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# Microcosmic Architectures as Catalysts for Macrocosmic Visions
## A Study of *Nitida saga*

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**Abstract** This contribution aims to analyse the possible influences of the Christian mystical tradition on the late medieval Icelandic romance *Nitida saga*. The text employs mandalic architecture to construct its narrative space, particularly in correspondence with panoptic visions of the world. The significant aspects that unite this configuration with those elaborated by Christian mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) will be highlighted, together with the moral calibre of the characters to whom the vision is entrusted. Through this analysis, the article will also investigate the possible communicative functions of the text itself.

**Keywords** Chivalric literature. Riddarasögur. Nitida saga. Vision literature. Mandalic architecture.



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## 1 The Old Norse-Icelandic Response to Chivalric Literature and Ideology

In the twelfth century, European societies underwent significant social, political, and economic transformations often summarised as 'Twelfth-Century Renaissance', which impacted various aspects, including literary production (Verger 1996). The ruling élites sought renewal by renovating role models and values, primarily through the institution of chivalry and its ideology (Keen 1984, 2). This drive to shape the European aristocracy around the virtues of knighthood also extended to marginal lands such as Norway and Iceland.[1]

In Norway, Hákon IV Hákonarson's court (r. 1217-63) became a centre of literary innovation through the translation of foreign literature such as Chrétien de Troyes's romances and Marie de France's *Lais*.[2] In contrast, Iceland faced more evident challenges in integrating the chivalric value system, due to the lack of a centralised power and to a less defined social structure. Iceland had implemented one of the earliest forms of pseudo-parliamentary governance in Europe, with the Alþingi as an imperfect form of legislative assembly (Gunnar Karlsson 2000, 9-78). The last phase of its political independence, known as *Sturlungaöld*, was marked by violent conflicts among the local ruling families and significant bloodshed, which influenced subsequent efforts to establish positive models of rulership (Gunnar Karlsson 2000, 79-88).

The civil war ended in 1262 with Iceland's declaration of allegiance to Norway, aligning the country more closely with the cultural innovations of the previous century. This shift allowed Icelandic society to experience significant changes, including the assimilation of new literary trends. Icelanders developed their own chivalric romances, which modern critics refer to as 'indigenous *riddarasögur*' (sagas of knights), distinguishing them from those translated at Hákon IV's court from English and French sources. Despite the profound influence of the Norwegian translations, the original *riddarasögur* present a notable degree of experimentation that has prompted much critical engagement in recent decades.[3]

1 For a study on the movement of texts across Europe in this period, see Sif Ríkharðsdóttir 2012.

2 Amongst the narratives that were allegedly translated at the court of Hákon IV there were *Erec et Enide* (*Erex saga* [Saga of Erex]), *Yvain ou Le Chevalier au lyon* (*Ívens saga* [Saga of Íven]), and *Parceval ou Le Conte du Graal* (*Parcevals saga* [Saga of Parceval] and *Valvens þáttr* [Tale of Valven]). Marie de France's *Lais* are preserved in the Norwegian codex Uppsala, Carolinabiblioteket, De la Gardie 4-7, with the title *Strengleikar* (Songs for Stringed Instruments). For an introduction to the translated *riddarasögur*, cf. Kalinke 1981; Glauser, Kramarz-Bein 2014; Johansson, Mundal 2014.

3 For an introduction to the genre, see Van Nahl 1981; Glauser 2005; Driscoll 2005; Barnes 2000; 2014.


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One of the most popular Icelandic *riddarasögur* is *Nitida saga* (Saga of Nitida; henceforth *NS*), which survives in over sixty manuscripts from the fifteenth to the early twentieth century.[4] This article analyses the key aspects that make the text one of the most unique examples of literary experimentation in late medieval Iceland, including its peculiar strategies for legitimising female power as embodied by the protagonist, Nitida. Through spatial representation, the saga addresses pressing anxieties about gender and authority, offering an unparalleled positive model of female rulership within the corpus of *riddarasögur*. The liminal island Visio is interpreted as an example of sacred microcosm that triggers a macrocosmic vision of the world, granting Nitida nearly unlimited power and universal knowledge. Finally, a comparison between Visio's allegory and the sacred architecture found in the thirteenth-century *Rauðúlfs þáttr* (The Story of Rauð and His Sons) will help reconstruct the cultural background that inspired the innovations presented by *NS*.[5]

