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NICOLAS MEYLAN, *The Pagan Earl: Hákon Sigurðarson and the Medieval Construction of Old Norse Religion*, Odense, University Press of South Denmark (« The Viking Collection » 26), 2022, 264 pages, ISBN: 9788740834246.

Written in lucid, elegant English, Meylan's monograph presents a biography of the epoch-making, yet insufficiently studied very last pagan ruler of Norway, Hákon Sigurðarson (c. 937-995), *vis-à-vis* the discursive construction of paganism across medieval Scandinavia. This book, in my view, is a crucial contribution to the study of Old Norse religion, notably seeing its analytical approach focusing on the layer of discourse – or rather « language in use » (p. 19) – to interpret a rich corpus of Old Norse texts with reference to Hákon, as well as its innovative, multidisciplinary integration of memory studies, critical discourse analysis, anthropology, and literary perusal, whereby the author centripetally and convincingly has substantiated the overarching hypothesis that « paganism was, in medieval Scandinavia, a profoundly instrumental and context-bound category », and that « instead of being the fossilized remains of a long-gone state of culture, discourses of paganism were actively constructed to address contemporary issues » (p. 19).

The entry point of this monograph is the perennial debate over the origin, essence, and defining characteristics of paganism. While paganism as a category has been conventionally dichotomized from Christianity, Meylan is well cognizant of the indisputable and undisputed nature of such a dualistic stance, and he acknowledges the dual possibility for the historical information extractable from Old Norse sources to be either « of pre-Christian origin », or rather already « so heavily influenced by Christian medieval ideas that it cannot be viewed as pre-Christian at all » (p. 17). To neutralize the conceptually entrenched binary opposition between paganism and Christianity, Meylan introduces memory studies into the discussion and, with much methodological

ingenuity and insightfulness, transforms the issue « What was Old Norse paganism ? » into « How did the medieval period remember Old Norse paganism ? », in the belief that « the concept of memory has led to the foregrounding of the articulation between what was known to the past and the various contexts of production of that knowledge » (p. 18). Adopting a discursive approach to the bits and pieces of information concerning Hákon that permeate Old Norse texts of varying genres is also well in tune with Meylan's pronounced aim to study Hákon in memory « and the ways Hákon and, through him, paganism were constructed and utilized in the medieval literature » (p. 21).

To this end, the ten chapters of the book are strung as an integrated whole to render a full picture of Hákon's life alongside medieval Scandinavian memorialization and construction of paganism. Chapter 1, « Divine Kinship », teases out the concomitant assigning of holy extraction, trollish lineage, and descent from « mere men » (p. 45) to Hákon in Old Norse sources, where, noteworthy, Meylan also takes into account the codicological aspects of the manuscript of *Flateyjarbók*, clarifying that this very particular codex contains « a massive compilation of material dealing with the history of Norway up to c. 1263 » (p. 42). In so doing, the author distinguishes himself in the endeavor to consolidate the holistic textual landscape underpinning his intertextual comparison between the diverse Old Norse narratives of Hákon. And this culminates in the conclusion that Hákon's discursively constructed divine kinship should be viewed as « a malleable and strategic argument deployed to modify the consciousness of one's own audience », thus « belong[ing] to the realm of discourse, to be mobilized » (pp. 44-45). Chapter 2 delves into the accounts and records of

sacrifice in such texts as *Heimskringla* and the *Greater Saga of Olaf Tryggvason*, where Meylan proposes that «the discourse of sacrifice mobilized by *Heimskringla* provides a means of describing an alternative to the centralized kingship Harald Fairhair was credited with» (p. 61). While Chapter 3 starts with Frazer's argument that nature's clemency in Old Norse literature can be construed as an embodiment of the king's just intention, and that, conversely, environmental disasters such as droughts and famine «might be chalked up to royal ill will» and «a king's physical, bodily failure» (p. 66), Meylan also keenly detects examples of discrepancy: while «*Historia Norwegie* and *Ágrip* both report that there was famine under the sons of Gunnhild, they are silent regarding the good weather in the days of Earl Hákon» (p. 77); likewise, while Odd reports Hákon's identity as the tributary earl of Norway, «the Benedictine monk makes no mention of an improvement of the weather» (p. 78). Mindful of such lacunae between textual evidence and theoretical framework, Meylan accentuates, once again, that what can be quarried from such examples of inconsistency is, in all probability, the Old Norse texts' bearing on «contemporary matters», for «a medieval text's memory of a long-gone past inevitably answered to concerns of its present – and was shaped by the same» (p. 80). Along this line, in Chapter 4, which concentrates on the verbal construction of temples in medieval Scandinavia, Meylan's critical discourse analysis yields to the theory that there actually exist «two main types of discourse about temples in connection with Earl Hákon, one highlighting their place in the economy of power, the other foregrounding theological issues» (pp. 100-101).

