

Austrfararvísur and Interreligious Contacts in Conversion Age Scandinavia

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SUMMARY: *This article examines stanzas 4-8 of Sigvatr Þórðarson's poem Austrfararvísur which describe the famous confrontation between the Christian skald and the inhospitable pagan inhabitants of a remote place. Rather than see the rejections of the skald as caused by the private nature of the alfablót, they are understood as a symptom of the fact that the traditional religion was changing in response to the pressure exerted by the Christian mission.*

RESUME: *Artiklen undersøger strofe 4-8 af Sigvatr Þórðarsons digt Austrfararvísur som beskriver den berømte konfrontation mellem den kristne skjald og de ugæstfri he-denske beboere på en fjerntliggende sted. Snarere end at se afvisningerne af skjalden begrundet i et alfablóts private natur, forstås de som et symptom på det forhold at den traditionelle religion var ved at forandre sig under pres fra den kristne mission.*

KEYWORDS: Austrfararvísur; alfablót; hof; mission; conversion.

The early thirteenth-century compendium of kings' sagas known as *Heimskringla* reports in chapter 91 of *Óláfs saga helga* that Sigvatr Þórðarson, an Icelandic poet affiliated with the court of the Norwegian king Óláfr Haraldsson, undertook a journey from Borg in southeastern Norway to Skarar in Vestra Gautland where he met with his good friend Jarl Rognvaldr (ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, II, 134–45). The report includes a good number of stanzas that Sigvatr is said to have composed during the journey. These stanzas are in typical saga fashion presented as Sigvatr's improvised and spontaneous reactions to events that occurred during the journey.

Several scholars have discussed the possible motivations for Sigvatr's journey and questioned the historical accuracy of the information given by *Heimskringla*. It is possible, indeed probable, that the stanzas describe more than one journey and that the

travelers took a different route from the one laid out in the saga.¹ In spite of these uncertainties, it seems likely that the stanzas cited in the chapter were part of a longer unified composition that Sigvatr presented before the Norwegian king and his retainers after having returned from a journey. This supposition is supported by the fact that the poem, as it is commonly reconstructed, opens with a formal and customary bid for attention and informs the audience about the topic of the poem: “I composed these stanzas about the/a journey”, Sigvatr states.² The title of this consolidated poem, *Austrfararvísur* (Stanzas About a Journey to the East), is given in *Heimskringla* as well as in the shorter compendium *Fagrskinna*. The latter text also characterizes *Austrfararvísur* as a *flokkr*, a term which generally refers to a poem that is more loosely organized than the rigid *drápa* form.³ According to Fulk, the most recent editor of *Austrfararvísur*, these questions regarding Sigvatr’s route, mission and the circumstances of composition are “matters of immense interest” but also impossible to resolve with certainty (Fulk 2012, 582); hence these issues will not be discussed in the following.

Of equal interest, however, is the content of the stanzas composed by Sigvatr in connection with the journey(s). The present contribution will focus on four of these, namely on sts 4–8 as they are ordered in *Skj* as well as in Fulk’s edition. This group of stanzas is occasionally referred to as the *alfablót*-stanzas (see e.g. De Vries 1932). These stanzas have received particular scholarly attention as they comprise one of the few pieces of skaldic evidence for pre-Christian cultic practices from the period of conversion in Scandinavia. The exact circumstances of composition of *Austrfararvísur* and its unity as a poem are not the main concerns here, but three basic assumptions are made, namely 1) that the attribution to Sigvatr is correct, 2) that the poem dates from the reign of the Norwegian missionary king Óláfr Haraldsson (r. 1015–28), and 3) that sts 2–8 describe some real or imagined journey which takes the poet through the Eiðaskógr region.

The first of these premises relies on contextual information provided by *Heimskringla* and *Fagrskinna* and the general style of the composition, but is not directly supported by the stanzas that are held to be a part of *Austrfararvísur*. The poet makes a point of his Icelandic origin in st. 15,⁴ but this is hardly sufficient to attribute them to Sigvatr. The second assumption is supported by sts 17 and 20, both of which directly address the king directly as *Ǫleifr*—this being an older form of the name Óláfr. The third assumption, finally, is directly supported by st. 14, in which the poet states: “Eiðaskógr was difficult to traverse for the brave men on their way east to meet with

¹ Another journey to Skarar is mentioned along with a few stanzas a bit earlier in the text (ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, II, 92–4). These stanzas are also considered a part of *Austrfararvísur*.

² “[P]essar . . . vísur . . . of fǫr gerðak” (ed. Fulk 2012, 583).

³ “[K]vað Sigvatr skáld Austrfararvísur um ferð sína” (ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, II, 144) and “orti [Sigvatr] flokk um ok kallaði Austrfararvísur” (ed. Bjarni Einarsson 1985, 179).

⁴ In this connection it may be noteworthy that the poet refers to his own looks, mentioning his black eyes in *Austrfararvísur* 15 and his black bangs (ON *skǫr*), in *Nesjavísur* 5 (ed. Poole 2012, 563).

the coercer of rulers.”⁵ The Eiðaskógr region is also named st. 8 where the poet states that he “longed for the dwelling of Ásta on the way east of Eiðaskógr.”⁶ An additional two stanzas mention a location called Eið, giving either a singular form (st. 2 *til Eiðs*) or a plural form (st. 3 *frá Eiðum*). These three assumptions, while by no means certain, should be uncontroversial.

The discussion below is organized in two sections. “Rejections” seek to illustrate how the stanzas’ depiction of pre-Christian religious practice deviates from the depictions found in most other textual sources for pre-Christian Scandinavian traditions. A second section, “Antagonism”, will more briefly place the *Austrfararvísur* in the historical context of the conversion age.

Rejections

In the opening stanza of *Austrfararvísur*, Sigvatr at first strikes a pompous tone by imitating the formal opening line of Einarr skálaglamm’s paradigmatic encomium *Vellekla*.⁷ This grandiose opening is immediately undermined when Sigvatr signals that the poem is not a panegyric and that the theme is that of his own misadventures (*váass*, ‘difficulty’) during a journey to Sweden; a journey so taxing that he was barely able to get any rest along the way: “I was sent up from the ships [*< skis of the swan meadow*] on a long journey to Sweden in the fall—I slept little after that.”⁸ The theme of misadventure is retained through the first eight stanzas of the poem. Thereafter the tone changes somewhat and Sigvatr’s tribulations recede into the background while his description of his travels grows to more spectacular proportions as he wistfully conjures up phantasies of beautiful women that marvel at his arrival at earl Røgnvaldr’s farm. The poem, as it is generally reconstructed in editions, concludes with expressions of satisfaction that he has carried his mission to a successful conclusion and averted a great danger. The nature of that danger, however, is not made clear.