## 2 Nitida: An Atypical Maiden-King

*NS* centres on its eponymous protagonist, a young queen of a fictional France, vaguely defined both chronologically and geographically. She is mostly referred to as 'maiden-king' (*meykóngr*), to emphasise her refusal to accept any lesser title than a man in a similar position of authority.[6] Numerous noble knights attempt to court her, but Nitida consistently refuses to marry, as she is unwilling to relinquish any portion of power and wealth to a man. Rather than seeking a politically advantageous union, the queen is more interested in pursuing experiences and knowledge.

Her first journey, described in Chapter 1, takes her to the remote island of Visio, located near the North Pole and characterised by lush nature, healing herbs, and apples with supernatural properties (McDonald 2010, 124-7).[7] There, Nitida discovers a square

4 McDonald Werronen 2016, 27. The article adopts the original spelling for the protagonist's name, as a Latin calque from *nitidus* 'clear', instead of the modern 'Nítíða'.

5 For previous studies on *NS*, cf. Guðbjörg Aðalbergsdóttir 1994; Ármann Jakobsson 2015; Barnes 2006; Schäfke 2013, 220-5; McDonald Werronen 2016. For a diplomatic edition of *NS*, see Loth 1965a.

6 *Þessi meykóngur sat í öndvegi heimsins í Frakklandi hinu góða og hélt Parissborg* (McDonald 2010, 124; "This maiden-king sat on the throne of the world in the good kingdom of France and ruled in Paris", 125). All quotations from *Nitida saga* and their English translations are taken from McDonald 2010, who is also responsible for the orthographical normalisation. Any portions of the original text that McDonald chose not to translate have been inserted within square brackets for the sake of clarity. Translations of other primary sources are provided by the author, unless otherwise stated.

7 The chapter division follows McDonald 2010.


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vessel filled with water, containing four stones, one at each corner. By gazing into the stones, she receives a simultaneous vision of the whole world and its inhabitants. Captivated by this experience, Nitida takes the vessel, the stones, and a large quantity of apples and herbs back with her. The rest of the saga focuses on her attempts to evade suitors from Byzantium, the Muslim kingdoms (*Serkland*), and India. The supernatural objects found on Visio help her protect both herself and her reign, such as by allowing her to disappear at will. Only Liforinus, the son of the king of India, succeeds in marrying Nitida – not through violence, but through his cunning and nobility, which make him her equal and the only one allowed to share her panoptic vision through the stones.[8]

Tales of women in positions of power, contemptuous of their suitors and sometimes bordering on sadism, are widespread in the corpus of original *riddarasögur*. These figures likely evolved from more archaic literary motifs, such as warrior or shield maidens (*skjaldmæjar*), exemplified most notably by Brynhildr in *Völsunga saga* (The Saga of the Volsungs).[9] The fascination with maiden-kings led to the development of a subgroup of Icelandic *riddarasögur*, commonly referred to as *meykónga sögur* (Sif Ríkharðsdóttir 2010). Generally, the behavioural model proposed for noblewomen in Icelandic romances consists of chastity and passivity. In contrast, maiden-kings are typically punished for their failure to embody these virtues and for encroaching upon the ideological domain of patriarchy and masculinity (Jóhanna K. Friðriksdóttir 2013, 108). The noblewomen in *meykónga sögur* adhere to a recurring pattern, ultimately surrendering power to their male counterparts after putting up fierce resistance.[10] It can be suggested that these sagas were conceived in late medieval Iceland as means to exorcise the fear of a complete overturning of the gender balance, which was perceived as pre-established but fragile, especially in a country where social boundaries were traditionally less rigid than elsewhere in Europe.

