Laughing at religion was possible for medieval Christians, whose Twelfth Night and Shrovetide revels seasonally encouraged the parody of God’s priests and scriptures. Here it is presumably the worshipper’s, not the agnostic’s, familiarity with the divine which ‘breeds innocent humour within groups who share common knowledge and common assumptions’. Within religious groups the humour is innocent even when propriety is transgressed, for ‘without the veneration there would be no joke’, and the common set of beliefs amplifies a shared response to jokes, be they ever so irreverent. The joker elicits the knowledge of others, who then find themselves contributing the background that will make the joke work; if it works (even tastelessly), the audience joins him in its response (even unwillingly) and both find themselves ‘a community, a community of amusement’. And yet there are some who fail to see the joke, who might regard religious irreverence as blasphemous.

2 Screech, _Laughter at the Foot of the Cross_, p. 232.
4 Cohen, _Jokes_, p. 40.
what extent Norse heathen jokers could blaspheme is a question which I shall face here.

The best case of heathen reaction to a religious joke is that of a Christian humorist against pagans in c. 998, Hjalti Skoggiason, whose brother-in-law, Íslendingabók (1. 1125) it is said that Hjalti was sentenced in the Alþing to the lesser outlawry of goðgja. En þat vas til þess haft, at hann kvað at logbergi kvölding þenna:

Vil ek eigi goð geýja; grey þykkly mér Freyja.³

Hjalti made his joke a year before Iceland became Christian by an act of the same parliament in c. 999.⁴ The word goðgja occurs only in connection with the tale of Hjalti's bad day at the Alþing: in Íslendingabók, as above, and in Landnámabók (Sturlubók, ch. 367 and Hauksbók, ch. 322), Kristni saga, ch. 10 (c. xiii, author possibly Sturla Dóðarson) and Njáls saga, ch. 104 (c. 1290).⁵ Kristni saga provides the fullest account of the prosecution, which was led by the overbearing Rúnlfr Úlfsón, goði of Dalr. Landnamabók adds an aftermath: on his illegal return to Iceland, Hjalti and his followers got mounts to the Alþing from Hjalti's brother Þórdalr, 'en engi treystisk annarr fyrir ofrifi Rúnlfrs Úlfssonar, er sekðan hafði Hjaltu um goðgja.⁶ It is worth noting that Rúnlfr was brother's son to the arch-heathen Valgarðr the Grey and cousin of Móðr Valgarðsson. In Njáls saga, he acts as host to Órkell, one of the enemies of Gunnarr Hámundarson (chs. 52–3), and supports Móðr in law against Gunnarr (ch. 65). Since Móðr and Hjalti both married daughters of Gizurr the White, Rúnlfr, Móðr's cousin, was Hjalti's kinsman by marriage. In his prosecution of Hjalti, therefore, it is likely that we see an instance of frendaskomm ("kinsmen's shame"), a term for a law first passed in Iceland in c. 997 by which kinsmen of the third to the fifth degrees were shamed into prosecuting their family's religious rebels for the sake of the greater honour.⁷

This law had been passed in order to banish Stefni Dorgilsson, a Christian lay preacher, whose crime according to Kristni saga was 'at meiða hof ok horga en bjóta skurðgoðy.⁸ His offence, approximate to sacrilege, is related to blasphemy. Stefni's punishment was mild, when compared with that of Wulfred, an English missionary in Sweden in the early eleventh century who was lynched by the crowd when he tried to smash an idol of Þor in a pagan council.⁹ There are other expressions whose meanings might overlap with 'sacrilege': at granda vœum ("to injure the sanctuaries"), a crime charged to the

³ Íslendingabók, ch. 7: Íslendingabók. Landnamabók, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, ÍF 1 (Reykjavik, 1968), 15. Cf. Íslendingabók. Skyldredning, ed. Finnur Jónsson, A I–II, B I–II (Copenhagen and Oslo, 1912–15) B 1, 131 (= Skj): 'For mockery of the gods. And it was held as grounds, that he had recited this ditty at the law-rock: I don't want to mock the gods (or, the gods to bark); to me Freyja seems to be a bitch.'


religiously disinterested sons of Eiríkr Haraldsson in an unnamed drópa by Einarr Helgason (c. 985); at granda veði is said to be typical of Eiríkr himself in a verse which is attributed to Egill Skallagrímsson in Eglí s álaga, and gøða gremi (‘fury of the gods’) is used by Egill and also in Vatnsdæla sága as an expression for the gods’ response to men who fail to do their duty to the laws and customs of their society. The term gøði (‘mockery of the gods’) is usually thought to refer to the verbal counterpart of sacrilege, to blasphemy, an offence which, by the laws of Moses or Justinian at least, was punishable by death. The heathen laws of Iceland have perished, but there it is reasonable to suppose that the form of verbal sacrilege was the making of an insult against a god. The native term for poetic insults or slanders is níð, about which there is much comment in the Icelandic Christian law. Grágás (c. 1119) stipulates full outlawry for the poet of even half a verse that contains either insult, or praise that the addressee can construe as one (‘Scoég gang varðar ef maðr ykir vm mani hálfa vísó þa er löstr er í eja hánung eða lofi þat er hann ykir til hæðungar’). Such insults charged the offended party with ergí, passive homosexuality if against a man; probably promiscuity, if the object of the allegation was female. A charge of ergí entitled the defamed party to kill the slanderer. That an ergí, once enacted, was probably regarded as an affront to the divine as well as the social order, is clear from a stanza attributed to the poet Þorný in Fóstbræðra saga, in which he refers to the gaping buttocks of a drowned enemy as a matter of gøððiðin (‘what causes hatred of the gods’), probably because the drowned man’s posture resembles one of a woman offering herself to a man.15

By calling Freyja a bitch (grý) in his verse in c. 998, Hjalti had charged her with a female version of ergí. That much is clear from the symbolic gøð in Hnúmál that Billings mar (probably the ‘wife of Billings’) leaves in her bedroom as her stand-in for sex with Óðinn (Hnúmál 101), who regards the bitch as one háðung (‘humiliation’) among several that his promised date inflicted on him (Hnúmál 102).16 Whether or not Hjalti’s gøði thus constituted a níð (‘slander’) is another matter, however. Hjalti, sentenced in the Alþingi to just three years’ outlawry, was not threatened with death or permanent exile. His relatively mild sentence may reflect his extended kinship with Rúnólf, the prosecutor; but at any rate, it is doubtful that his gøði was synonymous with an offence as severe as níð, which, if ever made against gods, might be regarded as ‘blasphemy’.


In failing to approximate to blasphemy from the heathen standpoint, the word goda undermines the idea of heathen piety. Unlike níð, this compound is not attested in the legal texts. Its second element derives from geva ('to bark; mock'). Hjalti plays on the ambiguity of this word, unexpectedly turning god from the verb's object to its subject, as if beginning with a promise to behave well among heathens after an earlier transgression against them. His words god geva are syntactically analogous to a construction in Hávamál 135, in which a man is advised to be kind to beggars: 'gest þú ne geva nē á grind hreikir'. The idea of goda, then, was not only to scorn the gods, but also to expel them from one's society. Hjalti's fellow Icelanders, who did not see his joke, expelled him from theirs. In this light, it seems to be the corollary of goda geva that Norse heathens saw their gods as guests at the feast, with the same questions of precedence ('Hvar skal sittja sjá?', Hávamál 2), food (Hávamál 3–4), attentiveness ('þunnu hljóði þegir', Hávamál 7) and squabbling ('órir gestr við gest', Hávamál 32), as would arise for humans. It is hard to see much piety in these circumstances. Even Loki, the gods' professional joker, is not killed but outlawed when he charges Freyja with promiscuity in Ægir's feast in Lokasenna ('Ása ok álfa, er hér inni ero, hvurr hefir þinn hör verit', Lokasenna 30). Loki's tirade is a sona ('statement of truths', cognate with sann, 'true'). His statement about Freyja is true, in a sense, and in another poem Freyja makes fun of her own mystery to Þórr when she turns down his request that she wed Þyrn in the land of the giants: 'Mic veiztu verða vergiarnasta' (Þrymskritha 13). These are two poems probably from the Christian era, from the eleventh and twelfth or thirteenth centuries respectively. But the fact that Hjalti walked off unscathed from Freyja in c. 998, even while his judges would have known her cult to be under threat, probably means that the question of religion is hardly relevant to these Eddic poets, because Icelandic heathens knew neither blasphemy nor veneration, two faces of the devout religious coin, as Christians understand these things.

'Heathen piety' for Norsemen must be redefined. There appear to be no surviving hymns to Norse gods, although Vetrloði's invocation of Þórr, a fragment, may be one (Skj B I, 127). As the poetry alludes to the gods with a focus on exploits, not attributes, perhaps would-be praisers of heathen gods had a fear of litigation similar to that which directs skalds in Gráðas to compose 'vm man löst ne löþ' (Gráðas). But even that degree of touchiness, if true, would add to the Norse gods' humanity. And when the gods die in Ragnarök, it is clear that they express not the failure of godhead but man at his best (Vafthrúðnismál 52–3, Vílauspá 53–7). Human embodiments for deities are not only standard in Norse mythology, but also fundamental to their names, in that terms such as 'thunder', 'brilliance' and 'love' had long been personified respectively as Þórr, Ólfr and Frigg. The inference from these names is that heathens gave human shapes to divine natural and abstract phenomena in order to deal with them personally. Portraying men as gods, the other way about, is also integral to Norse poetry, in which heathen skalds sometimes styled their patrons as gods and

17 Hávamál, ed. Evans, I, 67 and 129–30 (for forms). 'Do not mock a guest nor should you drive him to the gate.'
18 The Poetic Edda: Volume II: Mythological Poems, ed. U. Dronke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 339. 'Of Æsir and elves who are here inside each one has been your bed-fellow.'
19 'You'll know that I have become the man-craziest woman alive.'
21 Gráðas, § 238; Gráðas, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen, II, 183. 'Neither blame nor praise of a man.'
regularly used divine names as *heiti* for humans and giants. It is not for

Yet for gods the drawback to this two-way flow of influence is that weakness as well as strength attends the human form. The poet of *Lokasenna* (which, as John McKinnell says, 'has a surface of comic mockery') plays by this rule. In this poem, Loki's technique is to deconstruct the gods by moralizing their mysteries as flaws of character. So, for example, Óðinn's quest to father an avenger for Baldr becomes a matter of effeminacy, Freyja's fertility becomes nymphomania, Njörðr's oceanic process deviancy (stanzas 24, 30, 34). Moralizations of the sacred are dangerous. As Frigg says to Loki, 'firrir x forn rok firar' (*Lokasenna* 25): that is to say, humans should not know too much, lest they end up unravelling the powers on which they depend. Even Bórr stands by his humanity, and not only in his spell-witted entry into *Lokasenna*. His first duel with the world serpent is treated heroically in *Ragnarðrśpa* 14–20 (c. 850), *Húsdr śpa* 3–6 (c. 990), Eysteinn's and Gamli's verses (c. 1000), if not in at least three Viking Age stone relics. But his anxious time in Skýmir's giant glove figures unflatteringly in *Hárðarðsfjöðr* 26–7 (c. x) and in *Lokasenna* 60, as well as in Snorri's tale of Útgarða-Loki in *Gyfaginning*. In the first,

probably the oldest, instance:

* Bórr á afl cerit, enn ecci hiarta;
  af hrezzo oc hugleþyði þér var i hanzca troðtí,
   oc þóttsc a þa þa þor vera;
  hváþi þ þa þorir fyr hrezzo þínni
   hniósa ne fis,
   svá at Falarr heyðr.

Hárðarðr ínng rág, ec mynda þic i hel drepa,
  ef ec metta seilaz um sund.

Snorri's jokes in *Gyfaginning* are Christianized embellishments, but the greater age of his theme, as seen in these other examples, breeds the suspicion that the Norse heathens had many stories in which they could laugh at Bórr besides other gods.

To turn suspicion into likelihood, we must look for evidence of sanctioned *godgi* in skaldic verses with dates and contexts in the century preceding Hjáli's ditty in c. 998. My first of six examples is stanzas 23–4 of *Ynglingatal*, a genealogical poem which is held to have been composed by Háódlfr of Hvinir for King Rognvaldr of Greneland, and thus to be contextually dateable to c. 890:

Veit Eysteins enda fólginn
lokins lífs á Lófund, ok síkling með Sviarum kvýðu
józka menn ínna brenna.

'Óðinn: Bórr has enough strength, but no heart; in fear and cowardice of mind, you were stuffed into a glove, and then you didn't think you were Bórr; then, because of your fear, you dared neither sneeze nor fart in any way that Falarr might hear.

[Bórr:] Hoary-Beard the queer, I'd send you dead to hell if I could reach over this strait!'


god geýja: the Limits of Humour in Old Norse–Icelandic Paganism

Pjóðólfr, and possibly for Þorleifr inn spaki, a chieftain of Hordaland.31 In the second of two surviving narratives in this poem, Þórr is treated with affection, as he races towards Hrungrir (stanzas 14–20); in the first, however, Loki, Hönnir and particularly Óðinn are treated with mockery (stanzas 2–6). When Þjazi, in eagle’s form, asks them for some roast ox from their cooking fire, Óðinn fails to see the risk:

Fljót báð foldar dróttinn Fárbauna mög vára
þekkiligt með þegnum þrymsilar hvál deila,
ef af þreiðu þjóði bragðviss at þat lagði
ósvífandi ása upp þjóðhluti fjóra.32

(st. 5)

With beef on a table, Loki as a bad-tempered serving boy and Óðinn as a naively festive host in a retined hall, Pjóðólfr frames a conceit that gives a human baths to his gods. He has already called them velsparr varnendr göða (‘defenders of the gods economizing on trickery’, st. 4), so perhaps they deserve the indignity. But there is no doubt that his comparison mocks them. No tale survives to tell us that Pjóðólfr’s host thought his joke on Óðinn flat; the initial survival of this work suggests that he might have laughed at it. The title and vocabulary of Haustlög (‘harvest-long (lay)’) show that this poem was probably made for an autumn festival, in which any laughter would have been communal.

It was probably in Tønndlag in c. 960 that Kormakr composed Sigurðarkrýpa in honour of Earl Sigurðr of Hlaðir. With the exception of effectively two stanzas quoted in Snorri’s Hákonar saga göða, the

31 Íbíd., pp. 4–5. ‘Swiftly the handsome lord of the land [Óðinn, Earth’s husband] bade Fárbauni’s boy [Loki] deal out the whale of the cracking rope of spring-times [whale of the traces [changed from ‘whip’]: ox] among the thighs, and after that the Eslir’s prank-wise disobliger [Loki] served up four bull-portions from the broad table’.

32 The Poetic Edda II, ed. Dronke, p. 15.
stanzas of this work are strewn about his Edda. The difficulties of stanzaic sequence in this poem are discussed by Bjarne Fidjestol, who proposes pairing off belmingar into full stanzas. 33 I follow the sequence in SnE B I, 69–70, while quoting from Faulkes and breaking up st. 6 as stanzas 6 and 7:

Heyri sonr á (Sýra) sanreynis (fentanna vtr græppa letté uppi jast-Rín) Haralds (mína). (SnE v. 292)
Meytr er mogrum æðri morðteins í dyn fleina. Hjort far hildihorrum bjart Sigurdj jarli. (SnE v. 211)
Eykr með ennúðki jarðhjótr fáðardar breyti, hún sá er húnað bindtr. Seið Yggr til Rindar. (SnE v. 12, 308)

Svall, þá er gækt með gjallan Gauts eld hinn er styrr bækti gladfæðandi Gríðar, gunnr. Komsuk Urðr ör brunn.

(SnP v. 241)

Heiðr geri ek of mög mæran meir Sigroðr fleira; haptsœniss galt ek hærum heīðr. Sitr Þórri í reitum. (SnE v. 301)
Haftr maður ask nē eskis afspring með sér þingat fésærnanda at forra fæts. Vētru gōð Bjazra. (Hákonar saga, v. 68)

Hver myni vēs við valdi vegja kind of borgask? Þvít fúr-Rognfjóðr fagnar fens. Vá Graum til menja. (Hákonar saga, v. 68)

Algildan bið ek aldar allvald of mér halda ýs biðvangr Yngve uagr. Fót Hroptr með Gungni. (SnE v. 21)36

Each belmingr ends with a throw-away comment consisting of five syllables, an effect which Snorri, creating his own in Háttatal, calls hjaðstætti (‘abutted’), adding that ‘skal öðræk vera form minni’. 37 Turville-Petre may be wrong when he says that these minni ‘have nothing to do with the context’. 38 It is fairly clear that Earl Sigurðr is identified with Óðinn in stanzas 8 and 3, in which earl and poet in the main stanza are juxtaposed with Óðinn plus another subject in the minni. In st. 8, Kormak makes himself an instrument for the earl’s weapon-hand; as much as Gungnir is Óðinn’s spear. The inference of st. 3 seems to be

poetry] be heard.

