SCRIPTA ISLANDICA

ISLÄNDSKA SÄLLSKAPETS

ÅRSBOK 67/2016

REDIGERAD AV

LASSE MÅRTENSSON OCH VETURLIÐI ÓSKARSSON

under medverkan av

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UPPSALA, SWEDEN

Publicerad med stöd från Vetenskapsrådet.

ISSN 0582-3234
Sättning: Ord och sats Marco Bianchi
urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-307788
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-307788

Innehåll

The term *leizla* in Old Norse vision literature – contrasting imported and indigenous genres?

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I. Introduction. The vision genres

Throughout Europe in the Middle Ages, visions were a popular genre. They were translated into many of the vernaculars, including Old Norse. In most languages, people either borrowed the Latin term *visio* as the genre designation, or they used indigenous words that translated *visio*'s meaning of 'vision, something seen'. In Old Norse, however, a completely different solution was chosen. *Leizla*, the term that in most cases translates *visio*, literally means 'leading, guiding'. This articles aims at explaining why this term was chosen.

The Latin term *visio* covers a wide variety of heterogeneous texts. In an attempt at systematisation, Dinzelbacher (1981: 29) uses five criteria to establish a modern, analytic term 'vision'. This, he divides into two types. The first can be summed up as wanderings in the afterlife ('visions of heaven and hell', in Gardiner 1993: xviii ff.). They are morally instructive Christian tales about people who have travelled to the afterlife – Heaven, Hell and Purgatory – and what they have seen and experienced there. As eyewitnesses, they give an account of what the landscape is like in the afterlife, how progressively worse sinners are punished in ever more terrifying ways the deeper one penetrates into hell, and how eternal life becomes proportionally more pleasant the higher up in heaven one comes. The journey is taken involuntarily by the soul (*anima*, 'air, wind, breathing, life, soul' or *spiritus*,'breath, breathing, life, spirit'; about the connection between breath and soul / spirit / mind, see Heide 2006b) of the person who is having the vision while his body is left behind, possibly lifeless, because the person is close to death, dreaming or in some kind of

Heide, Eldar. 2016. The term *leizla* in Old Norse vision literature – contrasting imported and indigenous genres? *Scripta Islandica* 67: 37–63.

http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-310197

ecstasy. The other main type in Dinzelbacher's typology is in particular experiences of a mystical union with the deity ('mystical visions', in Gardiner 1993: xviii ff.) – seeing and / or speaking to God or the saints, hearing voices, receiving prophecies, etc. Typically, those who have had such experiences are charismatic mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen, Elisabeth of Schönau or Birgitta of Vadstena (Bridget of Sweden). Dinzelbacher's type I had its heyday in the early and high Middle Ages (but some examples of it, e.g. *Visio Pauli*, remained popular into the late Middle Ages, see Jiroušková 2006), while type II 'only becomes prominent from the thirteenth century onwards' into the late Middle Ages (Volmering 2014: 8). The terminology also changes: *Visio*, 'vision', was by far the most common Latin term in the early and high Middle Ages, while in the late Middle Ages, *revelation*, 'revelation', became equally or more common.[1] Dinzelbacher's typology is, like any typology, a simplification, and has been criticised for that reason. Still, however, it (or similar systematisations) is widely seen as a useful tool corresponding to reality – especially the fundamental distinction between visions of heaven and hell (the otherworld), and mystical (ecstatic) visions, and their chronological relationship (e.g. Gardiner 1993, Easting 1997: 13–14, Wellendorf 2009: 39 ff., Volmering 2014: 7 ff., Carlsen 2015: 21–22).

Many variants of the visions circulated throughout Europe[2] in Latin and some were translated into the vernaculars, including in some cases Old Norse – by which I mean the language of Norway and lands settled from Norway, as opposed to the language(s) of Denmark and Sweden. We know of only one example of a type II vision translated into Old Norse (*Visio de resurrectione beate virginis Marie* / *Vision about the Resurrection of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, Wellendorf 2009: 41). According to Wellendorf, five type I visions were translated into Old Norse (based on a modification of Dinzelbacher's definition): *Páls leizla* (*Visio Pauli*), *Dryhthelms leizla* (*Visio Dryhthelmi*, or *Drycth-*), *Duggals leizla* (*Visio Tnugdali*), *Gundelinus leizla* (*Visio Gunthelmi*), *Furseus leizla* (*Vita Prima Fursei*), and one that originated in Iceland after the genre had

[1] Dinzelbacher (1981: 46): 'Besitzen Darstellungen von Visionen oder Erscheinungen überhaupt eine Überschrift, sei es als Kapitelbeginn in einem größerenWerk, sei es als Titel eines eigenen Manuscriptes, so heißt es im frühen und hohen Mittelalter so gut wie immer, im späten weniger häufig «Visio» [….] In der Häufigkeit an zweiter Stelle steht wohl «*revelatio*»; im Spätmittelalter kommt dieses Wort vielleicht sogar öfter vor als «visio».' In addition, other terms were used, less frequently: *elevatio* 'lifting up', *visus* 'appearance', *somnium* 'dream', and others.

[2] Including Dante's famous, highly literary *Divina commedia*, written in Tuscan / Italian.

gained a foothold there: *Rannveigar leizla* (Wellendorf 2009: 59, 282 ff.). The Norwegian folk ballad *Draumkvedet* also belongs to type I and, by all accounts, originated in Scandinavia (probably in the Middle Ages, even though it was not written down until the 1800s; see Liestøl 1946, Strömbäck 1946, Wellendorf 2008, and others). Moe 1927 (1911) offers an accessible overview of the Norse vision genre and the backdrop to it. The most comprehensive account of Norse vision literature is Wellendorf 2009. Carlsen 2015 focuses on literature composed in Old Norse possibly inspired by type 1 visions.

