

## A road to India: the example of *Eireks saga víðförla*

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### Resumo

O artigo analisa a saga islandesa *Eireks saga víðförla*, explorando as representações literárias da Índia, percebida como uma terra exótica e paradisíaca dentro dos referenciais religiosos do período, refletindo as relações entre política e cristianização da Escandinávia, Leste Europeu e Oriente.

Palavras-chave: Sagas islandesas – Explorações escandinavas – Representações do Oriente

### Abstract

The article analyzes the icelandic saga *Eireks saga víðförla*, exploring the literary representations of India, perceived as an exotic and paradise land within the religious references of the period, reflecting the relationship between politics and the Christianization of Scandinavia, Eastern Europe and the Orient.

Keywords: icelandic Sagas – scandinavian Explorations – Representations of the Orient

Medieval Icelandic sagas often show an incredible awareness of the place of Icelanders in the physical world: travels represented the fundamental framework to the narration. This has consequences on how groups of humans form their identities. The relationship to this distant and exotic “Other” constitutes a part of this identity. For the medieval Scandinavian minds, no part of the known world was more distant than the “Far away-East”. What follows is a discussion on the literary perception of India in *Eireks saga víðförla*.

Numerous studies have been devoted to the literary perception of the Viking travels abroad in the medieval Icelandic sagas.<sup>1</sup> But only a few of them are studying the literary representation of the Far East,<sup>2</sup> and even less are focused on *Eireks saga víðförla*.<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that *Eireks saga víðförla* is known for its travel to Paradise, it is still considered as an exception among the *víðförla* narratives (Shafer 2010, 204 e Tómasson 2006). In his article entitled *A road to Paradise* (Jakobsson 2006: 941), Sverrir Jakobsson studied the literary representations of the travels to Paradise. He established a list of three criteria defining the narrations of each text belonging to what he calls the genre *víðförla*. He sets out generic markers of fictive travels to the East, and among them is *Eireks saga víðförla*, still categorized as an exception of the genre. In this article, we aim to understand the literary perception of India in medieval Scandinavia by taking the example of *Eireks saga víðförla*. We decided to start our study by examining Sverrir Jakobsson’s article.

According to *A road to paradise* (2006), the travels to the East are recognizable by:

- The presence of a great Christian monarch, either being the lord of Constantinople, Kiev, Novgorod, or any of the main city-states of Russia.
- “The presence of kingdoms and people, hardly an uncivilized territory or a fantastic region of giants, dragons and wondrous beast [...]”
- The “Eastern road as a progress towards a geographical goal, it also leads to social and spiritual advancement. In the eastern lands, the Scandinavian travelers meet with people of the highest order, and gain instruction in the Christian world view, and exercise their faith.”

Indeed, the protagonists entered the service of a great monarch, that some scholars easily and without any real proof, called the Emperor of Byzantium.<sup>4</sup> And as a good Christian,<sup>5</sup> this monarch Christianized then Eirekr and his companions. But what makes the originality of *Eireks saga víðförla* is the approximate date at which the story takes place: not between 980-1050 as the others *víðförla* but in a prehistoric past. According to Sverrir Jakobsson, this might be the reason why the protagonists are being Christianized and did not Christianize others in the “far East”.

## I. The exotic image of India

According to Sophie Macheda, most of the narrations about pilgrims start in Jerusalem, and very few of them describe the journey to get there.<sup>6</sup> In *Eireks saga víðförla*, we witness a very rare description of the way to Paradise. We aim to argue here India is not a sacred place, but is more a faraway territory and exotic enough to welcome the Paradise. In other words, the literary perception of India is deeply related to the literary perception of Paradise in Medieval Iceland as it is represented in

*Flatexjarbók*. Unfortunately we will only mention this problematic but we will not be able to go deeply into it.

