

goð geyja: the limits of humour in Old Norse-Icelandic paganism

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Laughing at religion was easy for medieval Christians, whose Twelfth Night and Shrovetide revels seasonally encouraged the parody of God's priests and scriptures (Screech, pp. 220-61). Here it is presumably the worshipper's, not the agnostic's, familiarity with the divine which 'breeds innocent humour within groups who share common knowledge and common assumptions' (*ibid.*, p. 228). Within religious groups the humour is innocent even when propriety is transgressed, for 'without the veneration there would be no joke' (*ibid.*, p. 232), and the common set of beliefs amplifies a shared response to jokes, be they ever so irreverent (cf. Cohen, pp. 25-9). The joker elicits the knowledge of others, who then find themselves contributing the background that will make the joke work; if it works (even tastelessly), the audience joins him in its response (even unwillingly) and both find themselves 'a community, a community of amusement' (*ibid.*, p. 40). And yet there are some who fail to see the joke, who might regard religious irreverence as blasphemous. To what extent heathen jokers could blaspheme is a question I shall face here

But I shall start with a Christian humourist, Hjalti Skeggjason, whose

brother-in-law, Ísleifr Gizurarson, became the first bishop of Skálholt. In his *Íslendingabók* (c. 1125), Ari says that Hjalti was sentenced in the Alþing to the lesser outlawry of *goðgá*. *En þat vas til þess haft, at hann kvað at lögbergi kviling þenna* ('for blasphemy. And it was held as grounds, that he had recited this ditty at the law-rock'):

Vil ek eigi goð geyja: grey þykki mér Freyja.

I don't want to mock the gods (the gods to bark); to me Freyja seems to be a bitch (ÍF 1, 15; cf. Skj B I 131)

Hjalti would have made his joke in 998, a year before Iceland became Christian by an act of the same parliament. Ari's word *goðgá*, which occurs only here and in the same story in *Njáls saga*, ch. 104 (c. 1290; ÍF 12, 269), is usually thought to mean 'blasphemy', which, by the laws of Moses or Justinian at least, was punishable by death. Yet Hjalti was only exiled for three years. By the standards of Icelandic Christian law (the heathen laws having perished), three years for a defamer was mild. *Grágás* (c. 1119) stipulates full outlawry for even half a verse that contains either insult, or praise that the poet can turn into an insult (*Scog gang varðar ef maðr yrkir vm man hálfá víso þa er löstr er í eða haðung eða lof þat er hann yrkir til haðungar*; p. 183 (§238)). By calling Freyja a bitch, Hjalti had charged her with promiscuity (*ergi*). That much is clear from the symbolic *grey* in *Hávamál* that *Billings mæ*r (probably the 'wife of Billings') leaves in her bedroom as her substitute for sex with Óðinn (*Háv* 101), who regards the bitch as one *hýðung* ('humiliation') among several that his promised date inflicted on him (*Háv* 102). A charge of promiscuity, when made against men as passive homosexuality, entitled the defamed party to kill the slanderer (cf. Ström, pp. 4-8). So it is not clear that we can equate Hjalti's *goðgá* with an offence as severe as *níð* ('slander'), which, when made against gods, might have counted as 'blasphemy'.

The word *goðgá* not only suggests a lesser category, but undermines the idea of heathen piety itself. *Goðgá* is not attested in the legal texts and means 'mocking the gods', its second element deriving from *geyja* ('to bark; mock'). Hjalti plays on the ambiguity of this word, unexpectedly turning *goð* from the verb's object to its subject, as if beginning with an avowal of good behaviour among heathens after an earlier transgression against them. His words *goð geyja* are syntactically analogous to a construction in *Háv* 135, in which a man is advised to be kind to beggars: *gest þú né geyia né á grind hrækir* ('neither mock a guest nor drive him to the gate'). The idea of *goðgá*, then, was not only to scorn the gods, but also to expel them from one's society. Hjalti's fellow Icelanders, who did not see his joke, expelled him from theirs. In this light, it seems to be the corollary of *goð geyja* that Norse heathens saw their gods as guests at the feast, where the same questions of precedence (*hvar skal sitia síá?*, *Háv* 2), food (*Háv* 3-4), attentiveness (*þunno hlióði þegir*, *Háv* 7) and

