

The survival of medieval Christianity in the Icelandic folktale

Apart from some beginnings in the times of Árni Magnússon, most Icelandic folktales were collected between the mid-19th and the mid-20th century. As in the case of the Grimm tales in Germany, the pioneering collection, that of Jón Árnason, also became something of a classic, but a great mass of material has been published since his Leipzig edition of 1862-4, much of it, unfortunately, inaccessible to a researcher remote from Iceland.

Despite the comparative lateness of written recording, any reader of these tales will be struck by the amount of continuity that connects them with the medieval narrative tradition of the sögur, naturally the fornaldar sögur with their many phantastic elements more directly than the Íslendinga sögur. On the level of supernatural personnel, giants and trolls are much the same as in the old sources, the huldufólk, the elves, have taken over from the vættir and come much to the fore, and a specifically Christian demonology has been added with Satan and his helpers, kölski and his púkar. The haunting dead, the draugar, are as prevalent as ever, and fearlessness, strength and some elements of magic are still needed to deal with them. Runes are still being used for magic purposes. On the level of style, there is an interspersing of verse, and many formulae have a familiar ring, e.g. for bridging time ("segir nú ekki af.., fyrr en..", "nú er þar til máls að taka, að..", "líður nú veturinn..", "ber ei till tíðinda.., fyrr en.."), for termination ("lykur svo sögu þessari"), for first meetings ("Hann heilsar henni kurteisliga, en hún tók vel kvæðju hans"), for hospitality ("Vorur þar um nóttina í góðum fagnaði", "Var Sigurður hjá kóngi í góðu yfirlæti", "að veizlunni endaðri eru höfðingjar með gjöfum út leystir"), for assent ("Hann lét vel yfir því", "segist það gjarnan þiggja vilja"), for decision-making ("hún segir hann ráða skuli").

One consequence of this continuity of narrative tradition is that the Icelandic folktale is to a much greater extent localised and personalised than elsewhere. It is true that we get a fair number of impersonal international magic tales under the heading Ávintýri in the collections and international popular tales as Kímnisögur, but they are not a large group compared to

the mass of localised legends, with many compromises between fairy-tale stereotypes and the authenticity conventions of the saga tradition.

However, it is not these aspects of literary continuity I wish to discuss today but, in accordance with the theme of the conference, the question whether these popular traditions contain traces of medieval Christianity centuries after the adoption, admittedly a distinctly unenthusiastic adoption, of the Lutheran faith. I have to warn you that I am not concerned with tracing, in customary and safe philological manner, tale X to a presumptive source or forerunner in saga Y. Rather, I am concerned with attitudes manifested in folktales, and for this purpose I have to make some pretty broad assumptions as to what medieval Catholicism and what Lutheranism or Protestantism stand for.

One basic tenet of Lutheranism was that religion was a matter of an individual's direct relationship with God, an inner and spiritual relationship to which the individual brought contrition and faith and God brought mercy and guidance. This spiritualisation of religion made for a lot of redundancies both in the material and in the supernatural spheres. In the physical world, a lot of churches, chapels, monastic houses, wayside shrines, centres of pilgrimage, statues and mementos were no longer needed; a city like Visby on Gotland is still living testimony to the ruin which resulted from changed attitudes. A similar depopulation occurred in the spiritual world. Where for a medieval Christian a host of helpers and guardian spirits had mediated between him and a remote God, angels, martyrs, saints with a wide range of specialisation for both bodily and mental ills, above all the Virgin Mary, both perfectly human and perfectly divine, these were all swept aside, not as false or worthless but as inconsequential and as potential obstacles or at least distractions in the path of free and direct communication.

In this respect the Lutheran cleansing of the temple seems to have been very effective. The sections entitled "Helgir menn" or "Helgisögur" are the meagrest in the folktale collections. Jón Árnason claims (II 27) that the only living Icelandic folktale about the Virgin Mary is the one that explains why the

ptarmigan has hairy legs. The Virgin ordered all birds to walk through fire, and in the process the feathers on their legs and feet were burned off. The ptarmigan was too chicken-hearted or refractory and refused, and hence was cursed to fall an easy prey to the falcon. The Virgin has here, as is evident, no particularly Christian dimension but is simply a power whose command cannot be resisted with impunity. This is not entirely unique in folktales; the Grimm tale Marienkind (KHM 3) would be a parallel. In other tales her role is purely incidental, as for instance in "Kerling vill hafa nokkuð fyrir snúð sinn" (JÁ II 479) where a foolish couple wishes to bring the Virgin Mary the remainder of their porridge and break their necks in the process of climbing to heaven.

