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Relating Mary's life in Medieval Iceland: *Mariu Saga*

Similarities and differences with the continental *Lives of the Virgin*

Mariu saga is the biography of the Virgin Mary in Old Norse, which begins with her own Conception, as in the apocryphal Infancy Gospels, the *Protevangelium Jacobi* and its Latin renditions, and concludes with her death and her miraculous translation from this world, as in the *Transitus Mariae*. The saga moves well beyond the narrative of events

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Abstract: This article deals with the relationships between *Mariu saga* and other medieval *vitae mariae*, which were composed at the same time in order to discuss the statements made by Wilhelm Heizmann in his article entitled "Mariu saga" published in *Medieval Scandinavia: an encyclopedia* (P. Pulsiano, K. Wolf eds., 1993). *Mariu saga* is the biography of the Virgin Mary in Old Norse, which begins with her own Conception, as in the apocryphal Infancy Gospels, the *Protevangelium Jacobi* and its Latin renditions, and concludes with her death and her Assumption, as in the *Transitus Mariae*. The saga moves well beyond the narrative of events witnessed in these earlier sources as it offers extended exegetical and theological reflections on the significance of its material, and historical background. In the first part, I will focus on Late Antiquity, namely on the New Testament apocrypha and on the Byzantine *Lives of the Virgin* which are the earliest biographies of the Virgin. In the second and the third parts, *Mariu saga* will be contrasted with the most popular and representative continental biographies of Mary in Medieval West; namely the *Vita Rhythmica*, the *Conception Nostre Dame* by Wace and the *Romanz de Dieu et de sa Mere* by Herman of Valenciennes – a *Sacred History of the Virgin* –, in order to demonstrate that the saga takes its main features from both the *Lives of the Virgin* and the biblical paraphrases, whether it be from a literary or a doctrinal perspective.

Keywords: *Mariu saga*, *Lives of the Virgin*, Apocrypha, Infancy Gospels, *Transitus Mariae*, *Vita Rhythmica*, *Conception Nostre Dame*, *Li Romanz de Dieu et de sa Mere*, biblical paraphrases.

witnessed in these earlier sources as it offers extended exegetical and theological reflections on the significance of its material, and historical background. *Maríu saga* is extant in three redactions, A, E and St. The three texts emerged over a period going from the 13th century to the early 14th century. During this period, the Icelandic compilers re-translated, adapted and expanded existing material.

Maríu saga has already been the subject of a philological and stylistic analysis through articles and two dissertations which have reached the following conclusions: firstly, the Old Norse *Life of Mary* is the work of an Icelandic clerk who compiled various and numerous Latin sources; secondly, as stated by Wilhelm Heizmann: “[t]his *vita* contains numerous theological opinions and commentaries, which give the saga its distinctive stamp”;¹ and thirdly: “[i]t is not the literary quality of *Maríu saga* that accords it a special place within the genre of Marian *vitae*, but the unusual, or even eccentric, way of interweaving *vita* and theological commentary”.² He even concludes by saying that the Old Norse saga is: “a work that is unique within the continental medieval tradition on Mary’s life”.³

Wilhelm Heizmann’s article was the starting point of our discussion. This article deals with the relationships between *Maríu saga* and other medieval *vitae mariae*, which were composed at the same time. In order to support this discussion, I will stick to a chronological order and approach these works from a literary and doctrinal perspectives. In the first part of this article, I will focus on Late Antiquity as it is significant for subsequent accounts. In this opening part, I will provide an overview of the New Testament apocrypha which contain accounts of the life and death of the Virgin Mary. Subsequently, a brief insight into the Byzantine *Lives of the Virgin* which are the earliest biographies of the Virgin is necessary in order to explain the genesis of this enormously popular literary genre in the Middle Ages. In the second part of this article, I will address the main features of the most popular and representative continental biographies of Mary in Medieval West; namely the *Vita Rythmica* and the *Conception Nostre Dame* by Wace. I will then compare them with *Maríu saga* in order to demonstrate that the latter shares the same features with its continental counterparts. Finally, in the third part, *Maríu saga* will be

¹ W. Heizmann, “Maríu saga”, P. Pulsiano, K. Wolf *et alii* (eds.), *Medieval Scandinavia: an encyclopedia*, New York and London, Garland, Taylor & Francis, 1993, p. 407–408, p. 407.

² W. Heizmann, *ibid.*, p. 408; see also G. Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1953, p. 124–125.

³ W. Heizmann, *ibid.*, p. 408.

contrasted with the *Romanz de Dieu et de sa Mere* by Herman of Valenciennes – a *Sacred History of the Virgin* –, which belongs to the continental medieval tradition on Mary's life. In this final chapter, it will be discussed in what way the *Mariú saga* bears a strong resemblance with biblical paraphrases.

I. The “Proto-lives” and *Lives of the virgin* in Late Antiquity

When one reads the four canonical Gospels, it is quite clear that little is learned about the family of Jesus; such as his origins, his birth, his childhood and what happened to him after his death on the cross. As for Mary, she simply is presented as Joseph's bride. Only two gospels provide further information. The *Gospel of Matthew* presents the genealogy of Jesus and then relates that Mary “was found with a child of the Holy Ghost” (1, 18), and the *Gospel of Luke* recounts the Annunciation (1, 26–38) and the Visitation (1, 39–56). Consequently, and very soon, early Christians began asking many questions; for example, about moments in the lives of Christ and his mother Mary. These questions were an inexhaustible source of curiosity. And it is the New Testament apocrypha that filled the gaps in the biblical accounts. In other words, all we know about Mary's story, her parents, her conception, her education in the Temple, the choice of Joseph as her protector, her death and her ultimate fate comes from apocryphal traditions.

Etymologically, the term “apocryphal” comes from the Greek adjective ἀπόκρυφος, “apokruphos”, which means “hidden”, “secret”. Yet the term has led to a misunderstanding; indeed these texts were neither more hidden nor less known than the texts that became part of the canon. Moreover, these works contain no secret; they do not reveal anything to us.⁴ Gradually, the word “apocryphal” took on a negative connotation and eventually acquired a different meaning: that of “non genuine” and “false”. And it is this second meaning of the term that would come to replace the first one; as categorical judgments and decisions were taken by Councils. Regardless, this second sense of “apocryphal” was applied to the entirety of Christian literary production which did not become part of the canon of the New Testament. This occurred even though these texts were contemporaneous and some even earlier to some texts that

⁴ This sense of “secret” corresponds rather to Gnostic texts, whose purpose was to pass on secret words of Jesus to a few disciples he had entrusted.

were to be part of the canon of the New Testament. Regarding the reasons for the selection of future canonical texts, and in order to serve as a background to this analysis, it must be briefly recalled that it was only after many debates and disputes that the list of the texts included in the canon was entirely fixed in the fourth century.⁵ In 360, at the Council of Laodicea, the term “*kanôn*” took the meaning of “rule of truth”, because it is then that the list of holy books was compiled.⁶ From that point, the term then continues to evolve to eventually designate the catalogue of the twenty-seven books selected by the decree of Damasus⁷ (382) as the only true Christian writings of divine inspiration. As for the term “apocrypha”, which was designated as the opposite of “canon” at the Council of Laodicea, it also changes meaning, “[it] no longer is the hidden writing mentioned by Irenaeus [of Lyons] but, from Jerome, every text excluded from the Canon”⁸. The texts, unauthorized by the Catholic Church, are now called “*libri non recipiendi*” (“books not received”).

Among all the apocryphal texts about Jesus, Mary and Joseph, the Gospels take up a prominent place. Etymologically, the word “gospel” means “good news” and is a translation of the Greek *εὐαγγέλιον*. In the New Testament, the word “gospel” refers to the act of announcing the “good news” but also its content.⁹ According to the *Dictionnaire de la Bible*, the apocryphal gospels are divided into three groups: the synoptic-type gospels – so called because they were associated in genre with the canonical synoptic gospels¹⁰ –, the sectarian-type¹¹ gospels and the “fiction” or “legendary” gospels. The latter have been named so due to

⁵ It was not until the 15th century that the canon was definitely established at the Council of Florence.

⁶ F. Quéré, *Évangiles apocryphes*, Paris, Seuil, 1983, p. 12.

⁷ This decree will be valid only for the Church of Rome.

⁸ “Ce n’est plus l’écrit caché dont parlait Irénée, mais, à partir de Jérôme, tout texte exclu du Canon”, F. Quéré, *op. cit.*, p. 12. Unless otherwise indicated all translations in this essay are my own.

⁹ It is not until the 2nd century that these texts were entitled *εὐαγγέλια*, “Gospels”. For example, we now know that it was not the original title of the canonical gospels and that they received it only a century after they were written, see F. Bovon, P. Geoltrain, “Introduction générale”, F. Bovon, P. Geoltrain (eds.), *Écrits apocryphes chrétiens (EAC)*, I, Paris, Gallimard, “Bibliothèque de la Pléiade”, 1997, p. XVII.

¹⁰ The three synoptic gospels are those of Matthew, Mark and Luke. All three show important analogies, whereas the *Gospel of John* proves to be quite original. They are characterized by the word “synoptic” because they can be presented and compared in a table with several parallel columns, in “synopsis”.

¹¹ They were “expressly written to defend heterodox teachings, whether they are made entirely of imagination or whether they are falsifying the canonical writings”, *Dictionnaire de la Bible: Supplément (DBS)*, Paris, Letouzey et Ané, 1907–1953, p. 470. Among the most famous of them, there is the *Gospel of Thomas*.

the fact that they are fictitious stories whose heroes are Jesus, Mary and their families.¹² These “fiction” gospels are divided into three main groups: “Jesus’s family”, “Jesus’s infancies” and “the Passion Cycle”. The first group is divided into two subgroups. The first one contains texts that narrate Mary’s life; called the Infancy Gospels. The texts of the second subgroup recount Mary’s passing and her fate after death; called the *Dormitio Virginis* or *Transitus (Virginis) Mariae*. The second group, “Jesus’s infancies”, contains numerous various texts, but they all have one thing in common: their authors do not accept the fact that there is no trace of Jesus’s divinity during his early youth. The key text of this cycle is the *History of Jesus’s Infancy* which has long been published under the misleading title of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. Finally, “the Passion Cycle” contains accounts of the death of Jesus and what followed. Its key text is the *Gospel of Nicodemus* or *Acta Pilati B* which recounts the Harrowing of Hell.

