

The Representation of Hakon Sigurdsson and other Heathen Characters in Viking Age Literature

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Hakon Sigurdsson was a unique figure in Icelandic literature during the Viking age. He spear-headed a new type of state-paganism intended to validate his authority and appease the Norwegian population. As the last heathen leader before Olaf Tryggvason assumed power in Norway, he features heavily in saga literature and many examples of heathen ritual and custom are associated with him. In this essay I will attempt to understand the motives behind the portrayals of Hakon jarl and other heathen characters in several sagas and to decipher the symbolic meaning of some literary depictions of heathen ritual.

The rituals involving gods in sagas are complex and difficult to decipher, due in part to the fact that they are filtered through the mind-set of Christian Icelanders, centuries after paganism had been replaced and also because the sources containing information about paganism, to which they may be compared, such as the *Prose Edda*, are equally as problematic for the same reasons. I will briefly examine theories that attribute symbolic significance to Hakon Jarl, drawing parallels with the Gods Freyr and Oðinn. I will also compare the representation of Hakon Jarl and other heathen heroes in *Færeyinga Saga*, *Heimskringla*, *Egil's Saga* and *Njáls Saga* and examine the representation of pre-Christian rituals and themes depicted in these sagas.

Hakon lived from 975-995, his life and death are depicted by Snorri Sturluson in *Heimskringla*. After the death of Harald Grafeld, Earl Hakon was given power over men in Norway by King Harald Gormsonof Denmark. He proceeded to consolidate his power across Norway with campaigns of violence and revival of pagan worship:

Jarl Hakon, when he travelled from the South along the coast in the summer and the people of the country submitted to him, then he ordered over his whole realm that people should maintain temples and rituals, and this was done. Thus it says in *Vellekla*:

*At once, wise, he enabled
honour of all Einriði's
famed temple grounds, ravaged,
and the gods' sacred places,
before over all the ocean
and on the giants' road, the Hlorriði
of the spears' yard — gods guide him—
goes with the wolf of slaughter.
And, useful to men, the Æsir's
offspring return to rituals; the mighty master of Hlökk's
meeting's red board wins glory.
Now the earth is growing again; the wealth-destroyer
lets happy spear-bridge envoys
inhabit the gods' temples.
Now all land from Vik northwards
acknowledges the jarl's rule;
widely the bringer of battle-
board storm, Hakon, grows mighty.*

The first winter that Hakon ruled over the country, herring came in over the country, and the previous autumn corn had grown wherever it had been sown. And in the spring people got seedcorn, so that most farmers could sow their land, and there was soon prospect of a good harvest.[1]

This excerpt from *Heimskringla* includes a part of the *Vellekla*, a *drápa* by the Icelandic skald, Einarr Helgason Skálaglamm. He depicts the Earl as a glorious leader, whose power is divinely appointed through the approval of the Gods. The fact that Hakon was victorious as he subjugated Norwegians along the coast and that under his rule there was a good harvest and plenty of fish, indicated that the gods approved of his authority. Hakon's activities regarding renewal of pagan worship seem, ironically, to be intensified after he is baptised. King Harald of Denmark is baptised by Bishop Poppo and he then orders Earl Hakon to receive baptism too and then return to Norway and baptise the heathens there. Hakon is quick to abandon this new faith and makes a sacrifice to Oðinn before he even arrives back in Norway:

And when he came east off Gautasker, then he sailed to land. Then he performed a great pagan sacrifice. Then two ravens came flying there, screeching loudly. Then the jarl felt sure that Oðinn had accepted the sacrifice and now it would be a propitious time for the jarl to fight. Then the jarl burned all his ships and went up inland with his troops and ravaged everywhere. [2]

Hakon then proceeds to restore temples across the country, encouraging blood sacrifice which his skalds say is the cause of Norway's fertility at this time. Another excerpt from *Vellekla* explicitly connects Hakon's fortunes in battle with his observance of heathen ritual.