The one saint that has generally survived best in the folktales of Protestant countries is St. Peter, often as Christ's companion in timeless walks on earth, less frequently as an independent miracle-worker or supernatural helper. In this respect, too, Icelandic collections yield a largely negative result. A short etiological tale, as devoid of Christian connotations as the one about the ptarmigan, may serve as an example: Christ and St. Peter walk along the sea-shore. Christ spits into the sea, and the result becomes rauðmaginn, the male lumpsucker. Peter does the same, and his spit turns into grásleppan, the female lumpsucker. The devil, who walks after them, tries his luck, but all he achieves is marglyttan, the jellyfish. It is possible that the collectors excluded some material as non-Icelandic. JÁ (II 31ff.) gives a longish story about St. Vitus as a "sýnishorn af útlendu ævintýri, and it is true that it bears the character of a translated written source and not of a genuine folktale. There is the occasional linguistic echo of the cult of saints, as when it is said of a girl that she kept a certain ring "like a holy relic" (eins og helgan dóm; Gr.V 198).

Angels, too, play only a minor part in the folktales. One example, a didactic tale recorded by Ólafur Davíðsson (II 314): A priest promises his congregation to enumerate God's charitable deeds to mankind in his next sermon. On his way home he finds a white-clad youngster busy bailing out the sea with a shell -

an angel who points out that this enterprise is no more foolish than what the priest proposed to do.

The devil and his helpers, on the other hand, are alive and well in the folktales, but so they are in mainland Scandinavia and on the Continent. Often the devil enters into a bargain with a person and ends up as inevitably tricked as the giant smiör who built Ásgarð for the gods according to the Gylfaginning. It is well known that the dumb devil in many roles simply succeeded the dumb giants of the pre-Christian world.

While the host of beings that a medieval Christian could call upon to intercede and mediate for him and to help him both in practical and in spiritual difficulties hardly seems to have left a trace, another source of strength in anxiety has proved more durable: the innate power of consecrated localities and objects, holy places and holy things. Here again, Lutheranism meant a clean break with the past, a denial of the division into sacred and profane. No particular holiness was now attached to persons, buildings or objects; in the rigorous spiritualism of the new faith, no vessel had any spiritual qualities divorced from its content, and if the spirit was liberated in faith, the whole of creation was holy. With the Scandinavians in their majority being farmers with a strong attachment to familiar places and the qualities traditionally associated with them, the quasi-magic belief in the properties of certain localities and substances must have been harder to uproot; the Icelandic belief in clearly localised fairies, and the mainland Scandinavian one in helligkilder, are non-Christian and Christian facets, respectively, of the same attitude. Here, however, I am only concerned with a continued belief in the power of church-related places and objects.

First two examples, taken from typical fairytale contexts, of both the punitive and the protective power of the eucharist. Sigurður blindi (JÁ V 142ff.) comes in the course of his wanderings to a court where the princess is inexplicably and incurably ill. As he has mastered the language of animals and birds, he learns the cause from the conversation of two ravens: the princess, out of haughtiness, had refused to share the

eucharist with ordinary people. Her condition improves immediately when Sigurður makes her see the wrongness of her conduct. In Sagan af kóngsdótturinni og köleka (JÁ V 244ff.) a princess has been promised to the devil; the hero offers to accompany her there, but every time he first makes her take the sacrament, whereupon the devil refuses to accept her as she has poison in her mouth, as he puts it, and the third time the hero takes a cup of the holy wine along and threatens to pour it over the devil unless he signs a formal annulment of his claim. In tales of this kind - princesses won and maidens rescued - an ogre is normally responsible for the situation which then is rectified by the hero, and religion has no part in the normal tale of magic. It may again be the blurring of the supernatural and the natural in the Icelandic folktale which explains the intrusion of real-world ingredients, here in the form of the medieval belief in the magic power of the eucharist.

The last-mentioned episode is an incidence of the "cheated devil", and here the use of consecrated objects that the devil cannot touch is probably fairly widespread outside of Iceland, too. Another example where the magic objects may be more attuned to Protestant preferences is provided by Túnið á Tindum (JÁ II 20f.), where the devil loses his wager with the farmer to mow his homefield in the course of one night because the farmer has put the bible and the psalter on two knolls in the midst of the field.