According to Henric Bagerius (2009), the Icelandic *riddarasögur* represented an effort to interpret and stabilise the social transformations occurring in Iceland from the latter half of the thirteenth century. A new aristocracy, connected to the monarchic institution in Norway, gained legitimacy, especially after the conclusion of the

8 *Er það líkast ég taki þetta upp* […]*; veit og ei æðri kóng ríkjandi en Liforinus kóng* (McDonald 2010, 140; "It is most fitting that I should take this up, […] for I do not know a nobler king ruling than King Liforinus", 141); *Meykóngur tók upp stein og bað hann í líta* (140; "The maiden-king took up a stone and asked him to look into it", 141).

9 For a study on the origins of the motif, see Jóhanna K. Friðriksdóttir 2012.

10 One example of cruel maiden-king is Sedentiana in *Sigurðar saga þögla* (Saga of Sigurðr the Silent). She tortures and humiliates the protagonist's brothers for trying to talk her into marriage (Loth 1965b, 127).

civil war, necessitating the establishment of defined social boundaries aligned with the ideology of the emerging élites (Bagerius 2009, 55-60). As Jóhanna K. Friðriksdóttir (2012, 242) points out:

> Sexual behaviour became an increasingly important domain that the Icelandic aristocracy […] used to define itself in opposition to those of lower social status, and to signify aristocratic masculinity and femininity.

In order to achieve new gender ideals, contemporary narratives served as platforms to caution women about the consequences of arrogance and prevarication, while encouraging men to exercise restraint in their sexuality.

In this framework, *NS* can be considered a singularity within an already distinct subgroup of narratives. Despite employing various stratagems to reject her suitors, the protagonist avoids both the cruel traits and the final submission associated with other maiden-kings in favour of a glorification of her intellectual virtues. For instance, she immediately recognises Liforinus when he arrives in France disguised as a foreign prince.[11] Although Nitida eventually agrees to marry him, she does not endure any abuse or subversion of the *status quo*. Thus, the saga contains all the typical elements of *meykónga sögur*, yet it clearly subverts the motif's defining traits and outcomes. This approach creates a unique story where the noble protagonist diverges from both the passive female models in most *riddarasögur* and the cruel figures in other *meykónga sögur*. By celebrating an enlightened female ruler who overcomes obstacles through intellect, the saga stands out as a significant example of the literary experimentation that emerged in Iceland towards the end of the thirteenth century. It reflects a conscious process of renewing literary canons, drawing on the stylistic features of contemporary mainland literature while adapting them to new perspectives.

The initial description of Nitida is rich with elements that echo late medieval Marian iconography, contrasting with the focus on the youth and training of the male protagonist typical of *riddarasögur*.[12] She is presented as

**11** *"Liforinus kóngur" segir hún, "legg af þér dularkufl þinn. Hinn fyrsta dag er þú komst kennda ég þig"* (McDonald 2010, 140; "'King Liforinus', [she said], 'remove your cloak of disguise. I knew you the first day you came'", 141).

**12** The *Heldenjugend* – or *Auszug der Helden* – is among the structural elements of Icelandic *riddarasögur* defined by Van Nahl 1981 and Glauser 1983. In *NS*, this section is replaced by a description of the maiden-king that inspires admiration. On Marian iconography, cf. Larson 2013.

> vitur og væn, ljós og rjóð í andliti þvílíkast sem hin rauða rósa væri samtemprað við snjóhvíta lileam (McDonald 2010, 124)
>
> wise and fair, her face bright and rosy just as if the red rose had been mingled with a snow-white lily (125)

with bright eyes, pale skin, and long golden hair that would cover her whole body. She is as smart as *hinn fróðasti klerkur* (124; "the wisest scholar", 125) and has such soothing voice that *hún svæfði fugla og fiska, dýr og öll jarðlig kvikindi* (124; "it made birds, fish, wild animals, and all worldly creatures sleep", 125). Finally, she reigns over France with *friði og farsæld* (124; "peace and prosperity", 125).

