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PAGAN SYMPATHY:
ATTITUDES TO HEATHENDOM
IN THE PROLOGUE TO *SNORRA EDDA*

I

This discussion relates to the prologue to *Snorra Edda* (*SnE*) as reconstructed by Finnur Jónsson in *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*.¹ The prologue is extant in four independent manuscripts. Recent scholarly opinion inclines to the view that the text in Codex Wormianus has been expanded by the interpolation of fairly lengthy passages, and that the text in the Uppsala manuscript has been shortened by compression of phrase and sentence (but without much matter being omitted). In the other two manuscripts (Codex Regius and the Utrecht manuscript) the beginning is lacking. Finnur Jónsson based his text on the Codex Regius, and supplied the beginning partly from the Utrecht manuscript (which does not lack so much as the Codex Regius) and partly from Codex Wormianus.² How close this reconstructed text is to the author's original is not possible to know; nor is there enough evidence on which to base an opinion whether the prologue as we have it is by Snorri Sturluson. But it seems to be an integral part of the work, and discussion of the ideas in it must of necessity be based on what seems to be the best available text.

There are in fact several indications that the prologue was originally conceived as an essential part of *SnE*, and that it is by the same author as the rest of the work. First of all, it is required as a narrative introduction to *Gylfaginning*. It is referred to in *Skáldskaparmál*, *SnE*, p. 86/17–22 (in AM 757, 4to, there is an even more detailed reference to the prologue and its contents, see footnote to *SnE*, p. 86/18). The heading in the Uppsala manuscript specifically states: *bók þessi . . . hefir saman setta Snorri*

¹ *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* (Copenhagen, 1931). References to *Snorra Edda* are to this edition, but the spelling of all passages quoted from Old Icelandic sources is normalised.

² There in fact seem to be some seventeenth-century manuscripts from which the missing part of the text of the prologue in the Codex Regius might be more satisfactorily reconstructed, e.g. Sth. papp. fol. nr 38; Thott 1494, 4to; NkS 1878 b, 4to; AM 755, 4to. See Anthony Faulkes, 'The Prologue to Snorra Edda: An Attempt at Reconstruction', *Gripla* III (Reykjavík, 1979), pp. 204–213.

Sturlusonr eptir þeim hætti sem hér er skipat (Snorri Sturluson made this book after the manner found below). There are various links between the ideas of the prologue and those in *Gylfaginning*, and some of these are pointed out below.³

The information in the prologue, and the manner in which it is presented, does not differ from that in Snorri's *Ynglinga saga* more than one would expect with two works written at different stages of an author's development. The historical, euhemeristic treatment of the Æsir in the prologue is not basically different from that in *Ynglinga saga* (whereas their presentation in *Gylfaginning* is in fact different from both, since there they are not treated euhemeristically at all within the framework of the conversation except in one brief passage, *SnE*, pp. 16/20–17/3). The historical interest in heathen religion, characteristic both of the prologue and *Ynglinga saga*, appears also in Snorri's *Hákonar saga góða*.⁴ Both the prologue and *Heimskringla* make use of material (genealogies and regnal lists) similar to those in AM 1 e β II fol. Finally, the prologue (admittedly in differing versions) is found in each of the only four independent manuscripts of *SnE* that contain *Gylfaginning* as well as *Skáldskaparmál* and *Háttatal*.

The prologue is not one of the kind found in *Heimskringla* and *Íslendingabók*, in which the author in his own person discusses his aims and methods. It relates only to *Gylfaginning*, and thus is not in fact a prologue to the *Edda* as a whole, and is a narrative introduction that sets the scene for the 'frame' within which the mythological stories in *Gylfaginning* are told. This 'frame' is the conversation between Gylfi (calling himself Gangleri) and three Æsir (calling themselves Hár, Jafnhár, and Priði). The prologue is necessary on a narrative level to define the situation, give it a historical setting, and introduce the characters (though it actually only introduces the Æsir collectively, not individually). The distinction between the historically conceived frame and the mythological content of the stories set in it is underlined by the fact that the author confines himself to quoting Eddic verse in the stories, while he allows himself to quote two scaldic verses by named poets in the frame.

³ A. Holtsmark, in *Studier i Snorres Mytologi* (Oslo, 1964), gathers evidence from vocabulary and concepts shared by the prologue and *Gylfaginning* that supports the assumption of common authorship. On the differences between the two see A. Heusler, *Die Gelehrte Urgeschichte im Altisländischen Schrifttum* (Berlin, 1908), pp. 28–29, 32–34 (reprinted in A. Heusler, *Kleine Schriften* [Berlin, 1969], II, pp. 101–102, 104–106).

⁴ *ÍF*, XXVI, pp. 167–72.

Besides its artistic and structural purpose, the frame of *Gylfaginning* also provides an explanation of the preservation and transmission of the mythological stories it contains (see *SnE*, pp. 76/20–22), thus again linking myth and history. This rather naive preoccupation with justifying the author's knowledge is common in early Icelandic narrative, and appears elsewhere in Snorri's work.⁵

But although the prologue has a primarily narrative function, and the author does not obtrude his own personality into it, he does appear to be trying in it to define his attitude to the mythology he is presenting and to clarify the relationship of the religion implied by the mythological stories in *Gylfaginning* to his own beliefs and to the Christian culture within which he was writing. Undoubtedly one of his motives for including the prologue, and maybe the chief reason for the use of the frame device itself, was to avoid the criticism that his stories were dangerous to orthodoxy. This preoccupation is made explicit in the so-called epilogue (*SnE*, pp. 86/17–18).⁶ But the author's attitude to his material is based on a historical interpretation rather than an ideological or mythical one. He tries to fit it into the framework of universal history as he knew it from the Bible and other Christian writings. From the *í upphafi* of the first sentence to his remarks on the origin of place-names in the last, the author of the prologue relates his material to historical learning and explains the religion of his forefathers rationally as a groping towards truth by unenlightened heathens in a pre-Christian age. His aims thus appear to be very similar to those of the author of *Skjöldunga saga* as defined by Bjarni Guðnason: 'að tengja Norðurlönd við heimssöguna.'⁷ Both authors are following the tradition of Eusebius, Orosius, Isidore of Seville, Ado, and Peter Comestor, who all try to combine sacred and secular history and mythology in a single scheme.⁸

⁵ *ÍF*, XXVI, p. 298; XXVII, pp. 358–60. See S. Nordal, *Snorri Sturluson*, 2nd ed. (Reykjavík, 1973), pp. 167 ff. Cf. also *Grettis saga*, *ÍF*, VII, p. 205; *Qrvar-Odds saga*, ed. R. C. Boer (Leiden, 1888), pp. 194–95; *Njáls saga*, *ÍF*, XII, pp. 330–31; *Orms þátr Stórolfssonar* in *Flateyjarbók* (Christiania, 1860–1868), I, p. 529.

⁶ *Eigi skulu kristnir menn trú á heiðin goð*. Compare the slightly different disavowal at the end of the *Táin bó Cuailnge* in the Book of Leinster, trans. T. Kinsella (London, 1970), p. 283, quoted by F. Paasche, *Norges og Islands Litteratur inntil utgangen av middelalderen*, 2nd ed. (Oslo, 1957), p. 349. It might be maintained that the stories in *Gylfaginning* are deliberately narrated in a naive way so as to make it impossible for a sophisticated audience to take them seriously. See Y. Ågren, 'Virrighetens Apoteos', *Edda*, 61 (1961), pp. 13–38.

⁷ *Um Skjöldungasögu* (Reykjavík, 1963), p. 265. Cf. also pp. 199–200. Ari follows a similar line in *Íslendingabók*.

⁸ In various chapters of his *Historia Scholastica*, Peter Comestor relates events

In spite of its preference for historical narrative as opposed to theology or philosophy, the prologue is more obviously learned than *Gylfaginning*, though not more obviously so than *Skáldskaparmál* and *Háttatal*. But its learning is of a different kind from theirs, and leans more heavily on foreign European tradition. While in *Skáldskaparmál* and *Háttatal* the author applies his broad education to native material, in the prologue he is much closer to simply reproducing foreign learning.

The ultimate aim of *Gylfaginning* (as of most of the narratives in *Skáldskaparmál* too) is presumably to give the mythological background to the kennings of scaldic verse, though this is nowhere stated in the book. In *Skáldskaparmál* the relevance of individual stories to the kennings they are supposed to explain is often directly stated (as for example in *SnE*, pp. 83/11–14, 142/5), but this is nowhere done in *Gylfaginning* except perhaps in two places (pp. 31/2–3 and 33/5, footnote). Indeed, a great many of the stories told in *Gylfaginning* seem to have nothing to do with kennings at all, and the choice of material in this part of the *Edda* can hardly have been determined by the need to explain particular aspects of scaldic diction, as can be maintained with most of the material in *Skáldskaparmál*. The immediate intention in *Gylfaginning* must therefore be to give a survey of the mythology itself as a whole, without reference to particular kennings. What is perhaps even more surprising is that the myths are related without any attempt at interpretation or comment (other than the general implied comment on their significance in the prologue, the last chapter of *Gylfaginning*, and the so-called epilogue in *Skáldskaparmál*, *SnE*, pp. 86–88). The author seems only concerned to tell the stories clearly and effectively. He has not even troubled in some cases to reduce conflicting versions of myths to a single coherent account (see, for example, *SnE*, pp. 17/8–18/22, 19/12, 70/20–22, and 76/13). This approach, with its complete absence of interest both in the possible symbolic or allegorical significance of myths and in their religious implications, is very different from that of other European mythographers of the Middle Ages such as Fulgentius and his followers, who are generally more concerned with the interpretation of myths than with the myths themselves. *Gylfaginning*, therefore, has reminded scholars more of the matter-of-factness of earlier mythographers like Hyginus,

in world (i.e. principally Roman) history to biblical events. These he calls *incidentiae*. See J. Seznec, *La survivance des Dieux Antiques* (London, 1940), pp. 16–19; P. Alphandéry, ‘L’Evhémérisme et les débuts de l’histoire des religions au moyen âge’, *Revue de l’histoire des religions*, 109 (1934), p. 19. *Breta sǫgur* also integrates pagan Greek and Roman story with British and English Christian tradition.

Servius, or Ovid.⁹ But though the author may have adopted the manner of classical mythographers, and perhaps absorbed some of their ideas and some from later writers too, the content of his narratives seems fairly free from the direct influence of classical mythology; such similarities as there may be seem more likely to be due to influence at a pre-literary stage.¹⁰

Medieval Iceland has a rich mythology, but it is largely known from just three sources: the *Poetic Edda* and two works of Snorri Sturluson (his *Prose Edda* and *Ynglinga saga*, the latter being the first section of his *Heimskringla*). These were all compiled in the thirteenth century, though many of the individual poems in the *Poetic Edda* may be much older in origin. The information in these three sources can be supplemented from a variety of other medieval Icelandic writings, such as *fornaldar sögur* (mythical-heroic sagas) and accounts of the conversion of the Scandinavian countries that involve some mention of heathen practices and beliefs. There are also some mythological poems besides those preserved in the *Poetic Edda*. (Some of these are in fact preserved only in manuscripts of *SnE*, and the scaldic poems that relate myths are also nearly all preserved as parts of Snorri's works.) But it is only in the two *Eddas* and *Ynglinga saga* that there is any attempt at a coherent account of Norse mythology. There are no comparable mythographical writings from the other Scandinavian countries in the Middle Ages except for the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus (written about 1200), where euhemerised versions of many of the myths recorded in the *Eddas* are given in Latin prose. Nor is there anything similar in any of the other Germanic languages, except for the unsympathetic and brief account in Ælfric's homily *De falsis diis*.¹¹ Snorri as a mythographer is therefore a

⁹ See R. M. Meyer, 'Snorri als Mythograph', *ANF*, 28 (1912), pp. 109–21. Seznec (*La survivance des Dieux Antiques*), traces four ways in which mythology survived through the Middle Ages, *la tradition historique, la tradition physique, la tradition morale, la tradition encyclopédique*. Of these, only the first can be said to appear in Icelandic sources.