A. The “proto-Lives”¹³ of the Virgin: the Infancy Gospels and the *Transitus mariae*

The two subgroups of apocrypha that are part of the “Jesus’s family”, the Infancy Gospels and the *Transitus Mariae*, were not composed at the same time – the first ones before and the second ones after the canon was fixed – and they do not address the same theological issues.

1. The Infancy Gospels

The Protoevangelium of James

The earliest Infancy Gospel is the *Protoevangelium of James* (BHL 5333m and following). It is a Greek manuscript which dates from around the beginning of the second century. It has been pseudepigraphically ascribed to James the Greater, but the *Gelasian Decree*¹⁴ attributed it to James the Less. In the sixteenth century, a Jesuit named Guillaume Postel discovered the manuscript while travelling in the East. After his return to the West, he published a Latin translation in 1552 and entitled it *Proto-*

¹² For more details, see *DBS, ibid.*, p. 460–514.

¹³ We borrow this term from S. J. Shoemaker, *The Life of the Virgin, Maximus the Confessor*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2012, p. 18.

¹⁴ Written between the late fifth and early sixth century, the Decree of Gelasius is a catalogue of the works forbidden, such as the *Protoevangelium of James* and the *Gospel of Nicodemus*.

*evangelium of James*¹⁵, because it relates events before those recounted in the New Testament gospels. This text was not regarded as a sacred writing, but as a historical one, which allowed this major text to survive despite the fact that it was charged with heresy by the Church of Rome, as it was part of the Eastern Churches' liturgy.

The text consists in the narrative of the prayers of Joachim and Ann who wished to have offspring despite their advanced age, the miraculous circumstances of Mary's conception from sterile Ann, Mary's upbringing in the Temple, her betrothal to Joseph, the Annunciation, the Nativity of Christ in Bethlehem, the Flight into Egypt, and it ends with the murder of Zechariah by Herod. This apocryphon was highly influential as it emphasized Mary's virginity *ante, in* and *post partum*. Its other distinctive feature is that it is the earliest text describing Joseph as a widower with sons, thus offering an explanation for the "brothers of Jesus" mentioned in the New Testament.¹⁶ The *Protoevangelium of James* was enormously successful and widely disseminated. A Latin translation circulated from at least the fourth century in the West, but it was ignored in official circles, mainly as a result of the rejection of its authority by Jerome. But this did not prevent this apocryphon from entering into the tradition.¹⁷

The Gospel of the Pseudo-Matthew

The oldest Latin rendition of the *Protoevangelium of James* is the *Gospel of the Pseudo-Matthew* (BHL 5334 and following), but this is not its original title.¹⁸ This text was pseudepigraphically attributed to Matthew. Its author draws on the *Protoevangelium of James* and the *Infancy Gospel of Pseudo-Thomas*. The *Protoevangelium of James* began with the words *Ego Iacobus* but, as the Decree of Gelasius condemned the text, the author of the earliest form of the *Pseudo-Matthew*, the form A, replaced these words by a fictitious epistolary exchange between Jerome and the bishops Chromatius and Heliodorus. In the first letter, the

¹⁵ M. Neander, *Proteuangelion sive de natalibus Iesu Christi et ipsius Virginis Mariae sermo historicus divi Iacobi minoris...*, Bâle, 1552.

¹⁶ *Mt* 13, 55–56; *Mc* 6, 3.

¹⁷ Brian K. Reynolds, *Gateway to Heaven: Marian Doctrine and Devotion, Image and Typology in the Patristic and Medieval Periods*. New York: New City Press Hyde Park, 2012, vol. 1, p. 190–191.

¹⁸ In the manuscripts, the text has another title, *Liber de nativitate (beatae) Mariae et infancia salvatoris* (Book on the birth of the Blessed Mary and the Infancy of the Saviour). It also attained the following title *De nativitate (sanctae) Mariae (virginis)*. For more details, see J. Gijssels, "Évangile du Pseudo-Matthieu: Introduction", *EAC*, I, *op. cit.*, 1997, p. 107.

bishops ask Jerome to translate a "Hebrew Gospel of Matthew" into Latin. The second letter is the positive answer from the translator of the *Vulgate*.¹⁹ The dating of this apocryphon seems to meet general agreement: Jan Gijssel believes that the first two forms independent from one another, form A and form P, should have been written "in the last decades of the sixth century or the first half of the seventh century"²⁰ while Rita Beyers dates it "between 550 and 750"²¹. Between the late eleventh and mid-twelfth century appears a third form, Q, which depends on P, and ultimately, around 1200, a fourth form, known as R, which is a reworking of Q.²²

The *Pseudo-Matthew* is divided into four parts: "History of Joachim and Ann", "History of Mary", "History of Jesus", "The Flight of the Holy Family into Egypt".²³ As for its distinctive features that differentiate it from the *Protoevangelium of James*, this is what Rita Beyers says:

... in the first part, the reworker shifted the emphasis, from the figure of Ann to that of Joachim, so that the narrative reflected the political and social situation of the reign of the Merovingian kings. He inserted a chapter describing Mary's life in the Temple. [In this chapter], one can clearly see the influence of the early monastic rules and this chapter appears to be taken from another Latin source. He replaced the story of the murder of Zechariah by that of the flight into Egypt, which is presented as a series of four miracles, [...].²⁴

Finally, as an example of reworking and amplification, there is in the *Protoevangelium of James* (20, 4) the scene of the Nativity of Jesus in the cave, in which the hand of the midwife Salome is consumed by fire because she had doubts, whereas in the *Pseudo-Matthew* (13, 4), Salome

¹⁹ J. Gijssel, *ibid.*, p. 112. For more details, see *ibid.*, p. 107–114; R. Beyers, "La réception médiévale du matériel apocryphe concernant la naissance et la jeunesse de Marie : Le *Speculum Historiale* de Vincent de Beauvais et la *Legenda aurea* de Jacques de Voragine", J. Longère, É. Cothenet (éd.), *Marie dans les récits apocryphes chrétiens : communications présentées lors de la 60^e session de la Société Française d'Études Mariales, Solesmes 2003*, Paris, Médiaspaul, "Études mariales", 2004, p. 179–200.

²⁰ Jan Gijssel, *ibid.*, p. 112.

²¹ Rita Beyers, *art. cit.*, p. 180.

²² For more details, see J. Gijssel, *op. cit.*, p. 111–113; R. Beyers, *ibid.*, p. 180–181.

²³ *Évangile de l'Enfance du Pseudo-Matthieu*, in *EAC*, I, *op. cit.*, p. 117–140.

²⁴ "... dans la première partie le remanieur a transféré l'accent, de la figure d'Anne à celle de Joachim, de façon que le récit reflète la situation politique et sociale du règne des rois mérovingiens. Il a inséré un chapitre décrivant la vie de Marie au Temple où l'on constate nettement l'influence des premières règles monastiques et qui semble emprunté à une autre source latine. Il a remplacé le récit du meurtre de Zacharie par celui de la fuite en Égypte, qui se présente comme une suite de quatre miracles, [...]". R. Beyers, *art. cit.*, p. 180.

has a withered hand. Moreover, it is in the latter that the episode of the crib in the stable with the ox and the ass appears – and one knows how enormously successful this tradition will be in Christian liturgy.

The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary

The *Evangelium de nativitate Mariae*, or *De Nativitate Mariae*, (BHL 5343 and following) is a reworking of the *Pseudo-Matthew* dating from around the ninth century. The *Gospel of the Nativity of Mary* is a short Latin text which is traditionally attributed to Jerome. In this narrative that the author wanted to be “stripped of the romantic details of the apocryphal tradition”²⁵, some episodes from the *Pseudo-Matthew* are omitted, such as, the complaint of Ann and the crib. The unknown author displays thorough knowledge of the biblical accounts of the Annunciation and Jesus’s birth.²⁶ The text combined the first twelve chapters of the *Pseudo-Matthew* with canonical texts from Matthew and Luke. The narrative gives an account of Mary’s birth and childhood, her betrothal to Joseph and the Nativity of Jesus. The *De Nativitate Mariae* was enormously popular and soon added to the collections of texts to be read during Mass on the feast of the Nativity of the Virgin. In fact:

[t]he institution of the feast²⁷ and the writing of this apocryphon proceed from this continuous development of the Western cult of the Virgin, which reached a peak around the year one thousand and then triumphs in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.²⁸

These two Latin renditions of the *Protevangelium of James* both show that their authors shared the same will to “legitimate their narrative”. The *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* made Mary, the “model of the nuns”, while the *Gospel of the Nativity of Mary* can be seen to reflect a desire of “harmonization with the canonical Scriptures”.²⁹

²⁵ “dépouillé des détails romantiques de la tradition apocryphe”, R. Beyers, “*Livre de la Nativité de Marie: Introduction*”, in *EAC*, I, *op. cit.*, 1997, p. 146.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

²⁷ It is the feast of the Nativity of Mary which is celebrated on September 8.

²⁸ “L’institution de la fête et la rédaction de cet apocryphe procèdent de ce développement continu du culte occidental de la Vierge, qui atteint un degré éminent vers l’an mille et triomphe aux XII^e et XIII^e siècles”, A. Boureau, “La Nativité de Marie: Notes”, A. Boureau, M. Goullet, P. Collomb *et alii* (eds), *La Légende dorée*, Paris, Gallimard, “Bibliothèque de la Pléiade”, 2004, p. 1372.

²⁹ E. Norelli, *Marie des apocryphes: Enquête sur la mère de Jésus dans le christianisme antique*, Genève, Labor et Fides, “Christianismes antiques”, 2009, p. 96–102.