squabbling (*órir gestr við gest, Háv 32*), would arise as for humans. It is hard to see much piety in these circumstances. Even Loki, the gods' professional joker, is not killed but outlawed when he charges Freyja with promiscuity in Ægir's feast in *Lokasenna* (*Ása ok álfa, er hér inni ero, hveir hefir þinn hór verit*, 'Of Æsir and elves who are here within each one has been your bed-fellow': *Lok 30*). This is true, in a sense, and Freyja makes fun of her own mystery to Þórr when she turns down his request that she wed Prymr in the land of the giants: *Mic veiztu verða vergiarnasta* ('you'll know then that I really have become the man-craziest woman alive', *Prymskviða 13*). These are poems probably from the Christian era, from the eleventh and twelfth or thirteenth centuries respectively. But the fact that Hjalti walked away from Freyja in 998, even while his judges knew her cult to be under threat, probably means that the religion of these Eddic poets hardly matters, because Icelandic heathens knew neither blasphemy nor veneration, two faces of the devout religious coin, as Christians understand these things.

'Heathen piety' for Norsemen must be redefined. There appear to be no surviving hymns to Norse gods, although Vetrliði's invocation of Þórr, a fragment, may be one (*Skj B I, 127*). As the poetry alludes to the gods with a focus on exploits, not attributes, perhaps heathens had a fear of litigation similar to that which directs skalds in *Grágás* to compose neither praise nor blame of a man (*vm maN löst ne löf, §238*). But that even adds to the Norse gods' humanity. And when they all die in Ragnarök, it is clear that they express not the failure of godhead but man at his best (*Vafþrúðnismál 52-3, Völuspá 53-7*). Human embodiments for the divine are not only standard in Norse mythology, but also fundamental, in that Þórr personifies 'thunder', Ullr 'brilliance', Frigg 'love', and so on. The inference from these names is that heathens gave human shapes to natural and abstract phenomena in order to deal with them as gods. Portraying men as gods, the other way about, is also integral to Norse poetry, in which heathen skalds sometimes styled their patrons as gods and regularly used divine names as *heiti* for humans and giants. Yet for gods the drawback to this two-way flow of influence is that weakness as well as strength attends the human form. The poet of *Lokasenna* plays by this rule, in that Loki's time-calling technique is to deconstruct the gods by moralizing their mysteries as flaws of character. So Freyja's fertility becomes nymphomania, Njörðr's oceanic process deviancy, Óðinn's quest for an avenger a matter of effeminacy (st. 30, 34, 24). As Frigg says to Loki, *firriz æ forn roç firar* ('let men always shun old mysteries', *Lok 24; pace Dronke, p. 338*): humans should not know too much, lest they end up unravelling the powers on which they depend. Even Þórr stands and falls by his humanity, and not only in *Lokasenna*. His first duel with the world serpent is treated heroically in *Ragnarsdrápa 14-20* (c. 850), *Húsdrápa 3-6* (c. 990), Eysteinn's and Gamli's verses (?c. 1000), if not in at least three Viking Age stone reliefs (McKinnell, figs. 6-8). But his anxious time in Skrymir's giant glove, in which he dared neither sneeze nor fart, figures

unflatteringly in *Hárbarðsljóð* 26 (?s. x) and in *Lok* 60, as well as in Snorri's tale of Útgarða-Loki in *Gylfaginning* (cf. Faulkes 1982, pp. 37, 67). Snorri's jokes are Christianized embellishments, but there is a suspicion that heathens had many stories in which they could laugh at Þórr besides other gods (cf. McKinnell, pp. 80-5).

To turn suspicion into likelihood, we must look for evidence in Scaldic verses with dates and contexts in the century preceding Hjalti's ditty in c. 998. *Haustlong* is a work of mythology; it was probably composed in c. 900 by Þjóðólfr of Hvinir, and possibly for Þorleifr inn spaki, a chieftain of Hordaland (North, pp. xxxi-xli). In what survives, Þórr is treated with affection, as he races towards Hrungrnir (st. 14-20); but in the first tale, Loki, Hýnir and particularly Óðinn are treated with mockery (st. 2-6). When Þjazi, in eagle's form, asks them for some roast ox from their cooking fire, Óðinn fails to see the risk:

Fljótt bað foldar dróttinn Fárbauda mög vára
þekkiligr með þegnum þrymseilar hval deila,
en af breiðu bjóði bragðvís at þat lagði
ósvífrandi ása upp þjórhloti fjóra. (st. 5)

Swiftly the handsome lord of the land [Óðinn, Earth's husband] bade Fárbaudi's boy [Loki] deal out the whale of the cracking rope of spring-times [whale of the traces: ox] among the thegns, and after that the Æsir's prank-wise disobliger [Loki] served up four bull-portions from the broad table.