Stanzas 2 and 3 describe the initial trials of the journey—soaked and cursing, Sigvatr and his companions drag their unseaworthy ship up to a place called Eið⁹—and the blisters they get on their feet as they traverse the thirteen *rastir*-wide Eiðaskógr. Stanzas 4–8, the *alfablót*-stanzas, recount Sigvatr’s encounters with the pagan inhabitants of the region. The circumstances of transmission make it impossible to determine whether all of these stanzas refer to different farms or whether some of the stanzas

⁵ “drjúggenginn vas drengjum | . . . | austr til jofra þrýstis | Eiðaskógr á leiðu” (ed. Fulk 2012, 603).

⁶ “Mista ek fyr austan | Eiðaskóg á leiðu | Östu bús . . .” (ed. Fulk 2012, 594).

⁷ “Hugstóra biðk heyra” (*Austrfararvísur* 1, ed. Fulk 2012, 583) vs. “Hugstóran biðk heyra (*Vellekla* 1, ed. Marold 2012, 283).

⁸ “sendr vask upp af öndrum | austr (svafk fátt í hausti) | til Svíþjóðar (síðan) | svanvangs í fgr langa” (st. 1, ed. Fulk 2012, 583).

⁹ Old Norse *eið* designates a portage site where one can transport one’s ship between two bodies of water. The name of the Eiðaskógr region which Sigvatr and his men traverses thus means ‘forest of (many) *eiðs*’.

may deal with the same farm. As the poem is understood here, the sequence refers to four different farms:

Farm 1: sts. 4-5 - The *alfablót* at Hof

Farm 2: st. 6 - The *Qlvirs*

Farm 3: st. 7 - The most generous man

Farm 4: st. 8 - The *ókristinn halr*

The following discussion will begin with the final stanza of the sequence, which sums up his tribulations in the border region, and then turn to the three preceding stanzas.

Farm 4. The ókristinn halr

8. I longed for Ásta's farm on the way east of Eiðaskógr when I asked an unchristian man for lodging. I did not meet the son of the powerful Saxi. There was no fairness in that place. I was ordered to leave four times in one evening.¹⁰

On his way through Eiðaskógr and the region east of the forest Sigvatr was turned away from no less than four farms while looking for a place to lodge for the night.¹¹ The question of whether the “unchristian man” (*ókristinn halr*) mentioned in stanza 8 allowed Sigvatr spend the night at his farm or not is left open by the preserved text of the poem. But as the poem is understood here, the *ókristinn halr* lives at Farm 4. Consequently, the *ókristinn halr* rejected Sigvatr.¹² At this point he presumably gave up his attempts at finding accommodation and the stanza therefore links back to his opening statement that he got little sleep on his journey.

The characters mentioned in the stanza—Ásta and the son of the powerful Saxi—are not referred to elsewhere in the *Austrfararvísur* or indeed in this part of *Óláfs saga helga*. The lack of contextual information complicates the interpretation of these references. The identity of “the son of Saxi” is indeterminable. But Saxi and his son seem nevertheless to have been well-known entities at Óláfr's court. Otherwise, the reference would hardly have made sense to the intended audience of the poem. One might speculate, as Ellekilde did (1933-4, 183), that someone at Óláfr's court had advised Sigvatr to seek hospitality at the residence of the son of Saxi, but that he was unable to find his dwelling.

Ásta was the name of Óláfr Haraldsson's mother. It seems possible that Sigvatr by mentioning her invokes a memory he shares with the intended audience of the poem—and first and foremost with Óláfr himself—of some occasion on which they spent an enjoyable night at Ásta's farm. This recollection of a generous welcome, if that was

¹⁰ “Mista ek fyr austan | Eiðaskóg á leiðu | Qstu bú, es æstak | ókristinn hal vistar. | Ríks fannka son Saxa; | saðr vas engr fyrir þaðra | (út vask eitt kveld heitinn) | inni (fjórum sinnum)” (st. 8, ed. Fulk 2012, 594).

¹¹ According to *Heimskringla's* prose text these rejections took place over two nights, but the stanza clearly mentions that it happened over one evening.

¹² Other groupings are also possible. One could e.g. see stanzas 4, 5, 6 and 7 as referring to one farm each and the *ókristinn halr* would then occupy a fifth farm and begrudgingly have offered Sigvatr lodging but not extended his hospitality beyond the bare minimum.

indeed what it was, would then be contrasted with the uncongenial reception he received at the four farms east of Eiðaskógr. Óláfr's mother was married to Sigurðr sýr, a petty king of Hringaríki. The location of Sigurðr sýr's main dwelling is not known for certain, but it is of course possible that Sigvatr stayed with Ásta and Sigurðr at the beginning of the journey recounted in (this part of) *Austrfararvísur*, although the journey from Borg to Skarar, as outlined in *Heimskringla*, would not have taken Sigvatr through Hringaríki.

Stanza 8 does not give any particular reason for Sigvatr's turning away. It only mentions that the *ókristinn halr* made sure that Sigvatr did not receive any *saðr* (fairness, *lit.* truth) at his place. Thus st. 8 rounds off the *alfablót*-sequence by stressing the two main themes of these stanzas: The emphasis on the paganism of this particular *halr* aligns with the general friction or hostility between the non-Christian inhabitants of the region and the Christians who are passing through that is expressed in connection with Farm 1 (sts 4 and 5). While the general lack of fairness and a friendly reception is stressed in the context of Farms 2 (st. 6) and 3 (st. 7). The following discussion will highlight these aspects of the stanzas with an emphasis on the first.

Farm 1. The alfablót at Hof

The most recent discussion of the *alfablót*-sequence and the reasons for Sigvatr's rejection is offered by Luke John Murphy in a thought-provoking article entitled "Paganism at Home: Pre-Christian Private Praxis and Household Religion in the Iron-Age North" (2018). In this article, Murphy endeavors to study private (as opposed to public) religious practices, understood as practices that occur in a domestic setting. Sigvatr's *alfablót*-stanzas form one of the main pieces of textual evidence for such private praxis, and after some discussion Murphy suggests that Sigvatr was turned away because the *alfablót* was "a sacrally charged event" where a ritual specialist had declared that the doors were not to be opened during a specific period of time (2018, 59), and that the *alfablót* was a small-scale private ritual exclusively accessible for the members of individual households.¹³ The exclusivity of the ritual carried out has also been remarked upon and discussed by earlier scholarship; most notably perhaps by De Vries who connected the *alfablót* with 'Totenfeier' (1932, 174), i.e. worship/celebration of the dead. De Vries argued, along lines similar to Murphy, that the *alfablót* was celebrated at the individual farmsteads and that strangers were prohibited from participating (1932, 173). De Vries attempted to support this argument by pointing to post-medieval customs connected with the Yule celebration and citing Celander's *Nordisk Jul: Julen i den gammaldags bondesed* (1928, 257) for the fact that Christmas day was considered the day of souls and *tomtar* and that it was forbidden to receive visitors or even leave one's farm on that day – if one did so the Christmas of the dead would be interrupted and the *tomtar* would move away (De Vries 1932, 174).

¹³ "Sigvatr and his Norwegian companions may have been turned away from four Swedish dwellings not *only* because the *alfablót* mandates a strict division between inside and outside of the houses where it was conducted, but *also* because they were not members of the household congregation (Murphy 2018, 66)."

