meadows, its vineyards and orchards—a miracle of nature and art.

And the monasteries were not only great agricultural centres, they were also centres of trade; and, thanks to the immunities that they enjoyed, they were able to establish markets, to coin money and even to develop a system of credit. They fulfilled in a primitive fashion the function of banks and insurance societies. Landowners could purchase pensions or become permanent residents at a monastery as oblates.21

Thus the Carolingian culture far outlived the Empire itself, and continued to survive in monastic centres such as St. Gall, the home of the four Ekkehards and the two Notkers, while Western Europe was plunging into the deepest anarchy and distress that it has perhaps ever known. It was owing to the work of the monasteries that the Carolingian culture was able to survive the fall of the Carolingian Empire. All through the darkness and distress of the hundred years of anarchy from 850 to 950 the great monasteries of Central Europe, such as St. Gall and Reichenau and Convey, kept the flame of civilisation alight, so that there was no interruption in the transmission of the culture from the Carolingian period to that of the new Saxon Empire.22
THE AGE OF THE VIKINGS
AND THE CONVERSION OF THE NORTH

We have seen how Western Europe first achieved cultural unity in the Carolingian period. The rise of the Carolingian Empire marks the end of the dualism of culture that had characterized the age of the invasions and the full acceptance by the Western barbarians of the ideal of unity for which the Roman Empire and the Catholic Church alike stood. And thus in the new culture all the elements that constitute European civilisation were already represented—the political tradition of the Roman Empire, the religious tradition of the Catholic Church, the intellectual tradition of classical learning and the national traditions of the barbarian peoples.

Nevertheless, it was a premature synthesis, since the forces of barbarism both within and without the Empire were still far too strong to be completely assimilated. Within the limits of the Carolingian world itself, there was an almost immeasurable gap between the artificial humanism of men like Servatus Lupus and Walafrid Strabo and the mentality of the warrior noble or the peasant serf: while in the outer lands there yet remained new peoples who were still unaffected by the influence of Christianity and Roman-Christian civilisation. Hence the age of Carolingian unity was followed by a violent reaction, in which a new wave of barbarian invasion threatened to destroy all the work of Charles the Great and his predecessors, and to reduce Europe to a state of anarchy and confusion even more complete than that which followed the fall of the Roman Empire four centuries earlier.
The chief source of this external danger was to be found in Scandinavia, which from remote prehistoric times had been the centre of an active and independent movement of culture. This Nordic culture-centre had always tended to be a world apart, and since the age of the migration of peoples in the fourth and fifth centuries its isolation from the rest of Europe had been accentuated. The causes of this isolation are somewhat obscure, though no doubt the cessation of the active trading relations that had existed under the Roman Empire was one of the main factors. And it is still more difficult to explain the sudden change that caused the violent explosion of aggressive energy which characterised the period of the Viking invasions. After remaining quiescent for centuries in the narrow confines of the lands around the Baltic, the peoples of the North suddenly poured forth in a wave of conquering expansion that carried them far beyond the limits of the European world. In the course of the ninth and tenth centuries their activity extended from North America to the Caspian, and from the Arctic to the Mediterranean. They had attacked Constantinople and Pisa and North Persia and Moslem Spain, while their settlements and conquests embraced Greenland and Iceland and Russia, as well as Normandy and a great part of England, Ireland and Scotland.

The grounds of this remarkable achievement must be sought primarily in the peculiar conditions of Nordic society and culture. It was an old and in some respects highly developed culture which yet possessed few opportunities for peaceful expansion. During its centuries of isolation it had carried the art and ethics of war to a unique pitch of development. War was not only the source of power and wealth and social prestige, it was also the dominant preoccupation of literature and religion and art. The centre of the social organism was the war leader or "king," whose power rested not so much on a territorial basis as on his personal prowess and his power of attracting a following of warriors. There was no fixed law of primogeniture, and it was the ambition of every man of royal or chiefly blood to gather a hird of retainers, and to win renown for himself, after the fashion of Beowulf, by war and adventure and by boundless liberality to his followers.