With beef on a table, Loki as a bad-tempered serving boy and Óðinn as a naively festive host in a retinued hall, Þjóðólfr responds to the situation by framing a conceit that gives a human bathos to his gods. He has already called them *vélsparir varnendr goða* ('defenders of the gods economizing on trickery', st. 4), so perhaps they deserve the indignity. But there is no doubt that his comparison mocks them. No tale survives to tell us that Þjóðólfr's host thought his joke on Óðinn fell flat; the initial survival of this work might suggest that he laughed at it. The title and vocabulary of *Haustlong* ('harvest-long [lay]') show that this poem was probably made for an autumn festival, in which the laughter was presumably communal.

It was probably in Trøndelag in c. 960 that Kormakr composed *Sigurðardrápa* in honour of Earl Sigurðr of Hlaðir. With the exception of effectively two stanzas quoted in Snorri's *Hákonar saga góða*, the stanzas of this work are strewn about his *Edda* (I follow the sequence in *Skj* B I, 69-70, while quoting from Faulkes (1998) and breaking up st. 6 as st. 6 and 7):

Heyri sonr á (Smrgr) sannreynis (fentanna)
orr greppa lætk uppi jast-Rín) Haralds (mína). (*SnE* vs. 292)

Meiðr er mǫrgum æðri morðteins í dyn fleina.
Hjorr fær hildiborrum hjarl Sigurði jarli. (*ibid.* vs. 211)

Eykr með ennidúki jar_hljótr díafjarðar
breyti, hún sá er beinan bindr. Seið Yggr til Rindar. (*Ibid.* vs. 12,
308)

Svall, þá er gekk með gjallan Gauts eld hinn er styr beldi
glæðfæðandi Gríðar, gunnr. Komsk Urðr ór brunni. (*Ibid.* vs. 241)

Hróðr geri ek of mög mæran meir Sigrøðar fleira;
haptscenis galt ek hánum heið. Sitr Þórr í reiðum. (*Ibid.* vs. 301)

Hafit maðr ask né eskis afspring með sér þingat
fésæranda at færa fats. Véltu goð Þjaza. (*ÍF* 26, 168, vs. 68)

Hver myni vés við valdi vægja kind of bægjask?
þvít fúr-Roðni[r] fagnar fens. Vá Gramr til menja. (*ibid.*)

Algildan bið ek aldar allvald of mér halda
ýs bifvangi Yngva ungr. Fór Hroptr með Gungni. (*SnE* vs. 21)

1. Let the lively son of the true tester of Haraldr [Earl Sigurðr] hear! (Being a generous man) I will let my yeast-Rhine of the Sýr [Freyja] of the poets of the fen-teeth [rock-poets' (:giants')] Freyja's (:Gunnlōð's) yeast-Rhine: mead of poetry: poem] be heard.

2. The tree of the murder-twig [sword's tree: warrior: Sigurðr] is better than many a man in the din of arrows. The sword gets dominion for battle-keen Earl Sigurðr.

3. The land-obtainer honours the provider of the deities' fjord [:poetry] with a forehead-canvas [:head-band?], he who binds the mast-top straight. Yggr [terrifier: Óðinn] bewitched Rindr.

4. Battle swelled, when he who has brought about war, the feeder of Gríðr's mount [giantess' mount: wolf], advanced with the shrieking fire of Gautr [Óðinn's fire: swords]. Urðr [fate] came out of her spring.

5. Even more glory, furthermore, I perform for the renowned son of Sigurðr [Earl Hákon]; him I have paid the wages of the gods' ?reconciler [:poetry]. Þórr sits in his chariot.

6. Let no man have food-dish or the bowl's offspring to take to the house of the man who inflicts wounds on his own vat's wealth. The gods tricked Þjazi.

7. Which man's son would allow himself to quarrel with the ruler of the sanctuary? for it is the prince of the marsh-fire who gives the welcome [:gold-giver: Earl Sigurðr]. Gramr [:Sigurðr Fáfnisbani's sword] fought for necklaces.

8. I who am young bid the fully-endowed power-wielder of the people of Ingvi-freyr [:men of Þrændalqg] to hold over me his bow's quivering slope [:hand]. Hroptr [Óðinn] took Gungnir on campaign.