Not only does Nitida inspire devotion, but she is also imbued with symbolism typically associated with the Virgin Mary, beginning with the use of rose and lily imagery to describe her complexion (Larson 2013, 306-7). Marian iconography employed floral metaphors for the Virgin's purity, with her chastity symbolising high moral calibre, often represented by the image of a thriving, inaccessible garden, a *hortus conclusus* (Frye 1990, 152-3). Originally derived from the Song of Songs (4,12), the motif evolved into a symbol for Mary's immaculate body and was applied in various contexts, both religious and secular, to convey an ideal of pure femininity (Larson 2013, 303-4).[13] This tradition was known in Iceland, as evidenced by the skaldic poem *Lilja* (Lily), attributed to the ecclesiastic Eysteinn Ásgrímsson (first half of the 14th c.), where the lily represents Mary herself.[14]

## 3 Visio: An Example of Sacred Design

Despite the symbolism associated with Nitida's appearance, the privileged landscape she encounters and interacts with appears to carry the most interesting allegorical meanings in the saga. Although Visio is located near the North Pole, its morphology and nature highlight elements reminiscent of the Garden of Eden (or Terrestrial Paradise) and other idealised locations from various literary traditions (e.g. Avalon in the Arthurian cycle):[15]

**13** For an English translation of the Song, see Coogan 2010, 950-9. For a recent contribution on the re-elaborations of the Song between the twelfth and the seventeenth centuries, cf. Caporicci 2024. One significant example is the *Roman de la Rose*, where a walled garden is presented to a lover in a dream. The place is idyllic, with plants, trees, flowers, and a source of water, and a symbol of virginity. The rose represents the ideal lady (Dahlberg 1995, 32).

**14** Cf. Ármann Jakobsson 2015, 162-3.

**15** Barnes (2006) explains the contradiction of Visio's location as a strategy of the author to develop a 'counter-cosmography'. Placing this *locus amoenus* near the North

> [Þau] ganga síðan upp um eyna þar til er þau finna vatnið. Þau sjá einn bát fljótandi, taka hann og róa út í hólminn. Þar voru margar eikur með fagri fruckt og ágætum eplum. Sem þau fram koma í miðjan hólman sjá þau eitt steinker með fjórum hornum. Kerið var fullt af vatni; sinn steinn var í hverju horni kersins. Meykóngur leit í steinana; hún sá þá um allar hálfar veraldarinnar. (McDonald 2010, 124)

> [They] walked up across the island until they found the lake. They saw a boat floating there, took it, and rowed out to the islet, where there were many oaks with beautiful fruit and fine apples. When they came to the middle of the islet, they saw a stone vessel with four corners. The vessel was full of water, and there was a stone in each corner of the vessel. The maiden-king looked into the stones; then she saw all the regions of the world. (125)

The most notable aspect of this description is the concentric arrangement of Visio around the water vessel that triggers Nitida's vision. The site features a central lake with a smaller islet in its centre, and at the heart of this islet lies the container filled with water. Later in the saga, each magic stone is said to correspond to a cardinal point, thereby activating a vision of one quadrant of the world (McDonald 2010, 140-1). The Garden of Eden in the Judeo-Christian tradition is generally depicted as a microcosm associated with metaphysical experiences (Helms 2002). Mircea Eliade characterises such liminal places as the most primitive examples of sacred space in human history. These natural sanctuaries – comprising water, trees, and stones – catalyse manifestations of the sacred known as 'hierophanies' (Eliade 1964, 16, 230). Nitida's transcendental experience is situated within a flourishing and delimited landscape, consisting of these three elements centred around a focal point (the vessel) endowed with symbolic significance, which activates a vision of the world.