"Beowulf, son of Scyld, was renowned in Scandinavian lands—his fame spread far and wide. So shall a young man
bring good to pass with splendid gifts in his father's possession, so that when war comes willing comrades shall stand by him, again in his old age, the people follow him. In every tribe a man shall prosper by deeds of love." 1

It is true, as Professor Ofrink insists, 2 that there was another element in Northern society, the constructive labour of the peasant and wealthy landowner "who tilled the soil and worshipped God." And this element finds its spiritual counterpart in the worship of the old deities of the earth and the powers of fertility, the Vanir—Frey, Freya, and Njord—who were regarded as a different race to that of Odin, the god of kings, and the warlike Aesir. 3 It is perhaps due to its connection with the ancient sanctuary of this cult at Upsala that the Swedish monarchy was able to establish its power so early and so firmly in the fertile lands of East Sweden. Elsewhere, however, and especially in Norway, the little tribal kingdoms seem to have been engaged in continual warfare in which only the fittest survived, and their very existence depended, as we see in Beowulf, on the personal powers and reputation of their warrior kings.

We have no direct historical evidence as to what was happening in Scandinavia in the age between the barbarian invasions and the Viking movement. It was certainly an age of intense political and military activity in which the stronger kingdoms were gradually consolidating their power at the expense of their neighbours. Thus the kingdom of the Geats was destroyed by that of the Swedes, while the Jutes and the Heathobards were conquered by the Danes, who had already created a powerful kingdom in the eighth century under the leadership of King Harold Wartooth. In Norway, owing to the character of the country, the lesser tribal unities preserved their independence to a much later period, but the evidence of archaeology shows that the same tendencies were at work in the little tribal kingdoms of Eastern Norway—Romariks, Hedemark, Ringerike and Vestfold, where the great howes or burial mounds of the prehistoric kings at Raknehaug in Romarik, at Svei in Hedemark, and at Borre in Vestfold, which are among the most imposing monuments of the kind in Europe, bear witness to the increasing strength and prestige of the royal power.

No doubt this development had some influence on the movement of migration and colonisation that marked the Viking period, and there is no reason to question the substantial
truth of the Icelandic traditions that are recorded in such
detail by Ari the Wise in his remarkable work on the settle-
ment of Iceland. But Western Norway, above all the king-
doms or aristocratic federations of Rogaland and Hordaland,
had been centres of Viking activity for a century before King
Harold Fairhair broke the power of the Western hestr or
tribal chieftains at the battle of Hafrsfjord. This region had
long possessed a cultural tradition of its own, which was
distinguished in the fifth and sixth centuries by its aristo-
cratic character and by the striking resemblance that it shows
to the culture of Anglo-Saxon England, particularly that of
the Midlands. According to Professor Shetelig these peculiar-
ities are due to the fact that Western Norway had been af-
cected by the same wave of Germanic invasion that had
brought the Anglo-Saxons to Britain and the Franks and the
Burgundians to Gaul. These invaders from the South had
conquered the native population and formed a ruling class
which preserved its own burial rites and maintained relations
with the other Germanic peoples of the West, especially those
of Anglo-Saxon England. Thus Western Norway had been in
contact with the British Isles for centuries before the age of
the Vikings; indeed it is from these maritime relations that
the country originally derived its name of Norweg—"the
North Way." Possibly the improvements in the means of
navigation that took place in the seventh and eighth cen-
turies opened the way to piratical expeditions on a larger
scale. But whatever may have been the cause, the coasts of
the British Isles were visited almost yearly from the close of
the eighth century by the fleets of the Norwegian Vikings. The
great monasteries of the islands and the coasts which were
the centres of Christian civilisation in the North offered an
easy and rich prey to the invaders. Lindisfarne was sacked
in 793, Jarrow in 794, and Iona in 802 and 806.