With these points in mind, and the general caveat that Sigvatr aimed to produce an entertaining account of his tribulations while traveling among the rustics rather than an accurate depiction of pre-Christian Scandinavian traditions, it is now time to look at the two central *alfablót*-stanzas:

4. I decided to aim for Hof. The door was closed but I asked from outside—determined I poked in my bent nose. I got few words from the people, but they said [it was] holy. The heathen men chased me away. I asked the ogres to take care of them.¹⁴

The first farm was called Hof.¹⁵ There are, according to Magnus Olsen’s classic study *Farms and Fanes of Ancient Norway* (1928, first publ. as *Ættegård og helligdom* in 1926), no fewer than 85 farm names in Norway which are named with the Old Norse simplex Hof.¹⁶ Olsen argued that farms named Hof (or had the ON word *hof* as their generic, such as the place-name Njarðarhof, ‘Hof of Njørðr’) dated from the Viking Age and that these locations were centers of public cult in the late pre-Christian period.¹⁷ While Magnus Olsen’s interpretations in some cases tended towards the over-ingenuous, his point that the *hof* was a site of public cult has fared well in later scholarship. Olaf Olsen, e.g., in his thorough study *Hørg, hov og kirke* disagreed with Magnus Olsen on many central points, but after some discussion of the Old Norse *hof*, he defined a *hof* as a “farm where cult meetings were regularly held for more people than those living on the farm (Olsen 1966, 280).”¹⁸ The two Olsens, Magnus and Olaf, therefore agree that ON *hof* designates a location where public cultic practices take place. Where they differed was in determining what kind of building it was. Olaf Olsen held that *hof* indicated a farm where celebrations were held, while Magnus Olsen found the literary sources reliable and imagined a building that was exclusively used for cultic purposes (a building he referred to as a “temple”). The distinction is of little importance in the present context, as Magnus Olsen held that such *hof* or temples were so closely associated with important farms that the farms were known by the term *hof*.¹⁹ Some scholars have attempted to identify the particular Hof visited by Sigvatr in the course of his journey, but this may well be beside the point as it is possible to take “Hof” as a generic name for a farm where public cultic celebrations took place. It is of course possible (and indeed likely) that ritual activities exclusively intended for the household would have taken place at farms named Hof as well as public activities. But when Sigvatr is

¹⁴ “Réðk til Hofs at hæfa; | hurð vas apt, en ek spurðumk | —inn settak nef nenninn | niðrlútt— fyrir útan; | orð gatk fæst af fyrðum, | (flögð baðk) en þau sögðu, | hnekkðumk heiðnir rek- kar, | heilagt (við þau deila)” (st. 4, ed. Fulk 2012, 589).

¹⁵ It is possible to interpret the placename Hof as a common noun as well, i.e. *hof*.

¹⁶ Half of these are found in close conjunction with a church farm (1928, 268).

¹⁷ Conversely, and perhaps less convincingly, he argues that place names that have a sacral first element followed by the generic *land* (such as Þórsland and Hofland) designated “private places of worship” (Olsen 1928, 269).

¹⁸ This formulation comes from Olsen’s English summary. In his main text he characterizes a *hof* as a “betegnelse for en gård, i hvilken der regelmæssigt afholdtes kultiske sammenkomster for en større kreds end gårdens egne beboere (Olsen 1966, 94).” For a recent assessment of Magnus Olsen’s work on *hof* names, see Vikstrand 2009, 68-71.

¹⁹ For the development of the term *hof*, see Andersson (2000).

referring to a farm with the generic name Hof, the name alone would suffice to indicate to his intended audience the kind of farm at which Sigvatr had arrived; namely a farm strongly associated with public cult activities.

The second half of the stanza explains why Sigvatr was denied entry: “þau sǫgðu heilagtr” (they said [it was] holy).²⁰ The exact significance of the Old Norse adjective *heilagr* (of which *heilagt* is the neuter) is much discussed and opinions differ depending on whether primacy is given to the poetic or the legal textual evidence. In the most recent contribution to this debate, Clunies Ross shows that the adjective *heilagr* in the oldest ON poetic sources is applied to the gods and to objects and locations closely associated with the gods. She argues that there is nothing in this material to support the notion “of the *heilagr* being, object, or place as ‘inviolable, unharmed, complete’ (2020, 38).” Contrary to the poetic examined by Clunies Ross, legal sources amply support the notion that *heilagr* and related terms designated “inviolability” of some sort. Given that the term *heilagr* appears to have had religious significance in pre-Christian poetry, and that it is also used widely and early in a Christian religious sense (e.g. “*heilagr andilinn helgi andi*”, The Holy Spirit), the question of whether *heilagr* in its legal sense of “inviolable” also has a religious basis has been raised. This has given rise to a long controversy on whether the ancient legal traditions had a sacral or a profane basis (viz. the so-called *Sakraltheorie* and *Profantheorie*).²¹ Von See argued in his discussion of Old Scandinavian legal terminology that the legal sense of *heilagr* and related terms should not be understood in connection with the numinous or sacral in any way (von See 1964, 131–8), but he also acknowledged that the difference between the sacred and the profane in some cases can be difficult to draw. In the present context *heilagr* should probably be understood as “inviolable”, but since this status of inviolability is occasioned by its connection with the ritualistic activities, it seems impossible to distinguish between the legal and the religious sphere.

Sighvatr’s phrasing in “þau sǫgðu heilagtr” (they said [it was] holy) further recalls the linguistic usage of Old Norse Christian laws where Sundays and various feast days are designated as days of rest. The noun *helgr* is in these texts used to designate timespans with this special status and while the adjective *heilagt* can be used to characterize this timespan. One example is found in the Norwegian *Eiðsivaþingslög*, where *heilagt* is juxtaposed with *sýknt*. The latter term designates an ordinary, non-holy day: “Now a man begins his journeying with a packhorse or a burden on his shoulders; he should travel while it is *sýknt* but remain at rest while it is *heilagt*. But if he travels during the *helgr*, the fine is 6 *aurar* of silver.”²² The laws contain fairly detailed provi-

²⁰ The neuter plural pronoun (*þau*) used to refer to those who turned Sigvatr away indicates that they are a mixed group of men and women.

²¹ For a recent survey of this discussion, which focuses on the contribution of Folke Ström, see af Edholm (2019).