2. The *Transitus Mariae*

The *Transitus Mariae* (BHL 5348 and following) are apocryphal, homiletic and patristic texts that convey ancient traditions about the ultimate fate of the Virgin, the Dormition, or Assumption³⁰ as it came to be called in the Latin Church in the eighth century. They were written between the fifth and the seventh centuries, that is to say, after the biblical canon was entirely fixed. These narratives were enormously popular. The problem is that the *Transitus* texts are manifold and that the classification criteria suggested by scholars differ. Let us bear in mind that there are two main types of stories, the “Palm from the Tree of Life” family (30 texts) and the “Bethlehem and the Burning of Incense” family (27 texts), to which must be added ten “homilies for the feasts of the death and assumption which draw freely on apocryphal narratives”.³¹ We owe this division to Michel van Esbroeck.³²

The texts of the two families of *Transitus* tell more or less the same story, but some details differ greatly. Two years after his ascension, Gabriel – or Jesus, according to the different versions – appears before Mary to announce her impending death and her assumption. Previously, Mary had asked her son to keep her body safe from corruption. Before she died, the apostles miraculously joined Mary, who is either in Jerusalem or Bethlehem. Many miracles follow. It is on the last point that the two families differ. In the texts of the “Palm from the Tree of Life” family, three days after Mary's death, her body is taken by Christ and a myriad of angels, followed by the apostles, in paradise, under the tree of life, and her soul is reinserted into her body. The apostles then return to their evangelistic mission on earth. The most influential of these *Dormition* narratives is the *Transitus Mariae* of *Pseudo-John*. In the “Bethlehem and the Burning of Incense” family, the apostles and the Virgin's body are miraculously taken to paradise on clouds five days after Mary's death. There they meet, among others, Ann and Elizabeth. Mary's body remains in paradise while her soul ascends to heaven; paradise and heaven

³⁰ Strictly speaking, the Dormition (falling asleep) is a separate event from the Assumption since the Dormition implies the end of Mary's earthly life and the Assumption signifies her ascent to Heaven (*Transitus*), either with or without her body.

³¹ M. Clayton, *The Apocryphal Gospels of Mary in Anglo-Saxon England*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 45.

³² M. van Esbroeck, “Les textes littéraires sur l'Assomption avant le X^e siècle”, in *Les Actes apocryphes des apôtres : Christianisme et monde païen*, Genève, Labor et Fides, “Publications de la Faculté de théologie de l'Université de Genève”, 1981, 4, p. 265–285.

being two distinct places, body and soul are not reunited. The apostles are then sent back on earth to testify what they have witnessed. The key text in this family is the *Transitus of Pseudo-Melito*.

To conclude, as for the dissemination of apocrypha, Enrico Norelli recalls that the Church reworked these books by assigning them the same functions as hagiographic legends and it is thanks to this new institutional status that the Infancy Gospels and the *Transitus* texts reached the Latin Middle Ages.³³ These homiletic rewritings explain their penetration of the hagiographic literature and enabled these texts to adapt in some way to their context:

... neither with the help of immediate authority of an apostolic character (as *Transitus of Pseudo-John*), nor with the help of an apostolic authority via an intermediary (the *Transitus of Pseudo-Melito*, alleged disciple of John); [these homilies] do so by claiming to adhere to the ecclesiastical institution as such, which supports the feast and ensures the validity of the cult as it keeps it under control.³⁴

The most popular of these homiletic rewritings is the *Letter to Paula and Eustochium*, also called *Pseudo-Jerome* or *Cogitis me*. The text begins with these words: *Cogitis me, o Paula et Eustochium*. Its composition is quite surprising for a letter. Indeed, this treatise is both “a speech, a sermon, a doctrinal exposition of the mystery of the Incarnation, an exhortation to the present and future virgins to imitate the virtues of Mary”.³⁵ Its author is Paschasius Radbertus (ca 790 – ca 868), monk and abbot of Corbie, and an eminent theologian. It is dated between 835 or 836. This treatise presents itself:

... as a homily written by Jerome (Paschasius) at the request of Paula (Theodora, abbess of Soissons) and her daughter Eustochium (Emma) for the nuns of their community (St. Mary at Soissons). He [the author]

³³ E. Norelli, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

³⁴ “[...] non plus à l’aide de l’autorité immédiate d’un personnage apostolique (comme le *Transitus* du *Pseudo-Jean*), mais pas non plus à l’aide d’une autorité apostolique passant par un intermédiaire (le *Transitus* du *Pseudo-Mélon*, disciple prétendu de l’apôtre Jean) ; [ces homélies] le font en se réclamant de l’autorité de l’institution ecclésiastique en tant que telle, qui soutient la fête et garantit la validité du culte du fait même qu’elle le garde sous son contrôle”, *ibid.*, p. 145.

³⁵ “... un discours, une homélie, un exposé doctrinal du mystère de l’Incarnation, une exhortation aux vierges présentes et futures à imiter les vertus de Marie.”, M. A. A. Jugie, *La Mort et l’Assomption de la Sainte Vierge. Étude historico-doctrinale*, Rome, Presso la Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Studi e testi 114, 1944, p. 277.

does not accept the bodily assumption, but he stresses that Mary is glorified by all the angels and saints because of her exceptional dignity as the Mother of God.³⁶

It enjoyed such a huge success that it would be included among the sources of all the medieval *Lives of the Virgin*.

B. The Byzantine tradition: the earliest *Lives of the Virgin*

1. Genesis and generic features

In the seventh century, in the Byzantine Christian Empire, influential members of the clergy began to write sacred biographies of the Virgin Mary. At this time, these works were given the same considerations as the theological treatises. Moreover, it is also during the seventh century that the *Protoevangelium of James* and the “Six Books” Dormition apocryphon, the earliest exemplar of the “Bethlehem and the Burning of Incense” family, circulated. These two texts are considered by Stephen J. Shoemaker as the “earlier ‘proto-*Lives*’ of the Virgin”.³⁷

In his article on the subject³⁸, Simon Claude Mimouni estimated that the *Lives of the Virgin* “also called *Life-Histories of the Virgin*, are an intermediate literary genre between the hagiographic narrative and the homiletic narrative”.³⁹ Generically, they are composite, even heterogeneous texts. These stories offer little originality. The parts are identical: the Nativity and the Infancy of Mary, the life of Jesus, from his Nativity to the Resurrection, and an account of the Assumption. Besides the fact that these are often occasional works, they are also doctrinal writings where their authors take a stand on mariological issues such as the belief in the perpetual virginity of the Virgin or in the Dormition and Assumption. They were probably intended for “liturgical reading in monastic circles or even for a parish audience”.⁴⁰

³⁶ “... comme une homélie écrite par Jérôme (Paschasius) à la demande de Paula (Théodrade, abbesse de Soissons) et de sa fille Eustochium (Emma) pour les moniales de leur communauté (Notre Dame de Soissons). [...] Il [l’auteur] n’accepte pas l’assomption corporelle, mais souligne que Marie est glorifiée par tous les anges et saints à cause de son exceptionnelle dignité comme mère de Dieu”, R. Beyers, “*De Nativitate Mariae* : problèmes d’origine”, *Revue de théologie et de philosophie*, Lausanne, vol. 122, 1990, p. 171–188, p. 175.

³⁷ S. J. Shoemaker, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

³⁸ S. C. Mimouni, “Les *Vies de la Vierge*: État de la question”, *Apocrypha*, 1994, 5, p. 211–248.

³⁹ “également appelées *Histoires de la Vierge*, relèvent d’un genre littéraire intermédiaire entre le récit hagiographique et le récit homilétique”, *ibid.*, p. 211.

⁴⁰ “la lecture liturgique en milieu monastique, voire même en milieu paroissial”, *ibid.*, p. 211–212.

It seems that it is a Syriac manuscript, dated from the late fifth or early sixth century, which is at the origin of the genre. Indeed, one finds in the latter the three texts that are usually found in the *Lives of the Virgin*, but successively without any transitional passages:

It contains at the fos 12a–14b, a narrative of the Nativity of Mary (= *Protevangelium of James*), at the fos 14b–16a, a tale of Jesus' youth (= *Gospel of Pseudo-Thomas*) and at the fos 16a–45a, a narrative of the Dormition (= the Syriac *Six Books*).⁴¹

2. The earliest *Life of the Virgin*⁴²

It is attributed to Maximus the Confessor († 662), a Byzantine monk and theologian. Written in Greek, his *Life of the Virgin* is only preserved in an Old Georgian translation. From a literary perspective, it is a biography of Mary which consists of the following parts: the Birth and Childhood, the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Presentation in the Temple, the Revelation, the Passion of Christ, the Resurrection of Christ and the Dormition. The author compiled various sources, including the *Protoevangelium of James* and the “*Six Books*” Dormition apocryphon. In Chapter 2 of his *Life*, Maximus the Confessor refers to the canonical and patristic sources he drew upon. Then he gives an explanation about the use of apocryphal data while placing himself under the authority of a Father:

And if we say some things from the apocryphal writings, this is true and without error, and it is what has been accepted and confirmed by the above-mentioned Fathers. For so the blessed Gregory of Nyssa says, “I have read in an apocrypha book that the father of all-holy Virgin Mary was renowned for his observance of the Law and was famous for his charity”.⁴³

The fact that Maximus the Confessor quotes the favourable comment to the *Protoevangelium of James* that Gregory of Nyssa made in his *Homily on the Nativity* is not surprising. This is because it should not be forgotten that just as hagiographic narratives needed the ecclesiastical institution's recognition, the apocrypha could only exist outside of the biblical canon on the sole condition that they were recognized by the au-

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁴² For more details, see M. van Esbroeck, *Maxime le Confesseur : Vie de la Vierge*, Louvain, Peeters Publishers, “Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium” 478 et 479, 2 vols., 1986, p. i–xxxii; S. J. Shoemaker, *op. cit.*, 2012, p. 1–35.

⁴³ S. J. Shoemaker, *ibid.*, p. 38. All translations of Maximus' *Life of the Virgin* are Shoemaker's.

thority of the Church.⁴⁴ Moreover, Maximus interpolates into his narrative long theological and exegetical comments, and he even adds new episodes; among others, a “surprisingly developed account of Mary’s active involvement in her son’s ministry and her subsequent leadership of the apostles and the early church following his Ascension”.⁴⁵

From a doctrinal point of view, Maximus the Confessor avoids taking a frank stand about Mary’s ultimate fate. Indeed, he mentions the two traditions concluding that only God knows what happened to the Virgin after her death. As for the Immaculate Conception, that says Mary would be born without being tainted with original sin, he adopts the point of view held by the author of the *Protoevangelium of James*. For him, Mary is “the immaculate mother of Christ”, “the ever-virgin Mary” or “the immaculate Theotokos”, i.e. Mary is *virginitas ante partum, virginitas in partu* and *virginitas post partum*. However, he remains silent on the question of original sin.