II. Vernacular terms for *visio*. Why *leizla*?

In the Old Norse area, visions began to be translated into the vernacular before 1200 (Wellendorf 2009: 157, 199). These were of Dinzelbacher's type I ('visions of heaven and hell'), and at this time, visions were in Latin usually referred to with the term *visio* (*uisio*) (footnote 1), which literally means 'sight, something seen, vision'. In Old Norse, however, the term chosen for this was *leizla* (pronounced /[2]leitsla/[3]), which literally means 'leading, conducting, guiding'. Why was this term chosen?

In German-speaking areas as well as in England and Ireland, people borrowed one of the Latin terms for this genre – Middle English *visyon*, Middle High German *visiōn*, Old and Middle Irish *fís* (< *visio*); Middle English *reuelacioun* and Flemish *revelacie* (Dinzelbacher 1981: 46, Wellendorf 2009: 45, Volmering 2014: 16, *Dictionary of the Irish language* 1983 II: 154). In Middle Irish, the term *aislinge* was also sometimes used, and in Middle Welsh *breuddwyd*. These terms are indigenous with an original meaning 'dream' (*Dictionary of the Irish language* 1983 I: 247, Volmering 2014: 82 ff.; Mittendorf 2006a) which was extended to cover Latin visions.

In Old Norse, the standard Latin term at the time *could* have been used – it would have been **vísjón* in Old Norse – or else the literal translation *sýn*, 'a vision, something seen', could have been chosen. There are cases where the Old Norse translators have chosen *sýn* f., *andarsýn* f., 'spirit vision', *vitran* f., 'revelation, something laid open' and *birting* f.,

[3] The superscript figure '2' before the word marks the toneme 2 which is found in Modern Norwegian and Swedish and which Old Icelandic probably had as well, although Modern Icelandic does not (Myrvoll and Skomedal 2010, Haukur Þorgeirsson 2013).

'revelation, something illuminated' (Wellendorf 2009: 42, 45–46, 56), so there is no doubt that literal translation was seen as an alternative. But the term that was usually chosen was, in fact, a word that meant something entirely different: *leizla*, 'guiding'.

To my knowledge, nobody has discussed why this happened.[4] Wellendorf is the one who goes most deeply into the question of terminology, but he restricts himself to wondering whether *leizla* was an indigenous word that gained an extended meaning when the Latin visions were translated, or if it was newly coined in order to cover a concept that did not exist in the culture before. He is not sure, but believes 'the safest thing would be to view the word [*leizla*] as a neologism, created to describe a group of stories with Christian content, and therefore a borrowing' (ibid: 53).[5] Likewise, Wellendorf does not rule out the possibility that the word *leizla* predated the conversion. In that case, the likely meaning was 'funeral procession', he says, because that is a usual meaning of *leizla* in Old Norse, also 'in a pre-Christian context' (ibid: 56), and because the background for this term may appear to be Common Germanic and therefore old: 'It is thought that *leizla* in the sense of 'burial' does not have much to do with the process of placing the dead person in the ground but that the term rather refers to a possible funeral procession connected with the burial, and that *leiði* 'burial place' is a later development of this' (ibid: 56). This *leiði* has a parallel in Old High German, *leita* and *leitī* 'funus, exsequiae', and Middle High German, *bileiti* 'Begräbnis' (ibid). Therefore, *leizla* did not just mean 'guiding'; it also had 'strong associations with words that are linked to death and burial', and this may be why *leizla* was chosen as the word for the translated Latin visions. 'For it is often the case in the texts that the ecstatic who experiences the vision is described as dead,' Wellendorf points out (ibid: 57).

Whether *leizla* was coined for the translation of the Latin visions or merely acquired a new usage is of little relevance to my point in this article. The issue I want to address is why an Old Norse word was chosen that meant something quite different from the Latin word that was being translated. Wellendorf indicates a couple of factors that could serve as a key to explanation. First, he notes that the Old Norse terminology is more specialised than the Latin. In Latin, *visio* is a broad term applied to a wide

[4] As far as I can see, it is not discussed in Moe 1927 (1911), Listøl 1946, Strömbäck 1946, 1976, Sverrir Tómasson 1993, Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir 2005 or Wellendorf 2009.

[5] Quotations from Wellendorf are my own translations from the original Danish.

variety of texts and genres (for a discussion of the terminology in Latin, see Dinzelbacher 1981: 45 ff., Volmering 2014), while in Old Norse, *visio* is divided into *sýn*, *vitran* / *birting* and *leizla*. *Sýn*, which corresponds literally to the Latin *visio*, was used in Old Norse for both types of visions defined by Dinzelbacher, in other words as broadly as *visio*. However, *vitran* / *birting* was generally used for type II (which came later, as we have seen), and *leizla* primarily for the type I visions, i.e. the journeys to the afterlife (Wellendorf 2009: 56, cf. 40). This specialised terminology suggests that the Old Norse translators perceived the differences between the sub-genres as important. Secondly, Wellendorf points out (ibid: 55) that *leizla* focuses on a different aspect of the matter than *visio*. The Latin term refers only to visions, revelations, whereas *leizla* 'emphasises that the visionary [in the type I visions] is in actual fact being *guided* through the other world' (Cleasby and Vigfusson 1874: 381, Strömbäck 1976: 171 and Vésteinn Ólason 1992: 506 also hint at this, and Carlsen 2015: 127 agrees). *Leizla*, which comes from *leið-sla*, is derived from the root of the verb *leiða*, 'guide, lead', and in the type I visions, the visionary is guided through Hell, Purgatory and Heaven by an angel or a saint.

Wellendorf does not pursue this line of thinking any further. But these factors suggest that when *leizla* was chosen, this was seen as important in order to express the fact that guiding is a distinctive feature of the genre. This also emerges from other factors. First, the Old Norse vision texts often used the word *leiða* to refer to the process of being guided by the angel, even in one case where the Latin text uses the more neutral *venire*, 'to come' (*Gundelinus leizla*, Wellendorf 209: 54). Secondly, another derivative from the root of *leiða*, namely *leiðing* f., is also used synonymously with *leizla*, twice in *Furseus leizla* (ibid: 53). This strengthens the impression that those who introduced the generic term *leizla* had the literal meaning of the word in mind, and thus that there was a desire to emphasise that this *guiding* through the afterlife was what distinguished the genre. Why the desire to emphasise this?

