Myth and Religion in the Poetry of a Reluctant Convert

Diana Whaley
University of Newcastle upon Tyne

Introduction

Great exceptions - great expectations. As Wolfgang Lange pointed out, the Icelanders are the great exceptions (*die grosse Ausnahme*) to the rule that the Germanic peoples leave no direct accounts of their conversion to Christianity (1958, 13), and the uniqueness of their evidence gives it particular value. Among Icelandic skalds it is surely Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld who is most dramatically affected by the conversion. In a central scene in *Hallfreðar saga* ch. 6, which according to the saga chronology would be set c. 996, the hero conducts an antiphonal prosimetrum conversation with his new patron, the missionary king Ólafr Tryggvason. The skald’s three *dröttkvætt* stanzas and two half-stanzas voice the difficulty with which he accepts the new religion, and are punctuated by prose comments from the king, who reacts at first with indignation, then with shades of grudging acceptance as the poet distances himself increasingly from the old gods. The verses (which I will refer to as the
Conversion verses) are, with one exception, the only ones attributed to Hallfreðr that are squarely about religion. They are printed as Hallfreðr's lausavísur 6-10 in Skjaldeidning (henceforth Skj), and as vv. 9-13 in the Möðruvallabók ('M') version of Hallfreðar saga, and vv. 7-11 in the Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar ('O') version. The text reads as follows:

9. Fyrr vas hitt,* es harra
Hlíðskjalfar gat'k sjálfan
– skipst es á gumna giptu –
geðskjótan vel blóta.

It was different in former days, when *v.l. Hitt vas fyrr
Hlíðskjalfar gat'sjálfan
– there is change in the fortunes of men –
Lord of Hlíðskjálfr [Ólín] himself.

10. Qlí hefr ætt til hylli
Óðins skipat ljóðum
(algildar man'k) aldar
(iðjur vára niðja);
vald hugnaðsk skaldi;
legg'k à frænver Friggjar
frón, því't Kristi þjónum.

The whole race of men to win
Óðinn’s grace has wrought poems
(I recall the exquisite works of my forebears);
but with sorrow, for well did
Viðr’s [Ólíns] power please the poet,
do I conceive hate for the first husband of
Frigg [Ólín], now I serve Christ.

11. Hœfum*, hœlía reifir,
hrafnblóts goa nafni,
fl’s ól við lof l‡a
lóm, ór heðnum dömi.

I am neutral, patron of heroes, *vv.ll. hœfnum, hœfum
hlafrblóts göða nafin,
of him who repaid men’s praise
with fraud, from heathen times.

12. Mér skyli Freyr ok Freyja
– fjórð lét'k ðœul* Njarðar;
gram við Grímini –
Gram ok Pórr enn namm;
Krist vil'k allrar ástar
– erum leið sonar reiði;
valð á frægzt und foldar
fær– einn ok goð kveðja.

Against me Freyr and Freyja
– last year I abandoned Njóðr’s offspring; *mss adul, af
dul
let fiends ask mercy from Grímnir [Ólín] –
will bear fury, and the mighty Pórr.
From Christ alone will I beg all love
he holds famous power under the
father of earth– and from God.

13. Sá’s með Sygna resi
síðr, at blót eru kviðjuð;
verð'k ok* neyddr frá Njarðar*
niðjum Krist at bídja.

It’s the custom of the Sogn-men’s
sovereign [Óláfr] that sacrifices are banned;
we must renounce many an
anciently held decree of norns.

All mankind casts Ólíns
clan to the ?winds;
and I am forced to leave Njóðr’s *v.l.nu em’k; *v.l. Freyju
kin and pray to Christ.

---

1 The ‘last verse’ of Hallfreðr, discussed below.
2 Skj AI, 168-69, Skj Bl, 158-59, also inSkald 1, 86.
3 Text and translation are based on an edition which I am currently preparing. Textual problems of particular significance for the religious and mythological content of the verses, and for the question of authenticity, are discussed below. References to other skaldic and eddic poetry follow the conventions of LP. Skaldic texts can be found inSkj and Skald and eddic in Edda, ed. Neckel and Kuhn. In order to save space, page references to Skj are only given for brief fragments, not for longer and better-known poems.
A closer glance at one of these verses, v. 12, will serve to introduce the group as a whole. There is a striking balance between the two helmingar, in terms of both layout and content. In each case line 1 and (all or most of) line 4 together constitute a single clause, into which are intercalated two independent clauses, one in each of lines 2 and 3. The first helmingr, meanwhile, refers to two father-and-son pairs, Njǫrðr and Freyr (with Freyja) and Öðinn (Grímnir) and Þór, who are matched by God and Christ in the second. The poet dreads the anger of both types of deity. But the balance is one of opposition, and the parallels are a foil to contrast as the skald abandons the old gods in the first helmingr, and in the second commits himself to the Christian God, the sole source of divine love.4 Ohlmarks calls this renunciation ‘den formelle abjuratio’ (1957, 492).

