

Honey and Poison: Reframing the Pagan Past at Øgvaldsnes and Elsewhere

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Abstract

The Øgvaldsnes episode from Oddr munkr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and *Acallam na Senórach*, two roughly contemporary and somewhat similar texts, show how different strategies have been employed to reframe the pagan past and neutralise the poison of this material that worried early doctors of the church such as St Basil. The two texts propose different answers to Alcuin's oft-cited question about the relationship between Christianity and pagan traditions. Both solutions entail depriving the former divinities of their numinous powers, but each strategy also comes at a price. The Old Norse text opts for demonisation and exclusion while the Irish text strives for domestication and subordination. It is not claimed that these two texts are representative of the ways in which the Old Norse and Irish traditions at large handled this question. Rather, the choices of these strategies are probably dictated by the particular historical circumstances of each author, their respective aims, and the literary circuit to which they belonged. Some parallels with the two main texts and alternative ways of reframing the pagan past are also briefly discussed.

Keywords: *Oddr munkr*, *Acallam na Senórach*, *Óláfr Tryggvason*, *St Patrick*, *post-conversion handling of pre-Christian tradition*

In 797 Alcuin, resident scholar at the court of Charlemagne, wrote a letter to a certain bishop whom he addressed as Speratus (Ep. 124).¹ In the letter Alcuin admonished the bishop about proper episcopal conduct and activities, in particular as these related to the giving of alms and feasting. At one point Alcuin poses the question, '*Quid Hinieldus cum Christo?*' 'What has Ingeld to do with Christ?' (Dümmmler 1895, 183). This well-known and oft-cited question was rhetorical, but the answer Alcuin must have had in mind was probably 'not a lot' or 'nothing, really'.² Scholars have nevertheless

1 The identity of Speratus is uncertain, but he may well be identified with Bishop Unnuona of Leicester, as argued by Bullough (1993).

2 For a collection of authorities expressing similar points of view, see Wormald 1978, 42–49.

attempted to answer the question more constructively, and their answers have typically taken a moral dimension or some elements of the northern tradition, which, Ingeld represents metonymically, have been traced to Christian sources. Elizabeth Ashman Rowe provides an example of a moral interpretation when, in an article from 2006 entitled ‘Quid Sigvardus cum Christo?’ or ‘What has Sigurd to do with Christ?’, she discusses medieval moral interpretations of the story of the dragon-slayer Sigurðr Fáfnisbani. Heather O’Donoghue, on the other hand, represents the source-tracing approach when, in an article from 2003 entitled ‘What has Baldr to do with Lamech?’, she argues that the story of Baldr’s death as it is known from the *Prose Edda* is influenced by Christian and ultimately Jewish tradition.³

Alcuin’s formulation is striking, but if scholars have imitated him, he himself imitated earlier writers. The *quid X cum Y* formula, as it has been called, is so widespread that it is impossible to identify Alcuin’s direct source.⁴ A possible source is a well-known passage in Paul the Apostle’s Second Letter to the Corinthians, in which he writes:

Do not bear the yoke with the infidels, for what does justice share with injustice or what is the company of light with darkness? How does Christ agree with Belial or what is the share of the faithful with the unfaithful? What is the connection of the temple of God with idols?⁵

The church father Tertullian had a special fondness for this rhetorical device and employs it no less than twenty-six times in his writings, most famously when he wrote: ‘What has Athens to do with Jerusalem, what has the academy to do with the church, what have the heretics to do with the Christians?’⁶ The examples given all contrast pagan and Christian traditions, and the common stance of Paul, Tertullian, and Alcuin is clearly that the two are mutually exclusive and that pagan tradition is no match for Christianity. This uncompromising point of view was not uncommon

³ See also Johansson 2017.

⁴ See Garrison (2005), on whose article on this topic I rely for the following paragraph.

⁵ *nolite iugum ducere cum infidelibus | quae enim participatio iustitiae cum iniquitate aut quae societas luci ad tenebras | quae autem conventio Christi ad Belial | aut quae pars fideli cum infidele | qui autem consensus templo Dei cum idolis? (II Cor. 6, 14–16). Antonius saga renders a part of this passage in Old Norse: Variz við með aöllu kostgjæfvi at samteingiaz þeim, er i Arrivs villu eru vafðir, því at lios hefvir ecki samfelag með myrkrum (Unger 1877, I, 99) ‘take care with all diligence not to keep company with those who are entangled in the heresy of Arrius for light has no company with darkness’.*

⁶ *Quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolymis? Quid academiae et ecclesiae? Quid haereticis et christianis? (De praescriptionibus 7.9; Refoulé 1954, 193).*

and could also be expressed in many other ways. An example can be found in the life of St Jerome. The Old Norse version of this text tells how young Jerome voraciously read every book he came across, Christian as well as pagan. He especially strove to learn the writings of the pagan masters Plato and Cicero. At one point he is struck by a deadly fever and, in his delirium, he has a vision in which he sees his soul lifted up to heaven and brought before the heavenly judge, who commands that he be lashed as punishment for his choice of reading material. Some saints eventually intercede on his behalf, and 'Jerome promised that he would never henceforth read books by heathen authors. After that he regained consciousness and for the rest of his life he bore the scars of the whipping on his body as if it had been there.'⁷ This story, here summarised on the basis of the late medieval *Jeronimus saga*, is ultimately derived from one of Jerome's own letters, and in this letter he also uses a series of now familiar rhetorical questions: 'What does light share with darkness? How does Christ agree with Belial? What has Horace to do with the Psalter? Virgil with the gospels? Cicero with the apostle?'⁸ Incidentally, Jerome's nightly ordeal also became something of a standard topos, and a somewhat similar experience is attributed to young Alcuin in *Vita Alcuini* (see Wieland 1992, 84).