It is natural because guiding is a distinguishing feature of the genre. In type I visions, emphasis is typically placed on the fact that the visionary is guided by a psychopomp (angel or saint; see Zaleski 1987: 52 ff.), or encouraged by the escort to follow him (*fylgja*), and his dependency on the escort is stressed:

> the visionary's worst moment generally begins when the escort has vanished. […] The disappearance of the guide is also a motif that often occurs in the

> visions. […The visionaries] are struck with terror and become calm again only when the escort returns and the journey through hell can continue (Wellendorf 2009: 54–55).

Indeed there are cases where the psychopomp pulls the visionary through the afterlife on a string (ibid: 54).

Given this background, it is quite unremarkable that there was a desire to express that guiding was a characteristic feature of the genre (i.e., 'visions of heaven and hell'). What requires explanation is why this was more the case for Old Norse than for other languages. Might we not expect that the need to express this would be as great for those who wrote the visions in Latin or translated them from Latin into other languages? Or was there something special in the Old Norse area that created a desire or a need for an emphatic terminology – something in the Old Norse cultural background to which the Latin visions were to be transferred?

III. A suggestion

My suggestion is that the Old Norse translators chose the term *leizla* because in the Old Norse area, there were inherited, indigenous stories that greatly resembled the visions but lacked the guiding element. Since guiding was a central aspect of the newly introduced genre, it was natural to call them *leizla*, 'guiding', to distinguish them from the stories people knew from before. I am thinking of the apparently indigenous Old Norse stories in which people with special abilities get in contact with or explore the realm of the dead or other far-off places, sometimes through a free-soul journey, in which the body is left behind at home. These adventures occur without a psychopomp, as we shall now see.

In *Baldrs draumar*[6] Óðinn rides on his horse Sleipnir to Hel (the realm of the dead) – implying long roads and the need to cross one or more barriers that cannot usually be crossed (cf. Hermóðr's journey to Hel on the same horse, see below). There he wakes up a dead prophetess – a *vǫlva* – from the grave, from whom he obtains knowledge about the future of Baldr. In *Vǫluspá* 28–35, the situation appears to be similar (see for example Sigurður Nordal 1927: 66–67; Gísli Sigurðsson 2001 takes

[6] When citing the Edda poems, I refer to *Eddukvæði I* 2014.

a different view). In *Hárbarðsljóð* 44–45 it is said that Óðinn has sought out the dead in burial mounds in order to gain knowledge. In *Hávamál* 157 Óðinn is said to be able to bring hanged men back to life and make them talk – Snorri also refers to this in *Ynglinga saga* (1941: 18). After Baldr has died, Hermóðr rides to Hel to try to release him.

The road there passes through a landscape that is like the one we see in the visions; among others, he must overcome obstacles such as dark, deep valleys and then the river *Gjǫll* and the bridge that crosses it, the *Gjallarbrú*, which has an equivalent function in *Draumkvedet* (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* 1931: 66–67, Moe 1927 [1911]: 201–03; cf. for example *Duggals leizla* in *Heilagra manna sögur 1* 1877, chap. 4–7).[7] In *Vafþrúðnismál* 43 it is the giant Vafþrúðnir who has been to the realm of the dead and gained knowledge.

Even among these examples, though, *Baldrs draumar* and Hermóðr's journey to Hel are the only ones where there is explicitly a *journey* to the realm of the dead. However, such a journey may often be implied, because 'dying' is often referred to as *fara til Heljar*, 'travelling to Hel', or travelling on the *helvegr*, 'the road to Hel' (Ellis Davidson 1943: 84–85), and the hanged men Óðinn causes to speak are hardly dangling in his courtyard in Valhǫll. Perhaps he had a burial mound there in his courtyard, but typically in stories about journeys to the otherworld (see Schødt 1983 for a discussion of this concept) – whether the realm of the dead, the land of the giants, Jǫtunheimar, or others – one must cross several kinds of barriers (cf. Ellis Davidson 1943). Compare this to how Óðinn travels all the way to Hel in *Baldrs draumar* to find the grave in which the prophetess lies. We also find descriptions similar to those in Hermóðr's journey to Hel in journeys to other variants of the otherworld, especially the Jǫtunheimar. The clearest example of this is *Skírnismál*, in

[7] One might think that Snorri's descriptions of this were affected by the visions, causing him to make this journey more like those in the visions. But in that case, it will have been because he has seen that the genres are similar to one another, which is precisely my point. And Snorri did not introduce a guide for Hermóðr. The 'complete' story of Baldr is known only from Snorri, but many scholars (overview in Abram 2006) believe that his source value is high at this point, seeing that a number of alliterated sentences with three stave-rhymes in Snorri's text suggests that he has followed a subsequently lost eddic poem (e.g. *Vex viðarteinungr einn fyrir vestan Valhǫll*; Lorenz 1984: 559–60 lists eight examples). Abram (2006) rejects this view, arguing that alliteration appears also in prose that we know is not based on poetry. The appearance of alliteration as such in the prose of Snorri is not the argument, however; what suggests that he here builds on a lost poem is that this part of *Gylfaginning* differs *from other parts of Gylfaginning* by showing a distinctly higher frequency of sentences with three or even four rhyme staves.

which Skírnir rides on a magical horse through darkness and fire, over wet mountains, and finally manages to make his way past fierce guard dogs and a fence around the farm of the giant he is trying to reach (stanzas 8–16).