This configuration seems to have been a common feature across various civilizations and cults, including Judeo-Christianity, due to its archetypal nature (Eliade 1965, 43-7). According to Eliade, the centre of this sacred space includes either artificial or natural altars – such as the rock of the Greek *omphalós* in Delphi – enclosed and in alignment with the four cardinal points (1964, 233). This quadripartite arrangement imitates the structure of the cosmos on a microscopic scale, reflecting both the four directions and a primordial landscape:

Pole may stimulate a positive evaluation of the northern countries, despite their distance from the poles of Christianity (e.g. Jerusalem and the Holy Sepulchre). As regards Avalon, it is associated to Morgan le Fay and her healing powers, but it is also described as a fortunate island full of apple trees (cf. Flood 2015, 86).

> Le 'lieu sacré' est un microcosme parce qu'il répète le paysage cosmique; parce qu'il est un reflet du Tout. (1964, 234)

Therefore, it is not surprising that the island in *NS* serves as a catalyst of macroscopic visions and universal knowledge.

The descriptions of Terrestrial Paradise found in Old Norse sources share notable similarities with Visio. For instance, the loose adaptation of the Old Testament known as *Stjórn* (Guidance) includes a rewriting of Genesis's description of Eden which places a lake at the centre:

> Paraðisus […] er allskyns viðum ok aldintréum auðgaðr. Hann hefr í sér lífstré. […] Í miðri paraðis sprettr upp eitt mikit vatn þat sem nogu dǫggvir allan aldinviðinn. (*Stjórn*, Mosebog 1, 11)[16]

> Paradise […] is rich of all kinds of woods and fruit trees, including the Tree of Life. […] In the middle of Paradise lies a large lake that sufficiently dews all the fruit trees.

Besides religious literature, another description of the Garden is featured in the geographical treatise found in København, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, AM 194 8vo (1387), which states that *fagr skógr* […] *er í miðri Paradiso* (Kålund, Beckman 1908, 4; "a beautiful forest is in the middle of Paradise", Barnes 2014, 37). Finally, the didactic text *Konungs skuggsjá* (The King's Mirror, also known as *Speculum regale*) emphasises the presence of apples and their role in attaining superior knowledge:

> Tré þat hit fagra […] í miðri Paradiso með girnilegum eplum. Þat heitir vísinda tré. En aldin þat er tré þat ber þá heita þau froðleiks epli. (Finnur Jónsson 1920, 189)

> That beautiful tree […] in the middle of Paradise with delicious apples. That is called Tree of Knowledge. And the fruit that the tree bears are called apples of knowledge.

In all instances, the richness of a *locus amoenus* and the importance of the central point are emphasised, supporting Eliade's theories on the organization of sacred space and suggesting a religious influence in this passage of *NS*.

As noted above, the Judeo-Christian tradition was well-acquainted with spatial configurations based on circularity and sacred centres.[17]

16 For a critical edition, see Astås 2009.

17 Many early Christian churches and sanctuaries were built on concentric patterns, especially in Byzantium (cf. Shalev-Hurvitz 2015).

For instance, a concentric and quadripartite pattern underpinned many representations of Jerusalem as the centre of the world (Simek 1990, 515-17). One building within the city was believed to mark the exact *umbilicus mundi*, namely the Holy Sepulchre. A circular plan for this church was already registered in the seventh century by the Irish monk Adomnán of Iona (628-704), who recounted a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in his *De locis sanctis* (I, 1-3; cf. Meehan 1958, 40-8). Here, the Sepulchre is circular, featuring four concentric walls, four entrances aligned with the cardinal directions, and a dome with a central opening, corresponding to the world's navel, which allows sunlight to enter. Some manuscripts of the *De locis* include drawings of the Sepulchre that closely resemble the morphology of Visio, such as Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Codex 458 (f. 4*v*), and Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, Codex Aug. Perg. 129 (f. 10*r*).[18]

