it could make satisfaction for past sins, a place that was somewhere between Heaven and Hell.

Abbreviations

Ágrip = Ágrip af Noregskonunga Sǫgum. Fsk = Fagrskinna. HómÍsl = The Icelandic Homily Book Msk = Morkinskinna.

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