*The god of Froði's storm stacked
slaughter on the battlefield;
the gods' kinsman could glory
in gain; the slain went to Oðinn.
Who doubts the disrupter of royal
race by gods is guided?
I say the splendid deities
strengthen Hakon's power.*[3]

This part of the poem shows the fertility of the earth in connection with the gallantry of Hakon as a warrior leader, clearly implying that he is deserving of the gods' favour. Hakon's heathenism is reactionary. It was a response to the Christian incursions being made into Norway through the influence of King Harald and was a means of differentiating himself from the sons of Harald and of Eirik, whose religious policy was typified by suppression of heathen ritual.[4] His baptism was an acknowledgment of Harald's over-lordship but Hakon's apostasy was an assertion of his political independence from Denmark.[5]

Hakon is depicted by Snorri in favourable terms considering his un-apologetic apostasy but it is possible that Snorri interpreted Hakon's heathen revival in terms of political and cultural independence rather than aggression toward Christianity. Resistance toward European monarchy and assertion of cultural independence are themes that recur in Icelandic literature in the thirteenth century, most likely a reflection of attitudes regarding the Icelandic commonwealth. Snorri may have overlooked Hakon's heathenism on the grounds that he did not actively persecute Christians; the sources indicate his politics were pro-pagan rather than anti-Christian; this is supported by his acceptance of baptism. Paganism served a functional role in Hakon's politics of independence and resistance; his revival of temples cannot necessarily be interpreted as rejection of Christianity entirely as to many heathens the two religions were not mutually exclusive.[6]

It is his sexual activity that allegedly leads to Hakon's undoing, but Snorri describes him as being in possession of many of the qualities of a good leader before supporting his assessment with a section of complimentary verse from *Hákonardrápa* by the skald Thorleif Raudfeldson:

*We know no greater jarl
beneath the moon's pathway,
Hakon, than you; bush of army-goddess ,
you prospered through battle.
You have ushered to Oðinn —
the offered corpses ravens feed on—
nine royal men; this, ruler,
rendered your lands extensive.*[7]

This verse is in *Heimskringla* and is followed by Snorri's assertion that though a generous and good leader, he was doomed to fail, "then the time had come for heathen worship and heathen worshippers to be condemned, and be replaced by the holy Faith and proper morals."⁷

Though hated at the time of his death, Snorri acknowledges the Earl's qualities as a leader, defending him despite believing his failure was inevitable. To Snorri, Christianity was destined to replace paganism. Hakon is exalted in the poetry through his association with the gods, "Hakon's poets constantly promote the earl's image by making direct links between him and the pagan gods and their worship." [8] As well as making sacrifices to Odin, a typical god for a war-like leader to worship, Hakon is associated with other deities such as Freyr as shown by Eyvind Skaldaspiller in the *Haleygjatal*:

*There for workers
of woe for Freyr
was in the morning
a meeting*

*far from happy,
when with a fleet
the land-rulers
rushed on the wreckers,
when the sword-elf
from the south drove
an ocean-stud
against their force.*[9]

The Christians are not just described as being the enemies of Hakon, but also, perhaps by association, enemies of the fertility god Freyr. Stanza 7 of *Háleygjatal* refers to Hakon's ancestor, Hákon Grjótgarðsson as 'Freyr's heir' and further connections between Freyr and Hakon can be drawn by parallels between Hakon's lusting after the wives of the farmers and Freyr's forbidden love for the giantess Gerd, depicted in *Skírnismál*.^[10] Adam of Bremen's account of the temple at Uppsala describes a phallic representation of Fricco, most likely Freyr, which encourages the attribution of both sexual and fertility roles to this deity. Abram argues that Hakon is depicted in a similar way in later literary sources such as *Heimskringla*, in which his sexual activity assumes mythic qualities that link it to his success as a prosperous leader.^[11] Steffensen argues that the cult of Freyr was particularly associated with women, while men "superintended more important sacrifices",^[12] in Hakon's case this would mean Oðinn, but the skalds and saga authors did not limit comparison of Hakon to this god alone.