²² “Nú byrjar maðr ferð sína á laugardegi fyrri nónn með klyf eða fatlbyrði; fari meðan sýknt er, siti kyrr meðan heilagtr er. En ef hann ferr á helgi þá liggja við .vi. aurar silfrs” (ed. Fjeld Halvorsen and Rindal 2008, 16).

sions about allowed and prohibited activities when it is *heilagt*. The *Eiðsivaþingslög* furthermore specifies how one ought to feed guests that arrive in the time of *heilagt*, as *heilagt* indicated a day of rest and this imposed certain restrictions on the kinds of meals one would have been allowed to prepare for one's guests.²³

In the context of *Austrfararvísur*, Fulk has suggested that the term *heilagt* may refer to either the sacred space at Hóf or the day (2012, 590). Murphy, on the other hand, proposes reading the phrasing in light of saga episodes where "a ritual specialist [has] declared that the doors were not to be opened for a particular period of time" and suggests that *heilagt* thus refers to "a sacrally charged event" (2018, 59). Clunies Ross finally prefers to see the term *heilagt* as being "applied to pagan practices . . . in the manner in which a Christian would imagine it being used by pagans" (2020, 37). But given that Sigvatr lives through the conversion age, he would probably have been familiar with pre-Christian ritual practices even if he had received baptism as a young child and grown up a Christian in Iceland. He would therefore not have to resort to imagination when it came to depicting such activities.

For the reasons that Sigvatr was baptized and that this section of the poem emphasizes overall the paganism of denizens of the border land, it seems most straightforward to connect his turning away with the fact that he was a Christian. As he depicts it, it is then his presence which somehow would desecrate or violate the *heilagr* (invioable) sanctity of the place Hof or the timespan, which, as the following stanzas make clear, is the duration of the *alfablót*. In this way, he is depicting paganism as a religious system containing notions and ideologies similar to, but inverse of, those of Christianity. Just as pagans were not supposed to participate in Christian rituals, it would be sacrilegious for the pagans should a Christian partake in their rituals.²⁴

Having been denied food and lodging at Farm 1 Sigvatr curses the inhabitants wishing that they be taken by *flögð* (ogres). His curse echoes st. 2 in which he wished that *hauga herr* (the army of the mounds [supernatural beings]) take his boat.²⁵ Both curses are variations of the commonly-found expression *troll hafí þik* (may the trolls have you).²⁶ While supernatural beings in mounds and ogresses are not exclusively associated with *forn siðr* (the old custom) and survived the conversion to Christianity,

²³ "Ef gestar koma á hendr manni .iiii. eða fjórum fleiri; en ef hann hefir mjøl, þá man hann láta baka á sunnudegi sem annan sýknan dag sektarlaust, þat sem hann neytir við gesti, ok slátra ok hængja millim hurðarása ok bera ei í búr út" (If four or more guests arrive at a man's dwelling and if he has flour, then he is allowed to let bake that which he uses for the guests, and to slaughter and hang [the meat] between the door-beams, but not to carry it out to the storehouse; ed. Fjeld Halvorsen and Rindal 2008, 14–6) .

²⁴ Stanza 4's striking image of Sigvatr standing outside a closed door is also found in st. 2 of his *Vestrfararvísur* (Stanzas About a Journey to the West) which were most likely composed a few years after *Austrfararvísur*.

²⁵ "taki hlægiskip hauga | herr" (ed. Fulk 2012, 585). Sigvatr's use of the verb *taki* (take) instead of *hafí* (have) can be explained by a wish to avoid three alliterating syllables in the line.

²⁶ *Samsons saga fagra* even mentions that trolls are so common in a certain region that if one says that the trolls should take someone, trolls immediately appear and do that (ed. Wilson 1953, 32).

it is striking that it is the Christian Sigvatr who invokes traditional supernatural beings rather than, say, the devil, while the pagans claim that he is violating their *helgr*.

The following stanza, which in keeping with the understanding of st. 8 above is understood to refer to the same farm, makes clear the reason for Sigvatr's rejection.

Farm 1. The alfablót at Hof (continued)

5. 'Do not come further in, you vile fellow,' said the woman. 'I fear the wrath of Óðinn. We are heathen.' The nasty woman who determined chased me away like a wolf, said that they were having *alfablót* inside their farm.²⁷

Sigvatr is chased away "like a wolf" for fear of divine wrath. The topic of divine wrath in sources dealing with the pre-Christian Norse worldview is a complex one and a full discussion cannot be given in this context.²⁸ It nevertheless seems clear that the Norse gods were not envisioned as concerning themselves with the upkeep of moral standards among humans. Contrary to the Christian God, the traditional Scandinavian gods did not persistently monitor human behavior and did not punish those who failed to adhere to the standards of what was considered right.

In a recent paper, Raffield, Price and Collard discuss such supernatural monitoring and argue that "the gods were morally concerned some of the time" (2019, 13).²⁹ The most compelling example of such supernatural monitoring given by Raffield *et al.* regards oaths, where they claim that "oath-taking . . . was perceived to be an act that was of interest to the gods" (2019, 8).³⁰ However, judging from the available sources, the gods were not perceived as being particularly preoccupied by oaths. Rather, the oath-taker mobilizes the gods and makes them interested parties by invoking them and calling upon them to witness an oath. The basic idea of an oath is that the entity by which one swears will turn against or fail one if the oath is false; as such the oath is a conditional curse. The entity sworn by could be the gunwale, the rim of a shield, the shoulder of horse, the edge of a sword (cf. *Völundarkviða* st. 33), or it could be the gods. The gods as such are therefore not particularly concerned with oaths; rather by invoking godly agency as a guarantor for the truthfulness or sincerity of the oath, the oath-taker implicates the gods. One instance would be the well-known oath "sva se mærguð hol" found in the *Older Law of the Västgötar* (eds. Collin and Schlyter 1827, 10-11), where even the hypercritical Baetke agreed that *guð* can only be interpreted as a noun in n.pl.. It is therefore likely that the oath is a reflection of a pre-Christian oath, the

²⁷ "'Gakkat inn,' kvað ekkja, | 'armi drengr, en lengra; | hræðumk ek við Óðins | —erum heiðin vér—reiði. | Rýgr kvazk inni eiga | óþekk, súsmér hnekkði, | alfablót, sem ulfi | ótvín í bæ sínum" (ed. Fulk 2012, 590).

²⁸ The fullest discussion so far seems to be by Ström (1952).

²⁹ This was part of a more elaborate and interesting discussion of the role of 'Moralizing High Gods' and 'broad supernatural punishment' in the creation of complex societies.

³⁰ The archaeological and textual evidence for the swearing of oaths on rings is compiled and discussed by Sundquist (2015, 376–403).

translation of which would have been “so may the gods be gracious to me”.³¹ Extended forms of this formula that spell out the consequences only implied in the Swedish law are found in Old Norse legal texts (although in a Christianized form where the plural neuter *guð* is replaced by a singular masculine *Guð*). One example is from *Grágás* (St): “Sé mér Guð holhr ef ek sáttt segi en gramr ef ek lýgi” (May God be gracious to me if I tell the truth, but wrathful if I lie; ed. Finsen 1879, 277).