¹⁰ Cf. Ursula Dronke, 'Classical influence on early Norse literature', in *Classical Influences on European Culture A.D. 500–1500*, ed. R. R. Bolgar (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 143–49, especially p. 145, n. 1.

¹¹ *Homilies of Ælfric, A Supplementary Collection*, Early English Text Society, No. 260, ed. J. C. Pope (Oxford, 1968) II, pp. 667–724. This homily, which was partly based on a work of Martin of Bracara (d. 579), was known in medieval Iceland, and a translation is preserved in *Hauksbók*, ed. Eiríkur Jónsson and Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen, 1892–1896), pp. 156–64, but it is not certain how early this translation was made. See Ursula and Peter Dronke, 'The Prologue of the *Prose Edda*: Explorations of a Latin Background', *Sjötíu ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni 20. júlí 1977*, Reykjavík 1977, pp. 153–176.

somewhat isolated figure, and there are many problems both in trying to understand his attitude to myth and in finding the sources of his ideas. There is no obvious model either for his attitudes or his methods.¹²

Characteristic of the treatment of mythology in the prologue to *SnE* and in *Ynglinga saga* is the attempt to fit mythological figures, interpreted euhemeristically, into a chronological framework which would relate them to known historical persons. Though the influence of these writings in this respect cannot be said to be very extensive in later Icelandic literature, Snorri has followers in the interpolator of the version of the prologue in Codex Wormianus, the author of the so-called epilogue in *Skáldskaparmál* (*SnE*, pp. 86–88), if this was not Snorri himself, the authors of *Sǫrta þáttur*, *Bósa saga*, *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, *Völsungs rímur*, and the fragment of a mythological treatise in AM 162 m, fol.;¹³ and his nephew Óláfr hvítaskáld in the Third Grammatical Treatise, who wrote: *Qll er ein listin, skáldskapr sá er rómverskir spekingar námu í Athenisborg á Grikklandi, ok sneru síðan í latínumál, ok sá ljóðaháttur eða skáldskapr er Óðinn ok aðrir Asiamenn fluttu norðr higat í norðrhálfu heimsins, ok kenndu monnum á sína tungu þesskonar list svá sem þeir höfðu skipat ok numit í sjálfu Asialandi, þar sem mest var frægð ok ríkdómur ok fróðleikr veraldarinnar.*¹⁴ Again the interest is historical, the concern to relate traditional Icelandic culture to the mainstream of European learning.

Many parallels in European literature to the ideas of the prologue have been pointed out by other scholars, in recent years most notably by A. Holtsmark and W. Baetke.¹⁵ The parallels noted below are not aimed at adding

¹² Cf. A. T. Laugesen, 'Snorris opfattelse af Aserne', *ANF*, 56 (1942), pp. 301–15; Y. Ågren, 'Virrighetens Apoteos'.

¹³ *Fornaldar sögur Nordrlanda*, ed. C. C. Rafn (Copenhagen, 1829–30), I, pp. 391ff.; III, pp. 193 and 592; *Rímnasafn*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen, 1905–12), I, pp. 311 ff.; *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* (Copenhagen, 1848–1887), II, pp. 635–36. See also *Fornaldar sögur Nordrlanda* I, p. 411 (the beginning of one version of *Heiðreks saga*). Later versions of *Langfeðgatal* are also influenced by the prologue to *SnE*, e.g. *Alfræði Íslenzk* III, ed. K. Kálund (Copenhagen, 1917–1918), p. 58.

¹⁴ *Den tredje og fjerde grammatiske afhandling i Snorres Edda*, ed. B. M. Ólsen (Copenhagen, 1884), p. 60.

¹⁵ A. Holtsmark, *Studier i Snorres Mytologi*; W. Baetke, *Die Götterlehre der Snorra-Edda* (Berlin, 1952), cf. especially p. 55, n. 2; see also A. Heusler, *Die Gelehrte Urgeschichte im Altisländischen Schrifttum*; S. Bugge, *Studier over de nordiske Gude- og Heltesagns Oprindelse* (Christiania, 1881–1889), I; E. H. Meyer, *Völuspá* (Berlin, 1889). I am also indebted for many helpful suggestions to Professor G. T. Shepherd, University of Birmingham.

to the already sufficient evidence that the author was acquainted with various kinds of medieval Latin writing, but are an attempt to clarify his ideas by showing what lines of thought in European literature he was pursuing, and to reveal him not as an imitator and plagiarist but as an independent thinker applying ideas from foreign books to the literary and philosophical problems arising in his own culture from the juxtaposition of Christian and heathen tradition.

II

The prologue begins with an account of how mankind (except for a few people) lost its knowledge of the creator when time had passed after the creation, and again after the flood. This is based ultimately on Genesis and an intermediate source has not been demonstrated, though the account is similar in some respects to parts of Ælfric's homily *De initio creaturæ*, *Veraldar saga*, and Lactantius' *Divinæ Institutiones* II,14.¹⁶ Eventually mankind even forgot the name of God (*SnE*, p. 1/15). This idea was well known both from the same passage in Lactantius and from Gregory's *Moralia* I,1: 'Pagans were enchained by sin inasmuch as they lacked knowledge of their creator.'¹⁷ Note also *Beowulf* (ll. 180–81): *Metod hie ne cupon, || dæda Demend, | ne wiston hie Drihten God*. The idea reappears in Aquinas, who says that one of the causes of idolatry is *ignorantia veri Dei*: 'In the first age there was no idolatry because of the fresh memory of the creation of the world, as a result of which the knowledge of one God was still alive in the minds of men.'¹⁸ It is also found in an Icelandic manuscript of about 1500: *En þvíat þeir vissu eigi hvern hann (the creator) var, þá villast þeir af því í mǫrgum hlutum*.¹⁹

III

The author however goes on to say (*SnE*, p. 1/16 ff.) that God still gave men reason with which to understand the world around them (cf. Wisdom

¹⁶ *The Sermones Catholici or Homilies of Ælfric*, ed. B. Thorpe (London, 1844), I, pp. 20 and 22; *Veraldar saga*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson (Copenhagen, 1944), pp. 3–14; *PL*, VI, 326–29. With *SnE*, pp. 1/3–4 and 9–11, cf. *SnE* pp. 14/14–15, 16/18, and 76/3–4.

¹⁷ *PL*, LXXV, 528–29.

¹⁸ *Summa Theologicæ* 2a,2æ,94,4. Cf. Baetke, *Die Götterlehre der Snorra-Edda*, pp. 53–54.

¹⁹ *Alfræði Íslenzk* III, p. 96. That there was no idolatry before the flood is also expressly stated in Ælfric's *De falsis diis*, ll. 72–73.

7: 17 ff. and Lactantius, *Divinæ Institutiones* II,8: ‘God gave wisdom to all as part of the human lot’²⁰). From considering the physical universe they deduced the existence of the God they had forgotten, basing this deduction first of all on their observation of the analogies between the nature of animals and the earth: the water in the earth is similar to the blood in animals, vegetation to hair and feathers, the surface of the earth to skin, rocks and stones to teeth and bones. From this men came to believe that the earth was alive, and included her in their genealogies and, one assumes, worshipped her as a goddess (*SnE*, p. 2/13). The idea of the body as a microcosm of the earth has a long history in European literature, though usually the analogy is made with the human body.²¹ Among the writings where it is found are Ambrose, *Hexaemeron* VI,9,²² Gregory, *Moralia* VI,16,²³ Isidore, *Sententiæ* I,8,²⁴ Macrobius, commentary on Cicero’s *Somnium Scipionis* II,12,11,²⁵ Alain de Lille, *Liber de Planctu Naturæ*,²⁶ Guillaume de Conches, *Philosophia*,²⁷ Honorius of Autun, *De Imagine Mundi* II,59,²⁸ Peter Comestor, *Historia Scholastica*, *Genesis* 1,²⁹ R. Grosseteste, *Quod homo sit minor mundus*.³⁰ The idea is not confined to European tradition (cf. *Rig-Veda* X,90).³¹

²⁰ *PL*, VI, 287. Compare the end of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* (*Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda* III, p. 364): *þat er ok sannliga ritat, at guð hefir lánat heiðnum mönnum einn veg sem kristnum vit og skilning um jarðliga hluti.*

²¹ See R. Allers, ‘Microcosmos’, *Traditio*, 2 (1944), pp. 319–407 and cf. J. M. Parent, *La Doctrine de la Création dans l’École de Chartres* (Paris, 1938), p. 62 and nn. 5–7. Cf. Jón Helgason, *The Arna-Magnæan Manuscript 674 A, 4^o. Elucidarius* (Copenhagen, 1957; *Manuscripta Islandica* 4), p. xxxi, who refers to the passage in *Elucidarius in Old Norse Translation*, ed. E. S. Firchow and K. Grimstad (Reykjavík, 1989), p. 40.

²² *PL*, XIV, 264 ff.

²³ *PL*, LXXV, 740 (on Job 5: 10–11).

²⁴ *PL*, LXXXIII, 549; cf. E. H. Meyer, *Völuspá*, pp. 61–62.

²⁵ See Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. W. H. Stahl (New York, 1952), p. 224, n. 7.

²⁶ *PL*, CCX, 443; cf. Allers, ‘Microcosmos’, pp. 344–45 and 348.

²⁷ *Willelmi a Conchis Philosophia seu Summa Philosophiæ*, ed. C. Ottaviano, *Archivio di Storia della Filosofia Italiana* (1933), p. 18.

²⁸ *PL*, CLXXII, 154.

²⁹ *PL*, CXCVIII, 1055.

³⁰ *Die philosophischen Werke des Robert Grosseteste*, ed. L. Baur (Munster, 1912), p. 59.

³¹ *Der Rig-Veda*, trans. K. F. Geldner, Harvard Oriental Series 35 (Cambridge, Mass. 1951), III, pp. 286–88.

But the author of the prologue is talking about heathen philosophers and their attempts to understand the world, and it was well known that Plato regarded the earth and the heavenly bodies as having, in a sense, animal life (see *Timaeus* 30,B–C; 38,E; 40,B; 92,C; and Chalcidius’s commentary XCIII, XCIX–C, CXIII).³² Nicolas de Cusa (born 1401) writes in *De Docta Ignorantia* II,13: ‘The earth is like a sort of animal—as Plato says—having stones instead of bones, streams instead of veins, trees instead of hair.’³³ Plato nowhere says precisely this, but there is a detailed analogy made between the human body and the earth in the pseudo-Hippocratean treatise *De Septimanis* 6.³⁴ Rather less detailed is Ovid, in *Metamorphoses* I: ‘The great mother is the earth, and I think “her bones” means the stones in the body of the earth’ (ll. 393–94). This is reproduced in both the first and second mythographers.³⁵ There is also an interesting parallel in Philo Judæus, *Legum Allegoria* II,7: ‘Lifeless things, like stones and blocks of wood, share with all others the power of holding together, of which the bones in us, which are not unlike stones, partake. “Growth” extends to plants, and there are parts in us, such as our nails and hair, resembling plants.’³⁶ The best-known parallel in Christian writings is Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* VII,23: ‘He (Varro) says that this force in our bodies penetrates to our bones, nails, and hair, just as in the world trees, though they have no feeling, are nourished and grow, and in their own way have life . . . also stones and the earth, which we see in the world, to which feeling does not penetrate, are like the

³² *Plato Latinus* IV, *Timaeus*, ed. J. H. Waszink (London, 1962), pp. 146–47, 151 and 159.