The connection between Hakon and Freyr is less explicit than associations the poets draw between him and other gods. The ever increasing political prominence of Christianity in Southern Scandinavia may have been the catalyst that triggered a new type of creativity among Hakon's poets that led them to use traditional myths as a means to support their patron's authority and his relationship with the gods.^[13] An example of such poetic ingenuity can be found in *Háleygjatal*, where Eyvindr shows Hakon to be the product of the sexual union between Oðinn and the giantess Skaði:

*The descendent of the Æsir [Odin], shield worshipped
Begot the earl with the denizen of Ironwood [a giantess],*^[14]

Hakon's divine associations are deepened by his symbolic marriage to the mythical personification of Earth, the giantess Jörð, as depicted in *Hákonardrápa* in *Skáldskaparmál*. This union is depicted in sexually metaphoric terms, it was normal for land to be personified as female so Hakon's conquering of it is expressed in sexual terms for literary purposes and does not signify a divine relationship with Jörð.^[15] While Hakon's sexual union with the earth is symbolic, his sexual union with the wives of the farmers was very real and is more easily explained in comparison to the problematic lust of Freyr than as a political device for legitimising his authority over the land itself.

Snorri makes clear in *Heimskringla*, his belief that the Earl's declining popularity was a result of this sexual activity:

The jarl was popular with the farmers for the greater part of his life. But as time went on, it increasingly came about that he was unprincipled in his relations with women. This got so bad that the jarl had rich men's daughters taken and brought back to him and he lay with them for one or two weeks afterwards sending them home, and as a result he became very disliked by the women's kinsfolk and the farmers began to complain bitterly, as the *Proendir* are accustomed to do about everything that displeases them.[16]

In *Vellekla*, Einarr makes it clear that Hakon did not just sacrifice to Óðinn, the god most associated with the ruling class of pagan Scandinavia, but also restored temples to Þórr and thus appeased the Þórr worshipping farmers over whom he ruled. This looks like a kind of medieval populism that Hakon employed to rally support for his rule. Richard North describes the similarity between Earl Hakon's campaigns against the Danes and Jomsvikings and Þórr's battles with the giants depicted in the Prose Edda. He asserts that by emulating Freyr in his sexual exploits, Hakon lost his kingdom to his own Þórr worshipping subjects.[17]

The skalds did not just compare people to the gods in order to exalt or flatter them; such comparisons could also work as socially damaging insults. An Icelandic skald composed the following lampoon against King Harald Gormson and his bailiff Birger, between 958-85, as vengeance for his seizing an Icelandic vessel in Denmark:

*When Haraldr, hailed as killer,
in horse-form stood bracing
for the push—the Vinðr's punisher—
into penis-land, like wax he melted;
while wretched Birgir, rightly
run out of the land by spirits,
filled the role of filly
in front, as all could see. [18]*

This seems to be a direct reference to the story in *Gylfaginning* in which Loki changes into a Mare and mates with the stallion, Svaðilfari, resulting in the birth of Óðinn's eight legged horse, Sleipnir. [19] In *Lokasenna*, Loki is reproached by Óðinn who reminds Loki of another occasion when he took the form of a female animal and bore children:

*You spent eight winters under the earth,
As a milking-cow and a matron,*

*And there you bore babies;
That signals to me a cock-craver.* [20]

By comparing the Danish king and his bailiff with Loki, their sexual reputations are damaged. The inversion of sexual roles was known as *ergi*, normally understood as passive homosexuality, a sexual role which was thought to feminise the man who assumed it. This is a particularly damaging accusation for a leader in Viking age Scandinavia, where perceived masculinity was vital for the maintenance of power. The accusation of *ergi* is part of a specific type of defamation known as *nīð*, in which a man's masculinity is brought into question through insinuation of passive homosexuality.[21]