But it was on Ireland that the Western Vikings concen-
trated their attacks. During the first half of the ninth cen-
tury the whole island was invaded, so that in the words of
the Irish chronicler "there was not a point in the land without
a fleet." Here, too, it was the churches and monasteries that
offered the easiest points of attack, and the great age of Irish
monastic culture ended in wholesale slaughter and ruin. The
great Norwegian leader Turges, who began to establish a
regular Viking state in Ireland between 832 and 845, seems
to have deliberately attempted to destroy Irish Christianity.
He drove out the *comarba* of St. Patrick from Armagh and made it the centre of his kingdom, while at Clonmacnoise, the great ecclesiastical centre on the Shannon, he desecrated the church of St. Ciaran and enthroned his wife, a heathen *völva* or prophetess, upon the altar. His death did little to check the development of Viking power, for in 851 Olaf the White, the son of a Norwegian king, came to Ireland and established the kingdom of Dublin, which was to continue, under the rule of Ivar, "king of all the Norsemens of Ireland and Britain," and his successors, until the twelfth century.

Thus Ireland, which had been the starting-point of the revival of Christian culture in Western Europe in pre-Carolingian times, was also the first to succumb to the new barbarian invasion, and its fate was soon shared by the Anglian Christian culture that it had done so much to create. In 835 a new series of attacks on Northern and Eastern England had been begun by the Danes, and in 867 the kingdom of Northumbria was finally destroyed. For a time it seemed as though all England would become a Viking colony. But though the independence of Wessex and Southern England was preserved by the efforts of King Alfred, the whole of Northern and Eastern England north of the Thames and Watling Street was settled by the Vikings and became known as "the Danelaw." Nor was the Scandinavian settlement limited to this area, for all the western coasts belonged to the Irish-Viking sphere of influence, and considerable territories in north-western England, such as Cumberland and the Lake District, were occupied by Norwegian colonists.

Thus, by the close of the ninth century a Norwegian maritime Empire had been formed which extended from Iceland and the Faroes to the Irish Channel and embraced all the lesser islands of the Western seas as well as a considerable part of Ireland and Northern Scotland and England.

Meanwhile, on the continent of Europe the Viking movement had followed a somewhat different course. Here it was the Danes rather than the Norwegians who took the leading part, and they had to deal not with the scattered forces of Celtic tribal society, but with the formidable power of the Carolingian Empire.

Ever since the early Merovingian period the Frankish power had been a cause of fear and distrust to the Danes, as we see from the passage in *Beowulf* in which Wiglaf relates how "the goodwill of the Merovingian king has been denied to
us,” since the time when Hygelac the Dane invaded Frankish territory in 520. And the tension had been increased by the Carolingian conquest of the Frisians and the Saxons, which brought the Empire into direct contact with Denmark and seemed to threaten the existence of the free pagan peoples of the North. In 808 war broke out between the two peoples. Guthred sent a fleet to ravage Frisia and threatened to attack Aachen itself. But the assassination of the Danish king in 810 put an end to the conflict, and for the next twenty years the Empire only had to deal with isolated raids of Viking bands, probably from Norway and Ireland. Charles’ successor, Lewis the Pious, attempted to carry out the conversion of Scandinavia by peaceful means. He cultivated friendly relations with Harold, the son of Guthred, and finally induced him to receive baptism at Mainz in 826, together with his son and four hundred of his followers. These relations prepared the way for the missions of Ebbo and St. Anscear to Denmark and Sweden and for the establishment of Hamburg as a metropolitan see for the northern lands. But although St. Anscear was well received by the Swedish king and succeeded in founding a church at Birka in the very heart of Scandinavia, as well as several churches in Denmark, it was centuries before his work was destined to bear fruit. The dethronement of Lewis in 833 marks the beginning of a period of dynastic rivalries and civil wars which left the Empire defenceless against its Northern neighbours. The Danes established themselves in Frisia and Holland and destroyed the great port of Dunrystede near Utrecht that had been for generations the centre of commercial relations with the North.

After 840 the Emperor Lothair encouraged the attacks of the Danes on his brother’s territories. From this time the Viking invasions take on a new character. Viking expeditions were organised on a large scale with fleets numbering hundreds of vessels, and the western provinces of the Empire, together with England, were systematically ravaged year by year. For nearly fifty years the invasions went on increasing in intensity until all the abbeys and towns of the West from Hamburg to Bordeaux had been put to the sack and great tracts of country, especially in the Netherlands and in northwestern France, were converted into desert. Even the saints themselves were forced to leave their sanctuaries, and some of the most famous relics of the West, such as the body of St. Martin or that of St. Cuthbert, travelled for years from one
place of refuge to another as the tide of invasion advanced.