³³ Ed. E. Hoffman and R. Klibansky (Leipzig, 1932), p. 111; see note ad loc. Cf. R. Schmitt, *Dichtung und Dichtersprache in Indogermanische Zeit* (Wiesbaden, 1967), p. 279.

³⁴ *Oevres complètes d’Hippocrate*, ed. E. Littré, VIII (Paris, 1853), p. 637, and IX (Paris, 1861), p. 436. A great deal has been written about the Latin traditions of the eight parts of man; see W. Stokes, ‘Man octipartite’, *Mythological Notes* VI, *Revue Celtique* I (1870–1872), pp. 261–62; J. M. Evans, ‘Microcosmia Adam’, *Medium Ævum* XXXV (1966), pp. 38–42; Hildegard Tristram, ‘Der homo octopartitus in der irischen und altenglischen Literatur’, *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* XXXIV (1975), 119–53.

³⁵ *Scriptores Rerum Mythicarum Latini Tres*, ed. G. H. Bode (Celle, 1834), I, pp. 58 and 99. See H. Falk, ‘Martianus Capella og den Nordiske Mytologi’, *ANO* (1891), pp. 266–300, esp. 274.

³⁶ *Philo*, ed. and trans. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, Loeb Classical Library (London, 1971), I, pp. 238–41. Cf. also P. Dronke, *Fabula* (Leiden, 1974), p. 160 (Milo, *De Mundi Philosophia*).

bones and nails of god.³⁷ See also S. Hildegard, *Liber Divinorum Operum* I,4, 82 and I,4, 47.³⁸ A source almost certainly known to the author of the prologue is Honorius of Autun's *Elucidarius*, for this was translated into Norse in the twelfth century, and here a parallel is drawn between stones and bones, trees and nails, vegetation and hair.³⁹ The idea of the human body as a microcosm appears also in AM 435, 12mo, and the notion of the earth being alive appears in *Konungs skuggsjá*.⁴⁰

Another commonly found idea about the earth is that *hon fæddi öll kykvendi ok hon eignaðiz allt þat er dó* (*SnE*, p. 2/11–12). With this may be compared Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* II,26: 'all things return to earth and originate from the earth'; Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* I,248 ff., II,598 ff., 991 ff., especially 999; Gregory, *Moralia* II,17;⁴¹ and Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* VII,23.⁴²

The earth (*terra mater*) as an object of worship is a familiar idea from classical times onwards, as witness the passages of Cicero and Lucretius just mentioned, and also Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* III,20; Ovid, *Fasti* I,671ff.; the second and third mythographers.⁴³ The origin of heathen cults in nature worship is often mentioned in medieval authors (the starting-point is often Wisdom 13), such as Lactantius, *Divinæ Institutiones* II,5–7 and 14;⁴⁴ Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* IV,8–11; VI,8; VII,23;⁴⁵ Isidore, *Etymologiæ* VIII,11,29 and 59 ff.;⁴⁶ Rabanus Maurus, *De Universo* XV,6;⁴⁷ Ælfric, *De falsis diis* (also in the Norse translation

³⁷ *PL*, XLI, p. 212.

³⁸ *PL*, CXCVII, 839 and 862. On the comparison of the depth of water under the surface of the earth with the depth of blood under the skin (*SnE*, pp. 1/22–2/3) cf. Guillaume de Conches, *De Philosophia Mundi* III, 18 (*PL*, CLXXII, 83).

³⁹ *Elucidarius* I, 11, *PL*, CLXXII, 1116; Konrad Gislason, 'Brudstykker af den islandske *Elucidarius*', *Annaler for Nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie* (1858), p. 61. Cf. E. H. Meyer, *Vølusþá*, p. 63, who also quotes Honorius's *Sacramentarium* 50 (*PL*, CLXXII, 773).

⁴⁰ *Alfræði Íslenzk* III, p. 93; *Konungs skuggsjá*, ed. L. Holm-Olsen (Oslo, 1945), p. 18.

⁴¹ *PL*, LXXV, 570 (on Job 1: 21).

⁴² *PL*, XLI, 215. Again Augustine is quoting Varro. Cf. P. Dronke, *Fabula*, p. 160.

⁴³ Bode, *Scriptores Rerum*, I, pp. 90–91 and pp. 157–58. See also H. Liebeschütz, *Fulgentius Metaforalis* (Leipzig, 1926), p. 62.

⁴⁴ *PL*, VI, 277–84 and 329.

⁴⁵ *PL*, XLI, 118–20, 186, and 211–13. Cf. Baetke, *Die Götterlehre der Snorra-Edda*, p. 55.

⁴⁶ *PL*, LXXXII, 317 and 320–21.

⁴⁷ *PL*, CXI, 431.

in *Hauksbók*);⁴⁸ Chalcidius's commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*;⁴⁹ the third mythographer.⁵⁰

In Norse tradition, the idea of microcosm is implied in the account of Ymir in *Grimnismál* 40:

Ór Ymis holdi var iqrð um scöpuð,
enn ór sveita sær,
biörg ór beinom, baðmr ór hári,
enn ór hausi himinn.

Snorri's account in *SnE* (pp. 14/20–16/10) is based on this.⁵¹ Norse myth also has a figure corresponding to *terra mater* in Jqrð, wife of Óðinn and mother of Þórr (*SnE*, p. 17/5 ff.). On the names given to earth (*SnE*, p. 2/13) cf. *SnE*, pp. 115, 167–68, 209 and Isidore, *Etymologiæ* VIII, 11, 59 ff.⁵² But it should be noted that neither Jqrð nor Ymir/Aurgelmir (*SnE*, pp. 12–14) appear in Norse genealogies, and therefore the prologue's statement that men trace their descent from the earth (*SnE*, p. 2/13) does not represent popular tradition in the north. But one might compare with this the phrase *eorðan* (*eorðu*) *bearn* meaning 'men' in some texts of Cædmon's

⁴⁸ *De falsis diis*, ll. 82–89; *Hauksbók*, pp. 157–58.

⁴⁹ *Plato Latinus IV, Timaeus*, p. 171. Note also Guillaume de Conches, *Glosæ super Platonem*, ed. E. Jeaneau (Paris, 1965), p. 201 (which relates to the same passage in the *Timaeus*, i.e. 40, D).

⁵⁰ Bode, *Scriptores Rerum* I, pp. 171–72. On the third mythographer see B. Smalley, *English Friars and Antiquity* (Oxford, 1960), p. 111; E. Rathbone, 'Master Alberic of London, Mythographus Tertius Vaticanus', *Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, I (1941–1943), pp. 35–38. He probably lived in the twelfth century and his work was based on Fulgentius. Nature-worship is also described in the fragmentary Icelandic mythological treatise quoted above, note 13 (cf. *Heilagra manna sögur*, ed. C. R. Unger [Christiania, 1877], II, p. 391), and in the first interpolation in the version of the prologue to *SnE* in Codex Wormianus.

⁵¹ In an interesting parallel to this creation myth in the Book of the Secrets of Enoch 30: 8, man is said to be made of seven substances: 'one, his flesh from the earth; two, his blood from the dew; three, his eyes from the sun; four, his bones from stone; five, his intelligence from the swiftness of the angels and from cloud; six, his veins and his hair from the grass of the earth; seven, his soul from my breath and from the wind'. See R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1913), II, pp. 448–49. Compare also the passage in the *Rig-Veda*, trans. Geldner, pp. 286–88; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* IV, ll. 657 ff; and *Die Pseudoklementinen*, II, *Rekognitionen*, ed. B. Rehm (Berlin, 1965), X, 17, 30, and 32 (pp. 336 and 346–48). Cf. P. Dronke, *Fabula*, pp. 83 and 154–55. Cf. also J. Campbell, *The hero with a thousand faces* (London, 1971, 285).

⁵² *PL*, LXXXII, 320.

hymn,⁵³ and according to Tacitus, *Germania* 2, the Germans had a tradition that they were descended from the three sons of Mannus, son of Tuisto whom the earth brought forth. Moreover, there is little or no evidence for a cult of mother earth in Scandinavia in historical times;⁵⁴ but again Tacitus, *Germania* 40, claims that some Germanic tribes worshipped *Nerthum, id est Terram matrem* (Nerthus, that is, Mother Earth).

The prologue's analogy between vegetation and hair is reflected in the kenning *jarðar haddr* (earth's hair, i.e. grass) in *Bjarkamál* 3 and *vallar fax* (plain's mane, i.e. trees) in *Alvíssmal* 28; but the first is not recorded in manuscripts older than the seventeenth century and the second depends on emendation (the manuscript has *vallar far*).⁵⁵ Such kennings do, however, occur in fourteenth-century Icelandic poetry.⁵⁶ One might also compare the use of *coma* for vegetation in Latin poets.⁵⁷

IV

Pagan philosophers, according to the author of the prologue, went on to make another deduction. From the contemplation of the regularity of the motions of the heavenly bodies over long periods they came to the conclusion that there was an almighty ruler of the universe (*SnE*, pp. 2/13–3/1). This is one of the traditional proofs of the existence of God, though it was often neglected by medieval theologians in favor of more sophisticated arguments.⁵⁸ It is found, for instance, in Cicero, *De Inventione* I,34 (where it is given as an example of intelligent reasoning) and in his *De Natura Deorum* II,2 and 5: 'What can be so obvious and so apparent, when we look up at the sky and contemplate the heavenly bodies, as that there is some divine power of surpassing intelligence by which these things are governed? . . . the fourth and most important reason of all (for men's belief in the gods) is the regularity of motion and the revolution of the sky, the difference, variety, beauty, and order of the sun and moon and all the stars, just the very sight of which is enough to prove that all this is not fortuitous.'

⁵³ *Three Northumbrian Poems*, ed. A. H. Smith (London, 1933), pp. 2–3 and 38.

⁵⁴ See H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (Harmondsworth, 1964), pp. 111–14.

⁵⁵ *Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen, 1912–1915), A, I, p. 181; [*Poetic*] *Edda*, ed. Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg, 1962), p. 128.

⁵⁶ *Skjaldedigtning*, ed. cit., A, II, 353, 27/3; 357, 46/1; 396, 1/2.

⁵⁷ See *A Latin Dictionary*, by C. T. Lewis and C. Short (Oxford, 1879), s.v. *coma*, II (see especially Horace, *Odes* I.21.5, IV.3.11 and 7.2; Tibullus II.1.48).

⁵⁸ See G. Grunwald, *Geschichte der Gottesbeweise im Mittelalter*, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters, VI,3 (Münster, 1907).

Cf. also *De Natura Deorum* I,8, and II,20–21 (on the motions of the heavenly bodies). Plato's *Timaeus* (28,B–C and 47,B–C) is slightly less specific (the motions of the heavenly bodies are discussed in 39,B). See also Plato's *Laws* XII, 966,E. But Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* V,1182 ff. is, like Cicero, more straightforward: 'Moreover they saw the way the sky was arranged in an orderly fashion and how the various seasons of the year came round, but could not understand by what causes this happened. So they took refuge in assuming that everything was in the hands of the gods and declaring that everything was subject to their whim.'

