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Number Symbolism in Old Norse Literature

A Brief Study

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Abstract

It is generally agreed that some numbers such as three and nine which appear frequently in the two Eddas hold special significances in Norse mythology. Furthermore, numbers appearing in sagas not only denote factual quantity, but also stand for specific symbolic meanings. This tradition of number symbolism could be traced to Pythagorean thought and to St. Augustine's writings. But the result in Old Norse literature is its own system influenced both by Nordic beliefs and Christianity. This double influence complicates the intertextuality in the light of which the symbolic meanings of numbers should be interpreted. At the same time, the influence is better examined because of the cultural collision reflected in number symbolism.

This thesis focuses on eight special numbers (three, seven, eight, nine, ten, twelve, thirteen and eighteen) giving special attention to their symbolism. It then turns to explain how the symbolism of these numbers functions in certain sagas or some specific episodes to suit their author's needs. Saga writing is a process combining historical accounts and imaginary additions. Just like the four methods of allegorical interpretation to explain the Bible, saga reading can thus also be made at different levels.

Ágrip

Það er almennt talið að ákveðnar tölur, t.d. þrír og níu sem koma oft fyrir bæði í fornkvæðum og *Eddu* Snorra Sturlusonar, hafi sérstaka merkingu í norrænni goðafræði. Enn fremur virðast tölur í sögum ekki einvörðungu einvörðungu vera notaðar til að tákna staðreyndir um fjölda, heldur í ka stundum vegna táknrænnar merkingar sinnar. Hefð fyrir táknrænu gildi talna má rekja aftur Pýþagórasar og síðar skrifa Ágústínusar kirkjuföður. Hún birtist þó í norrænum miðaldabókmenntum sem sjálfstætt kerfi, mótast ísenn af goðsögum og kristni. Þessi tvíþætta áhrif verða til þess að það verður örðugra að lesa ítöurnar og merkingu þeirra. Á sama tíma verða áhrif þeirra sýnilegri vegna menningarlega árekstra sem endurspeglast í táknrænu gildi talnanna.

Íritgerðinni er sjónum beint að átta tölum (þrír, sjö, átta, níu, tíu, tólf og áttán) og táknrænu gildi þeirra. Síðan er gerð tilraun til að skýra hvernig þessar tölur birtast í ákveðnum frásögnum fornboókmenntanna og eru beittar af höfundum til að gefa merkingu þeirra til kynna. Höfundar fornsagna tvinnuðu saman sögulegum atburðum og viðbótum sem þeir sköpuðu sjálfir. Á sama hátt og lesa mátti Biblíuna áfærnan hátt, máttúlka fornsögurnar á mörgum plönum.

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“Of course there is a mark,” said Gandalf. “I put it there myself. For very good reasons. You asked me to find the fourteenth man for your expedition, and I chose Mr. Baggins. Just let any one say I chose the wrong man or the wrong house, and you can stop at thirteen and have all the bad luck you like, or go back to digging coal.”

- « An Unexpected Party » in *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien

1. Introduction

Numbers are frequent in Old Norse literature. In the *Poetic Edda* they describe the three important gods, the nine worlds of giantesses, the eighteen spells of the High One. In sagas numbers refer to the quantity of killers and victims, the age of heroes, the amount of possessions (such as the farms, the money), etc. The interesting example above in Tolkien's famous novel shows how the wizard Gandalf and moreover the dwarfs are obsessed by the question of numbers. But should dwarfs have existed, would they seriously consider thirteen as a bad omen? One of the counterexamples is that today's Icelanders still have the 13 Yule Lads, i.e. *jǫlasveinarnir* in their folkloric tradition. This “anachronism” not only had an effect on Tolkien's writing, but also left a scar on saga heroes' front: greatly influenced by Christian beliefs, Old Norse literature often shows its indelible obsession with the new religion. At the same time, Nordic beliefs have also played an essential role in the creation of literary works in Scandinavia. For example, three and nine are often considered as the most important numbers in Norse mythology and this impression comes mainly from the reading of the two Eddas.¹

Though several articles have dealt with the symbolism of numbers in Old Norse literature², a systematic study of number symbolism has not been made. Actually, a

¹ See a list of mythological legends on the website: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Numbers_in_Norse_mythology. Further discussion about the number 9 can also be read in Rudolf Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, translated by Angela Hall (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1993), 232-233.

² See Thomas D. Hill, “Number and patterns in *Lilja*” in *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 69:3 (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1970), 561-567. Árni Einarsson, “Saint Olaf's dream house: a medieval cosmological allegory” in *Skáldskaparmál* 4 (Reykjavík: Stofa hf., 1997), 179-209.

large quantity of numbers in sagas shows their symbolic values more than their face value. Studying number symbolism in sagas provides another perspective to view the fiction/reality of sagas.

Several questions thus rise to the surface: does number symbolism exist in Old Norse literature? If so, what are the symbolic meanings of numbers? How does number symbolism function in sagas?

In order to answer these questions, I do not cover all symbolic meanings of numbers, but rather choose some representative numbers that are widely used with their symbolic meanings. The corpus, however big it is, needs to be extended in the future by scholars wishing to continue this study which is to be considered a preliminary one.


2. Nordic number symbolism: origin, reason of study and definition

2.1. Number symbolism: from the beginning to the Middle Ages

Pythagoreans were the first school to associate numbers with symbolic meanings. Though their conclusions about numbers are not always persuasive, their starting point is interesting: Pythagoras and his disciples believed numbers to be the elements of all things because they found the harmony between numbers, geometry, music and even astronomy and extended this rule to the universe. They attributed different meanings to numbers: four as justice, requital or equality, seven as opportunity and ten which was called the perfect number.³ “The Pythagoreans were obsessed with limit and finiteness so that they always concluded that the numbers closest to unity and finiteness were the most perfect; hence numbers beyond the range of ten being further removed from the limit of all things, the One, were less important than the number contained within the decad.”⁴ These thoughts recognized the value of numbers and moreover, that of mathematics: “Falsehood can in no way breathe on Number; for Falsehood is inimical and hostile to its nature, whereas Truth is related and in close natural union with the race of Number.”⁵ Numbers as evidence of truth acted on the theory of four elements (earth, fire, water and air), Plato’s concept of “World Soul” deciphering “mathematics as a specially privileged, truth-telling language”⁶ and sensing the harmony of the world, and later biblical exegesis.

As a supporter of Pythagorean thought rooted in the culture of early Icelanders, Einar Pálsson proposes to harmonize the early settlement of Icelanders, their laws and stories by numerology: the numbers 8, 12, 18 and 27 represent respectively earth,

³ “Because they assumed, as a defining property of justice, requital or equality, and found this to exist in numbers, therefore they said that justice was the first square number; for in every kind the first instance of thing having the same formula had in their opinion the best right to the name. This number some said was 4, as being the first square, ... Opportunity, on the other hand, they said was 7, because in nature the times of fulfillment with respect to birth and maturity go in sevens.” W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek philosophy I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 303. “These (1, 2, 3 and 4 are the numbers which, added together, make 10, and the number 10, in the curious Pythagorean combination of mathematics and mysticism, was called the perfect number.

It was illustrated graphically by the figure called tetrakys, i.e. .” W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Greek Philosophers: from Thales to Aristotle* (London: Routledge & Francis Group, 1950), 38-39.

⁴ Peter Gorman, *Pythagoras: A Life* (London, Henley and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 133.

⁵ Kathleen Freeman, *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers: a Companion to Diels, Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1946), 75.

⁶ Christopher Butler, *Number Symbolism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 18.

water, air and fire, and furthermore *höddr*, *hersir*, *jarl* and *konungr*;⁷ 36 goðar of the Althing distributed in each quarter of the land are connected with the 12 signs of the Zodiac and 36 decans of the horizon;⁸ etc. He gives so much credence to Pythagorean thoughts that he even denies the original meaning of the number 9 in traditional Icelandic culture⁹ and confirms the use of the theoretical Pythagorean Triangle in *Njáls saga*¹⁰.

Most of Einar's opinions about Pythagorean influence in Medieval Iceland should be called into question, yet his attempt to associate numbers to a larger historical background is interesting. He is a staunch believer in the value of number symbolism in Old Norse literature: "the qualities of number found in the Icelandic sagas were eminently allegorical."¹¹

As an important thinker who endeavored to connect Christian thought and Jewish traditions, Philo Judaeus (ca. 25 BC- ca. 50 AD) greatly influenced the early church fathers. We can also see Pythagorean ideas in his writings. In *De Opificio Mundi*, he explains the creation of the world in six days by interpreting the numbers: 6 "being equal to the product of its factors (i.e. $1 \times 2 \times 3$) as well as made up to the sum of them (i.e. $1+2+3$), its half being 3, its third part 2, its sixth part 1."¹² Since odd numbers symbolize male and even numbers symbolize female, three and two represent the first male and female, i.e. Adam and Eve. Six, as the sum of all three first numbers, is the perfect number.¹³

Numbers played an important role in the Middle Ages since St. Augustine's focus on their symbolism. In Book Two of *De doctrina Christiana*, St. Augustine discusses the things "for their value as signs which signify something else", that cause us to "think of something beyond the impression the thing itself makes upon the senses"¹⁴. He further classifies the signs into two categories: natural and conventional signs.

⁷ Einar Pálsson, *The sacred triangle of pagan Iceland* (Reykjavik: Mímir, 1986), 24-25.

⁸ *Ibid.* 51-52.

⁹ Einar Pálsson, *Allegory in Njáls saga and its basis in Pythagorean thought* (Reykjavik: Mímir, 1998), 77-82.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 95-97.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹² Butler, 22.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ St Augustine, *On Christian doctrine*, translated with an introduction by D. W. Robertson (Indianapolis : Bobbs-Merrill, 1979), Book II, chap. 1.

According to his description, natural signs are those that do not show a specific intention to mean other things, such as the smoke that usually signifies a fire. But conventional signs are those that mean something else for a particular reason and therefore, with the intention of informing others, they become communicative. This communication is directed towards a certain community which understands certain rules to perceive and comprehend the meaning.¹⁵ Numbers belong to these conventional signs that St. Augustine mentions. He also gives the symbolism of several numbers in his famous work, *De civitate Dei*. For instance, he clarifies the signification of ten, eleven and twelve:

Now the Law is clearly indicated by the number ten (hence the never-to-be-forgotten ‘decatalogue’) and therefore the number eleven undoubtedly symbolizes the transgression of the Law, since it oversteps ten; and so it is the number of sin.¹⁶

In contrast, the line from Adam to Noah through Seth gives us the significant number ten, the number of the Law. To this the three sons of Noah are added; but one of these fell into sin, and two received their father’s blessings, so that with the removal of the rejected son, and the addition of the sons who were approved, we are presented with the number twelve. This number is significant as being the number of the patriarchs and of the apostles, because it is the product of the two parts of seven – that is, three multiplied by four, or four multiplied by three, makes twelve.¹⁷

Isidore of Seville, the famous bishop anxious to preserve all that he considered valuable from the Fathers, diffused widely Augustine’s ideas by quoting the latter’s arguments throughout his writings. “Hence, from the middle of the seventh century until the universities, whenever one sees Augustine quoted on some specific questions, it is frequently the case that the author has not referred to Augustine at all but has taken his information from Isidore.”¹⁸ At the same time, Isidore also shared the passion to emphasize number symbolism. In his most famous work, *Etymologiae*, Isidore explicates the originators of mathematics in this way:

“Now ‘ten’ is said to derive from a Greek etymology, because it binds and conjoins numbers

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Book II, chapters 1 and 2.

¹⁶ St. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, a new translation by Henry Bettenson with an Introduction by John O’Meara (Penguin Books, 1984), Book XV, chap. 20.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Allan D. Fitzgerald (general editor), *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Michigan, Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 457-458.

that lie below it, for δεσμός (“bond”) means to conjoin or to bind. Furthermore, ‘twenty’ (*viginti*) is so called because ten ‘occurs twice’ (*bis geniti*), with the letter v put in place of the b. ‘Thirty’ (*triginta*) is so called because it arises (*gignere*) from three (*ternarius*) tens, and so it goes up to ‘ninety’ (*nonaginta*). ‘One hundred’ (*centum*) is so called from ‘iron wheel-tire’ (*canthus*) because it is circular; ‘two hundred’ (*ducenti*) comes from ‘two one hundreds’ (*duo centum*). Thus it is for the remaining numbers up to one thousand. ‘One thousand’ (*mille*) comes from ‘great number’ (*multitudo*), and whence also ‘the military’ (*militia*), as if the word were *multitia*; and whence also ‘thousands’ (*milia*), which the Greeks call *myriada* (i.e. “myriads”), with letters changed.”¹⁹

Associating numbers such as 10, 100, 1000, etc. to their postulated origins gives rise to the symbolism of numbers. Furthermore, Isidore explains the symbolic meanings of numbers as well:

“That we find Easter Day among the seven days from the fourteenth to the twenty-first of the new moon is because of that number seven, by which a meaning of wholeness is often figured. That number is even given to the Church itself because of its image of wholeness, whence the apostle John in the Apocalypse writes to seven churches.”²⁰

Number symbolism vivified by St. Augustine and Isidore of Seville was inherited by later thinkers of the Middle Ages. “... Augustine was... immensely influential, especially from the eleventh century on, when the writings of Augustine, together with Chalcidius’s *Timaeus* and Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, represented the most solid body of theological and philosophical ideas available in Latin. These texts kept Platonism alive in the Scholastic period before the new translations from Greek and Arabic.”²¹ Heinz Meyer and Rudolf Suntrup use in their *Lexikon der Mittelalterlichen Zahlenbedeutungen* the sources of some important writers that discussed or used number symbolism until the 13th century: Cassiodorus, Gregory the Great, Bede, Alcuin, Hrabanus, Hincmar, Rupert of Deutz, Honorius of Autun, Hugh of St. Victor, Richard of St. Victor, Bernhard of Clairvaux, Thomas of Perseigne, etc.²² But number symbolism did not cease its charm by the end of the Middle Ages. The famous Italian poet, Dante is reputed for his use of number symbolism in *The*

¹⁹ *The etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, edited and translated by Stephen A. Barney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 89-90.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 144.

²¹ Butler, 26.

²² Heinz Meyer and Rudolf Suntrup, *Lexikon der Mittelalterlichen Zahlenbedeutungen* (Munich: Fink 1987), XII.

Divine Comedy.²³

2.2. Christian influence of number symbolism in Scandinavia

Already “during the centuries after 800, the area of western, Christian culture – of late Latin Christendom – at least doubled, as it came to encompass much of eastern and western Europe”²⁴. Converted around the year 1000, Scandinavia went through great changes and Christian beliefs affected the world-view of its inhabitants and later their writings.

Vernacular writings in Old Norse did not go without Christian thought. Most of the earliest preserved manuscripts are “of direct clerical provenance, mostly more or less close rendering of foreign material, viz. homiletic and other devotional literature”.²⁵ The earliest texts in these manuscripts attest the importance of Christianity: *The Icelandic Homily book*, the translation of Gregory’s *Dialogues*, etc. The translation of *Elucidarius* into Old Norse could also be dated to 1200 or even earlier. *Konungs skuggsjá*, considered as an independent didactic work written by a Norwegian intellectual around 1250, gives a considerable part (chapters 42-70) in its surviving version to the discussion of Bible stories and Christian values. Saga writing began in the decades round 1200.²⁶ Though oral traditions of sagas could have existed antecedently, Christian thoughts would have already been firmly implanted in the minds by then.

On the one hand, saga writing was influenced by the Scriptures. Robert Cook concludes from his comparison of several Sagas of Icelanders (*Flóamanna saga*, *Vápnfirðinga saga*, *Grænlendinga saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Grettis saga*, *Hrafnkels saga*, etc.) with the Bible that the former inherited considerably their general parallels, style, motifs and scenes from the latter.²⁷ On the other hand, sagas also referred implicitly

²³ See the discussion of *The Divine Comedy* by Vincent Foster Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism: Its Sources, Meaning, and Influence on Thought and Expression* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2000, originally published in New York: Columbia University, 1938), 136-201.