Collectively, the five verses enact a process of conversion very much like the one attributed to the whole Icelandic people in Ari’s Íslendingabók ch. 7 and elsewhere: confrontation between pagan and Christian factions, reluctance to abandon the old ways, and vilification of the heathen gods, all giving way at last to the realisation that a decisive choice has to be made. The whole world is in flux: Skipt es á gumna giptu ‘there is change in the fortunes of men’, v. 9; and in v. 13 it is hyperbolically ‘all mankind’ who reject Öðinn’s words. What is exceptional about these verses, however, is their intense subjectivity, expressed grammatically through first-person verbs and pronouns, and lexically especially through the ‘reluctance’ words traúðr v. 10, and neydr v. 13. If they are what they seem, they are a powerful and precious record of mythological and religious thinking at the end of the first millennium. If not, they are a triumph of verbal artistry and historical imagination.

The most urgent question, then, is, with what confidence can these verses be accepted as genuine? - defining ‘genuine’ or ‘authentic’ as having been composed by Hallfreðr at the close of the tenth century, though not necessarily in the circumstances described in the saga. Bjarni Einarsson finds them simply ‘too good to be true’ (1981, 218), ‘mjög hæpinn grundvöllur ályktana um trúmalahugmyndir og sálarástand síðaskiptamannsins Hallfreðar’ (1961, 162). This question of authenticity is the principal focus of the following discussion, though the hope is also to demonstrate the interest of these verses, irrespective of their date and authorship. The discussion will cover mythological and religious content, style and metre (briefly), and circumstantial or contextual evidence.

Mythological & Religious Content

---

4 Textual problems in the verse are discussed below.
The pantheistic nature of Nordic heathendom is captured in v. 12a, already discussed, where no less than five gods are named in the space of four lines. All but Óðinn, referred to as Grímnir, are spoken of by their most familiar names: Freyr, Freyja, Njörðr, and Pórr enn rammi, the only one to receive an epithet. V. 13 contains a reference to Njarðar / Freyja níðjum.

All other references to individual deities in these verses are to Óðinn. The god is referred to by three heiti and three kennings. The heiti used are Óðinn (v. 10), Viðrir (v. 10), and Grímnir (v. 12), all of which are compatible with a date at the end of the tenth century. Viðrir appears in mostly skaldic sources, for instance Rdr 16, Hfl 1 and 3, and it is frequent as a determinant in certain types of military kennings. Viðris kvæn ‘Óðinn’s wife’ appears as a kenning for Frigg in Lok 26. Grímnir is less common, but occurs, of course, in Grímnismál (47 and 49). Óðinn is, curiously, the most suspect of these words, in terms of dating. According to Jan de Vries, no skald uses this name between c. 1000-1150, and it is rare before that period (1934, 11). However, instances of the name are abundant in poems of the Edda such as Völuspá and Grímnismál, including Óðins hylli Grí 51, cf. v. 10 above.

Óðinn is also referred to by the kennings harri Hliðskjalfar (v. 9), frumver Friggjar (v. 10), and hrafnblótos goði (v. 11), all of which are puzzling in some way. The antiquity of frumver Friggjar is supported by early references to Óðinn as the husband of Frigg, such as Friggjar faðmyggvir, lit. ‘dweller in Frigg’s embrace’ in Harkv 12, c. 900. The precise mythological thinking behind the phrase is, however, somewhat elusive. Whether frum here implies ‘chief’ or chronologically first, the phrase is suggestive that Frigg has more than one partner. Although Frigg, as wife of the philandering Óðinn, had several rivals, she has no known husband other than Óðinn, though she is accused in Lok 26 of being a nymphomaniac (e.g. vergjorn) who took Vé(i) and Vili into her embrace (cf. Ynglinga saga ch. 3, ÍF 26, 12). If the phrase is to be taken strictly, therefore, it seems to encapsulate a rather esoteric mythological reference, which is perhaps more likely to date from the conversion period than later; and if the promiscuity of the goddess is the point, it is paralleled by Hjalti Skeggjason’s abusive couplet against Freyja (Íslendingabók ch. 7, ÍF 1, 15).

There is nothing like hrafnblótos goði ‘priest of the raven-sacrifice’ (v. 11) among known skaldic kennings, despite the wealth of expressions for ‘Óðinn’ in Skáldskaparmál ch. 10 (Snorra Edda pp. 88-92). The raven as an attribute of Óðinn is, of course, frequently mentioned in the older poetry (e.g. hrafnnáss, Haustl 4 and Refr 2.2) as is his association with sacrifice, but reference to raven sacrifice as such is, to my knowledge, unique, and to use the word goði

---

5 Kuhn regarded Viðrir and Grímnir as typical of poetry from the oldest period (1942, 137).
6 Snorri in Skáldskaparmál ch. 9 cites from five poets to prove that Jörð is known as Óðinn’s wife (Snorra Edda pp. 89-90), while Frigg can, among other things, be called co-wife (elja) of Jóðr, Rindr, Gunnlað or Gérfr (ch. 28, Snorra Edda p. 110).
7 References to Óðinn, ravens and sacrifice seem to co-exist in v. 9 of Úlfr Uggason’s
'priest', which in any case is rare in the poetry, to denote a god seems somewhat eccentric. This is a small item, but a tantalising one. Do these phrases betray a pseudo-Hallfreðr at work, and if so is he careless with mythological detail, or is he, artfully and succinctly, euhemerising the Æsir as priests rather than gods, just as he emphasised their promiscuity in frumver Friggjar? Or on the other hand, is this the real Hallfreðr at work, making subtle reference to matters that are no longer fully understood?