However, in spite of this obstinate stance to the classics, Christians, since the days of the early church, have had an ambivalent attitude towards the pagan traditions. On the one hand pagan traditions were explained as demonic deceptions, but on the other they had left a magnificent cultural heritage that could not simply be discarded. Although the ecclesiastical authorities mentioned above deemed it necessary to choose between two irreconcilable things, other authorities did not always feel the need to do so and held that one could in fact, if one exhibited due caution, have one's cake and eat it. Among the more famous testimonies to this attitude one may mention allegorical interpretations of the spoils of Egypt, perhaps best known in the West through Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* (II.40). Just as the Israelites brought gold and other treasures out of Egypt and used them in the construction of the Tabernacle, so, Augustine argues, Christians can use the best elements of the Classical tradition for spiritual purposes.⁹

7 [O]g Jeronimus lofade at hann skyllde alldreige optar lesa heidanna manna bækur þadan í fráa. og eftir þetta komzt Jeronimus aptor til sialfs sins. og symndizt aa likamanvm aorenn eftir aa jafnith og hann hafde þar verith (Loth 1969–70, II, 212).

8 *Quae enim communicatio luci ad tenebras? Qui consensus Christo et Belial? Quid facit cum psalterio Horatii? Cum evangelii Maro? Cum apostolo Cicero?* (Ep. 22.29; Hilberg 1996, 189).

9 For a discussion of this line of interpretation see Allen 2015.

Another example of this more pragmatic attitude can be found in St Basil the Great's letter 'To young men, on how they might derive profit from pagan literature' from the second half of the fourth century. In this text, which is also known as *On Greek Literature*, St Basil argues that the reading of pagan classics stimulates the intellect of the young, who are still unable to understand the full depth of meaning of Scripture, and that it thus better prepares them for their later readings of it.¹⁰ Any similarities between the two will be profitable to readers, he argues in the third section of the letter, while dissimilarities will make the light of Scripture shine even brighter. However, pagan literature should not be read indiscriminately. One should listen attentively whenever the deeds and words of good men are recounted, but not when the texts recount the deeds and words of evil men or stories about the pagan gods, 'for', he continues, 'familiarity with evil words is, as it were, a road leading to evil deeds. On this account, then, the soul must be watched over with all vigilance, lest through the pleasure the poets' words give we may unwittingly accept something of the more evil sort, like those who take poisons along with honey (Deferrari and McGuire 1934, IV, 389)'.¹¹ With this simile of poison and honey in mind we can turn to twelfth- and thirteenth-century Scandinavia, where many authors were grappling with similar questions.

II

A handful of Old Norse stories illustrate the dangerous allure of the pagan past and show how honeyed versions of this past may literally poison even

10 ἕως γε μὴν ὑπὸ τῆς ἡλικίας ἐπακούειν τοῦ βάθους τῆς διανοίας αὐτῶν οὐχ οἶόν τε, ἐν ἑτέροις οὐ πάντῃ διεστηκόσιν, ὥσπερ ἐν σκiais τισι καὶ κατόπτροις, τῷ τῆς ψυχῆς ὄμματι τέως προγυμναζόμεθα, τοὺς ἐν τοῖς τακτικοῖς τὰς μελέτας ποιουμένους μιμούμενοι, οἳ γε ἐν χειρονομίαις καὶ ὀρχήσεσι τὴν ἐμπειρίαν κτησάμενοι, ἐπὶ τῶν ἀγώνων τοῦ ἐκ τῆς παιδιᾶς ἀπολαύουσι κέρδους 'Yet so long as, by reason of your age, it is impossible for you to understand the depth of the meaning of these [Holy Scriptures], in the meantime, by means of other analogies which are not entirely different, we give, as it were in shadows and reflections, a preliminary training to the eye of the soul, imitating those who perform their drills in military tactics, who, after they have gained experience by means of gymnastic exercises for the arms and dance-steps for the feet, enjoy when it comes to the combat the profit derived from what was done in sport' (Deferrari and McGuire 1934, IV, 382–85).