²⁴ Anders Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia: Vikings, Merchants, and Missionaries in the Remaking of Northern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 5.

²⁵ Hreinn Benediktsson, *Early Icelandic Script as illuminated in vernacular Texts from the twelfth and thirteenth Centuries* (Reykjavik: The Manuscript Institute of Iceland, 1965), 13.

²⁶ Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas: Iceland's Medieval Literature*, translated by Peter Foote (Reykjavik: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2007), 22.

²⁷ Robert Cook, “The family sagas and the Bible” in *The sixth International Saga Conference 28.7. - 2.8. 1985* :

to each other or to earlier sources about certain themes (King Haraldr Fairhair's cruel rule, the Settlement of early Icelanders, etc.). Hermann Pálsson summarizes ten topics (including information about Snorri Sturluson, sparks of heathenism, the creator of the sun, etc.) concerning the theme of the Conversion frequently appearing in a great number of the 13th century Sagas of Icelanders: *Grettis saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Njáls saga*, *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, etc. that have their earlier models in *Islendingabók* of Ari Þorgilsson, *Þorvalds þáttur vǫförla* and *Olafs saga Tryggvasonar*, the *Heimskringla*, the Icelandic Annals, *Landnámabók* and *Kristni saga*.²⁸ This intertextuality allows the inheritance of influence from the Scriptures and the construction of a system of number symbolism in sagas.

2.3. Autochthonous number symbolism in Scandinavia?

To say Nordic beliefs have no effect on numbers in Old Norse literature is absurd, since numbers such as nine linked to Odin's ring and to the worlds in both Eddas should have reflected the composition of Scandinavian mythology. Before we set out to confirm the value of numbers from Old Norse mythology, however, we ought to consider how these numbers associated to Nordic mythology could be viewed and interpreted inimically by Christian orthodoxies. Adam of Bremen describes what a "Christian seventy-two years old" told him about the Scandinavian mysterious cult:

It is customary also to solemnize in Uppsala at nine-year-old intervals, a general feast of all the provinces of Sweden. From attendance at this festival no one is exempted. Kings and people all and singly send their gifts to Uppsala and, what is more distressing than any kind of punishment, those who have already adopted Christianity redeem themselves through these ceremonies. The sacrifice is of this nature: of any living thing that is male, they offer nine heads, with the blood of which it is customary to placate gods of this sort. The bodies they hang in the sacred grove that adjoins the temple. Now this grove is so sacred in the eyes of the heathen that each and every tree in it is believed divine because of the death or putrefaction of the victims. Even dogs and horses hang there with men.²⁹

workshop papers : themes: Christianity and West Norse literature (A), transmission and editing of texts (B), arranged by Det arnamagnæanske Institut, Københavns Universitet, (Copenhagen : s.n. 1985), 207-220.

²⁸ Hermann Pálsson, "The Transition from paganism to Christianity in early Icelandic literature" in *The sixth International Saga Conference 28.7. - 2.8. 1985 : workshop papers : themes: Christianity and West Norse literature (A), transmission and editing of texts (B)*, arranged by Det arnamagnæanske Institut, Københavns Universitet (Copenhagen: s.n., 1985), 483-497.

²⁹ Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen*, translated with an Introduction and Notes by Francis J. Tschann (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), Book Four, 27.

We can easily cast doubt on the veracity of this scene, since the story is retold by Adam of Bremen who did not tend to delineate Scandinavia in a very attractive way. However, whether this description remains loyal to history or not, the brutal sacrifice of 9 male living things every 9 years would definitely link nine to a barbarian Nordic paganism. This inimical Christian perspective towards Nordic paganism in Old Norse literature preserves and presents the knowledge about the pagan gods in a comparatively distorted way.

Similar to *heiti* and *kenning* that kept the secret of skaldic poetry, numbers in mythology retained their special meanings from generation to generation; at the same time, just as the poetic expressions would be forgotten and misused³⁰, numbers' meaning also received the confrontation by Christian beliefs. One key to explain this transition is the attitude of people converted into Christians. Spoken in modern terms, it is the social memory that works into the rebuilding of sagas: "Social memory is the process by which a society uses its past in giving its present form and meaning."³¹ "Noble heathen" is one salient image of saga heroes in the social memory of their descendants.³²

Apart from numbers that are historically real, those in sagas cannot be regarded as descending directly from Nordic beliefs, but rather as a product of social memory remarkably influenced by Christianity. Number symbolism in Old Norse literature is thus a consequence of the influence exerted from Christianity and the persisting belief in an aboriginal Scandinavian ideology. Just as the "Sagareligion" is a product that people painted according to the image of Christianity at least 200 years later after the Conversion³³, we need to be aware of the complicated character of the system of number symbolism.

³⁰ That may quite possibly be the reason why Snorri Sturluson composed *Edda*. "It seems that he wrote his *Edda* as a treatise on traditional skaldic verse to try to keep interest in it alive and to encourage young poets to continue to compose in the traditional Scandinavian oral style". Anthony Faulkes, *Introduction* in Snorri Sturluson: *Edda*, translated from the Icelandic and introduced by Anthony Faulkes (Everyman Classic, 1987), ix.

³¹ Jesse Byock, "Social Memory and the Sagas: The Case of *Egils saga*" in *Scandinavian Studies* 76:3 (2004), 300.

³² Lars Lönnroth, "The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas" in *Scandinavian Studies* 41 (1969), 1-29.

³³ Walter Baetke, *Christliches Lehngut in der Sagareligion, Das Svoldr-Problem: Zwei Beiträge zur Sagakritik*, (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1952), 7-55.

2.4. Number symbolism in Old Norse literature

According to St. Augustine's opinion, numbers are related to the incorporeal world (above the corporeal world that is contingent and mutable) to be understood by reason.³⁴ In the same light, number symbolism (we may say it belongs to an "incorporeal symbolism") should be distinguished with symbolism of objects (we call it the "corporeal symbolism"). It is nevertheless not always straightforward to distinguish these two symbolisms. For example, in *Guðmunðar saga biskups*, the bishop performed a miracle concerning four trees:

It was still in day that he performed a mass away from home at Hofs á that there was no sacrarium made by the altar and he had to wash himself down on the floor. There lay four palms, tied together, which had been used in the previous seasons and stored there by the altar. And he washed himself after the service above the palms. Then they were taken up when he said that they should be stored elsewhere. But then hops and leaves had grown on the palms and seemed to him as well as others that this was a remarkable event. This winter the holy Þorlákur bishop died in Skálholt two nights before Christmas. And then died Snorri Þórðarson in Vatnsfjörður at Remigius' mass, Hruna-Gunnarr and Solveig Jónsdóttir.³⁵

4 persons died after 4 palms sprouted. Though the number 4 can in Christian tradition represent the cardinal virtues, it is used in this episode only to measure the sum of palms. The sprouting of palms might bespeak the death of people, but this episode does not show the symbolic meaning of the number 4.

Góli Súrsson is said to be a person whose dreams are prophetic. In his outlawry, he has a strange dream:

"I have dreamt of two women," said he, "and one treated me well, but the other always said to me that something seemed worse to me than before and foretold me something bad. And I dreamt then about myself walking towards a house or a hut. It seemed that I walked into the house, and inside there I recognized many of my kinsmen and friends. They sat by fire and drank, and there

³⁴ Scott Macdonald, "The divine nature" in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, edited by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 76-78.

³⁵ „Þat var enn of d(ag). at hann sœng messo heiman til Hofs ar. at þar var enge sacrarium hia altare gerr. Ok var þ at þua ser agolf niðr. En þar lagu palmar iiij. bundnir saman er hafðr hœðo uerit. hin fyre missere. Ok komit þar við altarit. En hann þo ser eptir þionostu tekiuna ofan apalmana. En þa voro þeir upp tecnir. Er hann mel(te) at þa skyllde annars staðar uarðueita. En þa var humle sprottin a palmun(um) ok lauf. ok þotte beðe honum ok auðrum mænnum mikils uert um þenna atburð. Þenna uetr andaðz hinn heil(age) Þorlákur byskup i Skala h(ollte) .ij nottum firi iol. ok þa andaðz Snorre Þórðar s(on) I Vafnirð. Remigius messo. ok Hruna Gunar. Solveig Jons d(ottir).“ *Guðmunðar saga biskups*, chap. 40. The translation is from Haraldur Bernhardsson with some modifications.

were seven fires: some of them almost burnt out, and some were very bright. Then came in my dreamwoman who treated me better and she said that the fires indicated the rest of my life, the time that I had yet to live, and she counseled me while I lived, I should renounce old traditions and practice neither witchcraft nor old lore, instead I should be nice with those who are deaf, lame, poor and ill-advised. The dream was then over.”³⁶

This dream is linked to the collision between the old Nordic religion and the advent of Christianity. 7 fires in this episode are prophetic as they appear in G íli's dreams, but they only represent his survival of 7 years. A possibility does exist that the saga author wanted to create an episode to emphasize the importance of Christianity with the number 7³⁷. However, even though we know nothing about the veracity of this episode, seven which usually symbolizes completeness and perfection can hardly be associated to the life of an outlaw resisting restlessly in his own way outside the society. Its symbolic meaning then cannot be really explained. The corporeal symbolism is put to use instead of the incorporeal symbolism in these two episodes. Only the symbolism which can truly convey the meanings of numbers will be studied in this paper.

³⁶ „Ek á draumkonur tvær,“ sagði hann, „ok er qnnur vel við mik, en qnnur segir mér þat nokkut jafnan, er mér þykkir verr en áðr, ok spár mér illt eina. En þat dreyms mik nú, at ek þóttumk ganga at húsi einu eða skáa, ok inn þóttumk ek ganga í húsi, ok þar kennda ek marga inni frændr mína ok vini. Þeir sáu við elda ok drukku, ok sáu sjau eldarnir, sumir váru mjök brunnir, en sumir sem bjartastir. Þá kom inn draumkona mín in betri ok sagði, at þat merkð aldri minn, hvat ek ætta eptir dífat, ok hún réð mér þat, meðan ek lifða, at láa leiðask forna sið ok nema enga galdra né forneskju ok vera vel við daufan og haltan ok fátæka og fátæða. Eigi var draumrinn lengri.“ *G íla saga*, chap. 22. All translations of Old Norse and Old French texts are my own, unless otherwise stated.

³⁷ Its symbolic meanings shall be discussed in detail in the following.

3. Numbers and their symbolism in sagas

In Book Three of *De doctrina christiana*, St. Augustine cites and demonstrates 7 rules of Tyconius. About the fifth rule “of Times”,

He (Tyconius) calls those numbers “legitimate” which Divine Scripture commends above others, like seven, ten, twelve, and others which the studious reader will easily recognize. Many numbers of this kind are used for time as a whole, whence “seven times a day I have given praise to thee” means the same thing as ‘always his praise shall be in my mouth.’ They have the same meaning when they are multiplied by ten, like seventy and seven hundred, whence the seventy years of Jeremias may be spiritually interpreted to mean the whole time during which the Church is among strangers. The same holds true if these numbers are multiplied by themselves, as ten tens are a hundred, and twelve twelves are a hundred and forty-four, a number which signifies all of the faithful in the Apocalypse. Whence it appears that these numbers are of value not only for solving problems of time but that their significances are broad and touch on many things. Nor does this number in the Apocalypse apply to times, but to men.³⁸

St. Augustine thus explains two rules of number symbolism: firstly, numbers which mean the whole can be multiplied by ten or by themselves to still mean integrity; secondly, the symbolic use of numbers applies not only to time, but also to many other things like men. For the first point, according to St. Augustine’ theory, the numbers 100 and 1000 can both mean integrity because they are ten times ten³⁹ and hundred (ten times ten) times ten. We would like to develop the theory in that multiplying numbers (X) by 10 (which means the whole), 100 and 1000 contain the same meaning of X for the new number (10X) and enlarge this meaning as its new meaning is obtained by a multiple (original meaning plus integrity). For the second point, we know that sagas, as well as Bible stories, employ a lot of numbers to denote time and men, so the symbolic use of numbers for both subjects in sagas agrees with St. Augustine’s explanation of the Scriptures.

3.1. Number 3: sacred, many, royal

The number 3 is important in Christian tradition, as the most popular doctrine about three is the Holy Trinity. Except for this later interpretation dating since the second

³⁸ *On Christian doctrine*, Book III, chap. 35.

³⁹ Besides, 100 (hundrað) is sometimes denoted by *tú tígir* in sagas. For example, „Þá váru þar komnir allir hans menn, ok váru þat tú tígir manna. (Then all his men came there and they were one hundred in all.)“ *Njáls saga*, chap. 124.

century AD, the Bible also has direct sources about this number. “Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham and Japheth.” (Genesis 6:10) “Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water.” (Exodus 15:22) “‘Truly I tell you,’ Jesus answered, ‘this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.’” (Matthew 26:34)

We shall limit the quotations from the Bible to these, but let us take a look at the specific situations dealing with the number 3. According to God’s will, Noah builds the ark and keeps all that is necessary for the rebirth of the world. If he keeps two of every kind of creature, male and female, he is allowed to take his wife, his three sons and the wives of these sons, which indicates God’s grace towards his family. Having fled from Egypt but with no water to drink for 3 days, Israelites grumble to Moses. Clearly, three is the limit of their endurance. These two examples show already how three should be regarded as a great number in the Old Testament, and this meaning continues in the New Testament: in spite of Peter’s promise that he shall never fail Jesus, he disowns his master three times just as Jesus predicted. His inconsistency and frailty contrast with Jesus’ foresight and tolerance. Three thus not only has a sacred meaning as in the Trinity, but also is often associated with a great quantity.

These two symbolic meanings of three coexist in old Scandinavian beliefs. As to the sacred meaning, if we believe that Snorri Sturluson is faithful to Nordic mythology, 3 great gods sitting in three thrones satisfy Gylfi’s curiosity about the Æsir: Hár (High), Jafnhár (Just-as-High) and Þriðr (Third).⁴⁰ In the *Poetic Edda*, 3 great gods descend to the world: “Odin gave soul, Hænir gave spirit, Lóðurr gave warmth and color of gods”⁴¹ For the meaning of many, Freyr cannot wait 3 days to see his lover and sighs: “Long is a night, long are two nights, how about three nights that I yearn for?”⁴² The Æsir give one single winter on purpose to fail the artificer planning to build a stronghold for them in 3 seasons.⁴³ Thor is only able to take 3 draughts from the horn that Útgarðr-Loki offers him, but that is also the maximum times that

⁴⁰ Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning*, chap. 2.

⁴¹ „önd gaf Óðinn, óð gaf Hænir,/ lá gaf Lóðurr ok litu góða.“ *Vǫluspá* 18.

⁴² „Löng er nótt,/ langar ro tvær,/ hvé um þreyjak þrjár?“ *Gylfaginning*, chap. 35. The verse is also seen in the *Poetic Edda*, *Skírnismál*, 42.

⁴³ *Gylfaginning*, chap. 42.

Útgarða-Loki stipulates for those who are not poor drinkers.⁴⁴ 3 winters follow with no summer in between before the coming of Ragnarök.⁴⁵ When Geirroed catches Loki, the crafty god cannot resist 3 months starving.⁴⁶ It is also taught in *Hávamál*: “neither one nor the other should know; all the people know, if there are three who know.”⁴⁷ In *Völsunga saga*, Völsungr travels magnificently with 3 ships to see his son-in-law. Signý sleeps with her brother Sigmundr for 3 nights in order to get pregnant and gives birth to Sinfjötli who will avenge their father, Völsungr. Borghildr offers 3 times the poisoned drink to Sinfjötli who finally accepts to take it and dies. It is only the third time that Reginn succeeds in making the sword that Sigurðr needs to kill the dragon Fafnir. Sigurðr who exchanges his shape with Gunnar puts a sword between him and Brynhildr for 3 nights after their wedding, thus avoiding an intercourse with Gunnar’s bride.⁴⁸

It is interesting to see that these two symbolic meanings of the number 3 are present both in Christian and Nordic cultures. It is probable that the notion of “1, 2, many” and the idea of three as superlative wielded their power in people’s minds.⁴⁹ But we may also assume the possibility that Georges Dumézil’s tri-functional hypothesis works in Proto-Indo-European societies. Anyhow, with these linguistic or cultural common grounds, the fusion is easy to make between the two worlds.