The efforts of the Carolingian sovereigns, above all Charles the Bald, whose dominions bore the brunt of the storm from 843 to 877, were powerless to stave off the attacks of the enemy or to prevent the dissolution of society.

The last twenty years of the century, however, saw a gradual recovery of the forces of Christendom. The hard-won victories of King Alfred in England in 878 and 885, the defence of Paris by Odo the son of Robert the Strong in 885-887, and the victory of King Arnulf in Flanders in 901 mark the turn of the tide. It was impossible to expel the invaders altogether either from England or France, but the successors of King Alfred were strong enough to establish their authority over the Danes, while the treaty of Charles the Simple with Rollo placed the Viking occupation of Normandy on a regular feudal basis and prepared the way for the assimilation of the Norman settlers.

Nevertheless, there was still no hope of peace for Christendom, for the Vikings were not the only enemies with which it had to contend. While the Vikings were laying waste the Western provinces, Italy and the Mediterranean coasts were a prey to the Saracens. In 827 the forces of the Aghlabite emirs who ruled in Tunisia had gained a footing in Sicily and gradually overrun the whole island. Thence they went on to attack Southern Italy, and established themselves at Bari and on the River Catiglano, which they made the centres of their destructive activities for half a century. The Papal Patrimony was overrun by Moslem bands, and in 846 Rome itself was attacked, St. Peter's was sacked, and the tombs of the Apostles were violated, to the horror of the Christian world.

Meanwhile the northern coasts of the Mediterranean were exposed to the raids of Moslem pirates from Spain and the Balearic Islands, who finally established a base on the mainland at Fraxinetum, near St. Tropez. For nearly a century, from 888 to 975, this pirate stronghold was the scourge of the surrounding lands. Even the Alps were not secure, for the Saracens lay in wait at the Swiss passes and plundered the bands of pilgrims and merchants as they went down into Italy.

Finally, at the very moment when the pressure from the North had begun to decrease, Europe was threatened by a new menace from the East, the Magyars, a nomad people of
mixed Finnish and Turkish origin, like the Bulgars, who had followed the track of so many former invaders from the steppes of Central Asia and South Russia to the Hungarian plain. They destroyed the new Christian kingdom of the Slavs of Moravia, and began to raid far and wide, like the Huns and the Avars before them. They ravaged the eastern part of the Carolingian realm as mercilessly as the Vikings had done in the West, and gradually extended the range of their raids until they met the rival bands of the Saracens in Italy and Provence.

Thus in the first half of the tenth century Western civilisation was reduced to the verge of dissolution. Never had it been so hard pressed even in the worst days of the eighth century, for then the attack came from the side of Islam only, while now it was from every direction. Christendom had become an island surrounded by the rising floods of barbarism and Islam. Moreover, during the earlier barbarian invasions Christendom could rely on its cultural superiority, which gave it prestige even in the eyes of its enemies. But now even this advantage was lost: for the centre of the highest culture in the West during the tenth century was to be found in Moslem Spain, and Islam was no less superior to Western Christendom in its economic and political development than in intellectual matters. In so far as commercial activity still existed in Europe, it was owing to Moslem trade, which not only embraced the whole of the Mediterranean, but extended from Central Asia to the Baltic by way of the Caspian, the Volga and the Swedish-Russian trading settlements such as Novgorod and Kiev. This intercourse explains the existence of the hoards of oriental coins, struck in the mints of Tashkent and Samarkand and Baghdad, that are so common in Scandinavia during this period, and traces of it are to be found even in England in the Goldsborough hoard and the treasure chest of the Viking army of Northumbria of 911, that was found seventy years ago near Preston, containing not only coins, but numerous ornaments of oriental design. An even more curious proof of the range of oriental influence in this age is the gilt bronze cross, now in the British Museum, which was found in an Irish bog and bears the inscription Bismillah—"in the name of Allah"—in Kufic characters.