11 ἡ γὰρ πρὸς τοὺς φαύλους τῶν λόγων συνήθεια, ὁδὸς τίς ἐστὶν ἐπὶ τὰ πράγματα. διὸ δὴ πάσῃ φυλακῇ τὴν ψυχὴν τηρητέον, μὴ διὰ τῆς τῶν λόγων ἡδονῆς παραδεξάμενοι τι λάθωμεν τῶν χειρόνων, ὥσπερ οἱ τὰ δηλητήρια μετὰ τοῦ μέλιτος προσιέμενοι (Deferrari and McGuire 1934, IV, 388).

those most intent on propagating the gospel in the north.¹² In one well-known episode from the late twelfth-century saga of the missionary king Óláfr Tryggvason by Oddr munkr, Óláfr is celebrating Christmas at Qgvaldsnes, ‘The headland of Qgvaldr,’ in Western Norway. At night, when everyone is sitting at the table, an old one-eyed stranger wearing a big hat enters the hall. He turns out to be a first-rate storyteller possessing immense knowledge, and the king asks him after whom Qgvaldsnes was named. The stranger happens to know this story, and the king learns that Qgvaldr was the king of the headland many years ago and that he fell in battle against another king. The most striking aspect of the story is that this Qgvaldr had a cow that he loved so much that he would bring her wherever he went, and her milk was the only liquid he would drink. When Qgvaldr died, his cow was buried in a gravemound adjacent to his. This story raises a number of intriguing questions about Qgvaldr and the importance of the site of Qgvaldsnes, not to mention the role of cows in Scandinavian prehistory that other scholars have studied in other contexts,¹³ but the crucial point here is Óláfr’s reaction to the story: he is intrigued – and when the time comes to go to sleep, he invites the stranger to accompany him as he retires. The stranger sits at the king’s bedside and tells one story after another, and the king becomes more and more engrossed in them. At one point the bishop of the retinue

12 Basil’s image of poison sweetened by honey was widely used in the patristic tradition and elsewhere, but I am only aware of two instances in which it is explicitly used in Old Norse literary tradition. Both draw on the biblical Proverbs 5.3–8, which warns against prostitutes. One of these instances, incidentally, is from the Old Norse translation of Alcuin’s treatise *De virtutibus et vitiis*: *Sva sem driupanda hunang ero varrar portkono. ok biartari [< biartara] viðsmiorvi háls hænnar. en hinir æfsto lutir hænnar ero bitrir sem æitr. ok olyfian. ok hvasser sem túæggiat sværð* (Indrebø, 1931, 17) ‘The lips of a prostitute are like dripping honey and her neck is brighter than [olive] oil, but her nether parts are biting as venom and poison and sharp as a double-edged sword’. The other example is from the saga of Martha and Mary Magdalen (Unger 1877, I, 519).

13 For the site of Qgvaldsnes, Avaldnes in modern Norwegian, and the recent archaeological excavations there see the articles in Skre 2017. Nordland (1950) makes many interesting (if somewhat speculative) observations on the site, its importance, and Qgvaldr himself. For the cow see Ólafur Halldórsson 1990 and Uspenskij 2000. The most obvious parallel with the basic motif of a person living on the milk of a certain cow is found in the *Prose Edda*, where the primordial Norse giant Ymir lives on the milk that flows from the udders of the primordial cow Auðhumbla. An Irish parallel may be found in *Altram tigi dá medar*, ‘The fosterage of the house of two pails’, which tells of the fairy maiden Eithne, in whom an angel takes up residence. After this transformative event she is unable to consume the food of the fairy world and can only drink the milk of two cows which have been brought from the righteous land of India. Eithne eventually transitions into the world of humans, where she appears to be able to eat any kind of food. Eithne seems as out of place in the fairy world as in the human world. She dies shortly after her baptism by St Patrick and, the text assures us, finds a home in heaven when Patrick commends her soul to God. For this tale see Williams (2016, 234–46).

reminds the king that it is time to go to sleep, but the king pays no heed to this admonition and demands that the stranger continue his narrations. Eventually, the king falls asleep, but he wakes up shortly afterwards and immediately asks the stranger whether he is awake. However, the stranger has vanished and, although the king's retainers search high and low, he is nowhere to be found. Óláfr even asks his cook whether he has seen the stranger, and the cook responds that a stranger approached him as he was preparing meat for the royal table and denounced its poor quality. The cook told the stranger to provide him with better meat if he had any. The stranger then gave the cook two flanks of fat beef and the cook says that he is now ready to serve this meat to the king. As the king hears this, he realises the grave danger in which he has been and that the one-eyed man was in fact the devil, who had come to him in the shape of Óðinn. Óláfr then commands that the meat be thrown into the sea so that no one will eat it.

This story comes to us through Oddr munkr's late twelfth-century *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*. It is generally assumed that Oddr munkr wrote his text in Latin, and that this Latin original was lost following the translation of the text into the vernacular. The manuscripts which preserve Oddr munkr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* diverge somewhat from each other in phrasing and narrative detail, and the version summarised here is from the manuscript AM 310 4to, which has been dated to the second half of the thirteenth century and localised to the Icelandic monastery of Þingeyrar.¹⁴ In another version the meat is thrown to a dog which dies after taking a single bite; the rest of the meat is burned.¹⁵ The author of the saga in which this story is embedded has more to say about the ancient king and his cow, but he first briefly relates the story of how a group of wizards, led by a certain Eyvindr kelda, lands at Ögvaldsnes intent on killing King Óláfr and his men as they attend Christmas mass. However, the attackers lose their sight as soon as they see the church, and Óláfr captures them without difficulty as they stumble around aimlessly and has them put to death at a site which has been known as Skrattasker or 'Wizard Skerry' ever since. At this point in AM 310 4to the saga returns to King Ögvaldr and his cow. Óláfr breaks open the two mounds. He finds the bones of a man in the first and in the second those of a cow, and he is startled to realise that 'this old man had told the truth in some matters'. King Óláfr now also understands that the devil's scheme not

¹⁴ For the manuscript and differences between the versions see Ólafur Halldórsson 2006, CXLVI–CLI and CLXXI–CLXXXIII.