Frequently appearing in sagas, the number 3 can mean a rather important length of time. In two feasts that King Haraldr Fairhair is invited (respectively in the abode of Þórðfr and that of the sons of Hildir ðr), the stay lasts 3 nights.

The King was rather unhappy and was there for three nights, as it was planned.⁵⁰

The sons of Hildir ðr went to meet the king and invited him to their place for a feast of three nights.⁵¹

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, chap. 46.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, chap. 51.

⁴⁶ Snorri Sturluson, *Skaldskaparmál*, chap. 4.

⁴⁷ „einn vita n éannarr skal,/ þj óðveit, ef þr í ro.“ *Hávamál*, 63.

⁴⁸ See these episodes in *Völsunga saga*.

⁴⁹ These notions can be seen in the dual and the plural in the Egyptian, Arabian, Hebrew, Sanskrit, Greek, and Gothic languages, and also in the three degrees of positive, comparative, and superlative. Hopper, 4-5.

⁵⁰ „konungr var heldr ök ár ok var þar þrjár nætr, sem ætlat var.“ *Egils saga*, chap. 11.

⁵¹ „Hildiríðarsynir fóru á fund konungs ok buðu honum heim til þriggja náttu veizlu.“ *Egils saga*, chap. 12.

Three also works with other numbers to form the comparison. Haraldr Fairhair does not suspect Þórðfr for no reason, as Þórðfr shows off by his escort all the time:

During the winter Þórðfr made his journey up the mountain and had with him a lot of men no less than ninety in number; but before it had been a custom that the stewards had thirty men, sometimes even less.⁵²

The King had nearly three hundred men when he came to the feast, but Þórðfr had command of five hundred men.⁵³

“You could think about it in many ways,” says Hárekr, “if you had all that you deserved, but now it was far from it; there was a much bigger share that Þórðfr took under his control. He sent you as a gift three beaver skins, but I know for sure that he still had thirty of them that you should have owned and I think that such a difference would be for some other reason.”⁵⁴

The sons of Hildir ǫ took the district in Hálogaland; no man opposed the power of the king, but this change seemed inappropriate to many who were Þórðfr’s kinsmen or friends. In the winter they (the sons of Hildir ǫ) went onto the mountain and had with them thirty men; it seemed to the Finns that these stewards had much less honour than the time that Þórðfr went there; a much worse tribute was given when the Finns had to pay. The same winter Þórðfr went onto the mountain with one hundred men; ...⁵⁵

“It is well, King,” Hárekr says, “if you have noticed how much tribute usually is to come from Finnmark, because you know then how much you had missed, if Þórðfr did away with all the tribute from the Finns for you. We were in the winter thirty men there, just as the duty of the former stewards had been; Þórólfr then came there with one hundred men; ...”⁵⁶

Numbers show directly the difference between Haraldr (and in his camp the sons of Hildir ǫ) and Þórðfr. The great disparity in numbers of men not only reveals Þórðfr’s ambition, but also proves his popularity among the Norwegians and even in Lapland: 90 more than 30, 500 more than 300, 30 more than 3 and 100 more than 30.

⁵² „Þórólfr gerði um vetrinn ferð sína á fjall upp ok hafði með sér lið mikit, eigi minna en níu tigu manna; en áðr hafði vanði á verit, at sýslumenn hofðu haft þrjá tigu manna, en stundum færa.“ *Ibid.*, chap. 10.

⁵³ „Konungr hafði nær þrjú hundruð manna, er hann kom til veizlunnar, en Þórólfr hafði fyrir fimm hundruð manna.“ *Ibid.*, chap. 11.

⁵⁴ „Þá myndi yðr mart um finnask,“ segir Hárekr, „ef þér hefðið allan þann, sem þér áttuð, en nú fór þat fjarri; var hitt miklu meiri hlutr, er Þórólfr dró undir sik. Hann sendi yðr at gjöf bjórskinn þrjú, en ek veit víst, at hann hafði eptir þrj á tigu þeira, er þér áttuð, ok hygg ek, at slíkan mun hafi farit um annat.“ *Ibid.*, chap. 15.

⁵⁵ „Hildirǫarsynir tóku við sýslu á Hálogalandi; mælti engi maðr í móti fyrir ríki konungs, en mörpum þótti þetta skipti mjök í móti skapi, þeim er vǫru frændr Þórólfs eða vinir. Þeir fóru um vetrinn á fjall ok hofðu með sér þrjá tigu manna; þótti Finnum miklu minni vegr at þessum sýslumönnum en þá er Þórólfr fór; greiddisk allt miklu verr gjald þat, er Finnar skyldu reiða. Þann sama vetr fór Þórðfr upp á fjall með þundrað manna; ...“ *Ibid.*, chap. 17.

⁵⁶ „Vel er þat, konungr,“ segir Hárekr, „er þú hefir hugleitt, hversu mikill skattr er vanr at koma af Finnmark, því at þá veiztu gorr, hversu mikils þér missið, ef Þórólfr eyðir með öllu Finnskattinum fyrir yðr. Vér várum í vetr þr f tigur manna á mörkinni, svá sem fyrr hefir verit vanði sýslumanna; síðan kom þar Þórólfr með hundruð manna; ...“ *Ibid.*, chap. 17.

King Haraldr then has to wipe out this outrageous enemy elevated by himself. In the last instance, the sons of Hildir ⁵⁷ do nothing but kindle King Haraldr's fire of suspicion by adding some exaggerated facts (or even facts as they are, since Háekr and his brother retell the events by reporting the actual numbers). Actually, distrust is part of King Haraldr's character in *Egils saga*: though the king sends two brothers, Hallvarðr and Sigtryggr to kill Þórðfr, he departs right after them to perform the slaughter himself: "he had his entourage and nearly three hundred men; he had five or six ships, all big."⁵⁷

If we review Þórðfr's episode, we'll find that the number 3 is closely associated with King Haraldr and his royal status not to be challenged. King Haraldr always has the number 3, i.e. a great number in power, so he is crowned by an aura of invincibility. It is interesting here to see the extension of the symbolic meaning of three: from holy and many to royal, it marks the great power that the king possesses all the time.

Þórðfr makes a final gesture to express his regret: "When Þórðfr came forward to the wall of shields, he threw the sword through the body of the man who carried the banner. Then Þórolfr said: "Now I made three feet too short."⁵⁸ The short 3 that Þórðfr regrets gives evidence of his ambition: he aims the royal power, though he reacts too unwisely to get it.

3.2. Number 7: whole, complete, long

In biblical tradition, the creation of the world by God in 7 days consolidates the heptad: 7 virtues of the Holy Spirit (*sapientia, intellectus, consilium, fortitudo, scientia, pietas* and *timor*), 7 Beatitudes (the 8th one is considered to be the synopsis of the former 7 ones) and 7 petitions in the Lord's prayer, etc.⁵⁹ Also seven is the sum of three and four (the Trinity spread by 4 gospels or 4 cardinal virtues). The meaning of seven is especially influential. As we've mentioned, St. Augustine quotes 7 rules

⁵⁷ „hafði hann (Haraldr) hirð sína ok nær þremr hundruðum manna; hann hafði fimm skip eða sex ok öll stór.“ *Ibid.*, chap. 22.

⁵⁸ „En er Þórðfr kom fram at skjaldborginni, lagð hann sverð í gegnum þann mann, er merkit bar. Þá mælti Þórðfr: „Nú gekk ek þremr fótum til skammt.““ *Ibid.*, chap. 22

⁵⁹ *Lexikon der Mittelalterlichen Zahlenbedeutungen*, 479-490.

from Tyconius in *De doctrina christiana* and emphasizes the meaning of seven as a whole in this book.⁶⁰ And a week composed of 7 days is widely accepted in the whole Europe.

But we should not ignore the importance of the number 7 in Old Norse religion. Hárbarðr challenges Þórr: “I rested with seven sisters and I had all their mind and pleasure.”⁶¹ “They (the valkyries) were later busy with that, seven winters; all the eighth winter, they longed; but on the ninth winter, they were separated by necessity.”⁶² Seven, eight and nine are all used to modify the number of winters, which indicates the close relationship between these three numbers. 7 nuthatches, forming a mysterious unity, reveal Reginn’s plot to Sigurðr in *Fafnismál*. In *Guðrúnarkviða in forna* which is considered to be a later composition, Guðrún sings: “for seven days we rode across the cold land, but other seven days we hit the waves; the third seven days we went onto a dry land.”⁶³ Maybe the week of seven days had already exerted its influence among the Norsemen by the time of this last composition.

Seven is used in sagas to denote a rather long time that marks a whole: “and when Haraldr had been king for seventy winters, he then passed the kingdom to his son Eiríkr”⁶⁴ In fact, Haraldr lived nearly 82 years and his reign was from 872 to 930 AD. The expansion of 58 to 70 should only be seen as suiting the wish to portray a complete and accomplished sovereignty.

It is after 7 years that the earl Haakon asks Finnbogi to request the money that he lent to Bersi: “Then he (Bersi) asked me to lend some money, and I lent him twelve pure marks. After that Bersi the White went away, and never has he returned in seven winters.”⁶⁵

Seven as a sign of completeness stands not only for time, but also for times that an

⁶⁰ See page 12.

⁶¹ „Hvilda ek hjá þeim systurum sjau, / ok hafða ek geð þeira alt ok gaman.“ *Hárbarðsljóð*, 18.

⁶² „Sátu síðan/ sjau vetr at þat/ en inn átta/ allan þráðu, / en inn níunda/ nauðr of skilði.“ *Vöndarkviða*, 3.

⁶³ „vér sjau daga/ svalt land riðum, / en aðra sjau/ unnir kníðum, / en ina þriðju sjau/ þurrt land stigum.“ *Guðrúnarkviða in forna*, 35.

⁶⁴ „ok er Haraldr hafði verit sjau tigu vetra konungr, þá seldi hann í hendr Eiríki syni sínum ríki.“ *Egils saga*, chap. 57.

⁶⁵ „Síðan bað hann mik ljá sér fê nökkut, ok ek léða honum tólf merkr brenndar. Eptir þat f á Bersi inn hv fi á brott, ok aldri hefir hann aptr komit síðan á sjau vetrum.“ *Finnboga saga ramma*, chap. 18.

event takes place. The end of *Egils saga* describes the descendants of the famous Viking poet:

Þorgeirr, the son of Þorsteinn, was the strongest of the brothers, but Skúli was the biggest; he lived at Borg after that Þorsteinn, his father died. Skúli went on raids for a long time; he was a forecastle-man for earl Eiríkr in Járnbarðinn, when the king Ólafr Tryggvason died; Skúli took part in seven wars as a Viking. And he was believed to be the best and sturdiest of warriors; after that he went to Iceland and settled down at the farm of Borg and lived there until his old age, and there came many men from his lineage.⁶⁶

The exploits of 7 battles are sufficient to prove that Skúli is an accomplished warrior who inherits the heroic spirit of his grandfather, Egill.

3.3. Number 8: unstable, insufficient, unlucky

“In the Scandinavian countries, the numbers 8 and 9 held a further significance, unknown in more southerly climates, because of the prolonged winter of 8 or 9 months.”⁶⁷ Indeed, except for three, eight and nine are the numbers which appear the most in the *Poetic Edda*. Grímnir sings: “eight hundred dead warriors went at the same time from one door, and then they fought against a wolf.”⁶⁸ Þrymr brags to Loki: “I have hidden the hammer Hlóðrið eight miles below the earth”⁶⁹. On her way to Hel after death, Brynhildr announces dauntlessly her relationship with Sigurðr to the giantess:

“We slept and enjoyed ourselves in one bed, as if he were my brother; neither could we put one hand over the other for eight nights.”⁷⁰

⁶⁶ „Þorgeirr, sonr Þorsteins, var þeira sterkastr bræðra, en Skúli var mestr; hann bjó at Borg eptir dag Þorsteins, föður sins. Skúli var lengi í viking; hann var stafnbúi Eiríks jarls á Járnbarðanum, þá er Ólafr konungr Tryggvason fell; Skúli hafði átt ív king sjau orrostur. Ok þátti hann vera inn mesti kappi ok fullhugi; frá hann eptir þat út til Íslands ok settisk í bú at Borg ok bjó þar til elli, ok kom mart manna frá honum.“ *Egils saga*, chap. 90.

⁶⁷ Hopper, 205.

⁶⁸ „átta hundruð Einherja/ genga senn ór einum durum/ þá er þeir fara við vitni at vega.“ *Grímnismál*, 23.

⁶⁹ „Ek hef Hlórriða/ hamar of folginn/ átta röstum/ fyr jörð neðan“. *Þrymskviða*, 8.

⁷⁰ „Sváfu vit ok unðum
ísæing einni,
sem hann minn bróðr
of borinn væri;
hv áki kn átti
hönd yfir annat
áta nótum
okkart leggja.“
Helreið Brynhildar, 13.

The difference between eight and nine is rather small, which could be completed by adding one. Gr ímnir complains of king Geirroð's torture: "eight nights I sat here between fires, so that no one offered me any food"⁷¹. After that, i.e. on the ninth day, Agnarr comes, bringing him a horn to drink from. In *Hymiskviða*: "Eight broke up, but one of them, a hard-hammered cauldron was complete from the tree"⁷². Eight kettles and one cauldron make the number 9. The same rule applies to Þrymr's feast in which dressed as Freyja, Thor "ate one ox and eight salmon"⁷³: one plus eight makes nine as well. Odin's ring is said to have such a magical property: "eight are equally heavy that drop from it, every ninth night."⁷⁴ 8 rings dropping and the magic ring, all together they form the number 9 again. These four examples, however, show the unstable character of the number 8: eight is a torment for Gr ímnir, but nine is a turning point; 8 kettles are broken, yet one more is preserved; 8 salmon are not enough for Thor who needs another ox; 8 rings fall from the only magic ring owned by Odin. In comparison with nine, eight shows the insufficiency. As a matter of fact, eight as a quantity in sagas often indicates the side to be defeated.

Þorbjörn Ox urges the brothers Gunnarr and Þorgeirr to ambush Atli, Gr ímr and their companions, "Eight together, they ran towards Atli, but Atli's side were six in all."⁷⁵ Yet the eight men are thrashed by the group of six: Gunnar is killed by Atli and Þorgeirr by Gr ímr. The winners spare the life of three survivors at the end.

V ígbjórð and Vestmarr raid to the Hebrides with 8 ships. They meet Qnundr and Þrándr who have 5 ships. "And when the Vikings see the ships and know, how many there are, it seems to them to have enough force, they take the weapons and steer the ships against the opponents."⁷⁶ In spite of this advantage of eight over five, the two Vikings lose the battle: V ígbjórð is mortally wounded by Qnundr and Vestmarr flees.

When Kári and the Njálssons get ready to encounter Þránn and his men, the contrast in numbers goes the same way. Kári says: "Many shall lie in ambush and not

⁷¹ „Átta nætr sat ek/ milli elda hér,/ svá at mér manngi/ mat né bauð“. *Gr ínnismál*, 2.

⁷² „Stukku átta,/ en einn af þeim/ hverr harðsleginn/ heill af polli.“ *Hymiskviða*, 13.

⁷³ „einn át oxa, átta laxa“. *Þrymskviða*, 24.

⁷⁴ „átta eru jafnhöfgir,/ en ef drjúpa/ ina niundu hverja nótt.“ *Sk ínnismál*, 21.

⁷⁵ „Þeir hljópu at Atla ok váru átta saman, en þeir Atli sex saman.“ *Grettis saga*, chap. 43.