In the above-mentioned examples, however, no information is given that suggests the bodies of Óðinn or the others are left behind while they are travelling to the otherworld. However, Snorri gives an account of this in *Ynglinga saga*: *Óðinn skipti hǫmum. Lá þá búkrinn sem sofinn eða dauðr, en hann var þá fugl eða dýr, fiskr eða ormr ok fór á einni svipstund á fjarlæg lǫnd at sínum ørendum eða annarra manna*. (*Ynglinga saga* 1941: 18) 'Óðinn changed shapes. Then his body lay as if asleep or dead, while he was a bird or a beast, a fish or a snake and travelled in an instant to faraway lands on his own errands or for other people'. Tolley (1996) believes this description is not actually an account from the Old Norse tradition, but is modelled on the description of a Sami shamanic seance in *Historia Norwegie* (2003: 60–62). I do not see that these descriptions are that similar and, as we shall see, (other) Old Norse sources have parallels to almost all the information given in the *Historia Norwegie* séance (Lindow 2003: 106; Heide 2006a, chapter 4.3). I therefore see no clear reason to assume that Snorri drew the details of his description from this source.

Nonetheless, it is clear that Snorri's descriptions cited above do show considerable overlap with the descriptions of the shamans' (noaidis') trance journeys in the Sami tradition; they are precisely about the shaman going into a trance or a trance-like sleep so that his body is left behind, lifeless, while the disembodied soul travels to the realm of the dead or to faraway places to fetch objects or persons or carry out other errands there, in the shape of (or on the back of) an animal (especially birds, fish or a male reindeer, occasionally a snake or a whale)[8]. We find an Old Norse account of this in *Vatnsdœla saga* (1939: 34 ff.), in which two Samis shut themselves up in a house and make a spirit journey to Iceland to fetch an object. In other Old Norse texts – sagas of Icelanders, contemporary sagas and king's sagas – there are many similar examples where people with special abilities can, in sleep, make their soul travel its way to faraway places and carry out tasks there while their bodies are left behind (Strömbäck 1935, Heide 2006a: 146 ff., Tolley 2009 I: 167–99,

[8] Among others Skanke 1945 [1728–1731]: 206–07, Kildal 1945 [1730 and later]: 138–39, Olsen 1910 [after 1715]: 9, Lundius 1905 [1670s]: 6 and Olsen 1910 [after 1715]: 47.

471). While there, they can, among other things, meet other souls (*hugir*, *fylgjur*, *gandar*) and battle with them in animal form, just like the Sami shamans (more about this in Heide 2016). In these accounts, the sleep appears to be a kind of trance, and it may have been used well into the Christian era because it was less problematic for the church; *Lokasenna* 24 suggests that in the pre-Christian Old Norse tradition, people could place themselves in a trance through drumming, as was the case among the Sami (Heide 2006a: 143 ff., with references). In *Hávamál* 138–141 it appears that Óðinn uses fasting and physical pain to enter into a kind of trance that places him in contact with knowledge from other worlds;[9] this is also a point of contact with Sami shamanic methods (Mebius 2003: 174). Furthermore, Hermóðr's journey to Hel is also similar to the Sami shamanic journeys in terms of its purpose. According to Sami beliefs, serious illnesses arose because the deceased in the realm of the dead[10] had captured the soul of the sick person[11] (cf. Forbus 1910 [1727]: 35, Kildal 1945 [1730 and later]: 139, Kildal 1807 [1730s?]: 456), and there are frequent accounts of how the shaman in a trance travels to the realm of the dead to try to bring back the soul of the gravely ill person.[12] That is Hermóðr's task – the difference being in his case that the person to be saved (namely Baldr) is already dead.

Since Strömbäck's ground-breaking study in the interwar period (Strömbäck 1935), it has become a widespread view that when the sources in Old Norse tradition speak about shamanic elements, this is because parts of the Old Norse religion (in the broad sense) had a great deal in common with Sami shamanism, probably owing to influence from it (see for example Dubois 1999). In this way, Snorri's description of Óðinn's abilities in *Ynglinga saga* can be influenced by the Sami tradition without Snorri having taken his description from a specific text (for example *Historia Norwegie*).

Although Snorri certainly says that Óðinn could carry out trance journeys, he does not say that Óðinn travelled to the kingdom of the dead in this

[9] It is conceivable that something similar occurs in the opening passage of *Grímnismál*, but the descriptions are too short to enable us to say anything further about it.

[10] Southern Sami *jaemiehaajmoe*, Lule Sami *jábbmeájmmo*, Northern Sami *jábmiidáibmu*; Rydving 1995: 66.

[11] This seems to be less clear in the Northern Sami tradition, cf. Olsen (1910 [after 1715]: 88).

[12] For example in Skanke (1945 [1728–1731]: 195) and Kildal (1945 [1730 and later]: 140). Several examples in Hultkrantz's discussion of this (Bäckman and Hultkrantz 1978: 44–45, cf. 59–60, note 19).

way. None of the Old Norse texts that may possibly reflect pre-Christian tradition tell of gods or people with special abilities whose disembodied souls travel to the realm of the dead. Even so, the word *leizla* may have been chosen to distinguish the borrowed stories about journeys to the otherworld from indigenous stories. Firstly, we should assume that there used to be more stories about pre-Christian journeys to the otherworld than those recorded in surviving manuscripts. When we compare these to the several tens of metres of shelf-space occupied by the folk-traditions collected in the Nordic region since the Middle Ages, there is reason to believe that the surviving Old Norse texts account for only a small portion of the beliefs and folk poetry that existed. It is, therefore, not especially daring to think that there may have been stories which *combined* more of the elements mentioned above. Secondly, the visions have a great deal in common with stories like the one in *Baldrs draumar* and Hermóðr's journey to Hel, even if the body of the traveller to the realm of the dead remains at home (cf. for example Herrmann 1922: 103). The fact that the name *Gjallarbrú* of the bridge crossing the river separating this world and the otherworld was introduced into the Christian vision *Draumkvedet* indicates that this similarity was noticed by medieval Norwegians (Simek 2006: 138, Moe 1927 [1911]: 201–03, Carlsen 2015: 165–70). Thirdly, it appears that in many cases no important distinction was made between the realm of the dead and other variants of the otherworld. For example, Óðinn gains his secret knowledge just as much from the giants (*Hávamál* 138–41) and other undefined worlds (*Vǫluspá* 28) as from the prophetess in Hel (*Baldrs draumar*).