¹⁵ See Kaplan (2011, 164–7), who presents differences and similarities between the three versions in the form of a chart.

only included poisoning his mind and body with the stories and the meat of old, but that he had also cleverly attempted to keep the king awake long into the night so that he would oversleep and not attend Christmas mass.¹⁶

This tale from Oddr munkr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* can be read as a cautionary tale about the strange attraction the pagan past may exert on its audiences. If even a most staunch and uncompromising promoter of Christianity such as Óláfr Tryggvason could fall prey to the devil by allowing his mind to be poisoned by stories of pagan kings of an age long gone, what then of members of the audience who were more easily tempted? If even the most discerning only realised at the eleventh hour that the stories to which he had been listening were poison sweetened with honey, should the less discerning – the majority – even take the chance of listening to such stories? Would it not be preferable if, to use another metaphor from St Basil's letter to the young, one avoided the roses altogether out of fear of the thorns (Deferrari and McGuire 1934, IV, 390)? This seems to have been the position taken by Oddr munkr in his *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*.

Had this cautionary attitude been dominant in the northern Middle Ages, our materials for the study of pre-Christian myth and legend would have been very different. Luckily, other writers spurned the beaten path of rejection and demonisation, and instead sought to redeem and integrate the pagan past into a Christian present or at least to neutralise its poison by reframing it in a way that would make it digestible to medieval audiences concerned with their prospects of future salvation.

III

One could give a number of Old Norse examples illustrating different ways in which this goal of neutralising the pagan past could be achieved.

16 [O]k sýndisk nú opinberliga öllum at þessi hinn gamli maðr hafði suma hluti satt sagt, ok af því skildu menn at hann vildi blekkja bæði konunginn ok aðra með djöfuligri slægð, er hann tók svefnin frá konunginum ǫndverða nóttina. Ok á þeirri tíð er fram fór Guðs embætti þeir þá síðr vaka er þeir höfðu áðr misst svefnsins. Hafði hann svá sett bragðit at byskup skyldi eigi svá fagrliga halda sem síðr er til þá hina dýru hátíð. Ok hafði óvinr alls mannkyns svá fyrir búit tálsamligar snörur vélarinnar, at fyrst færi hann ǫndunum, en síðan líkǫmunum (Ólafur Halldórsson 2006, 253f.) 'and it now seemed apparent to all that this old man had told the truth in some matters, and from this people understood that he wishes to deceive both the king and the others with devilish cunning when he kept the king awake in the beginning of the night. And when mass was being celebrated they would be less inclined to wake up who had been kept awake before. He had planned his scheme so that the bishop should not celebrate that glorious feast as beautifully as one was accustomed to. And the enemy of all humankind had planned the treacherous snares of the deceit so that he would first destroy the souls and after that the bodies.'

However, in the spirit of the interdisciplinary Norse-Celtic conference in Edinburgh at which this paper was first presented¹⁷ I provide an example from Irish tradition, namely *Acallam na Senórach* or 'The Tales of the Elders of Ireland', as it is called in the translation by Dooley and Roe (1999). Stokes (1900, x–xii) and Dooley and Roe (1999, xxx–xxxii) list four manuscripts of the text, none of which is older than the fifteenth century.¹⁸ The text's conclusion is missing in all manuscripts.

It is with humility that I offer the *Acallam* as an example, and I acknowledge that my familiarity with Irish materials, in spite of a longstanding interest, is limited. I have opted to present this example because it not only completely inverts the message of Oddr munkr – opting for integration and redemption rather than exclusion and damnation – but also forms a fairly close parallel with Oddr munkr's tale.¹⁹ Although the two works are roughly contemporary and share certain narrative and thematic similarities, it should be stressed that their ideologies and attitudes towards the pagan past differ greatly, and that my intention is not to add to the longstanding debate concerning Irish-Norse literary connections²⁰ or to argue for the direct (or for that matter indirect) influence of one text on the other. Indeed, they are each part of their own literary circuits, and parallels with the two texts can be found in their respective traditions and elsewhere in medieval literature.²¹

The *Acallam* is an incredibly rich and fascinating, but also somewhat bewildering, literary work set in the period of conversion in Ireland, i.e. more than half a millennium earlier than the text's composition. It tells how St Patrick, as he is travelling around Ireland with a group of followers, is approached by a troop of ancient warriors led by a certain Caílte. Caílte had been a member of the Fíán, the legendary war band of Finn mac Cu-

17 'Thinking about Mythology in the 21st Century', The University of Edinburgh, November 2017.