India is represented in certain number of medieval Scandinavian sagas as *Barlaam and Ioasaph*<sup>7</sup>; *Tomas saga postula*; *Apostelen Bartholomæus*;<sup>8</sup> *Thorstein bæjarmagns*;<sup>9</sup> the old Norse *Elucidarius*;<sup>10</sup> *Jóns Ólafssonar Indíafara*;<sup>11</sup> and *Þorsteinn saga Hringssonar*. As noticeable here, India is a lot more represented in the medieval Scandinavian sagas than what we would usually expect. Even though, India is mentioned in many Old Norse texts, narrative time and space devoted to it is usually rather brief and presented matter-of-factly. There are some exceptions in particular sagas that deal partly or entirely with travels to the East, indicating their direction with the help of the four cardinal directions. Then, when we open the debate on the literary perception of a destination mentioned in a saga, it seems necessary to understand the world-view of its “writer”.<sup>12</sup> Quite recently, scholars started to establish and discuss the notion of moral geography, in other words the global view of the world<sup>13</sup>, otherwise called mental map. The commonly held medieval world-view was that Jerusalem is both the geographical and spiritual center of a world divided into European, African quadrants and an Asian half (see TO-Diagram). This mental map was certainly completely familiar to the saga writers. We will see what the choice of India, instead of Jerusalem, at the center of the world reveals on the motivations of the “saga-writer”.

According to Sverrir Jakobsson (2005: 77-79), the narrations concerning travels are most often concentrated on the qualities (*qualitas*) rather than the quantities (*quantitas*).<sup>14</sup> This is the case of *Yngvars saga víðförla*<sup>15</sup> Despite what Sverrir Jakobsson wrote, the writer of the saga describes quantitative and qualitative details, like the travel to India, the inhabitants met on the way, and the distances. In other words, it shows a more exact world-view than in other medieval Icelandic sagas. Moreover, the geographical knowledge given here inform us on the world-view of the late medieval Icelandic writers.

To the question in the chapter 2 of *Eireks saga víðförla*, “What is the most distant land in the southern part of the world?” The king answered, “India-land, we say, marks the ends of the earth in that part of the world.” Eirek asked, “Where is that place which is called The Deathless Acre?” The king says, “We call that Paradise, or the Living Land.” Eirek asked, “Where is it situated?” The king says, “The country is east of furthest India.” Eirek asked, “Can I get there?” “I don't know about that,” says the king, “A wall of fire stands before it, which reaches right up to heaven.”<sup>16</sup> This world-view corresponds perfectly to the model transmitted by Isidore of Seville's in his *Etymologiae*, “Paradise is located in the East [...] close to India” (Book XIV, iii 5: 286) (see the TO-diagram). According to H. Jensen and R. Simek (1984: 109-114), Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*, together with the *Elucidarium* and *Imago Mundi* by Augustus Honorius, are also the main sources of *Eireks saga víðförla*. Indeed, the geographic locations given in the saga correspond exactly to what is written in the *Etymologiae*. According to the *Etymologiae*, it seems very likely that India was the chosen territory to welcome Paradise. Thus, locating Paradise beyond India was not hazardous, and even more, it gives us information on their view of the “Far East” countries and qualifies Paradise.

