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## Eikþyrnir and the Rivers of Paradise

### Cosmological Perspectives on dating *Grímnismál* 26–28

#### Introduction

The present article will address the still-debated question of whether the Eddic poem *Grímnismál* in its present form should be dated to the late pagan period or rather to the 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century – a question which has important ramifications for the value of this poem for the reconstruction of pre-Christian Norse mythology, although it cannot be precluded (and may indeed be likely) that the poem is composed of different strata with differing dates (cf. Zimmermann 2006: 46; Hale 1983: 165, 182–184). In order to gain a new perspective on this question, the following discussion will centre on the description of the stag Eikþyrnir and its surroundings in *Grímnismál* 26–28. These stanzas present a tableau of striking

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**Abstract:** The present article discusses the dating of stanzas 26–28 of the Eddic poem *Grímnismál*. To date, scholarly opinion is still fundamentally divided on the question of whether the *Grímnismál* are a product of the late pagan period or of learned Christian literature, or even whether a resolution to this question is at all possible. A new approach to the problem is offered here for stanzas 26–28 of the poem, which present a description of the stag Eikþyrnir, the world tree and the origin of the world's rivers. A comparison of the imagery of these stanzas with cosmological concepts current in 12<sup>th</sup> century ecclesiastical literature and Christian iconography shows that the tableau described in *Grímnismál* 26–28 closely corresponds to Christian concepts and motifs which were widespread during this period. The detailed nature of this correspondence suggests that the poet of these stanzas was deliberately playing with Christian motifs, which in turn implies that the composition of at least this section of the *Grímnismál* should probably be placed in the context of high medieval Christian culture rather than being ascribed to the late pagan period. In addition, an appendix critically discusses the hypothesis that the description of Valhalla in *Grímnismál* 23 is derived from that of the Colosseum, as suggested by Olsen (1931/32), Dronke (2011) and Lassen (2011).

**Keywords:** Edda, dating of *Grímnismál*, cosmology, pilgrimage, Rome, iconography, Eikþyrnir, Læraðr, Yggdrasill, Paradise, rivers of Paradise, Tree of Life, Valhalla, Colosseum.

visual force which finds notably close parallels in the Christian iconography of Paradise as well as in Christian cosmological writing. The following pages will therefore draw upon a range of 12<sup>th</sup> century sources (the itinerary of Nikulás Bergsson, biblical and other ecclesiastical texts, and Christian iconography) in order to show that almost all key elements of the tableau presented in *Grímnismál* 26–28 correspond to ecclesiastical templates which could have been known to an Icelander of the period (and which certainly were known to some Icelanders of the period). The clear correspondence between these elements of the Eddic poem and such ecclesiastical motifs could be taken to indicate that at least certain parts of the *Grímnismál* should be seen as a sophisticated creation by an erudite high medieval poet rather than as late pagan.

## Rome

Around the year 1149, Nikulás Bergsson set out from Iceland on a pilgrimage to Rome and the Holy Land. It took him several years to complete this journey, but in the end he returned to Iceland (probably around 1154), where he became abbot of the Benedictine monastery Munka-Þverá in Eyjafjörður in the northern part of the island. He died only a couple of years later in 1159, but before his death he wrote a pilgrims' guide which is still extant: the *Leiðarvísir* or “way-leader” (ed. Simek 1990: 478–490; Kålund 1908: 12–23; cf. Marani 2009; Simek & Hermann Pálsson 2007: 246f.; Simek 1990: 264–280, 391; Hill 1983; de Vries 1964–1967: §§137, 148, 196; Magoun 1940: 277–288).

One of Nikulás' main destinations in Rome would have been the old Basilica of Saint Peter, which he indeed describes in some detail in his *Leiðarvísir* (Simek 1990: 482, 487; Kålund 1908: 18f.; cf. Magoun 1940: 286). As St. Peter's was traditionally identified with the burial site of the apostle Peter and therefore one of the holiest sites of Christendom, a visit to this basilica would have been an inevitable and central part of any pilgrimage to Rome. At the time of Nikulás' journey, St. Peter's was still a Constantinian basilica which only a couple of centuries later would have to give way to the present Renaissance building. The half-dome over the apse of this old basilica was decorated with a lavish mosaic showing an enthroned Christ, flanked by Saints Paul and Peter and two palm trees (the latter probably representing two Trees of Life). Under the throne of Christ, a fourfold fountain was represented – the Fountain

of Life – which was flanked by two stags drinking from its waters (Poeschke 1971a: cols. 377f. [fig. 1]).

The scene depicted here represented the eschatological Paradise of *Revelation* 22:1–2 (Poeschke 1971a: col. 379; Poeschke 1971b: col. 382), where the Waters of Life emanate “from the throne of God and the Lamb” (*de sede Dei et agni*) while Trees of Life grow on both sides of the river of the Waters of Life.<sup>1</sup> The setting of Trees of Life and spring in the paradisiacal garden hearkens back to the Old Testament account of Paradise (Poeschke 1971a: cols. 375f.): the paradise at the end of time mirrors and is directly interlinked with the paradise at the beginning of time (cf. Flemming 1968: col. 260; Schlee 1937: 43). The central description of the state of Paradise at the beginning of human history can be found in *Genesis* 2:8–14. This passage tells how, after the creation of man, Paradise is created as a “garden of delight” (*paradisus voluptatis*) and the abode of mankind. Apart from trees that are pleasant to look at and that bear sweet fruits, Paradise contains three features in particular: the Tree of Life, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the source of a river which splits up to form the four greatest rivers of the biblical world: the Pishon, which flows around the gold-rich land of Havilah; the Gihon, which flows around Ethiopia; the Tigris; and the Euphrates.<sup>2</sup>

Geographical scholarship of the 12<sup>th</sup> century – as represented by Niculás’ contemporary Honorius of Autun († c. 1151) – identified the obscure rivers of the Pishon and the Gihon of the Old Testament account with the Ganges and the Nile respectively; thus the spring in Paradise served as the source for the greatest rivers known to the Middle Ages (*De imagine mundi* I.9f. = *Patrologia Latina* [Migne] t.CLXXII, c.123A–B.). This notion was no medieval invention but reaches back to early Christian learning; it was formulated in a classic fashion already by Isidore of

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<sup>1</sup> *Apocalypsis Iohannis* 22:1–2: *et ostendit mihi fluvium aquae vitae splendidum tamquam cristallum procedentem de sede Dei et agni / in medio plateae eius et ex utraque parte fluminis lignum vitae adferens fructus duodecim per menses singula reddentia fructum suum et folia ligni ad sanitatem gentium.* (Ed. Weber et al. 1975.) – In general on the Tree of Life cf. Flemming 1968: cols. 258–264; Erdmann et al. 1954: cols. 25–27.

