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Searching for the Highest King: St. Christopher and *Pátrr Sveins ok Finns*

1. Introduction: The Conversion *Þættir*

Within the group of short prose narratives in Old Norse known as *þættir*, Joseph Harris has identified a sub-group which he calls “conversion *þættir*” (1980; 1986:202-4). Including such tales as *Rögnvalds þátrr ok Rauðs*, *Pátrr Eindriða illbreiðs*, *Völsa þátrr*, and *Pátrr Sveins ok Finns*, the conversion *þættir* deal with the conflict or opposition between Christianity and paganism. Often the *þátrr*-author presents the conflict as one taking place between the Norwegian King Óláfr Tryggvason and his subjects, who are frequently resistant to the conversion he forces upon them. At times the conflict takes place between two generations of the same family, and the victory of Christianity over paganism then coincides with the reconciliation of the family members (Harris 1986:196-7).

I would like to examine a particular conversion *þátrr*, *Pátrr Sveins ok Finns* (*Flateyjarbók* 1, pp. 430-6), and identify not only the elements which the *þátrr*-author seems to have borrowed from the legend of St. Christopher, but also the reasons which he may have had for doing so. We must not be surprised at the presence of non-Germanic material in this or any other conversion *þátrr*, since most of them occur in *Flateyjarbók*, a monastic compilation of the late fourteenth century. The editor-scribes of *Flateyjarbók* were Christian priests familiar with Scripture and exegetical literature, a certain amount of which had even been translated into the vernacular. For example, patristic works in Old Norse included the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great, and indeed we find an *exemplum* from the *Dialogues* worked into *Norna-Gests þátrr*, a *Flateyjarbók þátrr* of a sort closely related to the conversion *þættir* (Hill and Harris 1989).

2. Summaries of *Pátrr Sveins ok Finns* and the Legend of St. Christopher

Pátrr Sveins ok Finns concerns the search of the young Norwegian Finn for the king who excels all others. Finn is a protagonist of a type familiar in Old Norse literature; he is large and not unhandsome, but he behaves in an

unmanageable way, and some consider him witless. His poor relationship with his father also marks him as a “contrary hero”; in this case, Finnr’s discontent with the gods his father worships so faithfully causes their conflict. Since the *þátttr* is far from well-known, I provide a summary of the rest of the story.

After abusing the statues of Þórr and Óðinn in his father’s temple, Finnr vows to serve the king “best descended and surpassing the others in every respect” (“ek skal þjóna þeim konungi, er æðstr er ok at öllu um fram aðra”, p. 431). Refusing all offers of help, he travels to Denmark with a party of merchants who seem to think as little of him as he does of them. Arriving in Denmark, he promptly loses himself in the woods, and on reaching the other side, he meets with a shepherd boy and trades clothes with him. He inquires about the lad’s cross, and is interested but confused by the ignorant answers he receives. The shepherd refers him to a priest for education in Christianity. In keeping with his desire for the best, however, Finnr acts the fool for the priest, who hands him over to the bishop in despair. The bishop finds him a swift and intelligent pupil, and promptly baptizes him. In the meantime, Óláfr Tryggvason has been converting Norway to Christianity, and has met with resistance from Finnr’s father and brother. The brother, who resembles his father in name as in everything else, arranges a compromise: their household will become Christian if Óláfr will not require the destruction of the beautifully adorned temple to which his father is stubbornly attached. Óláfr agrees, and the two Sveinns become his faithful supporters. When Finnr hears of the Norwegian conversion, he returns to Norway and seeks the king. Since he is dressed in rags, the king’s door-keepers refuse him entrance, but he breaks through them, heading for where Óláfr sits eating. The ensuing scuffle between the retainers and the beggar who is stronger than he looks results in the king’s intervention. Óláfr guesses Finnr’s identity and tells him of the new condition of his family. When Finnr hears that the temple has not been torn down, he rushes home, knocks down the statue of Þórr, and, tying it to a rope, drags it back to the king. He becomes Óláfr’s devoted retainer, and dies of sickness in the king’s presence.