The fate of Christendom depended not so much on its power of military resistance as on its capacity to assimilate the pagan society of the North. If the Russian Varangians had
accepted the religion of their Moslem neighbours rather than that of the Christians, the history of Europe might have been very different. Fortunately for Christendom, the shattered culture of Western Europe preserved its spiritual vitality and possessed a greater power of attraction for the Northern peoples than either paganism or Islam. By the close of the tenth century Christianity had already gained a firm foothold in the North, and even such a typical representative of the Viking spirit as Olaf Tryggvason had not only become a convert himself, but set himself to spread the faith in characteristically Viking fashion.

Even the recrudescence of Viking activity and the renewed attacks on England and Ireland at this period did nothing to check this movement. In Ireland the battle of Clontarf in 1014 finally put an end to the danger of Viking conquest, while in England the success of the Danes only hastened the process of assimilation. For Canute made England the centre of his Empire and governed according to the traditions of his Saxon predecessors, whom he rivalled in his devotion to the Church and in the favour that he showed to the monasteries. His pilgrimage to Rome in 1026-1027, where he assisted at the coronation of the Emperor Conrad, is one of the most significant events of this period, for it marks the incorporation of the Northern peoples into the society of Christendom and their acceptance of the principle of spiritual unity. This finds expression in the code of laws which Canute promulgated in England in the later years of his reign, for it shows more completely than any document of the age how complete was the fusion between the secular and the religious aspects of the State and how the public law of Christendom had become the very framework of the new post-barbaric society that was arising in mediaeval Europe.

Thus the Viking invasions proved in the end an advantage to Europe, since they brought new life and energy to the somewhat anaemic and artificial civilisation of the Carolingian world. The descendants of the Vikings became the champions of Christendom, as we see above all in the case of the Normans, who were the leaders and organisers of the new movement of Western expansion that begins in the eleventh century. This gain was not, however, without cost, for it involved the disappearance of the independent tradition of Nordic culture. Alike in Normandy, in England, and in Russia, the Scandinavian settlers absorbed the culture of their environ-
ment and gradually became completely merged in the society that they had conquered. Even Scandinavia itself rapidly lost its cultural independence and became in time an outlying province of Germanic Christendom.

Only in the far West, in the Norwegian colonial territory that stretched from Greenland and Iceland to the Irish Sea, did the old traditions of the Viking Age survive and become the source of a brilliant and original culture which was entirely unlike anything that was to be found in continental Europe. Even here, however, the Nordic element did not stand alone, but came into relations with another culture which, like itself, had hitherto stood apart from the main stream of Western development—the culture of Celtic Ireland. Throughout this area the Viking colonists formed the ruling class, but the mass of the population remained Celtic, and there was considerable intercourse and intermarriage between the two peoples. In this way there arose in the ninth century a mixed Celtic-Nordic culture which reacted upon the parent cultures both in Ireland and in Scandinavia. Its influence is seen most plainly in the new style of the Jellinge period in the tenth century, which produced a remarkable development of Scandinavian decorative art. Here there is no question of the source and extent of foreign influence. But it is otherwise in regard to the problem of Celtic influence in Scandinavian literature, which has always been a matter of controversy. And it is a curious thing that it has been the Scandinavian scholars who have been the chief advocates of the theory of Celtic influence, while the English writers on the subject have made it almost a point of national honour to vindicate the purely Nordic character of Scandinavian literature.

Thus Vigfusson ascribed all the greatest poetry of the Edda to a school of writers who belonged to the mixed Celtic-Nordic culture of the western islands, and likewise regarded many of the characteristics of Icelandic literature, above all the very creation of the prose saga, as due to Celtic influence and to the existence of a Celtic element in the population. Vigfusson's theory of the "Western" origin of the Eddic poems is now generally abandoned save in the case of the Rigsthula, which undoubtedly shows strong Irish influence. On the other hand, his view regarding the Celtic influence on Icelandic culture is still widely held, and rests on very strong arguments. Many of the settlers in Iceland came from the
southern islands, bringing with them Irish wives or slaves, while some of them bore Celtic names and a few, such as the famous Aud the Wealthy, widow of Olaf the White, the King of Dublin, or Helge, the grandson of Caerbhall, King of Os- sory, were actually Christians of a sort. Nor did the Celtic element in the population consist only of thralls, for the Landnamabok described how Aud provided her Celtic freedmen with lands of their own, and the pedigrees recorded in that work and in the sagas show that some of the noblest families of Iceland had Celtic blood in their veins.