<sup>2</sup> *Genesis* 2:8–14: *plantaverat autem Dominus Deus paradisum voluptatis a principio in quo posuit hominem quem formaverat / produxitque Dominus Deus de humo omne lignum pulchrum visu et ad vescendum suave lignum etiam vitae in medio paradisi lignumque scientiae boni et mali / et fluvius egrediebatur de loco voluptatis ad irrigandum paradisum qui inde dividitur in quattuor capita / nomen uni Phison ipse est qui circuit omnem terram Evilat ubi nascitur aurum / et aurum terrae illius optimum est ibique invenitur bdellium et lapis onychinus / et nomen fluvio secundo Geon ipse est qui circuit omnem terram Aethiopiae / nomen vero fluminis tertii Tigris ipse vadit contra Assyrios fluvius autem quartus ipse est Eufrates.* (Ed. Weber et al. 1975.)

Seville (*Etymologiae* XIII.xxi.7f.).<sup>3</sup> However, the identification of the rivers of Paradise with real-world rivers whose sources were known at least by hearsay,<sup>4</sup> created the practical hydrological problem of how to convey the water of the spring in Paradise to the known sources of these rivers. On an intellectual level, this problem was solved by claiming a subterranean conduit: *Quæ quidem flumina infra paradisum terra conduntur ; sed in aliis longe regionibus funduntur* (Honorius of Autun, *De imagine mundi* I.9 = *Patrologia Latina* t.CLXXII, c.123B).

It was not only the rivers of Paradise which were ascribed an importance outside of Paradise proper. The Tree of Life in particular had a central symbolic position in Christian tradition, as it was associated with the cross of the crucifixion of Christ (cf. Flemming 1968: cols. 260f., 264; Erdmann *et al.* 1954: cols. 25f.). Adam of Saint-Victor († c. 1180) hailed the cross in the first few lines of his *In exaltatione sanctæ crucis* by equating it with the Tree of Life: *Salve, Crux, arbor | Vitæ præclara. | Vexillum Christi, | Thronus et ara* (*Patrologia Latina* t.CLXXXVI, c.1513B). Honorius of Autun in his *Expositio in cantica canticorum* comments on the mention of an apple in the *Canticum canticorum* 2:3, and in the course of his discussion he states: *Arbor vitæ est sancta crux* (*Patrologia Latina* t.CLXXII, c.384B). In a *Meditatio in passionem et resurrectionem domini* formerly ascribed to Bernard of Clairvaux, an anonymous author is no less clear in his identification of the cross and the Tree of Life: *In cruce enim pendet omnis fructus vitæ, quia ipsa est arbor vitæ, quæ est in medio paradisi* (*Meditatio* VI.15 = *Patrologia Latina* t.CLXXXIV, c.751D).

The mosaic in Old St. Peter can largely be understood on the basis of the eschatological Paradise of the Revelation without necessarily having to take this further Paradise-lore into immediate consideration. Returning to the Rome of Nikulás Bergsson, however, all these elements are united in the monumental composition of the apse mosaic of the Archbasilica of St. John Lateran (which happens to be the first church that Nikulás mentions in his itinerary; on this occasion he also gives a description of its rank and the relics kept there, though he does not explicitly mention the mosaics).<sup>5</sup> The centre of this apse mosaic is formed by a

<sup>3</sup> *Patrologia Latina* t.LXXXII, c.490B–491A. For other, allegorical interpretations of the four rivers of Paradise cf. Poeschke 1971a: col. 376. In general on the rivers of Paradise cf. Poeschke 1971b; Schlee 1937.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *De imagine mundi* I.10 = *Patrologia Latina* t.CLXXII, c.123B.

<sup>5</sup> Simek 1990: 481, 486f.; Kålund 1908: 17; cf. Magoun 1940: 281f. – The original composition of the mosaic dates to the 5<sup>th</sup> century, but it has been reconstructed several times since

representation of a large, gem-encrusted golden cross whose base rests in the waters of a spring; from the waters of this spring flow the four rivers of Paradise, whose Old Testament names are written next to them in golden letters. The spring is given a position on high ground from which the four rivers flow steeply downward; the whole arrangement of cross, spring and rivers distinctly recalls the roots of a tree reaching out from its trunk. Under the cross, exactly in its central axis and amidst the root-like Paradise rivers, sits a small representation of Paradise surrounded by walls, guarded by an angel and with the Tree of Life in its centre;<sup>6</sup> on the Tree of Life perches a phoenix, whose resurrection acted as a symbol of the resurrection of Christ.<sup>7</sup> The Tree of Life is depicted immediately below and aligned with the central axis of the cross: this creates a further association between the cross and the Tree of Life, which again underlines the association indicated by the tree-like arrangement of the cross, the spring and the root-like rivers of Paradise. The spring is flanked on both sides by large representations of two stags that are silhouetted prominently against the golden background of the mosaic; both stags lower their heads towards the spring. The lower margin of the composition is formed by the river Jordan.

The stags bending their heads to drink from the spring in Paradise are normally interpreted as a symbolic representation of the followers of the faith and more specifically the candidates for baptism: the spring is then both the baptismal font and the Spring of Life,<sup>8</sup> and the stags that have come to drink from the Spring of Life are the catechumens who have come to receive eternal life through baptism (cf. Domagalski 1991: col. 571; Gerlach 1970: cols. 287f.). In St. John Lateran, the depiction of the river Jordan (as the archetypical river of baptism) beneath the rivers of Paradise reinforces this association (Poeschke 1971b: col. 382). This motif complex was used in the most distinguished contexts: both examples of stags drinking from the Fountain of Life mentioned so far were found

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then; its last reconstruction took place in the course of a rebuilding of the apse in 1884. 17<sup>th</sup> century documentation of the apse shows that at least this reconstruction, based on a late 13<sup>th</sup>-century restoration, accurately reflected the previous state of the mosaic (Scafi 2006: 75 with fig. 4.5).