Each stanza ends with a throw-away comment consisting of five syllables, an effect which Snorri, creating his own in *Háttatal*, calls *hjástælt* ('abuttet'), adding that *skal orðtak vera forn minni* ('the expression must be old proverbial statements', text: Faulkes, 1991: 10; cf. Faulkes 1987: 176). Turville-Petre may be wrong when he says that these *minni* 'have nothing to do with the context' (p. 46). It is pretty clear that Earl Sigurðr is identified with Óðinn in st. 3 and 8, in which earl and poet in the main stanza are juxtaposed with Óðinn plus another subject in the *minni*. The inference of st. 3 seems to be that the poet, honoured as he is by the earl in a public ceremony, is as terrified as Rindr was when Yggr, with enormous difficulty (cf. Saxo's tale of Rinda), made her the mother of Váli; in st. 8, Kormakr makes himself the earl's instrument as much as Gungnir is Óðinn's spear. If we accept these correspondences, the earl is identifiable with Óðinn in other places too. Given the focus on the earl's *hjorr*

(‘sword’) in st. 2, the sword-kenning *Gauts eldr* (‘Gautr’s fire’) suggests that Sigurðr himself is Gautr (Óðinn) in st. 4, so wild in battle that Urðr herself comes out to register the dead. Sigurðr, the earl who bestows his wealth on unlimited numbers of guests in st. 5, is probably ribbed there for his unquestioning bounty in the proverb *Véltu goð Þjazi* (‘the gods tricked Þjazi’). After all, it was Þjazi who tricked the *vélsparu* gods when Óðinn offered him an ox-portion in *Haustlög* 5, even if the gods just managed to survive by having Loki trick Iðunn back and by killing Þjazi (cf. *vélum leiða mey aptr*, *ibid.* 11). The Þjazi-proverb must mean ‘don’t be too trusting’: a jest about prodigality. But then, in the st. 7 which does follow st. 6, Kormakr turns on the gentry with *vá Gramr til menja* (‘Gramr fought for necklaces’): each freeloader at Sigurðr’s table, like Kormakr, may expect to become his sword, his foot-soldier, in the battles by which this Óðinn-hypostasis seizes yet more treasure. Kormakr does not forget the earl’s son in st. 5, on whom he claims to load even more praise: *Sitr Þórr í reiðum* (‘Þórr sits in his chariot’: i.e. ‘help is coming’). If Earl Sigurðr is flattered as Óðinn, it follows that Kormakr meant to style his up-and-coming son as Þórr.

Hákon became Þórr’s more serious hypostasis when, as earl of his father’s region and ruler over most of Norway (c. 978-95), he consolidated his power after his victory against the Danes in Hjørungavágr in c. 985. It is thought that Eilífr’s *Þórsdrápa* was one of many works composed then in his honour, in which Þórr and the giants can be read as an allegory of Hákon in action against the comic Danes and their allies (Davidson, pp. 500-40). In this baroque masterpiece Þórr wades across a torrent on his way to see the giant Geirrðr in his cave. The flood is rising because of Gjálp, the giant’s daughter, who straddles the river the better to cascade into it from higher up (so Snorri, *SnE* 24-5). There is one thing left for Þórr to do (*SnE* vs. 79):

Har_vaxnar lét (WT; R sér) herðir hallands of sik falla
 (gatat maðr njótr in neytri njarð-ráð fyr sér) (-)gjarðar;
 þverrir lét, nema þyrri (Þórs barna) sér Marnar
 snerriblóð, til svíra salþaks megin vaxa. (st. 7)

The temperer of the land of the whetstone [:sword-temperer: warrior: Þórr] dropped his hard-grown (strength-) belt [f. pl. acc.] about himself; the possessor of the (strength-) belt [f. sg. gen.; Þórr] had not learnt as a man [cf. lengi man sá er ungr getr] Njorðr’s recourse to be the more useful option; the diminisher of the ogre’s (/Þorn’s) children [:giants] declared that unless Mírn’s swift-blood [urine: river] dried up, his power would grow to the peak of the hall-hatch [:to heaven] itself. (pace Davidson, p. 522).