[1] Let the lively son of the true testing Haraldr [Earl Sigurðr] heart (Being a generous man) I will let my yeast-Rhine of the Sýr [Freiya] of the poets of the fen-teeth [rock-poets’: giants’; their Freyja: Gummloð; her yeast-Rhine: mead of

that the poet, honoured as he is by the earl in a public ceremony, is as terrified as Rindr was when Yggr, with enormous difficulty (cf. Saxo’s tale of Rinda), 39 made her the mother of Váli. If we accept these correspondences, the earl is identifiable with Óðinn in other places too. Given the focus on the earl’s hjörðr (‘sword’) in st. 2, the sword-kennning Gauts eldr (‘Gautr’s fire’) suggests that Sigurðr himself is Gautr (Óðinn) in st. 4, so wild in battle that Úrðr herself comes out to register the dead. Sigurðr, the earl who bestows his wealth on unlimited numbers of guests in st. 5, is probably ribbed there for his unquestioning bounty in the proverb vélta god bjága (‘the gods tricked Bjazí’). After all, it was Bjazí who tricked the vélspurn gods when Óðinn offered him an ox-portion in Haustlæg 5, even if the gods just managed to survive by having Loki trick Óðinn back and by killing Bjazí (cf. vélum leða mey opt, ‘unless with trickery you lead the girl back here’, Haustlæg 11). The Bjazí-proverb must mean ‘But at what cost?’, a jest about prodigality. But then, in the st. 7 which does follow st. 6, Kormakr turns on the gentry with væ Gramr til menja (‘Gramr fought for necklaces’): each freecaller at Sigurðr’s table, like Kormakr, may expect to become his sword, his foot-soldier, in the battles by which this Óðinn-hypostasis seizes yet more treasure. Kormakr does not forget Hákon, the earl’s son, on whom he claims to load even more praise in st. 5: sér bjórr í reiðum (‘Bjórr sits in his chariot’: i.e. ‘I’m on my way’). If Earl Sigurðr is flattered as Óðinn, it follows that Kormakr meant to style his up-and-coming son as Bjórr.

Hákon became Bjórr’s more serious hypostasis when, as earl of his father’s region and ruler over most of Norway (c. 978–95), he consolidated his power after his victory against the Danes in Hjorungavágar in c. 985. It is thought that Eilfr’s hárðninga was one of many works composed then in his honour, one in which Bjórr and the giants can be read as an allegory of Hákon in action against the comic Danes and their allies. 40 In this baroque masterpiece Bjórr wades across a torrent on his way to see the giant Geirróðr in his cave. The flood is rising because of Gjálp, the giant’s daughter, who straddles the river the better to cascade into it from higher up. 41 There is but one thing for Bjórr to do:

Hardvaxnar lét (WT; R sér) herðir halllands of sik falla (gatat maðr njör in neytri njár-râð fyr sér) gjardhr; þverr lét, nema þyri (Bórnarn barna) sér Marnar snerribloð, til svíra salþaks megn vaxa. 42 (st. 7, SnE v. 79)

I take the prefix njár- to have two meanings and the word gjardhr two cases and roles; thus njárr can go into the second clause in apposition to maðr, without competing with herðir in the first clause, while neither maðr nor herðir need be emended (as in Skíð B I, 141). The consensus is for a singular compound njárðingr (‘strength-belt’, with Njórðr’s name in abstract form) in tmesis, but in a poem of so

39 Gesta Danorum III.iv.1–7; Saxoniae Gesta Danorum, ed. Olink and Ræder, pp. 70–2.
41 Skáldskaparmál, ch. 18: SnE I, 24–5.
many facets there is no reason why njarðr cannot also compound with rød, its neighbour (‘Njordr’s strategies’). The meaning would be that Þórr is too warlike to do what Njordr would have done in his place, swallow the giantess’ urine. Loki charges Njordr with this refinement in Lokasenna 34:

Hymnis meystr hófðo þik at hlandtorgi
ok þér i munn migo.44

whereby the river-drinking ocean is scorned as a patrician deviant.45 This is the human perspective. Eilifr appears to invoke for Njordr in his poem, whose cult may have become marginal (cf. *Hallfreðr’s claim to have left him a year before the other gods: ‘þjóðr lét ek af dul Njardar’).46 There is no disrespect for Þórr in Póstdrápa, who is fashioned into a more military hero than his prototype in Hauslóng, but in Párdrápa 7 his prestige comes at another god’s expense.

If Hákon could laugh at Njordr’s mystery in one poem, it seems that he was ready to make even more fun of Óðinn in another. ‘Hákonardrápa’ is the name scholars give a poem whose stanzas,


45 The Poetic Edda, ed. Dronke, p. 340. ‘Hymir’s daughters had you as a pissethrough and made water into your mouth’.

46 Chutie Ross (Þórr’s Encounter), p. 378) reads this scene as the humiliation of Njordr ‘during his captivity by the daughters of the giant Hymir’, without noting that it is the Ásir, not the giants, who have taken Njordr as a hostage in Lokasenna 34.

47 Fidjestøl, Det norrøne forstediket, pp. 102–6.


49 Cf. Fagriðna, ch. 26: Aggr, ed. Bjarni Einarsson, pp. 165–6: ‘Pessir jarlar hòfðu láti skirask ok heldu kristni, en engum manni þrongu þir til kristni, nema létu göra hvern sem vildi, ok um þeira daga spallas til kristni, svá at nálga var alþeitt um Úplund ok inn um Drúndheim, en helzk kristinni með sjónum.’ (These eruls [the sons of Earl Hákon] had themselves baptized and kept the Christian faith, but did not force anyone to become Christian, rather let each do as he wished, and in their day Christianity was greatly injured, so that throughout Úplund the country was almost entirely heathen and also around Drúndheim, and most Christian by the coast.’)

scattered about in Snorri’s Edda, are each attributed there to Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld Óttarssøn. The patron of this work is not named, as Fidjestøl points out; Fidjestøl considers it possible that the work named Hákonardrápa was composed for Earl Evrkr Hákonarson (i.e. in c. 1005).47 There is a story in Hallfreðr saga, supported by a full line of drottinkvætt and elsewhere by a brief statement in Skáldskaparmál, that Hallfreðr composed a poem in honour of Earl Evrkr Hákonarson, who, in the saga, pardons him for the earlier maiming of one Þórbjörn inn spaki.48 It is clear from the saga context that Christian forgiveness is the theme of the story about Þórbjörn. But it is also worth noting that the verse in Hallfreðr saga is not found in Snorri’s Edda, that Hallfreðr does not stay with the earl longer than it takes to compose the poem whose beginning is quoted; and that Evrkr’s Christianity, not to mention his brother-in-law relationship with King Knútr, might have made Hákonardrápa’s heathen kennings undesirable in a court with Christian clergy.49 Since Óláfr Tryggvason’s Christianity ruled out the use of pagan metaphors in Óláfsrdrápa and Æsfjadrápa Ólafs, which Hallfreðr dedicated to him, it is more likely that Hákonardrápa was composed, after all, in honour of the apostate Earl Hákon. Hákonardrápa, then, describes a marriage between the Earl and Norwaj in lavish detail. It is reconstructed from a scattering
of stanzas (Skj B I, 147–8), so no claims can be based on stanzaic sequence, but the idea contained in stanzas ‘3–6’ is clear enough.50

Sannyðum spenr sverða snaðr þiggjandi veggjar
barrathedda byjar biðtvær und sik Briða.  (SnE v. 10)

Prýr fleygjanda frakna (ferr jórð und menþverri)
líta eina at líta Ausa systur mjók traudan.  (SnE v. 121)

Ráð lukusk, at stúðan snjallráð konungs spaili
átti cinga dóttur Ónars við gróna.  (SnE v. 118)

Breiðleita gat brúði Bálgygg at sér teygða
steifar stoðvar hræfna stíla ríkismálum.51  (SnE v. 119)

Óðinn’s union with Jóðr had engendered Þórr, and his marriage with Norway, in particular, is hailed as glorious in Eyvindr’s Hálaygatal of c. 985.52 But while Halfreðr attributes a hiðras gamas role to Óðinn in Hákonardrápa, he characterizes this god rather differently from Eyvindr, as a ‘third-party’ (ðreith) ‘furnace-eyed’ (Bálgygg) husband,


51 [3] The brisk receiver of the steed of the following wind [ship’s pilot] entices himself with the true messages of words the barley- (or, pine-cone-) wimpled waiting-wife of the Third One [Óðinn].

[4] For this reason I think that the spear-caster [Hákon] (Earth goes down on the man who diminishes his store of necklaces) would be hugely unwilling to leave the gleaming sister of Auðr [earth] alone.

[5] The deal closed in such a way that, afterwards, the king’s eloquent conversational confidant took possession of the only daughter, who was grown with (or, in) (back-)woods, of Ænarr [Norway].


whose deception by a bored peasant wife (biðtvær, vói gróna; breiðleita brúði) follows on from her being sweet-talked (snjallráðr; teygða-þættir) by a passing ship’s captain into taking his necklaces (menþverri). It is odd enough that Halfreðr uses this ribaldry apparently to convey Hákon’s conquest of Norway. But why does he mock Óðinn while doing so? How, or with what licence, is easy enough: Óðinn is known to be cuckolded by his brothers (Lokasenna 26). But Óðinn was also acclaimed as Håkon’s ancestor, and if anything, Halfreðr’s mockery of this god is even sharper than Þjóðóðr’s nearly a century earlier in Haustfông.

Whatever the sequence of stanzas ‘3–6’ of Hákonardrápa, the poet’s emphasis on the earl’s victories as a sexual conquest is so strong there that it suggests Håkon wished to sanctify real-life coercions as an institution of kingship. The historical records of Håkon in the closing years of his reign do show him to have made peripatetic use of his subjects’ wives and daughters through the fjords of western Norway.53 Perhaps for this reason, Hákonardrápa may be dated to c. 990, a few years before Earl Håkon’s wronged subjects overthrew him.54 Its style is confident, and in stanzas ‘3–4’ the poet appears to identify Håkon with Ingvi-Freyr in his predatory role in Skírnismál. Three elements within Halfreðr’s ‘st. 3’ (the horse (teygdr), sword (þverd) and the barley-wimpled woman (bærbygðdóttir) connect Håkon with Freyr, whose emissary Skírnir, in order to secure a giantess for his master, rides the god’s horse (Skírnismál 8–10), wears his sword (Skírnismál 23) and relays Gerðr’s promise to meet Freyr in


54 Cf. SnE I, 158 (note to v. 10).
Barri (‘barley’, Skírnismál 41). With Norway’s being ítr in st. 4, Halldrœðr’s text is also reminiscent of Óðinn, whose arms are ítrbægdir (‘gleaming washed’) when she embraces her brother’s killer in Lokasenna 17 (just as Gerðr fears to do in Skírnismál 16). These are traces of older mythologies, but in Hákonardrápa they appear to reflect a shift in the earl’s politics by which he intended to revive the sexual privilege of archaic lordship. To do that, Hákon would probably have had to sideline Óðinn, whose cult is thought to have been boosted in the west of Norway by Haraldr hárfagri in the 880s. The Freyr-ideology would have been a mistake, however, given Þórr’s overriding popularity in the Viking age. Dórrdrápa bears witness to a solidarity between Hákon and his people which Hákonardrápa may show him to be in the process of losing.

If these examples show wit at the expense of different deities, it can also be inferred that a heathen poet could mock one god from the relative safety of being friends with another. Háðrarlóðjóð is a case where Þórr’s ‘slave’ adherents (þræla kyn, st. 24) are no match for Óðinn’s ‘earls’ (jarla, st. 24). In the more political context of occasional verse, however, Þórr generally comes off on top. He is more central to the harvest than either Óðinn or Loki in Haustlöng. Nótr can be mocked without fear of offending him in Dórrdrápa; although Óðinn, and perhaps Þórr, have lost prestige to Freyr in Hákonardrápa. With each shift of allegiance over time the pagan community is configured differently. That there were squabbles between cults is suggested by the Vanir–Æsir cult-war (Völuspá 23), the Óðinn–Þórr antagonism in Háðrarlóðjóð and Gautrekks saga (ch. 7).


Even an Óðinn–Freyr rivalry in the background of Viga-Glúms saga. But the fact that the comic stories were traditional, meant that they were sanctioned. The heathen community, largely coterminous with the joker’s ‘community of amusement’, remained intact so long as it laughed at a god when his story invited humour, and preferably under the patronage of a divine rival. When Úlfr mocks Þórrvaldr veili, who had asked him a. 998 to murder the missionary Bangbrandr, he appears to use Þórr as the butt of his humour:

Tekka ek, suns þótt sendi sanreynr bøð, tanna
hvarfn við hleypiskari, Hárbarðs vér fjaðræ,
érat ráfaka rekur, röng eru máð á gangi,
þé ek við minu mámi, minigít flugi á gína.

That is, with his kenning ‘true tester of the strait of the fjord of Hoary-Beard’s sanctuaries’ (sunds sanreynr Háðrarðs vía fjaðræ), Úlfr portrays Þórrvaldr as two things: a traditional drinker of Óðinn’s mead of poetry, a poet; and as a baffled Þórr, marooned on the other side of a (religious) gulf. Although Úlfr here appears to make fun of the Icelanders’ principal god, it seems that he does so, formally at least, under the aegis of Óðinn in his role as Þórr’s tormentor.

Hjálti, when he made his joke against a pagan deity, worked from the safety of knowing the Christian God. That much is clear from his

58 Cohen, Jokes, p. 40.
59 Njáls saga, ch. 102: Breuan-Njáls saga, ed. Einar Öl. Sveinsson, p. 263: ‘I'm not going to accede to the headlong cormorant of the teeth's vanishing [mouth's bird: fly], though the invitation is sent from a true tester of the strait of the fjord of Hoary-Beard’s sanctuaries; it isn't my business (wrong are the plans now afoot; I can see in them harm to myself) to gape for the fly of the sailyard-nag's [ship's] extender [sailor].’
mocker of Freyja as a ‘bitch’ (gry). Hereby the gods are dogs, their interaction rather like a scene in the Sermo Lupi ad Anglos (c. 1014), in which Archbishop Wulfstan describes a gang of men who buy a woman and use her ‘an æfter oðrum, and æce æfter oðrum, hundum geliccast, þe for fylþe ne scrifaþ.’ There is no extant scene from Old Norse mythology in which Freyja is transformed into a real bitch. In this way, Hjalti’s joke appears to represent an imported Christian conceit. In a heathen sense it had no basis in tradition; even if Freyja is promiscuous, it was not ‘true’ (could not be part of a *senna*) that she was a dog. This degree of cultural alieness may explain why there was a trial for Hjalti’s ditty in the first place. Not only was the penalty for this verse was mild, but of course the insult itself. Freyja was a relatively minor target. What would have happened to Hjalti if he had challenged Þórr?

To sum up, the evidence suggests that Norse and Icelandic heathens, while still heathen, did not know how to blaspheme. It seems that heathens could joke about their gods to each other so long as they did so within the scope of traditional motifs and with the backing of a more powerful god in each case as an insurance against personal retribution. Rulers could be styled as various gods, gods as flawed people, and it is likely that the communities that laughed at these permutations constantly changed religious configuration while keeping the same unfenced openness. That flexibility, so alien to Christianity, would have defined Norse paganism. The real blasphemy had to be directed from a foreign community, and to that extent, Hjalti’s god *gryja* may be our sole surviving example.

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60 *The Homilies of Wulfstan*, ed. D. Bethurum (Oxford, 1957), p. 270, lines 88–9. ‘One after the other, and each man after the other, most like dogs, that have no care for filth’.