Adomnán's descriptions enjoyed great popularity throughout the Middle Ages, fuelling western fantasies about the Holy Land as the ultimate object of desire, especially during the crusading expeditions. In the fifteenth century, literary depictions of the Sepulchre continued to reflect the architecture found in *De locis*. A notable example is the history of the crusades by Sébastien Mamerot (1418-1478) titled *Les Passages d'outremer*:

> Vers orient est assize l'eglise du Saint Sepulcre faicte en forme ronde […]. De puis qu'ilz en eurent sa seigneurie, par ce qu'il leur sembla que lieu, place et eglise de tant grant sanctite estoit trop petitement ouvrez et fais. Ilz y firent une nouvelle encainte et closture moult belle et moult haulte et de tres riche et forte ouvre qui enclost et contient dedens sou la premiere eglise. (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, ms. français 5594, f. 87bis*r*; Author's transcription)

> On the east slope is situated the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which is round in shape […]. After our men assumed the lordship, it seemed to them that the place and the space and the church itself were too mean, having regard to their sanctity, and they raised there a new outer wall and a fine and high enclosure, of most elaborate workmanship, which encompassed and contained the first church. (Delcourt, Masanes, Quéruel 2016, 297, 300)

Although Adomnán may not have been Mamerot's direct source, the passage still conveys the idea that a place gains greater sacredness when enclosed and centred around a focal point – i.e. Christ's tomb.

**18** The quadripartition created by the alignment of the Sepulchre's doors with the cardinal directions has been rendered graphically by Spinazzè 2018, 247.

The church was well-known in the West, so much so that it is also referenced in the geographical treatise in AM 194 8vo.[19] The codex does not explicitly mention concentric architectures; however, the information provided reflects the main characteristics attributed to the Sepulchre by Adomnán:

> Þar er kirkia su er grof drottins er i […] hon er opin ofan yfir grofinni þar er midr heimr þar skinn sol iamt or himni ofan of Iohannis messo. (ff. 15*r*-15*v*; transcription by Simek 1990, 483)
>
> There is a church there, where the tomb of Our Lord stands […] there is an opening above the tomb and that is the centre of the world, where the sun shines directly on the tomb on the day of the mass of Saint John.

It is likely that the author of *NS* was familiar with the Holy Sepulchre, especially considering the widespread influence of crusading ideology in Western Europe and the Christian fantasies of revenge against the Islamic world – notably, Nitida's most formidable adversaries are the Muslims from Serkland.[20] Although the original *riddarasögur* often downplay the religious militancy present in much continental literature, such as the *chansons de geste*, this does not preclude the presence of religious ideology in *NS* (McDonald Werronen 2016, 74).

On Visio, the alignment of the stones with the four directions introduces a quadripartite element to the concentric scheme, which, according to Eliade, was an integral aspect of cosmological architectures (1965, 45). Medieval *mappae mundi* such as Hereford, Psalter, and Ebstorf maps were constructed on similar concentric patterns, with Jerusalem at the centre of the world, Christ at the top, and God above him (Woodward 1987, 340). This arrangement reflects the centrality of both the Holy Land and the divine principle, albeit God lies on a higher cosmic plain. The application of these spatial schemes in cartography can be understood through the Christian notion of the world as the sacred space *par excellence* as a manifestation of God's word. One of the few extant Icelandic *mappae mundi* exhibits this very structure, further evidencing the widespread nature of this spatial approach already in the thirteenth century.[21]

**19** Icelandic sources present four maps of Jerusalem based on a concentric and quadripartite scheme (cf. Simek 2018, 578-9).

**20** The Sepulchre also features as a setting in *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* (Saga of Rémundr the Emperor's Son), when the protagonist stops there and pays homage to Christ (Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1954, 334-6).

**21** Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, GKS 1814 4to, f. 6*v*. For the extant Icelandic *mappae mundi*, see Kedwards 2020.