All in all, the Old Norse texts have many descriptions that have much in common with the borrowed Christian visions. If we view these descriptions as a corpus, it contains all the principal traits that we find in the visions, with the exception of specifically Christian ideas about (how things were in) heaven and hell. It can, therefore, hardly be the case that the translators perceived the visions written in Latin as something entirely new. Rather, they perceived them as a new variant of something that was already familiar to them. The most important narrational element 'lacking' in the indigenous tradition appears to have been the forcible nature of the visionary journey and the guide one was dependent upon as a result of this. The Old Norse tradition is consistent in that the travellers to the otherworld make their journey voluntarily and alone.[13]

[13] One reason for this difference may be that many of the visionaries are simple monks

I know of only one possible exception to this: at one point in Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* the hero, Had(d)ingus, is led by a woman down through the earth, through a landscape and across a bridge over a river to a place that resembles Valhǫll, which is, after all, a realm of the dead (Fisher and Ellis Davidson 1979–1980, book 1, 8, 14, mentioned by Wellendorf 2009: 58). But the source value of this story is unclear. As often with Saxo, the tales are composed of elements that we know from several unrelated myths in Old Norse texts (cf. Ellis Davidson 1943: 81–87, Herrmann 1922, 90, 1023).

In addition, there are a couple of Old Norse cases where a person who is recently deceased or who is on the point of death is fetched by somebody who leads them to the realm of the dead – and where the dead person will remain, contrary to what we have looked at in this article so far. In the prose introduction to the Eddic poem *Frá dauða Sinfjǫtla*, the body of the hero Sinfjǫtli is ferried over a fjord (and out of the tale) by a mysterious ferryman. The journey's destination is probably Valhǫll since that is where heroes went after death, and the skaldic lay *Eiríksmál* from the 900s names Sinfjǫtli as among Óðinn's men in Valhǫll (Finnur Jónsson 1912–1915 BI: 165). In *Egils saga einhenda* (1954: 365) and *Sǫgubrot af fornkonungum* (1982: 53–55), it appears that Óðinn fetches two heroes to his residence (Heide 2011: 67). This accompaniment to the realm of the dead fits in nicely with the possible meaning of *leizla* as 'accompaniment to the grave' before the use of the word in the translation of Christian visions (see above, point II), not least because it appears that the grave could be perceived as a kind of offshoot from the collective realm of the dead 'beyond' – so that, in a way, the dead person exists in both places (Heide 2014: 130). Therefore, the humans' *leizla* or 'guiding' of the dead person to the grave is closely related to the angel's *leizla* or 'guiding' of the visionary from this world to the realm of the dead – and back. One important difference applies, though: that the actual dead person does not usually come back – although in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* this happens for one night (see McKinnell 2005: 218–31).

In any case, it may make sense if the term *leizla* was chosen as a translation of *visio* in order to distinguish the new, imported genre from the indigenous tales of journeys to the next world.

(like Furseus) or laymen who may be more in need of 'guiding' than the gods and ritual specialists of Old Norse tradition.

IV. *Sýn* too closely connected to pre-Christian traditions?

Another factor that may also have played a role is that the word *sýn* had probably been in use from earlier times in relation to something other than the kinds of Christian visions we are looking at here – namely prophetic revelations, particularly in a dream. The Old Norse corpus contains many cases of such *sýnir* in a Christian context, for example in *Mariu saga* (1871: 537), where a monk tells how, in a prophetic vision, he has seen a crown descending from heaven, as a premonition that he would go there (*sá ek í sýn svá sem kóróna stigi niðr af himnum*; numerous examples in the *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog*). However, there is no reason to believe that the idea of such *sýnir* did not exist in Old Norse culture before the arrival of the Christian literature; in any event, it is also found in non-Christian contexts. *Heimskringla*, for example, tells how King Sigurðr Jórsalafari (in the 1120s) had a *sýn* in a dream that warned him of the challenger to the throne, Haraldr Gilli from Ireland: Sigurðr believed he was standing at Jæren in South-Western Norway and looking out to sea, and some kind of mist approached the land, with a tree that represented Haraldr (*Heimskringla* 1941 III: 264–65). In *Qrvar-Odds saga* we hear how a giant has a *sýn* by supernatural means that tells him who has come to an island near his dwelling – it is Oddr and his companions (*Örvar-Odds saga* 1954: 223–24). There are a good many of these *sýnir* providing supernatural knowledge, particularly about the future, in what is considered the pre-Christian tradition in Old Norse literature; but in those cases – by chance? – different words or expressions are used for 'vision' or 'seeing'. In *Fóstbrœðra saga*, for example, the term *bera fyrir*, 'come before ones eyes', is used about such a dream vision (*Fóstbrœðra saga* 1943: 243, cf. Heide 2006a: 24, 130).

Nevertheless there is no reason to believe that the pre-Christian use of *sýn prevented* the use of *sýn* for the Christian vision genre. The widespread use of *sýn* in Christian contexts shows that this word can hardly have had strong associations with pre-Christian magic and ocular delusions. Therefore, we should expect that s*ýn* could well have been chosen as the normal translation for *visio*, although possibly it would have given connotations related to prophetic visions rather than journeys to the afterlife.

V. Comparison with other areas in Europe

The explanation I am presenting does not presuppose that indigenous tales similar to visions but without guiding were *only* found in the Old Norse region. It presupposes the following:

i. That there were indigenous tales similar to visions but without guiding in the Old Norse region.
ii. That such tales were more important in the Old Norse area when the Latin visions were translated than at the equivalent time in other places in Europe, implying that the need for a term such as *leizla* was greater in the Old Norse than in other areas (where equivalent terms were not created).