Rather than concerning themselves with ethical questions of moral and justice, the Norse gods were, as far as we can tell from the sources, preoccupied with protecting their own sacral and cultic interests. This is particularly clear from *Víga-Glúms saga* (ed. Jónas Kristjánsson 1956) where Freyr turns decidedly against the human protagonist after acts of sacrilege in which he repeatedly violates the holy ground of the deity: Glúmr first kills an antagonist on the field Vitazgjafi, which appears to be under the special protection of Freyr (cps 7–8). While Glúmr is, at this point, in the right when judged from the moral and legal perspectives of the society delineated in the saga literature, an antagonist sacrifices a bull to Freyr with the wish that Glúmr eventually be forced to leave his land against his will (cp. 9). This sets in motion a series of events in which Glúmr acts with increasing recklessness: he violates the sanctity of Freyr’s *hof* by hiding his outlawed son on the *hofsland* (cp. 19). Later he swears an ambiguous oath by the gods (*æsir*) in the *hof* and even gives away the hallowed objects which embody the luck of his family (cp. 25). The antagonism between Glúmr and the deity reaches a climax of sorts when he dreams that his deceased ancestors attempt to intercede for him before Freyr. But to no avail: Freyr refuses *reiðulega* (wrathfully) and shortly thereafter Glúmr is coerced to leave his farm (cp. 26).

Víga-Glúms saga is particularly interesting in the context of divine wrath because it is set in a pre-Christian world where the protagonist, as well as his various antagonists, are pagan. Texts thematizing the anger of the gods often play out in the context of conversion narratives. One example is found in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, where the pagan Þrændir explain to the condescending missionary king that Freyr has been angry with them the past few years because they have not fully turned a deaf ear to the preaching of the king, and Freyr thinks that they have betrayed him.³² In another example, this time from *Óláfs saga helga*, the Þrændir believe that a severe shortage of grain among the Háleygir, and a less severe shortage among themselves, are consequences of the anger of the gods because the Háleygir had turned to Christianity (ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, II, 177–8).

These three examples show how deities are perceived as being offended when someone intrudes upon their turf or commits some kind of sacrilege or profanation. It

³¹ Baetke argues further that the word *guð* in the oath would not have been understood as a plural entity in the Christian middle ages (1948, 370 et pass.). See also Jón Axel Harðarson (2005, 88–91).

³² “[S]ögðu þeir at ‘hann er nú orðinn reiðr oss ok veldr þú því, þvíat síðan þú boðaðir oss annan guð á at trúa ok vér gengum nokkut eptir þínum fortölum, þykkir honum vér sér hafa brugðisk ok því vill hann nú engi afskipti veita oss” (ed. Ólafur Halldórsson 1958–2000, III, 3).

may be assumed that the woman turns Sigvatr away because she perceived that his mere presence would somehow erode or desecrate the rightful property of the god.

Fearing the wrath of Óðinn, the woman at the farm chases Sigvatr away as if he were a wolf (*sem ulfi*). Wolves were of course feared, chased away and, if possible, killed. The *Older Law of the Gulaping* even states that wolves (and bears) were to be considered outlaws wherever they were,³³ meaning that they do not have the protection of the law. But the comparison may acquire an additional layer of meaning when one considers that a person who has desecrated a sanctuary is to be considered a “*vargr í véum*” (a *vargr* in sanctuaries). This evocative phrase is only attested a few times in Old Norse literature, but it seems clear from Oddr munkr’s *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* that it designates an individual who has desecrated the property of a god by breaking it down and carrying away its valuables.³⁴ Alternatively, it designates someone who has desecrated a sanctuary by killing someone within it.³⁵ As was the case with Víga-Glúmr, who hid his outlawed son on the ground of the *hof* at Þverá, Iceland, the idea is that the gods will not tolerate the presence in their sanctuaries of those who have desecrated those sanctuaries, and the consequence is that the criminal is to be considered a *vargr í véum* wherever he went.³⁶ On the basis of cognates in other Germanic languages, it appears that PGerm. **wargaz*, the noun from which *vargr* descends, originally designated a(n outlawed) criminal (Strauch 1994). It was not until the early eleventh century that the significance of *warg*-terms began to expand to include wolves,³⁷ but as we have seen wolves and certain lawbreakers alike were both considered outlaws. Good use is made of this semantic overlap between wolves and outlaws in a stanza attributed to Hildir Hrólfsdóttir (and dated to the turn of the tenth century) in which she warns the Norwegian king of the dire consequences of chasing away Hrólfr,

³³ “Björn ok ulfr skal hvervetna útlagr vera” (ed. Eithun et al. 1994, 89). The same law adds later that when a killer, as required by the law, announces his killing at a farm nearby the place where the killing occurred, he should not be called “wolf” or “bear”, unless that was his name (ed. Eithun et al. 1994, 111).

³⁴ Both Oddr munkr and *Jómsvíkinga saga* recount how Hákon jarl (Sigurðarson) desecrated the main sanctuary in Gautland and was considered a “*vargr í véum*” because of this (ed. Ólafur Halldórsson 2006, 174; and eds. Þorleifur Hauksson and Marteinn Helgi Sigurðsson 2018, 38). *Heimskringla* and *Vellekla* also describe Hákon’s campaign in Gautland (ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, I, 260–2), but these sources stress the pagan fervor of the jarl and make no mention of sacrilege.

³⁵ As in *Egils saga*, where “Eyvindr hafði vegit í véum ok var hann vargr orðinn ok varð hann þegar brott at fara” (Eyvindr had killed in the sanctuary and had become a *vargr* and was forced to leave immediately; ed. Sigurðir Nordal 1933, 125).

³⁶ “Óttarr jarl kveðr þá þings ok gerir Hákon jarl útlagðan, ok skyldi hann heita vargr í véum, er hann hafði brotit hit æzta hof í Gautlandi” (ed. Ólafur Halldórsson 2006, 174). “[A]t Hákon jarl skyldi heita vargr í véum, fyrir því at hann kvað engi mann verri verk unnit hafa er Hákon hafði brotit it æðsta hof í Gautlandi ok unnit mart annat illt, ok öngvir menn vissu dæmi til slíks ok hvargi er hann fór eða kom þá skyldi hann þetta nafn hafa” (ed. Þorleifur Hauksson and Marteinn Helgi Sigurðsson 2018, 38).

³⁷ See Jacoby, who writes: “Die Idee, einen Täter als ‘Wolf’ zu sehen, ist im germanischen Recht vor dem 11. Jahrhundert nicht zu finden” (1974, 123). One of the earliest examples he provides comes from the laws of Edward the Confessor in England.

saying “It is terrible to act wolfish against such a wolf [i.e. Hrólfr, whose name is compounded of *hróðr* ‘fame’ and *ulfr* ‘wolf’]. He will not treat the herds of the ruler gently if he runs to the forest.”³⁸ As Hildir’s stanza shows, both wolves and *vargar* were furthermore associated with the forest. It seems likely that this significant semantic overlap between the two categories, the wolf and the criminal, gave rise to their eventual assimilation. In the context of *Austrfararvísur*, it is noteworthy that Sigvatr comes to the farm from the forest like a wolf would do, and the farmers chase him away back into the forest, again like a wolf. Another example that is worth considering in this context is the Icelander Þorvaldr enn veili’s libel against the Christian missionary Þangbrandr, where he encourages Úlfr Uggason to drive the missionary off the cliffs. In this stanza Þangbrandr is characterized as “argr goðvargr” (a cowardly criminal/wolf of the gods) who “við rogn of regnir (sets himself up against the gods; ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 262).³⁹