⁷⁶ „Ok er víkingar sjá skip þeira ok vita, hversu mörg eru, þykkjast þeir hafa nógan liðsafla ok taka til vápna sinna ok leggja skipunum ím áti.“ *Ibid.*, chap. 4.

be against the same odds as we: they are eight, but we are five.”⁷⁷ This phrase is neither a complaint nor a counsel, but rather a comment narrating the fact which neither Kári nor the Njálssons really care. On the contrary, Þránn is astonished at the direct arrival of these fearless warriors: “What will these men want? They are five, but we are eight.”⁷⁸ The battle again gives an advantage to five over eight, as Kári and the Njálssons severely beat these 8 men. However, it is to be noted that the final number of losers doesn’t equal the original 8. Skarpheðinn gives Þránn a deathblow, Grímr kills Hrapp and Kári slays Tjörvi with his sword; but the victors leave 4 men surviving in the text: Grani Gunnarsson, Gunnar Lambason, Lambi Sigurðarson and Loðinn. Indeed, 3 victims and 4 survivors don’t amount to 8 men. Thus, we have to suppose that the saga’s author chooses deliberately the number 8 to make the contrast.⁷⁹ Later, when Þorkell the Hake boasts of the deeds made with his short-sword in Sweden, Skarphéðinn smiles scornfully by mentioning this battle: “I had this axe in my hand, when I jumped twelve ells over the river Markarfljót and slayed Þránn Sigfússon. There stood eight men who did not get hold of me.”⁸⁰ In all these examples, eight is not greater than six, five and finally one (in Skarpheðinn’s words), especially because it is a symbol of insufficiency.

One might argue that Odin’s famous horse, Sleipnir also has 8 legs. But Sleipnir comes from Loki: “and with Svaðilfari (Loki) got Sleipnir”⁸¹. If Loki is always considered as a witty yet naughty troublemaker and that his sons, Fenrir and Midgard are said to have caused the disaster of Ragnarök, Sleipnir’s role should also be doubted. Actually, Sleipnir only appears seriously (i.e. except for his legend of birth) in the two Eddas to serve as a tool for Hermóðr to save Baldr; and even on this ride of 9 days to Hel, it could not help Hermóðr reach Baldr earlier: Baldr already passed the Gjallar-bridge at the arrival of Sleipnir. Hermóðr has then to find another plan to save

⁷⁷ „Margir munu fyrir sitja ok hafa eigi þann veg liðsmun sem vér: eru þeir átta, en vér fimm.“ *Njáls saga*, chap. 92.

⁷⁸ „Hvat munu þessir menn vilja? Þeir eru fimm, en vér erum átta.“ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ If the saga states two times that Þránn and his men were eight but only names seven, a mystery is created about who the possible eighth man was. It could have been the young Höskuldr who was old enough then to accompany his father to a feast. He will later be killed by the sons of Njál. Maybe they always mistrusted him, because he had witnessed their slaying of his father. I thank Torfi for this explanation.

⁸⁰ „Þessa øxi hafða eg þá í hendi, er ek hljóp tólf álna yfir Markarfljót ok ek vá Þráin Sigfússon, ok stóðu þar átta menn hj áög fengu ekki fang á mér.“ *Njáls saga*, chap. 120.

⁸¹ „en Sleipni gat/ við Svaðilfara“, *Völuspá in skamma*, 11.

Baldr, and Loki Layfeyjarson, dressed as a hag, fails the plan.⁸²

As a symbol of insufficiency, 8 becomes a number of the comparison. Grettir's force is indirectly compared with that of 8 men:

There was no pump on the sea-going ship; men had to bail water out with buckets or with tubs. This job was both wet and toilsome. Two buckets should be used: one went down, while the other went up. The lads asked Grettir to plunge the buckets, saying that he should show what he was capable of. He answered that only a little try was needed for this; he then went down and plunged the bucket, and two men were got to pour the water together with him; they didn't hold their own long before they were exhausted. Then four men replaced them, and this happened in the same way. Some men said that eight men poured the water with him (Grettir) before it was finished.⁸³

Grettir takes the most tiresome work. He does not show the fatigue, yet 8 persons are tired out by just assisting him. This prevailing advantage changes the mind of the people hiring him.

At the end of the saga, even though Grettir is killed by Þorbjörn's men, the latter cannot take the short-sword that the dead outlaw holds tightly by clenching his fist: "Many of them went there and could do nothing. Eight of them grabbed before the end, and they didn't manage to do anything either."⁸⁴ These men finally chop off Grettir's hand at the wrist and obtain the short-sword, which proves that even the strength of dead Grettir is greater than that of his 8 enemies.

In *Njáls saga*, angered by Skammkell and Otkell's rumour about his weeping, Gunnar Hámundarson thrusts his halberd into the ground and along with his brother Kolskegg, "there they kill all eight of them"⁸⁵. The 2 brother teach the 8 talkative men what real masculinity is by their actions.

"Now twelve attack G íli and reach the cliffs"⁸⁶. G íli Súrsson kills five of his opponents before his death. But "after this Eyj ófr and his men went home to Otradalr,

⁸² See all these episodes in *Gylfaginning*, 49.

⁸³ „Þá var ekki dæluastr á hafskipum; kölluðu menn það byttuastr eða stampastr. Hann var bæði vássamr og erfi ðr; skyldi þar hafa byttur tvær; fór þá önnur niðr, er önnur fór upp. Sveinar báðu, at Grettir skyldi sökva byttunum; kv áðu nú reyna skyldu, hvat hann mætti. Hann segir, at í fil raun myndi bezst um þat; ferr hann þá ni ðr og sökva byttunum, ok v áru þáfengnir til tveir at ausa til m áts við hann; heldusk þeir eigi lengi við, áðr þeir v áru yfirkomnir af mæði. Þá gengu til fjórir, ok fór allt á sömu leið. Svá segja sumir menn, at átta jósu þeir við hann, áðr en lauk.“ *Grettis saga*, chap. 17.

⁸⁴ „Fóru þeir þá til margir og gátu ekki at gørt. Átta tóku þeir til, áðr en lauk, ok fengu eigi at gørt at heldr.“ *Ibid.*, chap. 82.

⁸⁵ „þar vega þeir þá átta.“ *Njáls saga*, chap. 54.

⁸⁶ „Nú sækja tólf at Gísla ok komask upp á kleifarnar.“ *G íla saga Súrssonar*, chap. 35.

and died immediately the seventh man on the same night, and the eighth lay wounded for twelve months and died.”⁸⁷ This inexplicable death of 3 men after their battle with G íli could quite possibly have been arranged by the saga’s author to add up to the weak number 8.

Clearly, eight does not bring luck. As a savage bear runs out of its den and attacks the farms, Þorkell and his companions decide to attack it. “On Christmas Þorkell went to the den himself and they were eight together; there were then Björn, Grettir and Þorkell’s other followers”⁸⁸ But these men fail to catch the bear. Then, Grettir, going alone, succeeds in killing the bear by driving his short-sword through its heart.

King Haakon the Good’s messengers are persuaded by Egill to gather the tribute with him. “Together we are eight,” they said, “we want that four men here join us, so that we are twelve.”⁸⁹ The messengers want to avoid the number 8 and replace it with 12. It is highly possible that eight, like thirteen in Tolkien’s novel, *The Hobbit*, is the real unlucky number originating from Old Norse religion. This number can be considered to have somewhat avoided Christian influence, because eight is usually seen as the sign of resurrection because Jesus was raised up on the eighth day after the Sabbath.⁹⁰

3.4. Number 9: pagan, magic

Like three, nine is often linked to Nordic mythology. Freyr has to wait 9 nights to marry his beloved woman.⁹¹ The Seeress remembers “nine worlds” and “nine giantesses”⁹². But the number 9 also seems to be a wicked number: for 9 nights’ waiting to get his love, Freyr loses his sword in exchange for her hand and is killed without this weapon in Ragnarök.⁹³ Odin kills Bragi’s 9 slaves and replaces their

⁸⁷ „eptir þetta fara þeir Eyjólfir heim í Otradal, ok andaðisk þegar ina sömu nótt inn sjaundi maðr, en inn átti liggr í sárum tólf mánaði ok fær bana.“ *Ibid.*, chap. 36.

⁸⁸ „Á jólum fór Þorkell sjálfir til híðsins ok þeir átta saman; þar var þá Björn ok Grettir ok aðrir fylgðarmenn Þorkels.“ *Grettis saga*, chap. 21.

⁸⁹ „Vér erum saman átta,” sögðu þeir, “viljum vér, at héðan fari fjórir menn; eru vér þá tólf.“ *Egils saga*, chap. 70.

⁹⁰ *Lexikon der Mittelalterlichen Zahlenbedeutungen*, 566-570. One exception is from Alcuin who considered eight as numerus imperfectus, because 8 is the product of 1×2×4 but 1+2+4=7, while 6=1×2×3 and 1+2+3=6. However, this theory did not seem to show a great popularity.

⁹¹ *Gylfaginning*, chap. 37. *Sk ínismál* in the *Poetic Edda*.

⁹² „Níu man ek heima, níu íviðjur“, *Völuspá* 2.

⁹³ *Gylfaginning*, chap. 51.

work to obtain Suttung's mead.⁹⁴ "The son of Fjörgyn goes nine steps, fainting from the snake with no fear of insult."⁹⁵ "A young boy found a grandmother that he disliked very much, and she had nine hundred heads"⁹⁶.

However, though both nine and eight share negative meanings in pagan tradition, the former differs itself from the latter by its completeness. 9 nights, 9 worlds, 9 giant women, 9 slaves, 9 steps, 900 heads, they all form an entity. Furthermore, because of this completeness, nine is much more powerful and more often linked to pagan legends in sagas.

In *Njáls saga*, Skarpheðinn responds to Flosi's scorn about Njáll's masculinity: "because – if you are the bride of the ogre of Svinafell, as it is told, and every ninth night he makes you his wife"⁹⁷. The derision not only challenges Flosi's dignity as a man, but also links his leadership at Svinafell to a pagan cult. Skarpheðinn's response totally destroys the possibility of their reconciliation, as it treads on Flosi's self-confidence. After these words, the saga depicts Flosi's movements to show his fury: "Flosi pushed then the money and said he would not have one penny of it"⁹⁸. The proud man says only to the Sigfússons: "Let's go home! We shall share one fate."⁹⁹

This hearsay concerning the transformation of men into women at 9-day intervals is also seen in *Kraka-Refs saga*,

Þorgils said: "It is bad to talk about such a thing, and Greenland could always blush when it heard the rumour about Ref, because I knew that he had gained before in Greenland the biggest shame when he just came here. I had little to do with him, because when I was in Iceland, he was not in character with other men, instead he was a woman every ninth night and needed then a man. He was thus called Refr the Craven, and previously unheard stories always went about his dishonor. Because of this I want you not to be with him now."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ *Skaldskaparmál*, chap. 2.

⁹⁵ „gengr fet níu/ Fjörgynjar burrr/ neppr frá naðri/ niðs ókvíðnum“. *Völuspá*, 56.

⁹⁶ „Mögr fann ömmu/ mjök leiða sér,/ hafði höfða/ hundruð níu“, *Hymiskviða*, 8.

⁹⁷ „Því þá – ef þú ert brúðr Svinfellsáss, sem sagt er, hverja ína níundu nótt ok geri hann þik at konu.“ *Njáls saga*, chap. 123.

⁹⁸ „Flosi hratt þá fênu ok kvazk þá engan penning skyldu af hafa“. *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ „Göngum nú heim! Eitt skal yfir oss ganga alla.“ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ „Þorgils mælti: „Um slíkt er illt at ræða, ok ávallt mætti Grænland rauða kinn bera, er þat heyrði Refs getit, því at ek s á þegar hann var hingat nýkominn, at öfluð hafð verit áðr Grænlandi in mesta skömm. Þv íhefi ek fát við hann át, at þáer ek var á Íslandi var hann ekki í æð sem aðrir karlar, heldr var hann kona ína níundu hverju nótt ok þurfti þá karlmanns, ok var hann þv íkallað Refr inn ragi, ok gengu ávallt sögur af hans fádæmum endimligar. Nú vilda ek því, at þér ættið ekki við hann.““ *Kraka-Refs saga*, chap. 7.

Besides, the ox used for the magic rite in *G íla saga* is said to be 9 years old: “It is recently the news, that Þorkr paid Þorgr ímr Nose to cast a spell so that the man who had killed Þorgr ímr would not be saved, even if others would help him. A nine-year-old ox was sacrificed for this.”¹⁰¹

Traditionally in Christian beliefs, nine is considered as imperfect or nearly perfect because of its shortness in comparison with ten.¹⁰² Otherwise it could also be seen as the heavenly perfection, since it is one after the resurrection (8+1).¹⁰³ Both meanings don’t fit exactly our analysis of the number 9 in Old Norse literature. However, nine could be negative in its Nordic origin, but the first meaning from Christian belief would have reinforced this symbolism later. Nine is thus the number peculiar to the pagan religion that Christianity gradually put on its opposite side (as Adam of Bremen who described the macabre festival in Uppsala). By the communication or confrontation of two beliefs, nine even consolidates its symbolic meaning linked to pagan magic and mystery.

3.5. Number 10: complete

Already around 3000 BC, Egyptians began to use the decimal system which spread widely all over the world. The number 10 secured by this system the important meaning of completeness. In Christian tradition, the importance of 10 commandments could have contributed to this symbolism. Quite contrary to this worldwide influence, however, the *Poetic Edda* never mentions ten as an entity in its verses. Nevertheless, the number 10 is frequently used in sagas, which could probably be attributed to Christian influence.

In *Njáls saga*, Gunnar and his brother, Kolskegg go to Norway with Hallvarðr in a ship. Hallvarðr has in Vik 2 longships and Olvir agrees to give these Vikings 2 more longships. After several raidings in Denmark, in Småland and in the Eastern Baltic,

¹⁰¹ „Þat er næst til tíðenda, at Þorkr kaupir at Þorgrími nef, at hann seiddi seið, at þeim manni yrði ekki að björg, er Þorgrím hefði vegit, þó at menn vildi duga honum. Oxi níu vetra gamall var honum gefinn til þess.“ *G íla saga Súrssonar*, chap. 18.

¹⁰² Franz Carl Endres and Annemarie Schimmel, *Das Mysterium der Zahl: Zahlensymbolik im Kulturvergleich*. (Munich: Diederichs, 1993), 180.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 182.

Gunnar comes back and “he had ten ships”¹⁰⁴. The eventual return with 10 ships marks the complete success of Gunnar’s journey.

In *Finnboga saga ramma*, Urðarkötr rows the boat out to sea several nights secretly. When he is asked what he is up to, he replies that he has seen the same sight on the sea for 7 evenings without knowing what it is. Then he decides to go out with a crew to check what happened. They find on a shipwreck Finnbogi:

Then Urðarkötr asked: “How many of your men are on the ship apart from you?” He said then nine were alive, when he went to sleep. ... Urðarkötr ordered to carry out into the skiff the men who were alive. They were as many as Finnbogi had said. ... Finnbogi and two other men went to Eyri; Urðarkötr sat day and night close by them. It is said, that all men who were on the ship died, except for Finnbogi.¹⁰⁵

Seven and ten (nine men plus Finnbogi) here both have the meaning of completeness. Since only Finnbogi survives from the disaster, he is the only one (1) saved from the divine punishment upon the pagans that number 9. This episode written at the beginning of the saga is a sheer parable depicting to advantage Finnbogi who will later be baptized and become a Christian hero. As a matter of fact, the completeness of ten in both *Njáls saga* and *Finnbogi saga ramma* confirms the intrusion of 10 as a whole in Old Norse literature; as the plot develops, the first saga also gradually pays much more attention to the Conversion and Christian values (that we’ll discuss in the last chapter).

Moreover, this special relationship of $10-1=9$ is also used in *Grettis saga* to distinguish integrity from paganism. In its first chapter, Onundr, Grettir’s great grandfather, raids in the Hebrides with 5 ships. These Vikings meet the king of the Barra Isles, Kjarvalr who also has 5 ships and they fight against each other. The result is that Kjarvalr flees on one of his ships and Onundr’s men take all the ships except that one.¹⁰⁶ The saga hides astutely the number of ships that Onundr possesses after the battle: $9=5+5-1$.

¹⁰⁴ „hann hafði tíu skip“. *Njáls saga*, chap. 31.