Since the story of St. Christopher is no longer as familiar as it once was, I provide a summary of it as well:

Reprobatus is a Canaanite soldier twelve ells tall and terrible in appearance. He seeks to serve the greatest king, but the prince with the highest reputation turns out to be afraid of the Devil, and the Devil is afraid of the sight of a wayside crucifix. Reprobatus therefore goes in search of Christ, and comes upon a hermit in the wilderness. The hermit teaches him about Christianity, and says that in order to serve Christ, one must often fast. Reprobatus replies that he will do some other service, but not that. The hermit suggests prayer, but the giant rejects that as well, and asks for yet another type of service. The hermit then tells him to carry travellers across a nearby dangerous river, a service suitable for one of his size and strength. Reprobatus agrees to this, and establishes himself

on the riverbank. One night he is awakened by a voice calling him to come out and perform his function as ferryman. Reprobatus leaps up, but there is no-one outside. He goes in again, but the voice calls a second time. Again there is nobody there, but when this happens for the third time, the giant finds a boy outside of his hut. When they are fording the river, the child begins to weigh more and more heavily on Reprobatus' shoulders, and the waters rise and rush turbulently. Even the giant can scarcely make it across, and when he does, he comments to the child that it was as if he carried the whole world on his shoulders. The boy replies that this is not surprising, for he has carried not only the whole world, but also its creator, Jesus Christ, on his shoulders. In token of this service, Christ grants him the miracle of a blossoming, fruitful staff, and gives him the name Christopher. Christopher goes off to preach the word of God, and comes to the city of King Dagnus. He does not speak the local language, so he prays for understanding. He is granted the gift of tongues, and converts eight thousand people with the help of his blossoming staff. The pagan Dagnus hears of these bizarre actions and has him arrested. The soldiers do so reluctantly, but the giant insists that they bind him. At court Dagnus calls on him to worship the pagan gods, rather than Christ, who died in such a humiliating fashion. Christopher refuses, and is thrown into prison. Dagnus commands two girls to seduce him, but the brightness of Christopher's face while he is praying impresses them so much that they ask to be baptized. Dagnus threatens to have them killed as well, and they are asked to go into the temple to prove themselves. Once in the temple they pull down the idols by means of their sashes, and the soldiers kill them. In the process of martyring Christopher, an arrow blinds the king. When the martyr's blood cures him, Dagnus, too, is converted, and in typical fashion threatens to kill any of his subjects who will not believe in Christ.

3. The *Pátr*-Author's Use of the Legend of St. Christopher

As we can see, elements of the Christopher legend occur throughout the story of Finnr, particularly in the characterization of the protagonist. The most obvious parallel is the motive for his conversion – the search for the most excellent or highest king. As in the saint's life, this desire sets the narrative in action, and is fulfilled in the middle of the story. Next, the characterization of Finnr resembles that of St. Christopher. Finnr's interview with Óláfr makes a point of his size: *þá skipti, hversu gott væri mitt yfirbragð, ef mikit er* (p. 435 “then it matters if my appearance is large, however good it is”). Finnr's seeming foolishness finds a parallel in the saint as well, for the praying Christopher is arrested because the judges believe his action to be *insanum* (*Legenda Aurea*, p. 432). Furthermore, we can find Finnr's costume – that of a *stafkarl* (wandering beggar) – in many medieval Scandinavian representations of St. Christopher (Mowinckel 1926:63).

The *þátr*-author seems to have borrowed other motifs from the hagiogra-

phical material, such as that of dragging the idol from its pedestal with a rope or belt. One part of the legend is put to ironic use, for when Finnr scorns the worship of gods who have so little power that they cannot keep the dust off their statues, he employs the same argument as King Dagnus does for scorning the worship of Christ: “stultum tibi nomen imposuisti, scilicet Christi crucifixi, qui nec sibi profuit nec tibi prodesse poterit” (*Legenda Aurea*, p. 443).