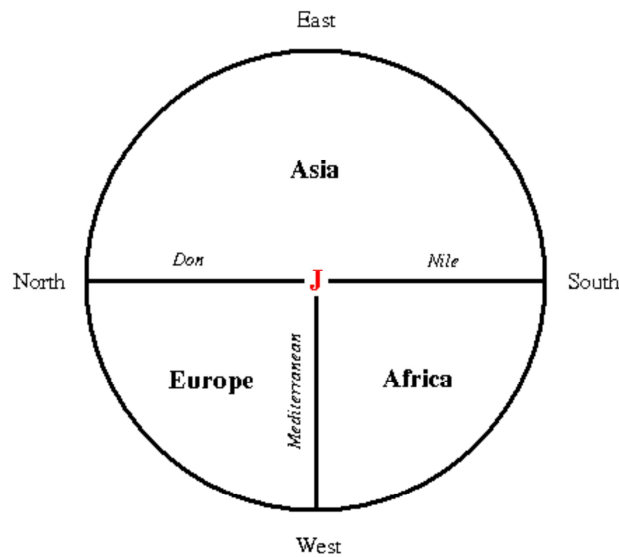


Figure 2. The medieval "TO-diagram" with Jerusalem at centre

As for the travel to India itself, nothing is described before reaching the river Phison, nowadays called Ganges<sup>17</sup>. India seems more to be represented as unreachable, far away, exotic. According to Kristel Zilmer<sup>18</sup> the limited description which often characterize the medieval Scandinavian texts do not indicate a lack of the writer's interest in their topics, but are more of a way to enlighten the dramatic elements composing the narration. India is then represented as the last land before Paradise, and not as an independent territory. It gains a liminal status without any independence.<sup>19</sup> And because of this dependence, the literary perception of India seems pretty close to the description of Paradise. The abundance of honey, the sweet smell that corresponds to the Canaan description in *Genesis* (7,17, 8.), linked India to the usual exoticism used to define the Far East countries. India is indeed just like a virgin earth. Moreover, the literary perception of India here is similar to the one contained in the late medieval Icelandic saga *Jarsonar saga bjarta*.<sup>20</sup> Thus, India was the place of exoticism, glory, and sweetness. In Isidore de Séville's *Etymologiae*, India is related to the existence of fantastic creatures, as the Dragon for instance, whereas in *Eireks saga víðförla* they do not appear before Paradise. India is not even defined by a magical creature. India is seen as the last land of the world. This saga does not show any lack of interest towards India, but more a lack of knowledge. This might be the reason of the exotic part of the image of India.

Considering the restrictions of the article, we will not try to estimate the system of influence that could have been established between the literary perception of India and Paradise. But what seems pretty clear to us is the importance of India in the literary perception of the Paradise itself. Another determinant element is the choice of India instead of Jerusalem. Jerusalem is considered a sacred place that often welcomes the spiritual Paradise. As for India, this is the last territory before the earthly Paradise. We might think that those differences are the reason why the saga is about the earthly Paradise. India is so close to earthly Paradise that it becomes a spiritual land whereas

Jerusalem is a sacred place. Thus, the center of the world is represented by India rather than Jerusalem.<sup>21</sup> It seems fairly possible, to us, that India was chosen because of the nature included in the perception of the earthly Paradise. To add to our observations, David Ashurst (2006) draws the same conclusions,<sup>22</sup> when he mentions that the spiritual Paradise is characterized by a perpetual day as is Jerusalem. It seems fairly useful not to describe the heavenly Paradise and to keep it in the “fog”, while the earthly Paradise and India seem to belong generally to the visionary literature.<sup>23</sup>

The description that we witness here in *Eireks saga víðförla* is even more surprisingly precise. More than simply describing the people met in the way, and the precise location of Paradise, it mentions the name Syria as a country on the way to go to India, and so to Paradise. We then compare this occurrence to what the *Etymologiae* has to say about Syria. “In the east, Syria’s boundary is the Euphrates, in the west the Mediterranean and Egypt; in the north it touches Armenia and Cappadocia, in the south the Arabian sea. Its territory extends immensely in length, more narrowly in width”.<sup>24</sup> Syria is then on the way to go to India. Another important precision, which does not appear usually in the narration of the travels to the East, is the river Phison. This is one of the four rivers that are supposed to flow from the heavenly Paradise.<sup>25</sup> Thus, India might be on the road passing by Syria. We compared it to the old road of treads of silk in Asia (see the map). Even though it is clear that this journey is purely fictional, the roads actually corresponds to the silk roads. It indicates to us the validity of the sources of *Eireks saga víðförla*, or even the presence of a new source like a book of travel that we might not be aware of. So, this saga does indicate qualitative and quantitative information that allows the reader to understand fully, and at every level, the status of the earthly Paradise, especially from the description of India. Thus, the earthly Paradise gains a physical location, an exotic and mysterious literary perception, especially because of the vague location “after the last land”.

This very uncommon information allows us to understand also more deeply the perception of the travels themselves, especially as representing the human advancement on Geography, knowledge...etc. In the chapter two, Eirek asks the king: “how great is the breadth of the earth? [...] The circumference of the earth, wise men tell, is a hundred and eighty thousand leagues, and it's not held up by any pillars, but by God's omnipotence” (Musikas 2011: 39).

The sense of Geography transmitted here by the writer informs us on the world-view of late medieval Icelanders, on the use of exoticism, and on the contemporary advancements made on travels for instance and finally on the literary perception of India. But, it seems fairly impossible to determine whether or not the writer was inspired by one or many sources to establish his work. Nevertheless, the knowledge freed here, when we compared our results to Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*, gave us a deeper understanding of *Eireks saga víðförla* and its sources.