Thus there seems no reason to doubt the existence of a Celtic element in Icelandic culture, which shows itself both in the character of the people and in their literary achievements. For the elements that distinguish Icelandic literature from the older tradition that is common to the Teutonic peoples, namely, the development of the Saga or prose epic and the elaborate rhymed poetry of the Skalds, are precisely those that characterize Irish literature.

Nevertheless, the probability that the Icelandic genius, like that of almost every great culture that the world has seen, arose from a soil that had been fertilized by the mingling of two different races and cultural traditions does nothing to detract from the originality of its creative achievement. Even if Icelandic literature is indebted to the Celts for its use of narrative prose, nothing could be further removed from the fantastic rhetoric and magical feats of the Irish epic than the sober realism and psychological truth of the Icelandic sagas. While the former seems to take the reader back behind the Middle Ages to a vanished world, the latter seem more modern in their attitude to life and to human nature than anything in mediaeval literature.

It is true that the mature achievement of this tradition is represented by the great prose sagas of the thirteenth century—the age of Snorri and Sturla—which lies outside our period; but it is directly founded on the traditions of the Viking Age, above all, of the century from 930 to 1030, which the Icelanders themselves termed "the age of the making of the sagas." This was the age of the heroic figures whose deeds are recorded in the sagas—Vikings like Egil Skalgrimsson, lawmen like Njal, kings like Olaf Tryggvason and Olaf the Saint, and sailors and explorers like the men who colonized Greenland and discovered North America.

Moreover, this age not only lives on in the later tradition of
the sagas, it is also represented by the contemporary poems of skalds like Egil Skallagrímsson and Kormac and by the completion of the older heroic poetry. Iceland was not only the creator of the saga, it was also the preserver of the Edda, and thus it is to Iceland that we owe almost everything that we know of the beliefs and the moral and spiritual ideals of the age of the Vikings. The date of the Eddic poems has long been a matter of controversy, but there can be little doubt that it coincides approximately with the whole of the Viking period. There is indeed, a wide gap between the barbaric simplicity and crudity of the more primitive poems, such as the Lay of Atli or the Lay of Hamðir, and the sublime cosmic vision of the Völuspá, but through them all we can trace the development of the same moral ideal and the same view of reality. The Eddic conception of life is no doubt harsh and barbaric, but it is also heroic in the fullest sense of the word. Indeed, it is something more than heroic, for the noble viragos and the bloodthirsty heroes of the Edda possess a spiritual quality that is lacking in the Homeric world. The Eddic poems have more in common with the spirit of Aeschylus than with that of Homer, though there is a characteristic difference in their religious attitude. Their heroes do not, like the Greeks, pursue victory or prosperity as ends in themselves. They look beyond the immediate issue to an ultimate test to which success is irrelevant. Defeat, not victory, is the mark of the hero. Hence the atmosphere of fatalism and gloom in which the figures of the heroic cycle move. The Nibelungs, like the Atreidae, are doomed to crime and disaster by the powers behind the world, but there is no suggestion of hubris—the spirit of overweening confidence in prosperity. Hogni and Gunnar, or Hamðir and Sóli, are conscious that they are riding forth to death, and they go to meet their fate with open eyes. There is no attempt, as in the Greek view of life, to justify the ways of gods to man, and to see in their acts the vindication of external justice. For the gods are caught in the same toils of fate as men. In fact, the gods of the Edda are no longer the inhuman nature-deities of the old Scandinavian cult. They have been humanised, and in a sense spiritualised, until they have become themselves the participants in the heroic drama. They carry on a perpetual warfare with the powers of chaos, in which they are not destined to conquer. Their lives are overshadowed by the knowledge of an ultimate catastrophe—the Doom of the Gods—the day when Odin meets the Wolf.
Here only is there room for some kind of a theodicy, since the apparently arbitrary conduct of the gods to the heroes may be explained as due to their need for human allies. As for instance in the Eiriksnaud, where Odin allows Eric to perish before his time, “because it is not surely to be known when the grey wolf shall come upon the seat of the Gods.”