Finally, the short tale *Rauðúlfs þáttr*, an interpolation of *Ólafs saga helga* (Saga of St. Ólafr), presents this sacred configuration applied to a building which is closely comparable to Visio. The *þáttr* focuses on King Ólafr II of Norway (995-1030), who was canonised and played a pivotal role in the conversion of Scandinavia, and his friend Rauðúlfr, a mysterious yet hospitable and wise man. After a feast hosted by Rauðúlfr, Ólafr and his men are invited to spend the night in a house with a unique plan. It is a circular, rotating structure, featuring four equidistant entrances and divided by two corridors that intersect at the centre (Turville-Petre 1947, 22-4). There lies Ólafr's private room, encircled by twenty equidistant pillars and furnished with a square bed. The king can observe the house's dome at night, which is adorned with images of the whole world. Due to the rotation mechanism, Ólafr enjoys a panoptic view of Creation in motion.[22]

## 4 Origin and Function of a Spatial Paradigm

The examples provided thus far underscore the epiphanic potential of a spatial paradigm based on concentricity and quadripartition as a reflection of the structure of the cosmos. This paradigm was widespread in medieval Christian Europe, as evidenced by the depictions of Jerusalem and the Sepulchre, as well as by the structure of many *mappae mundi*. It is likely that the Christian world encountered and adapted this concept from its early days, possibly through the influence of Eastern mandalas or through the twelfth-century revival of Aristotelian and Ptolemaic concentric cosmology. The cultural élites were generally acquainted with this spatial design, as can be seen in the cosmology of the *Divine Comedy*, by the Italian Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), which features a complex concentric system of spheres revolving around God (Mazzotta 2005). Similar mandala-like patterns in a Christian context are also found in Germany and France, especially in the work of mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) and Hugh of Saint-Victor (1096-1141).[23] According to Árni Einarsson's study on *Rauðúlfs þáttr*, Hildegard's *Liber divinorum operum* may have been known at least indirectly in thirteenth-century Iceland, inspiring the mystical symbolism of the rotating house as well as the dream vision experienced by Ólafr on the same night (Árni Einarsson 2001, 377-8). Hildegard's illustrations, such as the "Cycle

22 For a more detailed analysis of the passage, see Árni Einarsson 2001; on this motif, cf. Ghiroldi 2022, 71.

23 The concept of *primum mobile*, derived from the Aristotelian system, finds correspondence in the idea of God as the One principle putting the universe to motion (Simek 1992, 8-10). On the medieval concentric image of the cosmos, cf. Grant 2013.

of the Seasons" and the "Universal Man" (Lucca, Biblioteca Statale, MS 1942; 13th c.; ff. 38*r* and 9*r*, respectively), are often based on concentric schemes and divisions into quarters. These configurations are associated with the experience of the *visio Dei*, as they come to Hildegard during moments of transcendence.[24] Similar mandala-like designs appear in Hugh of Saint-Victor's *De arca Noe mystica*, already in Chapter 1, where the ascetic experience is linked to concentric circles drawn around a square centre (Zinn 1973).[25]

The Augustinian school of Saint-Victor in Paris played a significant role as a bridge between Icelandic and continental clergy, facilitating the transmission of texts and knowledge. It is believed that Þorlákr Þórhallsson (1133-1193), patron of Iceland, received his education in Augustinian philosophy at Saint-Victor and in Lincoln, England, alongside other Icelandic monks.[26] Knowledge of Christian mysticism was likely cultivated in the numerous Augustinian monasteries that were also established in Iceland. This type of knowledge subsequently found an ideal outlet in the sagas, particularly in the original *riddarasögur*, which afforded authors a notable degree of creative freedom.