18 The text is also preserved in later recensions, referred to as *Acallam bec* and the Reeves *Agallamh*.

19 Harris and Hill (1989) mention the *Acallam* in passing in their discussion of *Norna-Gests þátr* – a narrative to which Oddr munkr's tale is related – but I have not otherwise been able to locate scholarship that discusses these two texts in tandem. One article that discusses the *Acallam* in relation to an Old Norse text is McTurk 2001. Schlauch (1931) discusses Oddr munkr's account in the context of Celtic material; her treatment follows a different path and does not mention the *Acallam*.

20 Surveyed by Gísli Sigurðsson 2000. See more recent contributions by Power (2013) and, concerning religion, Egeler (2013).

21 Parallels with Oddr munkr's tale will be mentioned briefly in fn. 35 below. On the Irish side tales in some ways analogous to the *Acallam* have in particular been discussed by Nagy; see e.g. Nagy 1983 and 1997. Two additional parallels from other traditions are mentioned in section IV below.

maill, and had miraculously lived for hundreds of years. The text is vague in explaining exactly how and for how long Caílte has lived.²² Caílte joins Patrick's group, and as they continue their travels, Caílte tells Patrick stories and recites poems about past events that have played out in the landscape they traverse. More than one hundred such stories are told in the course of the work,²³ in greater or lesser detail, and, as in Oddr munkr's account, the stories often deal with sites of memory in the landscape and give the *raison d'être* for place names. Thus far, the Old Norse and Irish texts align nicely with one another but, as noted above, the attitude of the Irish text to these conceivably pre-Christian traditions is at odds with Oddr munkr's text. The absorbing appeal of the legendary tradition initially concerns the *Acallam's* Patrick and, as in Oddr munkr's account, there is a sense that the tales have the potential to interrupt religious life. On the first night he listens to Caílte's tales, Patrick is concerned that they will lead him to neglect his prayers.²⁴ The following morning, however, two angels descend from on high and Patrick asks them worriedly 'if it were the will of the king of heaven and earth that he be listening to the tales of the Fenians'. His concerns are alleviated when the angels in unison command him to commit the tales to writing: 'Have the tales written down,' they say, 'on poets' tablets in refined language, so that the hearing of them will provide entertainment for the lords and commons of later times' (Dooley and Roe 1999, 12).²⁵ To this explicit angelic imprimatur it can be added that Patrick not only baptises Caílte and his men, receiving a massive block of gold in return (Dooley and Roe 1999, 12; Stokes 1900, 10), but he also promises Caílte heaven (Dooley and Roe 1999, 46; Stokes 1900, 42). Later in the work he extends his blessings to Caílte's long dead parents and his lord Finn Mac Cumail, so that they, God willing, may be released from torment and enter heaven (Dooley and Roe 1999, 122; Stokes 1900, 117). Elsewhere in the work the reader learns that in a time long past the Fenians had actually come to realise of their

22 For time in the *Acallam* see Carey 2014.

23 A sense of the range of the text is provided by Ó Cadhla (2014, 139–43), who lists the questions to which the *Acallam* provides answers.

24 "*Adrae buaid 7 benmacht, a Cháilti!*", ar Pátraic: "*as gairdiugud menman 7 aicenta dúin sin acht min bhudh coll crábaid, 7 min bhudh maidnechtnaighi urnaighthi*" (Stokes 1900, 9); "*May victory be yours, Caílte, with my blessing,*" said Patrick. "*You have enlightened our spirits and our mind, even though our religious life is interrupted and our prayers neglected*" (Dooley and Roe 1999, 11).

25 *in budh móid le rígh nime 7 talman beith dosom ag éisdecht re scéla na Féinne [. . .] 'Ocus scríbhthar letsa i támlorguibh filed 7 i mbriat[h]raibh ollaman, ór budh gairdiugudh do dronguibh 7 do degdáinibh deridh aimsire éisdecht frisna scéluib sin'* (Stokes 1900, 9).

own accord ‘that there was indeed a True God’ (Dooley and Roe 1999, 45)²⁶ and that Finn, their leader, had a revelation in which ‘the truth came to him and lie was concealed from him’ (Dooley and Roe 1999, 56).²⁷ This leads to a divinely inspired poem in which Finn not only prophesies the future birth of St Ciarán, the first abbot of Clonmacnoise, but also declares his faith in the Trinity (Dooley and Roe 1999, 56–57; Stokes 1900, 52). In the *Acallam*, therefore, Cailte plays the part that the devil in his Odinnic disguise plays in Oddr munkr’s tale. Cailte is a concretised representation of the past, whose denizen he was. However, he is also brought into the Christian narrative present. As one cleric by the name of Colmán says on seeing Cailte: ‘Cailte is here, he is of the retinue of Finn Mac Cumail [...] he is now one of the household of holy Patrick (transl. Dooley and Roe 1999, 88).’²⁸ While Cailte is brought into the Christian present, the Christian present, in turn, is projected into the pre-Christian past in Finn’s recognition of the Christian God. The gap between the pre-Christian and the Christian age is maintained in the *Acallam*, but it is also bridged by Patrick and Cailte. Patrick is Óláfr in reverse and co-opts where Óláfr rejects.