While Sigvatr was turned away from Farm 4 simply because the inhabitants were pagan, the woman at Farm 1 provides additional motivation: they are having *alfablót* (sacrifice to the alfar). The collocation *alfablót* is only attested in this context and is used once in Sigvatr’s stanza and once in the prose that frames the *Austrfararvísur*. The exact nature of the *alfablót* cannot therefore be established with any kind of certainty. Murphy, who stresses that local and private aspect of the *alfablót*, associates Alfar with ancestral spirits (2018, 71). But the contradictory nature of the textual evidence as well as its paucity would speak in favor of seeing the term *alfr* (pl. *alfar*) as a fairly broad term that refers to “a wide variety of paranormal others (‘elves’ rather than ‘the elves’),” as Ármann Jakobsson has it (2015, 215). Kuhn was a bit more specific when he suggested that the Alfar were a group of beings which originally were more closely associated with the gods than they would be in later times.⁴⁰ Hall also aligns the (Scandinavian) Alfar with the *Æsir* (2007, 47), while Gunnell associates them more narrowly with the *Vanir* (2007). In addition to these classificatory uncertainties, it is also worthwhile to keep in mind that the farmers do not fear the wrath of the Alfar, but of Óðinn, and that the word *alfablót* in Sigvatr’s stanza stands in a rhyme position in such a way that it both alliterates and forms a *skothending* with *ulfr*: “*alfablót*, sem *ulfi*”. Metrical constraints may therefore have influenced the choice of words as well. All in all, the evidence for a particular feast associated with *ancestral* Alfar seems to be fragile.⁴¹ It is

³⁸ Illt’s við ulf at ylfask | . . . slíkan; munat við hilmis hjarðir | hægr ef rinnr til skógar (*Skj* BI, 27).

³⁹ Interestingly both Þorvaldr and Hildir use a *figura etymologica* which is a relatively rare occurrence in Old Norse poetry. For a full, if somewhat imaginative, treatment of these stanzas, see Olsen (1942).

⁴⁰ “Sie [Die Alben] sind wohl eine alte Gruppe, die sich aufgelöst und in verschiedene Richtungen entwickelt hatte, zuerst anscheinend den Göttern nah und den Menschen zugänglich, dann aber, zumal in christliche Zeit, ihnen zunehmend feindlich und verderblich (Kuhn 1978, 269).”

⁴¹ Kuhn suggests that the nickname of Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr, which is one of the few texts that directly links an *alfr* with a dead human, may have been misinterpreted and originates from Álafr, an older form of the name Óláfr (1978, 269).

therefore worth considering whether the farmers who turn Sigvatr away are having some other celebration. The most natural assumption, given that Sigvatr's journey takes place "at hausti" (in the fall; st. 1) and that the prose context of *Óláfs saga helga* places it *öndurðan vetr* (in the beginning of the winter; ed. Bjarni Aðalbarnarson 1941–51, II, 134), is that the farmers were in the middle of the annual celebration of *vetrnætr* (the winter nights), a three-day celebration which marked the transition from fall to winter.

Vetrnætr celebrations are often mentioned in saga literature and in some instances associated with the *dísablót* (sacrifice to the *Dísir*, a group of beings only marginally less obscure than the *Alfar*). The best example is found early in *Víga-Glúms saga*. In this episode which plays out in Western Norway, the *dísablót* celebration at the winter nights is somewhat subdued because everyone fears that a local *berserkr* named Björn jarnhauss will show up and make trouble, and this is indeed what happens (cp. 6, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson 1956). The general tendency in scholarship is to regard the *dísablót* as a fairly private affair with invited guests rather than participants (see e.g. Gunnell 2000, 129), although it has been argued that the *dísablót* should be seen as a public rather than a private celebration (Sundqvist and Vikstrand 2014, 160). The evidence, however, is inconclusive. *Víga-Glúms saga's* theme of the unwanted guest is also present in the second main account about a *dísablót*. This account is found in the well-known episode in *Egils saga* where Atleyjar-Bárðr is preparing to entertain Eiríkr blóðøx, queen Gunnhildr, and their retinue at the *dísablót* when Egill and his companion Ólvir arrive and ask for lodging. Atleyjar-Bárðr attempts in vain to keep the two groups separate by hiding Egill and his men in an outhouse (cps 43–4, ed. Sigurður Nordal 1933). This account is to some extent supported by stanzas by Egill (lv. 2–5), some of which may be authentic and make reference to Bárðr's lack of generosity in connection with the *dísablót* (lv. 2, *Skj* BI, 42–3) and Egill's subsequent flight from the presence of king and queen, having killed three retainers (lv. 5, *Skj* BI, 43). So although it would seem that the *dísablót* were mainly for invited guests, unexpected visitors were not unheard of either.⁴² The third major episode dealing with a *dísablót* is found in *Af Þiðrandu ok dísunum*. This account mentions a prohibition against opening the door to the farm at night during the *vetrnætr* celebration, but this interdict is occasioned by a local prophet's sense of foreboding and so should not be seen as a general prohibition against visitors.

The impression one gets from these accounts is that the *vetrnætr* celebration is a fairly decentralized affair and that they are celebrated at multiple farms at the same time. An episode in *Óláfs saga helga* also emphasizes the decentralized nature of the Winter Nights' sacrifices, and indicates that they were celebrated at multiple farms in the Þrándheimr area at the same time (ed. Bjarni Aðalbarnarson 1941–51, II, 177–81). A passage in *Hákonar saga góða*, on the other hand, also describes sacrifices in this area

⁴² *Víga-Glúms saga* stresses that many men arrived for the *dísablót* (ed. Jónas Kristjánsson 1956, 17), while *Af Þiðrandu ok dísunum* stresses that only a few of the guests that had been invited to the Winter Nights celebration at Hof arrived because of the bad weather (ed. Sigurgeir Steingrímsson *et al.* 2003, 2, 123).

and stresses its centralized nature where everyone in the region was expected to participate (ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, I, 171–3).

The saga passages presented here do not indicate conclusively that it is the private nature of the *alfablót* or *vetrnatr* celebration that causes the farmers to turn Sigvatr away when he asks for lodging, and justify searching for other motives. In the final section of this paper, the suggestion will be made that Sigvatr’s rejection should be understood in the light of the increasing antagonism between Christians and non-Christians that followed as a consequence of the Christian efforts to convert the Scandinavians to the new religion, but first the remaining two stanzas of Sigvatr’s *alfablót*-sequence will be (briefly) discussed. In these final two stanzas, Sigvatr shifts the emphasis somewhat. While sts 4, 5 and 8 emphasize the paganism of the inhabitants of the border region, sts 6 and 7 appear to focus on the unwelcoming nature of the inhabitants more broadly and do not make overt references to their paganism.

