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 (Tertulliani 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

1 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:

Petrus ait. Vita villda ek þat, hvart þvi ma rettliga trva, at hreinsonar elldr se eptir andlat. 39. Gregorius dixit. (...) En þo ma þvi trva, at hreinsonar elldr se friðon fyrir nokkrvar inar smæri synþir, þvi at drottinn maðr sva: 'Sa er mælir guðlastan í gegn helgum anda, þeim fyrirfæt þat hvarki þessa heims ne annars.' Í þesso akkvæði synir hann þat, at nokkrvar synþir fyrirfæzi í þessorn heimi ok nokkrvar annars heims. (Heilagra Manna Sægur 1, 252, ill. 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):

þeir scolo þat til hafsa til synþa lásnar oc verþleiða víþ gúþ. at þeir þóli vel hreinsonar eld þan es gúþ legr a hendi þeim her. oc brenir af þeim synþa söttir. (Hómsl 29, 44r17-19)

Nu scaut ec af þui dömisoðo þessi í þetti máð. at þat es styrkning mikil þeim mónom er fyr vanþiðo verþa eþa mana missi. eþa færþesp. nu er slíct hreinsonar eldr her ínan heims. oc brenir þat synþir at mónom þeim er sva verþa víþ sem jöð. (Hómsl 43, 70v32-35)

vít hver þa þegar sín hluta. hvért háðn scal helvitis qualar hafa þér es atløge scal þríða. eþa scal háðn hafsa hreinsonar eld nécqueria sund. ( .. ). Af þui nemi ec hældr enar smaéri til þes at hreinsonar eld dren megi af brenn an enar stórri. at þer eina ma hreinsonar eld en at taca. er hinar smaéri synþir ero callapær. en hinar eongar er hafþop synþir ð. (Hómsl 43, 71v15-21)

These examples show that the idea of purgatorial fire was certainly known in twelfth-century 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).

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2 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).

3 The word hreinsanareldr is also found in later works: Diplomatarium Islandicum (VI, p. 592, l. 2); Elucidarius (p. 120, l. 6); Hulda-Hroknkinna (I, p. 139, l. 14); Postola Sægur (p. 271, l. 21, where the word purgatorio is also recorded; p. 623, l. 31; p. 886, l. 15; p. 930, ll. 5-6); Marta Saga (p. 102, l. 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 Letzla (ch. 15), and Draumkvæde (att. 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 Elgjusetr, 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 Ækkvangur, founded in 1168, was only the first of five that adhered to it, the others being at Flatey (which moved to Helgafell in 1184), Saurboe (7), 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 Reykjavólábók.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 Æingeyrar in 1133; the other Benedictine houses in Iceland were Munkalývér and Kirkjubøar (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 Ágrip af Nörigs 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. Óláf 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 víttu, sonr minn, at fara nú með mér eða verða allra konunga rikastr ok lífa lengi ok gera þann glop, 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 (traut).

4 The saga of St. Nicholas of Tolentino has been recently edited and translated into Italian (Salvucci).
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 skalpr, who betrayed King Eyvisteinn Haraldsson, will get absolution for his grievous sin only after a long period of atonement:

Mun sás morði vanðisk
margillr ok sveik stilli,
sið af slikum rðum
Simon skalpr of hjalpask.  

(Fsk ch. 101 p. 341 st. 272)

Einarr’s stanza has been interpreted in slightly different ways by modern scholars. Guðbrandur 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 skalpr, will but slowly / for such deeds get absolution.’ I think that Guðbrandur 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: Simon skalpr 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 Haraldur 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 Sigrðarsonar (ch. 80) Snorri writes that King Haraldur opened the shrine of St. Óláfr, trimmed the saint’s hair and nails, then locked it again and threw the key into the river Nið: 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. Haraldur 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 those 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 Mártukirkju í Niðarösi -en nú liggr hann á Elgjusetri- þvat þat þótti fallit at hann fylgði kirkju þeiri er hann hafði látit gera, (...). (Ágrip ch. 42)
En v flétt hann at Elgesëtre. þvi at þat þótti fallit at hann fylgði þeiri kirkio er hann sialfr hafði látt gera. (Msk p. 284, 9-11)

Elgusetr, 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 Eysteinn erkiðyskup let þangat fera hann hreinljósis Mommom vndir hendra. oc aflæt til þar með mikilla eigna. oc a/kapi micoc staðarins gæpi með þeim eignom er hann sialfr hafþi þangat gefit. (Msk 284, 11-15)
(...) en Eysteinn erkiðyskup let þangat fara hreinljósisinn undir hendra, ok sukaði með þvi þa 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 Elgusetr 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. Ariës, 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,⁷ seems also to be witnessed in the Old Norse synoptic histories of the kings of Norway.