The Saga of the Faroese

In *Heimskringla* Snorri depicts Earl Hakon as a good leader who is doomed due to his heathen faith. Olaf Tryggvason is destined to overcome Hakon, as he is a warrior of Christ. The Earl and Olaf are portrayed in a similar way in *Færeyinga Saga*, in which the heroic Sigmundur Brestisson, though first on good terms with Earl Hakon, is destined to bring Christianity to the Faroe islanders on behalf of Olaf. There is an unusual representation of heathen devotion in which Sigmund and Hakon enter a heathen temple and the Earl entreats a statue to part with a sacred ring:

They go into the house, Hakon, Sigmund and few men with them. There were many gods inside. Many glass windows in the house, not a shadow anywhere. A female figure was in the house over at the far side, splendidly clothed. The Earl threw himself at her feet and lay a long while; then he

stands up and says to Sigmund that they must offer her some offering and lay the silver for it on the form in front of her-and as a sign that she accepts it, I want her to let go of the ring that is on her arm.[22]

The statue does not let go of the ring until after the Earl has thrown himself down a second time and wept as well. The image of a powerful leader kneeling down before the image of a god and weeping in an act of uncharacteristic heathen humility which seems more like Christian devotion. This may well be the Christian author's embellishment, intending to portray Hakon in a way that would evoke more sympathy from thirteenth century Icelanders. In this case it is difficult to clarify whether Hakon's worship is depicted as authentically heathen or is influenced by Christian habits of worship. Heathen devotion is normally typified by blood sacrifice which Hakon does perform, even going so far as to sacrifice his own son in *Heimskringla* in order to win victory against the Vikings of Jomsborg.[23] But in the scene in the temple, sacrifice is conspicuous by its absence. The author of *Færeyinga Saga* appears to be assigning Christian qualities to the Earl; Margaret Clunies Ross describes how the continuity of pre-Christian belief in Old Icelandic writing is depicted as though the heathens had an instinctive awareness of Christian practices, even before they had converted.[24] Such a belief could persevere among Icelandic Christian authors, eager to exaggerate the virtues of their heathen ancestors.

Despite the Christian overtones when Hakon obtains the ring, its symbolic function in the saga is exclusively pagan and it is for this reason that Olaf tries to get Sigmund to give it up, apparently for his own safety as Olaf says he, "wanted to keep his friends from trouble".[25] Hakon is not shown to be bad because of his paganism and Sigmund tells Olaf that he had considered the Earl a friend but ultimately Sigmund's loyalties shift toward Christianity and Olaf; to whom his reasons are expressed directly:

But since I can perceive by the fairness of your entreaty that this belief which you proffer is in all respects brighter and more blessed than that which heathen men hold, then I am eager to follow your counsels and win your friendship; but I did not sacrifice to carved gods because long ago I saw that that religion was worthless, though I did not know a better.[26]

Though Hakon is shown to be generous in *Færeyinga Saga*, there are indications in *Egil's saga* that this was not always the case. It is mentioned that Einarr Skálaglammi made Hakon's retainer, Einarr is described as being, "generous but usually had scant means, and he was a firm character and a noble man." [27] *Egil's saga* relates that Hakon was angry with Einarr when he composed *Vellekla* meaning "lack of gold", he then recites verse to win back Hakon's favour and is given a shield adorned with gold and precious stones. The title of *Vellekla* and the description of Einarr both indicate that Hakon needed to be encouraged to fulfil his obligation as a gold giving

leader.[28] This indicates that the author of *Egil's saga* was less inclined to glorify the generosity of Hakon Jarl than the author of *Færeyinga Saga* had been.