Consecrated ground plays a part in many contexts, some of them light-hearted ones. In one of the many anecdotes associated with Sæmundur fróði (JÁ I 470), Sæmundur escapes the devil by having himself buried in consecrated ground (a reduced form of AI 429 'Hiding from the Devil'). In another one a shepherd and the devil are seesawing on the wall of the churchyard; whoever touches the ground first wins. The devil cannot touch it because he is inside the wall and hence the ground is consecrated. When Sæmundur comes and takes the shepherd off the other side because the time is up, the devil drops to the ground and burns himself terribly. An even worse experience for the devil occurred when Sæmundur caught him in fly form, tied him up in a bag and put

him on the altar while he was officiating.

In a more tragic story involving denied burial in consecrated ground (Miklabæjar-Solveig, JÁ I 264ff.), a girl unhappily in love with the priest whose servant she is and killing herself in a state of derangement, haunts him when she is not allowed into the churchyard, swearing that she will keep him, too, out of consecrated ground, and manages to get him when he ventures out unaccompanied. Another draugur, Djárninn á Myrká (JÁ I 270ff.), almost succeeds in drawing the girl he loved into his grave but at the last moment she manages to grab the bell-rope and ring the church-bell, and that immediately sends the draugur back into his resting-place. Bell-ringing is also the standard solution when the dead are raised by magic incantation and are getting out of hand; stories of such uppvakningar abound. In the story of the young man who finally escaped the giantess who had stolen and fostered him (Loppa og Jón Loppufóstri, JÁ I 182f.), it is the ringing of the church-bell of Illugastaðir that saves him from her pursuit, although not from subsequent death from exhaustion. Again, in the more light-hearted vein of Sæmundur's dealing with the devil, his ringing of the bell causes the devil's trick (carrying water in a crate) to fail (JÁ I 482). The cross or crucifix, traditionally such a trusty weapon when dealing with the devil, would not seem to have been much in use in Iceland.

Much more important than the consecration of objects and places was, in medieval and still in modern Catholic thinking, the consecration of persons. Ultimately based on Christ's words to St. Peter and the idea of apostolic succession, all consecrated members of the church were, so to say, divinely endowed by derivation, and despite occasional doubts the church has maintained that the sacred functions a priest exercises are not related to his personal worthiness or saintliness. His spiritual power, then, was not a personal emanation but flowed from the original act of consecration. In this respect, Lutheranism was probably the most radical breach with a thousand years of Christian tradition. While for practical purposes the idea of universal priesthood was quickly abandoned by the reformers - especially after the unhappy experience of the 1520s with

anabaptists, iconoclasts and rebellious peasants -, the Protestant churches never claimed any special status for the ordained members of the church. A priest was no different from any member of the congregation insofar as his personal spiritual state was also the measure of his effectiveness as a Christian. It goes without saying that this did not prevent him, in a purely social context, from acquiring a considerable measure of standing and authority, especially in the countryside where he often was the only official and the only educated man.

No doubt it is this latter aspect which also affects the role of the priest in the Icelandic folktale; until very recently, Iceland was, after all, a thinly populated land of farmers and fishermen. But it is more than that; the priest does, in these tales, keep something of the magic power that has been associated with him in most religions with the exception of Judaism and Protestantism where the poor man has to re-establish his credentials, so to say, every Sunday with an inspired sermon. In contrast, the Catholic priest is a daily miracle-worker by virtue of celebrating the mass, for while the miracle of transubstantiation is credited to God, the priest sets it off by his actions.

If the magic role of the priest is the rule rather than the exception in a world-historical context, it does not, by any means, flow from Icelandic traditions as a matter of course. The sögur, on the whole, while recognising and often attesting to the existence of magic, take a dim view of the sorcerer or magician, whether it be the fakir-like tricks of the berserks that made them unburnable and invulnerable, the conjuring-up of storms or fog or landslides or hallucinations, or direct actions resulting in the death or madness of another person. By such actions they put themselves outside the pale of the law and could be killed with impunity, usually stoned or burned or drowned since weapons would not bite their charmed lives. There are some exceptions, of course, such as the combination of Christian exorcism and heathen rites to get rid of the hauntings and killings at Fróðá in the Eyrbyggja. In the folk-tales, occasionally a need is felt to reconcile respectability with the practice of magic by asserting that someone used his