Note also Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae* I, prose 6, and III, prose 12: 'I cannot at all imagine how such regular movements could take place by pure chance, and indeed I am sure that god the creator is in control of his works . . . indeed such a fixed order of nature would not continue, nor would things display motions so organised as to place, time, causation, space, and properties, if there were not one who, himself at rest, was arranging this variety of changes.'⁵⁹

For Christian writers the argument is principally an extension of Psalm 18: 2 (19: 1), Wisdom 13: 5, and Romans 1: 20, and commonly appears in association with commentary on these passages, for example, Abelard on Romans 1: 20: 'Not only did heathen philosophers from this order and from the marvellous ornaments of the world perceive its marvellous creator, but also from its perfect organisation, by an extension of this reasoning, were able to point to the perfect providence of the divine control . . .'⁶⁰ As in many of the theological writings where this 'proof' occurs, it is here presented not as part of Christian teaching, but as an example of how even the *philosophi gentium* have been able to come to a knowledge of God without the benefit of revelation. See also Abelard's *Introductio ad Theologiam* III,1 and *Theologia Christiana* V; Gregory, *Moralia* XXVI,12 (on Job 34: 5–7); Rupert von Deutz, commentary on Ecclesiasticus 1: 14, 15; Atto on Romans 1: 19–20.⁶¹

The argument appears occasionally elsewhere in more down to earth Christian writers, as in Augustine, *Sermons* 197 and 241: 'As therefore from the movements and control of the body you can perceive the soul though you cannot see it, so from the fact that the whole world is controlled, and from the guidance to which souls themselves are subject,

⁵⁹ See Parent, *La Doctrine de la Création*, pp. 32–33 and 130–31 (Guillaume de Conches's commentary on Boethius).

⁶⁰ *PL*, CLXXVIII, 803 ff.

⁶¹ *PL*, CLXXVIII, 1085 ff., 1315 ff.; *PL*, LXXVI, 358; *PL*, CLXVIII, 1231; *PL*, CXXXIV, 139.

perceive the creator . . . The wise ones among the heathens, who are called philosophers, those who were the most outstanding among them, examined nature, and came to a knowledge of the creator through his works (although) they had not heard the prophets, they had not received the law of God.⁶² Cf. also his *Enarratio in Psalmos*, *Psalm* 41: 4, section 7; *De Civitate Dei* VII,29–30 and VIII,1 ff., especially chapters 6 and 9, where Augustine, like the author of the prologue, is giving an account of the philosophy of the heathen.⁶³ Similarly Lactantius: ‘For there is no one so primitive or so uncivilised in his attitudes, who, when he raises his eyes to the sky, though he does not know by the providence of what god all that he sees is governed, does not nevertheless understand that there is some providence, simply from the magnitude, movement, arrangement, regularity, usefulness, beauty, and organisation of things; it is not possible but that what exists with wonderful method has been arranged by some intelligence greater than itself.’⁶⁴

One of Alcuin’s letters has an interesting parallel: ‘What else do we contemplate and marvel at in the sun and moon and stars but the wisdom of the Creator and their natural courses? Moreover it is said that the Patriarch Abraham came to know and worship God the creator through the study of astronomy.’⁶⁵ In this letter, Alcuin, like the author of the prologue, is defending the ideas of heathen philosophy. The account of how Abraham came to a knowledge of God through astronomy is also found in *Stjórn*,⁶⁶ where it is taken from Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum Historiale* I,102, who had it from the pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* I,32: ‘He (Abraham), when the whole world was again subject to various errors . . . having studied astronomy, was able from the logic and order of the stars to perceive the creator and understood that everything was governed by his providence.’⁶⁷

In most later writers the argument is swamped in more profound and complicated thoughts; see, for example, Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ* Ia,2,3 (*Quinta via*) and 2a,2æ,94,1, and Guillaume de Conches, *De Philosophia Mundi* I,5, who claims that the existence of God can be proved even to unbelievers

⁶² *PL*, XXXVIII, 1022 and 1133.

⁶³ *PL*, XXXVI, 468, *PL*, XLI, 219–20 and 231–34.

⁶⁴ *Divinæ Institutiones* I, 2; see also II, 5 and 14, and *Epitome* 1 (*PL*, VI, 121, 277–80, 328–29 and 1019).

⁶⁵ *PL* C, 271–72. Cf. Baetke, *Die Götterlehre der Snorra-Edda*, p. 55.

⁶⁶ Ed. C. R. Unger (Christiania, 1862), p. 104.

⁶⁷ Ed. B. Rehm, p. 26. Cf. *Stjórn*, ed. C. R. Unger, p. 104 (quoting *Speculum historiale*).

by arguments from the way the world has been created and the rationality of the daily ordering of the universe.⁶⁸ The author of the prologue to *SnE*, however, has expressed the argument in a more concrete way than any of these Latin writers. This is perhaps partly due to his use of the vernacular and partly to his characteristically Icelandic avoidance of abstractions.

The description in the prologue of how heathens came to a knowledge of a creator and then gave him a name fits well with the account of the highest god in *Gylfaginning*, *SnE*, p. 14/5–8; ‘Ok þat er mín trúa, at sá Óðinn ok hans bræðr munu vera stýrandi himins ok jarðar; þat ætlum vér at hann muni svá heita. Svá heitir sá maðr er vér vitum mestan ok ágæztan, ok vel megu þér (v. l. þeir) hann láta svá heita.’ Cf. also *SnE*, pp. 10/11–21, 17/35, 27/13–21. It seems likely that Snorri had the ideas of the prologue in mind when he wrote these passages.

Having described how mankind deduced the existence of God, the author of the prologue remarks that even so, *vissu þeir eigi hvar ríki hans var* (*SnE*, p. 2/24; cf. 10/16 f. and 11/5–6).⁶⁹ This is reminiscent of the teaching of the Epicureans, that the gods existed, but far away from the world we know (see for example Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* II,646 ff.; V,146 ff., 1188 ff.). The whereabouts of God are the subject of a passage in Honorius of Autun’s *Elucidarius* I,3; see also Augustine, *Enarratio in Psalmos*, *Psalm* 41, section 7.⁷⁰

v

The author of the prologue assumes that each nation gave a name in their own language to the ruler of the universe whose existence they had deduced, and this led to the variety of names of gods and different religions that now exist (as nations changed and languages branched, *SnE*, p. 3/4). The same idea lies behind several passages in *Gylfaginning*: *Sá heitir Alföðr at váru mali* (*SnE*, p. 10/12), *þat ætlum vér at hann muni svá heita* (*SnE*, p. 14/6–7), *svá margar sem eru greinir tungnanna í veröldinni, þá þykkjaz allar þjóðir þurfa at breyta nafni hans til sinnar tungu til akallz ok bæna firir sjálfum sér* (*SnE*, p. 28/14–16). The third mythographer has been quoted as a parallel to this: ‘(Heathen) philosophers . . . say there is one god, and they certainly mean the creator of heaven and earth and all things. They call him, however, by various names according to the various means by which

⁶⁸ *PL*, CLXXII, p. 44. Cf. Parent, *La Doctrine de la Création*, pp. 32–33, 130–131.

⁶⁹ Compare also the description of the three heavens in *Gylfaginning*, *SnE*, p. 26/9–13, and see A. Holtsmark, *Studier i Snorres Mytologi*, pp. 35 ff.

⁷⁰ *PL*, CLXXII, 1111; *PL*, XXXVI 467 ff.

different aspects of the world are governed.’⁷¹ This, however, does not explain the names of god as due to the different languages of his worshippers. Peter Comestor, *Historia Scholastica*, *Genesis* 40, is much more similar: ‘Thus he is called Belus by the Assyrians, and similarly other nations say according to the idiom of their language, some Bel, some Beel, some Baal, some Baalim. Moreover they also give him distinct names, some saying Beelphegor, some Beelzebub.’⁷² Cf. also Ælfric, *De falsis diis*.⁷³ Lactantius, *Divinæ Institutiones* I,22, says that Jupiter acquired different names through travelling to different places,⁷⁴ and this explanation of Óðinn’s names appears in *Gylfaginning*, *SnE*, p. 28/17 (cf. *Grímnismál* 48–50). Compare also *SnE*, p. 38/17–19. (In Isidore, *Etymologiæ* VII,1, *PL*, LXXXII, 259–61, God is said to have ten names in Hebrew.)

Most medieval comments on the variety of languages in the world are based on the Biblical story of the tower of Babel. This is retold in *Veraldar saga* and AM 194, 8vo,⁷⁵ and also at some length in the version of the prologue to *SnE* in Codex Wormianus (based on *Veraldar saga*), and there the connection of *SnE*, p. 3/4 with the Babel story is made explicit and the linguistic ideas are further developed.

It is unusual to find in medieval writings a truly genetic conception of the relationships of languages such as seems to lie behind the use of the verb *greina*, *SnE*, p. 3/4, and the noun *greinir*, *SnE*, p. 28/14, though it seems to be present also at the beginning of the First Grammatical Treatise.⁷⁶ See Isidore, *Etymologiæ* I,3,4 and IX,1,1, where the idea of the splitting of nations into sub-groups also appears (cf. ‘svá sem þjóðirnar skiptuz,’ *SnE*, p. 3/4).⁷⁷

⁷¹ Bode, *Scriptores Rerum* I, p. 152. See R. M. Meyer, ‘Snorri als Mythograph’, p. 117. Cf. also *Elucidarius in Old Norse Translation*, pp. 28–29 (see Jón Helgason, *The Arna-Magnæan Manuscript 674 A*, 4^{to}, pp. xxxi–xxxii)

⁷² *PL*, CXCVIII, 1090. Cf. *Stjórn*, ed. C. R. Unger, p. 102.

⁷³ Lines 124, 140, etc.

⁷⁴ *PL*, VI, 248–49.

⁷⁵ *Veraldar saga*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, p. 14; *Alfræði Íslenzk*, ed. K. Kálund (Copenhagen, 1908), I, p. 8. Cf. also *Hauksbók*, p. 157 (*De falsis diis*, ll. 73 ff).

⁷⁶ Ed. E. Haugen, 2nd ed. (London, 1972), p. 12. See A. Holtsmark, *En Islandsk Scholasticus fra det 12. Århundre* (Oslo, 1936), pp. 82 ff. Peter Comestor says rather ambiguously in *Historia Scholastica*, *Genesis* 38 (*PL*, CXCVIII, 1089): ‘In this division (at Babel) God created nothing new, for words are the same among all nations, but he separated the pronunciation and forms into various categories’. Cf. *Stjórn*, ed. C. R. Unger, pp. 67 and 102, and note also *Historia Scholastica*, *Genesis* 40 (*PL*, CXCVIII, 1090).

⁷⁷ *PL*, LXXXII, 75 and 325.

Both the prologue and *Gylfaginning* reveal considerable interest in and understanding of linguistic questions, though it is perhaps doubtful whether there is really any intention of drawing attention to the non-Norse derivation of some of Óðinn's names in *SnE*, pp. 3/4 and 28/14–17, though this is certainly done with both personal and place-names in *SnE*, p. 7/14–19.⁷⁸ With this may be compared Snorri's remark on a similar subject in *Heimskringla* (*ÍF*, XXVI, p. 153). Moreover, in several places in the prologue names are given in two forms, one of which is supposed to be native, one foreign.⁷⁹ A starting point may have been provided by the genealogy of Óðinn used by the author, for in the copy of it in AM 1 e β II fol. there is already the statement 'Voden, þann kǫllum vér Óðin' (cf. *SnE*, p. 5/3). Some of the equivalents given seem to be attempts at etymology, such as *Sibil* . . . *er vér kǫllum Sif* and *Tror er vér kǫllum Þór* (*SnE*, pp. 4/19 and 8). There are also several place-name doublets given, such as Trója/Tyrkland, Trakia/Prúðheimr, Jótland/Reiðgotaland (*SnE*, pp. 3/21, 4/16, 6/11). *Enea* as a name for Europe (*SnE*, p. 3/12, and also in *Ynglinga saga*) is unexplained.