<sup>6</sup> On the representation of Paradise as a walled precinct guarded by an angel cf. Poeschke 1971a: col. 380; Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae* XIV.3 (= *Patrologia Latina* t.LXXXII, c.496C–497A). Cf. also Scafi 2006: 76.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Kramer 1971. – On the phoenix in connection with Paradise in Old Norse sources cf. Simek 1990: 164–169.

<sup>8</sup> For which in Norse literature cf. the *Duggals leiðsla* (ed. Cahill 1983): 85–87/133 or the Old Norse description of the world edited by Simek 1990: 436–444.

in the apse mosaics of papal basilicas, i.e. in what was probably the most prominent location in two of the most prominent churches of 12<sup>th</sup> century Rome.<sup>9</sup> And the motif is not only prominent, but also prevalent: Domagalski remarks that the extant examples of the motif of the drinking stags are well-nigh uncountable (Domagalski 1991: cols. 572f.).

Travelling in the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Nikulás Bergsson might just have missed (or witnessed) the completion of a third monumental example.<sup>10</sup> The 12<sup>th</sup> century apse mosaic of the Basilica di San Clemente shows in its centre a cross with the crucified Jesus (Scafi 2006: 73 [fig. 4.3], 75; Collegio S. Clemente 1973: figs. 3, 6–8; Flemming 1968: col. 260). This cross grows out of a luxuriant acanthus.<sup>11</sup> The size of the acanthus leaves is equal to that of the crucified body on the cross, and thick tendrils reach out from them: their dark-green spirals embrace the cross from all sides and fill the whole vault of the apse, turning the apse mosaic into an arabesque jungle of leafy green whorls in front of a golden background – here the identification of cross and Tree of Life reaches possibly its most monumental expression. From the base of this all-encompassing Tree of Life, four rivers pour forth – the four rivers of Paradise – and two stags bow down their antlered heads to drink from them.

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<sup>9</sup> This is important to note. Recently, Marani has presented an in-depth analysis of several sections of Nikulás’ description of Rome (Marani 2009). In this analysis, Marani points out that the *Leiðarvísir* contains (sometimes incorrect) details which appear to be derived from written sources rather than Nikulás’ personal observation. The most striking case is Nikulás’ description of the Constantinian church Sant’ Agnese: in Nikulás’ day, the Constantinian basilica dedicated to St. Agnes had already been in ruins for centuries. Its description in the *Leiðarvísir*, where it appears as the most splendid church in Rome, must therefore be based either on (outdated) written sources, or on an erroneous identification of the Constantinian basilica with the medieval church Sant’ Agnese fuori le mura (Marani 2009: 49–58, 63). In either case, this example shows that the *Leiðarvísir* is a literary work prone to literary borrowings, and therefore that its testimony cannot in every case be taken at face value. This does not, however, affect the present argument: the basilicas of Old St. Peter and St. John Lateran were the two most important churches of Rome and would by default have been the destination of any pilgrim visiting the Eternal City. The present analysis uses the *Leiðarvísir* as an illustration of medieval Icelandic pilgrimages to Rome in order to outline the historical context of the argument, but given the importance and popularity of the relevant sites, my argument does not depend on whether or not the details of this particular text are accurate: the aspects of the *Leiðarvísir* here under discussion are only an example of what can be assumed to have been general practice among pilgrims.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Hill’s (1983: 201) remark about the eastern part of Nikulás’ journey: “But if Nikulás does not always specify what it was that he saw at a particular site, it is not difficult for the modern scholar to work it out for himself and we find, when we do so, that he was constantly seeing newly built Crusader churches, or churches in the process of being built.” For a number of examples cf. *ibidem*; perhaps this can be taken to indicate that Nikulás had some (in fact rather natural) interest in contemporary monumental building enterprises.

<sup>11</sup> On the acanthus in representations of Paradise cf. Poeschke 1971a: cols. 379f.

## Iceland

Having accompanied Nikulás Bergsson to Rome and seen some of the things he would have seen there in his day, it is time to follow him back to Iceland, where he would have given detailed accounts of his experiences. The prestige attached to such experiences may be reflected in his further career (Hill 1983: 177): soon after his return he became the abbot of Munka-Þverá.

One of the many problems of Eddic research is the question of the date of the *Grímnismál*.<sup>12</sup> To recall just a few of the more recent contributions,<sup>13</sup> Sprenger considered the poem to be firmly rooted in the pagan period (Sprenger 1999: 47). Dronke (in what is probably the most recent commentary on the *Grímnismál*) does not provide an explicit discussion of the date of the poem, but indicates that she considers it a Christian work (Dronke 2011: 111). Zimmermann assumes that parts of the poem may be early, but suggests that it contains later interpolations (Zimmermann 2006: 46), while Simek and Hermann Pálsson point out that wisdom poetry like the *Grímnismál* could have been composed both in the late pagan period of the 10<sup>th</sup> century and during the Icelandic renaissance of the 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century (Simek & Hermann Pálsson 2007: 128).

One aspect of the *Grímnismál* that has not been considered in this discussion to date is the description of the stag Eikþýrnir (“Oak-Thorn”) and his connection with the rivers he brings into being in stanzas 26–28:

Eikþýrnir heitir hiortr,	er stendr á hǫllo	Oak-Thorn the stag is called	which stands
	Heriafoðrs		on Odin’s hall
oc bítr af Læraðs limom;			and bites from the branches of Læraðr;
enn af hans hornom drýpr í Hvergelmi,		and from his antlers	it drips into Hvergelmir;
þaðan eigo vötn ǫll vega.			from there all waters take their course.
Síð oc Víð,	Sækin oc Eikin,	Slow and Broad,	On-Rushing and Raging,
Svǫl oc Gunnþró,		Cool and Battle-Stubborn,	
Fiorm oc Fimbulþul,		Hastening and Mighty-Roaring,	
Rín oc Rennandi,		Rhine and Running,	
Gipul oc Gǫpul,		Gorge-River and Ravine-River,	
Gǫmul oc Geirvimul,		Old and Spear-Swarming,	

<sup>12</sup> In general on the *Grímnismál* cf. Dronke 2011: 109–135; de Vries 1964–1967: §24; Gering & Sijmons 1927: 181–216.