The Óðinn kenning (göðskjótan) harri Hliðskjalfar ‘(mind-swift) Lord of Hliðskjölf [Óðinn’s high seat]’ in v. 9 is one of Bjarni’s Einarsson’s main specific targets for suspicion (1961, 192, 1981, 218-19). The word harri seems to be an adoption from OE h(e)arra ‘lord’ (Hofmann 1955, 23-24). Its most common usage in OE poetry is in kennings for God as lord of heaven, and it is used that way in Icelandic poetry from the twelfth century onwards, including Geisli 19, which also contains the phrase Fyrr vas hitt (cf. v. 9/1 of the Conversion verses). Bjarni Einarsson thinks that that makes it an unlikely word in a tenth-century kenning for Óðinn, but what he does not mention is that Anglo-Saxon poets, and skalds such as Egill, Sigvatr and Arnórr, use it to refer to secular rulers. Surely it has become part of a lexical set referring to lordship which, like gramr or dróttinn, can be readily applied to pagan gods, human sovereigns or, after the Conversion, to Christian gods. An elusive poet called Póralfr or Porvaldr, for instance, in an undatable verse preserved only in Snorra Edda, uses the phrase gramr Hliðskjalfar presumably for Óðinn (Skj AI, 418, Skj BI, 385). I do not think, therefore, that we need assume a twelfth-century Christian model for harri Hliðskjalfar.

A group of intriguing phrases in these verses appear to refer to the old religion as a whole, and to encapsulate attitudes to it, though the exact intention, in terms of both denotation and connotation, is in some cases quite obscure. (Ór) heiðnum dómi in v. 11 is the most straightforward of these - so downright that one might wonder whether a neophyte would really refer to the faith he is discarding as ‘heathendom’,9 and the occurrence of the phrase in the Gulapingslag (see Fritzner, I, 753a) in reference to baptism might sow seeds of doubt, especially when there is another possible legal echo: blót eru kvíðuð in v. 13, cf. blót er oss kvíðjað in Gulapingslag (pointed out by Bjarni Einarsson, 1961, 193). However, the fact that Sigvatr only two or three decades after Hallfreðr speaks of baptism as a rescue òr heiðnum dómi provides some measure of reassurance, and the phrase heiðin god is used c. 961 in the impeccably heathen Hák 21.

---

8 On kingship terms in early skaldic expressions for God see, e.g., Paasche 1914, 54 and 68.
9 Cf. kristindómr, a loan from OE cristendom, which appears, as kristin tumr, on the early eleventh century runestone at Kuli, Norway (Abrams 1998, 111, citing Hagland). To examine the Conversion verses in the light of runic evidence would be rewarding, but space unfortunately does not permit here.
Verse 12, as already seen, refers to abandoning the ‘something of Njörðr’, which seems likely to stand for rejection of the pagan religion in general. Even if this is a secure assumption, what is the ‘something’? The reading in all mss — representing several branches of transmission — is *adul*, except that AM 61 fol. has the tempting reading *af dal* (*Njardar*). ‘From the deceit (of Njörðr)’ would be a perfect phrase for a proselyte struggling manfully to shun the old gods. But perhaps this is precisely an illustration of the ‘too good to be true’ quality of these verses, and the 61 scribe might well have taken the opportunity to improve on the original from the Christian point of view. Given the weight of the ms. evidence, I think we have to make the best of the *adul* reading, but what does this mean? Normalisation to *ðul*, pl. of *ðal*, normally ‘nature, something inborn’ is preferred by Finnur Jónsson in *Skj* B and by Kock in *Skald*. This course, however, runs into semantic difficulties. The Cleasby-Vigfusson entry suggests ‘offspring’, a plausible meaning though one I am not able to parallel, and especially suitable as a reference to Njörðr as progenitor of Freyr and Freyja (cf. *Njarðar niðjum* in v. 13). The translation in *Skj* B has *Njords templer*, while the gloss in LP, s. v. *ðal*, is ‘hjem, odel’, as though the word was actually *óðal* ‘patrimony’. Even accepting this semantic sleight of hand, one would perhaps expect the sea-god Njörðr’s realm to be the sea, although to assume a looser ‘Njörðr’s realm’, referring metonymically to the old religion, is an attractive possibility. To read *adul* as actually being the word *óðal* is another route to the same conclusion, but it too involves sleight of hand, now in the form of normalisation which amounts to emendation, and this seems perverse when there are two viable readings already. The sad result of all of this is that it is not clear what this intriguing phrase actually means. I find the Cleasby-Vigfusson solution ‘offspring’ marginally preferable.

In v. 13 mankind is said to reject *Óðins ett*. If this refers to the Æsir, it makes an admirable counterpart to *Njarðar / Freyu niðjum* in the same stanza, as well as to the putative *ðul Njardar* in v. 12, if that phrase refers to the Vanir. But *Óðins ett* is far from straightforward. The mss are not unanimous, but read: *ett* 61, 53, 62, 557, Bb, 22, 325IX1b, *blöt* Fl and *ord* M. Both *ett* and *ord* make good sense: the poet abandons Óðinn’s kindred, or his words, but both of them produce superfluous (vocalic) alliteration. The Fl reading *blót* ‘sacrifice’ is metrically preferable, semantically straightforward, and is adopted in ÍF 8, 159, but it is exclusive to Fl and may well be influenced by *blöt* in l. 2. Even the often conservative Kock felt obliged to emend to *sett* (*Skald* I, 86).