3. The other Byzantine *Lives of the Virgin*

Among the other *Lives of the Virgin* written in Greek in the same geographical area, three have been clearly identified until this day, those by Epiphanius the Monk (late eighth century), John the Geometer and Symeon the Metaphrast, both dating from the late tenth century.⁴⁶ The paternity of the genre has long been erroneously attributed to Epiphanius the Monk. In his *Life*, he wished to be a critical compiler with regards to the sources he used; namely the *Protoevangelium of James*, the homilies on the Dormition of John of Thessalonica and Andrew of Crete, as well as the *Pseudo-John*, and he takes care to mention it in his prologue.⁴⁷ Regarding his sources concerning Mary’s fate after death, “Epiphanius’ use of the Dormition narratives from John of Thessalonica’s homily and the Ps.-John *Transitus* reflects the emerging quasi-canonical status of these two texts at around the same time”.⁴⁸

We do not know how the *Lives of the Virgin* born in Christian Eastern Empire arrived in Western Europe, or which of them were then circulating. What we do know is that there is a Latin version of the *Life of Mary* by Epiphanius the Monk, which was disseminated in Medieval Europe,

⁴⁴ E. Norelli, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

⁴⁵ S. J. Shoemaker, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁴⁶ For more details, S. C. Mimouni, *art. cit.*, p. 211–248.

⁴⁷ S. C. Mimouni, *ibid.*, p. 224.

⁴⁸ S. J. Shoemaker, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

and which is attested in several manuscripts.⁴⁹ This translation dates from the twelfth century and is dedicated to Henry Dandolo (ca 1130–1180), Patriarch of Grado. Its author's name is Paschal Romain.⁵⁰

II. *Marín saga* and the continental medieval *Lives of the Virgin*

Thanks to their homiletic renditions, the Infancy Gospels and the *Transitus Mariae* texts were integrated independently into the Dominican hagiographic collections. The five major Dominican compilers were the ones who contributed to disseminating them throughout medieval Europe; namely John of Mailly, Bartholomew of Trent, Vincent of Beauvais, Humbert of Romans and Jacobus of Voragine.⁵¹ At the same period, the *De Nativitate Mariae* appeared in the official liturgy through, *inter alia*, the sermons of Fulbert of Chartres; and during the thirteenth century it was used in lessons at Mass. Thus, these texts which convey traditions long accepted by popular piety came to enrich evangelic history and were included in the traditional teaching clergymen received during that time. Meanwhile, members of the clergy began to compose sacred biographies of the Virgin Mary, both in Latin and in vernacular languages.

A. The continental *Lives of the Virgin*

Two texts were enormously popular in continental Medieval West: the *Vita Rythmica* and the *Conception Nostre Dame*. The latter is the most representative of all the biographies of Mary written in the Old French-speaking area.⁵²

1. The *Vita Rythmica*

In the first half of the thirteenth century, the *Vita Beatae Virginis Mariae et Salvatoris Rythmica* – a Latin *Life of the Virgin* probably written in

⁴⁹ S. C. Mimouni, *art. cit.*, p. 228.

⁵⁰ It has been edited by E. Franceschini, *Studi e note di filologia latina medievale*, Milano, Societa editrice "Vita et pensiero", 1938, p. 111–124.

⁵¹ About the way they used apocryphal data on Mary's birth and adolescence, see R. Beyers, *art. cit.*, p. 189–199.

⁵² For a list and brief description of the other *Lives of the Virgin* in *langue d'oïl* (Anglo-Norman and Old French), see P. Meyer, "Les légendes hagiographiques en français", in *Histoire littéraire de la France*, Paris, Imprimerie nationale, t. XXXIII, 1906, p. 328–358; R. J. Dean, *Anglo-Norman literature: a Guide to Texts and Manuscripts*, London, Anglo-Norman Text Society, 1999, p. 265–273.

the south-eastern German-speaking countries – experienced some success, as is evidenced by its survival in sixty manuscripts and by its various translations in the vernacular. This text consists of four books: 1) the story of Joachim and Ann, Mary's Immaculate Conception, her childhood and dedication to the Temple, her betrothal to Joseph (l. 1–1477); 2) the Annunciation, the Nativity of Christ, the Flight into Egypt, the return to Judea and the life in Nazareth (l. 1478–3622); 3) Jesus's Ministry, his Passion and Mary's compassion for her suffering son (l. 3623–6061); and 4) the Resurrection, the Pentecost, the Assumption (l. 6062–8031). Each book contains a prologue, and an epilogue concludes this *vita mariae*.⁵³

The main sources of the *Vita Rythmica* – whose unknown author recognizes that this is a *compilatio* (l. 7975) – are three *Lives of Mary*, recently translated into Latin, including that of Epiphanius the Monk (l. 1–14). Other sources include, among others, the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, *Homilies on the Assumption*, references to Augustine and Jerome. Its author also draws on the *Speculum Ecclesiae* by Honorius Augustodunensis and the *Historia scholastica* by Peter Comestor.⁵⁴ Its interest lies in the fact that theological commentaries are interpolated into the narration:

The author takes a firm stand with regard to certain points of Marian doctrine of his time: on the one hand, it states the belief in the Immaculate Conception; on the other hand, it propagates the belief in the Assumption.⁵⁵

The *Vita Rythmica* enjoyed such a success that it was included among the sources of numerous *Marienleben*.

2. The *Conception Nostre Dame* by Wace

Wace defined himself as a “clerc-lisant”⁵⁶ and was one of the most popular Anglo-Norman writers, thanks to his *Roman de Rou* and *Roman de Brut*. He began his poetical activities with three hagiographical poems:

⁵³ *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique (DSp)*, Paris, Beauchesne, 1932–1995, XVI, p. 1025–1028.

⁵⁴ S. C. Mimouni, *art. cit.*, p. 246–247.

⁵⁵ “L’auteur prend fortement position à propos de certains points de la doctrine mariale de son temps : d’une part, il affirme la croyance en l’*Immaculée Conception* ; d’autre part, il propage la croyance en l’*assomption*”, *ibid.*, p. 246.

⁵⁶ A “clerc lisant” was a sort of notary, whose responsibility was to read texts aloud in various types of assemblies. This means that, as a “clerc lisant”, Wace was used to translate the Latin into French for the benefit of non-clerical listeners.

La Vie de sainte Marguerite, the *Conception Nostre Dame* and *La Vie de saint Nicolas*, composed some time in the second quarter of the twelfth century, before he joined the court of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Henry II Plantagenet around 1150. All his works were widely disseminated. According to Françoise H. M. Le Saux, the *Conception Nostre Dame* “is likely to have been commissioned” given that “theologically, it was composed in the middle of a polemic” about “the newly formulated doctrine of the Immaculate Conception”.⁵⁷

The *Conception Nostre Dame* is a *Life of the Virgin* from her Conception to her Dormition and Assumption. It is a poem of 1810 octosyllabic lines grouped in rhymed couplets, which were favoured by twelfth-century romance writers. It consists of five parts: 1) the *Établissement de la Feste de la Conception Nostre Dame* is the narrative of the miracle of Helsin that leads to the establishing of the feast in England (l. 8–172); 2) the *Conception Nostre Dame* is the account of Mary’s life, from her Conception to the Nativity of Christ (l. 173–1110); 3) a short transition poem, “where the narrator summarises what precedes and announces a new section on the Virgin’s family”⁵⁸ (l. 1111–1139); 4) the *Histoire des Trois Maries* (l. 1140–1292); and 5) the *Assomption* (l. 1293–1810). These five parts are “connected, in a loose but effective manner, by short transitional passages in the narrator’s voice with a strong homiletic quality”.⁵⁹

The sources consist of the following: 1) the translation of a *Miraculum de conceptione sanctae Mariae*, ascribed at the time to St. Anselm; 2) the second part was inspired by the *Gospel of the Nativity of Mary* and the *Protoevangelium of James*; 3) the third part is taken from the *Trinubium Annae*⁶⁰; and 4) the last one is the translation of the *Transitus of Pseudo-Melito*. What is interesting is that, from a doctrinal point of view, it draws on both the *Cogitis me* (which represents the hostile tradition to the Assumption) and the Pseudo-Augustine (representing the favourable tradition to the Assumption)⁶¹ at the same time.

⁵⁷ Françoise H.M. Le Saux, *A Companion to Wace*, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2005, p. 8; see also W. R. Ashford, *The Conception Nostre Dame : a dissertation...*, Chicago, University of Chicago Libraries, 1933.

⁵⁸ Françoise H.M. Le Saux, *ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁶⁰ In the ninth century, Haymo of Auxerre composed his *Historiae sacrae epitome*. In this work, according to Jerome’s position, Haymo offered a new explanation for the “brothers of Jesus” mentioned in the canonical Gospels: Ann was married three times and gave birth to three girls named Mary. Their children, Jesus’s cousins, are called his “brothers”. This legend was so popular that it eventually began circulating independently under the title of *Trinubium Annae*. We know several versions in verse and in prose.

⁶¹ M. A. A. Jugie, *op. cit.*, p. 360.