In addition to the elements mentioned above, the *þátttr*-author seems to have borrowed from the structure of the saint’s life. The two-part sojourn of Christopher with the king and the Devil before finding instruction with the hermit may correspond to Finnr’s stay at home (with the respected pagan earl Hákon Sigurðsson having a role parallel to that of the *maximus rex* of the beginning of the *vita*) and his trip with the Danish merchants that results in his becoming lost in the forest. External evidence strengthens this possibility; a Swedish translation of the life of St. Christopher describes him as meeting the Devil not in the *aspera solitudo* of the original, but in a *skoghe* or forest (Thorén 1942:41).¹ More certain is the correspondence between Christopher’s tripartite arrival into Christ’s service and Finnr’s tripartite education. Christopher rejects fasting and prayer before his symbolic baptism while crossing the river with Christ; Finnr rejects the shepherd and the priest as teachers before he accepts baptism at the hands of the bishop.

We will have no problem in accepting the legend of St. Christopher as a source for *Þátttr Sveins ok Finns* if we compare his *vita* to those of other saints. While the topos of refusing to worship powerless gods often occurs in hagiography, other elements of the *þátttr* are found only in the *vita* and *passio* of St. Christopher. Although many saints’ legends contain references to the destruction of pagan idols, my search of the *Legenda Aurea* revealed no other instances of the association of the destruction of the idol with a rope of some sort. Taken with Christopher’s unique motivation (the *Index Exemplorum* lists no other occurrence of a search for the highest king), this suggests that the *þátttr*-author borrowed specifically from the legend of St. Christopher, rather than from any other saint’s life. As we shall see, the legend of St. Christopher was quite popular enough for such borrowing to be likely.

4. The Cult of St. Christopher in Medieval Scandinavia

A look at the spread of the cult of St. Christopher through Scandinavia shows that medieval Icelanders were not far behind their continental con-

¹ The familiar topos of forest as spiritual wasteland is sounded again later in *Þátttr Sveins ok Finns* when Þórr appears to the younger Sveinn in a dream and asks that his idol be taken out of the temple and into the forest for safety before Finnr’s arrival (p. 435).

temporaries in their interest in him. Although Christopher has always been liturgically overshadowed by the apostle James, whose feast was celebrated on the same day (July 25), in Denmark and sometimes in Iceland July 26 was free (because the feast of St. Anna was celebrated on Dec. 19 instead of July 26), so the feast of St. Christopher could be celebrated a day late (Gad 1971).² Christopher was also far more popular a saint than James ever was, ranking in the later Middle Ages with such favorites as St. George. His cult spread from Germany through Denmark to the rest of Scandinavia in the twelfth century;³ a Norwegian priest's manual from around 1200 (NKS 32, 8vo (F)) includes Christopher in the litany of saints (Fæhn 1962:169), and a late thirteenth-century Icelandic copy (AM 680a, 4to) of the *Ordo Nidrosiensis ecclesiae* (the liturgical book for the archdiocese to which Iceland belonged) lists his feast day (Gjerløw 1968). At this time, Danish and Swedish paintings of the saint portrayed him in his eponymous role as "Christ bearer". When the life of St. Christopher was spread in the thirteenth century by such translations as the Danish, Swedish and Low German versions of the *Seelentrost*, illustrations of various episodes in his life became popular (Nielsen 1937–52; Thorén 1942; Schmitt 1959). The earliest mention of such a picture in Norway is from 1336, in a Bergen lawyer's will. Shortly after this there were three churches and a chapel dedicated to Christopher in Denmark and Sweden, as well as further translations made of his *vita*. The first recorded use of the name in Iceland is that of Kristoforus Vilhjálmsson (d. 1312). Before 1400, the church of Hof á Skagaströnd owned an image of St. Christopher, and around 1400 we find four sketches of him in an Icelandic manuscript which show him as a long-haired and bearded man wearing a simple robe and carrying both staff and the Christ child. In fact, more altar paintings of St. Christopher are from Iceland and Norway during this period than from the rest of Scandinavia combined.