*Verðum flest at forðask / fornhaldin skop norna* ‘we must renounce many an anciently-held decree of norns’ in v. 13 is textually unproblematic, but semantically somewhat enigmatic. The couplet itself, and the previous one about a ban on sacrifices, encourage the idea that the phrase *skop norna* refers not merely to fate (as seemingly in *Kml* 24 and *Fáfn* 44), but also to the ancient religion of the Æsir. This would be supported by the fact that the norns seem to represent the old religion in a helmingr from an unidentified poem attributed to
Eilífr Goðrúnarson:

Setbergs kveðja sitja
sunnar at Urðar brunní,
svá hefr ramr konungr remðan
Róms banda sik ljóðum.

“They say that he sits in the south by the spring of [the norn] Urð; thus has the strong
King of Rome [God] strengthened himself with the lands of the gods’ (Skj AI, 152, Skj
BI, 144).

Whatever its exact import, skop norna is clearly something to be left behind by
the neophyte, and it probably contributes to the negative picture of things
heathen. Elsewhere the norns’ duty of allotting fates shades off into a valkyrie-
like role (e.g. Snorra Edda p. 40). They are cruel (norn erum grimm, in the
Kveldúlfr verse on the death of Þóroldr, Skj AI, 29, BI, 26), and ugly (Sigsk 7),
which perhaps explains why ‘norn’ , unlike valkyrie names, rarely functions as
the base word to kennings for ‘woman’ (Meissner 1921, 409). Nevertheless, the
adjective fornhaldir and the note of compulsion in verðum suggest that
renunciation of skop norna is attended by painful nostalgia.

As well as mythological names and phrases, the verses contain somewhat
more extended religious ideas. Divine power was a vital issue in the missionary
period. Steinunn crows over Þórr’s superiority to Christ when the missionary
Þangbrandr’s ship is wrecked (Skj AI, 135-36, BI, 127-28), while on the
Christian side Skapti Þóродsson praises the might of Christ (mátr es munka
dróttins / mestr ) and his role as powerful (ríkr ) creator of the whole world (Skj
AI, 314, BI, 291). Eilífr Goðrúnarson, composer of a mighty Þórsdrápa, also
commemorated the victory of Christianity in the lines cited above, presenting it
directly as a territorial takeover, and highlighting strength by means of word-
play in ramr - remðan . The emphasis on power or rule in the Conversion
verses is fully in accord with this. The vald attributed to Christ and God in v.
12 is a clear counterpart to the statement in v. 10 that the poet is content with
Óðinn’s vald. Divine power also inspires fear. As we saw, the skald in v. 12
fearfully anticipates the wrath of the pagan gods while flinching equally from
the anger of the ‘son’ (erum leið sonar reiði ).

Sacrifice is presented as the main ritual manifestation of Ásatrú, as the
skald recalls sacrificing to Óðinn (gal’k ... vel blóta, v. 9, cf. Óðinn as
hrafnblóts godi in v. 11 ).10 Again, these statements are counterbalanced, or in
fact cancelled, by the Christian response. It is the custom of the Sogn-men’s
sovereign that sacrifices are banned (Sá’s med Sygna resi / síðr, at blótt eru
kvíðjóð, v. 13). Poetry is also seen as a form of devotion to the god (Oll hefr ett
til hylli / Óðins skipat ljóðum ... aldar ‘the whole race of men has wrought
poems to win Óðinn’s grace’, v. 10), and part of the ancient and honourable

10 Ohlmarks sees vel blóta as a reference specifically to poetry, and hrafnblót as a kenning for
‘battle’, the offering of corpses to ravens; its ‘priest’ is hence Óðinn, god of battle (1957, 490-91).
roots of the old religion (algildar man'k ... iôjur várra niôja ‘I recall the exquisite works of my forbears’, also v. 10). But Oôinn is said to have repaid men’s praise by nourishing fraud in v. 11 (¡ess’s ól viô lod liôda i lôm ); and this is picked up in the reference to dul Njarôar ‘the deceit of Njôrôr’ in the AM 61 version of v. 12. If there is a pseudo-Halfreôr at work, using the famous skald’s conversion as a platform for Christian didacticism, we might glimpse him here. Talk of deceit is the nearest these verses ever get to renouncing belief in the old gods, or perhaps, since treachery is an attribute of Satan, we could see it as a touch of demonisation. If so it might be akin to lûknisk grôm viô Grîmni ‘let the grôm ask mercy from Grîmnr [Oôinn]’ (v. 12). Grôm, or gramir, seems elsewhere to refer to unspecified demons, as in the phrases hafí þik gramir (Hárôb 60) or gramir hafí Gunnar (Brot 11), so presumably the sense is ‘demons may go on serving Oôinn, but I cannot’.

The two religions cannot ultimately be reconciled. The end of v. 10 makes it clear that one cannot serve Christ and Oôinn; and the end of v. 13 shows that worship of Christ entails rejecting Njôrôr’s / Freyja’s kin and the skôp norna.