## II. The political image of India

An element that does not occur often in the Icelandic medieval saga is the Christianisation of Scandinavian princes in Miklagarðr. Here, they are not Christianizing the usually uncivilized “far East”, they are Christianized there. This informs us on the status of India, which does not seem to be more important than an annex of Greece. India is dependent upon Greece, and obey to the orders of the Greek king. We believe this is to give even more power to Greece and the Greek king. Greece

then becomes this powerful country, which has a monarch as leader.<sup>26</sup> The testimony of the letters of the Greek king – complete with its seal—seems to be important enough to appear even in another version of the saga, in the manuscript AM 657 c4to. E. A. Rowe related the importance of Greece here to the general meaning of the sagas. For her, *Flateyjarbók* was initially written down for the young Norwegian prince Óláfr Hákonarson, whose father the king Hákon Magnússon just died when he was three.<sup>27</sup> And as such, *Eireks saga víðförla* might entirely be political. To add to this, E. A. Rowe argued that *Eireks saga víðförla* is an exemplum, or more precisely a “meta-exemplum”, which would have been made to give the necessary information concerning the questions on the daily-life of the audience. This might also have been used by the priests to familiarize themselves with practical questions that they might have had to answer to every day. As for Sverrir Jakobsson, the reason of the evangelisation of the Scandinavian princes in *Eireks saga víðförla* is the date at which the saga takes place: before 850 AC.

At that time, Greece is one of the main seats of Christianity (Rowe 2005: 159). The saga starts in Trondheim, the medieval center of Norway, continues in Denmark, its biggest neighbour, and ends in Miklagarðr.<sup>28</sup> As center of the Christianity, Miklagarðr represents the imperial throne and the seat of Christianity. *Eireks saga víðförla* might have been written down to illustrate how a Scandinavian prince succeeded to become the spiritual son of a Monarch. India indeed help to set the divine authority of Greece and so the Monarch's authority.<sup>29</sup> Also, by telling the story of an medieval Norwegian king being Christianized, the saga traces the roots of Christianity in Norway back since the ancient times. We then recognize the use of the narrative hegemony of the Greek royalty for the scribe Jón Þórðarson.

The road to Paradise goes through Syria until reaching the border of India. The countries on the way seem to be simple annexes of Greece, enlightening civilized people subdued to the Greek king.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, this saga does not consider any of the qualities and the independence of India and Syria, only countries quoted. India is only quoted to refer either to the physical location of the earthly Paradise, or to enlighten the power of the Greek kingdom. And, despite what Sverrir Jakobsson argues, India is not defined by an uncivilised population. Quite the contrary, India is seen as an extension of Greece, well educated and civilised.<sup>31</sup> To us, the only authentic element about India still remains its name. The literary image of India seems then to be trapped between the political and Christian major themes. India was fairly studied until recently, instead of the political implication in *Flateyjarbók* for instance.

This study brought us a new perspective on the interlaced major and problematic themes of Politics and Christianity that are even extending to the rest of *Flateyjarbók*. And, the focus on the literary perception of India gave us an indication on the audience of the *Flateyjarbók*, and what they might imagine when a narration is about the “faraway East”.