Etymological fantasies such as the association of Æsir with Asia (p. 6/14, also in *Ynglinga saga*), Vanir with Vanaland (in *Ynglinga saga*) and (perhaps) the Goths with Goðþjóð (in *Skjöldunga saga*) are in accord with the methods of European writers such as Fulgentius, Isidore, Augustine, Hrabanus Maurus, and the third mythographer.⁸⁰ The practice was well established in Iceland before Snorri, and *Skjöldunga saga* already implied the identification of Æsir with Asia, besides other similar 'etymologies', and examples are also found in *Hversu Noregr byggðisk* in *Flateyjarbók* and the beginning of *Orkneyinga saga*.⁸¹ *Rígsþula* also seems to have derived the word *konungr* from *Konr ungr*. In *Gylfaginning* some of the names of the Ásynjur are explained as personifications of abstractions by the same characteristic kind of medieval etymology (*SnE*, pp. 38–39). In the context of the Middle Ages, it is wrong to call this phenomenon 'popular etymology'; it is a learned activity characteristic of the Latin encyclopaedists and mythographers.

⁷⁸ This passage is closely based on the beginning of *Skjöldunga saga*, see *ÍF* XXXV, p. 39.

⁷⁹ E.g. *SnE*, pp. 4/24–5/5. See Heusler, *Die Gelehrte Urgeschichte im Altisländischen Schrifttum*, pp. 68 f. (134 f.).

⁸⁰ Cf. Alphandéry, 'L'Evhémérisme', p. 17, n. 1; Bode, *Scriptores Rerum I*, pp. 153, 160, 200–203, etc. Compare the explanation of the origin of the name Selund in *SnE*, p. 8 and *Ynglinga saga*, *ÍF*, XXVI, p. 15.

⁸¹ See *ÍF* XXXV, p. 39; *Flateyjarbók* (1860–68), I, pp. 21–24, 219–21. Cf. Bjarni Guðnason, *Um Skjöldungasögu*, pp. 230–31. Note also *Stjórn*, ed. C. R. Unger, pp. 67 ff.

Like many theologians, the author of the prologue makes a clear distinction between the knowledge of God that heathen philosophers gain by natural wisdom (*jarðleg skilning* ‘earthly understanding’) and that gained by grace or revelation (*andleg spekt* ‘spiritual wisdom’).⁸² Thus Hugh of St Victor in his *Expositio in Hierarchiam Coelestem S. Dionysii* I,1:

For two images were offered to man in which he would be able to see invisible things: one of nature and one of grace. The image of nature was the appearance of this world, and the image of grace was the humanity of the Word. And in both God was revealed, but he was not comprehended in both; for nature indeed by its appearance revealed the creator, but could not illuminate the eyes of the beholders . . . For nature could show, but could not illuminate. And the world proclaimed its creator by its appearance, but did not infuse the hearts of men with the understanding of truth. Therefore by the images of nature, the Creator was no more than indicated; but in the images of grace God was shown in his actuality . . . this is the distance of the theology of this world from that which is called divine theology.⁸³

There is also a long discussion of the limitation of ‘natural reason’ in *Quæstiones in Epistolas S. Pauli*, which includes the following:

Some say that natural reason by itself can go a long way, as can be seen in the philosophers, who have learned many things on their own by the use of reason, not only in the understanding of truth concerning the created world, but also about the Creator, that is that God exists, and is one, and that he is three. But they do not seem to have arrived at this train of thought without the help of grace.⁸⁴

Alain de Lille, in his *Liber de Planctu Naturæ*, speaks of the limitation of *naturalis ratio*; Guillaume de Conches comments ‘This is as much as pagans have been able to know about God by means of natural reason’, and Hugh of Rouen, in his *Tractatus in Hexameron* I,3, speaks of what is known ‘not from human wisdom, but by the instruction of the Holy Spirit.’⁸⁵ The distinction often arises from discussion of Romans 1: 19–25

⁸² *SnE*, p. 3/4–6. Both are gifts of God, see *SnE*, p. 1/16 ff. and the parallels quoted to that passage in Section III above.

⁸³ *PL*, CLXXV, 926. Cf. W. Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century* (Princeton, 1972), p. 52; R. Baron, *Études sur Hugues de Saint-Victor* (Bruges, 1963), pp. 139–49.

⁸⁴ *PL*, CLXXV, 440–41. This work can no longer be attributed to Hugh of St Victor with confidence.

⁸⁵ *PL*, CCX, 446; *Philosophia*, ed. C. Ottaviano, p. 32; *PL*, CXCII, 1249.

(like the argument for the existence of God from contemplation of his works discussed above), as in Abelard's commentary:

But he clearly refutes this excuse (of the heathen's ignorance of God), pointing out that even without scripture God was already known by heathens through the natural law, since he had bestowed on them knowledge of himself through the reason he had given them, that is the natural law, and through his visible works . . . the nature of the godhead has now been revealed to the world through the written law, but even without scripture it was already manifest through natural reason.⁸⁶

Atto, in his commentary, assumes that in Romans 1: 22 ('professing themselves to be wise') St Paul is referring to classical authorities such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Zeno, Virgil, Cato, Ovid.⁸⁷ Augustine (*De Civitate Dei* VIII,23) writes of Hermes Trismegistus: 'He says indeed many things about the one true God, the creator of the world, which are like the truth; and I do not know how with that darkness of the heart he falls into the error of always wanting men to be subject to gods who he admits are made by men.'⁸⁸

In Sermons 240 and 241 he also discusses the incomplete understanding of philosophers (cf. also his *Confessiones* V,3⁸⁹). A similar distinction is made in AM 435, 12mo:

. . . þá er viðrkvæmilegt at sýna, hver grein verit hefir millum skilningar fornra meistara og helgra feðra. Fornir fræðimenn ok meistarar skilðu ok trúðu alla hluti gerast eftir náttúrlegu eðli, ok þvíat þeir skilðu af náttúru skepnunar, at sá var almáttugr, er hana hafði í fyrstu skapat . . . En þvíat þeir vissu eigi hvern hann var, þá villast þeir af því í mǫrgum hlutum . . . En heilagir feðr með guðs miskunn ok giǫf skilðu ok trúðu ok vissu sannan guð eigi at eins af náttúrlegu eðli eða af náttúrlegri skynsemð, heldr jafnvel af heilags anda birting.⁹⁰

VII

At the end of his section on the development of 'natural' religions the author of the prologue adds the rather intrusive remark: *svá skilðu þeir at allir hlutir væri smíðaðir af nokkuru efni* (they deduced that all things were made

⁸⁶ *PL*, CLXXVIII, 802 (reading *seipso* for *seipsis*).

⁸⁷ *PL*, CXXXIV, 140.

⁸⁸ *PL*, XLI, 248.

⁸⁹ *PL*, XXXVIII, 1132–34 and XXXII, 707–08.

⁹⁰ *Alfræði* III, ed. K. Kálund, pp. 96–97; cf. A. Holtsmark, *Studier i Snorres Mytologi*, p. 11.

of some material, *SnE*, p. 3/6–7).⁹¹ Here again the reference seems to be to the doctrines of classical philosophers; see Plato, *Timaeus* 28–37, and Chalcidius’s commentary XXVII ff. and CCLXXIX–CCCLV;⁹² Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* I,155–205: ‘nothing can be made out of nothing.’ The remark might also be a reference to the materialism of some Greek philosophers, cf. Chalcidius’s commentary on *Timaeus* CCXIV–CCXVII.⁹³

The author of the prologue would not have needed to read classical writings to know of these doctrines, for they are often quoted in later writers, for example, Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiæ* V, prose 6: ‘Therefore they are not right who when they hear the view of Plato that the world had no beginning in time nor would ever have an end, think that this means that the world is co-eternal with the maker’; Peter Comestor, *Historia Scholastica*, *Genesis* 1: ‘God created . . . the world, that is made it out of nothing . . . When Moses used the word “created”, he refuted three errors, those of Plato, Aristotle, and Epicurus. Plato said there were three eternals, God, ideas, and matter; and at the beginning of time, the world was formed out of this matter’;⁹⁴ Hugh of St Victor, *Advertationes Elucidatoriæ in Pentateuchon* 4: ‘In this our (Christian) writers differ from (heathen) philosophers, that the philosophers make God just a craftsman and assume three principles: God, matter, and archetypal ideas; our (writers) however assume just one principle, that is God alone’;⁹⁵ Hugh of Rouen, *Tractatus in Hexameron* I,10: ‘There were men who in their opinions accepted the evidence of their senses, saying there were three things coeternal, that is God, and matter, and all forms . . . they said something could be made from something, but not anything from nothing.’⁹⁶ John of Salisbury, in his *Metalogicon* II,2, speaks of the ‘Stoics, who claim that matter is co-eternal with God.’ The question of the priority in time of God and matter perhaps lies behind the remark *þess væntu þeir, ef hann réði fyrir höfuðskepnunum, at hann myndi ok fyrr verit hafa en himintunglin* (they presumed that if he was lord of the elements he must also have existed before the heavenly bodies, *SnE*, p. 2/19–21). See Guillaume de Conches, *De Philosophia Mundi* I,4–5.⁹⁷

⁹¹ Cf. . . . *trúðu alla hluti gerast eftir náttúrlegu eðli* in the passage just quoted.

⁹² Ed. cit. (note 32 above), pp. 78 ff. and 283–346.

⁹³ Ibid., pp. 229–31.

⁹⁴ *PL*, CXCVIII, 1055.

⁹⁵ *PL*, CLXXV, 33. Cf. Hugh’s *De Sacramentis* I, 1, *PL*, CLXXVI, 187.

⁹⁶ *PL*, CXCII, 1251. Cf. Grunwald, *Geschichte der Gottesbeweise im Mittelalter*, p. 77 and n.3.

⁹⁷ *PL*, CLXXII, 43–44.

The author would of course have known that the orthodox Christian doctrine of creation, based on Genesis, was that God created matter *ex nihilo*. See Lactantius, *Divinæ Institutiones* II,9: 'Let no one ask from what materials God made these so great, so marvellous works, for he made all things out of nothing . . . It is easy to reply to those who, not understanding the power of God, believe that he was unable to make anything except from material lying ready at hand; and even the (heathen) philosophers laboured under this error.'⁹⁸ See also Augustine, *Confessiones* XII,7 and 8; *Contra Adversarium Legis et Prophetarum* I,8 and 9; Hugh of Rouen, *Tractatus in Hexameron* 1,2 ff.⁹⁹ Note also Ælfric, *De Initio Creaturæ: Ealle ðing he geworhte buton ælcum antimbre*.¹⁰⁰ In Icelandic sources the doctrine is also spelled out in *Hauksbók: Allsvaldandi guð er af engu efni gerði alla hluti . . .*,¹⁰¹ and *Placidus saga: Ek em Jesus Kristur, ek gerða himin ok jörð ok allar skepnur af engu efni*.¹⁰²

In the various twelfth-century attempts to harmonise Platonic philosophy with Christian theology, this basic disagreement about God's role in creation caused a major problem that was much discussed (see Clarembald, *Tractatulus super librum Genesis* 25; Thierry of Chartres, *De sex dierum operibus* 2–3; Guillaume de Conches, commentary on Boethius; John of Salisbury, *Metalogicon* IV,35).¹⁰³ It is of particular interest in this connection that Snorri's quotation of *Vǫluspá* 3 (*SnE*, p. 11) has the reading *er ekki var* (when nothing existed) instead of *er Ymir bygði* like the texts of the *Poetic Edda*. The whole of *SnE*, pp. 10/11–14/8 and 27/10–28/19 seems to be Snorri's attempt to show how the ideas in the prologue about the origin of religion in general apply to the actual religion of heathen Scandinavia. In the account of creation in *SnE*, p. 12 (presumably developed by heathen philosophers using *jarðleg skilning*) there is a primal matter that congeals into the giant form of Ymir, from which the earth was subsequently made by the sons of Borr. The concep-

⁹⁸ *PL*, VI, 297.