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In Search of Lost Time:
Aldhelm and *The Ruin*

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*The Ruin* – which it is almost traditional to describe as a ruin itself, as bad fire damage has obliterated large parts of the text in the Exeter Book – is a meditation on that most Anglo-Saxon of preoccupations: the transitoriness of worldly glory. It takes the form of an extended description of an urban scene which alternates between the physical decay which confronts the poet in the present and an imagining, inspired by this vision, of what the city must have been like in the past. It is a poem of contrasts: between then and now, between a living city and a ruined shell, between the city as a collection of buildings and the city as a body of people with a corporate life. These contrasts serve to build up a unique sense of lost time, for not only does the author of *The Ruin* construct his own conception of the past, but he does so by examining the past constructions of other people.

In this paper I shall argue that, whether or not it is a description of an actual location – which most scholars take to be the Roman city of Bath, owing to the reference to hot streams in lines 43 and 46 —

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The Ruin is itself a construction, an edifice of literary building-blocks which have been quarried from the works of past authors. In particular, I shall examine the possible role of Latin tradition in the formation of the Ruin-poet's vision of the past and his poetic sensibility.

I think this approach may be helpful, as The Ruin's peculiarities of theme and style have not successfully been explained by purely vernacular references: although it is true that The Ruin shares an elegiac mood with the other texts from the Exeter Book which have been designated as elegies, there are also important differences between this group and The Ruin. The Ruin does not make use of octopoeia, the


For the purposes of argument I accept here the traditional eighth-century dating of The Ruin given by R. F. Leslie, Three Old English Elegies (Manchester, 1961), p. 35, although there has been no consensus on this matter.

trope of speaking through an imagined person, and it does not constitute a lament. Whereas the other elegies tend towards thoughts of consolation at the end, The Ruin - although the final section is so badly damaged that it is hard to say for sure - continues merely to describe the past life of the imagined inhabitants of the city. It features one of the most potent images of the Anglo-Saxon elegy - the remains of a past civilization crumbling under the inexorable pressure of fate (made explicit in The Ruin in line 24: oppeat pat onwende wyrd seo swihre) - but, while The Wanderer, probably the locus classicus of this motif, relates this general decay to the eardstapa's personal lament for his own vanished way of life, The Ruin takes this image and expands it with unparalleled detail of the remains themselves, making the overall tone of the poem - in the words of R. F. Leslie - 'an imaginative nostalgia for a glorious past, stimulated by a particular scene spread out before the poet's eyes'. The overall theme, much more so than in the personal elegies, is simply sic transit gloria mundi.

A model for this type of text can be found in variants upon the encomium urbis theme: there are abundant late Latin examples of poems in praise of a city which, like The Ruin, describe in great detail


The classic definition of the characteristics of Old English 'elegy' is that of Greenfield: 'a relatively short reflective or dramatic poem embodying a contrasting pattern of loss and consolation, ostensibly based upon a specific personal experience or observation, and expressing an attitude towards that experience'. S. B. Greenfield, 'The Old English Elegies', Continuations and Beginnings: Studies in Old English Literature, ed. E. G. Stanley (London, 1966), pp. 142–75, at 143.


Leslie, Three Old English Elegies, p. 3.
the city's architectural features and often the lives of its inhabitants. This genre, which was codified in the works of Menander the Rhetorician around 300, was described in the eighth century in a rhetorical tract:

Urbium laudem primum conditoris dignitatem idque aut ad homines illustres pertinet aut eam ad deos, si Athenas a Minerva dictur constitutas: et ne fabulosa potius quam vera videantur. Secundus est de specie moenium locus et situs, qui aut terrenus est aut maritimus et in monte vel in plano: tertius de secunditate agrorum, largi tione, monibus incolarum: tum de his ornamentis, quae postea accesserint, aut felicitate, si res sponte ortae sint et prolatae aut virtute et armis et bello propagatae. Laudamus etiam illud, si ea civitas habuerit plurimos nobiles viros, quorum gloria lucem praebet universi.

The city described in The Ruin is praised in similar terms: the walls are mentioned in the first line, where they are described as *wurtlic* 'wondrous', even though *wyrd* 'fate' has shattered them. Other architectural features – roofs, arches, gates – are described, which would also fall into the ‘second praise’ of the city.

The customs of the departed troops of men may have a particularly Germanic ring to them in The Ruin, with its description of *meodoheall monig mondromna full* ‘many a mead-hall, filled with the joys of men’ (line 23), but it fits the pattern of the encomium. We know that the inhabitants of the city were a martial people, and a noble people: they wear armour as, proud and flushed with wine, they look upon treasure, silver, on costly stones, on wealth, on property, on this precious jewel, this bright city in this broad kingdom (32b–38). Even after long years of decay, it is this impression of glory which comes to captivate the author of The Ruin.

There is no evidence that the works of Menander the Rhetorician or the eighth-century Frankish text quoted above were known in Anglo-Saxon England, and yet the *encomium urbis* was a genre of which the Anglo-Saxons were certainly aware. The late Old English poem *Durham*, for example, is a neat exposition of the rhetorical device in an English context: it briefly describes Durham's location, dwelling once again upon the waterways in the vicinity, and specifying that there are stone constructions in the city. The main concern of the *Durhamb-poet* is the town's ecclesiastical glory, and so the description of the bishops and holy men of Northumbria dominates the bulk of the poem; but it is the town, specifically, which is ‘extolled throughout Britain’:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Is } \text{deos } \text{burch breome geond Breotenrice,} \\
\text{steppa gesta dolad, stanas ymbutan} \\
\text{wundrum gewæcen. Weor ymbeornad,} \\
\text{eas ydum strange, } \text{and der inne wunan} \\
\text{feola fisca kyn } \text{on floda gemenge.}
\end{align*}
\]

\footnote{See P. Zanna, “Descriptiones urbis” and Elegy in Latin and Vernaculars in the Early Middle Ages. At the Crossroads between Civic Engagement, Artistic Enthusiasm and Religious Meditation’, *ML* 3rd ser. 32 (1991), 523–96.}

\footnote{See M. Schlauch, ‘An Old English “Encomium Urbis”’, *JEGP* 40 (1941), 14–28.}
And ðær gewexen is wudafastern micel;
wunniad in ðæm wycum wilde deor monige,
in deophe dalum deor ungerim.
Is in ðære byri eac bernum gecyðed
ðe ærfste ealdig Cudberc
and ðes clæne cyninges heafud,
Oswaldes, Engle leo, and Aidan biscal,
Eadberc and Eadfrith, scealere gefere.
Is ðær inne midd heom Ædelwold biscal
and breona bocca Beda, and Boisil abbot,
ðe clæne Cudberht on geceðe
ferde lustum, and he his lara weal genom.
Eardheoræt ðæm eadige in ðæm minstre
unatrimeda reliqua,
ðær monia wundrum gewurðað, ðes ðæ wæt seggeð,
midd ðæne drahnes weor ðomes biðereð. 12

The Ruin and Durham appear to form a distinct sub-group of Old English poetry with an urban setting. In Anglo-Latin, Alcuin's Versus de patribus, regibus et sanctis Eboriciensis ecclesiae comes close to fitting the paradigm, although it is only in one short passage near the beginning that the physical attributes of the city are described:

Mecum ferte pedes, vestris componite carmen
hoc precibus: patrisque quoniam mens dicere laudes,
et veters cunas propter proferre parumper
Eboriciæ gratis praecellae versibus urbis!
Hanc Romana manus muris et turribus altum
fundavit primo, comites sociosque laborum
indigenas tantum gentes adhibendo Britanniæ
nam tune Romanos fecunda Britannia reges
sustinuit mercito, mundi qui spectra regebant. 13 (15–23)

The correspondences in theme and imagery between Alcuin's poem and Durham are striking; it is worth noting that, in these two texts, as well as in The Ruin, it is only stone-built, Roman cities, which are lauded. Native Anglo-Saxon habitations, built in wood, do not seem to have attracted the attentions of such poets. 14

The remains of the city in The Ruin are stone, but they have crumbled all the same, and so this poem is not such a straightforward exposition of a city's good points: it takes the eulogistic rhetoric of the encomium and applies it to a vision of a destroyed settlement and its vanished inhabitants. The overall mood might thus be said to resemble that of the de excidio, 15 a type of text, if not a recognizable

12 ASPR VI, 27. 'This town is extolled throughout Britain, established on high, with stones around it, wonderfully grown up. The Wear surrounds it, a river strong with waves, and therein dwell many sorts of fish, many in the flood. And there is grown up a great forest: many a wild animal lives in its lair, in the deep dales there are many beasts. Also in this town, well-known to men, steadfast in grace, the blessed Cuthbert; and the head of Oswald, the holy king, lion of England; and bishop Aidan, and Eadberht and Eadfrith, his noble companions. Bishop Ædelwold is there with them, and the famous scholar Beda, and Boisil the abbot, who taught the holy Cuthbert in friendship, and he took his teaching well. In the minster are buried countless relics of the blessed; there many wonders come about, as writings relate, while God's company await the Judgement Day.'

13 Alcuin: The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York, ed. P. Godman (Oxford, 1982), p. 4. 'Walk with me, compose this song with your prayers: for my mind hastens to speak praises of our homeland, and quickly to proclaim in pleasant verses the ancient origins of the most renowned city of York. This high city a Roman hand first founded with walls and towers, bringing as companions and partners in these works only the native British people: for fertile Britain then rightly supported Roman rulers, who reigned over all the earth.'

14 R. I. Page, Anglo-Saxon Apologies (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 22-4, notes that Anglo-Saxon ruins could themselves be imposing, but this does not seem to have prompted poetic endeavour in the same way that Roman remains did.

15 Zanna, "Decriptiones urbis", p. 524, offers a definition of a sub-genre of elegiae urbis, which he sees as a 'meditative reflection on the fated downfall of great cities, their present and future state'.
genre, which was well known in Anglo-Saxon England as a result of Gildas’s polemical De excidio Brittaniae. But a closer parallel to The Ruin is offered by a sixth-century Latin work on the decay of a civilization, Venantius Fortunatus’s De excidio Thuringiae. In particular, the opening of this poem, with its emphasis on fate as the agent of destruction, and its dwelling on the architectural features of the city, seems to encapsulate the mood of the first half of The Ruin.

Condicio belli tristis, sors invida rerum!
quam subito lapsu regna superba cadunt! 
quae stetere longo felicia culmina tractu 
victa sub ingenti clade cremata iacet. 
aula palatino quaerit floruit ante ante culm, 
hanc modo pro cameris maesta favilla tegit. 
archa quae rutillo nireure ornata metallo, 
pallidus oppressit fulgida tecta cinis. 
missa sub hostili domino captiva potestas, 
decidit in humilis gloria celsa loco. 

Although this is only a brief excerpt from a much longer work, the correspondences between the two poems make the Fortunatus poem an interesting analogue – even if it cannot be claimed as a direct source – especially since Venantius Fortunatus was known in Anglo-Saxon England. Of early Latin authors, Bede knew at least one of

his poems, and Alcuin was familiar enough with his work to cite him as a source. It should not surprise us to discover, however, that the Anglo-Saxon author who seems to have known and used the works of Venantius Fortunatus more than any other Englishman of the period is Aldhelm, abbot of Malmesbury, bishop of Sherborne and ‘first English man of letters’. It has been demonstrated, by Andy Orchard in particular, that Aldhelm knew the full range of Fortunatus’s work, both his monumental Vita S. Martini, as well as his eleven volumes of occasional poetry. This knowledge forms an important part of the ‘remembered reading’ which underlies Aldhelm’s own writings. And thus, when we find references to urban decay in Aldhelm, it may be tempting to see the influence of Fortunatus somewhere behind them.

Aldhelm’s attitude to the past is necessarily coloured by his Christian beliefs: we see this when he speaks of the folly of pagans in believing fate to be the guiding force of their lives. He throws this in


Lapidge, ‘Earlier Period’, pp. 291–4. It is in the Versus de patribus, regibus et sanctis Eboracensis ecclésae that Alcuin relies most heavily on Fortunatus, reproducing verbatim diction from the Vita S. Martini.


as an appropriate aside during his narration of the life of St Benedict in his prose De virginitate.

si quidem post deruta simulacrorum sacella et dissipatas fanaticea
genititatis caeremonias, quae vitam veritatis expertem fatu fortunae et
genesi gubernari iuxta mathematicorum constellationem.22

The Ruin is not given to such overt moralizing, but from the very start of the poem the relationship between paganism, fate and the destruction of the city is implicit. Line 1 mentions fate, and line 2 describes the enta gewore, a term which I take to refer particularly to the remains left behind by a Roman, and importantly a pagan, civilization.23 The reference in line 27 to byra wigsteal ‘their temples’, implies a pagan sanctuary.24 There is a degree of moral irony in the

suggestion that these pagans, who believed in fate, were themselves undone by its capriciousness.25 Aldhelm would surely have approved of such a conclusion, as he probably wished to associate St Benedict with the prophecy in Amos VII.9: ‘demolientur excelsa idoli et sanctificationes Israhel desolabuntur’.26 This attitude unsurprisingly permeates Aldhelm’s writings, and yet it is well known that he read with great relish the works of pagan authors. His pupil, Æthilwulf, wrote to praise Aldhelm the teacher for the ‘veritable sagacity of your blessedness, being imbued, I believe, with almost all praiseworthy writings, both of secular (literature) produced with the fluency of verbal eloquence, as well as of the spiritual corpus’. The eternal truths of scripture of course took precedence, but the pagan authors had left behind a body of work which was still praiseworthy for its form, if not for the belief system it may have represented. Likewise in The Ruin, the remains are magnificent, even if the pagans themselves have withered away.

Aldhelm’s potential indebtedness to Fortunatus and the de excidio tradition, however, reveals itself in specific episodes in his work

22 De virginitate, ch. 30: Aldhelm Opera, ed. R. Ehwald, MGH Auct. antiq. 15
(Berlin, 1919), 269. After the sanctuaries of idols had been destroyed and the ceremonies of fanatical paganism routed – (paganism) which thinks according to the gang of astrologers, that life, empty of true meaning, is governed by the decree and formation of fortune. M. Lapidge and M. Herren, Aldhelm: The Poetic Works (Ipswich, 1979), p. 90.
23 The phrase enta gewore appears a total of seven times in Old English verse (see Table 1 on p. 38 below), and although this precise collocation does not necessarily refer to Roman remains in all these texts, it is possible to infer from the use of bora enta as an epithet for Rome in Eleso that the Romans could quite properly be described as ‘giants’ in Old English verse. For A. V. Talento, the implication of enta in the context of The Ruin is men of a former age who lived outside of Christian morality (‘Moral Irony in The Ruin’, Papers in Lang. and Lit. 14 (1978), 3–10, at 5. On the wider meaning and significance of this phrase, see P. J. Frankis, ‘The Thematic Significance of enta gewore and Related Imagery in The Wanderer’, ASE 2 (1973), 253–69; cf. E. V. Thornbury, ‘Éad enta gewore and the Relics of Empire: Revisiting the Dragon’s Lair in Beowulf’, below pp. 00–00.
24 There has been some debate over the meaning of wigsteal; Leslie stated that ‘all the other compounds of wig in Old English are used in the context of war’ (Three Old English Elegies, p. 73). As Wentersdorf points out (‘Observations on The Ruin’, p. 174), Leslie’s assertion is incorrect: wigsteal itself bears the

(C)NERI 200B; A. N. Napier, Trans. of the Philol. Soc. 1908, 184; Laws of King Edmund, ‘Be wifmannes bewed dung’, Ancient Laws and Institutes of England, ed. B. Thorpe (London, 1840) II, 254), and there are numerous compounds which are formed from wig and refer to pagan idols: see B–T, s.vv. ‘wiggld’, ‘wigsmið’, ‘wigerðung’, etc.
25 This point has been made by Talento, ‘Moral Irony’, 8–10; he probably goes too far, however, in ascribing a moralistic element to the poem; the description of the former inhabitants’ way of life (lines 32b–36), which Talento reads as condemnation for their drunken wantonness and savagery in warfare and their profligate wealth, does not imply such condemnation: line 48b, jox is nygel jing, ‘that is a noble thing’, seems to close the poem on a positive note.
26 ‘The high places of the idol shall be demolished, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste.’
rather than in his general outlook. In the Carmen de virginitate, during the account of the life of St Sylvester, he tells us of a dream which the emperor Constantine had, and which Sylvester interpreted as an instruction that the imperial capital should be moved to Constantinople. In the dream, a hideous crone is revived from death and rejuvenated, and the emperor does her great honour. This is how Sylvester interprets the dream:

Femina, quam torua crevisti luce vetustam,
Quae tibi horrebat ruillum squalente senecta,
Urba est, quam vulgo Bizantii nomine dicunt:
Constantinopolis post haec vocitetur in aevum!
Nomine nempe tuo gestat per saecula triumpbos;
In qua murorum praeclasa cacumina quondam
Nunc prostrata solo veterescunt arce ruenti;
Moenia marcescent et propugnacula mutant,
Quae quassat caries et frangit fessa vetustas.77 (632–40)

Constantine is charged with rebuilding the city, and Aldhelm continues the construction metaphor:

Per quos erectis castrorum turribus altis
Moenia murorum resursum imbecice rubra!78 (646–7)

The detail of the colour of the bricks, together with the description of the crumbling walls and battlements, is not traceable to a previous

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77 Aldhelmi Opera, ed. Ehwald, p. 379. ‘The woman, whom you thought was old in grim appearance, who disgusting you so much by her decrepit senility, is the city which men commonly call by the name of Byzantium: henceforth let it be called Constantinople for all time. Indeed, in your name it will perform triumphs throughout all ages. In this city the once lofty heights have grown old and now, fallen from their eminence, they lie strewn on the ground. The walls decay and the battlements totter – decay shatters these things and infirm old age destroys them.’ Lapidge and Rosier, Poetic Works, p. 117.