fjölkynggi only for good purposes, but on the whole there seems to be a surprisingly unquestioning acceptance of the use of magic in all sorts of situations. Sæmundur fróði, the most famous of the priestly magicians, is said, like other galdramen, to have acquired his expertise at the Black School, í Svarta-skóla, which may have been the Sorbonne but was apparently run by the devil himself. There is an element here of the folktale situation of the magician's pupil who outwits his master (AF 325), which enabled Sæmundur in later life to keep a ready supply of devil servants both for difficult tasks, like Aladdin calling the serving spirits of his magic lamp, and for odd jobs around the house. He had a special whistle for the purpose (JÁ I 479), whereas Séra Eiríkur, who was priest at Vogsósar at the end of the 17th century, used a handbook, which he only had to open to call the serving devils. Others saved their magic powers for the odd occasion. Of the priest Guðbjartur flóki at Laufáss it is reported that he used his weather magic and his sjónhverfingar only against his superior, the Bishop of Hólar. But his son Þorkeill was credited with the composition of one of the great compendia of magic, the Gráskinna, so presumably the father was already a competent expert (JÁ I 492f.). It is true that there were sorcerers other than priests, but one needs only to run through the lists of "einstakir galdramenn" in JÁ I 468-599 and III 498-622 to see that the great majority of them were gentlemen of the cloth.

By and large, the priests seem to have used their magic powers for surprisingly mundane purposes - no doubt in keeping with the desires and expectations of the audience of such tales. Séra Eiríkur produced a snow bridge across a swollen river for the merchants who had offered him brännivín while he left a stingy party stranded where they were. Séra Hálfðan í Feili, while out fishing with his men, spirits the kettle of meat his wife has been cooking at home into the boat but has to give up a big flounder he caught instead (JÁ III 537). According to another tradition, it was hot blood-pudding he obtained from the kitchen of an old woman Ólúf (JÁ I 500); in both cases the disappearance of the flounder is given as the origin of the saying "The old woman will want something for her trouble"

(Hafa vill kerling nokkuð fyrir snúð sinn).

While this kind of magic would have both impressed and amused an audience, it was on the level of conjuring tricks. The business becomes more serious where the magic power is exercised not on objects or dumb devils but on people, living or dead. This could be done in an entirely philanthropic way, as in the instance where Séra Eiríkur decided to help a young man depressed by the prospect of his girlfriend leaving him (JÁ I 552). Séra Eiríkur, by an act of telepathic hypnosis, made the girl walk, in her nightie, all the way through the cold rainy night to his house and ask for shelter. He excused himself that all the beds were already taken; she would have to share a bed with someone else. In her miserable and frozen state she accepts anything, and her bed-companion turns out to be her former boyfriend. His warming company proves sufficient to patch up the relationship and becomes the foundation of a good marriage.

The real test however - and here the tales do not treat the matter lightly - was the field where both the Old and the New Testament, from the witch of Endor and the prophet Elisha to Christ's dealings with the young man at Nain and with Lazarus, offered some impressive precedents: the conjuring-up or bringing back of the dead. No doubt, Iceland with its rich tradition of haunting dead both in literature and in reality - the geographic-historical Handbook Landið þitt lists famous draugar on a par with famous chieftains, scholars and outlaws - almost invited such an exercise of priestly magic. Here, too, the reason for engaging in this risky activity could be entirely unselfish. The longest story told about Séra Hálfðan á Felli (JÁ I 501f.) concerns the island of Málmey in the Skaga-fjörð on which nobody, it was said, could stay for more than twenty years. One farmer, who did not believe in such superstitions, tempted fate by staying longer - with the result that his wife disappeared on Christmas Eve (a day even more fraught with danger in Iceland, it would seem, than on mainland Scandinavia). When all searches had proved fruitless, the farmer turned to Séra Hálfðan. The priest tells him to come to the churchyard on a certain night and takes him on a wild

ride to a far-off cliff. He makes the rock open, and two blue-clad women bring the missing wife out, transformed however into a troll-like creature; only the part of the forehead where she has received the sign of the cross at baptism was unchanged. After the women have disappeared into the rock again the priest "seals" it safely - presumably to prevent the wife from haunting her husband. This sealed door is still said to be recognisable by the different colour of the rock. Séra Eiríkur, on the other hand, succeeded on two occasions to recuperate a young wife snatched by some óvættir, although on one occasion a certain amount of treatment was necessary (e.g., to restore her lost memory) before she could be returned to her husband (JÁ I 556ff.). He talked to the óvættir very much as their master: "látið gamla Eirík aldrei fréttu að þið gjörið það oftár, og lofið því nú!" It may be a coincidence, but one cannot help thinking of "Gamle-Erik" as a euphemism for the devil in mainland Scandinavia, and there is indeed a fine line between the spheres of authority of the devil and the priest, as in cases of both being served by púkar. It hardly surprises that on his deathbed Séra Eiríkur was anything but sure whether the white or the black bird to be seen after his death was to win. As it turned out, the heavenly bird got the upper hand (JÁ I 565), but the story itself shows the ambivalence felt vis-à-vis the priest-magician.