⁹⁹ *PL*, XXXII, 828–29; *PL*, XLII, 609–10; *PL*, CXCH, 1249–51.

¹⁰⁰ Ed. B. Thorpe, p. 14.

¹⁰¹ P. 180.

¹⁰² *Heilagra manna sögur*, ed. C. R. Unger (Christiania, 1877), II, p. 194 (*Placidus saga* I).

¹⁰³ N. M. Häring, *Life and Works of Clarembald of Arras* (Toronto, 1965), p. 237; idem (ed.), *Commentaries on Boethius by Thierry of Chartres and his School* (Toronto, 1971), pp. 555–57; Parent, *La Doctrine de la Création*, pp. 131–32. There is a good general account of the problem in the same work, pp. 34–43. See also T. Silverstein, 'The Fabulous Cosmogony of Bernardus Silvestris', *Modern Philology*, 46 (1948–1949), pp. 100–01.

tion in this account of the primal matter coming into existence as a result of the meeting of two (rather than four) elements, in this case heat and cold (or moisture), is reminiscent of the Stoic view of the origin of matter.¹⁰⁴ One might also compare Ovid, *Metamorphoses* I, ll. 430–31: ‘For when moisture and heat are mingled, they become pregnant, and from these two things everything originates.’ Or Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones* II, 10: ‘Therefore there are these two principles, which have power that is different and mutually opposed: heat and moisture. These God has marvellously contrived for the maintenance and production of all things.’¹⁰⁵ The Florentine commentator on Martianus Capella also speaks of the function of warmth and moisture derived from the planets in the structure of the human body.¹⁰⁶ See also Chalcidius’s commentary on Plato’s *Timaeus* CCCVII and CCLXXX.¹⁰⁷

The source of the *kraptr* in *SnE*, p. 12/20 may be conceived as personal (Alfǫðr or Surtr?) but *þess* could be neuter (only the Uppsala manuscript has a specifically masculine pronoun). There is a similar vagueness in Ovid’s account of the creation in *Metamorphoses* I, ll. 21 and 32 (*quisquis fuit ille deorum*).

VIII

The idea in the prologue of an intuitive conception of an almighty creator giving rise to heathen religion is reflected in *Gylfaginning*, *SnE*, pp. 10/11–11/6 and 14/5–8. In *SnE*, pp. 17/3–5 and 27/13–21 Al(l)fǫðr is explicitly identified with Óðinn. It would appear that in *Gylfaginning* Óðinn-worship is being presented as the specific Scandinavian version of the type of religion described at the beginning of the prologue.

¹⁰⁴ H. Falk, ‘Martianus Capella og den Nordiske Mytologi’, p. 282, n. 1, quotes Notker’s commentary on Martianus Capella, *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* (*Notker des Deutschen Werke*, ed. E. H. Sehrst and T. Starck (Halle, 1935), II, p. 207), but this passage is not about creation. Cf. E. H. Meyer, *Vǫluspá*, pp. 55–60.

¹⁰⁵ *PL*, VI, 308–09. K. von See, *Mythos und Mythologie* (Heidelberg, 1988), p. 53, also refers to Guillaume de Conches (without naming the work) as mentioning the creation of matter from heat and cold, but Guillaume usually accepts the usual classical doctrine of the four elements (*De Philosophia Mundi* I, XXI; II, XIX; *De Imagine Mundi* I, III; *PL*, CLXXII, 48–55, 83, 122).

¹⁰⁶ Quoted from manuscript by P. Dronke, *Fabula*, pp. 111 and 117. On the growth of the universe from a primal giant form (*SnE*, pp. 12–16) see the passages quoted in note 51 above. The pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* X, 32, is particularly reminiscent of *SnE*, p. 12/6–21.

¹⁰⁷ Ed. cit. (note 32 above), pp. 308 and 284–85.

The speculations in the first part of the prologue about the pagan conception of God find parallels in other thirteenth-century Icelandic writings, where a belief in a nameless creator or ruler of the world is assumed for pre-Christian Iceland and Norway. Thus in *Vatnsdæla saga*:

Njóta mun faðir minn þess frá þeim, er sólina hefir skapat ok allan heiminn, hverr sem sá er. En þat má vita, at þat mun nokkurr gert hafa.

Nú vil ek heita á þann er sólina hefir skapat, því at ek trúi hann máttkastan, at sjá ótími hverfi af þér; vil ek þat gera í staðinn, fyrir hans sakar, at hjálpa við barninu ok fæða upp, til þess at sá, er skapat hefir manninn, mætti honum til sín snúa síðan, því at ek get honum þess audit verða.

Þorkell kvazk eigi vilja aðra trú hafa ‘en þeir Þorsteinn Ingimundarson hǫfðu ok Þórir fóstri minn; þeir trúðu á þann er sólina hefir skapat ok öllum hlutum ræðr.’ Byskup svarar: ‘Þá sǫmu trú boða ek með þeiri grein, at trú á einn guð fǫður son ok helgan anda, ok láta skírask í hans nafni.’¹⁰⁸

Landnámabók:

Hann lét sik bera í sólargeisla í banasótt sinni ok fal sik á hendi þeim guði, er sólina hafði skapat; hafði hann ok lifat svá hreinliga sem þeir kristnir menn er bezt eru síðaðir.¹⁰⁹

Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar:

Haraldr konungr var heiðinn ok vissi ekki til guðs . . . finnz þat ok í hans orðum at hann hafi vænt sér nokkurs trausts af þeim sem hann hafði skapat, þó at hann hefði eigi fulla vissu af hverr sá guð var.

Nú ef sá er sannr guð er sólina hefir skapat til þess at birta ok verma veröldina, ok ef honum líkar vel milldi ok réttlæti sem ver hǫfum heyrt sagt, þá sýni hann oss miskunn sína svá at vér megim prófa með sannindum at hann er skapari manna, ok at hann megi stjórna ok stýra allri veröldu.¹¹⁰

The legal formula *hjálpi mér svá Freyr ok Njǫrðr ok hinn al máttki áss* may reflect the same idea.¹¹¹ Cf. also *Vǫlospa* 65 (only in *Hauksbók*):

¹⁰⁸ *ÍF*, VIII, pp. 62, 97–98 and 125.

¹⁰⁹ *ÍF*, I, pp. 46–47.

¹¹⁰ *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson (Copenhagen, 1958–2000), I, p. 383 and II, pp. 182–83. The first is part of a speech supposed to have been made by King Óláfr, the second is from one by Arnórr kerlingarnef. Similar sentiments to those expressed in these quotations are attributed to Harald hárfagri in *Heimskringla* (*ÍF*, XXVI, p. 97); *Fagrskinna* (*ÍF*, XXIX, pp. 368–69).

¹¹¹ *Landnámabók*, *ÍF*, I, p. 315; *Þórðar saga hreðu*, *ÍF*, XIV, p. 232; *Þorsteins þátr uxafóts*, *Flateyjarbók* (Christiania, 1860–1868), I, p. 249. Cf. H. Kuhn, ‘Das nordgermanische Heidentum in den ersten christlichen Jahrhunderten’, *ZfdA*,

Þá kómr in ríki at regindómi,
oflugr, ofan, sá er ǫllo ræðr.

And *Hyndlolióð* 44:

Þá kemr annarr, enn mátcari,
þó þori ec eigi hann at nefna.

One might also compare the *regnator omnium deus* in Tacitus, *Germania* 39.

The passages from *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Landnámabók*, and *Óláfs saga* have in common with the prologue to *SnE* both the attribution to heathens of a belief in a nameless god and an attitude to that belief that is not only not condemnatory but inclined to be idealising. The story of the worship of the unknown god in Acts 17: 23 ff. could well have been in the minds of the writers of some of these passages (particularly the third from *Vatnsdæla saga*). Cf. also Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* IV,9: ‘Varro believes that it is he (Jupiter) also who is worshipped by those who worship one god only without an image but called by another name.’¹¹² Cicero, in *De Natura Deorum* II,2 and 25, presents a similar idea, and quotes Ennius in support of it. A similar tendency to idealise heathens by suggesting that they were in fact atheists (or agnostics), and thus at any rate better than idolaters, appears in stories about vikings who are said to have believed in their own *mátt ok megin*¹¹³ and in the much-discussed account in *Hrafnkels saga* of how Hrafnkell abjures the heathen religion.¹¹⁴ The common medieval idea of the ‘noble heathen’ is probably at the root of all this, together with the desire on the part of Icelandic writers to justify or apologise for the attitudes of their forefathers. Augustine has a similarly almost nostalgic respect for the Platonic school of philosophers, in spite of their being heathens (*De Civitate Dei* VIII, 5–9¹¹⁵), and besides Plato, Aristotle and Virgil were highly regarded by Christian writers in the Middle Ages. Even Aquinas is not too hard on the ignorant heathen (*Summa Theologiæ* 2a,2ae,94). Some heathens (or at least pre-Christians) were believed to have been saved in various ways; cf. *Summa Theologiæ*

79 (1942), pp. 133–66 (reprinted in H. Kuhn, *Kleine Schriften* (Berlin, 1969–72), II, pp. 296–326), especially pp. 159–60 (319–20). In this article Kuhn discusses medieval Icelandic attitudes to the heathen gods in general.

¹¹² *PL*, XLI, 119.

¹¹³ See E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North* (London, 1964), ch. 14. There is an example in *Landnámabók*, *ÍF*, I, p. 48: *þeir feðgar vildu ekki blóta ok trúðu á mátt sinn*.

¹¹⁴ *ÍF*, XI, p. 124.

¹¹⁵ *PL*, XLI, 224–34.

2a,2ae, 2,7; Dante, *Paradiso* XIX, XX; *Piers Plowman*, B version, XII, 268–86 and X, 384 ff.¹¹⁶ There is a discussion of the problem in *Quæstiones in Epistolas S. Pauli* I,38 ff.¹¹⁷ Cf. also Honorius of Autun, *Elucidarium* III,6.¹¹⁸ The best-known expression of sympathy for the righteous heathen is Dante, *Inferno* IV.¹¹⁹

The view of heathen religion held by the author of the prologue is that it is a perversion or partial understanding of the true religion, the result of an honest attempt by moderately enlightened heathen philosophers to understand the nature of existence. They were misguided but admirable (cf. Wisdom 13: 6: ‘But yet for this they are the less to be blamed: for they peradventure err, seeking God, and desirous to find him’). Though this is not the usual ecclesiastical view of paganism, it does correspond to the general attitude to classical philosophers in the twelfth century, at any rate among humanists in the universities. The author evidently saw a parallel between the relationship of Greek and Roman writers to European Christendom and that of heathen Norse literature to the Icelandic civilisation of his own time. His sympathetic attitude to native culture is in the tradition of Ari, the author of *Skjöldunga saga*, and other Icelandic writers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Heusler was certainly right in supposing the ideas of the prologue to be learned and to belong to the thirteenth century rather than being inherited from ancient, pre-Christian Norse tradition.¹²⁰ The starting point is the historical humanism of the genealogies and the result is an original, perceptive, and detached theory of the origin of heathen religions. The method is scholarly and logical and non-polemic. Though this matter-of-fact humanism and lack of moral condemnation of non-Christian material is common enough in clerical authors of the twelfth century, there remains little reason to suppose that the author of the prologue was himself a cleric, since in Iceland by the thirteenth century there were enough lay authors with an education in the learned writings of medieval Europe.