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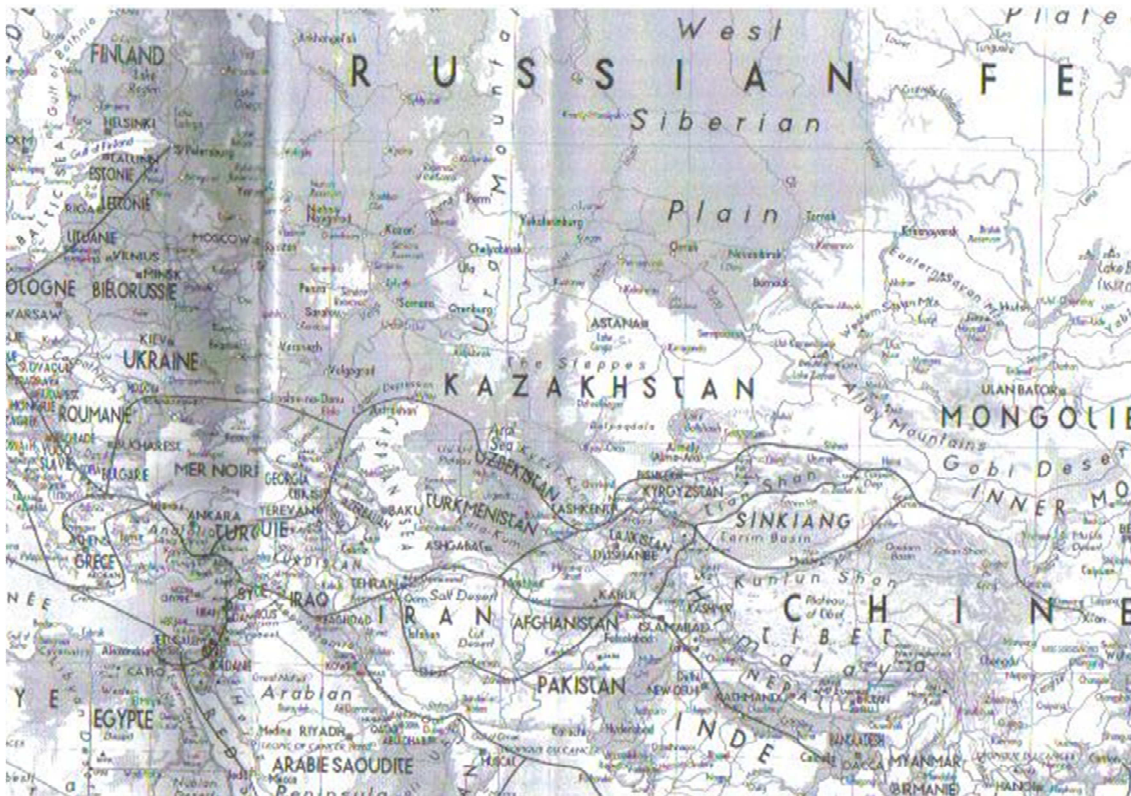
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**Roads of the commerce of silk :**



(Lemark 2004)

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> See P.H. Sawyer (1994); Richard Hall (2007: 96); F. Durand (1977: 45); Sverrir Jakobsson (2005, chapter 3).

<sup>2</sup> Also called *Austurvegr*.

<sup>3</sup> There are five manuscripts of *Eireks saga víðförla*, AM 657 c4to, GKS 1005 fol, AM 720 aVIII 4to5, AM 557 4to, and GKS 2845 4to7. We based our study on the most complete version, where no leaf is missing : the *Flateyjarbók* (GKS 1005 fol, in latin *Codex Flateyensis*).

<sup>4</sup> See for example Sverrir Jakobsson (2006: 935-936).



<sup>5</sup> For further information see Rowe (2005: 158-159); J. Shafer Douglas, (2010: 97); Claire Musikas (2011: 20).

<sup>6</sup> « La plupart des récits de pèlerins commencent habituellement en terre sainte, et que donc, très peu d'entre eux décrivent le voyage pour y parvenir. » Sophie Macheda, 2009, pp. 133. Moreover, in *Við of Veröldin*, Sverrir Jakobsson argues that each pilgrim finish, by definition, in Rome (pp.107). For further informations on Pilgrimages, see Gary B. Doxey (1996: 156) ; and Steinunn Le Breton Filippusdóttir, 2001; et Steinunn Le Breton Filippusdóttir, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> AM 230 fol, (1350-1399)

<sup>8</sup> Both are from SÁM 1, (1360-1375).

<sup>9</sup> From the manuscript AM 313 4to (1657).

<sup>10</sup> The manuscript *Hauksbók*, AM 544 4to (1305-15) contains the translation of the latin *Elucidarius*, usually called the Old Norse *Elucidarius*.

<sup>11</sup> AM 959 4to (1800-1850)

<sup>12</sup> For summaries of the debate regarding the authorship of the sagas, see Clover 'Icelandic Family Sagas', pp. 245–48. Important contributions to the debate include Hallberg, 'The Syncretic Saga Mind', pp. 113–16, and *The Icelandic Saga*, pp. 49–69; Lönnroth, 'Tesen', pp. 9–20, and *Njáls saga*, especially pp. 104–214; Hermann Pálsson, review of Steblin-Kamenskij's *The Saga Mind*, pp. 219–20; Hofmann, 'Die Einstellung', and 'Die Bedeutung'; and Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, pp. 180–89.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Shafer (2010: 27), the opening paragraphs of Snorri Sturluson's *Ynglinga saga*, ÍF XXVI 9-10. See also Simek (1990: 37-46, 189-92, 197) and Cassidy (397-98), and Sverrir Jakobsson, *Við og veröldin* (1996), and Sverrir Jakobsson (2006b).