Righteous heathens in the sagas

Just as Hakon is depicted by Snorri in *Heimskringla*, as profiting from his heathenism, so too does the author of *Egil's saga* show Egil, the violent warrior-poet, to have virtuous qualities and to benefit from his heathen practices. Egil is a heroic character and despite his violence and heathenism, is portrayed in a favourable light by the author. Egil, like Einarr was a skilled poet and like Hakon seems to have worshipped the god of war and poetry, Oðinn. Though at no point in the saga does he make an offering to the god, it is likely that he carried out such practices as is indicated by the kennings for Oðinn and use of the word *blota* in the following poem where it is translated by Bernard Scudder as 'worship' but specifically means 'to carry out pagan sacrifices':[29]

*I was in league
with the lord of spears,
pledged myself loyal
to believe in him,
before he broke off
his friendship with me,
the guardian of chariots,
architect of victory.
I do not worship
Vilir's brother,
guardian of the gods,
through my own longing,
though in good ways too
the friend of wisdom
has granted me
redress for affliction.
He who does battle
and tackles the hell-wolf gave me the craft
that is beyond reproach,
and the nature
that I could reveal
those who plotted against me
as my true enemies. [30]*

When Egil says that Oðinn has broken off their friendship, he is saying he feels that Oðinn has not been giving the fortune Egil expects in return for making sacrifices. Though he laments his unwilling

devotion to Óðinn, it is his poetic skill, bestowed upon him by the god, which saves his life twice in the saga. Christopher Abram identifies Egil as having among the most complex of religious sensibilities of all Viking-age poets; he conforms to a typical Óðinnic paradigm, using runes, *seiðr* and engaging in both warfare and poetry which exhibits many pre-Christian religious sentiments.[31] Toward the end of the poem *Sonatorrek*, Egil's anxiety relating to his own mortality leads him to accept his death which he describes in the personified form of Hel, who functions as a psychopomp-figure and not merely a destination of the soul. Egil's acceptance of his death and destiny is heightened by this depiction of Hel as death itself.[32]

Egil's knowledge of runes, like his poetic skill, can be interpreted as a gift from Óðinn, and like his poetry, it saves his life. In Ch. 44, Egil is handed a horn of poison mead, he carves runes onto the horn, then reddens them with his blood and composes a verse which causes the horn to shatter and the poison drink to spill to the floor. The poem and the runes that save him, like the mead itself, are associated with Óðinn, who delivers poetry to mankind in the form of mead made from Kvasir's blood in *Skáldskaparmál*.**[33]** In *The saga of Hákon Góði* in *Heimskringla*, Snorri describes the drinking ritual at a *blót*, where the first toast is made to Óðinn and the next to Njörðr and Freyr.**[34]** Óðinn is thus evoked through rituals involving alcohol and poetry and poetry itself is understood as an alcoholic beverage given to mankind by Odin:

The Kvasir myth, as Snorri tells it, involves a three-fold transformation: from spittle to man, from man's blood with the addition of honey to poetic mead and from inert substance to a powerful source of spiritual and intellectual strength. [35]

Egil's fear of death is typical of the common anxieties that characters have in saga literature. This is sometimes manifested in what may be a pre-Christian spiritual motif, the dead rising from the grave. An example of this can be found when Egil takes special precautions with his father's corpse, including sewing shut the nostrils, eyes and mouth and then taking the body to be buried beneath a mound at a remote promontory, presumably all to ensure his father does not return from the grave.[36] This is more terrifying if the dead return with malicious intent, but that is not always the case.[37] In *Njáls saga*, Gunnar's ghost is heard happily reciting poetry from within his mound.[38] The pagan overtones of Gunnar's ghost in the barrow seem to contradict the Christian message of the saga.[39] The depiction is strange and raises many questions, why would the author want us to remember the heroic Gunnar in this way and why is he so happy in death? It may be a plot device to ensure the duty of vengeance is carried out; Gunnar, like Njáll, has in death attained supernatural foresight and is glad because he knows his death will be avenged by Skarpheðin and Hogni.[40]