¹⁰⁵ „Þá frétti Urðarkötr: “Hvat mun fleira lifa manna yðvarra á skipinu en þú?” Hann kvað þá n ú á l fi, er hann fór at sofa. ... Urðarkötr l á n ú bera menn þá er lifðu, ú í skútuna. Svámargir v á u þeir sem Finnbogi hafð sagð. ... Finnbogi fór á Eyri ok tveir menn a ðir; sat Urðarkötr dag ok nótt at næra þá Er þat sagð, at allir menn deyja, þeir er á skipinu v á u, nema Finnbogi.“ *Finnboga saga ramma*, chap. 8.

¹⁰⁶ *Grettis saga*, chap. 1.

The pagan sign eventually casts a shadow on Onundr and his descendants. Out of the integrity of ten and out of the whole, it is the pagan 9 which leads to the loss of Grettir as an outlaw.

3.6. Number 12: epic, perfect, mature

Numbers 12, 13 and 18 to be discussed here can all be divided by the formula of 10+X and explained by the sum of each part. Twelve, as the sum of ten and two, represents the 10 Commandments and 2 loves (love the Lord and the neighbor).¹⁰⁷ Thirteen represents the 10 Commandments and the Trinity.¹⁰⁸ Eighteen represents the 10 Commandments and the Resurrection.¹⁰⁹

But these three numbers do not owe necessarily their symbolic meanings to their components. Widely extant in a lot of cultures as a sign of whole probably due to the duodecimal system, twelve is often used to designate a group of deities or valiant heroes: 12 Olympians in Greek mythology, 12 Roman Gods, Charlemagne's 12 Peers, Beowulf's 12 noble warriors, etc. Berserkers also often number 12 in sagas: in *Egils saga*, "and the King's berserkers were twelve on the forepart of the ship"¹¹⁰. In *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, Arngrímur has twelve sons and "all of them were berserkers"¹¹¹. On the island of Hramsey Grettir encounters 12 berserkers.¹¹² This twelve is considered epic appearing in a great amount of legends¹¹³. Also we have mentioned that Haakon the Good's messengers want to make up twelve instead of eight in number in *Egils saga*¹¹⁴, which suggests the importance of this number for the people in a group.

Nevertheless, we should also accept the possibility that it is Christianity that confirms the power of twelve in other cultures. In Christian tradition, twelve is often regarded as a perfect number. Abraham's son Ishmael is promised by God to have 12

¹⁰⁷ *Lexikon der Mittelalterlichen Zahlenbedeutungen*, 627.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 646.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 666.

¹¹⁰ „en berserker konungs tólf vǫru í sǫxum.“ *Egils saga*, chap. 9.

¹¹¹ „allir vǫru þeir berserker.“ *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, chap. 2.

¹¹² *Grettis saga*, chap. 19.

¹¹³ Though a list of berserkers is mentioned by *Hyndluljóð* in which 12 is not directly given, see Helga Maria Klockow, *Die Berserker und ihre Rolle in den Isländischen Sagas* (Leipzig: Faculty of Philosophy, 1956), 81-82.

¹¹⁴ See page 22.

sons who become 12 tribal rulers (Genesis 17). Jacob has 12 sons who form the 12 tribes of Israel (Genesis 35). Moses sets up later 12 stone pillars to represent them (Exodus 24). The most famous example should be Jesus's 12 disciples. Twelve seems to be destined by a divine power which requires its existence as a whole.¹¹⁵

Twelve is often linked to the amount, either of men or of objects. In *Þorsteins þátr uxafás*,

At daybreak, Þorsteinn woke up. He was then very sweaty and said: "You have stayed awake faithfully, Freysteinn... And here are twelve pure marks of silver that I will give you."¹¹⁶

But when Þorsteinn came there, it seemed well arranged. He saw there eleven men sit on the bench on the right hand. They were all dressed in red and rather reserved. On the other side of the mound, he saw twelve men sitting who were all dressed in black. One of them, the biggest was very scary. Brynjarr bent towards Þorsteinn and said: "He is my brother, the big man, but we are not physically alike. He is called Oddr and wants bad luck for most people. ..."¹¹⁷

Brynjarr took then the gold from the dead Oddr and gave it to Þorsteinn and asked him to bring it to his mother. He gave him twelve pure marks of silver in a money-bag.¹¹⁸

Twelve emphasizes the amount of money that Þorsteinn receives from Brynjarr and then gives to Freysteinn. It is also the number of two groups of men totally on opposite sides. Twelve is then used for both the good and evil sides: 12 men in red including Brynjarr and 12 men in black including Oddr to be killed by Þorsteinn and Brynjarr. Actually, the epic signification of the number 12 goes a long way towards explaining its use here.

An interesting fact is that twelve and sixteen are both the age of maturity in *Grágás*¹¹⁹, but it is twelve that refers mostly to the age of the heroes when they show

¹¹⁵ The symbolic meaning of twelve is also explained by the multiply 3×4. 12 can mean then the belief in the Trinity and 4 cardinal virtues. Twelve is thus the sign of the universe, that of the God and the men. See *Lexikon der Mittelalterlichen Zahlenbedeutungen*, 626-627.

¹¹⁶ „En er lýsti af degi, vaknaði Þorsteinn ok var þá sveittr mjök ok mælti: „Dyggiliga hefir þú enn vakat, Freysteinn. ...ok hér er tólf merkr silfrs, at ek vil gefa þér.“ *Þorsteins þátr uxafás*, chap. 6.

¹¹⁷ „En er Þorsteinn kom þar, sýndist honum þar vel fyrir búit. Hann sá þar til hægri handar sitja ellifu menn á bekk. Þeir váu allir rauðklæddir ok heldr fágir. Öðrumegin í hauginum sá hann sitja tólf menn. Þeir váu allir bláklæddir. Einn var þeira mestr ok mjök illiligr. Brynjarr laut at Þorsteini ok mælti: “Sá er bróðir minn, inn mikli maðr, ok erum vit þó ekki skaplíkir. Hann heitir Oddr ok vill flestum illt. ...“ *Ibid*.

¹¹⁸ „Brynjarr tók nú gullit af Oddi dauðum ok fekk Þorsteini ok bað hann færa móður sinni. Hann gaf honum tólf merkr silfrs ísjóð...“ *Ibid*.

¹¹⁹ For example, “Þar er yngri maður vegur mann en sextán vetra [K: en tólf vetra] gamall, og skal hann eigi verða um þáð vág sekur þó að hinn væri saklaus. Frændur hins unga manns skulu gjalda hinn vegna niðgjaldum, og bæta þáð vág. Þar skal rekja til baugatal. (When it occurs that a man younger than sixteen winters old [Konungsþátta:

their extraordinary talent in sagas. This use is probably due to the emphasis on their early maturity.

Descended from giants on his father's side and from trolls on his mother's side, "he (King Dumbr) took kingdom when he was twelve winters old."¹²⁰ Gunnbjörn, Finnbogi's son, wrestles with an opponent of 15 years old while he is only 8. "Gunnbjörn grew up with Dalla, there until he was twelve winters old. He was then so big and strong, surpassing his peers."¹²¹ He wrestles then with a fierce man called Rauðr:

Then Gunnbjörn said: "Do you want to wrestle with me, Rauðr?" "How old are you?" Rauðr asked. "I'm now twelve winters old," he answered. "Wrestling with you seems to me to be a little thing or nothing, but you shall decide." After that they began to wrestle for a long while, and when Gunnbjörn's strength was weakened, he protected himself more. Rauðr fought vehemently until he was exhausted. Gunnbjörn fought then after he was without force, until Rauðr fell.¹²²

Þorsteinn Ox-leg also begins his journey at the age of twelve: "Ásbjörn Wiggle-arse had a ship anchored in Gautavík. Then Þorsteinn went to journey with him when he (Þorsteinn) was twelve winters old."¹²³

In *Stjörnu-Odda draumur*, Geirviðr comes to the throne at the age of eight after his father Hróðbjartir takes ill and dies.¹²⁴ Because of his young age, the kingdom becomes weak. But this situation will change: "This went on, until Geirviðr the king

twelve winters old] kills a man, he shall not for this killing become guilty though he is without prosecution. Kinsmen of the young man should pay the wergild for it, and compensate for the killing. The rings should continue to be paid.)" "Ef yngri maður vinnur á manni en tólf vetra gamall, þá á maður að færa hann úr höfði sér svo sem þámundi ef hann væri föstri eða faðir, og skal eigi gera örkumbl að hinum unga manni. En ef hinn vaxni maður gerir örkumbl að hinum unga manni, og verður hinn ungi maður eigi að heldur dæilagur þó að hann hefði áður unnið á hinum vaxna manni saklausum. (If a man younger than twelve winters old hurts someone with a weapon, then the man has to raise him by himself as his foster-father or father, and he will not hurt this young man. But if the adult hurts the young man, then the young man will not be guilty even though he had hurt the adult without persecution before.)" *Grágás: Lagasafn íslenska þjóðveldisins*, edited by Gunnar Karlsson, Kristján Sveinsson and Mörður Árnason, (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1992), *Véslóð* 32, 235.

¹²⁰ „hann tók tólf vetra konungdóm.“ *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, chap. 1.

¹²¹ „Vex Gunnbjörn upp með Döllu, þar til at hann er tólf vetra. Var hann þá svá mikill ok sterkr or mikit afbragð annarra manna.“ *Finnboga saga ramma*, chap. 35.

¹²² „Þá mælti Gunnbjörn: „Viltu glíma við mik, Rauðr?“ „Hversu gamall ertu?“ segir Rauðr. „Ek em nú tólf vetra,“ segir hann. „Þá þyki mér til lítils vera eða engis at glíma við þik, en þó skaltu ráða.“ Eptir þat taka þeir at glíma lengi, ok er Gunnbjörn aflaminni ok forðar sér meir. Rauðr sækir með ákefð ok þar til at hann mæðst. Gunnbjörn sækir þá eptir megni, þar til Rauðr fellr.“ *Ibid.*, chap. 35.

¹²³ „Ásbjörn kastanrazi átti skip uppi standanda í Gautavík. Þar tók Þorsteinn sér fari með honum; þá var hann tólf vetra gamall.“ *Þorsteins þátr uxafás*, chap. 8.

¹²⁴ *Stjörnu-Odda Draumur*, chap. 2. In *Grágás*, 8 is also considered as the age to be looked after: „[K] Það er lögfóstur er maður tekur við manni átta vetra gömlum eða yngra og fæð til þess er hann er sextán vetra gamall. ([Konungsbók] He is the law-father who takes care of a man of eight winters old or younger and brings him up until he is sixteen winters old.)“ See *Grágás*, 1992, *Véslóð* 27, 227.

is twelve winters old. And when he was coming at that age, he grew then into such a big and strong man as most of the fully grown-ups, considering his age and accomplishments and according to these who were on good form in all aspects.”¹²⁵ He then decides to fight against the two berserkers Garp and Gny who raid in the kingdom and makes an eloquent speech in front of his subjects:

“Since I am now old enough, it’s time for me to test myself and to know that my position will grow up to some degree and increase more than before, as I become now a man of twelve winters old. Also, at my age, not many are better brought up.”¹²⁶

Indeed Geirviðr defeats both berserkers by himself and kills these two robbers at this special age.

Another great warrior, Egill shows his remarkable talent at the age of twelve as well: “Then when Egill was twelve winters old, he was so big, that few men were so big and strong by force and Egill defeated then most of the men in games.”¹²⁷ Twelve is lawfully and legendarily the sign of maturity.

3.7. Number 13: unlucky, Christian

Different from twelve, thirteen, though considered widely as an unlucky number because of the Last Supper, never appears directly in the four gospels.¹²⁸ Nevertheless, the negative meaning of this number is still extant, which could be observed by a great quantity of paintings to represent this scene in the Middle Ages (the best example would certainly be Leonardo Da Vinci’s work, *Il Cenacolo*). Another explanation of the unlucky 13 is the fact that 13 is 12+1, which overreaches itself by adding one to the complete 12.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ „Slíku ferr fram, til þess er Geirviðr konungr er tólf vetra. Ok þá er hann var svá aldrs kominn, þá var hann svá mikill maðr vexti ok sterkr at afli sem þeir menn margir, er fullkomnir v áru at aldri ok atgervi n ága, eptir þv ísem þeir, er beztr váru á sik komnir fyrir allra hluta sakir.“ *Stjörnu-Odda Draumr*, chap. 3.

¹²⁶ „En þó er ek nú svá aldrs kominn, at mér er nú mál at reyna mik ok vita, at nökkut vili mitt ráð þroskast ok meir hefjast en áðr er, þar sem ek er n ú orðinn maðr tólf vetra gamall. Eru ok margir ekki betr mannaðr á m þum aldri.“ *Ibid.*, chap. 3.

¹²⁷ „Þá er Egill var tólf vetra gamall, var hann svá mikill vexti, at fáir váru menn svá stórir ok at afli búnir, at Egill ynni þá eigi flesta menn í leikum.“ *Egils saga*, chap. 40.

¹²⁸ “Then one of the Twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priest” (Matt, 26:14) “When it was evening he reclined with the Twelve.” (Matt, 26:20) “But he replied: ‘One of the Twelve, the one who is dipping bread with me in the dish,’” (Mark, 14:20) Originally twelve should have a more significant meaning to the Jewish than thirteen.

¹²⁹ *Das Mysterium der Zahl*, 223-224.

The 13 Yule lads in Icelandic folklore are well-known, but they are rather a formation of later centuries. It is said that these lads, varied in number, were trolls at the very first beginning and used to scare children. We wonder if the number 13 is adopted to confront the Christian unlucky number or as an interpretation of the unlucky 13 in an Icelandic way: after all, these lads are troublemakers even though they bring joy to families. Another interesting fact is that the *Poetic Edda* and *Snorra Edda* never mention the number 13 as a separate set. The importance of 13 in sagas can thus be considered as a complete invasion of Christianity.

The inharmonious 13 appears in sagas not totally as an unlucky number, but also as a sign of Christianity. For example, King Sverrir Sigurðarson dreamt about his meeting with Samuel:

After this he woke up and told immediately the dream to twelve men that slept in the same room. The dream seemed to all great and wonderful, all his men became quite happy about this dream. Yet when he asked them to interpret the dream, nobody could give any help. But it seemed to everyone better to have this dream than nothing. And when he found that this dream could not be explained, he demanded then not to mention the dream though the dream was brought to him.¹³⁰

According to the saga, Sverrir dreams of his encounter with the archangel Samuel throughout his life. Sverrir's retelling of this first encounter to his retinue of 12 men gives almost the incarnation of Jesus Christ and his disciples. The Christian symbolism of 13 not only exists in Kings' sagas, but also in the sagas of Icelanders as *Finnboga saga ramma*:

Then the king said: "Bersi, have you some money to be paid to the earl Haakon?" He answered that he had twelve pure marks to pay, "but I never have the intention to pay him back." The king said: "Now it should be paid to him here immediately." Bersi was now obliged to pay the money. The king added far more to the amount and Finnbogi got all the money right away. Then the king said: "You should know, Finnbogi and the people here, that I do it for your sake. And I want to ask you for this, that you promise us that we'll see what you're capable of, because I know that you are stronger in force than other men, and that you will later be baptized." Finnbogi says: "I will

¹³⁰ „Eftir þetta vaknaði hann ok sagði þegar draum þeim tólf mönnum er þar sváfu í því herbergi sem hann sjálf. Öllum þótti draumrinn mikill ok merkiligr, ok urðu allir hans menn þessum draumum nokkut svá fegnir. Ok er hann leitaði eftir at þeir myndi ráða drauminn þá bar engi traust á, en öllum þótti betra dreymör en eigi. Ok er hann fann at draumr þessi myndi eigi ráðinn verða bað hann þá ekki um skefta, þó at þetta hefði fyrir hann borit.“ *Sverris saga*, chap. 10.

promise you that, if the gospel arrives in the north, then few people will take the faith before me, and I'll incite all those who follow my orders to act in the same way." The king sat on the throne and twelve men beside him, six on each side. Finnbogi stood before the king. He was extremely finely clothed, and all the men wondered at his beauty and courtesy. Finnbogi went to the throne, lifted it up on his shoulder, went outside of the throng and put it down there. All were surprised by this man's force.¹³¹

The conversion of Finnbogi in front of the emperor can be compared to a visit to the church: the emperor on the throne surrounded by 6 men on each of his side makes just another picture of Jesus and his disciples often appearing in triptychs, on the doors of churches, etc. Maybe it is also by this inspiration that Gandalf leads twelve dwarfs to find the Hobbit.