I take the prefix *njarð-* to have two meanings and the word *gjarðar* two cases and roles; thus *njótr* can go into the second clause in apposition to *maðr*, without competing with *herðir* in the first clause, while neither *maðr* nor *herðir* need be emended (as in *Skj* B I, 141). The consensus is for a sg. compound *njarðgjörð* (‘strength-belt’, with Njorðr’s name in abstract form) in tmesis, but in a poem of so many facets there is no reason why *njarð-* cannot also

compound with *ráð*, its neighbour ('Njörðr's recourses'; cf. Kock, § 449). The meaning would be that Þórr is too warlike to do what Njörðr would have done in his place, swallow the giantess's urine. Loki charges Njörðr with this refinement in *Lok 34* (*Hymis meyjar hofðu þik at hlandtrogi ok þér í munn migo*, 'Hymir's daughters had you as a piss-trough and made water into your mouth', Dronke, p. 340), whereby the river-drinking ocean is scorned as a patrician deviant. This is the human perspective Eilífr appears to invoke for Njörðr in his poem, whose cult may become marginal (cf. *Hallfreðr's claim to have left him a year before the other gods: *fjörð lét ek af dul Njarðar*; Turville-Petre, p. 72; cf. *Skj B I*, 159, 9). There is no disrespect for Þórr in *Þórsdrápa*, who is fashioned into a more military hero than his prototype in *Haustlög*; but his prestige in *Þórsdrápa 7* still seems to come at another god's expense.

If Hákon could laugh at Njörðr's mystery in one poem, it seems that he was ready to make even more fun of Óðinn in another. *Hákonardrápa*, probably of Hallfreðr, lavishly describes a marriage between Earl Hákon and Norway. This poem must be reconstructed from the scattered stanzas that appear to belong to it in Snorri's *Edda* (*Skj B I*, 147-8), so no claims can be based on stanzaic sequence, although the idea contained in st. '3-6' is clear enough (cf. Davidson; Ström 1981, pp. 452-56):

Sannyrðum spenr sverða snarr þiggjandi viggjar
barhadda_a byrjar biðkván und sik Priðja. (*SnE* vs. 10)

Því hykk fleygjanda frakna (ferr jörð und menþverri)
ítra eina at láta Auðs systur mjök trauðan. (*ibid.* vs. 121)

Ráð lukusk, at sá síðan snjallráðr konungs spjalli
átti einga dóttur Ónars viði gróna. (*ibid.* vs. 118)

Brei_leita gat brúði Báleygs at sér teygða
stefnir stöðvar hrafna stála ríkismálum. (*ibid.* vs. 119)

3. The brisk receiver of the steed of the following wind [ship's pilot] entices beneath himself with the true messages of swords the barley- (pine-cone)-wimpled waiting-wife of the Third One [Óðinn].

4. For this reason I think that the spear-caster [Hákon] (Earth goes down on the man who diminishes his store of necklaces) would be hugely unwilling to leave the gleaming sister of Auðr [earth] alone.

5. The deal closed in such a way that, afterwards, the king's eloquent conversational confidant took possession of the only daughter, who was grown with / in (back-)woods, of Ónarr [Norway].

6. The broad-featured bride of Furnace-Eye [Óðinn's bride: Norway] was lured by the harbour-ravens' [ships'] captain to himself by the kingdom-building words of his steel blades.

Óðinn's union with Jörð had engendered Þórr; and his marriage with Norway, in particular, is hailed in Eyvindr's *Háleygjatal* of c. 985 (Ström 1981, pp. 446-8). But while Hallfreðr attributes a *hieros gamos* role to Óðinn in *Hákonardrápa*, he characterizes this god rather differently from Eyvindr, as a

‘third-party’ (*Þriði*) ‘furnace-eyed’ (*Báleygr*) husband, whose deception by a bored peasant wife (*biðkván; viði gróna; breiðleita brúði*) follows on from her being sweet-talked (*snjallráðr; teygða -málum*) by a passing ship’s captain into taking his necklaces (*menþverri*). It is odd enough that Hallfreðr uses this ribaldry to convey Hákon’s conquest of Norway. But why does he mock Óðinn while doing so? How, is easy enough: Óðinn is known to be cuckolded by his brothers (*Lok* 26). But Óðinn was also acclaimed as Hákon’s ancestor, and if anything, Hallfreðr’s mockery of this god is even sharper than Þjóðólfr’s nearly a century earlier in *Haustlǫng*.