Farm 2. The Qlvirs

6. Now three men with the same name have chased me away, those who turned their backs to me. The MEN [firtrees of the whetstone bench] do not at all show praiseworthy behavior. Yet this is what I fear the most that every MAN [loader of the sea-ski] who is called Qlvir will henceforth chase guests away.⁴³

As Sigvatr’s *Austrfararvísur* are read here, st. 6 apparently refers to a single farm housing three men who all had the same name. *Heimskringla*’s prose context indicates that the three Qlvirs lived on their separate farms (ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, II, 137–8), which is also possible. Whatever the case, Qlvir was never a common name, although Widmark shows that it was more common in Norway and Western Sweden than in Iceland and Eastern Sweden (1965).⁴⁴ The mention of three Qlvirs should probably be seen as the punchline of a joke and De Vries’s suggestion that the name was a pun on the adjective *qlværr* (friendly, kind; 1932, 171) makes excellent sense in the context, although the adjective is rare.⁴⁵ De Vries furthermore etymologized the name Qlvir as Proto-Nordic **alu-wīhar* (“Priester des alu-(ahl-)Heiligtumes”; 1932, 177), a suggestion which was later supported and elaborated upon by Kousgård Sørensen who, on the basis of personal names such as Old Norse *Sølvi*, Qlvir, *Guðvēr* (Runic Swedish) and *Þiūðvēr* (Runic Danish) and some toponyms, speculatively reconstructs an entire series of titles supposedly borne by ritual specialists in the proto-Scandinavian period, what he calls “den før-kristne præstestand” (1989).⁴⁶ While it cannot be

⁴³ “Nú hafa hnekk, þeirs hnakka | (heinflets) við mér, settu | (þeygi bella þollar) | þrír samnafnar (tíri). | Þó séumk hitt, at hlæðir | hafskíðs myni síðan | út hverrs Qlvir heitir, | alls mest, reka gesti” (ed. Fulk 2012, 592).

⁴⁴ Sigurður R. Helgason mentions some remarkable toponyms in Iceland that are derived from the name Qlvir (2017).

⁴⁵ *Qlværr* is only attested once (in the Eddic poem *Atlamál*, st. 5), but the adverb *qlværliga* (friendly, kindly) and the noun *qlværd* (hospitality, f.) in particular are better attested.

⁴⁶ The four personal names he interprets as the titles “(sal-)helligdomspræst”, “helligdomspræst”, “gudepræst”, and “præst for et folk” (1989, 5–13).

excluded that the personal name Qlvir derives from the title of a Proto-Nordic ritual specialist, it seems that it no longer had that function in Sigvatr's day and that no one was aware of the origin of the name at that point in time. Hence, De Vries's suggestion that it is a pun seems to be preferable.⁴⁷ It is also possible that Sigvatr, by mentioning this name, attempts to poke fun at Qlvir á Eggju, who was a prominent pagan chieftain in central Norway in Óláfr's day. A confrontation between Qlvir á Eggju and Óláfr is narrated at length later in *Heimskringla's Óláfs saga helga*. This confrontation, which ends with the killing of Qlvir, set in motion a series of events which contributes heavily to the fall of the king.⁴⁸

Farm 3. The most charitable/generous man

7. Then I went to see the MAN [breaker of the wave-gleam] whom men say is by far the most generous. I expected peace. The MAN [warden of the hay-fork] scowled at me. The worst is bad if he is the best. I rarely spread criticism of people.⁴⁹

The main joke of this stanza lies in its juxtaposition of advance report and reality and the images conjured up by the kennings associated with two stages. Sigvatr had learned ahead of time that a certain farmer surpassed others in generosity and describes this farmer accordingly, using an elaborate but conventional ring-breaker kenning that would be suitable for a man,⁵⁰ but in particular for a generous high status individual: “bõru blikis brjótr” (the breaker of the wave-gleam). He is, however, disappointed to learn that the generosity of this farmer has been exaggerated. The second kenning by which he refers to the farmer is therefore a much less laudatory: “grefs gætir” (warden of the hay-fork). This is an ironic derogatory variant of the kenning type by which an individual is designated by that which he is in charge of, and may be compared to a stanza in which Sigvatr likens Erlingr Skálgsson to Dala-Guðbrandr whom he describes as “gætir gumna” (protector of men) (ed. Jesch 2012, 628).⁵¹ However, Sigvatr attempts to reconcile reputation and his personal experience by stating that the worst is bad indeed if this farmer is the most generous.

⁴⁷ Sigurður R. Helgason has recently noted that saga characters named Qlvir are often characterized as staunch adherents of pagan cult and suggested that Qlvir should be seen as an Óðinn alias. This, he claims, “allows a new interpretation of the section of Sighvatr Þórðarson's *Austrfararvísur* in which the name Qlvir appears (2017, 120)” —although he does not specify what this interpretation might be.

⁴⁸ Qlvir's widow, Sigríðr Þórisdóttir, was the sister of Þórir hundr and was later married to Kalfr Árnason. It was these two, Þórir and Kalfr, who along with a certain Þorsteinn knarrarsmiðr reputedly gave Óláfr his three death-wounds at the battle of Stiklastaðir (ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, II, 385).

⁴⁹ “Fórk at finna bõru | —fríðs vættak mér — síðan | brjótr, þann's bragnar létu, | blikis, vildastan miklu. | Grefs leit við mér gætir | gerstr; þás illr inn versti | — lítt reiðik þó lýða | løst — ef sjás inn bazti” (ed. Fulk 2012, 593).

⁵⁰ As *Skáldskaparmál* states: “Maðr er kallaðr brjótr gullsins” (a man is called breaker of the gold; ed. Faulkes 1998, 62).

⁵¹ Incidentally, this stanza also contains two variants of the ring-breaker kenning: “hati ormláðs” (hater of the worm-land) and “lægir linnsetrs” (diminisher of the snake-home).

Antagonism

Discussing the process of Christianization in Northern, Central and Eastern Europe between ca. 900 and 1200, historian Nora Berend argues that a clear pattern emerges in which the areas that were “most firmly under the rulers’ power were the first to become Christian” (2007, 25). Conversely, in areas that were peripheral to the power of these rulers, the pre-Christian belief systems held out longer than in the central areas. Eiðaskógr, the area which Sigvatr traverses in *Austrfararvísur*, is such a remote region situated between the more densely populated parts of Eastern Norway that had been Christianized relatively early, and Götaland which is generally considered to have converted to Christianity relatively early as well (earlier, at least, than Svealand).⁵²

The honoree of this publication has with characteristic clarity outlined some of differences between the pre-Christian religion of Scandinavia and Christianity, noting that “Christianity is religion in quite another way than the pagan religion was religion” (Schjødt 2014, 266). The typological distinction he outlines agrees with the one that is often made between indigenous and world religions, or, as Jens Peter prefers (following Jan Assmann), primary and secondary religions. One noteworthy difference is their relative valuation of orthopraxy and orthodoxy. This distinction, along with others that are often made between these two broad types of religions, should not be applied uncritically. It is nevertheless useful as a convenient shorthand that efficiently captures an essential difference in the present context. Generally speaking, indigenous polytheistic religions are more occupied with how to act than what to believe than monotheistic world religions are. They rarely show a great interest in theological doctrine. It is imperative that rituals, ritual performances, and recitations are carried out properly, correctly, and in accordance with tradition. Conversely, world religions are more concerned with belief and with separating that which is true and correct from that which is false and wrong, or orthodoxy from heterodoxy. Jens Peter neatly sums this up as follows: “‘Religion’ for the pagans was something they ‘did’. . . and not something they believed” (Schjødt 2014, 270).