<sup>13</sup> Among the older contributions at least two should be mentioned: de Vries ascribed the poem to the late pagan period (de Vries 1964–1967: §24), and Hale suggested that stanzas 27–29 are a later interpolation in a poem which he argued to be highly defective and full of interpolations (Hale 1983: 165, 182–184). For some scepticism towards the argument that the *Grímnismál* are of a strongly composite character cf. Simek & Hermann Pálsson 2007: 128.

þær hverfa um hodd goða,  
 Þyn oc Vin, Þöll oc Höll,  
 Gráð oc Gunnþorin.

they encircle the gods' treasure,  
 Roaring and Vin, Young Fir and Sloping,  
 Greed and Battle-Daring.

Vína heitir enn, qnnor Vegsvinn,  
 þriðia Þióðnuma,  
 Nyt oc Nøt, Nōnn oc Hrōnn,  
 Slíð oc Hríð, Sylgr oc Ylgr,  
 Víð oc Ván, Vōnd oc Strōnd,  
 Gioll oc Leiptr, þær falla gumnom nær,  
 enn falla til heliar heðan.<sup>14</sup>

One is called Dvina, another Way-Swift,  
 a third Nation-Capturer,  
 Milk and Spear, Strong and Wave,  
 Fearful and Tempest, Drink and She-Wolf,  
 Broad and Hope, Difficult and Shore,  
 Din and Lightning: they flow close to men,  
 and flow to Hel from here.<sup>15</sup>

In this little tableau, the stag Eikþýrnir stands on the hall of Odin, where he feeds on the foliage of the tree Læraðr. Liquid is dripping from his antlers into Hvergelmir; here all rivers have their origin, and the poem gives a long and predominantly fanciful list of rivers which flow through the world of the gods, the world of mankind and finally to the nether-world.

The stag Eikþýrnir also appears outside of the *Grímnismál* (the Snorra-Edda mentions him twice), although these appearances add nothing to the information provided by the poem. In *Gylfaginning* 39 Snorri gives a prose version of the description presented by the *Grímnismál* which corresponds too closely to the *Grímnismál*-account to be anything but a direct prose paraphrase of this poem (which Snorri indeed quotes explicitly in *Gylfaginning* 40). The name Eikþýrnir also appears in a list of stag-*heiti* in a *þula* in *Skáldskaparmál* 75 (stanza 512). In Snorri, the tree Læraðr is attested in the slightly different form Léraðr; neither form of the name has so far been explained in a satisfactory way.<sup>16</sup> The *communis opinio* during the last decades seems to have been that Læraðr is on one level or another identical with the world-tree Yggdrasill.<sup>17</sup>

Many of the river-names enumerated in the *Grímnismál* also occur in

<sup>14</sup> Ed. Neckel & Kuhn 1983; cf. Dronke 2011.

<sup>15</sup> The translations of the (river) names are primarily based on Dronke 2011: 118; Lorenz 1984: 112–114, 476–479; Hale 1983: 167–182; Finnur Jónsson 1931; Gering & Sijmons 1927: 198f.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Simek 1993: 185; Lorenz 1984: 473; de Vries 1961: 372 (*s.v.* 'Læráðr'); Gering & Sijmons 1927: 197. The explanation as *\*Hleraðr*, "Secret listener at doors and shutters", which has recently been suggested by Dronke (2011: 130), is unconvincing (1) on a semantic level, as it presupposes the acceptance of Dronke's (1997: 48f.) rather implausible equation of Heimdall and the world-tree, and (2) on a phonetic – or rather source-critical – level, as it presupposes that a (re-?)constructed form is closer to the actual name than the manuscript evidence.

<sup>17</sup> Dronke 2011: 129f.; Simek 1993: 70, 185; Lorenz 1984: 473f.; de Vries 1956–1957: §583. Gering & Sijmons 1927: 197 find it doubtful whether such an identification is justified.



the Snorra-Edda, including the *þulur*. There, they are clearly taken directly from the *Grímnismál* (even though some of the river names show variant forms), and therefore, these quotations do not add any useful context either (*Gylfaginning* 4 and 39; *Skáldskaparmál* 75; cf. Faulkes 2005: 66). The most notable aspect of the list of river names presented in *Grímnismál* 27f. is the overwhelming predominance of names which do not seem to be attested independently elsewhere in Old Norse literature. The few clear or at least possible exceptions are the *Rín* (i.e. the Rhine), the *Gjöll* (which reappears in *Gylfaginning* 49 as the border river of the land of the dead), the *Ván* (mentioned in *Gylfaginning* 34 as the river springing from the saliva that runs from the jaws of the bound Fenris-wolf), and the *Leiptr* (by whose bright waters an oath is sworn in *Helgavíða Hundingsbana ǫnnor* 31.3). The *Vin* or, more likely, the *Vína* might be the Dvina (Gering & Sijmons 1927: 198f.; cf. Hale 1983: 174, 175), while the *Slíð* may mirror the *Slíðr* from *Vǫlospá* 36 (cf. Lorenz 1984: 113). Even if all these identifications are correct, the percentage of river-names with an independent existence in Old Norse literature outside of the *Grímnismál* is strikingly small. Such a striking lack of reference to rivers which would recur outside of these two stanzas is particularly important as this list of river-names is introduced as a list of all the world's rivers: while the list claims the highest cosmological significance, the lack of independent Old Norse references to the vast majority of the rivers of the *Grímnismál* suggests that these rivers had no contemporary real-world relevance.<sup>18</sup> This could be taken to indicate that the list of