The stories of the not-so-pre-Christian past in the *Acallam* may draw on tradition, but they are far from being its unmediated reflections. It has been argued that ‘more than most, the compilers of the *Acallam* are bending tradition to suit their specific agenda’ (Dooley 2014, 252). Many of Cailte’s stories deal with the dead in the mounds that adorn the Irish landscape, and again a stark contrast to the Norse tale is readily apparent. After Óláfr Tryggvason realises that he has been the victim of diabolical deceit, he goes to the mounds of Ógvaldr and his cow, and has the mounds desecrated by exposing the bones buried in them. We do not learn what he does with the bones, but in other tales in which mounds are opened, the bones of the dead are generally burned (cf. Þórólfr bægifótr in *Eyrbyggja saga*). Patrick’s interaction with the dead in the *Acallam* is often much more benevolent. At one point Patrick learns from Cailte’s narration that the king who lies buried in the mound on which he is sitting died of shame because he was unable to reward a visiting poet in a timely manner for a poem the poet had composed in his honour. Patrick intercedes for the soul of this unfortunate king and prays that he may enter heaven. And in that very moment, we read, ‘his soul was released from suffering [...] and he appeared as a white dove on

26 *go raibi in firDhia* (Stokes 1900, 41).

27 *do faillsiged fir dhó 7 do ceiledh gáí fair* (Stokes 1900, 52).

28 ‘[i]s é Cailti siut, 7 do muintir Fínd hé [...] 7 is do muintir nóem Patraic fos dó (ed. Stokes 1900, 82).’

the stone column above Patrick's head' (Dooley and Roe 1999, 35).²⁹ Another king had been buried with great treasures in the same mound. Caílte opens his mound so that Patrick and his men may take the treasures. In return for this treasure Patrick grants the dead king heaven (Dooley and Roe 1999, 35; Stokes 1900, 31). Later in the text, after Caílte has left Patrick's company to travel on his own for a while, we hear how another gravemound is opened. As in the previous example the goal is not to desecrate but to marvel at the dead man's magnificent size and the splendour of his martial equipment. The dead person in this case was a certain Garb Daire, one of Finn's men, who had been buried with his weapons and an especially prized possession, namely a certain chain that had belonged to the deity Lug. The king who now lives at the site, Conall, son of Níall, receives the weapons, while Caílte intends to bring the chain to Patrick (Dooley and Roe 1999, 63f.; Stokes 1900, 58f.).³⁰

The dead in their mounds share the subterranean world with the *Túatha Dé Danann*, usually rendered as 'the People of the goddess Danu'. The *Túatha Dé Danann* is an otherworldly, subterranean people that is generally held to reflect the pre-Christian divinities of Ireland. Irish texts differ considerably concerning their exact ontological status, and the *Acallam* leaves this question open.³¹ They interact with humans in numerous ways, and have some supernatural and superhuman powers. One gets the impression that they were more powerful in the past, but that their powers have gradually decayed and that they are in need of human assistance. Late in the text the king of the *Túatha Dé Danann*, Donn son of Midir, even surrenders voluntarily to Patrick and entrusts the power over the subterranean inhabitants to the saint (Dooley and Roe 1999, 150; Stokes 1900, 147). Towards the end of the text it is hinted that Patrick will eventually close the passages between the two worlds so that the supernatural beings will be confined inside the hills and rocks of Ireland (Dooley and Roe 1999, 210; Stokes 1900, 210).³² In this way the *Acallam* brings the perilous fascination with the pagan past under ecclesiastical control. The past itself is sanctioned by the church, represented by Patrick, but also domesticated, rendered innocuous, and finally walled up underground.

29 *Ocus táinic a anum a péin [...] sin gu raibhe 'na cholom ghel arin cairthi cloichi ós cinn Pátraic* (Stokes 1900, 31).

30 This chain does not appear to be mentioned elsewhere in Irish tradition (Williams 2016, 219).

31 For the representation of the *Túatha Dé Danann* through time and across a wide range of texts see Williams 2016. The name *Túatha Dé Danann* and its history are discussed on pp. 186–93.

32 The conclusion of the text is missing, so we do not actually discover if this is carried out.

In this way it becomes unnecessary to sweeten the poison about which St Basil was worried, for it has been neutralised. Rather than hiding the poison, the honey now serves to supply the mellifluous eloquence that will entertain 'lords and commons of later times', as was the charge of the angels (see fn. 25 above).

At the level of the framing narrative of the *Acallam* music is treated similarly to stories. At one point Patrick's group is joined by a certain Cas Corach, a musician of otherworldly origin. When Patrick realises the power and beauty of his music, he baptises him and promises him heaven. He also allows him to continue and improve his art. Interestingly, Patrick even has a discussion with the musician about the value of music. Their deliberations conclude with Patrick's verdict that it is improper to banish music completely, although 'one should not put too much stock in it' (Dooley and Roe 1999, 106) either.³³ Thus, in the narrative present of the text, music is treated similarly to tales as Patrick co-opts and neutralises the musical traditions of the Túatha Dé Danann. However, although the music Patrick thus sanctions is rendered mostly harmless, it has another, more perilous, face, which is highlighted in one of the stories told by Caílte. In this narrative we hear that Finn himself vanquishes Aillén, a mythological character of the Túatha Dé Danann. For twenty-three years, Aillén had come to Tara every year at the festival of Samain, bringing his dulcimer. Everyone who had gathered there would fall asleep when he played his sweet music on the dulcimer, and he would burn the place to the ground. With the help of a magic spear Finn is able to withstand the enchanting and sleep-inducing music. He kills the musician and thus prevents future visits to Tara from this menace. Like Oddr munkr's tale, this example shows the dangerous aspects of the pre-Christian tradition, but in contrast to Oddr's tale the conflict is pushed safely into a pre-Christian past where it can be dealt with by a confident hero who, although he may be of the pagan past, already believes in the True God.