In the Scandinavian polytheistic context, plenty of examples display this priority which polytheists ascribe to orthopraxy over orthodoxy. One of the clearest examples is the performance of the *varðlok(k)ur* chants in *Eiríks saga rauða*, which appear to be necessary in order to conduct a prognosticating *seiðr* ritual. The Christian woman Guðríðr first refuses to perform the *varðlok(k)ur* because she is a Christian, but when pressured by her host Þorkell, she yields and chants “so beautifully and well that no one thought they had heard it chanted with a more beautiful voice”.⁵³ Another well-known example is found in *Hákonar saga góða*, when the pagan Þrendir abduct the Christian king and force him to participate in their midwinter sacrifice at Mœrr

⁵² For the area around the Oslo Fjord, see the discussion of Walaker and Gulliksen 2007. For Götaland and Svealand, see Ljungqvist 2018.

⁵³ “Kvað Guðríðr þá kvæðit svá fagrt ok vel, at engi þóttisk fyrr heyrt hafa með fegri raust kveðit” (ed. Ólafur Halldórsson 1985, 412).

“neyða konung til blóta”; ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, I, 172). A third example is found in Adam of Bremen’s description of the collective sacrifices at Uppsala from which no one is exempted (“nulli prestatatur immunitas”; ed. Schmeidler 1917, 259). The text continues by stating that those who already have assumed the Christian faith can free themselves from the obligation to participate by paying a fee (“illi qui iam induerunt christianitatem, ab illis se redimunt ceremoniis”; ed. Schmeidler 1917, 259), but a scolion adds that the Christian Swedish king Anunder was deposed because he refused to participate (ed. Schmeidler 1917, 259).

While the evidentiary value of these examples is uncertain, as they are either drawn from saga literature of the thirteenth century or from Adam of Bremen’s unsympathetic account, the attitude they exemplify can readily be found in other traditions and is typical of the so-called indigenous religions. The three examples highlight that formalism outweighed dogma in the pre-Christian religion and that individual religious conviction or faith was unimportant if these individuals fulfilled their expected function. Framing this in the terms used by Jens Peter, one may say that the pre-Christian religion was a societal religion, while for Christians “the religious community is seen as more important than the societal community” (Schjødt 2014, 266).

The pre-Christian Scandinavians’ relatively indifferent attitude towards matters of doctrine and orthodoxy changed as the methods with which the proselytizers were willing to use to promote their faith became clearer, and in particular as the power dynamics between the two groups began to shift and the pagans began to experience the division brought about by conversion within their own families. This falling out is vividly depicted in *Kristni saga*, which relates how the Icelanders considered those who had converted to Christianity *frændaskömm* (‘a disgrace to one’s family’) and promulgated laws that meant that the still-pagan relatives must prosecute their Christian relatives for *goðlǫstun* (‘blasphemy’; ed. Sigurgeir Steingrímsson *et al.* 2003, 16-17). *Þorvalds þáttur viðförla I* remembers the dissection of societal bonds in even more striking terms. Þorvaldr Koðránsson had invited the Saxon Bishop Friðrekr to Iceland to spread the word of the Gospel. The *þáttur* tells that they established themselves at Lækjamót in Víðidalr, and continues:

And during the first year in which they lived at Lækjamót, Þorvaldr asked to marry a woman named Vigdís, she was the daughter of Óláfr who lived at Haukagil in Vatsdalr. But when the bishop and Þorvaldr came to the wedding celebration many heathen guests had been invited. There was a great well-equipped hall there, such as was customary on many places, and a little brook streamed through the hall. But because neither party, the Christians and the heathens, wanted to have anything to do with the other, it was decided that a curtain should be hung between them across the hall where the brook streamed. The bishop should stay in front of the hall with the Christians while the heathens should stay behind the curtain.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ “Á inum fyrstum misserum er þeir váru at Lækjamóti bað Þorvaldr til handa sér konu þeirar er Vigdís hét; hon var dóttir Óláfs er bjó á Haukagili í Vatsdal. En er þeir byskup ok Þorvaldr kómu til veizlunnar var þar fyrir fjöldi boðsmanna heiðinna. Þar var mikill skáli sem þá var víða siðr til, ok fell einn lítill lækr um þveran skálann ok búit um vel. En því at hvárigir vildu

As one would expect, this compromise does not last long and the text goes on to describe how two berserks confront the bishop, how a miracle happens and many turn to God, and how Óláfr shortly thereafter builds a church at Haukagil. But the crucial point in this context is the *þáttir*'s striking evocation of a conversion age Icelandic wedding.⁵⁵

It is against the background of this historical context of religious change that one should understand Sigvatr's *Austrfararvísur*. Saga accounts of this prolonged confrontation between the old and the new generally sympathize with the new and are often found in the context of conversion narratives. Studying what he termed "conversion þættir" and a related group of tales that has since been called "pagan contact þættir" (Rowe 1998, 11), Harris argued that they follow a typical paradigm: "1) an original (old, damned, pagan) state of affairs; 2) intervention by a Christian agent; and 3) a new (redeemed, Christian) state" (1980, 165-6). Sigvatr's *Austrfararvísur* stand out in our corpus as one of the few texts that thematize the relations between Christians and non-Christians outside of the context of a conversion narrative. Sigvatr is traveling as a representative of the king who promotes the new religion, but his mission is of a diplomatic rather than a missionary nature. Traveling through border regions he experiences first hand some of the divisions sown by the propagation of the Christian faith. Whether taught by experience or rumor, the inhabitants of the border zone have learned that visits by Christians spell trouble, and since they are in a position to do so, they refuse to shelter Sigvatr at their farms. The issue that shines through in the text is thus not one of private ritual practices from which strangers should be barred, but rather that the traditional religion is changing in response to the pressure exerted by the Christian mission. Sigvatr may depict this in humorous terms, but the pagans were not in a position where they could afford such a light attitude—for them it was a matter of existential threat.

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þórum samneyta, kristnir menn ok heiðnir, þá var þat ráð tekit at tjaldat var um þveran skálann í milli þeira þar sem lækinn fell. Skyldi byskup vera fram í skálann með kristna menn, en heiðingjar fyrir innan tjaldit" (ed. Sigurgeir Steingrímsson *et al.* 2003, 69–70).

⁵⁵ *Þorvalds þáttur víðforla* II and *Stefnis þáttur Þorgilssonar* also thematize the disruption in memorable ways.

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