¹¹⁶ Ed. G. Kane and E. T. Donaldson (London, 1975), pp. 481–82 and 430 ff.

¹¹⁷ *PL*, CLXXV, 440–42 (on this work see note 84 above).

¹¹⁸ *PL*, CLXXII, 1161.

¹¹⁹ See *St Erkenwald*, ed. I. Gollancz (London, 1922), pp. xxxviii–lv; and cf. L. Lonnoth, ‘Studier i Olaf Tryggvasons saga’, *Samlaren*, 84 (1963), pp. 86–87, who refers to the account of Aigolandus in the Pseudo-Turpin chronicle, ch. 13 (which also appears in *Karlamagnus saga*, ed. C. R. Unger [Christiania, 1860], pp. 146–47); and the same writer’s excellent article ‘The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas’, *SS*, 41 (1969), pp. 1–29.

¹²⁰ *Die gelehrte Urgeschichte im altisländischen Schrifttum*.

The author does not, of course, confuse heathen religion with classical philosophy, nor should he be accused of anachronism in attributing to pagan Scandinavia ideas proper to Greek philosophers. He takes the Æsir to have come from Asia minor, and their culture to be an offshoot of the pre-Christian culture of the Mediterranean, and not a separate culture at all. He sees all heathendom as having the same roots. (Compare the quotation from the Third Grammatical Treatise at the end of Section 1 above.)

IX

The assumption behind the account of Þórr and Óðinn in the prologue is that they are gods interpreted euhemeristically. Euhemerism in Icelandic literature, when it relates to the Norse gods, nearly always appears in association with the story of the migration of the Æsir from Asia and with genealogy (as already in Ari). The standpoint is essentially historical, and these three aspects of it appear only in secular, scholarly writings. Icelandic genealogies themselves seem to be largely the result of historical speculation among the learned members of two Icelandic families, Ari's and the Oddaverjar, and insofar as they were mainly cultivated by scholars, were probably not really part of popular tradition.¹²¹ Popular mythology on the other hand takes the gods at their face value, as timeless and immortal and non-human, and makes no attempt to fit them into a historical scheme.

In clerical writings whose purpose is religious edification, the attitude is different both from that of the scholarly historians and from that of popular mythology. In these the heathen gods are usually interpreted as devils deliberately trying to lead men astray, and pagandom is represented as idolatry and positively evil. This attitude is common in the lives of saints and of the missionary kings Óláfr Tryggvason and St Óláfr, and many stories about devils in the form of heathen gods may originally have been popular tales originating soon after the conversion—but presumably popular in a different sense, or among different people, from the popular mythology of the *Eddas*.

¹²¹ See Bjarni Guðnason, *Um Skjöldungasögu* (Reykjavík, 1963), pp. 156 ff. When *Upphaf allra frásagna* (*ÍF XXXV*, p. 39) makes Óðinn son of Þórr in defiance of both mythology and genealogy, this is presumably the result of learned identification of Óðinn with Mercury and Þórr with Jupiter. Their relationship in Roman mythology has been given precedence over that in Norse mythology. Cf. Ælfric, *De falsis diis*, ll. 141–49 (which might indeed have been known to the author of *Upphaf*), and Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* VI, 5 (ed. J. Olrik and H. Raeder, I [Copenhagen, 1931], p. 152).

Euhemerism, however, is less polemic, and in itself fairly neutral from a moral point of view, and does not necessarily involve a harsh judgment on the misguided worshippers. This accords with the fact that it is commonest in the early Middle Ages and in historical rather than theological writers. It is also easy to see why the theory was adopted by the scholarly humanist Icelandic writers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, who were not preachers. They tended to see paganism as partial truth, incomplete understanding, rather than a positive evil.

There was an inherent contradiction in Icelandic tradition by the beginning of the thirteenth century between the conception of heathen gods implied by genealogies and the historical works into which they were incorporated, where they appeared euhemerised as ancestors (and sometimes descendants) of human beings, and the way they appeared in myths, where the Æsir and Vanir were presented as beings of a different nature from human beings and having little contact with them.¹²² Moreover, this contradiction was not only one of attitude but also of irreconcilable facts, for in historical works Óðinn was son of Frealaf and father of various human sons who are progenitors of royal houses (Skjöldr, Sæmingr, Beldegg, Veggdegg, Siggi), while in mythology he was son of a giant called Borr and father of most of the other Æsir. Njörðr (or sometimes Freyr) appears as his son in some genealogies, while in mythology Njörðr and Freyr were unrelated to the Æsir. In order to reconcile genealogy and mythology, the gods in the prologue and *Gylfaginning* are separated into two sets, the historical ones who migrated to Scandinavia in the time of Gylfi, and the others about whom they, under the names Hár, Jafnhár and Þriði, tell Gylfi stories. Gylfi wanted to find out whether the success of the historical Æsir was due to their own power or to the gods they worshipped (*SnE*, p. 8/19–21), and the answer is presumably the latter: the gods about whom they tell Gylfi stories are the gods they themselves worship (*SnE*, pp. 14/5–8, 10/12–11/4, 27/10ff., 31/22–25).¹²³ In *Ynglinga saga*, too, the euhemerised gods worship other gods, but there the objects of their worship are not identified.

¹²² Euhemerised gods also appear side by side with their mythical counterparts in Irish books. See A. Nutt, *The Voyage of Bran* (London, 1895–1897), I, pp. 232–33 and II, p. 165 ff. Note also the miscellany of mythical and pseudo-historical names in the *þula* of *burir Óðins*, *SnE*, p. 196, v. 429. Cf. Kuhn, ‘Das nordgermanische Heidentum’, pp. 160–63 (321–23).

¹²³ Cf. Lactantius, *Divinæ Institutiones* I,11 (*PL*, VI, 183–84 and 168), where euhemerised gods are also said to worship other gods. See Baetke, *Die Götterlehre der Snorra-Edda*, pp. 27–32.

But while in *Ynglinga saga* some myths are related in euhemerised form about the historical Æsir (who there are also made to stand in their correct mythical relationship to each other), the confusion of the mythical Æsir with the historical ones is avoided in *SnE*, since the gods within the frame are kept distinct from those outside it, and are generally not euhemerised, but presented as alien creatures with a nature different from that of human beings. But in one place in *Gylfaginning* the gods the historical Æsir worship are themselves euhemerised, and said to be the ancestors of the Æsir telling the stories (*SnE*, pp. 16/19–17/3).¹²⁴ Here they are said to have lived on earth in old Ásgarðr, that is, Troy (though this identification is not in the Uppsala manuscript). They are therefore identified with the inhabitants of Troy in the prologue, *SnE*, pp. 3–4 (this identification is further elaborated in the version of the prologue in Codex Wormianus). At the end of *Gylfaginning* (*SnE*, p. 77/4–8) and in the so-called epilogue in *Skáldskaparmál* (*SnE*, pp. 86–8) the Æsir who are the subject of the stories in *Gylfaginning* are again identified with the heroes of Troy, and it is suggested that the myths told about them in *Gylfaginning* are historical allegories of events in the Troy story.

Thus the prologue and *Gylfaginning* present us with two Óðinns, the older one of the myths, who is presumed to have lived at the time of the Trojan war, and the later one who migrated to Scandinavia in the time of Gylfi, and (under the names Hár, Jafnhár, and Priði) told stories to Gylfi about his ancestors; two Þórrs, the Þórr of the myths, identified at the end of *Gylfaginning* with the Tror of the prologue and Hector of Troy (cf. *SnE*, p. 17/7–8, where, although he has a different pedigree, he has the same attributes as the monster-fighting Tror in the prologue), and another one, contemporary with the later Óðinn; and presumably two of each of the other gods. At any rate the Gefjun of *SnE*, p. 38/10 is distinct from the Gefjun of *SnE*, p. 8. The reason for the doubling of names is given in the last chapter of *Gylfaginning*: the historical Æsir deliberately adopted the names of their more powerful ancestors, the old gods, so that their new Scandinavian neighbours should believe that they too were gods.¹²⁵ (The identification of Þórr with [H]ector, son of Priam, at the end of *Gylfaginning* and in the ‘epilogue’ in *Skáldskaparmál* is of course

¹²⁴ Cf. *SnE*, pp. 10/12, 20/4 ff.; cf. Baetke, *Die Götterlehre der Snorra-Edda*, p. 30, n. 1. There is one euhemerised myth related in *Gylfaginning* (*SnE*, p. 8/1–12), but this is outside the frame of the conversation within which the other myths are related.

¹²⁵ On the transference of names of men and gods cf. again Lactantius, *Divine Institutiones* I,11 (*PL*, VI, 176 and 181–82), and see Kuhn, ‘*Das nordgermanische Heidentum*’, pp. 162–64 (322–24).

incompatible with his identification with Tror, son of Munon/Mennon in the prologue, though it springs from the same sort of interpretation of myth, and must represent a revision, whether by the same writer or another.)

As a further complication, the first part of the prologue proposes yet another, more general explanation of the origins of heathen religion: that it began from nature worship and a conviction that a personal agency controlled natural phenomena. Presumably we are to imagine that the worship of the old Æsir who are described in *Gylfaginning* began from nature worship and that the myths told about them are, at least in part, the development of stories told to account for natural phenomena, which were later, in some cases, identified with stories about Trojan heroes. The author does not go into detail about this, and some of the stories in *Gylfaginning* are more susceptible to this sort of interpretation than others.