*Rauðúlfs þáttr* and *NS* are examples of the incorporation of this spatial paradigm in Iceland, prompting reflections on the reasons for its presence in the narratives. Árni Einarsson underlines the function of this sacred space in elevating the moral virtues of the characters positioned at the centre of the microcosm:

> What stands out is the noble cosmological position taken by St. Olaf, both in terms of the macrocosmos and the microcosmos, the position of Christ. (Árni Einarsson 2001, 400)

Although Nitida is not a saint, she embodies an ideal of femininity that contrasts with the standards of Icelandic *riddarasögur* and offers an alternative to patriarchal authority. This glorification is achieved by placing her at the centre of Visio as a microcosm, which endows her with a universal perspective on the world.

The acquisition of such extensive knowledge aligns with monarchic ideals prevalent in the late Middle Ages. This is evidenced by the proliferation of didactic works like *Konungs skuggsjá*, designed to educate royal heirs with moral instructions while condensing all

**24** "It is the shape of the wheel that presented for Hildegard the symbol of universal proportion. […] The ultimate animating power of the totality of the wheel comes from God. […] Hildegard measures the micro world of humans against the macro world that surrounds it in complete proportion" (Escot 1993, 35-6; cf. also Newman 2002).

**25** For an edition and commentary of the text, see Rudolph 2014.

**26** The Victorine school distinguished itself for a focus on mysticism, Neoplatonic influences, and the promotion of liberal arts. For a further analysis of the exchanges between Iceland and Saint-Victor, see Bullitta 2024. For a focus on Lincoln, see Etheridge 2021.

available knowledge into one medium. Nitida and Liforinus exemplify this trend, as they are both noble recipients of the panoptic vision. Although the defence of France from the Muslims requires India's military support, *NS* does not promote a form of power based on violence and physical prowess.[27] On the contrary, the saga endorses a sovereignty legitimised by moral virtues and alliances between equals, which makes it a most atypical *riddarasaga*.

## 5 Conclusions

A paradigm of sacred space was adopted in learned religious environments throughout Europe, particularly within the mystical tradition, and likely transmitted to Scandinavia and Iceland through direct contacts with both continental and insular educational institutions. In the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus, *NS* and *Rauðúlfs þáttr* are notable for using this configuration to celebrate their protagonists as positive role models. In *NS*, the island Visio carries features of concentricity and quadripartition that reflect the structure of the universe on a microscopic level, catalysing macrocosmic visions of the world; in the *þáttr*, the rotating house and its decorated dome serve the same function.

*NS* stands out for its innovative approach, offering a more secular interpretation of this paradigm by positioning a female leader at the centre of the microcosmic design. Consequently, *NS* emerges as a multifaceted text with various levels of interpretation, as is often the case with original *riddarasögur*. It demonstrates a solid knowledge of foreign traditions adapted to indigenous narrative forms, blending erudite materials from Latin sources with elements of chivalric romances and local lore in a surprising instance of 'biculturalism' (Barnes 2014, 10). The complexity of *riddarasögur* like *NS* reflects the commitment of Icelandic authors to expand the local literary landscape by engaging with contemporary trends while preserving traits of originality and intellectual emancipation.

*NS* illustrates the need for fourteenth-century Icelanders to redefine social boundaries and explore different solutions to address emerging anxieties or desires, including the involvement of women in the administration of power. Under Norwegian rule, a new aristocracy consolidated their dominance, and literature played a crucial role for the promotion of their ideology. The educated élite likely possessed the tools to interpret the messages and behavioural

27 Liforinus shows reluctance to continue fighting against Ingi and offers him a truce. He also provides him with medical attention and consents to his marriage with his sister, Sýjalín (McDonald 2010, 142-3).

models presented by *riddarasögur* also via the adoption of allegories like Visio. As Geraldine Barnes notes,

> [they] were familiar with both learned tradition and traditional lore and accustomed to moving back and forth between them in creative literary composition. (2014, 10-11)

Therefore, the use of microcosmic spatial architectures to catalyse macrocosmic visions and glorify their recipients is not surprising. On the contrary, these allegories represent some of the authors' most brilliant strategies for deepening the evaluation of characters, their intentions, and the values they embodied.

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