78 Aldhelmi Opera, ed. Ehwald, p. 380. ‘Having erected the lofty towers of a fortress, you shall renew the walls of the building with red brick.’ Lapidge and Rosier, Poetic Works, p. 117.

version of the Vita Sylvestri and it strongly recalls parts of The Ruin.

Further extraneous details about the nature of building materials are found in Aldhelm’s prose rendering of the episode from Sulpicius Severus’s Vita S. Martini in which Martin destroys the pagan temples. The source text describes Martin’s desire to destroy the temple, and the way in which he had to call upon divine assistance to achieve this goal.79 Aldhelm usually extracts carefully the fundamental parts of the narrative from his sources in the prose De virginitate, in line with the text’s nature as a catalogue of saintly behaviour: there is little room for embellishment. And yet in this instance he goes on to describe the temples in much more detail than does Sulpicius:

Priscorum diis ubera paganorum a cimentario politissimis compacta
petris rubrisque tegularum imbicibus tecta mortuim diffidens
ammiculco et angelorum fretus suffragio, qui hostii et scutati famulo
Dei praesidiis tantum venisse leguntur, solo tenus deruta quassavit,
eviet, destructix.80

Here pagans are once again explicitly linked to building in stone: the shrines of their gods were evidently an impressive structure, built, like the city in The Ruin, by craftsmen. In the Old English, the builders are referred to as wuldend wyhtgan ‘lords and makers’, or else possibly a compound meaning master-builders. This collocation of wuldend and wyhtgan occurs elsewhere in Old English as an epithet for the Christian


80 De virginitate, ch. 26: Aldhelmi Opera, ed. Ehwald, p. 262. ‘The sanctuaries of the ancient pagans which had been constructed from stones polished by the mason and covered with red roof tiles, he shattered, overturned and destroyed by casting them to the ground, distrust the assistance of mortals and relying on the help of the angels, who are said to have come armed with spears and shields to bring aid to the servant of God.’ Lapidge and Herren, Poetic Works, p. 85.
deity, this implies a high degree of approbation for the creative skills of these heathen artisans, and the temples that Aldhelm describes are also worthy of mention for the quality of their construction.

Although terracotta or clay roof tiles are naturally red, it is interesting to note that both Aldhelm and the Ruin-poet both specifically describe the roofs of the buildings as being this color. In line 30 of The Ruin there is a very unusual descriptive phrase which expresses this: _ond pas teaforgapapa tigelum seadeb_. Tigel for ‘roof tile’ is found nowhere else in the poetic corpus, and teaforgap is a hapax legomenon, the meaning of which has been much disputed, but which is a compound with the first element meaning ‘red lead’. This has been added partly from its appearance as a gloss for Latin _minium_ in the Antwerp glossary. Tigelum, which is not uncommon in prose, is also found in glosses, and it is used to gloss the lemma _imbriicus_ in the same passage on St Martin from Aldhelm’s prose _De virginitate_ in two manuscripts: Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, 1650, and Oxford, Bodleian Library, Digby 146. So the Ruin-poet appears to choose words which might have been obtained from glossaries to describe almost exactly the same architectural detail as the text from in which one of the glosses was available.

Throughout, the vocabulary of The Ruin is highly idiosyncratic, and merits further discussion. Of the 225 words in this poem, 37 are found nowhere else in Old English verse, which equates to 16.4%, and of these 37, 21 are unique compounds. Although a comparison with the rest of Old English is difficult, such an incidence of hapax legomena seems unusually high. Many of the compounds are part of a vocabulary of architectural and topographical description newly coined to describe an urban scene, and so the proportion of new words is perhaps unsurprising, but this reliance on neologisms displaces to a large extent the formulaic diction which normally characterizes this type of poetry. Apart from _enta geworra_ in line 2, there are only seven formulas which appear elsewhere in the corpus; even these are rarely found in an identical syntactic or metrical situation. The effect of this switch from formulaic doubles to unusual, apparently newly-invented compounds is to create a heightened poetic vocabulary which requires greater interpretation on the part of the audience, which was probably accustomed to the repetition of standard formulas as both a structural device, and a way of placing a text within a wider poetic context known to them. The vocabulary of The Ruin is part of a process of defamiliarization, which shifts the text slightly away from the expected norms of Old English verse. This process might be said to mirror the lexical choices made by Aldhelm and other authors of ‘hermeneutic’ Latin, where archaisms, Graecisms and glossary words all contributed to the complex, prolix and somewhat tortuous nature of their prose.

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31 See Table 1 (below, p. 38) for text references.
32 See Klink, Old English Elegies, p. 216. The rendering of _teaforgapapa_ that she adopts is ‘this red-arched thing’, this ‘arch of red stone’.
Christopher Abram

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Table 1. Formulatic diction in The Ruin.

As can be seen from Table 1, the one text which shows a surprisingly high number of verbal parallels to The Ruin is Maximus II. In the first five lines, we learn that cities are seen from afar, the ingenious work of giants, those which there are on this earth, wondrous work of wall-stones:

Cyning sceal rice healdan. Ceastr beoð feorran gesyme, 
orðane enta geweorc, þa þe on bysse cordan synond, 
wrelict wealstana geweorc. Wind byð on lyfte swifust,


In Search of Last Time: Aldhelm and The Ruin

þunar byð þragum hludast. þrymmas sundan Cristes myclec, 
yrd byð swiðost.37 (1–5a)

Here, fate is said to be the most severe, recalling line 24b of The Ruin, wyrd sceo swipe. It seems strange that a poem of such a general proverbial aspect should use phrases which are found also in a poem which is so rooted in a specific location, and which uses such an unusual vocabulary to describe a specific scene. As Maximus II is believed to be among the earliest extant Old English poems, possibly dating in some form to the conversion period,38 we might safely assume that if the author of The Ruin borrows from any one vernacular text, Maximus II is that poem.

But the author of The Ruin departs from the norms of Old English not merely by his use of a non-standard vocabulary. He or she also demonstrates a number of stylistic quirks which seem unusual, but which may have parallels in Anglo-Latin. The most striking example of this is the prevalence of double alliteration, where two stressed syllables in the first half-line alliterate with each other as well as with a stressed syllable in the off-line. 80% (32 out of 40) of the legible verses in The Ruin feature double alliteration, which is clearly a very conscious effect. The ofþer-clause at line 24, which is the culmination of the first half of the poem, with its reference to fate as an agent of change, has only single alliteration, after a very

37 ASPR VI, 55. ‘A king must rule a kingdom. Cities are seen from afar, the ingenious work of giants, those which there are on this earth, wondrous work of wall-stones. Wind is swiftest in the air, thunder the loudest in its seasons. The powers of Christ are great; fate is the most severe.’

nearly continuous string of double-alliterating verses up to this point; this patterning directs our attention to fate’s role in the city’s decay. Elsewhere in Old English, double alliteration is fairly common, with an average of almost 47% of lines bearing this type of alliteration, but no other poem is nearly so insistent in its use of this device.  

Aldhelm, it has been suggested, made a feature of alliteration in imitation of vernacular practice in his octosyllabic Latin verse, and this includes some instances of double alliteration, but Aldhelm’s approach to this device is unsystematic, and only 23% of the lines in his Carmen rhythmicum feature double alliteration. It is in the works of his pupil, Æthilwald, that the rate of double alliteration in Latin octosyllables shoots up above even the average distribution of this type of line in Old English, and the structure of these lines is practically identical to that of the vernacular model. There is little doubt that Æthilwald consciously imitated vernacular verses, as Aldhelm rebuked him in a letter for perhaps straying too close to the pagan poetry that Æthilwald suggests he learnt from Aldhelm himself. Æthilwald’s alliterative practices in his octosyllabic verse show that he has learnt all too well the art of secular versification. In his poetry, for example, all vowels alliterate with each other, and f, r, and ph all alliterate, just as in Anglo-Saxon macaronic poetry. And, as both his poetry and The Ruin stand so far above comparable texts in their use of double alliteration, it is perhaps not too far-fetched to postulate potential influence of the one upon the other. It may seem

a perverse line of argument, that a specifically Germanic metrical feature should lead to the suggestion of Latin influence, but through Aldhelm, Æthilwald and down into the octosyllables of other West Saxon poets such as Boniface and his circle, all of whom existed in a West Saxon literary milieu similar to that which probably produced The Ruin, alliteration was almost as much a part of Anglo-Latin stylics as it was of Old English. Latin authors, however, did not rely on alliteration for their metre as vernacular poets generally do; it was a conscious poetic effect, and the heightened use of double alliteration in The Ruin seems to be an attempt to achieve something similar. That the Ruin-poet’s approach to double alliteration may be paralleled with Æthilwald’s is perhaps shown by the fact that Riddle 40, a translation of one of Aldhelm’s Latin Enigmata, in fact shows considerably less than average double alliteration: 30%, which is not too far away from the 23% of lines in Aldhelm’s rhythmical verse which exhibit this feature. This may constitute evidence that Latinate Anglo-Saxon poets were capable of a good deal of sensitivity in choosing when and where they appropriated stylistic effects from the other tradition.

There are other stylistic features which may have derived from Latin: the six instances of rhyme in this poem, and the other instances of rhyme in Old English verse, have been identified as a Latinate device, although the internal half-line rhyme of lines such as sorenet, gedorene (5b) and steope geap gedreas (10b) much more closely resembles the type of rhyme which predominates in Old English verse – with the exception of The Rimming Poem and lines 1236–50 of Elene, both of which texts exhibit something akin to leonine rhyme –


40

41

Ibid., pp. 242–53.
than the end-rhyme which is often found in Anglo-Latin couplets.\textsuperscript{45} The Ruin is also notable for its unusually low incidence of enjamment; most lines are self-contained sense units.\textsuperscript{46} Aldhelm, too, is noticeable for the prevalence of end-stopping in his hexameter verse, perhaps as a result of his inexperience with the meter;\textsuperscript{47} his caesura-patterning is simplistic and unvaried, with the caesura in his hexameter lines falling with great regularity in the middle of the hexameter line, creating something similar to vernacular half-lines.\textsuperscript{48} It seems clear that even the stylistic quirks of the Ruin-poet cannot be sourced to a particular Anglo-Latin author, they can often be paralleled in the works of Aldhelm and his followers.

There has been a growing suspicion over the years that Old English and Anglo-Latin poetry must have been mutually influential;\textsuperscript{49} Anglo-Saxon poets who wrote in Latin would naturally have known Old English, and William of Malmesbury's oft-quoted description of Aldhelm's unmatched prowess as a vernacular poet is worth mentioning again.\textsuperscript{50} It is interesting to note that the poems for which influence of Anglo-Latin have been claimed are generally associated with a West Saxon literary milieu: Michael Lapidge has forcefully argued for a West Saxon origin for Beowulf\textsuperscript{51} whilst James W. Earl's insistence that the Exeter Book Rime Poem constitutes an example of 'hisperic' Old English analogous to 'hermeneutic' Latin would militate in favour of a West Saxon origin, as the hermeneutic style was developed and popularized in West Saxon foundations. The translation of Aldhelm's Enigma c, 'De creatura', into Old English is similarly preserved in the Exeter Book as Riddle 40. It seems incontestable that The Ruin should be viewed as part of this same bilingual tradition of West Saxon poetics: first, it is almost certainly a poem describing Bath, and it is preserved in a Wessex manuscript. The stylistic features shared by The Ruin and Latin poems of Aldhelm and his followers are suggestive, but they can be no more than that: to compare Old English verse and Latin hexametrical or octosyllabic verse is not to compare like with like: their verse forms must, by their nature, differ much more than they agree.

The Ruin, however, is not to be associated with the West Saxon Anglo-Latin tradition merely on stylistic grounds; there is a cumulative weight of evidence, which seems incontrovertible. The Ruin's formulaic diction may be found in a small number of texts, all with possible West Saxon connections: The Wanderer is preserved in the Exeter Book; Beowulf is possibly West Saxon and has been associated with Aldhelm, and Andreas may be closely connected to Beowulf, on lexical grounds; Maxims II has been claimed as a West Saxon production.\textsuperscript{52} There are also the similarities between The Ruin

\textsuperscript{45} See F. Kluge, 'Zur Geschichte des Reimes im Altgermanischen', Paul Braun Beiträge 5 (1894), 422–50, esp. 425–6 and 429–30. Of Old English poems, Beowulf appears to contain the most instances of this type of rhyme; steep gap geredas resembles Beowulf 1423a fload hlode wæl, and even more closely resembles Exodus 463b fald hlod gwaed.

\textsuperscript{46} Not until lines 6b–7a is there a phrase which makes no sense within a half-line: another extreme stylistic effect; Lee, 'Bath or Babylon?', p. 452.

\textsuperscript{47} Lapidge, 'Aldhelm's Latin Poetry', p. 217. Orchard, Poetic Art, p. 115, postulates that Aldhelm's attitude towards end-stopped hexameters may indicate the influence of 'oral tradition'.

\textsuperscript{48} Orchard, Poetic Art, pp. 92–4.


\textsuperscript{52} The provenance of Maxims II, which is preserved only in London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B i (s. xi\textsuperscript{med}), is unclear; two suggestions have been offered. S. A. Brooke, The History of Early English Literature, 2 vols. (London,
and the De excidio Thuringiae of Venantius Fortunatus, whose work was sufficiently well known in early Wessex that King Ine (688-726) had an epigram based upon Fortunatus’s poems inscribed in his new church at Glastonbury; Aldhelm is otherwise the only Southumbrian author who demonstrably quotes from Fortunatus. Most compelling of all, though, are the direct links between the motif of ruined cities in The Ruin and the works of Aldhelm. Kathryn Hume, rightly stressing that motif study must be rigorous to have any validity or usefulness, argues that there is no ‘ruin motif’ in Old English poetry; I think it safe to say, however, that the use made of ruin imagery by Aldhelm and the author of The Ruin constitutes a motif by itself, a motif which represents a shared attitude towards the Roman past but it is a motif within Anglo-Saxon poetry, not merely Old English. The peculiarities of The Ruin may best be explained by examining them in the context of an Anglo-Saxon poetic culture which breaks down the barriers between Latin and the vernacular, just as Aldhelm broke down those barriers when he interspersed his crowd-pleasing tales in Old English with quotations from scripture.

Did Columba’s Tunic Bring Rain?
Early Medieval Typological Action
and Modern Historical Method

Lawrence P. Morris
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Like most medieval hagiography, Adomnán’s Vita S. Columbae focuses on the miraculous. As a result, his narrative, and those of his contemporaries, has frequently met incredulity among modern audiences. Occasionally, however, various episodes in hagiography directly challenge our general assumption of ahistoricity. One such episode appears in book two, chapter forty-four of Adomnán’s Vita S. Columbae. Since this episode is the focus of my paper, I give it here in full.