Nowhere is the identification of priesthood and magic lore stronger than in the various accounts where theology students in Hólar or Skálholt, occasionally a galdramaðr who was already a priest, conjure up dead clergy in order to obtain their magic secrets. Most famous of such uppvakningar was the ill-fated attempt by the early-18th century Galdra-Loftur who, after assiduously studying Gráskinna, decided to conjure up Bishop Gottskálk, one of the last Catholic bishops of Hólar, who had taken the priceless Rauðskinna into his grave (JÁ I 572-5). But the attempt fails because Loftur's companion loses heart and rings the bell so that all the dead bishops disappear again. Loftur never quite recovers from the experience, fears to be alone and in the dark and disappears during lent, presumably fetched by the devil, as he had predicted himself. More

successful were the three students Bogi, Magnús and Eiríkur in Skálholt (JÁ I 544) who wake up all the dead in the churchyard until the man who had Gráskinna appears; between the three of them they manage to grab at least part of the book. Of the three, only Bogi comes to a bad end; the other two become priests, Eiríkur, as we have heard, at Vogsósar, where he managed to secure a leaf from another book of magic from a dead man.

This notion of certain books being sources of power may strike us as a peculiarly Icelandic preoccupation but it is a common enough concept associated with all witchcraft. It was, of course, not the printed and mass-produced book but the book in manuscript form where one could conceive of a personalised and almost physical transfer of knowledge and spirit in the act of writing, and where such possessions could be considered unique and priceless. In Iceland, where printed books until far into modern times were rare and the writing and copying of books by hand was practiced long into the 19th century, such 'medieval' notions obviously had a much better chance of survival. They connect with genuinely medieval anecdotes such as the one in Jóns þáttur Ögmundssonar where, as a student in Paris, the future bishop of Skálholt unleashes a terrible storm when he sneaks up to the lectern in the absence of his teacher and starts reading from the book he finds there.

One last point which connects magic, medieval Christianity and Icelandic folktales is the power of the spoken word or, rather, the powerful formula. Here again, Lutheranism has made an almost clean sweep; the words said at holy communion and at baptism are practically the only magic formulae allowed to survive, unless one includes the Lord's Prayer and the words of blessing taken from St. Paul. The Catholic church had a much richer store of these, and the fact that until recently they were all spoken in Latin undoubtedly added to their psychological effectiveness. Indeed, there are still words prescribed for directly magical purposes such as the rite of exorcism. How seriously the spoken word was taken in Old Iceland in secular contexts is attested by the sanctions for nið or even love songs and the number of slayings in return for scurrilous verses. The folktales show little evidence of the use of religious formulae

but they give testimony to the magic strength of certain words in other ways. The conjuring up of the dead out of their graves or of the fairies out of their rocks is always primarily a matter of verbal magic, circling the place counter-clockwise or using a wand being optional extras. The giantesses who stole the boy later known as Tröllla-Láfi burn their fingers when they try to touch him because Bishop Oddr Einarsson prays for him (JÁ I 184f.). An old woman who is forever complaining about her lot accepts the offer of a stranger - the devil in disguise - to bring her to a better place. He carries her on his back, and as the night is cold she gets increasingly uncomfortable and finally asks God to save her from freezing. At the word "God" the fiend sinks into the ground and leaves her behind alone (JÁ II 17f.). Inversely, the draugur in Djákninn á Myrká cannot call his girlfriend by her real name, Guðrun, because "guð" would probably send him back into the grave, so he calls her Garún.

I do not wish to make excessive claims for the survival of medieval Christianity in the Icelandic folktale. The elements I enumerated occur in a minority of tales, and they are not exclusive to Iceland. One only has to go to the chapters "Trollkunniga och 'klarsynta' präster" and "Prästen och djävulen" in K. G. Olofsson's collection Prästhistorier (Lund 1942) to find numerous parallels from mainland Scandinavia. Yet the medieval flavour is stronger in the Icelandic tales - or is it simply that the authoritative social position of the priest in the Iceland of the past has combined with a more general acceptance of supernatural occurrences, especially in the form of draugar, with a superstitious respect for bookish learning and with a belief in the power of the spoken word, to create that impression?

Sources

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