Among the features of the text are, firstly, a narrative economy and, secondly, a strong didactic intent. One example is when, in the end of the second part of the poem, Wace makes a long comment on the mystery of the incarnation and on the perpetual virginity of Mary. He also addresses the contrast between Eve and Mary – Eve is the one who brought sin into the world and Mary is the one who redeemed it by the sacrifice of her son, the Redeemer. Another example is when he comments on a short episode from *De Nativitate Mariae* on the oblation that Joachim did before joining Ann at the Golden Door in Jerusalem:

Par les aigniaus que il ocist,
Nos senefie Jhesucrist,
Qui en la croiz fu morz et pris,
Et por noz pechiez fu ocis :
Aigniau fu qui nul mal ne fist,
Aigniaus qui nul mal ne dist.
Li.xij. tor senefierent
Li.xij. apostle qui p[r]echierent
Et puis furent sacrefié
Por amour dieu et martreié.
Les cent brebiz qu'ot demandées,
Au pueple furent devisées :
Ce nos avis senefie
La celestiaus compaignie,
Car cent, cist nombres, ce savon,
Senefie perfection.
Icil qui sont el ciel lassus
Sont parfait, ne lor estuet plus ;
Sanz enferté sont et sanz vice,
Sanz mauvestié et sanz dampnice.⁶²

In this passage, Wace explains that the twelve white lambs sacrificed to God represent Jesus Christ who died for our sins, that the twelve bulls sacrificed for the poor represent the apostles who preached and who were martyred for their love of God, and that the hundred sheep sacrificed for the people represent all of mankind who one day will enjoy a perfect life in Heaven. Eventually, Wace adopts a firm stand on certain points of the Marian doctrine of his time. Wace professes his belief in the Immaculate Conception and in the resurrection of the soul and the body of the Virgin, *i.e.* in the Assumption.

⁶² G. Mancel et G.-S. Trebutien, *L'Établissement de la fête de la Conception Notre-Dame dite la Fête aux Normands par Wace, trouvère anglo-normand du XIIe siècle, publié pour la première fois d'après les manuscrits de la Bibliothèque du Roi*, Caen, B. Mancel, 1842, p. 20–21.

To conclude, minor differences can be noted between the medieval *Lives of the Virgin* and the Byzantine *Lives* as they did not address the same theological problems. The *Vita Rhythmica* only recounts the great moments of Jesus's ministry in order to emphasize the compassionate attitude of Mary. As for Wace, he did not include moments of Jesus's life after his Nativity in the *Conception Nostre Dame*.

B. *Mariu saga*: a *Life of the Virgin* in Old Norse

The saga is extant in three redactions all dating from the 13th century to the early 14th century, that were identified by Carl Richard Unger in the introduction to his edition:⁶³

- I – The A-redaction (AM 234 fol). It is also fully preserved in the manuscripts AM 232 fol (B) and AM 633 4to (C);
- II – The St-redaction (Holm perg 11 4to), which is also preserved in a fragment of a manuscript AM 233, folio; it is the text on which the present study is based.
- III – The E-redaction (Holm perg 1 4to); two other manuscripts also contain fragments; namely AM 240 I fol and AM 240 IX folio.⁶⁴

Regarding the content and the stylistic features in the three texts, Laura Tomassini claims in her dissertation that “[n]one of these three texts seems to originate from the others and they are to be treated as parallel redactions of the same saga, probably derived from a common archetype”.⁶⁵

The question of its authorship is still unsolved. An old tradition ascribed the composition of the saga to Kygri-Björn Hjaltason⁶⁶ († 1238),

⁶³ C. R. Unger (ed.), *Mariu saga: Legender om jomfru Maria og hendes jertegn, efter gamle haandskrifter*, Kristiania, Brøgger & Christie, 1871, p. XI–XXXII. The Norwegian philologist published a collection of texts consisting of *Mariu saga* and a collection of some two hundred stories of miracles of the Virgin. This is a diplomatic edition, in the spirit of the facsimile.

⁶⁴ For a complete handlist of the manuscripts with references to their approximate dates and a bibliography on *Mariu saga*, see K. Wolf, *The Legends of the Saints in Old Norse-Icelandic Prose*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2014, p. 231–235. This work is an updated version of H. Bekker-Nielsen, O. Widding and L. K. Shook, “The lives of the Saints in Old Norse prose: A Handlist,” *Mediaeval Studies*, 1963, vol. 25, p. 294–337; on *Mariu saga*, see p. 321–322.

⁶⁵ L. Tomassini, *An Analysis of the three redactions of Mariu saga, with particular reference to their style and relation to their Latin sources*, Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Københavns Universitet, 1997, p. 17–18.

⁶⁶ Shortly after the election of Guðmundr góði Arason as Bishop of Hólar, Kygri-Björn Hjaltason († 1238) became the secretary of the diocese. However, the two men got along very poorly. Kygri-Björn left Iceland in 1214, traveling first to Norway and then to Rome,

based on a statement in the *Guðmundar saga Arasonar*⁶⁷; firstly, because Kygri-Björn Hjaltason was in Rome in 1214, *i.e.* a year before the Fourth Council of the Lateran was held, and, secondly, because Arngrímur Brandsson, its author, wrote that: “Var Kygri-Björn mikilsháttar klerkr, sem auðsýnask má í því, at hann hefir samsett Maríu sögu”⁶⁸. A controversy however erupted when Ole Widding was the first to challenge this ascription for reasons of chronological ordering:

[...] er det ikke sandsynligt, at han er “forfatteren”, medmindre han har anvendt de samme kilder, som de to ovenfor omtalte latinske forfattere. Man ved dog, at sagaen har været til i det trettende århundrede, for der findes to fragmenter af sagaen, der må stamme fra det århundrede.⁶⁹

Following the Danish scholar, Laura Tomassini⁷⁰ and Wilhelm Heizmann⁷¹ also questioned the ascription to the Icelandic clerk. In order to close the question regarding the identity of the compiler⁷², scholars established that: firstly, there are three versions of the saga clearly identified; secondly, they were not written at the same time; and thirdly, the latter version does not draw on the same sources as the first two versions. Moreover, it is quite possible that there were other versions of the *Lives of the Virgin* in Iceland and Norway at that time. This means that if Kygri-Björn Hjaltason is the compiler of one of the versions of *Maríu saga*, then the question regarding which version remains.

Maríu saga is the biography in prose of Mary in Old Norse. Here is its content schematically summarized:⁷³

where he attended the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Kygri-Björn returned to Iceland in 1224 and was elected Bishop of Hólar in 1236. He then returned again to Rome, but died on the way back in 1237 or 1238. Thus, the year 1215 can in fact be seen as the *terminus post quem* because in one of the last chapters of the saga there is an account of that council.

⁶⁷ This saga was written in c. 1350, cf. R. Boyer, *La vie religieuse en Islande (1116–1264) d'après la Sturlunga Saga et les Sagas des Évêques*, Paris, Fondation Singer-Polignac, 1979, p. 24.

⁶⁸ GSAA, *Biskupa sögur* II, København, 1878, p. 186.

⁶⁹ O. Widding, “Jærtegn og Maríu saga”, O. Widding, H. Bekker-Nielsen, T. D. Olsen, *Norrøn fortællekunst: Kapitler af den norsk-islandske middelalderlitteraturs historie*, København, Akademisk Forlag, 1965, p. 129.

⁷⁰ L. Tomassini, *op. cit.*.

⁷¹ W. Heizmann, *art. cit.*, p. 407–408.

⁷² According to A. J. Minnis's work on authorship, I will use the word “compiler” rather than “author” since the *auctor* “bore full responsibility for what he had written, the *compiler* firmly denied any personal authority and accepted responsibility only for the manner in which he had arranged the statements of other men”, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988, 2nd ed., p. 193.

⁷³ The summary of the text of the saga is based on the text St, p. 1–62 (Unger, 1871). I indicate in parentheses the numbering of chapters in the Unger edition.

- A prologue ;
- The story of Joachim and Ann, Mary’s conception and birth (chap. 1–3);
- Two exegetical chapters on the *Song of Degrees* and on the *Psalms* (chap. 4–5);
- Mary’s education and dedication to the Temple from the age of three, her desire to remain chaste, her engagement to Joseph, the Annunciation (chap. 6–10);
- The Visitation, the *Magnificat*, Joseph’s doubts, the departure for Jerusalem, Jesus’s birth in Bethlehem, the Magi (chap. 11–15);
- The Presentation to the Temple (chap. 16);
- Herod’s journey to Rome, his return to Judea, the Slaughter of the Innocents (chap. 17);
- The flight of the Holy Family into Egypt, the story of the miracles then accomplished by Jesus⁷⁴, the death of Herod the Great and the division of his kingdom among his three sons (chap. 18–22);
- A brief summary of the theological and doctrinal issues raised, including that of the precise age of Christ on the day of his death, at the Fourth Lateran Council, which was held in 1215 at the initiative of Pope Innocent III (chap. 23);
- Mary’s death and Assumption, with long exegetical and theological passages on the triple peace, the man made in the image and likeness of God, and the resurrection of the body at the Last Judgement intertwined in the narrative (chap. 24–27);
- The last chapter of the saga includes an exegetical comment about the qualities of the Virgin, followed by a prayer to Mary (chap. 28).

The main sources on which there is a consensus are the following: passages of the Holy Scripture, the *De Nativitate Mariae*, the *Trinubium Annae*, and a *Transitus Mariae* narrative. Other sources, which include, among others, the *Protevangelium Jacobi*, the *Pseudo-Matthew*, Pachasius Radbertus’ *Cogitis me*, Peter Comestor’s *Historia Scholastica*, works of the Church Fathers and a translation of a poem of Godfrey of Saint-Victor entitled “*Planctus ante nescia*”, are still being debated.⁷⁵ Moreover,

⁷⁴ This is about the miracles of: the dragons who adore him; the wild beast who escort and protect the Holy Family; the miracle of the palm tree, which inclines to the feet of Mary to give her fruit; the miracle Jesus accomplishes to shorten the stages of their journey; and the falling idols when the Holy Family come in a temple and the conversion *ipso facto* of governor Afrodissius.