It is at this time – around 1380 – that *Pátr Sveins ok Finns* was adapted for inclusion in *Flateyjarbók*, presumably by Jón Þórðarson and Magnús Þórhallsson, the two priests who are believed responsible for *Flateyjarbók*.⁴ Undoubtedly they knew of St. Christopher from Jerome's *Martyrologium*, available in Iceland since 1146; they knew of him as one of the fourteen Holy Helpers, which he had become about 1300, and they could read the details of his life and death in the *Legenda Aurea*, written more than one hundred

² Of eight extant calendars from Iceland before 1400, five list the feast of St. Christopher and two specify that it was to be celebrated on the 26th (Cormack 1983).

³ The first occurrences of the name "Kristoffer" in the Danish royal family date from the 1150's (Gad 1961).

⁴ I say adapted and not written because the *pátr* begins: *Pess er getit, ok svá er ritat á fornum bókum, at á dögum Hákonar jarls Sigurðsson var nefndr í Prándheimi sá maðr, er Sveinn hét* (p. 430 "It is said, and so it is written in old books, that in the days of Earl Hákon Sigurðsson there was a man in Prándheimr named Sveinn").

years previously. St. Christopher was believed to afford protection against the danger of dying suddenly (i.e., without having the chance to receive the last rites), and because it was popularly believed that anyone who looked on an image of the saint would not die that day, enormous statues or paintings of him were placed in highly visible locations in the church, such as on the north wall over the entrance, on the west wall, near the door, or even outside, so that he was the first and last thing the worshippers saw (Lassen 1972:322; Gad 1971:166–7). Although St. Christopher continued to grow in popularity until the end of the sixteenth century, the date of *Pátr Sveins ok Finns* falls well within this period.⁵

5. The Thematic Value of the Figure of St. Christopher for *Pátr Sveins ok Finns*

The argument that *Pátr Sveins ok Finns* contains material from the legend of St. Christopher has more force if we can point to a reason for its inclusion. The motifs are clearly present, yet the *pátr*-author handles them freely. He does not follow the life of the saint episode by episode, for example, and he sometimes reverses the moral basis for the parallels, as when the power of the pagan gods is measured in terms of their ability to take care of themselves. In fact, the correspondence with the legend of St. Christopher is not the main focus of the *pátr*; the conflict between generations and between faiths is, as with the other conversion *þættir*.

The significance which the hagiographic material has for the *pátr* on the most general level is that St. Christopher, like Finnur, refuses to sacrifice to pagan gods. On a more detailed level, we may point to St. Christopher's association with other figures. While scholars have always recognised parallels between St. Christopher and the apostles (in his preaching and in the gift of tongues) and Old Testament figures such as Aaron (who also had a flowering staff), they have not agreed on parallels between St. Christopher and pagan deities. Early Germanicists were quick to seize on the figure of Þórr as a source for St. Christopher. It was noticed that Þórr carried Aurvandill over the Elivágar, and that when statues of St. Christopher were displayed on Midsummer's Day at the Falsterbo church, people brought among other offerings hens, a bird dedicated to Þórr. It was discovered that a plant, *Osmunda crispa*, which in Scandinavia is known as *Thorböll*, was also called St. Christopher's herb. Later scholars such as Konrad Richter

⁵ *Christoforus saga* was translated into Old Norse from Low German in the sixteenth century – too late to be a source for *Pátr Sveins ok Finns*, but certainly a further indication of his popularity in Iceland. (See Widding, Bekker-Nielsen 1962; Widding, Bekker-Nielsen, Shook 1963.)