I have argued point i. above. Point ii. may initially appear dubious, since there are reasons to believe that shamanic elements have occurred in many places throughout Europe (see for example Siikala 1986, on the Baltic-Finnish region). However, we should remember that it is just as much a question of time as of place. There would be no need for a term such as *leizla* in any particular place unless many time-dependent conditions applied:

a. Christendom with its literature must have arrived.
b. Written literature in the vernacular must have been well established.
c. Type I visions must have been translated into the vernacular
d. … in sufficient numbers to constitute a literary genre in the vernacular.
e. The type I visions must not have gone out of vogue.
f. The time since the conversion must not have been so long that literary traditions with roots in pre-Christian religion were forgotten or had faded dramatically.
g. The literary elite must have perceived literary traditions with roots in pre-Christian religion as relevant and legitimate at the time when the translations occurred – otherwise there would have been no need for terms that distinguished them from Christian genres.

Point ii. above can thus be amplified as follows: that such tales were more important in the Old Norse area when type I visions were translated to the vernacular than they were in other places in Europe *at the time* when people *possibly* translated such visions. In the Old Norse region, all the

conditions from a. to g.[14] were in place when people began to translate the type I visions – which probably happened before 1200 (Wellendorf 2009: 157, 199).

This appears to have been less the case in other regions. In the Baltics, Christianity came so late (reaching Lithuania at the end of 1300s, Rowell 1994) that the type I visions were no longer so popular. Furthermore, people did not begin to write in the vernacular to any significant extent until (long) after the type I visions had become less popular; the same was true in Finland and most of Eastern Europe: in the case of the Finno-Ugric and Baltic languages this did not happen until the 1500s, in Polish and Hungarian, the 1400s and in Czech not until the end of the 1300s (Laanest 1982, Fraenkel 1950, Sussex 2006, Balázs 2000). There are a handful of texts written in Czech from the 13th century (the Christianisation of Bohemia was probably completed in the early 900s; Sommer et al. 2007), but we do not know of a vision translated into Czech (condition c. and d.) until much later,[15] and the same seems to be the case with the other mentioned areas.

In Sweden and Denmark, people began writing in the vernacular earlier, but there, too, the scope of written literature in the vernacular was very limited until well into the 1300s.[16] We know of some visions from Sweden and Denmark that were translated into the vernacular, including Birgitta of Vadstena's *Revelationes coelestes*, 'Celestial Revelations' (re-translated from Latin). These translations are late – from the end of the 1300s and from the 1400s – and, with one exception (as far as I can see, based on the typology of Dinzelbacher, Wellendorf, and others; see above) all are of type II, which was the most popular variant at that time (Pipping 1943: 110, Dahlerup 1998a: 339 ff., 360 ff.). The exception is the early Christian, originally culturally Greek, and later greatly extended *Visio Pauli* (ibid), known in Old Norse as *Páls leizla* (see Wellendorf 2009: 122 ff., Jiroušková 2006, Carlsen 2015: 23 ff.). This was translated into Danish (Dahlerup 1998a: 363) – but late, as we have just seen.

In Germany, France and the British Isles, written literature in the vernacular came much earlier. In France, this happened in earnest from the end of the 11th century (Zink 1995; on vision literature, see Carozzi 1994,

[14] f. and g. also in Norway, as can be seen from among other things Eddic verses on rune sticks from Bryggen in Bergen, Meulengracht Sørensen 1991: 219–20.

[15] Personal communication Lenka Jiroušková, May 2015.

[16] Brix 1943, Kasperson et al. 1990, Dahlerup 1998a and 1998b, Schück and Warburg 1926, Pipping 1943, Hägg 1996.

Owen 1981). But there, people would hardly have reflected on the possibility of using terminology other than that drawn from Latin, since French evolved from Latin and therefore acquired most of its vocabulary from it. The terminology in French and the other romance languages (Dinzelbacher 1981: 46) is accordingly of little interest to my discussion.

From Germany, we know of written literature in the vernacular from as early as the Viking Age, but the scope was fairly small before the second half of the 12th century (Erb 1964, Bräuer 1990). Within vision literature, *Visio Pauli* was translated in the first half of the 1100s (Erb 1964: 556). *Visio Tnugdali*, 'The Vision of Tundale', based on an event in 1148 and written in Latin by an Irish monk in Regensburg, Bavaria, in around 1149 (Edel 2001: 77), was translated into Frankish (South-western German) in the second half of the 12th century (Palmer 1982: 33, 363).

In England, written literature in the vernacular became well established early on; we know of some vernacular literature written (down) in Viking times (for example Treharne and Pulsiano 2001: 4–5), transmitted for the most part in manuscripts from the second half of the 10th century and later. The Venerable Bede included two visions in his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, which was probably completed in 731 and translated into Old English between 875 and 930 (Lemke 2015: 89, cf. Rowley 2011). These two visions are the one included in *Vita Prima Fursei* (about the Irish missionary Furseus / Fursa, d. 449/450), which Bede summarised, and *Visio Dryhthelmi*, which Bede wrote (and which is supposed to have been experienced by the English monk Dryhthelm in the year 690). *Visio Pauli* was translated into Old English at some point before the 11th century, probably in the 900s (Morey 2013: 455, cf. Healey 1978: 15–20; Wright 1993: 108, Palmer 1999: 419). From the second half of the 12th century, more visions were translated in England (into both English and Norman French; Easting 1997: 16 ff.).

The Celtic region in Wales–West England had written literature in the vernacular early on, but no Christian visions are known from that corpus (Jarman and Hughes 1976) until the 14th century or later (*Breuddwyd Pawl / Visio Pauli*, *Purdan Padrig / Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*; Mittendorf 2006a, 2006b).