⁷⁵ For the inventory of the postulated sources and the positions of each, see C. Fairise, *Recherches sur la littérature hagiographique islandaise : les sagas traduites du latin en norrois (XII^e – XIV^e siècles)*, Unpublished Master’s Dissertation, Université de Toulouse II Le Mirail, 2011, p. 112–114.

scholars cannot determine which sources were used, especially for the numerous theological and exegetical comments. However, Carl Richard Unger already postulated in 1871:

Meget finder man i den store encyclopædiske Haandbog Speculum Historiale af Vincent fra Beauvais og i Legenda Aurea af Jacobus de Voragine.⁷⁶

This hypothesis deserves closer attention, firstly, because the “Life of Mary” found in the *Speculum Historiale* is a compilation of numerous sources, among which are two apocryphal gospels, the *Pseudo-Matthew* and the *Gospel of the Nativity of Mary*;⁷⁷ and, secondly, because Vincent of Beauvais:

... completes the narrative passages with numerous extracts from theological or exegetical works that he draws from the great ecclesiastical authorities from Ambrose to Bede, from Bernard of Clairvaux to Peter Comestor.⁷⁸

What is certain is that the clerks had a set of textual models on their desks so it can be assumed that the compiler of *Maríu saga* had at least heard of the literary tradition of the *Lives of the Virgin* as the Old Norse saga shares the same features with the other continental *Lives of Mary*, in other words: the combination of the narrative and homiletic genre and the intertwining of narrative and exegetical passages. Like Wace in the *Conception Notre Dame*, the Icelandic compiler explains qualities of the Virgin, when in Chapter 3, for example, he compares Mary to a star that guides sailors during the night. This comparison is due to Fulbert of Chartres:

En li doit l'en avoir torné
Et son corsage et son pensé.
Con cil qui doit aller par mer
Garde as estoiles de la mer
Une estoile qui ne se muet :
Qui connoistre la set et puet
Et son cors par lui gouverner
Ne puet pas en mer esgarer.
Cest estoile nos senefie
Nostre dame sainte Marie.⁷⁹

María þýðiz sævar stiarna, en þat
köllum vér leiðarstiörnu. En því
var þessi meyi þat nafn gefit, at
hon lýsir öllum eilífa braut, hversu
ganga skal til eilífs fagnaðar, er sinna
synda vilia iðraz, sem leiðarstiarnan
kennir faröndum mönnum rétta leið
til góðrar hafnar.⁸¹

⁷⁶ C. R. Unger, “Forord”, *Maríu saga*, *op. cit.*, p. III, note 1.

⁷⁷ R. Beyers, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

⁷⁸ “Vincent complète ces passages narratifs par de nombreux extraits d’œuvres exégétiques ou théologiques qu’il puise aux grandes autorités ecclésiastiques d’Ambroise à Bède, de Bernard de Clairvaux à Pierre Comestor”, R. Beyers, *ibid.*, p. 195.

⁷⁹ G. Mancel et G.-S. Trebutien, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

⁸⁰ *Maríu saga*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

That said, unlike the text of Wace, but also unlike the *Vita Rhythmica* and the Byzantine *Lives of the Virgin*, the comments of the Icelandic clerk and his doctrinal stand contain nothing personal. In fact, all exegetical and theological comments are made in accordance to the dogma established by the Church. For example, in Chapter 25, when commenting on the *Credo in Deum*, the clerk states that:

ok þeir lutir, er þar vóru boðnir, skylldu eigi breytaz, svá sem þat, er nú er á stórþingum upp tekit eða prestastefnum, er öllum skyllt at hallda, þar sem enir vitruztu menn hvers landz eða ríkis finnaz at.⁸¹

Therefore, it can be assumed that the clerk followed the same didactic and scholastic intent as the commentators, paraphrasers and adaptors of the Bible did, such as Herman of Valenciennes. Thus, the next part will discuss in what way *Maríu saga* also bears a strong resemblance with the *Romanz de Dieu et de sa Mere*, which is not strictly speaking a *Life of the Virgin*, but which does belong to the continental medieval tradition on Mary's life. Thus, in anthologies and literary dictionaries the *Vita Rhythmica* and the *Conception Nostre Dame* by Wace are in the section "Legends in verse" or "Hagiographic Poems", while the *Romanz de Dieu et de sa Mere* by Herman of Valenciennes appears in the "Bible" section in the category "sacred histories in verse" or "translations of the Bible in verse".

III. *Maríu Saga* and the "Marian Bible"⁸²

First of all, a brief insight into the translations-adaptations of the Bible is necessary in order to support our argument. In the early twelfth century, eminent members of the clergy, soon joined by clerks, began to translate, adapt, comment and paraphrase the Bible in both Latin and the vernaculars.⁸³ The starting point for all this is the transformation of "methods of

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁸² We borrow this term from J.-R. Smeets, "Les traductions, adaptations et paraphrases de la Bible en vers", H. R. Jauss (ed.), *Grundriss der romanischen Literaturen des Mittelalters*, vol. VI, *La littérature didactique, allégorique et satirique*, 2 vol., Heidelberg, Winter, 1968–1970, I, p. 48–57 and II, p. 81–96, I, p. 53.

⁸³ On all this, see P.-M. Bogaert, "Adaptations et versions de la Bible en prose (langue d'oïl)" and J.-R. Smeets, "Les traductions-adaptations versifiées de la Bible en ancien français", *Les genres littéraires dans les sources théologiques et philosophiques médiévales: définition, critique et exploitation. Actes du Colloque international de Louvain-la-Neuve*

reading and of interpreting the Bible". Amongst other things, this consisted of the addition of history "which is not that of the sole Bible, but that of humanity: this use was introduced in the ninth century in the practice of exegesis" in order to demonstrate "the connections between all the books of the Holy Scripture, between the Old and New Testament".⁸⁴ It then follows that the biblical text undergoes "a true metamorphosis which, certainly, was to meet very contemporary issues".⁸⁵ The biblical paraphrase is defined as:

... a transposition of an entire statement, and in fact, a rewriting of a document, in this case a text in the same language or in another. In other words, paraphrasing is conceived as a rhetorical reformulation [...] targeting an audience, identified explicitly or not. This directional reformulation incites one to piece together, and more specifically, to mix genres in order to captivate, seduce, nurture, convince and carry away.⁸⁶

This new interpretative approach would somehow be validated in a letter addressed by Pope Innocent III in 1199 to the Bishop of Metz, in which he imposed "a clear limit to the ambitions of laymen by submitting them to the doctrinal authority of the clerks. The Pope emphasizes the difficulties in interpreting the Bible, which require the assistance of competent clerks".⁸⁷ In 1228, in Paris, the General Chapter of the Dominican Order decreed that three books should be required in theological study: the *Glossa ordinaria*, Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, and Peter Comestor's *Historia Scolastica*.⁸⁸ Consequently, André Vauchez recalls that in addition to the comments of the Fathers of the Latin Church, there were:

(25–27 mai 1981), Louvain-la-Neuve, Institut d'études médiévales de l'Université Catholique de Louvain, 1982, p. 249–258 and 259–277; P.-M. Bogaert, "Bible française", G. Hasenohr, M. Zink (dir.), *Dictionnaire des lettres françaises. Le Moyen Âge*, Paris, Le Livre de Poche, "La Pochothèque", 1994, p. 179–196.

⁸⁴ G. Lobrichon, "Un nouveau genre pour un public novice: la paraphrase biblique dans l'espace roman du XII^e siècle", D. Kullmann (ed.), *The Church and Vernacular Literature in Medieval France*, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto, 2009, p. 87–108, p. 94.

⁸⁵ G. Lobrichon, *ibid.*, p. 95.

⁸⁶ "... une transposition de l'ensemble d'un énoncé, et, en réalité, d'une réécriture d'un document, ici un texte, dans la même langue ou dans une autre. En d'autres termes, la paraphrase se conçoit comme une re-formulation rhétorique [...] en direction d'un public, spécifié explicitement ou non. Cette reformulation directionnelle incite au bricolage et, tout particulièrement, au mélange des genres, afin de captiver, de séduire, de nourrir, de convaincre et transporter", G. Lobrichon, *ibid.*, p. 97.

⁸⁷ "une limite claire aux ambitions des laïcs en les soumettant à l'autorité doctrinale des clercs. Le pape insiste sur les difficultés d'interprétation de la Bible, qui requièrent l'assistance de clercs compétents", G. Lobrichon, *ibid.*, p. 88.

⁸⁸ S. R. Daly, "Peter Comestor: Master of Histories", *Speculum*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Jan., 1957), p. 62–73, p. 71.

[o]n the desks of medieval libraries, the Bible [which] is, as a general rule, followed by the *Antiquitates Judaicae* and *De Bello Judaico* of the Romanized Jewish historian Flavius Josephus that complement, in Latin version, the *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* of Pseudo-Philo of Alexandria, the narratives of the canonical books. All of it was summarized in a book of sacred history composed for students and which had a lasting success in teaching. [It is] the *Historia scolastica* of the “master of histories”, Peter Comestor († 1179), which adds excursus drawn from profane sources to the biblical frame, from the Genesis to the Acts of the Apostles.⁸⁹

As for medieval Norway and Iceland, according to Ian J. Kirby, who studied biblical translations into Old Norse in connection with those into French and into Anglo-Norman:

In the 12th century, Paris became especially popular as the centre of learning for the Nordic countries: Archbishop Erik of Nidaros and Bishop Þorlákur Þórhallsson of Skálholt studied there, and the works of the monks of St Victor and Peter Comestor became widely known. It is thus clear that the use of the Bible and translation from it in England, France and Germany in the medieval period may well throw some light on what might be expected in Norway and Iceland in the same period.⁹⁰

A. The “Marian Bible”: the *Romanz de Dieu et de sa Mere* by Herman of Valenciennes

Everything that is known about Herman of Valenciennes is in his text; namely, that he is a canon and a priest connected to the court of Hainaut. His poem, his only work, was widely disseminated. The *Romanz de Dieu et de sa Mere* by Herman was completed about 1190. It is a biblical poem written in 744 monorhymed alexandrine *laises* typical of the *chanson de geste*, that is to say 6687 + 567 lines.⁹¹ The usual title of Herman’s

⁸⁹ “Sur les pupitres des bibliothèques médiévales, la Bible est, en règle générale, suivie des *Antiquités judaïques* et de la *Guerre des Juifs* de l’historien juif romanisé Flavius Josèphe qui complètent, en version latine, avec les *Antiquités bibliques* du Pseudo-Philon d’Alexandrie, les récits des livres canoniques. Le tout sera résumé dans un véritable manuel d’histoire sainte qui a connu un succès durable dans l’enseignement, l’*Historia scolastica* du ‘maître des histoires’, Pierre le Mangeur († 1179), qui agrémenté d’excursus puisés aux sources profanes la trame biblique, de la Genèse aux Actes des apôtres”, A. Vauchez, “Bible au Moyen Âge”, *Dictionnaire des lettres françaises. Le Moyen Âge*, *op. cit.*, p. 174–179, p. 177.