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<sup>18</sup> This does not contradict the findings of Hale 1983: 167–182, who presents a survey of possible parallels between the formation of river names in the *Grímnismál* and the formation of a number of modern Scandinavian river names (e.g., he points out that the adjective *síðr*, which seems to underlie the river *Síð* in *Grímnismál* 27, may have an etymologically related parallel in the first element of the Swedish name *Sibro*: p. 168). Beyond the examples already quoted above (the Rhine and Dvina), Hale does not normally attempt any specific identifications of the names in the list in the *Grímnismál* with actual Scandinavian rivers, although he hesitantly points to some possible close parallels in modern hydronymy – indeed, his only explicit example of a possible identification of one of the rivers of the *Grímnismál* with a modern Scandinavian river name is the *Gopul*, for which he refers to a river in Norway: the river in question “quite likely” (!) once bore the name of *Goppollen*, which Hale considers a probable etymological parallel to *Gopul* (Hale 1983: 171f., 183, quote: p. 172). Hale’s etymological discussion clearly illustrates that a number of the river names of the *Grímnismál* are formed according to linguistic patterns which a Norse audience would have recognised as plausible patterns for the formation of river names. It is a very different question, however, whether Hale’s discussion is able to support his argument that “it is possible that all of these names have been those of actual rivers in the real world and in particular in Scandinavia or Norway, due to the many etymological and semantic parallels to them” (1983: 184, cf. 182). In contrast to this, Dronke 2011: 118, 130 treats the river

river-names is a purely literary creation which does not even make a serious attempt at relating to the real world. Even more importantly, such a lack of reference to the real rivers of the Old Norse cosmos might be a strong indication that this list of rivers is not based on an authentic pagan cosmological tradition.

Considerably better attested than the majority of the rivers is the spring Hvergelmir, which appears several times in the *Gylfaginning* (4, 15, 16, 39, 52). Recently Faulkes has emphasised that Snorri seems to try to reconcile two different accounts of this spring. Its description in connection with Eikþyrnir in *Gylfaginning* 39 (and *Grímnismál* 26) conveys the impression that Hvergelmir is fed from the liquid that drips from the antlers of Eikþyrnir. In *Gylfaginning* 4, on the other hand, Hvergelmir seems to have existed already in primeval times long before the creation of the earth and that of Valhalla, on whose roof Eikþyrnir is standing (Faulkes 2005: 66, cf. de Vries 1956–1957: §577). This suggests that at least the name of the spring Hvergelmir reflects authentically pagan lore that has been used by the author of *Grímnismál* 26–28, rather than representing an invention of this poet like most of his river-names.

## Iceland and Christian Rome

It is striking how closely the tableau presented by *Grímnismál* 26–28 corresponds to the imagery of the Roman apse mosaics and the cosmological texts described above, especially if the common assumption is correct that Læraðr should be identified with the world-tree Yggdrasill. Both share the following motifs: (1) the world-tree/Tree of Life; (2) the

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names of the *Grímnismál* as poetic inventions; I follow her in this and interpret the parallels between the formation patterns of river-names in the *Grímnismál* and modern Scandinavian hydronymy as a sign of the skill of the poet rather than as evidence for the real-world existence of these names, especially given the dearth of clear one-to-one correspondences. Be that as it may, the important point in the present context is that the most prominent rivers of a religious cosmology could be expected to correspond to rivers which are also of importance in real-life geography: as typological parallels one may recall the importance of the Boyne in early Ireland (cf. MacKillop 2004: 50f.), or of the Christian rivers of Paradise, which medieval geography identified with the Nile, Euphrates, Tigris and Ganges. The obscurity of the river-names in the *Grímnismál* and the absence of independent references to them in Old Norse sources strongly indicate that these rivers were not as important as the poet makes them out to be, whether or not some of them existed, and this strongly undermines the poem's claim that they are – or ever were – world-rivers of cosmological significance.

spring; (3) the rivers which flow from it and which are identified with the great rivers of the world; (4) the stag(s) which are feeding or drinking there and are in one way or another directly connected to the spring; (5) the general location of the tableau in the respective versions of the blissful otherworld, i.e. the Garden of Eden and the eschatological Paradise of the Revelation on the one hand, and the warrior-paradise of Valhalla on the other. Furthermore, it may or may not be significant that the respective rivers encompass potentially equivalent sections of the world order: they originate and flow through Paradise / the land of the gods, and they reach mankind later on in their course. One might even wonder whether it is significant that in both contexts there is a subterranean portion of the course of the rivers: the rivers of Paradise take an underground course in order to resurface as the Nile and the Ganges, whereas the rivers of Hvergelmir conclude their course by “falling down to Hel”.<sup>19</sup>

Of course there are also differences. In the Christian image of the stags on the Fountain of Life, there are normally two stags next to a fountain from which the four rivers of Paradise spring forth, whereas in the *Grímnismál* the water dripping from the antlers of a single stag feeds into a spring in which a multitude of rivers have their source. Yet the difference in numbers between these two images affects the overall visual effect of the tableaux only to a very limited extent, and in fact there is good evidence to suggest that the exact number of stags is of limited significance in this context. Domagalski notes that one of the two stags of the motif in Christian iconography is sometimes replaced with a dedicatory inscription (Domagalski 1991: col. 573), creating a variant of the motif with only one stag. Meanwhile, the apse mosaic of San Clemente adds a small third stag to the composition by placing it on the base of the acanthus from which the cross and the Tree of Life are growing (Collegio S. Clemente 1973: fig. 7). A similar fluctuation in numbers can even be noted within the *Grímnismál* themselves: *Grímnismál* 33 locates not one but four stags in the world-tree. The number of rivers presents a similar case: as mentioned above, the apse of St. John Lateran introduces the river Jordan into the composition in addition to the four rivers of Paradise

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<sup>19</sup> The general parallelism between Eikþýrnir and the stags at the rivers of Paradise has already been noted by Heizmann 1999: 604, who, however, leaves open the question of whether it should be interpreted as an eastern element transmitted by Christianity or as an eastern element that spread via the northern and central Eurasian cultures of hunters and pastoralists. To the present writer, the level of detail of the Christian-Norse correspondence seems to tip the balance towards the former interpretation.

(Pietrangeli 1990: 98f.). Thus, while it must be acknowledged that there is not a perfect numerical correspondence between the single stag Eikþýrnir of the *Grímnismál* and the two stags which typically feature on the Fountain of Life, it must also be stressed that such a fluctuation is not unusual and has no significant impact on the overall layout and visual effect of the motif.