This unique view of the world finds its highest expression in the great Nordic apocalypse of the Voluspa, which was probably composed by an Icelandic poet at the very close of the Viking period. In this poem the crudities of the old pagan mythology have been replaced by an almost philosophic conception of nature, which is probably due to the contact with the higher culture of Christendom. The opening lines especially, describing the primeval chaos, bear a striking resemblance to the Old High German verses of the Wessobrunner Prayer. “Earth was not, nor high Heaven, nor hill nor tree. The sun shone not, the moon gave not light, nor the glorious sea. Then was there Naught, unwending, unwending, and one Almighty God, mildest of men.”

And so, too, the final description of the Doom of the Gods seems to have taken some of its colouring from the Christian presentation of the Last Judgment. Nevertheless, there are elements in the poem which belong neither to the world of Christian thought nor to that of Scandinavian nature religion. Above all, it is strange to find in the Voluspa an idea which seems to us so difficult and recondite as that of the Eternal Return—the rebirth of the world and the repetition of all that has gone before.

The Asir meet on Ida meadows:
Tell over once again mighty exploits of old,
Con ancient runes of Odin’s graving.

Wondrous strange, on the sword are found
Mid the grass, long after, the golden pieces,
The draughts they had owned, in the dawn of days.

But throughout the Eddic poems we are constantly being surprised by the mixture of profound thought and primitive mythology, of sublime heroism and barbaric cruelty, which seems to characterise the Viking mind. In the same way it is difficult for us to reconcile the savage brutality of the hero of Egils Saga with the intense personal feeling of his great lyric on the death of his sons—the Sonatorrek, the composition of which, according to the saga, restored to him his will to live,
after he had resolved to commit suicide. And this contradiction is no less marked in the history of the Icelandic society itself, in which the harshest possible environment produced so remarkable a development of culture.

It is indeed one of the miracles of history that this desolate island, settled by pirates and adventurers who revolted against the social constraint even of Viking Norway, should have produced a high culture and a literature which is, of its kind, the greatest in mediaeval Europe. It is as though New England had given birth to Elizabethan literature or French Canada to that of the Grand Siècle. But as W. P. Ker has said, the apparent anarchy of Icelandic society is deceptive. "The settlement of Iceland looks like a furious plunge of angry and intemperate chiefs, away from order into a grim and reckless land of Cockayne. The truth is that these rebels and their commonwealth were more self-possessed, more clearly conscious of their own aims, more critical of their own achievements than any commonwealth on earth since the fall of Athens." It was an intensely aristocratic community in which almost every family possessed a great social tradition, and its very remoteness and lack of material wealth led to the intensive cultivation of its traditions and of the resources of its interior life.

It almost seems to justify the extreme claims of nationalist separatism when we find this Ultima Thule of the habitable world, this society which had voluntarily exiled itself from the European unity, producing, nevertheless, the earliest and most precious fruit of modern European culture. Yet the amazing achievement of the native Nordic genius must not blind us to the fact that Icelandic culture in its mature development did owe something very essential to the world outside. The influence of Christianity on Iceland was not, as some writers would have us believe, a superficial and external element in the life of the people: it was of fundamental importance for their culture. It is true that the acceptance of Christianity by the Althing in 1000, as recorded in the Islandingbók, does appear rather a lukewarm and "political" affair, and that the apostles of the new faith, such as Thangbrand and even Olaf Tryggvason himself, are not precisely models of evangelical morality. But neither was Constantine, nor Theodosius, nor Charlemagne. The lawlessness and individualism of Viking society were naturally unfavourable to the strict observance either of the moral or the ceremonial law of
the Church and must have produced many queer types of Christian, such as Thormod the poet, who made a vow that he would fast on nine feast days and eat meat on nine fast days if he succeeded in slaying his enemy, and who replied to the scandalised protest of St. Olaf’s master-cook by saying that “Christ and I shall be good friends enough if there be no more than half a sausage to part us.” 16