The Christian content of these verses, already glimpsed above, is altogether more transparent, and there is no Christian doctrine of the kind that might be implausible in a composition by a recent convert: no sin or redemption, Crucifixion or Judgement.11 The awesome power of God and Christ are coupled with their love in v. 12. Only two persons of the Trinity are mentioned, not the eining sønn í þrennum greinum of Lilja 1, and this accords with the absence of the Holy Spirit from other skaldic poetry from the early Christian period. The seeming reference to the son holding power under the father of Earth (vald á frægt und foldar feôr)12 prompted an anxious exploration of possible Arianism by Hjelmqvist in 1908, from which he was only able to exonerate Halfreôr by means of deft but rather implausible emendations; but other commentators have been untroubled by this. Hjelmqvist was also among those who noted that the idea of an angry god (sonar reîði) is paralleled in Psalm 2:11-12, and Bjarni Einarsson adds that vv. 7-8 of the same Psalm refer to the father-son relationship (1961: 191-92). This, Bjarni believes, is a sophisticated notion more plausible in a learned Christian saga-author than a neophyte. However, I am not convinced that the motifs of an angry God and of Christ holding power under God require a specific source, or are so sophisticated as to be unlikely in a missionary environment.13

Overall, then, the old religion of the north receives more, and more

11 Unless Sigurôur Skûlason is correct in interpreting rôda in the phrase láta fyr(îr) rôda (v. 13/6) as the first record of the word rôði ‘cross, crucifix’, which he argues was grammatically either masculine or feminine, though the feminine rôda prevailed (1931-32).
12 There is some doubt as to whether foldar is to be construed with feôr, hence ‘Father of earth’ or with vald, hence ‘power over the earth’.
13 I would therefore agree with Lange (1958, 36 n.1) that Hjelmqvist’s 1908 discussion of v. 9 exaggerates Halfreôr’s Christian learning.
complex, coverage in these verses than Christianity, and it is viewed with a blend of nostalgia with denunciation and renunciation. The stance remains essentially polytheistic, in the sense that there is no outright statement of disbelief in the Æsir and Vanir, though there is a recognition that the perfidy of the old order must give way to the power and love of the new, and there may be hints of demonisation. If the verses are not genuine, they are a skilful and sensitive reconstruction of conversion mentality.

**Style & Metre**

Stylistic tests for authenticity are notoriously unreliable. Skaldic style and diction are conservative, and a skilful pastiche could in theory replicate the style of Hallfreðr or any other poet. There are Hallfreðr hallmarks, but none is both consistent enough within Hallfreðr’s œuvre and rare enough outside it to tip the balance in arguments about authenticity. For example, unity and symmetry between two helmingar in a stanza, achieved by harmony of ideas, imagery, diction, or clause arrangement, or by syntactic links between helmingar, is distinctive of Hallfreðr, but it is far from unique to him, so this feature in the Conversion verses can only be used as supporting evidence. Further, where there are dissimilarities, they may be determined by difference of genre or topic as much as by difference of author or period. Some devices which appear in Hallfreðr’s court poetry, such as the use of verbal extensions to kennings e.g. hlyspimeiddr hlunnviggja in Óláfsdrápa 5, or of echoic effects e.g. sverði/sverðleikr in Óláfsdrápa 8 and nóðr/nóðr in Efrídrápa 26, cf. also Lv. 1, 11 and 14, are rare or non-occurring in the Conversion verses, but this is unlikely to be significant. One feature which is striking, however, is the similarity of emotional tenor between the Conversion verses and Hallfreðr’s Efrídrápa (memorial poem) for Óláfr Tryggvason - a poem whose authenticity has never been questioned - where the skald not only laments a loss but portrays himself in an agonising dilemma, torn between belief and disbelief at the rumours that his liege lord escaped the battle of Svǫlðr. He even complains about deceit on both occasions.

Metre is much more readily quantifiable than style, but again is difficult to use as a criterion for dating. Kari Gade, in a forthcoming article, adduces metrical evidence which encourages faith in a tenth-century dating for at least some of the verse in Kormáks saga and Hallfreðr saga. Unfortunately, though, the Conversion verses themselves show scarcely any of the archaic features, such as disyllabic hiatus constructions in words such as áar or fiendr, archaic name forms, or use of the expletive of, which might confirm a late tenth-century date; nor do they show any of the specific metrical types which would betray a later pastiche.

**Cicumstantial & Contextual Evidence**
In the attempt to understand these verses and form an opinion about their authenticity, I turn now to wider circumstantial and contextual evidence, especially that relating to the life and œuvre of Hallfreðr, and the manuscript preservation of the verses, with which I begin.

It is interesting how often mythological names have been mangled in transmission, for not only the phrases harra Hliðskjalfar and frumver Friggjar, but also Njarðar (twice) and Grímni are affected. 14 I am not certain what this tells us, other than that mythological and skaldic expertise were at low ebb among the mainly fourteenth-century scribes, and possibly that we should think in terms of a longer rather than shorter period of transmission for these verses. This seems reasonable in the light of their overall state of preservation. It is striking that two are isolated helmingar, and there are several textual cruces. If the verses were late fabrications one could expect them to be better preserved.