Quae postquam omnia iuxta initum sunt peracta consilium, mirum dictu, eadem die caelum in praeteritis mensibus, marito uidelicet et apreli, nudatum nubibus mira sub celebitate ipsis de punto ascendentibus ilico opertum est, et plua [sic] facta est magna die noctuque descendens. Et siensi prius terti saeita saiatia oportune germina produxit sua, ut ulde laetas eodem anno segites.\(^1\)

Adomnán’s claim to have witnessed this event with his own eyes makes a strong claim to historical accuracy, and has convinced Charles Doherty, Máire Herbert and others of the event’s occurrence.\(^2\)

1 Adomnán, *Vita S. Columbae* II.xlv: *Adomnán’s Life of Columba*, ed. A. O. Anderson and M. O. Anderson, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1991), p. 172. The miracle which by God’s favour we are now about to recount took place in our own time and we witnessed it with our own eyes. It happened about seventeen years ago. Right through the spring a severe drought lasted unrelieved so that our fields were baked dry. It was so bad that we thought our people were threatened by the curse which the Lord imposed on those who transgressed, where it says in Leviticus: “I will make your heaven as iron, and your earth as brass. And your strength shall be spent in vain: for your land shall not yield her increase, neither shall the trees of the land yield their fruit”, and so forth. As we read this and thought with fear of the blow that threatened, we debated what should be done, and decided on this. Some of our elders should walk around the fields that had lately been ploughed and sown, carrying with them St Columba’s white tunic and books which the saint had himself copied. They should hold aloft the tunic, which was the one he wore at the hour of his departure from the flesh, and shake it three times. They should open his books and read aloud from them at the Hill of Angels, where from time to time the citizens of heaven used to be seen coming down to converse with the saint. When all these things had been done as we had decided, on the same day – wonderful to tell – the sky, which had been cloudless through the whole of March and April, was at once covered, extraordinarily quickly, with clouds rising from the sea, and heavy rain fell day and night. The thirsty ground was quenched in time, the seed germinated and in due course there was a particularly good harvest.\(^3\) R. Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba* (Harmondsworth, 1995), pp. 199–200.

2 M. Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry: the History and Hagiology of the Monastic...

Not all have been convinced, however. Richard Sharpe, following Gertrud Brüning, has drawn attention to the general and verbal similarities of Adomnán’s account to an episode recorded in Gregory the Great’s *Dialogi*.\(^3\) According to Gregory, whenever the citizens of Nursia were threatened by a long drought, they would raise the tunic of Euthicius, offer up prayers, and process through the fields, whereupon rain would come at once.\(^4\) As a result of these similarities, Sharpe comments, ‘Adomnán’s use of this text…raises an insoluble problem: … Did it happen, is it a literary fiction, or was the act itself influenced by Gregory’s book?’\(^5\)

I believe that this problem is not insoluble. Moreover, an answer to the question of the episode’s historicity is important for the literary historian, since whether or not the event occurred dramatically affects

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our understanding of Adomnán as an author. If the event did occur, then Adomnán’s account becomes a more or less accurate description of an historical event. If the event did not occur, then Adomnán’s account, and his own personal testimony, cannot be trusted for historical accuracy, and, indeed, are alien to historical concerns, and may even be downright intentionally deceptive. The interpretation of this event therefore affects our reading of the Life as a whole and its aims and purposes.

If the literary historian must therefore investigate history, it is nonetheless not clear where to begin. There are no other accounts besides Adomnán’s about the event in question, so it is impossible to compare Adomnán’s report with the reports of others. What I have therefore undertaken is to place the details of Adomnán’s account within the general devotional background of the early Insular middle ages. The results of this investigation suggest that a procession with relics was a likely response to natural disaster in the early Insular middle ages. The nature of the evidence of this argument cannot prove that the event happened precisely as Adomnán indicates, but, combined with Adomnán’s personal testimony, it does demonstrate that the event is highly likely to have occurred. Once the historicity of the event has been established, we can investigate more accurately Adomnán’s relationship to his alleged source, Gregory’s Dialogi.

As already mentioned, the details of Adomnán’s account reflect religious practices common in the early middle ages. Adomnán’s notion that the drought had come upon the people on account of their sin has parallels not only with the bible, which Adomnán himself points out, but also with the general early medieval belief that sin resulted in disaster. For example, Gildas, writing in the sixth century, attributes the fall of the British to their sins.  

Within a more agricultural context, Bede’s commentary on Genesis notes that mankind loses control over nature through disobedience to God. A similar theme is found in Felix’s Vita S. Cuthberti, written around 735. These theological views parallel the statements in Leviticus, and mirror the punishment given mankind for the primal Fall. The link between righteousness and fertility can also be found in the apparently native Irish concept of fir flathemon, in which the fertility of a kingdom depends on the ‘truth’ or just judgement of its king. The concept of fir flathemon appears in a variety of early vernacular texts, and would become wide-spread throughout western Europe by means of the De duodecim abusivis, written in the late seventh century. Adomnán’s association of crop failure and unrighteousness was therefore a common one for his time and culture.

Likewise, the response of walking around the fields appears to reflect practices, or at least thought-framesworks, common in the early British Isles. Encircling or encompassing appears to have played a significant role in early Irish religion. One geis in early vernacular

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6 Gildas, De excidio Britonum i.3 and xxiv.1, among other places: Gildas: the Rain of

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7 Bede, Hexaemeron, bk I, comment on Gen. I.28: PL 91, cols. 9–190, at col. 31. Note the similar comment in Bede, Vita (prosaca) S. Cuthbert, ch. 21: Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert, ed. B. Colgrave (Cambridge, 1940), p. 224. For more on the connection in exegesis between the Fall and nature, see the note by Colgrave, Two Lives, p. 350.


9 For examples of fir flathemon in early vernacular texts, see Audacht Morainn and Togail Bruidne Da Derga. Audacht Morainn was compiled c. 700, and Togail Bruidne Da Derga was first written down during the ninth century; both works were dependent on earlier tradition. For the texts of these works and commentary, see Audacht Morainn, ed. F. Kelly (Dublin, 1976) and Togail Bruidne Da Derga, ed. E. Knott, Med. and Mod. Irish Series 8 (Dublin, 1936). For the date of De duodecim abusivis, see Audacht Morainn, ed. Kelly, pp. xv–xvi.
literature prohibited walking left-handwise around a particular place. The circle itself seems to have carried mystic significance, to judge from the various stone circles still to be seen in various parts of the British Isles. Similarly, the location of cult centres in early Gaul suggests that borders had mystic associations in early Celtic religion. Moreover, the comparative evidence offered by the Roman ambarmalia and the *sunetanuña*, both of which involved circling the fields with sacrificial offerings in order to ensure a good crop, suggest that walking the borders could be associated with fertility in an Indo-European context.

Although one cannot expect Adomnán to have been familiar with the practices of La Tène continental Celts, or the Roman festivals, these practices highlight associations that appear to have lived on into Adomnán’s time. Mystic liminality, in a literal sense, can be seen in the *Vita prima S. Britigae*, in which the saint is born in the doorway, with one of her mother’s legs being outside the house, and the other inside.

Moreover, *Samas Cormaic* notes, albeit perhaps imaginatively, that the poet-see *fiá* places a chewed morsel of raw meat behind a door and then sleeps in order to receive a prophetic dream. The protective aspect of encirclement can be seen in the seventh-century *Lorica of Laidenn*, in lines such as:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Tege rotum nae cum quinque sensibus} \\
\text{et cum decem fabrefactus foribus,} \\
\text{un a plantis usque ad uerticem} \\
\text{nullo membro foris intus egotem.}
\end{align*}
\]

The link between encirclement and fields can be seen in Anglo-Saxon charms, such as the tenth-century charm *For Unfruitful Land*, which involves blessing four pieces of turf from the four quarters of the land. And the *Vita S. Martinii* by Sulpicius Severus indicates that the practice of walking around fields with a statue for the sake of fertility, a version of the *ambarmalia*, was common at least in late fourth-century Gaul. A similar walk around a hill in Locronan,


15 *The Historica Flamina II: Related Poems*, ed. M. Herren, Studies and Texts 85 (Toronto, 1987), pp. 86–8. ‘Cover all of me along with the five senses and the ten skillfully-made doorways, so that from the soles of my feet to my summit, I may not be ill in any member, inside or out.’ Compare the eighth-century *Lorica of St Patrick* (Faith Fiadh):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Crist linum, Crist reum, Crist im degaid,} \\
\text{Crist indium, Crist iism, Crist isasum,} \\
\text{Crist desum, Crist tuathum. (lines 62–4)}
\end{align*}
\]

J. Carey, *King of Mysteries: Early Irish Religious Writings* (Dublin, 1998), pp. 127–35 at p. 134. ‘Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ below me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left.’


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Brittany, was held until recent times, and a small number of people still make ritual walks around holy wells in Ireland.\footnote{For Locronan, see A. Rees and B. Rees, *Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales* (London, 1961), p. 197. Some older women still circle Tobar Einne, on Inis Oírr, saying prayers and placing a stone on the well's wall for each circuit that they do; this information comes from private correspondence with Máire Deaug Ui Dhualghaigh of Inis Oírr.}

Most similar of all to Adomnán’s procession, however, are the Rogationtide and related processions practised in western Europe since at least the fifth century. Martertus, bishop of Vienne from roughly 461–475, seems to have been the first to introduce the rogations.\footnote{For a useful introduction to the Rogationtide, and similar penitential processions, see *Anglo-Saxon Litaniæ of the Saints*, ed. M. Lapidge, HBS 106 (London, 1991), pp. 8–11. For more thorough reviews, see H. Leclercq, 'Rogations', *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de littérature*, ed. F. Cabrol and H. Leclercq, 15 vols. (Paris, 1907–53) XIV, 2459–61; H. Leclercq, 'Marc, Procession de Saint', *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne*, ed. Cabrol and Leclercq, X, 1740–1; and J. H. Miller, 'Rogation Days', *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 15 vols. (New York, 1967) XII, 551.} As a response to a year-long series of earthquakes, incursions of wild animals into the city and a fire, Mamertus declared that the three days before the Ascension should be filled with fasting and processions. When the calamities ceased after these days of fasting and procession, news of the event is said to have filled Gaul, and many other districts followed Mamertus’s example. The Council of Orléans, in 511, declared that the churches under its authority should celebrate the rogations on the three days before the Ascension. In due course, the celebration of the Rogation days spread to Rome, and were officially adopted by Leo III at the turn of the ninth century.

Rome had other penitential processions besides the Rogations, however. According to Lapidge, ‘from some time in the sixth century onwards, it was customary at Rome to hold penitential processions in time of peril’.\footnote{Anglo-Saxon Litaniæ, ed. Lapidge, p. 10.} Thus, Gregory of Tours, and the papal letters themselves, record that Gregory the Great confronted divine wrath in the form of floods, food shortages, and ultimately a plague, by instituting on the feast of St Mark seven penitential processions, originating in different parts of the city and all heading to the church of Maria Maggiore; these processions were to sing and cry to the Lord for mercy.\footnote{Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum* X: *Gregorii episcopi Taurinensis libri historiarum*, ed. B. Krusch and W. Levison, MGH SS rer. Merov. I:1, 2nd ed. (Hannover, 1951), 477–81; Gregory the Great, *De nuntiatio pro septiformi litania*. S. Gregorii Magni Opera. *Regestrum epistolarum Libri VIII–XIV. Appendix*, ed. D. Norberg, CSCL 140A (Turnhout, 1982), 1102–4.} This procession became called the *major litanía* and was later frequently linked with the *litaniae* or *rogations* instituted by Mamertus.
Not only did these *litaniae* have a penitential aspect in the face of God’s punishment, but they could also have a particularly agricultural focus. In a tract on religious ceremonies attributed, doubtfully, to Bede, and drawn on in a tract attributed, also doubtfully, to Alcuin, the author comments that the *major litania* is held on 25 April in order to ask God to preserve the new crops at a time when ‘the corn shoots up, the fruit of the trees comes forth from its flower, the vines and olives burst forth from their trees and the animals graze the fields’.\(^{22}\)

With regards to Anglo-Saxon England, processions with song, or *litaniae* as they had come to be called, seem to have been a common liturgical practice. Thus, according to Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica*, St. Augustine approached his initial meeting with Ethelberht of Kent in a procession carrying a cross and an image of Christ and singing a penitential litany asking for mercy.\(^{23}\) Lapidge notes that litany-processions were also used when visiting the sick.\(^{24}\) Moreover, Cuthbert’s *Epistola de obitu Bedae* shows that Rogation day processions were practised in England by 735. According to Cuthbert, he and his fellow monks had to leave their beloved abbot for a brief time on the day of his death, which was the Wednesday before Ascension Thursday, 735, in order to partake in the Rogation day procession. According to Cuthbert, ‘From the third hour, we walked with the relics of the saints, as the custom of the day demanded.’\(^{25}\) At least by 735, therefore, the Rogation day proceedings included the use of relics. Relics may indeed have been used in processions at a considerably earlier date, since the cross and image of Christ mentioned by Bede in Augustine’s procession could certainly encourage the addition of other mementos. Eddius Stephanus reports that a procession carrying relics went to meet the body of the dead Bishop Wilfrid in 709.\(^{26}\) At any rate, the use of relics formed an integral part of the celebration of the Rogations commanded by the Council of Cloeseshoh in 747, and relics are mentioned in the Old English Martyrology’s description of the *major litania*.\(^{27}\)

Iona’s procession therefore seems to have been an adaptation of the rogationes and major litania for the purposes of the Iona community. It should perhaps be noted that the timing of the event, which Adomnán places in May, fell near the celebration of the *major litania*.

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\(^{24}\) Anglo-Saxon *Litianæ*, ed. Lapidge 44–5. Lapidge does not term these litanies ‘processions’, but the passage from the *Regularis concordia* which he quotes:

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\(^{25}\) ‘cum omni congregatio eant ad usitandum infernum canentes psalmos paenitentialis, consequente litania’, grammatically implies that they are singing (canentes) while they are walking (cant). Lapidge quotes this text from *Regularis Concordia: the Monastic Agreement*, ed. T. Symons (London, 1953), p. 64.


held on 25 April, and near the movable Rogations, which start thirty-seven days after Easter, and therefore generally in May. It may even be that the ceremony Adomnán describes is actually a Rogation day procession particularly adapted for Columba's familia. If so, this would not be the first miraculous rainfall as a result of a Rogation tide ceremony. Gregory of Tours records in the *Vita sacrum* that St Quintianus was asked during the Rogation days to pray against the drought that had afflicted the countryside of Auvergne. Quintianus responded with a passage from Chronicles, and rain duly fell. Like Adomnán, Quintianus considered the drought to be a punishment sent by God upon the sin of the people.

Even if the procession described by Adomnán was not performed during the rogations, it seems to have drawn on the general ethos behind such processions: it does penance, it asks for mercy, it is associated with agriculture and drought. The way homilies link the major litania and the rogations together suggests that the category of penitential procession in the face of God's wrath fit both ceremonies, and that the same genre could be applied to other processions. In other words, the power of the major litania or the rogations was not linked to the particular days on which they were celebrated, but rather to the idea of penitential procession. As a result, the litania itself, and not the day on which it was done, is the important thing, and penitential processions could theoretically be performed on any given day. Indeed, the processions or litaniae for the sick, practised in Anglo-Saxon England and Carolingian France, show that petitional processions were not tied to a particular season.

If, as hopefully shown, the procession around the fields was not an unusual response to a disaster, neither was the choice of relics. According to Adomnán, the community shook Columba's cloak, the one he had been wearing on his death-day, three times, and read from the saint's books. Both cloaks, including death-shrouds, and books appear to have been common relics in the early medieval British Isles. For example, the death-shroud (*sindri*) of Saint Guthlac seems to have been preserved at Crowland. According to Felix, Guthlac was buried in clothes sent to him by one Ecgburh. Twelve months later, Guthlac was found incorrupt and his death-clothes sparkling clean, whereupon Guthlac's body was wrapped in clothes sent by the male anchorite Ecgburth, not to be confused with the female Ecgburh. Felix does not mention what happened to Guthlac's original death-shroud, but it seems reasonable to suppose that it was kept as a relic

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29 Si clauso caelo pluviis non fuerint propter peccata populi, et conversi deprecavi faciunt tuam fuerint, exaudi, Domine, et dimittite peccata populi tui, et da pluviam terren quam dedisti populo tuo ad possidendum.' Gregory of Tours, *Vita sacrum*, ch. 4: PL 71, col. 1025. 'If on account of the sins of the people the sky has been closed and there has been no rain, if they should return to you and beseech your face, listen, O Lord, and forgive the sins of your people, and grant rain to the land that you have given into the possession of your people.' Cf. II Chron. VI.26–7.
in the shrine set up in Crowland by King Æthelbald of Mercia. These would not have been the first of Guthlac’s clothes to be used as relics — according to Felix, a retainer named Ega in the service of King Æthelbald was cured from madness through wearing Guthlac’s girdle, which he used ever since to protect himself from Satan. Similarly, the touch of Guthlac’s sheepskin cured another gesith of blood-poisoning caused by a thorn.