<sup>14</sup> See Rowe, pp. 156-163. She notice that no mountains are described.

<sup>15</sup> "Síðan ferr Yngvarr marga daga eftir ánni. Þá hófust upp borgir ok stórar byggðir, ok þá sjá þeir ágæta borg." (*Yngvars saga víðförla*, in *Formaldarsögur norðulanda book II*, Guðni Jónsson, pp. 437).

<sup>16</sup> See Peter Tunstall, *Eirek the far traveller* (2005).

<sup>17</sup> See Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* (2006: 286).

<sup>18</sup> "There is nothing to tell of their journey until they reached [Destination]", see for instance "Learning About Places and People" (2004), "The Motive of Travelling in Saga Narrative" (2005), and "Icelandic, Sagas and the Narrative Tradition of Travelogue" (2006), J.D.Shafer (2010: 17).

<sup>19</sup> The theme of liminality concerning *Eireks saga víðförla* is particularly interesting. We do notice for instance that Trinity compared to the sun is also done in Saint Paul's work. Another interesting symbol that confirms the liminal position of this saga is the entrance of the Paradis, which might also have been an allegory to indicate the entrance of a church. Moreover, Paradise is located at the top of a tower. See E. A. Rowe (2005: 152-156).

<sup>20</sup> There are some 8 mss of the saga, and about 30 of rímur based on it. The earliest is early 18th century. One can easily suspect that the saga was created late 17th century, with heavy use made of late medieval *formaldarsögur* motifs. It has never been transcript until recently by Andrew Wawn, who very nicely helped me.

<sup>21</sup> In *Við og veröldin*, pp. 136, Sverrir Jakobsson argues that center was believed to be in Asia.

<sup>22</sup> See J. D. Shafer (2010: 27): "Thus travels from Scandinavia located in the northern portion of the European quadrant, to the distant south and east take saga-characters towards the righteousness and

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holiness appropriate to the moral center of the world, whereas travels to the distant north and west, by and large, take them towards evil or profane lands and peoples”.

<sup>23</sup> See Ashurst (2006: 74-75), and *Medieval Scandinavia: an encyclopedia*, 1993, ‘Visionary Literature’.

<sup>24</sup> Isidore de Seville, book XIV, III Asia, n°16.

<sup>25</sup> “Þat skilr Eirekr, at á sú mun skilja þessi lönd, at frásögn Grikkjakonungs. Þat kom honum í hug, at á sú mundi falla ór paradiso ok heita”. For further information, see Margaret Schlauch (1973: 49) and Sverrir Jakobsson (2006).

<sup>26</sup> For further informations, see Shafer (2010: 204).

<sup>27</sup> This theory is based on the work of Ólafur Halldórsson (18. Apríl 1990: 58-59). See also Rowe, pp. 152, who partially is based on this study, and C. Musikas, *Eiriks saga víðförla*, 2011, who add an argument to the discussion.

<sup>28</sup> Myklagarðr is otherwise called Byzance, which is the actual Constantinople.

<sup>29</sup> “En hvar sem þeir koma á ókunnig lönd, þá var við þeim vel tekit, ok allr lýðr greiddi ferð þeirra, því at þeir höfðu með sér bréf ok innsigli Grikkjakonungs ok patriarchi ór Miklagarði, ritat á allar tungur þeirra þjóða, sem ván var, at þeir mundi koma til.” See Claire Musikas (2011: 40).

<sup>30</sup> We chose not to study the status of the Greek monarch. Nevertheless, for further informations, see E. A. Rowe, especially pp. 156-163.

<sup>31</sup> Here, we are in opposition with John. D. Shafer, who wrote : “Byzantium is merely a stop on his spiritual quest. For this saga-writer, when one is searching for Paradise, Byzantium is the sort of place where one asks for – and receives – direction” (2010: 115).