The manuscript transmission is vital in other ways, too. To read these 32 lines in Skj, printed in the ‘Hallfreðr’ section alongside his court poetry, encourages faith in their authenticity by implying a belief that the verses originated with the poet and pre-dated Hallfreðar saga by two centuries. The saga context, on the other hand, introduces the possibility that they are as much of an imaginative reconstruction as the prose. It is indeed disconcerting, if one is predisposed to accept the authenticity of the Conversion verses, to note that they are only preserved in Hallfreðar saga, not, for instance, in the Olaf sagas of Oddr Snorrason or Gunnlaugr Leifsson, or in Heimskringla, and not either in Snorra Edda. However, it is arguably only the ‘Óðinn’ kennings that could have earned the verses a place in Snorra Edda, and as we have seen, the particular kennings deployed are rather eccentric.

Bjarni Einarsson’s view of the skald sagas, as is well known, is that they are mainly fictional, drawing their love triangle plots ultimately from the Tristan story (1961, passim). He accordingly sees the occasional verses, lausavísur , in them as also likely to be later fabrications. But a number of studies, most recently Finlay 1995 and forthcoming articles from Finlay and Andersson, have undermined the claims of Romance influence and to some degree restored faith in the native origins of Hallfreðar saga. This does not necessarily imply historicity in the prose narrative or authenticity in the verses, but it does leave these questions more open. Moreover, the imperfect ‘fit’ between the Conversion verses and the surrounding prose (as when the king claims that v.

---

14 In 9/2 (normalised) harra Hliðskjalfar is the reading only of M and 61, with the variants: harra herra 62, herra Bb, 22; -skialfar -skialfan 53, 557, Bb, 22, 325IX1b, Fl, -skialfra 62. In 10/7a frumver Friggjar is the reading of 61 and Fl, with the variants: frumver frumver 53, 22, 325IX1b, Bb, að bæn við Friggjar friggjar friggjar friggjar 557. In 12/2, Njarðar is the reading of M, 61, 62, and Fl, with the variants: mærdar 53, 557, 22, 325IX1b, mærdar Bb. In 12/3 Grímni in M, 61, 62 and Fl has the variants: grimmri 53, grimm 557, grimm Bb, grimm 22, grimm 325IX1b – despite the mention of Freyr, Freyja and Pórr in the same helmingr. Finally, in 13/7 the majority reading Njarðar has the variants: hiardar 53, Bb, Freyi M.
11 is no improvement on v. 10) suggests that the verses were inherited by the prose author and not composed by him, though it does not rule out the possibility of a date in between Hallfreðr’s lifetime and the compilation of the saga.\(^{15}\)

The Conversion verses constitute five out of thirty-three verses in *Hallfreðar saga* (‘M’ version). If we could be certain that the others either were or were not authentic, this would at least be an indicator. But, as usual, certainty eludes us, and opinions have been divided, although in general scepticism has increased through time. The faith of Einar Ólafur Sveinsson (ÍF 8, 1931, lix-lx) contrasts with the atheism, as it were, of Bjarni Einarsson 1961, and although the metrical evidence adduced by Gade allows for a tenth-century dating, it does not prove it. The other verse in the saga which wrestles with religion, Hallfreðr’s ‘last verse’, in which he speaks of his dread of Hell, is particularly problematic, but there is undoubtedly a possibility that it was composed late for inclusion in the ‘O’ redaction of the saga. Otherwise its absence from the ‘M’ redaction would be an inexplicable piece of carelessness. Moreover, we know that false attribution can even afflict formal encomium, since one of the *Óláfs drápur Tryggvasonar* has been recognised as a twelfth century product for a very long time, despite its attribution to Hallfreðr in Bergsbók (Skj AI, 573).

The preservation of *Hallfreðar saga* partially within *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta*, and its general kinship with the *konunga sögur*, in which we would have much higher expectations concerning verse authenticity, might inspire some faith in the verses, especially when, as is the case with the Conversion verses, they occur within the most Olaf-dominated part of the saga. On the other hand, the verses are presented as part of the action (Pá kvæð Hallfreðr vísu...) rather than in the manner of footnotes to authenticate the narrative (Petta sannar Hallfreðr...). They are ‘situational’ rather than ‘authenticating’ (using the terminology of Whaley 1993), and poems cited in this manner are generally regarded as carrying less historical weight.

Overall, then, the context of the Conversion verses’ preservation in *Hallfreðar saga* yields mixed messages about the likelihood of authenticity. I would estimate the factors pro and con to be of roughly equal weight.

As to the general likelihood that Hallfreðr would have composed verses about the Conversion, I would see this as strong. No one could deny that Hallfreðr was ‘a real historical person, and a great poet’ or that Hallfreðr’s conversion is a ‘historical fact’ (Bjarni Einarsson 1981, 217 and 218). His devotion to the missionary king Óláfr Tryggvason is, for instance, attested from the twelfth century, when Hallar-Steinn says that Hallfreðr, hróðar gjarn composed a drápa for the king (Rst 34, Skj AI, 552, BI, 534; cf.Íslr 12).

---

\(^{15}\) It appears highly likely that the verses were originally a sequence, even a unitary poem. Ohlmarks calls them *Goðavísur* (1957, 490); Sophie Krijn wondered whether they might be fragments of the lost *Uppreisardrápa* (1931, 126).
Óláfr is commemorated not only as Hallfreðr’s patron but specifically as his godfather in Hallfreðr’s Erfigrápa for Óláfr, v. 26:

Hlautk þánn œztr vas einna
– ek sanna þat – manna
und niðyrði Norðra
norðr goððœður ordinn.