Felix’s nonchalant account, in which two people send garments suitable for death-clothes to the saint, suggests that the practice was common in England at the turn of the eighth century. Similarly, Bede’s Vita S. Cuthberti reports that the abbess Verca had sent a shroud to Cuthbert which the saint had kept for his death-shroud. When Cuthbert’s body and death-clothes were found to be incorrupt eleven years later, the garments were sent to the bishop, who ordered that fresh garments be put on the body. It is not clear what happened to the original garments, but the shoes, at least, were kept on display with other relics of the saint.

While the Anglo-Saxons clearly attached some value to the death-shroud and other garments of the saints, Irish hagiography also attached importance to saints’ clothes. St Patrick’s robe (casula) is miraculously preserved from fire in Muirchú’s seventh-century Vita S. Patricii. The Vita S. Caimnici reports that Saint Cainnecb brought the dead abbot of Achadh Droma to life by placing his cloak (tunicula) over the corpse. Apparently, this cloak was still on display and venerated in Achadh Droma at the time of the writing of the Life sometime in the eighth or ninth centuries. Moreover, many Irish saints were later reputed to have cloaks that could serve as boats, or that would increase in size upon request. Considering that Venantius Fortunatus records the clothes of the saints being used for healing purposes in sixth-century Gaul, it seems that the cloak was a standard part of the repertoire of saintly relics in the early middle ages. Such use of clothing has biblical parallels in the sudaria (and semicinctia) of Paul mentioned in Acts, the healing of the unclean woman by the robes (vestimenta) of Jesus in Mark, and perhaps the wrappings (linteamina, sudarium) left behind by Jesus in the empty tomb in John.

The use of books that a saint had copied as relics also appears to have been common, especially in Ireland. Adomnán several times reports various miracles attached to books that the saint had written.

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43 E.g. Vita S. Eudhei, ch. 8: Vita Sanctorum Hiberniae, ed. Plummer, II, 63.
44 E.g. Venantius Fortunatus, Vita S. Radegundis, ch. 34: Venantii Honorii Clementiani Fortunatus presbyteri italic: Opera posthedia, ed. B. Kruisch, MGH Ausnb. antiqu. 4.2 (Berlin, 1881), 38–49, at p. 47.
46 Adomnán, Vita S. Columbae, II.viii–ix: Adomnán’s Life, ed. Anderson and Anderson, pp. 104–6. Cainnecb’s books, moreover, are miraculously saved from
St Molaise and St Patrick were also associated with certain books that, along with the Psalter of St Columba, would later be placed in *cum daign*, or ornamental book-caskets, during the eleventh century.\(^{47}\) Within the Iona monastery, Adomnán reports that the books in conjunction with the saint’s clothes were used on another occasion to ask Columba for a change in the winds; perhaps this combination, of books and clothes, was deemed particularly effective in dealing with the weather.\(^{48}\)

So far, the evidence from native religious thought and Christian *litanies* has shown that a procession around the fields was a natural and reasonable response to a calamity, such as a drought. Moreover, the choice of relics reflected common contemporary practices in the British Isles. The concord between Adomnán’s procession and the contemporaneous devotional background suggests that the procession did actually occur, and was not simply a literary borrowing from Gregory the Great. Indeed, the Iona monastery could easily have decided upon such a procession without ever having read or heard of the tale in Gregory’s *Dialogues*.\(^{49}\)

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Adomnán *campar, Gregory porgerus* / Adomnán *circumireat*. Moreover, the two accounts differ substantially in detail – thus, Gregory’s account makes no mention of shaking the tunic, nor of reading from books. With regards to the most unusual of the shared words, *satiare*, this word was commonly associated in other authors with water (e.g. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, bk VIII, lines 835–6, and more influentially Psalm CIII.13, which describes the earth, watered by God, bringing forth crops), and particularly with thirst. In fact, *satiare* and *sitâ / sitâ* are very frequently lexically linked, e.g. *M. Vai. Martishi Epigraphat*, ed. W. M. Lindsay, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1929), bk VI, poem 35, line 5; *Isidore Hispalensis episcopi etymologiarum sive originum libri xx*, ed. W. M. Lindsay, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1911) VIII.ii.28; *Isidore, Quaestiones in veterem testamentum – in Genevii, ch. 17* (PL 83, cols. 207–88, at col. 248); Gregory the Great, *Moralia in lob XVIII.liv* (PL 76, cols. 9–782, at col. 94); *Anonymous (Pseudo-Bede)*, ‘De husu Isaac cum Ismaele’, *Quaestiones super Genesim ex dictis patrum dialogus* (PL 93, cols. 233–364, at col. 317). Adomnán’s description of ‘sitchens plius terra…saitia’ must therefore be informed by the larger context of Latin literature, not just the *Dialogues*, especially since the passage from Gregory’s *Dialogues* does not use *sitâ / sitâ*.

\(^{47}\) *The Steu Missal*, ed. G. F. Warner, 2 vols., HBS 31–2 (London, 1915) II, xlv. Interestingly, the ‘Cathach’ of Saint Columba, as the Psalter is also called, was connected with encircling even in later times; according to Kenney, the book was carried three times sunrise round the army of the Cenél Conaill before a battle in order to ensure their victory. J. F. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical* (New York, 1966), p. 630.


\(^{49}\) Moreover, the actual verbal similarities between Gregory’s account and Adomnán’s are few. Namely, both authors use isolated forms of *sictitas, terra, lenare, tunica, planica*, and *satiare*. The authors do not share any substantial phrases, and they frequently choose different words, for example, Gregory *augus / fire in the anonymous *Vita S. Cainnici*, ch. 28: *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. Plummer, 1, 163.

\(^{50}\) ‘Macheram beluinis ornatae dolciss…dentibus’. Adomnán, *Vita S. Columbae*
has since shown that the Solinus passage in question was an interpolation that Adomnán could not have seen, and suggests instead that Adomnán is describing an actual type of sword, the Old Irish for which is *cailc déit* 'sword of tooth'\textsuperscript{52}. Sharpe did, however, cast guarded suspicion on whether Columba sailed to Ireland with twelve companions, as Adomnán and a contemporaneous addition to the B manuscripts claim.\textsuperscript{52} Sharpe comments, 'This apostolic number may arouse suspicions as to the genuineness of the list, but it must be remembered that St Columba as well as Adomnán knew the gospels; he may have set out deliberately with that number of companions to establish his church in Britain.'\textsuperscript{53} Sharpe's statement effectively casts doubt on the number twelve by referring to the Gospels, and then defends the number twelve by referring to the same Gospels! This reasoning may seem dubious at first, but it introduces an important principle, namely that early medieval Christians acted typologically, that is, they consciously strove to imitate their predecessors, even in details that can seem trivial to a modern consciousness. As a result, literary parallels can equally be historical realities.

Examples of this typological action, or at least portrayals of conscious typological action, are abundant in early medieval literature. The eighth-century Felix notes that Guthlac goes out into the wasteland of the East Anglian fen in order to imitate the examples of the desert fathers whose Lives he has read.\textsuperscript{54} Beče claims that Cuthbert constantly strove to imitate the fathers, and encouraged others to do the same.\textsuperscript{55} As a result, Cuthbert took up working with his own hands, and worked various miracles in imitation of other saints.\textsuperscript{56} Imitating renowned saints was not only a subject of Cuthbert's teaching, and the practice of several Insular saints, but was also encouraged by the Rule of Benedict, chapter forty-two of which ordains that hagiographical reading be undertaken by the monks.\textsuperscript{57} Moreover, major doctrinal issues in the British Isles were resolved by appealing to the examples set by the saints. Thus, the Roman form of


\textsuperscript{53} Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona*, p. 19. Sharpe does not note the many other instances of twelve companions in insular contexts. For example, Columbanus is also reported to have departed from Ireland with twelve disciples in the late sixth century; *Crith Gablach*, composed in the early eighth century, prescribes twelve as the number of a king's companions; Adomnán claimed that Oswald was baptized along with twelve of his retainers; and Bede reported that Eanfrith travelled with just twelve retainers, and that bishop Aidan received twelve English boys for instruction. Rees and Rees have collected many other examples of this theme. Although there is no space for a full discussion here, the wide spread of this theme in a variety of sources, hagiographical, historical and legal, inclines me to believe that travelling with twelve companions was an actual practice in early Ireland. Jonas, *Vita S. Columbae Liv: Ionae Sanctorum Columbani, Vidastis, Iohannis*, ed. B. Krusch, SS rer. Germ. 37 (Hannover, 1905), 1–294, at 160. *Crith Gablach*, ed. D. A. Binchy, Med. and Mod.


\textsuperscript{55} Bede, *Vita S. Cuthberti*, ch. 7: *Two Lives*, ed. Colgrave, p. 178.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid. ch. 19: pp. 220–2.

coronal tonsure was considered to be the tonsure of St Peter.\footnote{E.g. Felix, *Vita S. Guthlac*, ch. 20: Felix’s Life, ed. Colgrave, p. 84.} Adherents to the so-called ‘Celtic Easter’ thought that they were following the example of the Apostle John and also that of Columba and his successors.\footnote{Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* III.xxiv: Bede’s Ecclesiastical History, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 298–308.} According to Bede and Eddius Stephanus, King Oswiu decided the Easter controversy at the Synod of Whitby by deciding to follow the practice of St Peter over that of St Columba, since to Peter had been entrusted the keys to heaven whereas Columba had not received such power.\footnote{Ibid. Eddius Stephanus, *Vita S. Wilfridi*, ch. 10: Life of Bishop Wilfrid, ed. Colgrave, pp. 20–3.} In surr, following the examples of the fathers was seen as leading not only to personal holiness and miraculous powers, but also to doctrinal orthodoxy. The mark of truth was therefore precisely unoriginality; one should imitate what one found in books. As a consequence, the apparent modern temptation to use literary parallels and unoriginality as a sign of historical fiction runs into obvious problems. As seen, the very ‘source’ of the literary parallel could have been the source of the historical action. Moreover, it seems that early medieval authors drew upon the language of other authors when describing similar events.\footnote{Sharpe, *Adamnan of Iona*, p. 59.} As a result, even accounts with significant verbal borrowings may relate base events rooted in historical reality.

For the purposes of historical investigation, I suggest that we treat passages with literary borrowings and echoes as we would those passages devoid of such parallels; all passages, whether having literary parallels or not, require careful study of the cultural background, other reports and the author’s sources of information before a judgement can be made on an episode’s historicity or lack thereof.

Only after such judgements have been made can the literary historian accurately address the question of an author’s style, purpose \textit{et cetera}. After all, we need to know what was there already before we can determine what the author added—we need to know the material the author had before we can accurately determine how he shaped it.

In the case of Columba’s relics and rain, Adomnán has recorded an event likely to have occurred in that culture. There is no need or reason to doubt his account; indeed the element of his personal eyewitness testimony makes it one of the best-attested episodes in the \textit{Vita}. I can now answer several of Sharpe’s original questions. ‘Did it happen?’ Apparently, yes. ‘Was it literary fiction?’ For the most part, no. ‘Was the act itself influenced by Gregory’s book?’ Possibly, though not necessarily, since the \textit{litaniae} and \textit{rogationes}, along with associations from native religion, were more than sufficient in themselves to provide the instigation for such a procession.
Not Drowning but Waving: the Sagas of Icelanders after the Golden Age

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Constructing a cultural past is, more often than not, a matter of repeating a particular story until it becomes an assumption. So I would like to begin by telling you one. Like many origin myths, it is not entirely true, and tends to exaggerate rather; but it is no less powerful for all that. I shall call it ‘The Rise and Fall of the Classical Saga’.

King Haraldr ruled over part of Norway, and as he grew more powerful he became overbearing. Many independently-minded chieftains emigrated to Iceland. They set up a republic or commonwealth in 930 AD – unique in medieval Europe, anticipating modern nationalism by eight centuries. Despite constant pressure from Norway, they remained stubbornly independent, ruled by Conscience rather than Church or King. But the delicate balance of power on which the commonwealth depended started to break down, especially after the evil Church of Rome got its claws into this pristine society. During the thirteenth century, power became concentrated in the hands of a few enormous chieftains. The crafty king of Norway played them off against each other, hoping to add Iceland to his empire. Iceland almost sank into a brutal and disgraceful civil war, and the legal and social traditions of the commonwealth were under threat of extinction.

Appalled at this impending loss, and dismayed at the social evils which had hastened it, many literati were moved to examine and record their heritage. Fortunately, they were geniuses, and they engaged imaginatively in ‘dialogues with the Viking Age’. The result was an unparalleled feat of national self-fashioning: the ‘classical’ Sagas of Icelanders. Half a millennium before Jane Austen and George Eliot, these lachrymose literati produced the finest body of realistic prose fiction in the Western world. But in 1264, Iceland fell at last into the clutches of Norway. Somewhere in the distance, an offstage orchestra started playing Wagner. There was a final flowering of achievement: in 1280, Njáls saga was written. But a generation later, the literati started to lose touch with commonwealth traditions. The ‘classical’ saga fell into a rapid decline. It was all downhill from here. Famine, plague, volcanic eruptions and political subjection played sad havoc with the Icelanders’ national pride, and they stopped engaging in serious literary dialogue with their past. Unable to cope with the sheer tragedy of it all, they escaped into a vulgar fantasy-world of giants, trolls, knights and superheroes, borrowed shamelessly from the Continent. It was not until the growth of the independence movement in the nineteenth century that the new literati could once again reclaim the glorious literature of their tragic Golden Age.

Such is the ‘origin myth’ of the Sagas of Icelanders, with my apologies for the purple passages. But if you look into many histories of Iceland, you will find the same romantic sentiments.¹ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson’s Age of the Sturlungs describes thirteenth-century Iceland with his heart on his sleeve:

it was true that a world was coming to an end, a world perhaps corrupt and full of suffering, but wonderful in many ways: the world of the

Icelandic Commonwealth, its view of life and its culture. There followed peace, but it was the peace of the graveyard.²

As several historians have since demonstrated, this ‘catastrophe theory’ wildly extrapolates from sources themselves given to exaggeration.³ The rise-and-fall ‘origin myth’ is a Romantic construct.⁴

Why was it constructed? The answer – to simplify enormously – lies in the Icelandic national awakening. Nineteenth-century nationalists saw the commonwealth as a ‘golden age’, lamenting Iceland’s violently tragic fall into subjection. Using the sagas as historical sources, they invoked the individualism of saga heroes to inspire their descendants with national feeling.⁵ But as the dream of


leading the way in the drive for freedom in our time’ (Icelandic Culture, p. 302); Sigurður N ordinal, Islendinga saga, p. 353.
⁶ Iceland gained home rule in 1904, a university in 1911, official autonomy as a ‘kingdom’ in 1918 and complete independence in 1944.
compulsion of honour’ and ‘tragic actions’. Frivolity was a sign of ‘discontent with reality’. The saga-author needed to have lived within memory of the commonwealth, in order to be familiar with its unique social and legal structures. Consequently, the fictional chivalric and legendary sagas were devalued. As we have seen, they are often incorrect affiliations with those ‘foreign elements’ like Continental fabliaux, placed them beyond the pale. The Icelandic School explained their immense popularity in fourteenth-century Iceland as a collapse of national pride. This left the serious ‘classical saga’ as a ‘glass’ in which thirteenth-century Icelanders ‘could aspire, at least in imagination, to see themselves’.

Certainly, this ‘origin myth’ can shed much light on the way Icelanders constructed their past. It underpins Vésteinn Ólason’s recent book, _Dialogues with the Viking Age_, perhaps the finest and most sensitive introduction to the ‘classical sagas’ for the non-specialist reader. Vésteinn characterizes them as ‘dialogues about...the loss of an entire world’, which simultaneously express ‘an idealised view of the past’ and ‘developing anxieties in the face of an uncertain future’.