Whatever the sequence of st. ‘3-6’ of *Hákonardrápa*, the poet’s emphasis on the earl’s victories as a sexual conquest is so strong there that it suggests Hákon wished to sanctify real-life coercions as an institution of kingship. The historical records of Hákon in the closing years of his reign do show him to have made peripatetic use of his subjects’ wives and daughters through the fjords of western Norway (cf. *ÍF* 26, 293-6). Perhaps for this reason, *Hákonardrápa* may be dated to c. 990, a few years before Earl Hákon’s wronged subjects overthrew him (cf. *SnE* 158). Its style is confident, and in st. ‘3-4’ the poet appears to identify Hákon with Ingvi-freyr in his predatory role in *Skírnismál*. Three elements within Hallfreðr’s st. 3 (the horse (*viggr*), sword (*sverð*) and the barley-wimpled woman (*barrhǫdduð*)) connect Hákon with Freyr, whose emissary Skírnir, in order to secure a giantess for his master, rides the god’s horse (*Skí* 8-10), wears his sword (*Skí* 23) and relays Gerðr’s promise to meet Freyr in *Barri* (‘barley’, *Skí* 41). With Norway’s being *ítr* in st. 4, Hallfreðr’s text is also reminiscent of Iðunn, whose arms are *ítrþvegnir* (‘gleaming washed’) when she embraces her brother’s killer in *Lok* 17 (just as Gerðr fears to do in *Skí* 16). These are traces of older mythologems, but in *Hákonardrápa* they appear to reflect a shift in the earl’s politics by which he intended to revive the sexual privilege of archaic kingship. To do that, Hákon would probably have had to sideline Óðinn. The Freyr-ideology would have been a mistake, however, given Þórr’s overriding popularity in the Viking age (cf. McKinnell, pp. 57-86). *Þórsdrápa* bears witness to a solidarity between Hákon and his people which *Hákonardrápa* may show him in the process of losing.

If these examples show wit at the expense of different deities, it can also be inferred that a heathen poet could mock one god from the relative safety of being friends with another. *Hárbarðsljóð* is of course a case where Þórr’s ‘slave’ adherents (*þræla kyn*, st. 24) are no match for Óðinn’s ‘earls’ (*iarla*, *ibid.*). In the more political context of occasional verse, however, Þórr generally comes out on top. He is more central to the harvest than either Óðinn or Loki in *Haustlǫng*; Njǫrðr can be mocked without fear of offending him in *Þórsdrápa*; although Óðinn, and perhaps Þórr, have lost prestige to Freyr in *Hákonardrápa*. With each shift of allegiance the pagan community is configured differently. That there were squabbles between cults is suggested by the Vanir-Æsir cult-

war (*Vsp* 23), the Óðinn-Þórr antagonism in *Hárbarðsljóð* and *Gautreks saga* (ch. 7), even an Óðinn-Freyr rivalry in the background of *Víga-Glúms saga*. But the community itself remained intact, even in the early days of a new god. When Ulfr mocks Þorvaldr veili, who had asked him c. 998 to murder the missionary Þangbrandr, as the Þórr marooned on the other side of Hárbarðr's fjord —

Tekka ek, sunds þótt sendi sannreynir boð, tanna
hvarfs við hleypiskarfi, Hárbarðs véa fjarðar; (ÍF 12, 263)

I'm not going to accede to the headlong cormorant of the teeth's vanishing [mouth's bird: fly], though the invitation is sent from a true-tester of the strait of the fjord of Hoary-Beard's sanctuaries [a poet (=Þorvaldr); also a baffled Þórr].

— he makes fun of Þórr as well. But it is unlikely that he would do so without first shifting his allegiance to Christ. That also Hjalti had the Christian community to go to, is clear from his mockery of Freyja as a 'bitch' (*grey*). Hereby the gods are dogs, their interaction rather like a scene in the *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* (c. 1014), in which Archbishop Wulfstan describes a gang of men who buy a woman and use her *an æfter oðrum, and ælc æfter oðrum, hundum geliccast, þe for fylþe ne scrifað* ('one after the other, and each man after the other, most like dogs, that have no care for filth'; Bethurum, p. 270.88-9). In this way Hjalti's conceit appears to be Christian, and one made against a relatively minor target. It is worth asking what penalty would have come from the law-rock if Hjalti had provoked Þórr.

To sum up, it seems that heathens could make jokes against Norse gods without breaking any limits, so long as they were ready to use traditional means of playing off one against the other. Rulers could be styled as different gods, and gods as variously flawed people, and it is likely that heathen communities that laughed at these permutations constantly changed configuration while keeping the same unfenced openness. The real blasphemy had to embody a foreign community, and to that extent alone, Hjalti's *goð geyja* may be our one surviving example.

References

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