Earl Hakon also appears in *Njáls saga* and so do some seemingly heathen rituals and references to pre-Christian practices. Just as in *Færeyinga Saga*, the earl is depicted as a generous leader, giving Gunnar a gold arm ring much like the one given to Sigmund.[41] There is also a second golden arm

ring which has significance in association with the earl; Hrappr goes into a heathen temple belonging to the earl and steals a headdress and a golden arm ring from a statue of a goddess named Þorgerðr.[42] The temple also contains statues of Þórr and a lesser known goddess called Irpa, who may have been thought of as a pair with Þorgerðr.[43] Hrappr desecrates all of these idols after taking rings from them. This desecration seems to parallel that of Earl Hakon's *Þorgerðr* statue by Olaf Tryggvason in *Flateyjarbók*. [44] When Hrappr attempts to flee, Thrain and the sons of Njáll conceal him, the Earl realises this and tries to kill them. [45]

The conversion of Iceland to Christianity is central in *Njáls saga*, but though the author seems to favour Christianity over paganism, he does not necessarily favour Christian characters over pagan ones. Hakon Jarl is an enemy of the virtuous Njáll but is shown to be generous to the heroic Gunnar. When Hakon's death is announced, it coincides with the conversion of Norway by Olaf Tryggvason and then Njáll gives us his personal opinion regarding the new faith:

It seems to me that this new faith is much better, and that he who accepts it will be happy. If the men who preach this religion come out here, I will speak in favour of it. [46]

This statement suggests the inevitability of Christianisation and relegates Hakon Jarl to the doomed paganism of the past. Mord Valgardsson in contrast, though he converts to Christianity, remains an unpleasant character throughout the saga. Mord attempts in vain to convert his father to the new faith, but his father gives him prophetic council on how to defeat his enemies, Gunnar and Njáll. Both Njáll and Valgard have supernatural foresight, so this ability cannot be attributed to Valgard's defiant paganism nor to Njáll's virtue as a Christian. Valgard destroys his son's crosses and then dies; having set in motion the events that will lead to Njáll's burning. *Mord* carries out his Father's plan for vengeance despite his new found faith in Christ:

Mord however is a known hypocrite and thorough-going scoundrel who is perhaps, beyond the palliative powers of his Christianity. [47]

Characters in *Njáls saga* are not clearly portrayed as good or bad. Just as Hakon is a duplicitous character, so too are the main characters of the saga. This reflects the duplicity of good and evil in the gods of Norse mythology, where just as in *Njáls saga*, evil is a potential rather than an absolute. [48] Óðinn is both a creator god and also a god of war, and a god who participates in the war that ends creation, this is his unavoidable fate. Njáll, though a helpful and virtuous figure is also duplicitous in this way as he is resolved to accept his fate of being burned with his family. Paul Beekman Taylor argues that not only is Njáll's foresight like that of Óðinn, but their reaction to foresight is also similar, both seem blind to the predictable consequences of events that their actions will lead to. [49] Njáll, Skarpheðin, Mord and Hallgerðr all mirror the roles of Óðinn, Þórr, Loki and Freyja respectively. [50] Mord's duplicity is like that of Loki, the closest thing to an absolute evil that

exists in Norse mythology, though he is also shown to be a friend of the gods and resolves many of their problems. In both cases, the duplicitous nature is hereditary:

Just as Mord Valgardsson seems to inherit the malice of his father along with the charm of his mother, Loki's duplicity of being seems to be inherited. His mother carries traits of natural fruition in her names, *Laufey* [leafy] and *Nál* [blade of grass]; while his father is the giant *Fárbauti* [Cruel-striker?]. . . Like Mord, Loki is an implacable enemy of order.[51]