In sum, therefore, the parallels between the Christian image and the tableau presented in *Grímnismál* 26–28 are remarkably close and precise. So far, it has normally been assumed that the motif of Eikþýrnir feeding on Læraðr and creating the rivers of the world is an authentic pagan notion (e.g., Simek 1993: 185; de Vries 1956–1957: §574). Yet the similarities between the Christian and Norse tableaux raise the question of whether this assumption should really be upheld. The voyage of Nikulás Bergsson is just one of many possible examples of how the motif of the stags at the spring below the Tree of Life, from which the world's great rivers have their origin, could have reached Iceland. The present analysis is not intended to suggest that Nikulás himself is responsible for providing the poet of *Grímnismál* 26–28 with the inspiration for these stanzas; rather, Nikulás' journey to Rome is merely meant to serve as an illustration of how thoroughly Iceland was integrated into the wider world of 12<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. Other Norse travellers undertook quite similar journeys: another 12<sup>th</sup>-century example is Gizurr Hallsson, who travelled to Italy in 1149–1152 and after his return wrote the *Flos peregrinationis* as a (now lost) account of his journey.<sup>20</sup> It should also be noted that these 12<sup>th</sup>-century travellers were by no means the first Norsemen who could have seen images like the stags on the Fountain of Life in St. John Lateran. For instance, the Danish king Cnut went to Rome on pilgrimage in 1027 (Townend 2001: 150). On this journey he was accompanied by the poet Sigvatr Þórðarson, who later treated it in his *Knútsdrápa* 10f. (ed. Finnur Jónsson 1908–1915, vol. 1.A: 248–251; 1.B: 232–234; cf. Townend 2001: 153–156). The reference to Cnut's pilgrimage in Sigvatr's praise-poem, where it appears as a deed of equal standing with the king's military exploits (cf. Townend 2001: 162), illustrates the prestige attached to such Roman pilgrimages already in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century.

Furthermore, Rome is not the only place in which a Scandinavian traveller could have become familiar with the iconographic motif of the stags drinking from the Fountain of Life. The most famous example in

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<sup>20</sup> De Vries 1964–1967: §196; Simek 1990: 293–295. For some general remarks on Old Norse itineraries and related works cf. e.g. Simek 1990: 262–315.

Italy outside Rome is probably the so-called 'Mausoleum of Galla Placidia' in Ravenna, a 5<sup>th</sup> century shrine which was formerly joined to the church Santa Croce (Rizzarda 1996: 43, 45, 56, 58, 70, 72–75, 105, 129f., 133; Poeschke 1971a: cols. 379f.). Nor is the motif restricted to Italy, but was widely used throughout the Mediterranean (cf. Domagalski 1991: cols. 572f. with examples ranging from southern France to Palestine). Given that the Christian use of the motif in monumental architecture goes back to late antiquity, Norse travellers could in principle have encountered it in a wide variety of locations over a time span of several centuries. Even the possibility of an encounter already in the pre-Christian period of the North cannot be strictly precluded; it is considerably less likely, however, that the Christian motif already had a strong impact at such an early date, than that an encounter took place after the conversion of Scandinavia, both in terms of general plausibility<sup>21</sup> and in terms of the specific treatment of the rivers in the *Grimnismál*. This last-mentioned aspect of the poem will be discussed further at the end of the article.

Returning to the question of whether and how the motif complex of the stags at the Fountain of Life and the rivers of the world could have been transmitted to Scandinavia in a Christian context, it should also be noted that most of the relevant motifs are extremely common within Christian learned works of the Middle Ages. The main sources quoted above for the Tree of Life, the source of the four rivers of Paradise, and their identification with the largest rivers known to the Middle Ages are the Bible and the works of Honorius of Autun. It is of course unnecessary to demonstrate that the Bible would have been available in the high medieval North, and Honorius' *Imago mundi* (as well as Isidor's *Etymologiae*, also mentioned above) is also assumed to have been known in Iceland.<sup>22</sup> Just how rapidly the works of Honorius spread during the 12<sup>th</sup> century is perhaps best illustrated by the 12<sup>th</sup> century Norse translation of his *Elucidarium* (Simek & Hermann Pálsson 2007: 80; Simek 1990: 25f.; ed. Firchow & Grimstad 1989). In fact, the equation of the rivers of

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<sup>21</sup> The idea of a Scandinavian pagan on a sightseeing tour in the Christian basilicas of the Mediterranean does not seem intrinsically likely, and in any case it would make for a very unwieldy argument to suggest that the motif was transmitted by a pagan as the consequence of a journey which is not attested, while it is clear that Christian Norsemen encountered the motif in the course of well-attested pilgrimages.

<sup>22</sup> Simek 1990: 26f. A (strongly abbreviated) Old Norse version of *De imagine mundi* was available from the early 14<sup>th</sup> century at the latest: Simek 1990: 396. Concerning descriptions of Paradise in (mostly post-12<sup>th</sup>-century) Norse texts cf. Simek 1990: 162f., 164–171, 193, 205, 254, 430, 434, 437, 439, 441, 443, 450, 454, 474, 476, 522, 527, 530, 556f., 562, 565.

Paradise and the greatest rivers of the world, illustrated above with reference to the works of Honorius, is even attested directly in the Icelandic cosmographic literature of the period, appearing in a short description of the world whose oldest manuscript dates to c. 1300.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the itinerary of Nikulás illustrates that he (and travellers like him) saw the works of art described above which combine the Paradise tree, spring and stags with the motif of the world's great rivers: Nikulás explicitly mentions the Lateran and St. Peter's, and even if he had not mentioned them, they would have been obvious destinations for any pilgrim. After the pilgrims returned to Iceland, word of these wonders of Rome would inevitably have spread. Even today these monumental mosaics are a sight to be marvelled at; the impact they must have had on a contemporary (and much less jaded) Icelandic observer probably cannot be overestimated (cf. Magoun 1940: 287f.). It might even be possible to speculate about whether their iconography might not, in one medium or another, have found (now lost) reflections in the art of the medieval North. If this were so, there would not be any further need to explain the transmission of the motif to Iceland, and its consequent use in literary compositions, as it would already have been readily available there.

The close correspondence between *Grímnismál* 26–28 and conceptions current in the literature and art of the 12<sup>th</sup> century might, therefore, have considerable ramifications for the question of the dating of these stanzas: if these parallels reflect a conscious play with Christian motifs, then this implies that of the two dating options proposed by Simek and Hermann Pálsson (10<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century respectively), the latter is vastly more probable.