‘I gained a godfather who was the greatest of all men in the north under the burden of Norðr’s kin [dwarfs -> sky]. I vouch for that’ (cf. v. 28).

The first preserved narratives of Hallfreðr’s conversion appear in Oddr Snorrason’s saga of Oláfr Tryggvason at the end of the twelfth century, and his biography is developed into a saga, with influences from all kinds of narratives including legends of Sigvatr, while his persona is clearly drawn in conformity with the emergent stereotype of the wilful and lovelorn skald. The theme of reluctant conversion is a leitmotiv throughout the saga. An accusation of continued paganism leads to bloodshed for which Hallfreðr has to atone by reluctantly maiming the recalcitrant heathen þorleifr; he travels the perilous (óhreinn) route to pagan Gautland, where his religious observance amounts to blowing in the shape of a cross over his drink but not praying much; he marries a pagan woman who is then baptised; he makes further reparation by composing a presumably religious poem, Uppreistardrápa; he is twice restrained from taking blood revenge by a posthumous visitation from Óláfr Tryggvason. Finally, on his death at sea, his body is washed up on the Holy Island of Iona, where it is buried and the treasures given him by King Óláfr are made into sacred objects. From the point when he meets Óláfr, then, Hallfreðr’s whole turbulent career is punctuated, even dominated, by the influence of his sovereign and the new religion. But again the evidence is ambivalent, for it is not clear whether the verses about Hallfreðr’s conversion belong to the historical kernel which inspired this rich development, or whether they are part of the later process of elaboration.

As a functionary skald whose career straddled the turn of the millennium, Hallfreð composed for both pagan and Christian patrons. Nine helmingar ascribed to him in Snorra Edda are among the most pagan verses we have, presenting a jarl in a sacred marriage to Jǫrð – goddess and land. Despite problems with the traditional editorial ascription to a Hákonardrápa (e.g. Fidjestøl 1982, 102-3), Hákon - whose paganism was an integral part of his political identity, and whose propaganda machine was fed by sophisticated

---

16 Experiences in common between the two poets include these: A Christian king Óláfr (Tryggvason or Haraldsson) initially refuses to hear the skald’s poem; at royal command Sigvatr uses material from Uppreistarsaga, the story of Creation, in a poem while Hallfreð composes an Uppreistardrápa; both go on missions to Gautland; their royal patrons make posthumous appearances to them at the time of their deaths (see Bjarni Þinarrsson 1961, 207, 232 and references there).
pagan poems such as *Vellekla* – is the likeliest dedicatee. The remainder of Hallfreðr’s court poetry is almost all for Óláfr Tryggvason, belonging either to the *Óláfsdrápa*, a catalogue of campaigns, or to the *Erfi-drápa*, which centres on the tragic defeat at Svöðür. According to *Hallfreðar saga*, the king only gave Hallfreðr’s poetry a hearing with reluctance, presumably because he favoured too pagan a brew of Óðinn’s mead, while Hallfreðr clearly feels a tension between his poetry and his change of religion (opening of ch. 6).

As it turns out, composing for a Christian ruler does not present a major technical problem to the neophyte skald. Kennings containing pagan allusions are not altogether abandoned. The god-name Týr, for instance, forms the base word of warrior-kennings in *Óláfsdrápa* 9 and *Erfi-drápa* 17, and wolves appear as the steeds of troll-wives in *Óláfsdrápa* 6. However, there is a slight decrease in such expressions, which forms part of - and helps to initiate - a wider trend which has been noted by several scholars (e.g. de Vries 1934, Fidjestøl 1993). My own view would be that expressions of this sort were already stereotyped and religiously void in much pre-Conversion poetry, and they certainly are here. In *Erfi-drápa* 15, for example, slétan sylg Surt’s ættar ‘smooth drink of giants [poetry]’ is immediately followed by the name of the missionary king Óláfr himself; and the reference to the sky as the ‘burden of Norðri’s kin’ is juxtaposed with the word goðfuðr in v. 26 (above). It is inconceivable that the mythical allusion is a piece of defiance at this point, so it must mean that the idea of dwarfs holding up the sky was a mere poetic whimsy, not an article of faith to Hallfreðr.

Meanwhile, a moderate amount of Christian content is injected into the ancient form of the *drápa*. Hallfreðr does not praise Óláfr for the conversion of the northern lands, or for pagan-crushing crusades, but casts him twice as the bane of heathen sanctuaries, once in the kenning horgbrjótr in *Óláfsdrápa* 3, and once in the adjective végrimr, which is juxtaposed with Óláfr’s enemies, the notoriously pagan Wends (Vindr), in the alliterative scheme of v. 4a. In the *Erfi-drápa* Óláfr is commemorated as Hallfreðr’s godfather (cited above), and there is a prayer for his soul in v. 29, which seems to launch a tradition continued by Sigvatr and others. In the same verse the exciting eschatological references to the sky splitting are a superb example of continuity between pagan Ragnarök and Christian Doomsday, looking back to Eyvindr Skáldaspillir’s *Háek* 20 as well as looking forward to, and influencing, Arnórjarlaskáld in *Þórfinsdrápa* 24. By dint of skilful compromise, therefore, Hallfreðr produces resounding praise for rulers of both religious persuasions, rather like the craftsmen whose moulds could cast Thor’s hammers and Christian crosses with equal ease. Nevertheless, the conversion was clearly an anxiety to a poet steeped in the pagan tradition living precisely at that period - a threat both to his