But this is only one side of the picture. The conversion of Iceland was not merely a matter of political expediency; it was the acceptance of a higher spiritual ideal, as is shown by the attitude of Hialte, the Christian spokesman at the Althing of 1004: “The heathen men summoned a great gathering and there they agreed to sacrifice two men out of each Quarter and call upon the heathen gods that they would not suffer Christendom to spread over the land. But Hialte and Gizor had another meeting of Christian men and agreed that they too would have human sacrifices as many as the heathen. They spoke thus: “The heathen sacrifice the worst men and cast them over rocks or cliffs, but we will choose the best of men and call it a gift of victory to our Lord Jesus Christ, and we will bind ourselves to live better and more sinlessly than before, and Gizor and I will offer ourselves as the gift of victory of our Quarter.”” 17

In fact, the higher elements in the Icelandic culture itself, as represented by men like Njal, the peacemaker, and Gisli Sursson and the author of the Voluspa, had already outgrown the barbarism of the old pagan society with its practice of human sacrifice and infanticide and its insistence on the duty of blood revenge.

The Viking ideal was by itself too destructive and sterile to be capable of producing the higher fruits of culture. It acquired its higher cultural value only after it had accepted the Christian law and had been disciplined and refined by a century and more of Christian civilisation. Between the age of the Vikings and the civil wars and feuds of the Sturlung period, there intervenes an age of peace and piety during which the leaders of the people were churchmen like the great bishop Gizor the White, and St. John of Holar and St. Thorlac of Scalhol. As the Christie Saga writes, “Bishop Gizor (1082-1118) kept such peace in the land that there was no great feud between the chiefs, and the carrying of arms was almost laid aside. Most of the men of worship were clerks and hallowed priests, albeit they were chiefs.” This was the
society that created the new literary tradition, and it is well to remember that its founders, Saemund the Historian and Ari the Wise, were both of them priests and scholars, the former having even made his studies at Paris. It is to Ari that we owe not only our knowledge of the beginnings of Iceland and its institutions, but the creation of the literary style which made possible the work of Snorri Sturlason and the great Saga writers. But this Christian Icelandic culture, like that of the Anglian kingdom of Northumbria four hundred years before, is essentially transitory. It is the point at which the dying world of the barbaric North comes into momentary contact with the new consciousness of Christian Europe. It is followed by a sudden decline in which the anarchic element in northern society, which could no longer find an outlet in external aggression, turns inwards and destroys itself. Here, as in Norway, the aristocratic class that was the heir and guardian of the old traditions was swept away by civil wars and confiscations, and with the thirteenth century the Viking world sinks into the peaceful stagnation of an impoverished peasant society.
THE RISE OF THE MEDIAEVAL UNITY

The storm of barbarian invasion that fell upon Europe in the ninth century seems sufficient of itself to explain the premature decline of the Carolingian Empire and the dissolution of the newly-acquired Western unity. Nevertheless, it is easy to exaggerate its importance. It was far from being the only influence at work; indeed, it is almost certain that the fortunes of the Carolingian Empire would have followed a similar course, even if it had not had to undergo the attacks of the Vikings and the Saracens.

The germs of decay were inherent in the Carolingian state from its origins. For in spite of its imposing appearance, it was a heterogeneous structure without an internal and organic principle of unity. It claimed to be the Roman Empire, but it was in fact the Frankish monarchy, and so it embodied two contradictory principles, the universalism of the Roman and Christian traditions on the one hand, and the tribal particularism of barbaric Europe on the other. Consequently, in spite of its name, it bore little resemblance to the Roman Empire or the civilized states of the old Mediterranean world, it had much more in common with those barbaric Empires of the Huns and the Avars and the West Turks which were the ephemeral products of military conquest and which succeeded one another so rapidly during these centuries on the outskirts of the civilized world.

The Roman Empire of the Carolingians was a Roman Empire without the Roman law and without the Roman le-