In Ireland, written literature in the vernacular was well established at least as early as in England. The country had its own alphabet (*og*[*h*]*am*) before the arrival of the Latin alphabet, with a similar area of utilisation to runes – i.e. for short texts (Ó Cathasaigh 2006: 9–10, McManus 1991). Moreover, Christianity and its written culture came early: the Pope sent

the first bishop to Ireland in 431 (Edel 2001: 96, 112–20, Ó Cathasaigh 2006: 9). It appears that the Latin alphabet was adopted for writing Irish around 600 at latest (ibid: 10, cf. 140–41, Edel 2001: 113). However, no manuscripts containing long texts in Irish date back further than the 1100s, so it is difficult to determine what comes from older periods and how much the texts have changed to become the versions that we know (Ó Cathasaigh 2006: 24, Mhaonaigh 2006: 33 ff.). There are, nevertheless, some surviving secular texts that we are fairly certain date from the 700s and perhaps the 600s (Ó Cathasaigh 2006: 13, 24, Ní Bhrolcháin 2009: 21). From the 700–800s onwards, it appears to have become more common to write both secular and religious texts in Irish than in Latin (Ní Bhrolcháin 2009: 141, Mhaonaigh 2006: 40). The texts that probably date from the 700s include an *echtrae*, 'otherworld journey' (*Echtraei Chonnlai*, 'The Expedition of Connlae', ibid: 26). Visions are both translated from Latin – among others, *Visio Pauli* – and newly written in Irish: *Vision of Laisrén*, *Vision of Lóchan* in *Immram Curaig Ua Corra* ('the Voyage of the Ui Chorra / Hui Corra'), and the best known, *Fís Adomnáin* ('Vision of Adomnán', Volmering 2014: 20). *Vision of Laisrén* is thought to be from around 900 and *Fís Adomnáin* to be well over a century younger (Edel 2001: 71, 68/72, Mhaonaigh 2006: 40). The translation of *Visio Pauli* is probably from the same period, but may be older. Visionary literature from the Irish milieu (in both Latin and Irish) had an important influence on common European visionary literature (Edel 2001: 64–79).

This examination shows that we must take a closer look in particular at England and Ireland. As can be seen, we know that visions were translated into the vernacular in England between 875 and 930 (*Vita prima Fursei* and *Visio Dryhthelmi*, perhaps also *Visio Pauli*), i.e., just 200–250 years after the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons (which principally occurred between 597 and the last three decades of the 600s; Edel 2001: 121 ff., Chaney 1960). This is not so much later after the conversion than when people began to translate visions into Old Norse. So shouldn't a term like *leizla* as explained in this article, have been just as likely to occur there, when most of the other conditions, a.–g., also applied? Both Christian literature and literature in the vernacular were well established, only the type I visions were common, and more than one vision had been translated. But this did not lead to any Old English generic term equivalent to *leizla*. In any event, there is a time difference; in the Old Norse region, the translation of the visions probably began less than 200 years after the conversion, and we can assume that traditions with roots in pre-Christian religion

faded more rapidly in England than in the Old Norse region (condition f.), because in England, a Christian population was already there when the Anglo-Saxons arrived only 100–200 years before they converted. As far as we know, there was also a vast difference in the elite's attitude to the indigenous literary tradition with roots in pre-Christian religion (condition g.). During the Old Norse renaissance at the end of the 1100s and into the 1200s – i.e., when the first comprehensive translation of the visions into Old Norse took place – Iceland experienced an interest in and acceptance of indigenous, pre-Christian heritage that was unparalleled in the Christian Middle Ages (with the possible exception of Ireland, which we will shortly examine more closely). The Englishmen apparently also saw reason to record pre-Christian heroic literature (such as *Widsith* and *Beowulf*; see for example Robinson 2001) before it was forgotten, but they have not left us a single truly mythological text – in other words, nothing along the lines of *Baldrs draumar*, Hermóðr's journey to Hel or *Skírnismál*, which we looked at above. It is impossible to know whether this was because this type of pagan literature was rapidly forgotten or was simply taboo until it was forgotten. In any case, the implication is that there was hardly any need for a defining term that would distinguish the Christian vision genre from pre-Christian tales.

It seems that much the same can be said about Germany – where, in addition, no translation of visions into the vernacular is known before the 12th century, when the people in the area (the Franks) had been Christians for 600–700 years. There is nothing to indicate that literary traditions rooted in pre-Christian religion were of importance to them at that time. In Denmark, too, such literary traditions must have been of little relevance when *Visio Pauli* – i.e. a type I vision – was translated into the vernacular. This probably did not happen until the 15th century (Dahlerup 1998a: 363), and when the Dane Saxo Grammaticus around 1200 wrote a Danish legendary history using substantial elements from Old Norse mythology, it is thought that his sources were largely Icelandic (see for example Herrmann 1922: 5 ff., Turville-Petre 1964: 30–31).

In Ireland, too, a long time passed – 350 to 400 years or more – between the conversion in the 400–500s and the time when the oldest visions we know of appeared in Irish. Nevertheless, it seems that people had a quite different attitude to the pre-Christian literary heritage there than in England: 'A distinguishing feature of Irish culture in the seventh and eighth centuries was the confidence and apparent ease with which external elements were combined with the inherited ones. This is true

of scholarship, literature and art.' (Ó Cathasaigh 2006: 26, cf. 17, 20–21 and Williams and Ford 1992: 3, Ní Bhrolcháin 2009: 14). The indigenous culture 'engaged in an intensive dialogue with the culture of the new faith, a dialogue which led eventually, through reciprocal influence, to integration' (Edel 2001: 34, cf. 31, 112). In Ireland, therefore, the literary traditions with roots in pre-Christian religions were not rejected as inappropriate, but were blended with the borrowed material into something new, in which it is difficult to separate one from the other. This is most apparent in the *echtrae* and *immram* genres, both of which deal with expeditions to the otherworld (in many variants) – *immrama* as journeys by sea to mysterious islands (see for example Edel 2001: 64 ff., Dumville 1976, Moylan 2007). Many *echtrai* and *immrama* have much in common with both the visions and the kinds of journeys to the otherworld in the indigenous Old Norse tradition that we looked at above.