Mord's name means the English marten, an animal known for its vicious nature but also for its valuable fur.[52] The parallels continue; just as Mord plots the death of Hoskuld Thrainsson, so Loki plots the death of Baldr in The Prose Edda.[53] Both commit 'evil' deeds, apparently motivated by envy of the 'good' of others and both are agents of fate, directing others toward their foreseen inevitable destinies.[54] Taylor does not suggest that these parallels with pagan gods are the reworking of the Norse myths for a thirteenth century audience, but that they are symptomatic of a desire among Icelandic scholars of the time to incorporate the symbolic structure of pre-Christian mythology into a Christian context:

What is at work in this style is not allegory but typology; that is, a shaping of notable human acts in a mythic mould. . . The intricate interlace of events which includes the burning of Njáll and Skarpheðin and culminates in the vengeance exacted by Kari, follows the eschatological sequence of *Völuspá*, including oath breaking slander, deceit, destruction and renewal. [55]

The moral worth of heathen characters in saga literature such as Hakon Jarl, Egill Skallagrímsson and Gunnar Hámundarson is not determined by their faith alone. The answer to whether or not practice of heathenism is beneficial remains ambiguous in saga literature. Though ultimately heathen characters are defeated by Christian ones and their religion is replaced, the heathens are able to achieve fortune through sacrifice and other rituals such as *seiðr*. Faith does not determine virtue, as is demonstrated in the case of Mord Valgardsson. Even before the conversion, heathens can be depicted as virtuous and somehow aware of Christian morality.

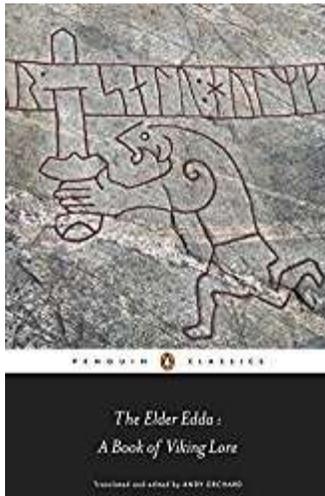
To conclude, the sagas, unlike hagiographical literature, do not serve the simple function of illustrating correct Christian moral behaviour by example. They still favour Christianity over any preceding spiritual disciplines and so, though Hakon is said by skalds to be a good leader, beloved by his people, his defeat is inevitable. It is telling that his final moments before death in *Heimskringla* are spent shamefully hiding with a slave in a pig-sty.[56]

Snorri's main concern when writing *Heimskringla* is how kings attain power and keep it, this reflects his own concerns and it may be that Snorri's admiration of Hakon is based entirely on his qualities as a defiant leader against centralised authority. This same sympathy may explain Hakon's depiction

in *Færeyinga Saga*; though Olaf was the Christian, he was also seeking to subjugate the peoples of the North-Atlantic islands, while Hakon is a liberator. It can also explain Egil, another rebellious figure who, despite being a humble Icelander, is able to travel to Europe and rub shoulders with the king of England. For such heroic, historical figures, heathenism is forgivable.

Besides the more obvious depictions of heathenism in sagas, there is the symbolic value of the characters as representations of mythological figures to consider. This is as likely to serve a contemporary political function as it is to be a genuine relic from pre-Christian oral traditions. If the actions of the gods in their myths were examples of cultural archetypes and archetypal behaviours, then it is logical that they should recur in different types of stories and poems. In the case of *Njáls saga*, such archetypes can be superimposed on actual historical figures as a means of bringing the semiology of pre-Christian narrative into a Christian context and thereby validating it.

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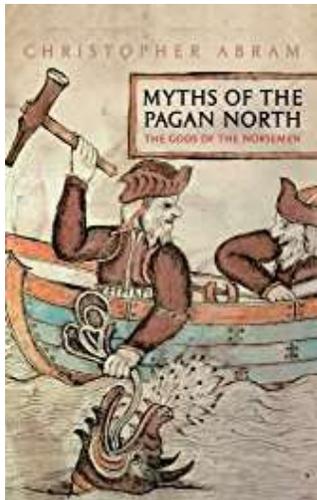
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