By the same token, the following chapters revolve around the issues of «Gods and Goddesses», «Conversion», «Myth», «Human Sacrifice», «Fate», and «Religion» throughout Hákon's life, each of which concludes by further illuminating the discursive nature of these linguistically constructed categories. Pointing out that

Þorgerð is «a discursive goddess» (p. 123), Meylan showcases how pagan gods permeated the Scandinavian ideological spectrum both throughout the Christian Middle Ages and during the pre-conversion period, thereby evincing that the conversion narrative in the *Íslendingabók* actually features a dearth, rather than any exaggeration, of the «essential conflict between the old institutions and Christianity» (p. 140). And by reading myth as a similar discourse, Meylan asserts that the incorporation of Odin into *Heimskringla* is largely due to the narratorial intention to perform Hákon as a «pillar of the traditional hierarchical order», instead of a «wolfish, Fenrir-like menace to society» as fashioned in *Jómsvíkinga saga* and *Landnámsbók* (p. 157). Also, to challenge the post-Enlightenment anthropological misconceptions that religion and politics are «consistently compartmentalized» and that «human sacrifice belongs more to the realm of imagination than to the phenomenal world» (p. 176), Meylan refers to *Fagrskinna* and relevant skaldic sources to illustrate a scenario where we see «religious discourses mobilized by religious individuals in the pursuit of ends our society usually classifies as political» (p. 176).

All in all, Meylan's monograph strikes a delicate balance between applying postmodern theories and reading the Old Norse source texts scrupulously. It weaves theological and sociopolitical agendas into the biographical retelling of Hákon's life – one that is situated in times of drastic dynastic-ideological transfer – with pleasing coherence and cohesion. Indeed, merits of this monograph can be located in its persuasive rebuttal against the modern Western dualistic view (of the human and nature, politics and theology, Christianity and paganism, etc.), and also in its cross-disciplinary echoes with postclassical narratology increasingly concerned with covert plot progressions, as well as the turn of historiographical studies currently diverting attention to giving meanings to human experiences of the past, instead of being obsessed with

accurate recomposition of the traces of the bygone. Meylan, I believe, will further arouse philological curiosity as to the marginalia, bookbinding, potential medieval readerships, trajectory of circulation, and other detailed compilation features of the manuscripts with which he deals. And for literary critics, Meylan's research, which is solidly built upon the theory of discourse, should also trigger reflection upon the spontaneous and «pre-reflective» potentials of Old Norse narrative. Are discourses invariably constructing something with full-fledged narratorial consciousness,

intention, and mature self-reflexivity in Old Norse literature? Would there be room to read certain narratives as drenched in some foregoing literary traditions already saturated with certain cultural-conceptual metaphors, as well as entrenched narrative frameworks that are of import on both rhetorical and cognitive levels for our understanding of medieval Scandinavian commemoration of the past?

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SARA PETRELLA, *Quand les dieux étaient des monstres. La « Mythologie » hybride de Natale Conti e Vincenzo Cartari*, preface by Hélène Cazes, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2023, 334 p., ISBN: 978-2-7535-8828-8.

Jean Seznec famously studied the long-term iconographical traditions of mythological figures and deities of classical antiquity, their transformation and afterlife in art and literature through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. With his fundamental publication the French historian indeed contributed to an overall rediscovery and appreciation of mythographic treatises such as Lilio Gregorio Giraldi's *De deis gentium varia et multiplex historia*, Natale Conti's *Mythologiae sive explicationum fabularum libri decem*, and Vincenzo Cartari's *Le imagini con la spositione de i dei de gli antichi*, critically highlighting the importance and remarkable popularity of this literary genre. As the title of his influential study, *La Survivance des dieux antiques*, suggests, Seznec interpreted the works of early modern mythographers in a linear perspective, against the background of an uninterrupted transmission from antiquity. There is however a lot to be gained by freeing these books, their authors, publishers, and illustrators from the somewhat passive role assigned to them by Seznec and by studying them, individually and thoroughly, as the rich and complex sources they are.

The book under review, *Quand les dieux étaient des monstres*, an elegantly written study by Sara Petrella, does exactly that by presenting an in-depth, multilayered analysis that reassesses the importance of a volume published in Lyon in 1612 by Paul Frelon, the *Mythologie, c'est-à-dire Explication des fables contenant les genealogies des Dieux, les ceremonies de leurs sacrifices, leurs gestes, aventures, amours*. This publication is not the original work of an author or an illustrator, but a «composite» edition combining a French translation of Natale Conti's *Mythologiae* by Jean de Montlyard with illustrations from a Venetian edition of Vincenzo Cartari's *Imagini de i dei*. The volume edited by Frelon, derivative and hybrid as it may appear to be at first glance, is a noteworthy document. It was a book for all audiences and experienced a considerable reception in its time in the francophone world. Despite its historical relevance it has gone virtually unnoticed in scholarly literature. Sara Petrella's decision to focus on this one publication, subjecting it to close scrutiny in a micro-historical approach, allows for a study at the crossroad of various disciplines, precisely because the 1612