17 Fidjestøl prints the seven examples from court poetry in a useful survey of religious content (1993, 117-18).
long-cherished religion and to his livelihood – and it seems more likely than not that he would have composed stanzas about this major personal and public upheaval. In support of this is other poetry reflecting the power struggle between the old gods of the north and the new ones from the south, for instance the quatrain from Eilífr Guðrúnarson cited above.

Conclusion

The large and important question about the authenticity of the Conversion verses spawns a myriad of other questions about their content and context, and it would unrealistic to pretend that certain answers can be given. The dating of dróttkvætt poetry is formidably difficult, especially given its conservatism, and the interpretation of specific details and of literary links often uncertain. For instance, does the fact that òr heïðnum dòmi occurs in a verse by Sigvatr as well as in one of the Conversion verses encourage faith in the latter, or indicate one of the sources for pseudo-Hallfreðr’s clever pastiche? The debate therefore has to draw evidence both from the verses themselves, and from their context. To me the strongest indicators against authenticity are the possible echoes of Christian law and the preservation of the verses only in Hallfreðar saga. It is easy to envisage the fabrication of verses as part of a general development of the Hallfreðr legend, which is so intimately bound up with that of Óláf Tryggvason that Hallfreðar saga as a whole is as much a narrative of conversion and the tension between the two religions as it is a love story (cf. Mundal 1974, 119). In other cultures one could expect such forgeries to be more unequivocally anti-pagan, but this is not necessarily the case here. The saga appears fascinated by Hallfreðr’s religious angst and rather indulgent towards it, so a verse forger could arguably have shared the same sensibility and have invented the verses in response to traditions about the poet who proved such a slippery catch to the monarch angling for new Christians.

On the other hand, it is beyond dispute that poetry played a major role in the pagan-Christian debate in the years around the millennium, and that the conversion affected the life and output of Hallfreðr more than any other skald known to us. It seems likely that he would compose about it, and if he did, it would be curious if the verses were lost and then replaced by fakes – excellent fakes, which show some general similarities with Hallfreðr’s court poetry, especially the urgently personal tone, the wit, and the integration of helmingar within stanzas. The verses’ poor state of preservation and the mismatch of prose and verse in Hallfreðar saga ch. 6 would argue for composition not later than the twelfth century – certainly not contemporary with the saga at the beginning of the thirteenth.

As to the verses themselves, my provisional view – and I will be grateful to have the opinions of others – is that there is no detail, metrical, stylistic, lexical or conceptual, which obliges us to look for a date outside the conversion period.
I would suggest that some of the more obscure pagan allusions encourage rather than discourage the assumption of authenticity. On the evidence of the trouble that later copyists had with names such as Grímnir and even Njörðr, and of the necessity for a *Snorra Edda*, knowledge of the old mythology declined substantially. The Christian doctrine embedded in the verses is elementary, and the emphasis on divine power is entirely in keeping with what we know about the conversion of the Nordic peoples. So too is the view of conversion as a ‘transfer of loyalty’, ‘a matter of shifting allegiance’ (Karras 1997, 101 and 105). The transfer is between gods, but it is also a consequence of a new earthly allegiance. Hallfreðr’s conversion takes place under duress from the *hólda reifir* apostrophised in v. 11. One can almost agree with Lange that ‘Hallfreds Christentum heisst Olaf’ (1958, 38). Meanwhile, Hallfreðr’s reluctance and ambivalence is the personal correlative of the conversion process in Scandinavia – ‘gradual, piecemeal, muddled and undisciplined’ (Fletcher 1997, 416), and it is in tune with material evidence of pagan-Christian continuity (e.g. Abrams 1998, 120-1).

If twelfth-century fabrications, then, the Conversion verses represent a remarkably – implausibly? – good attempt to get inside the troubled head of a reluctant convert, and they can take their place alongside *Snorra Edda* as one of the most creative glances back over the great religious divide, though their value is diminished by our total ignorance of the time and milieu to which they belong. If genuine, the verses are a precious rarity, given ‘the unfortunate condition of near-sourcelessness’ (Abrams 1998, 109) which dogs the study of the Christianisation of the North, and they modify, though they do not overturn, the view that that process was ‘top-down’, instigated by rulers, everything to do with politics and with external manifestations of cultural identity and nothing to do with religious belief. They give unparalleled access to the intensity of the personal and professional dilemma which conversion posed to this millennium man.

References


Finlay, Alison. Forthcoming. ‘The European Context of the Poets’ Sagas’. In Poole, forthcoming.


Gade, Kari Ellen. Forthcoming. ‘Age and authenticity of the lausavísur in the Skald Sagas’. In Poole, forthcoming.


Hjelmqvist, Theodor. 1908. ‘Var Hallfreðr vandraedaskald arian?’ Arkiv för nordisk filologi 24, 155-79.