IV

The *Acallam* and the Ogvaldsnes episode deal, as has been shown, with the same problem of what one should do with the traditions of the pre-Christian past. They both reframe this past, but they do so in radically different ways, choosing respectively integration and rejection. It is not

33 *acht gan rochreidim dó* (Stokes 1900, 99).

claimed that these texts are representative of the ways in which the Old Norse and Irish traditions at large handled this question. Rather, the choices of these strategies are probably dictated by the particular historical circumstances of each author, their respective aims and the literary circuit to which they belonged. Oddr munkr's hostile attitude towards traditions from the pre-Christian past is apparent throughout his text and is fairly typical both of Old Norse texts of the period and of texts describing the missionary efforts of the missionary kings Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson. On the Irish side it has been suggested that the general aim of the author of the *Acallam* was to harmonise traditional and Christian learning in the face of the arrival in Ireland of foreign religious orders (Carey 2015, 59).³⁴

Oddr munkr's tale belongs to a group of four tales in which a character of the past visits a King Óláfr of Norway. This Óláfr may be either Óláfr Tryggvason or Óláfr Haraldsson, but in all cases the visitor engages in conversation with him and tells of the past. This group of tales, which are all preserved in the late fourteenth-century Icelandic manuscript *Flateyjarbók*, has been studied by Merrill Kaplan in a monograph from 2011, and they will not be discussed in any detail here.³⁵ It should however be mentioned that they have two different outcomes. The character might be deemed evil, identified with Óðinn and, by extension, the devil, and rejected as in Oddr munkr's tale. Alternatively, the visitor may be a human who, for whatever reason, has had an unusually long lifespan, the prime example being *Norna-Gests þáttr*, in which the eponymous Norna-Gestr, who has lived three hundred years and has been an eyewitness to major events of legendary history, relates some of these events to King Óláfr Tryggvason. In these cases the king accepts the visitor at his court, enjoys his tales, and baptises him. But even if these visitors from the past are accepted in the present, we get a clear sense that they are out of place and out of time. They do not belong in this new Christian world and die shortly after their baptism.

34 Identifying more specifically ideological and genealogical concerns in the text, Dooley (2004) has argued for a western origin for the text (i.e. Connacht) and associated it with the Mac Oireachtaigh/Ua Raduibh family.

35 The four *Flateyjarbók* tales are *Norna-Gests þáttr* (Unger & Guðbrandur Vigfússon 1860–68, I, 346–59), the *Qgvaldsnes* episode (Unger & Guðbrandur Vigfússon 1860–68, I, 374–78), a tale rubricated *Odinn kom til Olafs konungs med dul ok prettum* (Unger & Guðbrandur Vigfússon 1860–68, II, 134–35), and *Tóka þáttr Tókasonar* (Unger & Guðbrandur Vigfússon 1860–68, II, 135–38). Some of these tales are also preserved outside *Flateyjarbók*. See also Harris and Hill 1989, 105–12 *et passim*.

Discussing the possible origin and evolution of this group of tales, Harris and Hill (1989, 117ff.), following an older study by Panzer (1925), have pointed to an anecdote recounted by the Franciscan friar Thomas of Pavia in his late thirteenth-century *Gesta imperatorum et pontificum* (Ehrenfuechter 1872, 511–12). This tale contains remarkable similarities with *Norna-Gests þáttr*, Oddr munkr's account of the meeting at Ögvaldsnes, and the *Acallam*, although the anxiety regarding the appropriateness of telling pre-Christian narratives in a Christian present, highlighted in the present article, is irrelevant in Thomas's account. One day in late 1231, Thomas recounts, as Emperor Frederick II is holding a council in Ravenna, a certain Ricardus shows up at court. Ricardus claims that he had been the squire of Oliver, closest companion of Roland (of *Chanson de Roland* fame). If this were true, Ricardus would have been more than four hundred years old when he presented himself before Frederick II. Ricardus can tell stories of the time when Charlemagne, Roland, and Oliver visited Ravenna. The text gives a brief summary of a story about a gigantic but simpleminded knight in Charlemagne's retinue who makes quite a spectacle when setting off on a horse without his stirrups. The emperor is understandably sceptical of Ricardus's claims and asks if Ricardus was ever in Ravenna with Charlemagne, Roland, and Oliver. Ricardus reveals that he was, and to give substance to his claims, he directs the emperor to an old chapel in the vicinity of which the emperor will find the graves of Theodosius I, his wife, two daughters, and the prophet Elisha.³⁶ Frederick is led to the chapel, which because of flooding has been covered with earth, and orders it dug out. He opens the sarcophagus of Theodosius. This suffices to convince him of the truth of Ricardus's claims, and he leaves the other graves untouched.³⁷