The template of the number 13 applies also to some humorous episodes. In *Þorsteins þátr uxafás*, when Þorsteinn Ox-leg meets again the female troll who escaped from him and now has grown from a 9-year-old virgin to a 12-year-old giantess, the number 13 appears:

The next day, when they were outside, they saw thirteen men in the forest and one of them was a woman. They turned around from there. Þorsteinn recognized his girl there, and she had grown up tremendously because she was now a big giantess.¹³²

13 trolls including a female seeking to avenge their families are to be slaughtered by Þorsteinn. Could this be a parody of Jesus and his disciples?¹³³

3.8. Number 18: bloody, evil

The meaning of the number 18 comes mainly from the healing of the woman

¹³¹ „Þá mælti konungr: „Áttu, Bersi, fê at gjalda Hákonu jarli?“ Hann kveðst eiga at gjalda honum tólf merkr brenndar, - „ok ætla ek aldri at gjalda honum.“ Konungr segir: „Nú skal gjalda honum þegar í stað.“ Hlýtr Bersi nú at greiða fát, en konungr leggir til háfu meira, ok fær Finnbogi þat eigi s ðr. Þá mælti konungr: „Þat skaltu vita, Finnbogi, ok þeir menn, sem hér eru, at ek geri þetta fyrir þín orð. En þess vil ek þik biðja, at þú veitir oss þat, at véc sjám nökkura aflraun þína, með því íat ek veit, at þú ert um fram aðra menn at afli búinn, ok takir s ðan við trú.“ Finnbogi mælti: „Þat vil ek heita þér, ef þessi boðskapr kemr norðr í land, þá skulu fair taka þann sið fyrr en ek, ok alla til eggja, þá er á mín orð vilja hlýða.“ Konungr sat á stöð ok tólf menn hjá honum, sex til hvárrar handar. Finnbogi stóð fyrir konungi. Hann var ágætliga búinn, ok undruðu allir menn hans fegrð ok kurteisi. Finnbogi gekk at stöðinum of hefr upp á öxl sín ok gengr út ór mannhringinum ok setr þar niðr stöðinn. Allir undra þessa manns afl.“ *Finnboga saga ramma*, chap. 20.

¹³² „Um daginn eptir, er þeir váu úti staddir, sá þeir þrettán menn á skóginum, ok var eitt kona í þeir snúa þagat til. Þorsteinn kennir þar stöðku sína, ok hafð heldr vaxit, því íat hon var núit mesta flagð.“ *Þorsteins þátr uxafás*, chap. 15.

¹³³ It is speculated until today that “the Beloved Disciple” in the Gospel of John could refer to Mary Magdalene. See Antti Marjanen, “Mary Magdalene, a Beloved Disciple” in *Mariam, the Magdalen, and the Mother*, edited by Deirdre J. Good (Indiana University Press, 2005). *The Da Vinci Code* written by Dan Brown gives a more audacious guess.

paralytic for 18 years¹³⁴: “There was a woman present who for eighteen years had a spirit of weakness. She was all bent over and completely unable to straighten up.” (Luke 13:11) Jesus criticized therefore the hypocrisy of the synagogue leader: “Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?” (Luke 13:16) In light of this, traditional exegesis gives the explanation of eighteen by the addition of ten (commandments) and eight (resurrection) or of Jota (10th letter in Greek alphabet) and Eta (8th letter) which form the initial name of Jesus, and three (sacred) times six (creation of the world).¹³⁵ Except for Richard of St. Victor’s *Liber exceptionum* which illustrates ten as the number of *transgression legis* and eight as the number of *desperatio resurrectionis*,¹³⁶ eighteen seems to be positive. However, rather to the contrary of this positive image in biblical context, eighteen is frequently used in sagas to indicate the number of people to kill others or to be killed. In *Grettis saga*, learning that Þórir Red-Beard was killed by Grettir, Þórir from Garð decides to ride west over the lower heath with nearly 80 men to kill Grettir, but

Þórir lost eighteen men and many were wounded. ... They said so, that Grettir killed six men in the battle, and Hallmundr killed twelve.¹³⁷

The insufficiency of the number 80 already foretells that Þórir will fail again. 18 men are killed by Grettir and Hallmundr, yet Grettir will be killed by 18 men in the end:

Halldórr then gave them six men for the journey. One was called Kárr, the other Þorleifr, the third one Brandr; no more names were known. Eighteen in all, they then went out to Fljót, came to Haganes and told Björn the message from Halldórr.¹³⁸

Not all the names are given, yet these men, eighteen in number, are heading to Drangey to take Grettir’s life. Grettir, now weak and sick, follows the same destiny

¹³⁴ *Lexikon der Mittelalterlichen Zahlenbedeutungen*, 665.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 666.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ „Hafði Þórir látit átján menn, en margir sárir. ... Svá hafa þeir frá sagt, at Grettir dræpi sex menn á fundinum, en Hallmundr tólf.“ *Grettis saga*, chap. 57.

¹³⁸ „Nú fekk Halldórr þeim sex menn til ferðar. Hér einn Kárr, en annarr Þorleifr, þriðji Brandr; eigi váru nefndir fleiri. En þaðan fóru þeir átján út í Fljót ok kómu í Haganes ok sögðu Birni orðsending Halldórs.“ *Ibid.*, chap. 81.

that awaited his victims in the Arnarvatn moor. Eighteen, linked to fight and death, corresponds to the episode above and forms a bloody cycle.

In *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, Hrafnkel and all the men he could gather to kill Eyvind Bjarnason for revenge make also the number of 18.¹³⁹

In *Þórðars saga Hreðu*, the conflict is always mentioned with eighteen. Þórðr dreams about the attack of eighteen wolves. Later, he and his eight fellows have to fight against Össur's gang totaling eighteen in number, and they kill nine of them.¹⁴⁰ When Skeggi and Þórðr plan to fight a duel, eighteen men from Eiður, Skeggi's son, arrive to stop the fight.¹⁴¹ But the battle is inevitable: Ásbjörn brings eighteen of the crew to see Skeggi, and Skeggi, along with Ásbjörn and other men, eighteen in number again, lie in ambush for Þórðr. Thirteen men from Skeggi's side die.¹⁴² To avenge his kinsman Ormr, Sörli arrives with 17 men. He challenges Þórðr to a duel. Though both sides fight valiantly, Þórðr kills Sörli.¹⁴³

We can guess from all the episodes above that eighteen is quite an unlucky number to envision the bloodshed. Actually, it avoids to be taken as the sign of salvation from Christian tradition. There is no reason to doubt that the number 18 derives its important meaning from Nordic beliefs. In fact, before Hallmundr's last breath, he pronounces specifically eighteen in a poem, reminiscing about his heroic yet bloody deeds:

I let fly off hands and heads of the heroes who went behind (Grettir), so that eighteen men of valour lay behind there in Kelduhverfi.¹⁴⁴

Eighteen is already a noteworthy sign in the Eddic poems: 18 spells are taught in

¹³⁹ *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, chap. 17.

¹⁴⁰ *Þórðars saga Hreðu*, chap. 8.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, chap. 10.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, chap. 11.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, chap. 13.

¹⁴⁴ „Ek lét hendr
ok hofuð fjúka
brögnum af,
es at baki gengu,
sv á kappar
Kelduhverfis
á þar
eptir lögu.“ *Grettis saga*, chap. 62.

Hávamál. “Thereafter he (Rígr’s son, Jarl) ruled over eighteen farmsteads alone.”¹⁴⁵ “He (Auðr) married into the highest man, Eymundr’s family, and he killed Sigtrygg with a fresh edge. He married Almveig, the highest woman; they begot eighteen sons.”¹⁴⁶ Eighteen has the look of magic, greatness and cruelty in these verses and all its meanings seem to be led by the mysterious paganism. The pagan meaning of the number 18 can also be associated to its composition: “im Germanischen erscheint die Achtzehn gelegentlich als Verdoppelung der heiligen Neun.”¹⁴⁷ Twice nine, eighteen could be estimated as an enlarged version of nine.

A striking example for the use of eighteen would be *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*:

And when Bárðr was thirteen winters old, Dofri married his daughter, Flaumgerð to him. They were there with Dofri until Bárðr was eighteen winters old.¹⁴⁸

It is at the age of eighteen that Bárðr whose life is associated with monsters, giants and wizards has a prophetic dream about the arrival of Haraldr Hálfðanarson and decides to leave his father-in-law for the north. The father of Bárðr, Dumbr will later be killed by eighteen giants:

Now we must tell the story that hostility began to rise between the giants and the king Dumbr; they considered him very stern in his government. ... They were eighteen in all. They attacked him and struck him with iron bars, but he defended himself with his servants. At the end, the king Dumbr fell, although he had then killed twelve of them. Harðverkr was alive and together with his men, they were six; he then became king in the north.¹⁴⁹

Another conflict is also between the victim and eighteen criminals:

Then eighteen outlaws were killed, but they burned Auðun Smiðkelsson inside in Þorvarðsstöðir.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁵ „Réð hann einn at þat/ átján búum.“ *Rígsþula*, 38.

¹⁴⁶ „Eflðisk hann við Eymund/ æðstan manna,/ en hann vá Sigtrygg/ með svölum eggjum,/ eiga gekk Almveig,/ æðsta kvinna,/ ólu þau ok áttu/ átján sonu.“ *Hyndluljóð*, 15.

¹⁴⁷ *Das Mysterium der Zahl*, p. 240.

¹⁴⁸ „En þá er Bárðr var þrettán vetra, gipti Dofri honum dóttur sína, Flaumgerð, ok v áru þau þar með Dofra, þar til Bárðr var átján vetra.“ *Bárðar saga*, chap. 1.

¹⁴⁹ „Nú er þar til at taka, at vex at eins ófrið milli þessa ok Dumbs konungs; þótti þeim hann ævar grimmr viðreignar. ... v áru þeir átján saman. S áttu þeim at honum ok börðu hann með járnstöngum, en hann varð st með árum, ok lauk með því at Dumbr konungr fell, enda hafði hann þá drept tólf af þeim. En Harðverkr var eptir ok þeir sex saman; gerðist hann þá konungr yfir þeim norðr þar.“ *Ibid.*, chap. 2.

¹⁵⁰ „Þá v áru átján Hellismenn drepnir, en Auðun Smiðkelsson brenndu þeir inni á Þorvarðsstöðum.“ *Ibid.*, chap. 10.

Though we agree that the symbolic meaning of eighteen comes mainly from the independent Scandinavian thought, we should not forget that eighteen could also be considered as a number of bondage. “The Israelites were subject to Eglon king of Moab for eighteen years.” (Judges 3:14) 18 years that the woman passed in her sickness according to the Gospel of Luke could be regarded as the sign of salvation that she had to wait, but also the torture that she endured. Though eighteen is not an imported element from the Bible, this symbol of bondage could have enhanced the meaning of eighteen: a sign of blood, death and devil.

4. Function of number symbolism: reality, fantasy and ambiguity

One question always asked about sagas is their credibility.¹⁵¹ Studying number symbolism cannot help decide directly whether sagas' stories and their episodes are based or not on the real history, but it helps to elucidate the intention of saga writers. For example, in *Grettis saga*:

So it happened one day, that Grínr caught one hundred fish, carried them home to the hut and gutted them outside, but the next morning, when he came there, all the fish were gone. This seemed very strange to him. He went to the water and then caught two hundred fish, took them home and gutted them. Yet all went in the same way, that all the fish were away in the morning. Now it seemed to him unnatural. The third day he caught three hundred fish, took them home... And when it was not yet the third of the night, he heard the walking outside and the step was rather loud; ...¹⁵²

The progressive gradation of 100-200-300 for the number of fish that Grínr caught on three following days could easily be understood: they are nothing but an imagination to complete the story. The more impressive use of numbers is situated at the end of *Grettis saga*:

The most valiant man who had been in Iceland, Grettir finished his life in this way; he was 45 winters old all but one, when he was killed; he was then 14 winters old, when he killed Skeggi on the first killing. All went well then for him until the time when he fought Glámr the scoundrel, he was then 20 winters old. Then he fell into exile, when he was 25 winters old. He was an outlaw for 19 winters and he often went into big trials with men and always kept his faith, as far as he had the chance; he foresaw most of the things, though he could do nothing about them.¹⁵³

We already talked about how importantly the number 18 works in Grettir's life: kill 18 men and to be killed by 18 men. We do not tend to raise doubts about the ages that

¹⁵¹ See "Are Family Sagas Medieval Novels?" and "Are Family Sagas Chronicles of Time Past?" in Heather O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction* (Blackwell, 2004), 24-36 and 36-47.

¹⁵² „Sv ábar til einn dag, at Grínr veiddi hundruð fiska ok bar heim til skáa of bjóum úti, en um morgininn eptir, er hann kom til, var íbrottu hverr fiks. Þetta þótti honum undarligt, ok fór til vatnsins ok veiddi nú tvau hundruð fiska, færði heim ok bjó um, ok fór allt á sömu leið, at allir váru í brott at morgni. Nú þótti honum eigi at einum brunni bera. Inni þriðja dag veiddi hann þrjú hundruð fiska, bar heim... Ok er eigi var þriðjungur af nótt, þá heyrð hann gengit úti hjá ok stigit heldr hart; ...“ *Grettis saga*, chap. 62.

¹⁵³ „Lá Grettir þann veg í f sitt, inn vaskasti maðr, er verit hefir á Íslandi; var honum vetri fát í hálftímtögum, er hann var veginn; en þá var hann fjórtán vetra, er hann vá Skeggja, it fyrsta vig ok þá gekk honum allt til vegs framan til þess, er hann átti við Glám þræl, ok var hann þá tuttugu vetra. En er hann fell í útleigð var hann hálftímtögur, en ísekt var hann vel n fján vetr ok kom opt ístórar mannraunir ok helt ávallt vel trúsúa, á því sem ráða var; sá hann flest fyrir, þó at hann gæti eigi at gort.“ *Ibid.*, chap. 82.

the author specifies at the end of *Grettis saga*¹⁵⁴, but mentioning in particular these different periods seems to conclude Grettir's life by imposing meanings. Grettir could do nothing about all that was settled for him, as if numbers of age, as well as the destiny that sagas often believe in, decided Grettir's life. In this lonely outlaw's life, 44 years of living minus his first killing at the age of 14 makes 30: a fight of 30 years could mean in number symbolism a lot. 44 is also the addition of 25 (the age that Grettir was outlawed) and 19 (years of outlawry that Grettir passed), as is emphasized by the saga's writer. Clearly fascinated by numbers, the author could have hidden the symbolism behind them: 25 as the square of 5 (five is the number of fingers and toes¹⁵⁵, but also an important number in Nordic beliefs that we haven't discussed in detail¹⁵⁶) and 19 as the addition of 10 (completeness) + 9 (paganism). As we've discussed, number symbolism not only works in *Grettis saga*, but also functions sparsely yet systematically in the saga writing. We resort to explain in this chapter the use of number symbolism and its functions in Old Norse literature.

"Through the operation of social memory, stories are altered again and again to meet the needs and expectations of a changing contemporary audience."¹⁵⁷ The retelling of stories by sagas is a significant way to impress the audience with semiotics. Numbers, being an important part of semiotics,¹⁵⁸ collaborate in the reconstruct of stories by adding their special symbolic meanings. With important works such as the *Poetic Edda* and the Bible, numbers also give a tropological reading by intertextuality. We now come to see several episodes chosen from sagas to shed light on this intertextuality.

4.1. The "Blóð-Egill" Episode in *Knýlinga saga*

As a chronicle considered to be composed by Óláfr Þórðarson, *Knýlinga saga*

¹⁵⁴ Though it is already doubted whether this episode is original or not, see *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, edited by Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1936), 262, note. 1.

¹⁵⁵ Hopper, 9.