He and his colleagues have moved on from the aggressive chauvinism of the Icelandic School, but his book retains and refines both the nationalistic ‘origin myth’ and the ‘classical’ canon. This conservatism is part of the book’s appeal: it feels good to be told by a leading scholar in the age of deconstruction that we are quite right — perhaps even rather clever — to admire _Njáls saga_ so much. Our aesthetic presuppositions, born of novel-reading, are nurtured and stimulated. Vésteinn celebrates the ‘classical saga’ as a dialogue with the past — a dialogue of special value because it transmits that past not as a fiction, but ‘as a lived experience’.

There really was, as the Icelandic Minister of Education put it in 1997, ‘a time when heroes rode proudly across the land, their actions guided solely by the dictates of individual conscience’.

But there are other ways to construct a past than this frankly Romantic approach suggests. Medieval Icelandic literature presents a bewildering variety of narrative forms, and an entire spectrum of outlooks upon the Viking past. But the nationalist ‘origin myth’ prevents us from appreciating the different approaches of ‘post-classical’ narrative forms on any terms other than literary decadence. This is particularly true of the so-called ‘post-classical Sagas of Icelanders’, since the term suggests a failed attempt at perpetuating the ‘classical’ genre. In fact, this multifarious group of texts only underlines the artificiality of such generic terms.

In any case, the all-important thirteenth-century composition of the ‘classical’ sagas, established largely on stylistic grounds by the
Icelandic School, has been exposed as a circular argument. Only Egil's saga and Laxdaela saga survive in pre-fourteenth-century fragments: most Sagas of Icelanders are only extant from the mid-fourteenth century onwards. To preserve the thirteenth-century canon, therefore, double standards need to be applied. I have attempted to illustrate this in Table 1 opposite.

With the 'post-classical' sagas, scholars have been happy to infer a late composition from late attestations because these sagas are so self-evidently 'young'. But with all the late-attested 'classical' texts, a great leap of faith has been made, simply on the basis of literary style and what might be called 'commonwealth awareness'. It is of course likely that many 'classical' texts were indeed written down in the thirteenth century, but it is no less likely that 'post-classical' texts were too. Conversely, it is quite possible that Hrafnkels saga and Valla-Ljóts saga, those paradigms of 'classicism', were composed in the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. To separate the two kinds of saga in the standard evolutionary parabola is as Procrustean (and historically dubious) as attempting to fit Shakespeare's comedies, histories and tragedies into three respective chronological 'phases'. Above all, the 'classical' canon is a matter of taste, personal or political.

Having established this point, let us put it into practice by examining a different mode of constructing the past. I would like to look at the way in which some 'post-classical' Sagas of Icelanders make playful forays into the narrative realms of legendary and

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Table 1. A selection of Sagas of Icelanders in chronological order of attestation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Saga (title)</th>
<th>最早出现日期</th>
<th>Dating difference of ‘original’</th>
<th>years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Sagas surviving in Möðruvallabók</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snorri's saga</td>
<td>1330</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Droplangsdróttar saga</td>
<td>1330</td>
<td>1220</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Sagas surviving in late-fourteenth-century fragments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bárbær saga</td>
<td>1390 (fragment)</td>
<td>1350</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hlærkar saga</td>
<td>1390 (fragment)</td>
<td>1350</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gisla saga</td>
<td>1390 (fragment)</td>
<td>1240</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vatnsha-la saga</td>
<td>1390 (fragment)</td>
<td>1270</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Fifteenth-century texts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dörfingrís saga</td>
<td>1400</td>
<td>1350</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bóðvar saga</td>
<td>1400 (fragment)</td>
<td>1380</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reykjavík saga</td>
<td>1400</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ljósvetninga saga</td>
<td>1400 (fragment)</td>
<td>1270</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hjáms-Bór's saga</td>
<td>1400 (fragment)</td>
<td>1280</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vípnfríðr saga</td>
<td>1420 (fragment)</td>
<td>1240</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borsteins hída stangarhögg</td>
<td>1420 (fragment)</td>
<td>1250</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Sixteenth-century texts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Víglundar saga</td>
<td>1500</td>
<td>1420</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hrafnkels saga</td>
<td>1500 (fragment)</td>
<td>1280</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Post-medieval texts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jókuls húsir Bäänaron</td>
<td>1600</td>
<td>1480</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ífljóstöd saga</td>
<td>1600</td>
<td>1500</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gunnars saga Bórandabana</td>
<td>1600</td>
<td>1220</td>
<td>380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valla-Ljóts saga</td>
<td>1600</td>
<td>1240</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borsteins saga hvítla</td>
<td>1600</td>
<td>1280</td>
<td>320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borsteins saga Súðr-Hallssonar</td>
<td>1700</td>
<td>1260</td>
<td>440</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

20 'Post-classical' sagas are marked with ‘+’. Dates of attestation are taken from ONP: Reitera; for the sake of argument, I have shown only the earliest possible datings. 'Traditional dating' is a rough average of the datings of individual saga 'originals' found in recent English and Icelandic reference works.
chivalric sagas – the world of Norse romance. They deflate the heroic or aristocratic posturing usually associated with this mode by juxtaposing it dissonantly or bathetically with the homely life of the Icelander. It would be misleading to employ the terms 'parody' and 'burlesque' here,\(^\text{21}\) as we cannot identify a 'target text' or even genre being parodied. When discussing this 'parodic' tone,\(^\text{22}\) then, I prefer to use the vaguer word 'anti-heroic'.

In the 'classical' texts, Icelanders often prove their heroism abroad, and the geographical shift is paralleled by a stylistic move towards Norse romance. Chivalric and legendary motifs accumulate, and after his sea-battle, berserk-bashing or mound-breaking, the Icelander returns home a hero. 'Post-classical' texts make mischief with this idealizing process, fragmenting the notion of the 'heroic' where the 'classical' saga forges dramatic unity. \textit{Finnboga saga} is usually dismissed as a half-baked attempt to idealize Finnbogi the Strong as a 'superhero';\(^\text{23}\) he seals his heroic reputation, conventionally enough, by killing a dangerous bear in Norway. The way in which this deed is introduced, however, warns us against taking it too seriously:

Dá mælti Finnbogi: ‘Stattu upp, bersi, ok nið móti mér; er þat heldr til nokkurs en liggja á suðarlaði þessu.’ Björninn settist upp ok leið til hans ok kastar sér niðr. Finnbogi mælti: ‘Ef þér þykkt ek of mjökk væpaðr móti þér, þá skal ek at því gera,’ – tektr af sér hjálminn, en setr niðr sjúðlindinn ok mælti: ‘Stattu nú upp, ef þu þórti.’ Björninn settist upp ok skóð hófuðit, lagðist níðr aprt síðan.\(^\text{21}\)

This brings more to the pantomime than the heroic biography: small wonder that Finnbogi repeatedly refuses to recount the details when questioned. Readers disappointed in his unglamorous later career in Iceland\(^\text{25}\) would do well to recall the humorous question-mark placed by this episode over traditional concepts of heroism.

A subtler but more consistent critique of such concepts is found in the second recension of \textit{Þórðar saga bróðar}.\(^\text{26}\) Þórðr is a typically heroic Norwegian aristocrat, who serves as King Gamli's champion and makes stirring battle-speeches.\(^\text{27}\) But geography has a profound effect on him. Once he has settled in prosaic Iceland, he does not even try to gain a chieftaincy. He devotes all his time to building boats and halls and going to the market, fighting (and boasting of his ancestry) only when compelled. But he is envied by the bullying chief-fain Skeggj, whose posturing is subtly mocked by the narrator. Whereas Þórðr's sword was an honourable gift from a grateful king, the bullying Skeggj has to grab his sword Sköfnung from a dead king, in an incongruous mound-breaking anecdote. This anecdote comes

\(^{21}\) \textit{Finnboga saga}, ch. 11: \textit{Kjalnesinga saga}, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, Íf 14 (Reykjavík, 1959), 274. ‘Finnbogi said, “Stand up, bear, and attack me; that'd be more worthwhile than lying on that dead sheep.” The bear sat up, looked at him, and flopped down. Finnbogi said, “If you think I'm over-armed against you, I'll remedy that,” – removed his helmet, put down his shield, and said, “Now stand up, if you dare.” The bear sat up and shook his head, then lay down again.’

\(^{22}\) See for example J. Kennedy's introduction to his translation of \textit{Finnboga saga} in \textit{The Complete Sagas}, ed. Vidar Heinsson, III, 221.

\(^{23}\) Only fragments of the first recension are preserved. This text presents Þórðr as a straightforward and rather belligerent 'hero', leading one to suspect that the second recension represents a conscious reworking. See \textit{Brut af Þórðar saga bróðar. Kjalnesinga saga}, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, pp. 229–47.

straight from the world of the legendary sagas, reminding the audience of the sword's supernatural property as well as establishing that Sköfnung was ‘bezt sverð hefr komit til Íslands’.28 Sveggj swaggers about with it, but Sköfnung kills nobody and audience expectation mounts. Finally, in chapter 10, he and Bóðir stand face to face in the moonlight, swords drawn – but then their families arrive and separate them. Desperately frustrated, Sveggj storms back to the local farm and slaughters a feeble old man in his bedroom, then makes an incongruously ‘heroic’ speech to the headless corpse.29 The bathos is repeated when, during the reconciliation wedding, Bóðir accidentally draws Sköfnung.


Bóðir is now in a classic Norse-romance dilemma. How can he get out of it without making a scene?

Bóðir segir, ‘ Petra skal prófa, ’ok hjóp út ok kvæð hann skyldu görra við merarbeining ok höggur hross ein, er söð í tánínu.’

The romantic ‘magical gift’ motif is deflated for a second time. No wonder Sveggj is so furious: Sköfnung was meant for better things. A similar deflactory role is played by the equally anticlimactic magic gloves in Borsfræminga saga.30 In both sagas, heroic posturing prevents these potent emblems of a legendary past from fulfilling their potential.

The dissonance between romantic or legendary worlds and prosaic Iceland has its finest comic expression in Sýrnu-Oðdu draumar. In this saga, the humble stargazer Oddi, who was neither a poet nor a singer,31 spends the night on Flatøy, where he has been sent on an errand. He dreams that he is back home at his master’s farm, and that a guest is telling a typical legendary saga about King Geirrjóðr of Gautland. When this storyteller mentions the king’s poet, something remarkable happens:

En þegar þessi mædr, Dagfinnr, var nefndr í sögunnri, þá er frá því at segja, er mjökk er undagrænt, at þá brá því við í drauminum Odda, at hann Oddi sjálfr þóttist vera þessi mædr, Dagfinnr, en gestrinn, sá er sognu sagði, er nú ór sognu ok drauminum ... En nú söðan er drauminu svá at segja sem honum þótt sjálfrum fyrrir sín bera, Odda, þá þóttist hann vera Dagfinnr ok rúðast í ferðina með konunginnun Geirrjóðr.

32 After a spate of legendary-saga adventures in Scandinavia, the hero Gull-Bóir returns to Iceland with a pair of magic gloves, also gifts from a mound-dweller. Bóir is told that if he strokes his men with these gloves before a battle, they cannot be wounded. Back in Iceland, Bóir becomes increasingly isolated, and his heroic feats are forgotten as his fortune wanes. In ch. 15, Bóir and his men are about to defend themselves against a large company. At this point the gloves are at last mentioned: Bóir puts them on to render his men invincible before the enemy sees them. The audience anticipates victory on a supernatural scale. But before Bóir can touch them, his vainglorious companion Vöðl-Gunnar rushes out to attack, and spoils everything. The gloves never reappear. See Borsfræminga saga, chs. 3 and 15: Harbar saga, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjalmsson, I: 13 (Reykjavik, 1991), 184 and 211.

33 Sýrnu-Oðdu draumar, ch. 1: Harbar saga, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjalmsson, p. 459.

34 Sýrnu-Oðdu draumar, ch. 4: Harbar saga, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni
‘Dagfinnr’ subsequently recites a splendid poem. But when the dream is approaching its climactic sea-battle, ‘Dagfinnr’ bends down to tie his shoelace. He wakes up ‘ok var þá Oddi, sem ván var’. After looking at the stars and remembering his dream-poem, he goes back to bed and his dream continues heroically from where it left off. After another praise-poem, ‘Dagfinnr’ wins the king’s sister’s hand in marriage. The kurtsiðg (‘courty’) happy ending arrives, and they live happily ever after.36

But the dream is over. Oddi wakes up and remembers part of his second poem, which appears to be a fourteenth-century archaising imitation of a driða. After these stanzas, the saga ends with truth-claims, and finally: ‘Má ök eigi undrast, þótt kvæðaskapinn sé stíðr, því at í svefní var kvæði.’37 This resembles the humorously self-conscious authorial protestations in some of the sillier Norse romances.

The author’s uncanny grasp of the narrative mechanisms of dream is worth a separate study in itself. Legendary Gautland, with lashings of chivalry, is superimposed on twelfth-century Iceland by means of a dream, which also mixes the imaginary landscape with local place-names. In the gap between these two narrative worlds, the ‘saga’ of Oddi’s dream and its twelfth-century substrate, we can locate that ‘large field of potential irony’ whose presence scholars still deny in the ‘completely objective’ Sagas of Icelanders,38 and whose recurrence in ‘post-classical’ texts is deplored. How we interpret that irony is a matter for speculation.39 One possibility, at least, brings us back to the old notion of ‘post-classical’ romance as stylistic escapism. Are we meant to conclude that Oddi’s dream represents a marginalized Iceland’s yearning for the good old days when men were real men? I doubt it. As with Grettis saga, in many ways a tragic counterpart to Stjörnu-Óddu draumr, the very concept of ‘heroism’ is subtly undermined, as well as the time being out of joint. Maybe the dream-saga is mocking such hypothetical yearnings, by pretending to pander to them. Perhaps this is over-subtle; but one other short, late saga reduces ad absurdum the idea that the near-civil war ending the commonwealth made people bury their heads in the sand of romance. This is Jökuls þástir Búasonar, composed by someone who was not satisfied with the ending of Kjalnesinga saga, in which Jökull kills his own father in self-defence. In this sequel, Jökull is so mortified that he flees from Iceland to a rambunctious Nordic world of clumsy trolls and giants, where he rescues a prince, marries a princess, and goes with them to Saracen-land, where he finally inherits the throne, safely cocooned from moral complexities in the Technicolor world of chivalric romance.40 Who knows? Perhaps these sages were supposed

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to make people laugh.

Thankfully, these neglected texts are now available in English translation in The Complete Sagas of Icelanders. But their availability is hampered by the product's punishingly high price. This, and the daunting array of distinguished Presidential prefaces, hints at a more familiar motive than making the sagas 'accessible'. The canon serves its old purpose: 'sagas' are historical works of 'classical wisdom' which 'invite comparison with the masterpieces of classical Greece', monumental works' proving 'that true democracy prevailed in Iceland in its earliest days... unhindered by the overburdening presence of central authority'. In this most monolithic form, the 'classical' canon is elevated from status symbol to totem object, both representing and embodying Iceland's heroic independence in the face of European centralization.

'May the sagas grow and flourish like the sacred ancient ash,' intones Jónas Kristjánsson in conclusion; and we can be fairly certain he was not referring to the anti-heroic frivolities of the 'post-classical' sagas. I hope I have shown in this short time that we need not work within that grand but restricting paradigm. Relegating flippancy to the cultural doghouse prevents us from appreciating the phenomenal scale and variety of the Icelandic literary achievement. I shall conclude with the words of Göngu-Hróf's saga.

I'd like to thank those who've listened and enjoyed this story, and since those who don't like it won't ever be satisfied, let them enjoy their own misery. Amen.  

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41 Björn Bjarnason, 'Foreword', p. ix.
42 Ólafur R. Grímsson, 'Foreword by the President of Iceland, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson', The Complete Sagas, ed. Viðar Heimsson, I, vii–viii (at vii).
43 Björn Bjarnason, 'Foreword', p. ix.
44 Jónas Kristjánsson, 'Foreword', p. xi.