## Concluding discussion

### Eikþyrnir and the rivers of the world

The present article therefore concludes with the suggestion that the striking similarities between the tableau presented in *Grímnismál* 26–28 and Christian cosmology of the High Middle Ages could be taken to indicate that these stanzas were created in an environment in which the corresponding medieval concepts were well-known. This implies that they

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<sup>23</sup> Ed. Simek 1990: 428–435, there 430, 434; cf. also the text edited by Simek 1990: 474–477, and the corresponding sections of the *Stjórn* (ed. Simek 1990: 523, 530).

should be attributed to the 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century rather than the late pagan period.<sup>24</sup>

It should however be stressed that this does not imply that *Grímnismál* 26–28 represents a purely fanciful composition entirely devoid of ‘authentically pagan’ mythical motifs. As has been rightly emphasised by de Vries, Simek and others,<sup>25</sup> the motif of liquid dripping from the antlers of Eikþýrnir has close counterparts in the goat Heiðrún (*Grímnismál* 25; *Gylfaginning* 39; *Skáldskaparmál* 75) and the cow Auðhumla (*Gylfaginning* 6; *Skáldskaparmál* 75): all three are horned (or antlered)<sup>26</sup> animals who provide an inexhaustible supply of drink seemingly out of nowhere, a trait for which there are no obvious Christian parallels. Nor would it seem reasonable to postulate a biblical origin for the Norse world-tree motif, or the association between supernatural tree and supernatural well: both are too deeply ingrained in the fabric of Norse mythology to be plausibly explained away as borrowings from Christianity.<sup>27</sup> The same holds true for the association between a hall and a tree, as exemplified by the location of Læraðr next to Valhalla; in a passage in the *Egils saga* (ch. 68.5), such an association even has proverbial status.<sup>28</sup> The impression conveyed by this material as a whole is therefore not so much that the poet of *Grímnismál* 26–28 created something entirely new, but rather that he was playing a literary game with pagan motifs on the basis of an ecclesiastical template.

The list of all the world’s rivers in stanzas 27f. is perhaps the element of the tableau in which the juxtaposition of 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century learned poetic fancy with authentically pagan motifs becomes most clearly visible. As noted above, the spring Hvergelmir is also at home in other, to some degree divergent, traditions; the rivers that issue from it in *Grímnismál* 26–28, however, are mostly *ad hoc* creations for which there is no reason to assume a traditional background. If this passage of the poem

<sup>24</sup> A dating to the 11<sup>th</sup> century cannot be strictly precluded on an empirical basis; however, I follow Simek & Hermann Pálsson (2007: 128) in considering it unlikely. My reason for doing so is that the composition of poems treating pagan subject matter does not seem probable in the period immediately following conversion: in a time still very close to the pagan past, such an undertaking would possibly have raised the suspicion of a ‘relapse’. The 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> centuries would have enjoyed a more secure distance from the old religion, thus representing a more comfortable climate for literary engagement with its concepts.

<sup>25</sup> Simek 1993: 70; Lorenz 1984: 472; de Vries 1956–1957: §574.

<sup>26</sup> The Norse does not strictly differentiate horns and antlers; cf. the use of *horn* in *Grímnismál* 26.4.

<sup>27</sup> Partly *contra* Bugge 1889: 421–561.

<sup>28</sup> Ed. Finnur Jónsson 1924: [...], *sem fornkeveðit orð er, at þá verðr eik at fága, er undir skal búa* – “as the old saying goes, that he must look after the oak who is to dwell under it”.



represented an authentic pagan tradition whereby all the world's great rivers originated in the well Hvergelmir, one would expect the list of rivers to represent the great rivers of the (northern) world. Yet this is emphatically not the case. This may be particularly important in the light of the contrasting situation of the biblical rivers of Paradise. The biblical account names four rivers of actual contemporary importance, the Tigris, Euphrates, Gihon and Pishon. For a medieval readership, however, the latter two rivers had no real-world significance, and later Christian scholarship updated the list of the rivers of Paradise by equating the Pishon and Gihon with the Ganges and the Nile. Thus the mythical account of the origin of the world's most prominent watercourses was once again made to correspond to contemporary geographical reality. The Ganges in India represents a typologically similar case: this river too is of great mythological importance – an importance which corresponds to the real-life importance of this river for the subcontinent. In contrast, almost all the river names of the *Grímnismál* are invented names without any real cosmological significance or any indications of traditional roots. This constitutes the single most important argument in favour of Christian influence in the *Grímnismál*: the cosmological meaninglessness of the list of the world's rivers in the *Grímnismál* in contrast to the importance of the rivers of Paradise for Christian cosmology, and that of the river Ganges for Indian cosmology, betrays how little this aspect of *Grímnismál* 26–28 owes to the pagan past and how much to ecclesiastical learning. The poet of these stanzas did not possess a traditional list of the northern world's great rivers, but he felt the need for such a list on the example of biblical cosmology; he therefore created one *ex novo*, sprinkling it only with the Rhine and a few names taken from other Eddic poems as a concession to the contemporary world and contemporary Norse literature.

Although the iconographic elements of the image in *Grímnismál* 26–28 may be Christian, its symbolic meaning is not; there is a marked difference in symbolic content between the rivers fed by the antlers of Eikþyrnir and the Christian rivers of Paradise. Rather than undermining the argument for influence, however, the contrast may provide further insight into how and why the poet of *Grímnismál* 26–28 used the motif. The waters of the Christian image have a strongly salvific symbolism: the fountain which feeds these rivers is the Fountain of Life, and the stags drinking its water are the catechumens who receive eternal life through baptism. In striking contrast to this, the rivers springing from Hvergelmir seem to have predominantly sinister connotations. The *Gjöll* appears elsewhere as the border river of the land of the dead, the *Ván* seems to be



identical with the river that is fed by the saliva of the Fenriswolf, and the *Leiptr* is a river by whose waters an oath is sworn, which might imply that it has the power to avenge the breaking of an oath (in a terrible way?). Some of the apparently imaginary rivers also have names with violent connotations; the best example is probably the *Geirvimul*, “Spear-Swarming”. A number of further names indicate the strength of the rivers in question, such as *Fimbulþul*, “Mighty-Roaring”. Finally, at the end of their course these rivers flow down to Hel. Overall, these traits strongly suggest an emphasis on strength, force and threat – an emphasis which is, in a way, a complete inversion of the salvific symbolism of the Christian rivers of Paradise. The difference is so marked that the Christian Fountain of Life and the rivers of Paradise, if taken in isolation, show virtually no correspondence to the rivers flowing from Hvergelmir – unless one accepts the possibility that the rivers of Hvergelmir are, on the level of symbolism, a conscious inversion of the rivers of Paradise. The parallel to the Christian motif only becomes visible if the motif complex is seen as a whole, as not only a list of otherworldly rivers, but as a combination of the motifs ‘world-tree’, ‘otherworld spring’, ‘otherworld rivers’, ‘deer’ and ‘location in the blissful otherworld’.