⁹⁰ I. J. Kirby, *Bible Translation into Old Norse*, Genève, Université de Lausanne, “Publications de la Faculté des Lettres”, vol. XXVII, 1986, p. 7–8.

⁹¹ According to Ina Spiele’s edition which remains the most accessible. Thereupon, her work does not claim the status of a critical edition as she edited a single manuscript, Paris

poem is “*Bible*”, as it is divided into two parts, an “old” and a “new” testament. This compilation, which is for Jean Roberts Smeets a “Marian Bible [because] everything is done according to the Virgin”.⁹² The *Bible* of Herman consists of four parts: 1) the “Old Testament” which actually is a summary of sacred history from Adam to Solomon (l. 1–2694); 2) the account of Mary’s life, from her Conception to Christ’s Nativity (l. 2713–3520); 3) the “New Testament” which chronicles Christ’s life from his circumcision to his arrest (see 3521–6037) and to which is added a long excursus on John the Baptist (l. 3135–3211, l. 3857–4101); and 4) the *Assumption* (v. A1–A562).

The main sources are the following: the *Bible*⁹³, a version of the *De Nativitate Mariae*, the *Protoevangelium Jacobi*, the *Trinubium Annae*, the *Transitus W* (which is one of the Latin versions of *Pseudo-John*) and the *Transitus* of *Pseudo-Melito*, i.e. two *Transitus* that convey different traditions about the ultimate fate of Mary.⁹⁴ Other sources include, among others, sermons with those of Fulbert of Chartres, the *Homilies of the Assumption*, references to Augustine and Jerome. The author also drew on the *Cogitis me*, the *Speculum Ecclesiae* of Honorius Augustodunensis and the *Historia Scolastica* of Peter Comestor. According to Peter Morey:

Herman adopted the Comestrian model of telling stories within a biblical historical frame. One possibility [...] is that given Comestor’s predilection for glossing liturgical practice, the liturgical material may have been in the *Historia* and in large part transferred by Herman into his Bible.⁹⁵

The *Romanz de Dieu et de sa Mere* is one of the numerous translations, adaptations and paraphrases in verse of the Bible that appear from the twelfth century.⁹⁶ Moreover, it is one of the earliest Old French versifications of the Bible and its author is thus considered as “most remarkable

BNF fr. 20039. In her edition, the end of the *Passion* is missing and the *Assumption* is edited independently, which explains the difference in the references of the lines below. However, Ina Spiele was able to identify most of the texts used by Herman to write his *Bible*. For more details, see I. Spiele, *Li Romanz de Dieu et de sa mère d’Herman de Valenciennes, chanoine et prêtre (XII^e siècle)*, Leiden, Publications romanes de l’Université de Leyde, 21, 1975.

⁹² “Bible mariale [car] tout se fait en fonction de la Vierge”, J.-R. Smeets, *art. cit.*, I, p. 53.

⁹³ Ina Spiele suggests that Herman’s main source for biblical accounts was a missal or a breviary.

⁹⁴ See *supra* I.A.2.

⁹⁵ P. Morey, “Peter Comestor, Biblical Paraphrase, and the Medieval Popular Bible”, *Speculum*, 68, 1, 1993, p. 6–35, p. 17.

⁹⁶ J.-R. Smeets, *art. cit.*, I, p. 52–53.

for doing in the vernacular what Comestor had done in Latin only some ten or fifteen years before” – even if Herman was “more eclectic” than Peter Comestor when he added to his “mix” Marian apocrypha “which are indigenous to France”.⁹⁷

Among the main features of the text are, firstly, the dramatization of the most important episodes.⁹⁸ Maureen Boulton says that there is “evidence that Herman intended his *Bible* as a sermon – he uses the term to refer to his poem – preaching obedience to the will of God and devotion to Mary. [...] Clearly, Herman’s intent is to move his hearers to change their lives”;⁹⁹ and, secondly, a strong didactic intent. Indeed, in his text, Herman interpolates many comments whose purpose is, for example, to explain how scenes of the Old Testament are a prefiguration of what will happen in the New Testament. And thus, the first part is built according to the theory of the six ages, that is to say, the first age corresponds to Noah, the second, to Abraham, the third, to Moses, and the fourth, to David and Solomon. Herman stops at the fourth age. Thirdly, and far more so than Wace, he cites numerous episodes from the canonical Gospels; for example, the *Magnificat*, whereas Wace does not mention it. Herman includes the song of the Virgin, but inside the scene of the Annunciation, so that the Virgin quotes Luke 1, 38 at the end of the *Magnificat*:

Qant ce ot dit li angles si respondi Marie
 Ele estoit prex et sage et de grant signorie,
 S’ert dou saint esperit durement raamplie :

3360 “Je ne sai, biaux amis, fait ele, que te die
 Fors tant que mon signor m’ame si magnifie,
 Car ele a grant leece de lui q’a em baillie.
 L’umilité regart li sires de s’amie.
 Les generations qui venront mil mile,

3365 Faire puet que a fait. Ses nons me beneïe.
 Sor toutes nacions sa merci et s’aïe
 Bien destruit l’orguillos qui en lui ne se fie,
 Les povres fait toz riches, les mendiz rassasie

⁹⁷ P. Morey, *art. cit.*, p. 17.

⁹⁸ For a detailed study, see C. Van Coolput-Storms, “Démarche persuasive et puissance émotionnelle : le *Romanz de Dieu et de sa Mere* d’Herman de Valenciennes”, M. Goyens, W. Verbeke (eds.), “*Lors est ce jour grant joie nee*”. *Essais de langue et de littérature françaises du moyen âge*, Louvain, Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 2009, p. 71–96.

⁹⁹ M. Boulton, “The Lives of the Virgin by Wace and Herman de Valenciennes: Conventions of Romance and Chanson de Geste in religious Narrative”, D. Kullmann (ed.), *The Church and Vernacular Literature in Medieval France*, Toronto, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2009, pp. 109–123, p. 120.

Et les puissanz destruit” les povres edefie.
3370 Israel ait ton fils si soit en ta baillie.
Si com le premeis si ait de toi aie
Abrehans et ses lins, com dist la profecie !
Je suis l'ancele Deu, ne sai que plus te die.
Soit selonc ta parole issi com l'aie oïe !
(*laisse* 425, v. 3357–3374)¹⁰⁰

The fourth feature of the *Romanz de Dieu et de sa Mere* is that its author takes no stand on doctrinal issues of his time; for example, he does not refer to the Immaculate Conception. This is why Herman's work can be characterized as a scholastic one in the sense that he “conforms to the method of Christian interpretation: he deciphers each episode in order to deliver its meaning in present history”,¹⁰¹ while not questioning the dogmas established by the Church. His task, as he himself says, is to translate a life of the Virgin from Latin into Old French, “Fai la vie en .i. livre ensi com je fui nee, [...] / De latin en roman z soit toute transposee !” (l. 450–458), for those who do not read Latin, in order to write a universal history in which everything refers to the Virgin.

B. *Maríu saga*: a Sacred History of the Virgin in Old Norse

As already said, we do not know when, where and by whom *Maríu saga* was written, mainly because “large numbers of mediaeval manuscripts in Old Norse have vanished, especially manuscripts containing doctrinal or devotional matters of little interest to Protestant readers”.¹⁰² What we do know is that:

... the growing popularity of the University of Paris as an international centre of learning; the training of inter alia Archbishop Erik of Nidaros and (probably) Bishop Þorlákr Þórhallsson of Skálholt at the Abbey of St Victor, and the existence in Norway and Iceland of works produced there; the encouragement given by Archbishop Eysteinn to the Augustinians in settling in Norway – all these may be cited as evidence of close connection between the countries and their religious cultures.¹⁰³

The major feature of biblical translations, adaptations, versions and paraphrases – or rather the connections established between the books of the

¹⁰⁰ I. Spiele, *op. cit.*, p. 258.

¹⁰¹ “se conforme à la méthode de l'interprétation chrétienne : il décrypte chaque épisode pour en délivrer le sens dans l'histoire actuelle”, G. Lobrichon, *art. cit.*, p. 101.

¹⁰² O. Widding and H. Bekker-Nielsen, “An Old-Norse Translation of the ‘Transitus Mariae’,” *Mediaeval Studies*, 1961, vol. 23, p. 324–333, p. 327.

¹⁰³ I. J. Kirby, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

Old and the New Testament – is one of the main features of *Maríu saga*. Indeed the Icelandic compiler often establishes these kinds of connections in his text. He actually began right from the Prologue in which he refers to Christ’s genealogy given in the *Gospel of Matthew*, thereafter explaining why David is listed first:

Ok nefnir Matheus því fyrr Davíð konung, at konungdómrinn merkir eilíft ríki og eilífan guðdóm allzvalldanda guðs, ok því Abraham síðarr, þó að hann væri fyrr í heimi, at guð hét honum at taka á sik manndóm ok láta beraz or hans ætt ok frá hans ættmönnum í þenna heim.¹⁰⁴

Moreover, in Chapter 5 of the saga, we see another connection when he interprets the first five levels of the *Song of Degrees* according to the theory of the six ages, “því at í þeim öllum hafa guðs ástvinir með þessum mannkostum þíónat drótni, sem pallarnir merkia”.¹⁰⁵ He continues by stating that the first age corresponds to Enoch, the second, to Noah, the Ark and the Flood, the third, to Abraham, the fourth, to Moses when he received the Ten Commandments, and the fifth, to David when he fought Goliath. Yet, in Chapter 10 of *Maríu saga*, another correlation can be established with the doctrinal of Pope Innocent III who, in his *Sermon 28*, opposed Marie to Eve because she “indicates the end of damnation and the beginning of salvation”. And this is why “[t]he one was called Eva, to the other was said ‘Ave’ because thanks to her the name of Eva was changed”:¹⁰⁶

Þat skýra ok helgar ritningar, fyrir hveria sök Gabriel hafði helldr þetta orð *Ave* í upphafe sinnar kveðiu til sællar Maríe, en annat þat er iöfn þýðing fylgir. En þat helldr til at þessir stafir ero í nafni Evo. Ok svá sem Eva leiddi bölvon yfir allt mannkyn í óhlýþni sinni í boðorða broti, svá leiddi María allan lýð til blezunar. Ok var því snúit stöfum í nafni Eva, ok hafðr sá fyrstr í hiálparkveðiunni, er síðastr var í nafni Eva, ok allir stafir ero öfgaðir þess nafns ok gört af Ave, at þá er öll sú bölvon niðr brotin, er af Evo hafði hlotiz, ok bakferlut, er almáttigr guð tók manndóm á sic til hiálpur öllu mannkyni.¹⁰⁷

The second feature of the Old Norse *Life of the Virgin* is the inclusion of occasionally lengthy, profane historical passages spelling out the significance of the material just presented; such as, the detailed description of Herod’s reign. We find the same historical background in the *Historia*

¹⁰⁴ *Maríu saga*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁶ B. K. Reynolds, *op. cit.*, p. 147–148.