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The rather picturesque engraving of a Neolithic grave-mound on Sjælland which forms figure 5 in Klaeber's edition of Beowulf might be regarded as the seal upon the official interpretation of the dragon's habitation in the final portion of the poem. Introduced by the poet as a stanboorh (2213a) or blæw (2296b), the mound in which the hoard was hidden was identified as 'evidently a chambered tumulus' as long ago as 1869. This categorization has subsequently been refined with sometimes remarkable specificity: 'a Stone or Early Bronze Age barrow', 'a passage grave of the megalithic period' with overtones, as to the treasure, of Anglo-Saxon royal burials in the style of Sutton Hoo; 'a megalithic tomb, not Scandinavian, but more probably Irish or Scottish'.

So many critics have been so willing to state that 'there can be no doubt as to which [type of Neolithic tomb] the dragon's barrow in Beowulf belongs' chiefly because of a chain of unusually specific links in terminology which allow the Beowulf-poet's description to be tied to

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1 Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg, ed. F. Klaeber, 3rd ed. (Lexington, MA, 1950), p. viii; all citations from Beowulf taken from this edition, and those from other Old English poems from ASPR. Klaeber's illustration, of a megalithic double passage grave in Udby, Holbæk Amt, is drawn from M. Hoernes, Die Urgeschichte des Menschen nach den heutigen Stande der Wissenschaft (Vienna, 1892), facing p. 302 (Figure 1 opposite); the original excavation is reported in Antiquitatis Tidsskrift 1846–8, 217–223; for further discoveries see P. V. Glob, 'Korshoj, en Dobbeljættestue ved Udby i Vestjylland', Fra Dømmers Ugnsgraver af Johannes Brundsted paa 50 Aarsagen, ed. H. Norling-Christensen and P. V. Glob (Copenhagen, 1940), pp. 67–92. It is not clear that a fifty-foot-long dragon (Beowulf 3042) could fit comfortably in either of the two chambers.


3 W. W. Lawrence, 'The Dragon and his Lair in Beowulf', PMLA 33 (1918), 547–83, at 576.


6 Lawrence, 'The Dragon and his Lair', p. 574.
identifiable archaeological remains. In the Anglo-Saxon poem, the
dragon’s bœrb is twice described as enta geweorc (2717b, 2774a), ‘the
work of giants’, and in the description of Denmark in the preface to
his Gesta Danorum, Saxo Grammaticus wrote that ‘Danicam vero
regionem giganteo quondam cultu exercitam eximiae magnitudinis
saxa venterum bustis ac specusbus affixa testantur.’ Even in recent
times it was customary for a megalithic structure in Denmark to be
called a jettistue, or ‘giant’s room’; and since many are still extant, it is
possible to gain a fairly exact picture of ‘the work of the giants’ as
perceived by Saxo, and, in the same Germanic tradition, the Beowulf-
poet. Hence figure 5 in Klaeber’s Beowulf.

But as some critics have likewise remarked, in the dragon-fight
episode ‘the background of scenery...is often vague or inconsistent’,
and the ambiguities in the Beowulf-poet’s sparse descriptions make
absolute classification more difficult than has often been recognized.
A few ‘facts’ are of course easily obtainable. First, the dragon’s lair is
made of stone: it is referred to as a stanbogan, 2213a, and is
consistently described as stan throughout the episode — at, for
example, 2553b, 2557b, and 2744b. Also, despite some disagreement
on this point,10 the bœrb itself is man-made: the vocabulary of

deld enta geweorc and the Relics of Empire: Revisiting the Dragon’s Lair in Beowulf

architecture which pervades the descriptions of the mound11 might
be considered as metaphorical or merely ambiguous language for
natural formations, if the mound were not specifically introduced as
nœwe be nœse, neoræfæran fæst ‘new upon the headland, sealed with
secure devices’ (2243) in the first explanation of the treasure’s origin.

These relative certainties mesh well with the idea of a Neolithic
tomb, as does the use of the words hlæw and bœrb — both of which
can mean ‘hill or raised ground’ but which frequently have the
specific meaning ‘barrow’.12 Other aspects of the hlæw, however, have
required sometimes elaborate explanations in order to reconcile them
with this theory. Two descriptive passages will serve to illustrate this:

Geseah þa he be wealle...
standan stanbogan, stream ut þovan
brecan of george; was þære burman wælm
headofyrum hat13

Da se ægeling giung,
þæt he bi wealle
geat on sece;
lu þa stanbogan
ecce eorðredec
wisyngende
seah on enta geweorc,
staþulm fæste
innan healle.14

(2542a, 2545–2547a)

(2715b–2719)

The word stanbogan (2545a, 2718a) has in particular proved

10. E.g. wæall ‘wall’ (2307b, 2526a, 2542a, 2716a, 2759a, 3060a, 3103a), earthwæll
‘earth-wall’ (3090a); reccut, scel ‘hall’ (3088a, 3128b), earthhæll, -reccut ‘earth-hall’
(2410a, 2515a, 2719a), hræggylc ‘eisg-hall’ (2840a, 3053a); stanbogan ‘stone arches’
(2545a, 2718a); staþul ‘support, post’ (2718b); hræf ‘roof’ (2755b).


12. ‘Then by the wall he saw stone arches standing, a stream emerged there from
the hill; that burning river was hot with battle-fires.’

13. ‘Then the nobleman went and sat, pondering deeply, on a seat by the wall; he
gazed upon the work of giants, saw how the eternal earth-hall contained inside
stone arches securely on supports.’

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problematic. The compound is found in all of Old English only in these two passages, and there is a difficulty in knowing precisely what is intended by it: literally 'stone bows', the word would seem to mean 'stone arches'. The arch in its technical sense, however, was unknown in the Neolithic period, although in some graves 'a kind of vaulted ceiling is obtained by laying stones horizontally which project beyond each other', forming a rounded corbelled ceiling which 'is quite unknown in the late megalithic architecture of Scandinavia. It occurs however not infrequently in the chambered tombs of Ireland and Scotland', a fact which has led some commentators to suppose that the description in Beowulf 'might have been compiled by the original bard from the accounts of raiders returning from these parts, or it may have been added [i.e., interpolated] in England by one personally acquainted with such monuments'; while others have suggested that sianbogan 'might equally well be applied to the heavy cross-pieces of stone set upon the uprights, stapulas, which formed the entrance to the passage, and, particularly in Scandinavian tombs, gave an accurate key to the structure of the interior'.

In other words, in order to accurately describe an English or Scandinavian megalithic tomb, the recurring word sianbogan must be very metaphorical and imprecise ('bow' is used to describe a square post-and-lintel shape). Meanwhile, the stapulas must be taken as meaning simply 'supports' – and this, in turn, is rather vague if referring to the weight-bearing walls of a corbelled vault – and thus quite different from a very similar-sounding passage in Andreas:

He be wealle geseg wundrum feste
under sæhwage sweras umylte.

\[15\] Lawrence, 'The Dragon and his Lair', pp. 577–8.
\[16\] Keilier and Piggott, 'The Chambered Tomb', pp. 360–1.
\[17\] Ibid., p. 361.
\[18\] Lawrence, 'The Dragon and his Lair', p. 579.

The pillars, called marmanstan 'marble' three lines later, are apparently classical-style columns, and in general, the setting of Andreas 'is apparently envisaged as being like a Roman province', as is indicated also by the heavy use of Latin loan-words. As Frankis has demonstrated with reference to the entirety of the Old English poetic corpus, the phrase enta gewor: (found in Andreas 1495a and, with reference to the dragon's mound, in Beowulf 2717b and 2774a) has specifically Roman connotations in Andreas, The Ruin, Maxims II, and possibly in The Wanderer. It is curious, therefore, that any Roman connotations in Beowulf – especially in 2715b–2719, a passage verbally extremely similar to the 'Roman' Andreas 1492–1495a – should be considered obviated by the Beowulf passage's apparent reference to an ancient burial-mound, and the phrase enta gewor: interpreted as an instance of a broader Germanic concept reflected more properly in Saxo Grammaticus and Snorri Sturluson's Gylfaginning than Andreas or The Ruin.

Romanitas in Beowulf has never won particularly wide acceptance, though it has been suggested with moderate frequency; purely Germanic material culture has generally been preferred. In the very

\[19\] By the wall he saw great columns remarkably steady, pillars standing along the hall's wall, lashed by storms, the ancient work of giants.
\[21\] Frankis, 'The Thematic Significance', p. 257.
\[22\] Ibid., p. 254.
\[23\] Ibid., p. 258.
\[24\] See also, for instance, M. Osborn, 'Laying the Roman Ghost of Beowulf' 320 and 725, NM 70 (1969), 246–55, for a refutation of the necessity to presume Roman-style pavement in either Hroorot or the surrounding road network.
early part of the last century, for instance, Stjerna proposed (in vain) that the dragon’s treasure-chamber be regarded as a description of a Roman ruin.\textsuperscript{25} Stjerna’s peculiar literalism – he read the poem as if it were a treatise on antiquities – is indeed hardly defensible; and yet insistence that the dragon’s mound itself must be a picture of a Scandinavian or British Neolithic grave so consistent and exact that one can ‘form a correct idea of the archaeological type to which it belongs’\textsuperscript{26} is unnecessarily dogmatic, and – much more importantly – requires the suppression or distortion of portions of the text.

\textit{Beowulf} is not an historical record of fifth-century Scandinavia, and the poet was not concerned to make it so. This is made clear enough by the description of Grendel’s mere, notoriously characterized as ‘a gallimaufry of devices’\textsuperscript{27} fusing multiple elements from sources as diverse as the folk-tale basis of \textit{Grettis saga} and the image of hell from the \textit{Visio S. Pauli};\textsuperscript{28} and there seems no reason that the poet should make archaeological exactitude his goal two-thirds of the way through the poem. It seems very reasonable, therefore, to accept the possibility of a mingling of disparate details in this scene, and thus to consider Brodeur’s more moderate observation that the

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\textit{beorh} ‘seems, as the poet conceives it, to combine the actual features of a primitive barrow with those of a Roman ruin’.\textsuperscript{29}

The appellation \textit{enta geworc} and the vocabulary of Roman architecture – the \textit{stapularis} and \textit{stanboleng}, as well as the frequent use of the Latin loan-word \textit{swal} – make a link to Roman ruins a natural interpretation of the text. Application of such a context to an underground treasury would not require a departure from Anglo-Saxon popular thinking, as the \textit{Anglo-Saxon Chronicle} entry for 418 reveals:

\begin{quote}
Her Romane gesommodon al þa gold hord þe on Bretene wæron, ond sume on corþan ahyddon. Þat he nægmon siþan findan ne mealt, ond sume mid him on Gallia leddon.\textsuperscript{30}
\end{quote}

Moreover, one of the treasures in the dragon’s hoard appears to have certain Roman connotations:

\begin{quote}
Swylce he siomian gescæh segn eall glycelden 
healf ofer horde, hordwulana mæst, 
gelocen leobucereftum; of þorn leoma stod, 
þet he þone grundwong ongan mealhtes ..., 
segn cac genom, 
beacna beorhtost.\textsuperscript{31} (2767–2770, 2776b–2777a)
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{26} Lawrence, \textit{The Dragon and His Lair}, p. 572.

\textsuperscript{27} E. G. Stanley, ‘Old English Poetic Diction and the Interpretation of \textit{The Wanderer}, \textit{The Seafarer}, and \textit{The Penitent’s Prayer}, \textit{Anglia} 73 (1955), 413–66, at 441.


\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Anglo-Saxon Chronicle} 418 A: Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel, ed. C. Plummer (Oxford, 1892–9) I, 10. Except for minor spelling variants, MS E is identical. ‘In this year, the Romans gathered all the treasures of gold that were in Britain, and hid some in the earth, so that no one should find it afterward, and some they took with them into Gaul.’

\textsuperscript{31} ‘He also saw a golden standard hanging high above the hoard, the greatest of hand-wonders, fastened with the craft of limbs; light shone from it, so that he could see the floor...he likewise took the standard, the brightest of beacons’. The manuscript reading of 2769b is actually \textit{lanan}; Tripp’s suggested interpretation ‘he [Wiglaf] stood out of the light, so that he could see the floor’ (R. P. Tripp, Jr, ‘The Restoration of \textit{Beowulf} 2769b and 2771a, and Wiglaf’s
The legionary standards – *necilla* – impressed the Anglo-Saxons greatly; some kings had *necilla* carried in their own processions, and the style of the standard was later modified to include a Christian cross. Moreover, the *necillum* was a popular metonym for victory in Anglo-Latin poetry; Alcuin, for instance, uses it to symbolize a martyr’s triumph in his *Carmen de virginitate*.

Cum his caelestis, qui fausta sorte fruuntur
Atque coronati gestant vexilla troperium

The phrase *beorn beorhtst* (2777a) is remarkably reminiscent of *The Dream of the Rood*:

yslicere treow
on lyft leadan, leote bewunden,
beama beorhtost. Ealh hæt beacom wæs
begoten mid golde.

While I seriously doubt the golden standard in *Beowulf* is meant to be a processional cross, the superlatives applied to it favour an interpretation that gives the standard some symbolic significance: significance which the *necillum*, as a token of victory and a symbol of the former might of Imperial Rome, certainly had. It is a wholly

Entrance into the Barrow*, ELN 15 (1978), 244–9) is perfectly reasonable (and does not oblige the acceptance of the remainder of his argument), especially if one does not presume the long passage into a Scandinavian-type barrow is an absolute necessity; though the emendation, given the eerie light in Grendel’s cave and the word *beorhtost* applied to the standard in 2777a, is not an improbable one.


33 *Alcuini opera*, ed. R. Elwald, MGH Auct. ant. XV (Berlin, 1919), p. 471. ‘With these heavenly citizens, who rejoice in favourable fortune, and, crowned, bear the standards of victory’.

34 ‘The rarer tree raised in the air; surrounded by light, the brightest of woods. That sign was entirely adorned with gold’.

appropriate object, at any rate, to be discovered in an ancient treasure chamber, especially just after the slaying of the dragon-guardian.

A final connection with Roman sites could perhaps be construed in *pære bæran weæm, beorhtfyrn beat* (2546b–2547a) that runs from the dragon’s mound; it rather reminds one of *The Ruin* 38b–39a, in which *stream bate wærwp, wian wylme* ‘the hot stream sprung forth with a broad flood’ in what is presumably Roman Bath. This is somewhat fanciful, though; it seems more likely that the burning stream is connected to the *fyrbæor* ‘fiery bath’ that is one of the torments of hell in, for instance, *Christ B* 830–831a. This image of rivers of fire is possibly connected to the classical Phlegethon – the fiery river of Hades may have been known to Anglo-Saxons, as the glossed lemma from Prudentius’s *Catheemerion* III.198, *de flegetonte* (glossed ‘de fluvio infirmi’, ‘quia totus sit igneus’, ‘of ligiespiewelum flode’), demonstrates.

In this case, then, the *Beowulf*-poet might have associated a fiery river with classical antiquity, or he may have perceived it as a purely Christian element in his synthesized setting. In either case, it is clear that traditional critical insistence on the real-world accuracy of the description of the dragon’s lair must be abandoned, for the *beorht* of the poem is no more authentic a Scandinavian landmark than the cave of the Grendel-kin. It is, rather, a construct, formed of disparate materials, each with its own set of associations: so that a better understanding of the significance of the individual strands will naturally lead to a more accurate perception of the episode’s full


36 H. D. Meritt, *The OE Prudentius Glosses at Boulogne-sur-Mer*, Stanford Stud. in Lang. and Lit. 16 (Stanford, 1959), 22 (gloss no. 207). The manuscript is Boulogne-sur-Mer, Bibliothèque municipale, 189 (Christ Church, Canterbury, s. x/si; glosses s. xi", xi"; provenance St-Bertin).
range of meaning. The recognition of Roman elements in the construction of the dragon's mound, for instance, allows our understanding of the scene to be tinted by the remembrances of departed worldly power and glory traditionally awakened by such ruins in Old English literature, and the nexus of associations which Frankis showed to be concentrated about the ehta geweon formula may – despite his own apparent doubts – be accurately attributed to the beorh. The elegiac tone, and inevitable parallels between the defeated Romans and doomed Geats, are fully consonant with the theme and tenor of the final portion of Beowulf, and show, moreover, a sort of emotional historical consciousness – a vision focused more on the perceived meaning of history than on any precise event – which fits well with our understanding of the poet's recreation of a vanished pagan world. Indeed, the Beowulf-poet's freedom to select and recombine those elements of the past which he believed to be most important and significant, contrasts rather amusingly with his interpreters' tendency to be too tightly fettered by our own critical past.