However, there is nothing unexpected about such a difference in symbolism. If the argument presented here comes close to the truth and if stanzas 26–28 of the *Grímnismál* are indeed a work of learned 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century poetry rather than a creation of the late pagan period, then the degree of respect with which the poet of these stanzas treated the pagan lore is noteworthy. Rather than deploring pagan ideas about the paradise of the dead warriors, he artfully interwove them with elements of the Christian Paradise – the message might be that the heroes of old, even though pagans, may not be entirely condemned. However, the magnanimity of a Christian poet can only go so far: however treasured or culturally important they might have been, the pagan heroes and their blissful otherworld in Valhalla were still just that – pagan. Even for the most benevolent of medieval Christian poets, the equation of this pagan paradise with the Christian Paradise could not possibly have extended beyond a certain point. This point may be marked by the both forceful and threatening connotations of the rivers springing from Hvergelmir. Valhalla, the pagan paradise, is the site of a never-ending battle where the Einherjar fight and kill each other every day before being reconciled in a daily feast (*Gylfaginning* 41; *Vafðrúðnismál* 40f.). This concept of a happy afterlife stands in the most distinct contrast to the quiet beatitude of Christian Paradise – the exact same contrast, in fact, as can be seen

between the threatening and forceful rivers of the *Grímnismál* and the promise of salvation through divine grace that is represented through the Christian rivers of Paradise. In the Norse poem, the rivers of Paradise have been accommodated with a twist that gives them both a brute force corresponding to the heroic spirit of their new surroundings, and a sinister undercurrent which may be meant to reflect that these surroundings pre-date (Christian) salvation. Thus, the poet of *Grímnismál* 26–28 did not simply copy an image of Christian symbolism. Rather, he artfully plays with it, and does so in a way that shows a clear awareness of both the symbolic meaning of the Christian motif and its ultimate incompatibility with the warlike atmosphere of Valhalla.

## Appendix

### Rome, again

In her recent commentary on the *Grímnismál*, Dronke also discusses the account of Valhalla in *Grímnismál* 23; there Valhalla is described as having 540 doors, and 800 warriors emerge from each of them for the last battle at the end of the world. Dronke suggests that this seems to reflect a Roman building like the Colosseum (Dronke 2011: 129). Ultimately, this idea goes back to Olsen, who in the 1930s proposed a derivation of the 540 doors of Valhalla from the Colosseum (or another Roman amphitheatre, although he considered the latter less likely: Olsen 1931–1932; Olsen 1935, part 2 in *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 112: 29–45). While de Vries stated that this proposition should be rejected categorically (de Vries 1956–1957: §582 [note 3 p. 378]), Simek has argued more recently that a Colosseum connection could indeed be “a possible source of the later poetic treatment” of Valhalla (Simek 1993: 347), and, parallel to Dronke, Lassen has also taken up Olsen’s idea (Lassen 2011: 357f.; on the historiography of the question cf. also Lorenz 1984: 481f.). In the original version put forward by Olsen, this idea derived the many doors of the description of Valhalla from old memories of an amphitheatre ‘in working order’ and connected the daily fight of the dead warriors in Valhalla with the constant fighting of gladiators in the arena (Olsen 1931–1932, esp. 157–162, 168f.; cf. Simek 1993: 347). There can be little doubt that such an idea is to be rejected unconditionally, as stated by de Vries: even though contacts between Germanic tribes and the Roman Empire were extremely close (cf. Olsen 1931–1932: 159f., 164f.), it would

be more than remarkable if the experience of the games had still had after-effects for Norse poetry almost a millennium later. There is, however, a possible alternative to the route of transmission proposed by Olsen: given the existence of medieval journeys of Icelandic pilgrims like Nikulás Bergsson, one might perhaps wonder whether the way in which the monumental architecture of the Roman Empire was experienced by such medieval travellers might not have had an impact on contemporary Norse poetic imagination, as has recently been suggested by Lassen (2011: 358). If so – and this appears to be the only way in which a connection between the Colosseum and the 540 doors of Valhalla is imaginable – then this feature of the *Grímnismál* would locate another stanza of the poem in the High Middle Ages. Before one becomes too confident about the Colosseum theory even in this high medieval form, however, it should be remembered that during the Middle Ages the Colosseum presented a completely different appearance from what we see today. Rather than being a ‘clean’ Classical ruin rich in vaulted entrances, its vaulted rooms and passages were used and systematically rented out as both commercial and living space; some of these units even included small gardens. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Frangipane family included at least parts of the Colosseum within their vast possessions and used one section of it to house a strategically important palace, while other parts functioned as the workshops and living quarters of humble artisans (cf. Wegerhoff 2012: 34–51; Rea & Orlandi 2001: 197–200). This represents a typical medieval usage pattern for Roman amphitheatres that can also be observed at other sites; the most well-known example of a Roman amphitheatre that still retains parts of the medieval additions is probably the amphitheatre in Arles. Whether such a conglomerate of ancient remains and contemporary squatters would indeed be suitable for providing inspiration for *Grímnismál* 23 is a question which the reader may decide for themselves. Nikulás Bergsson at least does not appear to have been overly impressed by the Colosseum in its contemporary 12<sup>th</sup>-century state: while he mentions a number of secular structures in Rome (such as the Baths of Caracalla, which he seems to mix up with those of Diocletian: Magoun 1940: 283), the Colosseum is pointedly ignored in his itinerary.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> For the sake of completeness it should, however, be admitted that other contemporaries *were* impressed by the Colosseum, as is illustrated e.g. by its depiction on 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century seals of German emperors: Wegerhoff 2012: 51, 60f. (with figs. 17a and 17b).

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