¹⁰⁷ *Maríu saga*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

Scholastica. The third feature is that *Maríu saga* can be characterized as a scholastic work as, like Herman's work, the Icelandic compiler also conforms to the method of Christian exegesis. Thus, when in Chapter 4, the Icelandic clerk comments on the meaning of the fifteen steps of the Temple and of its associated psalms (*Psalms* 120–134), he does not quote the biblical text, but explains the meaning of each degree and psalm. For example:

Ok ero þeir sálmar síðan kallaðir canticum graduum, þat þýðizt palla lof-söngur. En neðsti pallr merkir heims höfnun. Ok þá er maðrinn steig á pallinn upp, þá skyldi hann hefja upp salminn Ad dominum dum tribul- larer, og biðia þess, at guð veitti honum þat at hafna þessum heimi og hans blíðu en elska himneska dýrð framarr öllum veralldar fagnaði.¹⁰⁸

With regard to the doctrinal stand of its compiler, the Old Norse *Life of the Virgin* remains within the classical scheme. For example, Pope Innocent III explicitly rejected the Immaculate Conception and the same doctrinal stand is taken in Chapter 3 of *Maríu saga*:

En eftir þat fóru þau heim og áttu hiúskaparfar saman, ok af því munúðlifi gátu þau barn. Ok var þat barn getit með hinni gömlu synd sem hvert annat, þat er af karlmanni ok konu gezt. Ok er þat fyrirboþit at hallda getnaðartíð ennar helgu Maríu ok hins helga Johannes baptista, fyrir því at þau vóro bæði með munúð getin. En af gipt ens helga anda var María hreinsut af enni gömlu synd í móður kviði, fyrr en hon væri fædd; ok ef menn vissi, á hverri tíð þat hefði verit er hon var hreinsut af enni gömlu synd og getin til fagnaðar, svá sem nú er barnit getit til fagnaðar, þá er þat er hreinsat í skírnarbrunninum frá enni gömlu synd, þá mætti þessa getnaðartíð hallda henni til dýrðar, ef í þessa minning væri gert, og vitat í hvern tíma hallda skyldi.¹⁰⁹

In this passage, the clerk states that it is forbidden to celebrate the conception of both Mary and John the Baptist as they were conceived in desire and that Mary's soul was purified from original sin by the Holy Spirit while she was in her mother's womb. Then he goes on explaining that only baptism cleanses from original sin. As for the Assumption of the Virgin's body, the clerk draws on the *Cogitis me*, 2 in which Paschasius Radbertus "rejects the *Pseudo-Melito*, negates the possibility that we can know the fact that [Mary's] purported burial place lies empty, and recommends that the question be entrusted to God alone".¹¹⁰ Pope In-

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7–8.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹¹⁰ B. K. Reynolds, *op. cit.*, p. 313.

nocent III avoided any definitive statement about the bodily Assumption. In *Maríu saga*, the clerk expresses his strong scepticism when, at the very end of Chapter 25, he does not add any comment after his final sentence “that now her grave lies empty”:

En önd hennar var upphafin yfir öll engla fylki, ok lúta allir englar henna, ok allir helgir menn á himni. En líkami sællar Marie var iarðaðr í dal þeim er heitir Vallis Josaphat. Þar var síðan dýrðlig kirkia gör henni til dýrðar. En nú er gröf hennar tóm fundin.¹¹¹

It can be taken for granted that the Icelandic compiler knew several *Transitus Mariae* and that he was aware of the theological and doctrinal debate which took place at that time. Yet his stand is in accordance with Hugh of St Victor who was certainly a disciple of Pseudo-Augustine, but that did not prevent him from referring to Pseudo-Jerome, that is to say Paschasius Radbertus, noting “that he had not positively denied the resurrection of Mary”.¹¹² Other mariological issues raised by the compiler of the saga include those concerning the name “Mary”, Mary’s perpetual virginity, Joseph’s doubts, the virginal birth without pain, Magi’s gifts, the Slaughter of the Innocents in Bethlehem.

Unlike Herman’s work, *Maríu saga* has two distinctive features. The first one is that the clerk also addresses christological issues; such as Jesus’s human and divine nature, the tears Christ shed three times, and more general theological problems; for example, the triple peace, the resurrection of the body at the Last Judgement, and the man made in the image and likeness of God. However, a thorough investigation of the content of these exegetical passages cannot be undertaken here. The second distinctive feature is that, far more so than the *Romanz de Dieu et de sa Mere*, *Maríu saga* contains numerous moral and liturgical instructions intertwined in the narrative of Mary’s life, which gives the saga a strong didactic tone. According to Laura Tomassini, the Icelandic clerk “regards the story of Mary’s life as a means of reminding his audience of the basic principles of their faith, and to instruct them in the essential Christian virtues”.¹¹³ Thus, every point of Mary’s biography is explained and commented in connection with the way the god-believer shall act and think.

¹¹¹ *Maríu saga*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹¹² “que ce dernier n’avait pas nié positivement la résurrection de Marie”, M. A. A. Jugie, *op. cit.*, p. 378–379.

¹¹³ L. Tomassini, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

IV. Conclusion

The study of *Maríu saga* in connection with other continental *Lives of the Virgin* may be summed up in the following way. All these texts share the same features whether it be from a literary or doctrinal perspective: 1) they are compilations that draw on canonical and apocryphal texts as well as the writings of the Fathers or ecclesiastical literature; 2) it is difficult to identify the sources used in the *Lives of the Virgin*; 3) their narrative includes the same parts, that is to say, the life of the Virgin from her conception to her Assumption in which accounts of the life of Jesus are included; and 4) theological explanations and exegetical comments are interpolated into the narration. In fact, these texts are “occasional compilations that are using pre-existing texts, but by interpreting them (one should say, by updating them) according to the doctrinal problems of their times”.¹¹⁴ So, it seems that, unlike what Wilhelm Heizmann stated in his article, if *Maríu saga* “contains numerous theological opinions and commentaries, which give the saga its distinctive stamp”,¹¹⁵ then it must be understood that it is within the genre of the hagiographic sagas as it is a common feature of the genre of the *Lives of the Virgin*. Moreover, as this analysis has tried to demonstrate, there is nothing “unusual, or even eccentric” in the “way of interweaving *vita* and theological commentary”¹¹⁶ in *Maríu saga* as its continental counterparts share the same feature. As for taking a stand on mariological issues, once again, the medieval *Lives of the Virgin* share this same feature, except for the “Marian Bible”. So, like Herman of Valenciennes, it can be implied that the Icelandic compiler of *Maríu saga* wanted to write a *Life of the Virgin*, which would be a *Sacred History of the Virgin* at the same time.

Yet, Wilhelm Heizmann was right when he concluded that *Maríu saga* is: “a work that is unique within the continental medieval tradition on Mary's life”,¹¹⁷ but just as the *Vita Rythmica*, the *Conception Nostre Dame* and the *Romanz de Dieu et de sa Mere* also are unique. Indeed, if in Late Antiquity the question of the reception was not an issue, the same cannot be said of the Middle Ages. So, it seems that the genre of the *Lives of the Virgin* in the vernacular is now characterized above all by its eclec-

¹¹⁴ “des compositions de circonstances utilisant des textes déjà existents mais en les interprétant (on devrait dire, en les réactualisant) en fonction des problèmes doctrinaux de leur époque”, S. C. Mimouni, *art. cit.*, p. 248.

¹¹⁵ W. Heizmann, *art. cit.*, p. 407.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 408; see also G. Turville-Petre, *op. cit.*, p. 124–125.

¹¹⁷ W. Heizmann, *ibid.*, p. 408.

tic nature; the biographies of Mary are defined by their subject and, above all else, by their audience, even if their composition is the same as the Byzantine *Lives*'. The medieval Marian *vitae* were intended for different kinds of audience with various expectations. The monastic congregations and ecclesiastical audiences of both the *Vita Rhythmica* and the "Marian Bible" would only have spiritual needs, while the Plantagenet Court, the intended audience of Wace's hagiographical poems, would look at the same time for literary entertainment. As for *Marín saga*, it seems that this work was intended for both monastic circles and lay congregations as the text contains numerous moral and liturgical instructions. In fact, the point that distinguishes *Marín saga* from other *Lives of the Virgin* is Chapter 24 in which what was said during the Fourth Lateran Council is related. It seems to be an appeal to an authority for the validation of the doctrinal points and spiritual guidance which takes on its full meaning when one realizes that the Council was dedicated to re-awakening lay spirituality. Moreover, it was in 1215 in Lateran that Peter Comestor's *Historia Scolastica*, the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard and his glosses on Paul and the Psalms received papal approval, and that:

The Church brought the Virgin, a model of obedience to the will of the Father, in its process of religious normalisation. The figure of the "servant" of the Gospels is [therefore] highlighted by medieval commentators.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ "L'Église fait entrer la Vierge, modèle d'obéissance à la volonté du Père, dans son dispositif de normalisation religieuse. La figure de la 'servante' des Évangiles est [dès lors] mise en relief par les commentateurs médiévaux.", S. Barnay, *La Vierge : Femme au visage divin*, Paris, Gallimard, "Découvertes", 2008, p. 59.