Thus, one may argue that all the above conditions, a.–g., were in place with the Irish, and, accordingly, that they just as much as the Norse should be expected to have formed a genre term equivalent to *leizla*. However, the Old Norse term *leizla* appears to underscore the *difference* between the borrowed genre and similar, indigenous tales about journeys to the realm of the dead and other variants of the otherworld. This would hardly be consistent with the Irish project of fusion. Neither is it certain that in pre-Christian Irish tradition people tended to travel alone to the otherworld. Typically in *echtrai*, the hero is 'enticed by a beautiful woman or wonderful warrior' who then leads him to a lovely fairyland (MacKillop 1998: 148). Although this could be influence from the visions, this trait is also found in the oldest *echtrai* known to us (Mhaonaigh 2006: 26).

I conclude that there appears to have been less need outside the Old Norse region for a generic term that would distinguish the type I visions from the indigenous, inherited tales about journeys to the otherworld. It therefore makes good sense that it is precisely in the Old Norse cultural sphere that we find the type I visions referred to with a word that draws attention to guiding as a characteristic feature of the genre.

VI. Afterthoughts

If there is something to what I suggest in this article, it may have some relevance to our understanding of Old Norse literature in general and the

relationship between indigenous and imported literature, maybe even the cultural characteristics of the different regions in Medieval Europe.

As we know, Old Norse literature consists of two main components: the indigenous tradition inherited from the time before written literature became widespread, and imported literature translated from Latin, French, German and occasionally Old English in the High Middle Ages. (In addition, the criss-crossing of cultural contact means that fairy-tales and folk poetry have, to some extent, travelled in oral form throughout the ages, so that the indigenous tradition is not, after all, purely indigenous.) In the Old Norse literature known to us, these components are mixed, reworked and incorporated into one another to varying degrees. In some genres, there are few elements from the imported written literature (see for example Lassen 2011's review of Óðinn in the Eddic poems, page 308 ff.), in others, there are a great many. In the Christian vision literature, the entire genre is imported, but even so, we cannot bypass the indigenous background if we are to understand it. As Wellendorf points out (2009: 28 ff., 43 ff.), there is an interplay between the choice of words in the translations and the indigenous tradition, and, as we have seen, the genre term *leizla* itself may have been chosen as a contrast to that tradition. Accordingly, the vision literature can – somewhat paradoxically – remind us how important the indigenous component always is in Old Norse literature.

At the same time, the Old Norse vision literature can remind us of the opposite: namely that we should not be too quick to assume that this or that motif originated in the indigenous tradition. Because the Christian vision literature has so much in common with the indigenous tales of journeys to the otherworld, one might easily think that this Old Norse genre was the one that showed the greatest blend of indigenous and foreign components – with the journey to the otherworld itself coming from the indigenous tradition and the descriptions of heaven and hell from the Latin literature (cf. Ginzburg's theories [1991 among others] that the witches' Sabbath and other shamanistic concepts known from the Middle Ages and later are, to a great extent, a substratum from pre-Christian times across large areas of Europe). Or at least, that is what one might think if the vision literature in Latin had not been so well preserved. However, since it is, we can state that, on the contrary, the vision literature is a purely translated and imported genre. Accordingly, this example can illustrate how important it is to compare Old Norse literature with common European literature in Latin (and, to some extent, other languages).

As we have seen, there are often some very substantial differences between the countries when it comes to the reception of the vision literature, but relatively little research has been done into these differences and their causes. Perhaps more comparative studies can help us to see more clearly what distinguishes cultures in different countries, in different eras.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Else Mundal, Jonas Wellendorf, Eileen Gardiner, Lenka Jiroušková, and the participants at the University of Bergen's Medieval Philology Research Group seminar in May 2015 and the Old Norse Mythology Conference at the University of Stockholm in November 2015 for comments to drafts of this article. Thanks to Stephen Durnford for help with the English.

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Summary

This article attempts to explain why the Latin genre designation *visio*, which literally means 'sight, something seen, vision', is translated into Old Norse predominantly as *leizla*, which literally means 'leading, guiding' (*leið-sla*). At the time, *visio*, when used as a generic term, most often referred to Christian morally instructive narratives about people who journey to Heaven, Purgatory and Hell and about what they see and experience there. Such journeys are undertaken involuntarily by the soul (*anima*, *spiritus*) of the person who is experiencing the vision while the body remains behind, lying still and usually lifeless because the person is close to death, dreaming or in some sort of trance. The author suggests that the term *leizla* was chosen in order to provide a contrast to the pre-existing Norse tradition of similar journeys. This included narratives similar to such visions, namely narratives about journeys to the realm of the dead and back again and about journeys undertaken during a trance with only the soul going abroad while the body remains behind. Yet while the Christian *visio* narratives at the time of the earliest Old Norse translations usually feature a guide, often an angel or a saint, leading the visionary through the otherworld, there is no guide featured in the indigenous Norse narratives; in these, people always travel alone. This difference may be exactly what is indicated by the term *leið-sla*. The author evaluates this theory in relation to the translation of vision narratives from Latin into other Northern, Eastern and Western European languages during the Middle Ages and concludes that, within the (West) Norse area, visionary narratives of this kind were translated during a period of time when the need for a precise designation – *leizla*, 'guiding' – was greater there than in other geographical-linguistic areas.

Keywords: European vision literature, Old Norse vision literature, vernacular literature, leizla, Old Norse literature, Old Norse translated literature, Old Norse literary genres, Old Norse mythology, Eddic poetry, Heaven and Hell, Sami religion

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