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⁶ See Pesch (131), Nyberg (416), France (292).
⁷ Cf. Vovelle (74); Ariës (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 Clemenskirkja 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 (Ariés, 59). It is therefore difficult to know whether Óláfr kyrrí, Hákon Magnússon, Óláfr and Eysteinn Magnússon berfættu were buried inside or outside the church, because the sources only relate that they were buried at Kristskirkja in Nícórrós. The same is true of Harald gillíi and his son Sigurðr, who are only said to be buried at Kristskirkja in Bergen. We are provided with more detailed information in the cases of Sigurðr Jórsalafari and Ingi Haraldsson gilla, who are both said to be buried at Hallvard's kirkja in Oslo, in the stone wall on the south side outside the choir. The site fyrir vytt 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 exedris ecclesiae). Ariés (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 Kristskirkju fyrir vytt kor enn nu er þat jánnan kors
fyrir rume erkebýskups. (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 Morkinskina was written, i.e. in the thirteenth century), he lies inside the choir (enn nu er þat jánnan kors). 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 (Ariés, 52-53, 88-90).

The story of King Haraldr gillíí’s gifts to the Icelandic bishop Magnús 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 gillíí had blinded and emasculated his kinsman Magnús (Msk p. 401, ll. 20-22), and afterwards he had hanged Bishop Reinaldr (p. 401, ll. 27-31). Msk (p. 402, ll. 1-4) displays its strongly negative judgement, writing that this deed probably doomed Norway and caused God’s wrath.

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1. Óláfr kyrrí: Óláfs saga kyrrí ch. 8; Msk p. 296, ll. 25-27; Fsk ch. 79; Ágríph ch. 45; Theodrici Monachi Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium ch. 29. Hákon Magnússon: Magnús saga berfættu ch. 2; Msk 298, ll. 29-30; Fsk ch. 80; Ágríph ch. 47. Óláfr Magnússon berfættu: Magnúsóna saga ch. 18; Msk p. 364, ll. 26-28; Fsk ch. 93; Ágríph ch. 52. Eysteinn Magnússon berfættu: Magnúsóna saga ch. 23; Msk p. 388 ll. 2-3; Fsk ch. 93.


3. Sigurðr Jórsalafari: Msk p. 400, ll. 11-13; Magnúsóna saga ch. 33; Fsk ch. 93. Ingi Haraldsson gilla: Hákónar saga herðabréðs ch. 18.

4. 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 Magnus Einarsson. Msk’s author writes that this passage has been included to illustrate King Haraldr’s generosity (p. 405, II. 15-16: 

\[ \text{hessom ivt ma marca storleti Harallis konvngs}, \]

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:

\[ \text{Ða mælti byscop. Anat raø vil ec taca. Gøra scal af calec her at staðnom.} \]
\[ \text{oc vil ec sva firir mela at hann nioti. Oc villda ec at þeir enir helgo menn} \]
\[ \text{allir er her er af helgom domom i þessi iNe helgo kirkio leti konvng hvert} \]
\[ \text{siN niota. er ifir honom er messa svingi. (Msk p. 405, II. 6-12)} \]

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 Poenitentiera 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, especially 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: ‘\text{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 harbráði 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. Tschau 127-128).

King Haraldr died in 1066 during the Battle of Stamford Bridge, pierced in the throat just like Bonconte da Montecelotto. The sources write that on the very day and at the very hour in which Haraldr fell, his daughter Mári dried 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 Mári and Haraldr shared the same life: Pat mæltu menn, at þau haft haft eins mans fjór baði. (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 Mári: hon var oc alira quena vitrost oc frífræst syndum oc vinnhollost. (Msk p. 282, li. 4-5).

Msk's portrait of Mári 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, Mári'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

Agríp = Agríp af Noregskonunga Sǫgum.
Fsk = Fagrskinna.
Hómís = The Icelandic Homily Book
Msk = Morkinskinna.

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*Diplomatarium Islandicum. Íslenzkt Forbréfaskap, sem hæfir inni að halda bréf og gjörginga, dóma og múlafra, og aðrar skrár, er snerta Ísland eða íslenzka menn. VI bindi*. Reykjavík: Í Félagsprentsmiðju, 1900-1904.