The brief summary of Thomas of Pavia's account shows that it shares some features with *Norna-Gests þáttr*, Oddr munkr's account, and passages of the *Acallam*, the most prominent being that a figure of unusual longevity entertains a leader figure with tales of his own experiences in the far past, and that the accounts are corroborated by a subsequent 'archaeological' endeavour in which a grave is opened. There are naturally differences as well (as already pointed out, Ricardus the squire is not a survivor of the pagan

36 Theodosius and his family were long dead in the days of Charlemagne, but relics/remains of Elisha had been brought to Ravenna in 718, and the idea is probably that Ricardus had witnessed an event related to the entombment of Elisha's relics.

37 Thomas says that the sarcophagus of Elisha was opened on a later occasion at the request of Bonaventura.

past), but the similarities suffice to allow the assumption that this basic kind of account is likely to have been fairly widespread in the Middle Ages.³⁸

While Thomas of Pavia does not tell us what happens to Ricardus after his interview with Frederick II, the Old Norse tales all have the definite outcome that the visitor dies or simply vanishes. In the *Acallam*, on the other hand, the outcome is ambiguous, and we do not learn what happens to Cailte in the Irish text – this may be explained by the fact that the conclusion is missing in all manuscripts – but towards the end of the preserved text all Cailte’s followers die, and he is left with his companion Oisín. We have a distinct sense that they are old and feeble at this point and will soon die as well (although this is not spelled out in the preserved text). Now that their tales have been recorded, they have fulfilled their purpose and there is no longer any role for them to play – and indeed no room for them in these new times, and they will perish, like their counterparts in the Norse tales mentioned a moment ago.

Neither of the two approaches to answering Alcuin’s question illustrated here is characteristic of the Scandinavian texts dealing with the pagan gods most read today. In the mythological Eddic poems of the *Codex Regius* manuscript no overt attempt has been made to reframe the stories of the old gods beyond the fact that the compiler has put a great deal of thought and care into the organisation of poems in the manuscript. The result is that the poems are generally allowed to speak for themselves. Other texts, most notably *Ynglinga saga* and Saxo Grammaticus’s *Gesta Danorum*, opt for historicisation fairly straightforwardly, without explicit demonisation. In the *Prose Edda*, on the other hand, we observe the more complex auto-euhemerisation of the future gods of the Scandinavians as they tell tall tales about their ancestors, claiming their deeds as their own.³⁹

38 Panzer (1925) and Harris and Hill (1989), who focus on *Norna-Gests þáttur* and see the account of the long-lived Ricardus in the light of the tradition concerning Johannes de Temporibus (another long-lived character), are inclined to see a more direct influence from the continental tradition on *Norna-Gests þáttur*. To the parallels adduced by these scholars one might add *Akhbār al-Yaman* ‘The history of Yemen’, which records a series of nightly conversations between the Khalif Mu’āwiya I (r. 661–680) and a certain Yemeni sheik named ‘Abīd (or ‘Ubayd) b. Sharya, who was ‘one of the men of the past who is still living, because he had been alive at the time of the kings of the *Jāhiliyya* [pre-Islamic Arabs] [. . .] [‘Abīd] used to shorten the night for him [i.e. Khalif Mu’āwiya], drive away his cares, and cause him to forget about every earlier conversation partner [. . .] thus he used to recount to him the events, poetry, and history of the Arabs, and Mu’āwiya ordered his officials and secretaries to record it all and write it down’ (Crosby 2007, 70–71). For this text see, in addition to Crosby’s introduction to her translation, Heinrichs 1997, 250–61.

39 For a study of these texts see Wellendorf 2018.

The texts we have discussed show that different strategies have been employed to reframe the pagan past and neutralise the poison that worried St Basil, and propose different answers to Alcuin's question about the relationship between Christianity and pagan traditions. All solutions entail depriving the former divinities of their numinous powers, but in addition to this each strategy comes at a price. Many apparently thought the price of consistent demonisation and rejection too high, and so in the case of the *Acallam* integration and domestication seemed preferable. In Scandinavia the preferred strategy was historicisation, the price of which is that one has to admit to the credulity of those duped by the false gods. But as Saxo Grammaticus remarks: 'It is no wonder that the ancient Danes were misled into venerating false gods when even the Romans, sophisticated though they were, fell into the same trap.'⁴⁰ Were we to formulate an answer to the question of Alcuin with which we began, on the basis of these Scandinavian texts the answer might be to admit that such tales may not have much to do with Christ, but also that this need not prevent the medieval audience from listening to this material since it is also part of the past. They are wiser now than their ancestors and will not allow themselves to be fooled as they were.

* * *

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40 'Nec mirandum, si prodigialibus eorum portentis adducta barbaries in adulterine religionis cultum concesserit, cum Latinorum quoque prudentiam perlexerit talium quorundam diuinis honoribus celebrata mortalitas' (*Gesta danorum* 1.5.6; Friis-Jensen 2015, I, 42).

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