

WHAT A MAN IS THIS WHO ADDRESSES ME IN HOSTILE FASHION IN MY
HALL?

QUE HOMEM É ESSE QUE DE MODO HOSTIL SE DIRIGE A MIM EM MEU
SALÃO?



MCGILLIVRAY, Andrew. *Influences of Pre-Christian Mythology and Christianity on Old Norse Poetry. A Narrative Study of Vafþrúðnismál*. Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, 2018.

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McGillivray's study of *Vafþrúðnismál* is published under the guise of a very exciting proposal, to explore this poem narrative frame and its elements, mainly the journey of the god

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Óðinn in his quest for knowledge, putting himself in danger when engaging in a duel of wits against the *jotunn* Vafþrúðnir. Staying close to the *Codex Regius* manuscript, held today at Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies (Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum), and in which most of the modern editions of the Poetic Edda draws its materials, the author proposes a literary study of it, bringing examples from other works of the eddic corpus, not only from Snorra Edda, where one can see the quotes and exchange of verses and ideas, but also from different eddic poems, like *Völuspá*, *Grímnismál*, going further on a point of reserving one of the last chapters to a comparative analysis of *Alvíssmál*.

There are eight chapters, which covers the main elements and characters of *Vafþrúðnismál* (1 – Vafþrúðnir Who?), the theoretical choices and a very clear methodology (2 – Critical Contexts), a long analysis of the interaction between these characters, first between Frigg and Óðinn (3 – At Home in Ásgarðr), and then between Vafþrúðnir and Óðinn (4 – The Guest Waits on the Floor; 5 – Sitting on the Giant’s Bench; 6 – The Odinic Attack), to the already mentioned chapter about *Álvíssmal* (7 – Looking to *Alvíssmál*), to a brief review of what has been discussed and the conclusion (8 – Closing Time).

Probably one of the most changeling aspects of McGillivray’s goals is to seek elements from pre-Christian mythology and Christianity without falling in a common place over a simple dichotomy where these two brings their own concepts of Time, so it’s very clear from the first two chapters, the special interest the author has about temporality and time framing on *Vafþrúðnismál* narrative framework. Most of his theoretical and methodological choices to analyze *this* poem is actually pretty straightforward to this question, reflecting most of his comparisons with other old-Icelandic sources, specially *Völuspá*.

If the first two chapters covers mostly the choices McGillivray did on the field of theory and methodology, to a point where he can be very insistent in its theoretical and methodological tripod, defending the notion of Time from a Ricoeurian hermeneutical perspective and his narrative theory (not only Paul Ricoeur ideas is very present through the lines of this book, but also Gurevitch and Eliade concepts of Time as well), showing a very serious commitment to this proposal, which is pretty clear because the author comes back to this almost every chapter, by the other hand the core of this book focus on the analysis of the

narrative in different levels, showing an engagement of the author over the many details which lies hidden from the reader, which is praiseworthy. Such commitment is also the most relevant aspect of this book: at the end, McGillivray present us with a very useful way to carrying out a literary analysis of an eddic poem (and this is why an entire chapter focused on *Alvíssmál* was important).

From the third to the sixth he explores different relations of power, between Óðinn, Frigg and Vafþrúðnir, the details of obscure metaphors, magical verses, and what lies behind the contest between the *jötunn* and the head of the *Æsir* take places. And despite the fact that Time still the main topic here, Space starts to fill an important gap on the interaction between the characters: first at the briefly conversation between Frigg and Óðinn at Ásgarðr, then at Vafþrúðnir's hall, where Óðinn reach as a wanderer, presenting himself as Gagnráðr, occupying the floor, putting himself as a almost harmless guest, and then, later, at the bench, close to the *jötunn*, when the poem is getting to the climax.

It is clear through his analysis, how their duel of wits starts with both characters being very confident in their capabilities, although Óðinn, feigning tiredness and thirst (a situation which was true at the start of *Grímnismál*, but perhaps not here), starts to get a better position of this psychological battle, manipulating Vafþrúðnir, installing a false sense of security. In addition to this, McGillivray shows in a very convincing way how Óðinn replicates the same magical formula he used to convince his wife, Frigg, to let him go, to put Vafþrúðnir's game in motion following the god's desired end.

Unfortunately, this leads to a serious weakness on this book, which is the connection between the elements *Vafþrúðnismál* have with Christianity. Most of his observations are related to eschatology, which leads to conclusions towards Christian and pre-Christian perspectives where other poems from the eddic corpus, specially *Völuspá* were put into limelight. And this is one of the few times on which Cristianity appears as a relevant topic, here and there in parallel with *Genesis*. By the fifth chapter, although still pointing the cohesion of its conclusions with the set of his theoretical choices, he defines the historical background of the end of commonwealth in Iceland and the growth of Norwegian monarchy influence on

Icelandic politics, which could be seen as a Christian influence on the composing of *Landnámabók*, but only if one also consider the Genesis narrative.

Whoever expected a most balanced view between Christianity and pre-Christian influences of eddic poems could be a bit disappointed, but this really doesn't cast a shadow over the highlights of McGillivray's work, as this is a difficult topic and would had consumed a great portion of this book. Nevertheless, he could had spent more effort bringing up these elements, although his pursuit on different layers of Times, sometimes, fills this gap.

On the other hand, his conclusion is very elegant: pretty simple and although will not surprise most of the scholars or readers who takes an interest on topics of memory and old Norse culture, the author can show us some of the points where the intersection of pre-Christian and Christian conceptions of temporality can coexist, even centuries after the process of Christianization in Iceland. Our opinion is that the greatest thing McGillivray brought up with this work was his analytical model based on a Ricoeur's framework that could be applied also to different poems of the eddic corpus (as he did also with *Alvissmál*).

The process of separating the entire narrative not only into different temporal and spatial units, but also into different levels of analysis from the exercise of literary criticism, could be very helpful for someone who which to follow this methodology. It is a result from an exegetic reading of the poem that brought up elements of a pre-Christian system belief which was incorporated by the Icelandic Christian culture from the thirteenth century onwards.

Different layers of Time, from linear and cyclical concepts of temporality that does not necessarily overlaps, but tends to coexists in old Icelandic prose and poetry, can show how the Icelanders shown a very curious interest on their own pre-Christian past. Usually we could be taken to believe that they are opposites and could never be placed in the same context, and here lies one of the greatest merits of McGillivray's book, *Influences of Pre-Christian Mythology and Christianity on Old Norse Poetry*, to show us that things cannot be that simple, as the dichotomy we already signaled at the beginning of this review. If someone have an interest on how divergent ideologies could give new meanings to each other, this book could be very useful.