¹⁵⁶ Number 5 is repeatedly mentioned in the *Poetic Edda*, for example, „hverf er haustgríma:/ fjáð of viðir/ á fimm dögum/ en meira á mánuði. (The autumn light that turns around; a great number of weathers in five days, and more in a month.)“ *Hávamál*, 74. „Var ek með Fjálvari/ fimm vetr alla/ í ey þeiri,/ er Algræn heitir (I was with Fjálvar for five winters on that island which was called All-green)“ *Hárbarðsljóð*, 16.

¹⁵⁷ Byock, 300.

¹⁵⁸ See Vyacheslav Vs. Ivanov, "Towards Semiotics of Number" in *Bulletin of the Georgian National Academy of Sciences* (2007), 186-192.

relates the story of Saint Canute (Knútr Sveinsson) and that of his ancestors and successors. Nevertheless, its central part concerning Knútr IV is the most developed and detailed. The link is often made between this saga and *Heimskringla* which also gives much attention to the history of Saint Olaf (Ólafr Haraldsson). But if Snorri Sturluson still shows a conservative attitude towards Ólafr, Saint Knútr's story is rather a literary hyperbole in that the king is depicted in a hagiographic way.¹⁵⁹ This is especially embodied in its episode concerning Blóð-Egill (chapters 33-40¹⁶⁰).

In this episode, King Knútr attempts to persuade his dashing vassal, Egill Ragnarsson into confessing to the priests his act of drinking human blood in the battle against the Wends. Egill shows his stubborn pride by ignoring this advice repeatedly and gets then dismissed from the authority over the Bornholm estates given beforehand by the king. Egill, however, defies the royal authority again by attacking secretly a valuable merchant ship from Norway. Ólafr III of Norway, Knútr's brother-in-law, asks Knútr to investigate the missing of this Norwegian ship. Knútr's clemency turns out to be a severe punishment when he finds out the malefactor and has the latter hanged.

The "Blóð-Egill" episode reminds of *Egils saga* in which King Haraldr Fairhair dismisses his vassal Þórðr Kveld-Úlfsson and kills the latter as well by surrounding his house.¹⁶¹ While Hildir's sons' abetment and Haraldr's own inner fear of Þórðr's increasing power result in his action, Knútr's action is more obligatory because Blóð-Egill disregards the laws and religious belief that the king promotes. If Knútr is portrayed as a firm saint, Egill is rather the symbol of a devil full of deadly sins such as wrath, greed, sloth and pride. The dualistic qualities observed in Knútr and Egill are not only exhibited by their actions and conversations, but also dealt with a careful choice of numbers. The numbers in this episode, all dividends of three, have

¹⁵⁹ St Knútr Sveinsson's part is compared to the Lives of Saints by Carl Phelpstead. See his article: "Converting to Europe: Christian Themes in Knýtlinga saga" in *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005). 163-178.

¹⁶⁰ Bjarni Einarsson proves in his article that the "Blóð-Egill" episode in *Knýtlinga saga* is a pure invention assigned by its author to be the indirect cause of the revolt against Knútr. See "On the 'Blóð-Egill' Episode in *Knýtlinga saga*", *Sagnaskemmtun. Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson* (Vienna: Hermann Böhlaus Nachf. Gesellschaft m. b. H., 1986), 41-43.

¹⁶¹ See *Egils saga*, chapters 10-22.

their symbolic significance closely linked to the story apart from their face value.

Blóð-Egill's episode begins with the reasons for which Egill is valued by King Knútr: issuing from a wealthy family, Egill is reputed for his personal accomplishments and fighting skills. He also comes to the king when a chieftain is the most needed: after the death of a rich man called Aki, twelve of the royal farms on Bornholm are left without administration. The king puts Egill in charge, but the appointment is conservative:

“But we shall take three farms from those that we own there. Then you shall govern other royal farms that I have in Bornholm.”¹⁶²

Though Egill asks to serve the king loyally as a retainer, Knútr distinguishes clearly between “we” and “you”. Egill first gets 9 farms from the king, but later he is forced to return these farms and the authority over the Bornholm estates when he is on bad terms with Knútr. Eventually Knútr gets back all the twelve farms.

Twelve represents wholeness, first because it could stand for Knútr's trust. Clearly, the king's trust in Egill is not as firm as that in his former vassal, Aki. If the trust is broken, the relationship between Knútr and Egill is not to last. Secondly, twelve is here divided into three and nine.¹⁶³ If twelve is a sacred number (especially linked to Christian beliefs here) and three is a royal number, nine is a symbol of pagan belief. Pagan belief and deeds (such as Egill's act of drinking human blood without repenting) appear out of this division. Later, Blóð-Egill departs with eighteen ships for Wendland before many lives are lost in battle and he drinks blood. Eighteen is the double of nine, thus it could also suggest Egill's wish to enlarge his power given by the king (9 royal farms). Standing in stark contrast with twelve and three, nine has to be eliminated. The third reason to explain the existence of twelve as a whole lies in that both Egill and Knútr wish to acquire its wholeness. When Egill gets so thirsty after having defeated the Wends, he asks a serving lad to give him a drink. The boy responds that

¹⁶² „En þó munum vér af taka þrjú búin, þau er vér eigum þar. En þá skaltu ráða fyrir öðrum konungsbúm, þeim er ek á í Borgundarhólmum.“ *Knýlinga saga*, chap. 34.

¹⁶³ The division of 12 into 3 and 9 is very similarly to the implicit use of 10-1=9 at the beginning of *Grettis saga*.

all drinks have run from the broken barrels into the keel and get mixed with human blood so that they should not be taken, but

Egill then stands up, takes the helmet off his hand, sinks it under into the ship and drinks three big draughts.¹⁶⁴

The number of draughts that Egill takes plus the number of farms that he owns makes twelve, which reveals his desire to take charge of all the estates (the whole power). In spite of his strong desire, it is Knútr who recaptures the 12 farms after giving away 9 of them.

This scene shows again what a great number three can be by its symbolic meaning: Blóð-Egill takes 3 draughts of the mixed drink. Clearly, drinking so much human blood is a capital sin. The king keeps 3 farms while Egill has 9, which also implicitly indicates Egill's ambition and greed, just as the contrast exists between Haraldr and Þórðfr's men.

The number 3 is chosen both for Knútr and Haraldr, because three is not only a great number, but also a sacred number linked with power. This number can be a sign that they will reverse the situation to their benefit and defeat their enemies. Three is moreover the number of times that Knútr meets Blóð-Egill. Since the king could not persuade his rebellious liegeman on "many" occasions, he has to give up moralizing and to take action instead. On the contrary, Haraldr only sees Þórðfr twice before he makes his final decision to take this valiant man's life. Obviously, by this comparison, the former king is rather merciful and ready to show tolerance, whereas the latter could only be reckoned as cruel and credulous. This difference between the two episodes proves that three can extend its meaning from many to tolerance and limit.

Blóð-Egill is assigned 9 farms and thus considered an avatar of the devil. He doesn't obey the king's order to make the confessions perhaps because he should be portrayed as a worshiper of pagan gods refusing Christian rituals. In the end, Egill dies a pagan death.

¹⁶⁴ „Egill stendr þá upp ok tekr hjálminn af hofði sér ok sökuvir niðr í kjölinn ok drekkir þrjá drykki mikla.“ *Knýtlinga saga*, chap. 35.

4.2. The Rognvaldr's episode in *Egils saga*

As Torfi H. Tulinius proves, the Rognvaldr's episode in *Egils saga* is an imaginary creation to befit its symbolic interpretation: Rognvaldr and his companions, totaling thirteen in number, remind of Jesus and his disciples on Lake Genesareth.¹⁶⁵ Nevertheless, more details concerning this episode are worth discussing as well.

Ten of Egill's companions died there. Some ships rowed after Egill's men, but some plundered the trading ship; all the money that was on board was taken, and they burned the ship... but Egill and his men had little force; they were then eighteen on the skiff.¹⁶⁶

Then Egill made these verses:

“Now the staunch warrior has killed ten men from our company, but I spared myself from the reproof.”¹⁶⁷

Egill prepared the ship there to the sea and had then almost thirty men.¹⁶⁸

Another bloody warrior, Egill makes the verses regretting the great loss that King Eir Ír imposed on his companions. The number particularly emphasized by Egill shows how important 10 men mean to Egill. Despite this loss, Egill and his men, eighteen in number, escape. Eighteen foretells his revenge afterwards towards King Eir Ír's favorite son, Rognvaldr. Egill's preparation is also a sign of his success: 30 as a number of unity and power shows that Egill gets enough men to begin his journey.

Egill let twelve men guard the ship, but he went on the following boat and they, eighteen in all, rowed then into the strait.¹⁶⁹

Egill then went his way not long before his eleven fellows came towards him, but six watched the ship.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁵ Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Enigma of Egill: The Saga, the Viking Poet, and Snorri Sturluson*, translated by Victoria Cribb (Cornell: Cornell University Library, 2014), 83-86.

¹⁶⁶ „þar l áusk t ú menn af sveitungum Egils. Sum skipin reru eptir þeim Agli, en sum ræntu kaupskipit; var þar tekit fé þat allt, er innan borðs var, en þeir brenndu skipit. ... en þeir Egill hófðu þunnskipat; váru þeir þá átján á skútnni.“ *Egils saga*, chap. 56.

¹⁶⁷ „Þá kvað Egill v íu:
„Nú hefr Þrym-Rognir þegna
þáttar á, en mik var ák
v í, v árrar sveitar
v gælds t ú fellda.““ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ „býr Egill skip þat til hafs ok hafði þá enn nær þrimr tigum manna“ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ „Egill lét gæta tólf menn skips, en hann fór á eptirbátinn ok þeir átján saman, reru síðan inn eptir sundum.“ *Ibid.*, chap. 57.

¹⁷⁰ „Egill gekk þá leið sína ok eigi langt, áðr félagar hans kómu í mót honum ellifu, en sex gættu skips.“ *Ibid.*

Egill was now totally enraged, so that it was not possible to talk with him; he sat with the helm on the boat; and when they went out in the fjords to Herðla, then they rowed out against Rognvaldr, the son of the king and his men, thirteen in all on the painted skiff.¹⁷¹

They died there thirteen, Rognvaldr and his companions; Egill and his men rowed then to the island of Herðla.¹⁷²

30 men are divided by 12 and 18, both important numbers that we have discussed: the former symbolizes an epic unity and the latter suggests the bloodshed. Egill and 17 men, who seek revenge, meet their 13 victims including Rognvaldr. Egill sings his bloody exploit: “Then Egill composed the verses: ‘... there fell now thirteen fir-trees of the moons of the sea on one skiff, resulting from a tumult of the hasty work.’”¹⁷³

The scene of revenge also goes in correspondence with Þórðfr’s episode: Haraldr (father of Eir íkr and grandfather of Rognvaldr) kills Þórðfr (son of Kveld-Úlfr and brother of Gr ímr): Egill (son of Gr ímr and grandson of Kveld-Úlfr) kills Rognvaldr (son of Eir íkr and grandson of Haraldr). Both attacks are mounted when the company of victims is drinking and thus unprepared. Both episodes are more imaginative than realistic. And this time, Egill gives a lesson to King Eir íkr with the number 30 (3) that Þórðfr regrets not to reach.

4.3. *Þiðrandi þátr ok Þórhalls*

As a short saga, *Þiðrandi þátr ok Þórhalls* could be considered as an episode depicting specifically the Conversion of Iceland in a 14th century version¹⁷⁴. The saga is titled with the names of two heroes: Þiðrandi who is young and warm-hearted and Þórhallr who is old and taciturn:

That summer Þiðrandi came out to Berufjörður. He was then eighteen years old and went home to his father. People then admired him as much just as before they often did and praised his talent,

¹⁷¹ „Egill var nú allreiðr, svá at þá mátti ekki við hann mæla; sat hann við stýri á bátinum; ok er þeir sóttu út á fjörðinn til Herðlu, þá reru útan í móti þeim Rognvaldr konungsson ok þeir þrettán saman á karfanum þeim inum steinda.“ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² „Létusk þeir þar þrettán, Rognvaldr ok fýrunautar hans; þeir Egill reru þá inn til eyjarinnar Herðlu.“ *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ „Þá kvað Egill v á þú: „...þar fellu nú þollar/ þrettán lagar mána,/ stendr af styrjar skyndi/ starf, á einum karfa.““ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ Ármann Jakobsson, “Conversion and sacrifice in the Þiðrandi episode in Flateyjarbók” in *Conversions: Looking for Ideological Change in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. by Leszek Slupecki and Rudolf Simek (Vienna: Fassbaender, 2003), 18.

but Þórhallr the prophet was always silent when people praised the young man the most.¹⁷⁵

The young Þiðrandi at the age of eighteen is a “perfect Christian knight” and “the good and worthy must make sacrifices and be sacrificed”¹⁷⁶. His image follows that of those apostles and saints who “finally die a martyr’s death steadfast in their acceptance of the Christian God and rejection of the pagan gods”¹⁷⁷ as they are conventionally portrayed in hagiography. Þórhallr acts in this scene as another Njáll refraining himself from predicting the future. In the night, Þórhallr gives the counsel that no matter who knocks on the door, nobody should answer it.

But when most men were asleep, then someone knocked at the door, and no one acted as if they knew. This went on three times.

Then Þiðrandi sprang up and spoke: “It is a great shame, when people here all act as if they slept, and guests have come.”¹⁷⁸

The door is open, but the people outside are not guests:

He went then next to the pile of wood and heard that the movement was in the north of the field. He saw that there were nine women and all were dressed in black who had swung a sword in their hand. He heard also that there was a movement in the south of the field. There were nine more women, all in light clothes and on white horses. Þiðrandi wanted to turn around and to tell the others about the scene, but then the former women dressed in black attacked him. He defended himself bravely.¹⁷⁹

After as many knocks as the number 3 indicates, Þiðrandi could not pretend to be without ears and chooses to answer the door. The 18-year-old man sees then 9 women in black and 9 women dressed in light colors. He is forced to fight against the former 9 ones who finally take his life. Before his death, Þiðrandi tells the arriving guests the

¹⁷⁵ „Þat sumar kom Þiðrandi út í Berufirði. Þá var hann á jónvetra. Fór hann heim til föður síns, ok dádust menn þá enn mjök at honum sem oft áðr og lofuðu atgerði hans, en Þórhallr spámaðr þagð jafnan, þá er menn lofuðu hann mest.“ *Þiðranda þátr ok Þórhalls*, chap. 1.

¹⁷⁶ See Ármann Jakobsson (2003), 17.

¹⁷⁷ John Lindow, “Norse Mythology and the Lives of the Saints” in *Scandinavian Studies* (2001), Volume 73, Number 3, 437.

¹⁷⁸ „En er flestir menn váru sofnaðir, þá var kvatt dura, og lét engi maður sem vissi, ok fór svá þrisvar.

Þá spratt Þiðrandi upp ok mælti: „Þetta er skömm mikil, at menn láta hér allir sem sofi, ok munu boðsmenn komnir.“ *Þiðranda þátr ok Þórhalls*, chap. 2.

¹⁷⁹ „Hann gekk þá undir viðköstinn og heyrði, að riðið var norðan á völinn. Hann sá, að það voru konur níu og voru allar í svörtum klæðum og höfðu brugðin sverð í höndum. Hann heyrði og, að riðið var sunnan á völinn. Þar voru og níu konur, allar í ljósum klæðum og á hvítum hestum. Þá vildi Þiðrandi snúa inn aftur og segja mönnum sínina, en þá bar að konurnar fyrr, hinar svartklæddu, og sóttu að honum, en hann varðist drengilega.“ *Ibid.*, chap. 2.

whole story. Þórhall then explains the story by telling Þiðrandi's father that these 18 women are actually all dísir¹⁸⁰ who followed the family and knew that they would lose the tribute from this family at the arrival of Christianity. Nine of them, wicked, decided to take Þiðrandi's life as compensation; the other nine, better as they were in white, could do nothing but to witness Þiðrandi's loss. As repetitive signs, nine and eighteen in this episode confirm again the magic power (both as the symbols of the abhorred paganism) and the relationship between them: $9+9=18$ or $9 \times 2=18$.