(1896) and Hans-Friedrich Rosenfeld (1937) were equally quick to say that St. Christopher was no more “derived from” or “equal to” Þórr than he was “derived from” or “equal to” Anubis or Hercules, figures from other pagan pantheons who also bear some resemblance to St. Christopher.

The dispute about the origin of the figure of St. Christopher obscures to some extent the question of his contemporaneous role in medieval Scandinavian life and letters. The figure of St. Christopher did not result from the Christian metamorphosis of the pagan god Þórr (as was the case with St. Brigid, for example, who had been a pagan Irish deity worshipped at springs and wells). In medieval Scandinavia, however, St. Christopher might have been perceived as the Christian equivalent to Þórr – as standing in a generic relationship to him rather than in a genetic one. Both Þórr and St. Christopher were cult figures who enjoyed a great popular following; both were noted for their size and strength, rather than for their intelligence; both are associated with crossing torrential rivers;⁶ narratives about them often contained an element of humor. Since the *pátrr*-author depicts the defeat of paganism in terms of the defeat of Þórr, St. Christopher is the most appropriate saint he can employ as a type for his Christian hero.⁷ The characterization of the pagan gods and their Christian opponents which the St. Christopher/Þórr pairing implies (i.e., as opposite but equivalent in nature) is not unusual, and occurs elsewhere in Old Norse literature. For example, in *Sörla þátrr*, a *Flateyjarbók þátrr* of a sort closely related to the conversion *þættir*, Óláfr Tryggvason and Óðinn play opposite but equivalent roles.

6. Conclusion: Christian Strategies for Dealing with the Pagan Past

In using the story of St. Christopher, which was interpreted in the Middle Ages as an allegory of brute strength converted to the purpose of good by the grace of God, the *pátrr*-author shows how Sveinn’s strong loyalty to Þórr is converted to devotion to Christ and King Óláfr, and implies that “brute spirituality” (i.e., paganism) is not inherently sinful. This strategy takes its

⁶ In addition to his ferrying of Aurvandill, Þórr is described as wading rivers every day in order to reach his seat of judgment under Yggdrasil (*Grímnismál* st. 29; *Gylfaginning* 15). He must also wade a torrent to meet the giant Geirröðr (as told in *Pórsdrápa* and in *Skáldskaparmál* 26).

⁷ Although Óðinn’s malicious nature and position as chief of the Old Norse gods made him the most usual pagan deity to be interpreted as the Devil, perhaps because in general Þórr enjoyed greater popularity than Óðinn in Norway, or in particular because Trondheim was famous for its temple to Þórr, *Pátrr Sveins ok Finns* specifically equates Þórr with the Devil: *Eftir dauðann gerðist hann* (i.e., Christ) *svá háleitr, at hann herjaði í helvíti ok batt Þór, höfðingja allra goða* “Christ became so sublime after his death that he harried in Hell and bound Þórr, chieftain of all the gods” (p. 432).

place alongside the other strategies for the rehabilitation of pagan ancestors which we find in Old Norse literature. In the *Edda* and *Ynglinga saga*, Snorri euhemerizes the gods, portraying all of early Scandinavia as (mistakenly) worshipping invaders from Asia. In their depiction of more recent Scandinavian history, a number of sagas and *þættir* (including *Páttir Sveins ok Finns*) portray pre-Christian Norwegians and Icelanders as following (Christian notions of) a “natural religion” in their turning away from the pagan gods, having faith in their own “might and main”, and believing in the creator of the sun (and/or the moon, earth, sea, or cliffs, in Finnr’s case), as Lars Lönnroth (1969) and Gerd Wolfgang Weber (1981) have shown.

In addition to the above-mentioned evidence for the medieval association of St. Christopher with Þórr, the practice of decorating stave-churches with scenes from the pagan Eddic lays suggests that in general Scandinavian clerics found the juxtaposition of pagan mythology and Christian religion edifying for their flocks. In literature as in art, the relationship between the two remains a fruitful source of contemplation even today.

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