It is possible that this rather cumbersome scheme is all the work of one writer, but naturally scholars have been inclined to assume that there have been several hands at work; that the original author of *Gylfaginning* began with a fairly simple euhemeristic interpretation of the gods and that further explanations were added by later redactors with pet theories of their own, resulting in the existing superabundance of ideas. The prologue itself has often been assumed to be an addition to the original plan, or at least to have been subject to severe revision. The last chapter of *Gylfaginning* (or part of it) and the ‘epilogue’ in *Skáldskaparmál* have also been assumed to be additions.¹²⁶

It is true that if the intention was simply to explain away the heathen gods for a Christian audience there is an excess of motives in the prologue and *Gylfaginning*. One explanation would have been enough. But the author was a historian, and his sources contained conflicting accounts of the gods. His method in *Gylfaginning* when faced with conflicting versions of a story was sometimes to include both versions side by side (e.g., *SnE*, pp. 11/13 ff., 43/20 ff.; 17/8–19/12, 70/20–22, 76/13; 63/7–9). It may be that he did

¹²⁶ The passages in both *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál* that mention Troy are all lacking in the Uppsala manuscript, but the problem of the superabundance of ideas is not obviated by deleting them. The Uppsala manuscript still mentions Ásgarðr inn forni (*SnE*, p. 17/2), and this implies the migration legend, which appears in the prologue in this manuscript too. In *SnE*, pp. 16–17, the Uppsala manuscript expresses the euhemeristic attitude even more clearly than the other manuscripts (*þar [í miðjum heimi] bygði Óðinn ok ættir þeirra er várar ættir eru frá komnar*). Moreover, it is hoped that enough links between the ideas of the prologue and those in *Gylfaginning* have been demonstrated to make it clear that there is no reason to doubt that the prologue is by Snorri. The two pieces of writing are interrelated and best understood in the light of each other.

not want to reject any of his sources; that he devised his frame so as to be able to tell the myths without euhemerising them through the mouth of a suitable pre-Christian character (to have told them in his own person would have invited the charge of idolatry), and then composed a prologue which would allow him to reproduce his genealogical and historical account of the gods as well, besides giving room for his philosophical and theological speculations about paganism. Thus he did not need to reject (or violently alter) his historical or mythological sources, and was also able to make use of the ideas suggested by his reading of foreign Christian authors.¹²⁷

The one explanation of the gods which is not used in *Gylfaginning* is that of demonic deception, though the use of the title *Gylfaginning* ('deception of Gylfi') suggests that the author had it in mind.¹²⁸ But the word *ginning* undoubtedly refers to the end of *Gylfaginning* where the Æsir cause themselves and their hall to disappear, presumably because they have lost the contest of wisdom (cf. *SnE*, pp. 10/7, 48/23–24, 76/13–16). They also deceive Gylfi and his people into thinking that they themselves are the gods about whom they have told the stories. But the author nowhere suggests that either set of Æsir are really devils.¹²⁹

Allegorical explanations are also eschewed in *SnE* generally, though the etymological connection of some of the names of the Ásynjur with abstractions (*SnE*, pp. 38–39) and the account of Hel (*SnE*, p. 35/4–9) come close to it. Historical allegory is used in the last chapter of *Gylfaginning* and the 'epilogue' in *Skáldskaparmál*, *SnE*, pp. 87–88. Moral allegory is common in medieval mythographers.¹³⁰ Historical allegory is also found,

¹²⁷ Cf. Baetke, *Die Götterlehre der Snorra-Edda*, p. 32. There is the same complexity in Ælfric, Lactantius, Isidore, and Augustine, who all have multiple explanations of the origins of heathen gods.

¹²⁸ The interpretation of heathen gods as devils is often found in medieval sources, sometimes in association with euhemerism; see Ælfric, *De falsis diis*, ll. 159 ff., 197 ff., and *De initio creaturae*, ed. cit. (note 16 above), p. 22; *Hauksbók*, pp. 159 and 170; the translation of *Elucidarius* (Honorius of Autun), p. 156; *Beowulf*, ll. 175–78. The idea is biblical, see for example I Corinthians 10: 19 ff., Deuteronomy 32: 17. In Snorri's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (*ÍF*, XXVI, pp. 312–14) a story of the king being confronted by Óðinn, who is presumably a manifestation of the devil, is told. Cf. Baetke, *Die Götterlehre der Snorra-Edda*, pp. 37 f.

¹²⁹ The Æsir also delude Gylfi into thinking that the stories they tell him are literally true; see *SnE*, p. 86/20–22. According to the author they are either allegories of events in the Troy story or of natural phenomena (the latter, of course, is implied by the first part of the prologue, but nowhere stated). Cf. Kuhn, *Das nordgermanische Heidentum*, pp. 158–59 (318–19).

¹³⁰ E.g. the third mythographer, Bode, *Scriptores Rerum* I, pp. 246–48 and 251.

for example, in Servius, Lactantius, and the third mythographer (here it is actually in association with the Troy story, as in *SnE*).¹³¹

If the present interpretation of the prologue and *Gylfaginning* is correct, and the author saw the heathen religion as a groping towards truth by pagan thinkers, it is clear that any similarities between the account of the pagan religion and Christianity, and any apparent influence of Christianity on the mythology of *Gylfaginning*, are likely to be the result of a deliberate attempt by the author to explore the common ground between the two religions rather than of unconscious syncretism either in the author or the traditions he inherited. It would not be surprising if he sometimes made the heathen religion more similar to the Christianity he knew than it ever was in fact. Various passages in *Gylfaginning* are reminiscent of the Christian Credo, as *SnE*, pp. 27/10 ff., 10/11–11/4 (with these cf. p. 1/1 ff.); the idea of reward and punishment after death (*SnE*, pp. 11/1–4 and 74–75) seems a deliberate attempt to accommodate heathen ideas to Christian ones, and *ragnarøk* is made to seem rather like doomsday (*SnE*, pp. 26/1–9, 70–73).¹³² The idea that there were parallels between Christian stories and heathen myths, and that they were in some cases in a sense identical (e.g. stories about creation, the flood, the end of the world) could perhaps have been suggested by a reading of the *Ecloga* of Theodulus, which is said to have been known at any rate to the author of the opening chapter of *Tröjumanna saga* in *Hauksbók*.¹³³ From Theodulus it is a short step to the assumption that heathen mythology is merely a perversion of Christian stories.

¹³¹ See J. F. Mountford and J. T. Schultz, *Index rerum et nominum in scholiis Servii et Aelii Donati Tractatorum* (Hildesheim, 1962), p. 11, s.v. *allegoria*; Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones* I, 11 and *Epitome* 11 (*PL*, VI, pp. 170–72 and 1026); Bode, *Scriptores Rerum* I, pp. 174 and 222. Historical allegory is also found in *Stjórn*, ed. C. R. Unger, p. 87 (Deucalion).

¹³² Cf. *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*, III (Copenhagen, 1958), pp. 478–79.

¹³³ *Theoduli Ecloga*, ed. J. Osternacher (Ripariae, 1902). See G. L. Hamilton, ‘Theodulus: A Mediaeval Textbook’, *Modern Philology*, 7 (1909–1910), pp. 169–85; H. Dunger, *Die Saga vom trojanischem Kriege* (Leipzig, 1869), p. 76. The *Ecloga* is also apparently quoted in the Third Grammatical Treatise, but may not have been directly known to the author (see B. M. Ólsen, ed., *Den tredje og fjerde grammatiske afhandling i Snorres Edda*, p. 52). On the question of the Norse flood story see A. Holtsmark, ‘Det Norrøne Ord Lúðr’, *MM* (1946), pp. 49–65, and G. Turville-Petre, ‘Professor Dumézil and the Literature of Iceland’, *Hommages à Georges Dumézil*, Collection Latomus, XLV (Brussels, 1960), pp. 209–14. It seems likely that Snorri deliberately manipulated his sources in order to produce the greatest possible correspondence with the Old Testament; a flood is not mentioned in Norse mythological sources outside *Gylfaginning*.

There is no doubt that many of the Latin works quoted in this article were known in medieval Scandinavia, some directly, some perhaps only in quotation. For example, a translation of Honorius of Autun's *Elucidarius* into Old Norse survives in a manuscript of about 1200; there is a translation of Ælfric's homily *De falsis diis* in *Hauksbók*. Peter Comestor's *Historia Scholastica* is quoted extensively in *Stjórn*. Augustine and Gregory are quoted in AM 435, 12mo, in the introduction to a treatise on physiognomy.¹³⁴ Honorius's *De Imagine Mundi* I, 1 and II, 59 are quoted in AM 685 d, 4to, and in the same part of AM 435, 12mo.¹³⁵ Plato (probably the *Timaeus* in Chalcidius's version) is referred to in the Third Grammatical Treatise.¹³⁶ Macrobius is quoted three times in the Second Computational Treatise.¹³⁷ The pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* were known from *Clemens saga*. This list could be greatly extended.¹³⁸

But though the ideas of the prologue can be paralleled in various works, it is difficult to know which, if any, the author was actually acquainted with; and if his ideas were derived from Latin authors, it is difficult to say how far his knowledge was at first hand and how much reached him orally through the general dissemination of ideas in literary circles in Iceland. The analogies between the earth and living creatures (*SnE*, pp. 1/22–2/8) are developed much further than in any other medieval writer I know, and in a very individual way, and the author might have arrived at them independently. Nevertheless, the similarities with European writings, though they do not prove dependence, show that the author was thinking in a similar way to medieval Latin writers, and was not following a specifically Norse train of thought.

¹³⁴ *Alfræði* III, ed. K. Kålund, pp. 96–98. See Gregory, *Moralia* XXVI, 12 and V, 39 (on Job 35: 5–7 and 4: 20), and cf. also XI, 4 (on Job 12: 9) (*PL*, LXXVI, 358 and *PL*, LXXV, 719 and 956).

¹³⁵ *Alfræði* III, pp. 75 and 98; see *PL*, CLXXII, 121 and 154.

¹³⁶ *Den tredje og fjærde grammatiske afhandling i Snorres Edda*, ed. B. M. Ólsen, p. 34.

¹³⁷ *Alfræði Íslenzk* II, ed. N. Beckman and K. Kålund (Copenhagen, 1914–16), pp. li, 96, 103, 124.

¹³⁸ Not all the evidence for the knowledge of such works comes from the twelfth or early thirteenth centuries, of course, but interest in them is most characteristic of that period, even when the manuscript evidence is later. See T. Frank, 'Classical Scholarship in Medieval Iceland', *American Journal of Philology*, 30 (1909), pp. 139–52.

Whether or not the author was acquainted with medieval Latin writings, his work has a different flavour. It is more down to earth, more concrete and compact, less inclined to abstraction, discursiveness and flights of fancy, though it is not unimaginative. It is more reminiscent of earlier writers like Augustine, Bede, Isidore, or Ælfric, than of the subtler doctors of twelfth-century Paris and Chartres like Alain de Lille, Bernard of Chartres, or even Abelard, though it is not so unlike Peter Comestor. As far as classical writers are concerned, there are closer parallels in Cicero than Plato, and similarities with the thought of Lucretius and Lactantius are particularly noticeable. Even when indulging in philosophical speculation, the prologue has a firm grasp of concrete reality (which almost amounts to naivety at times) in a manner different from the abstract discourse of most theological writing. The lack of interest in allegory and symbolism and greater interest in history and historical synthesis mark thirteenth-century Iceland generally as more in the tradition of Bede and Isidore than of twelfth-century Europe.

Of all the Norse sources that touch on mythology, it is only in the prologue to *SnE* that we find a fully-developed attempt to give a theoretical and philosophical account of the origins and development of heathen Scandinavian religion (*Ynglinga saga* makes no attempt to explain the gods worshipped by the euhemerised Æsir or to expand on their beliefs), albeit even here it is done by means of narrative rather than discursively. But the prologue does define the relationship of heathendom to Christianity and give it a place in history (though it may be a spurious one). For much of the content of the prologue no direct source is known. If it is by Snorri in its present (reconstructed) form it entitles him to be considered one of the most original and analytical mythographers of the Middle Ages. The prologue to *SnE* and the prologue to *Heimskringla* are two of the very few pieces of writing in Old Icelandic that are not translations and where, at the same time, there is evidence of analytical thought—in one case applied to historical source-criticism, in the other to the history of religion.¹³⁹

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¹³⁹ I should like to draw attention to the article by Ursula and Peter Dronke on the subject of Snorri's prologue ('The Prologue of the Prose *Edda*: Explorations of a Latin Background', *Sjöttú ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni 20. júlí 1977* [Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1977], pp. 153–176), which was published since the writing of this article and could not be taken into account.

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ANF</i>	<i>Arkiv för nordisk Filologi</i>
<i>ANO</i>	<i>Aarbøger for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie</i>
<i>ÍF</i>	<i>Íslensk fornrit</i>
<i>MM</i>	<i>Maal og Minne</i>
<i>PL</i>	<i>Migne, Patrologia Latina</i>
<i>SnE</i>	<i>Snorra Edda</i>
<i>SS</i>	<i>Scandinavian Studies</i>
<i>ZfdA</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur</i>