4.4. End of *Njáls saga*

As a masterpiece of Icelandic sagas, *Njáls saga* develops its story from pagan Iceland to its conversion. The scenes concerning the burning in *Njáls saga* are good evidence of popular awe towards the violation of Christian virtues¹⁸¹, at least among the leaders such as Gizurr the White and Flosi. When Mörðr suggests to Gizurr to burn Gunnar inside, Gizurr refuses severely: „This will never be... though I know that my life lies at stake.”¹⁸² And Flosi admits his moral reluctance for the second choice that he is obliged to take: “the other (is) to set fire and burn them inside, and though it is a big responsibility before God, as we are Christians ourselves. Still we have to take this action.”¹⁸³

Introducing number symbolism into the analysis of the end of *Njáls saga* makes the impact of Christian thought even more visible. Chapters 149 to 159 (Kári's revenge on Flosi and his companions for Njáls's family) employ largely number symbolism.

Then the Sigfússons prepared themselves with the men who were designated; they were eighteen together. Then they rode away. And before they departed, they kissed Flosi.¹⁸⁴

They separated their company. Ketill of Mork rode eastwards to Meðalland and eight men with him, but the others lay down to sleep and did not beware of it, until Kári and his men came to

¹⁸⁰ About the explanation of dísir, see Ármann Jakobsson (2003), 15-16. They could include any kind of female pre-Christian deities.

¹⁸¹ Harald Müller, „...und gut ist keines von beiden“, Gedanken zur Akzeptanz der Brenna in der *Njáls saga* in *Studien zur Isländersaga*, edited by Heinrich Beck and Else Ebel (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2000), 200-201.

¹⁸² „Þat skal verða aldri... þó at ek vita, at I f mitt liggi við“ *Njáls saga*, chap. 77.

¹⁸³ „hinn annarr at bera at eld ok brenna þá inni, ok er þat þó stór ábyrgð fyrir guði, er vér erum kristnir sjálfir. En þó munu vér þat bragðs taka.“ *Ibid.*, chap. 128.

¹⁸⁴ „Sáðan bioggusk þeir Sigfússynir ok þeir menn með þeim, sem til þess v áru ætlaðr; v áru þeir átján saman. Riðu þeir þá íbraut. Ok áðr en þeir f áru, minntusk þeir við Flosa.“ *Ibid.*, chap. 149.

them.¹⁸⁵

Though some of the eighteen men's names in the Sigfússons' company are given, such as Ketill of Mork, Grani Gunnarsson, etc., the saga doesn't specify all their names. In fact, it is hard to avoid the impression that eighteen is used to emphasize the paganism of this troop. Before the troop is divided, Kári "then stayed there six nights"¹⁸⁶. So the hero prepares himself completely and on the seventh day he is eager to take the Sigfússons by surprise. The arrangement of the Sigfússons makes the paganism more clear: the number 18 is split into 2 nines and both nines are linked to evil and death.

The king Brj ánn pardoned his outlaws three times for the same crime; but if they committed the crime more, then he let them be sentenced according to laws, and it could be seen from this what kind of king he was.¹⁸⁷

According to our reading of Þór óðfr's episode and Blóð-Egill's episode above, three or even four (three plus one) symbolizing "many" and "tolerance" shows King Brj ánn's kindness and justice. On the contrary, wonders happen on three nights against Bróðir's men: a rain of boiling blood, swords' leaping, ravens' attack.¹⁸⁸ This three linked to "many" shows rather a great divine disapproval of Bróðir's ambition. As his companion Óspakr explains, blood raining forebodes the loss of both Bróðir's and Brj ánn's sides, the swords' leaping forebodes the speedy death, weapons forebode a battle, and finally the pressing of ravens forebodes devils who will drag Bróðir and his men to the pains of hell.

Now it is told that the king Brj ánn would not fight on Friday, and a wall of shield was made around him and the company was drawn up in the front.¹⁸⁹

On Friday this event happened on Katanes, that the man called Dörruðr went out. He saw, that twelve men rode together to some lady's bower and all disappeared there. He went to the lady's

¹⁸⁵ „Skiptu þeir þar liði sínu. Ketill ór Mork reið austr í Meðalland ok átta menn með honum, en hinir lögðusk niðr til svefns ok urðu eigi fyrr við varir en þeir Kári kómu at þeim.“ *Ibid.*, chap. 150.

¹⁸⁶ „dvalðisk þar sex nætr síðan.“ *Ibid.*, chap. 149.

¹⁸⁷ „Brj ánn konungr gaf upp útlogum sínum þrysvar ina sǫmu sǫk; en ef þeir misgerðu optar, þá lét hann dæma þá at lögum, ok má af því líku marka, hvílikr konungr hann var.“ *Ibid.*, chap. 154.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, chap. 156.

¹⁸⁹ „Nú er at segja frá Brjáni konungi, at hann vildi eigi berjask föstudaginn, ok var skotit um hann skjaldborg ok fylkt þar liðinu fyrir framan.“ *Ibid.*, chap. 157.

bower, looked inside through the window there and saw that there were women inside and they had built up a web. The heads of men were there instead of the stones of the loom, but intestines out of men were there instead of the weft and the yarn, a sword instead of the ley and an arrow instead of the weaver's rod.¹⁹⁰

They tore the web from above and asunder, and everyone had the part that she held. He went then away from the window and returned home, but they mounted their horses, and six rode southwards, but six northwards.

Such event happened for Brandr Gneistason on the Faroe Islands.¹⁹¹

Like the Fates weaving the destiny in ancient Greek mythology, the appearance of these unknown women is already depicted in *Þiðrandi þátr ok Þórhalls*: they are dísir, a rather wicked pagan force fighting against the advent of Christianity. The dísir, numbering the epic 12, kill many men and separate into two groups of six.

The date is also important to our reading. All happened on the Good Friday which is thus called because Jesus Christ was crucified on that day. Perceval, the main character in *Le Conte du Graal*, a French work from the late 12th century, was lost for five years before he repents of his sin of carrying arms on this special day.¹⁹² King Brjánn and other good men are thus sacrificed but sanctified because of their

¹⁹⁰ „Føstumorgininn varð sá atburðr á Katanesi, at maðr sá, er Dørruðr hét, gekk út. Hann sá, at menn riðu tólf saman til dyngju nokkurrar ok hurfu þar allir. Hann gekk til dyngjunnar ok sá inn í glugg einn, er á var, ok sá, at þar váru konur inni ok höfðu vef upp færðan. Mannahöfuð váru fyrir kljána, en þarmar ór mönnum fyrir viptu ok garn, sverð var fyrir skeið, en ǫr fyrir hræl.“ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ „Rifu þær þá ofan vefinn ok í sundr, ok hafði hver þat, er helt á. Gekk hann þá í braut frá glugginum ok heim, en þær stigu áhesta sána, ok riðu sex ísuðr, en aðrar sex ínorðr.

Slikan atburðr bar fyrir Brand Gneistason í Færeyjum.“ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² Chrétien de Troyes : *Œuvre complètes*, edited by Daniel Poirion, etc. (Paris : Gallimard, 1994), 839, lines 6253-6266,

“Et li uns des cinc chevaliers
L'areste et dit : « Biaux sire chiers !
Don ne creez vos Jhesu Crist,
Qui la novele Loi escrist
Et la dona as crest èns ?
Certes, il n'est reisons ne biens
D'armes porter, einz est granz torz,
Au jor que Jhesu Criz fu morz. »
Et cil qui n'avoit nul porpans
De jor ne d'ore ne de tans,
Tant avoit a con cuer enui,
A dit : « Quex jorz est il donc hui ?
- Quex, sire ? Si ne le savez ?
C'est li vanredis aorez.”

And one of the five knights stopped him and said: “Dear handsome Sir! So you don't believe in Jesus Christ who wrote the new Laws and gave them to the Christians? For sure, it is neither reasonable nor good to carry the arms on the day that Jesus Christ was killed. In fact it's a great wrong.” But the one (Perceval) who had such great afflictions that he didn't care about the day, the time or the season, said: “So what is the day today?” “What, sir? You don't even know? It's the Good Friday.”

unwillingness to fight; on the other hand, Bróðr, together with 15 burners, choose to ignore the Christian belief and are destined to the heathen death.

If it seems abrupt to add the story of Brjánn into the saga, it is because the saga's author makes it so. The war between King Brjánn and Bróðr and all the terrible scenes happening on the same day seem to link this episode to the Apocalypse in *the Book of Revelation*: the judgment has come in the battlefield for those having burned Njáll's family, the sinners are punished, the dǫfir will escape, and the final peace is to come.

That morning Kári went into the town. He came there, when Kolr counted the silver; Kári recognized him. Then Kári ran towards him swinging a sword and struck him on the neck, while he counted the silver, and the head pronounced ten when it flew off at the moment of death.¹⁹³

Ten is pronounced by the last sinner as a symbol of fulfillment. It paves the way for the conciliation. After this revenge, all 25 burners dreamt by Flosi are killed and the time of reconciliation has come. Flosi then goes on a pilgrimage to Rome and Kári embarks on his pilgrimage to Normandy. Both receive absolution.

In the summer Kári prepared himself to go to Iceland. Skeggi got them a tradeship; they were eighteen on the ship. They were rather slow in getting ready and then sailed away. They were for a long time out at sea, but later on they reached Ingólfshöfði and there the ship broke to pieces. However, all were saved.¹⁹⁴

We should not forget that eighteen is exactly the number of the Sigfússons and their men who were to kill Kári but turned out to be punished by the brave warrior. As the number of great evil and death, eighteen not only indicates the men to be spared, but also the end of the reprisal. Just as in the Bible, after the torture of 18 years, the woman recovered thanks to Jesus's blessing (Luke: 13). Kári forgets hatred, Flosi learns humbleness and Kári marries Flosi's niece. Nothing is more significant: God's justice has taken place and His graces are with the Christians.

¹⁹³ „Þenna morgin gekk Kári íborgina. Hann kom þar at, er Kolr talði silfrit; Kári kenndi hann. Sæðan hljóp Kári til hans með sverð brugðit ok hjó á hálsinn, en hann talði silfrit, ok nefndi höfuðit tíu, er af fauk bonum.“ *Njáls saga*, chap. 158.

¹⁹⁴ „Um sumarit eptir bjósk Kári til Íslands; Skeggi fekk þeim byrðing; váru þeir á ján á þeir urðu heldr sáðúnir; sigldu í haf. Þeir höfðu langa útivist, en um síðir tóku þeir Ingólfshöfða ok brutu þar skipit allt í spán, en þó varð mannbjörg.“ *Ibid.*, chap. 159.

5. Conclusion

The numerological study of Old Norse literature may not be completely new in Scandinavian studies. However, the aim of this work has been to attempt a systematic discussion of number symbolism, within the limits of a short MA thesis. Numbers in Old Norse literature cannot be seen as exempt from Christian influence; the interaction of two cultures (Christian and Scandinavian autochthonous) contributes to their symbolic meanings. As Einar Pálsson has said: “the most remarkable thing about its application is that right from the beginning it seems to have been Christian no less than pagan.”¹⁹⁵ He is not wrong about the existence of a complicated system of number symbolism, but the influence is a combination rather than a total triumph of Christian ideas or Pythagorean thoughts. After the study of several important numbers in sagas, we can to a large extent admit the existence of such a system used generally by saga authors. In fact, we believe sagas are influenced one by another, but moreover, they are written in a rather long period (since the 12th century) of common cultural values including the knowledge of numbers. Mathematics, as well as the symbolic meanings represented by numbers, is an important component of the quadrivium throughout the Middle Ages. We do not tend, however, to underestimate saga authors’ individuality, but medieval authors were likely to have been more conscious of what main meanings they wanted to convey by symbols and allegories. Number symbolism was a useful tool to impress the audience and to serve further didactic purposes.

The eight numbers that we’ve discussed in this thesis are in different situations: the numbers 3, 7 and 12 share their meaning in both worlds, the numbers 10 and 13 are more important in Christian tradition, while the numbers 8, 9 and 18 are especially significant in Nordic beliefs. Interactions between the two worlds with numbers are interesting: if sagas borrow the meanings of certain numbers (such as 10 and 13) from Christian tradition to convey a hagiographic message, Christian influence in sagas shows a hidden hostility towards the heathen world said to be comprised of 9 giantesses and 18 magic spells.

¹⁹⁵ Einar Pálsson (1998), 33.

Numbers can be representative of different characters' status, personality and destiny in sagas: 3 is the king's privilege, 9 is representative of a pagan hero, 13 men will often become victims, 8 men are usually to be defeated, 18 men can predict a slaughter, an 18-year-old man would have a pagan destiny or be a pagan sacrifice, etc. As dreams and prophecies, numbers could thus have the teleological function in Old Norse literature: *Vǫluspá* is a perfect example, as the numbers 3 and 9 in this poem not only depict a world full of fantasy, but also predict the future of Nordic gods. In this sense, the *Poetic Edda* resembles *the Book of Revelation* in their use of number symbolism: in the latter, among the 7 golden lampstands stands the man whose right hand holds 7 stars, the tree of life bears 12 crops of fruit, the wall of the city is 12 000 stadia in length and 144 cubits thick, etc. We are not sure which of the two, the *Bible* or the *Poetic Edda*, directly influenced saga writing regarding number symbolism, but aside from the story itself, numbers are also essential to saga reading.

Besides, the relationship between numbers (comparison, multiple, etc.) can serve as a narrative metaphor: for comparison, eight and nine are not as extensive as three in their symbolic meanings, since Christianity refused to highly evaluate the pagan numbers; eighteen, as the double of nine, enlarges implicitly the pagan power.

But the meaning of numbers also varies in different texts. Colors can contribute to their variant readings: twelve men in red are good, but the other twelve in black represent the forces of evil in *Þorsteins þátr uxafáts*. Since the number 12 is an epic sign, it is used both to indicate the number of disciples of Jesus and the number of berserkers. The number 3 comprehended as "many" in its symbolic meaning can be both positive and negative, all depending on the subjects that it concerns. The symbolism of numbers is never independent and one should always rely on the text to understand it better.

Furthermore, numbers conveying symbolic meanings show up in dreams, in retellings, in legends, or even in the recounting of facts, which seems to complicate our reading of sagas. We may never know if the numbers used in Old Norse literature are historically real or completely fabricated. Actually, numbers are easily to be modified and thus give a fictional space for sagas just as for the Scriptures. But if four

methods of allegorical interpretation (i.e. literal, anagogic, typological and tropological) exist in reading the Bible, we believe saga reading can also be attempted at different levels.¹⁹⁶ For example, *Njáls saga* is rich in that it can be considered as a real story, a discussion of masculinity¹⁹⁷, a metaphor of the pagan past, the Conversion and its influence on Icelandic society, and the like.

Rarely is the number symbolism of works written in vernacular languages of the Middle Ages studied. We admit Christian influence in romances and sagas from that period. But factors from autochthonous cultures should not be ignored. This collision, communication or even interaction between different cultures renders our study of number symbolism more intriguing.

My brief study of number symbolism in Old Norse literature is a beginning. This beginning is encouraging because it indicates very firmly that number symbolism was known to saga authors and that they used it in their work. This is in line with the general tendency in the sagas to combine in an original way pagan traditions and Christian view and values. However, a more ambitious study would be needed to give a more accurate and complete picture of the place of medieval number symbolism in Old Norse literature. Here are some of the questions that remain to be asked: what is the symbolism of other numbers such as five that have not been discussed in detail? Could number symbolism in Old Norse literature have evolved throughout the Middle Ages? In particular, the manuscripts containing the same saga or the same episode from one saga with differences in numbers (for example, the inserted paragraph about certain ages in Grettir's life) could be studied in view of the deliberate choice made by scribes.

¹⁹⁶ Ármann Jakobsson suggest four layers of meaning concerning the reading of the Bible to interpret Sverris saga, see his article, "King Sverrir of Norway and the foundations of his power: kingship ideology and narrative in *Sverris saga*" in *Medium Ævum*, Vol. 86, No. 1 (the Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 2015), 109-135.

¹⁹⁷ Ármann Jakobsson, "Masculinity and Politics in *Njáls saga*" in *Nine Saga Studies: The Critical Interpretation of the Icelandic Sagas* (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2013), 207-237.

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