

CONTRASTING CHRISTIAN AND PAGAN MOTIFS  
IN CERTAIN FAMILY SAGAS

In my article, "Structural patterns in the Eyrbyggja Saga and other sagas of the Conversion," I pointed out that a certain type of parallel structure is found in nearly all the Family Sagas set in the years spanning the Conversion of Iceland.<sup>1</sup> The first half of such a saga contains a number of incidents concerned with the pagan supernatural, which are balanced in the second half by an equal number of supernatural incidents, this time with a Christian bias. These incidents are arranged around the central pivot of the Conversion or some other incident of religious significance.

This contrast between Christian and pagan motifs is found in three areas of the supernatural in particular: in the figures of the witch, the ghost, and--to a lesser extent--the fylgja. In these three cases there is a pagan type, which is found only in pre-Christian parts of sagas, and a corresponding Christian type, found in parts of sagas where the action takes place after 999 A.D.

Witches in the Family Sagas fall into one of two types--the spákona (or spámaðr) or the fóstra (foster-mother).<sup>2</sup> Witches of the former type, who bear a certain resemblance to the witch of European tradition, can be either male or female, although women predominate. Their attributes are as follows: they can bring down darkness; they can make things appear to be other than they are; they can lay curses; they can alter the weather. And they all appear in pre-Christian parts of sagas.

As far as the first ability goes--that of conjuring up darkness--there are two examples in the Family Sagas.<sup>3</sup> In the Reykdale Saga Isgerðr, who is described as "mykill fyrir sér ok fjölkunnig mjök", comes to the aid of a young man whose beloved is about to be married to another (X, 192). In Harðar Saga ok Holmverja the witch waves a whip above her head and impenetrable darkness falls (I.S.12, 259).

The second attribute of witches was their ability to make things appear as other than they really were. People were not turned into animals or vice versa, but something was done to the eyes of the pursuer so that the pursued appeared as other than he really was.

The Icelandic term for this was sjónhverfing (lit. "sight-turning"). Two examples of this occur in Harðar Saga ok Holmverja. The first time the witch makes the three men who are being pursued look like three ashen chests; then she makes a herd of cattle look like advancing men, so as to scare the pursuers (I.S.12, 261-62). In the Eyrbyggja Saga Katla, the witch, makes her son look like a spindle, a goat, and a boar (IV, 51).

The third attribute is the laying of curses. In the early part of Njáls Saga Queen Gunnhildr, the witch-queen of Norway, lays a curse on Hrútr that he will not be able to achieve satisfaction with his wife--which in fact happens (XII, 21). In Egils Saga she lays a curse on Egill to prevent him from settling down, and he does not settle (II, 176). In Gísla Saga a magician is paid to cast a spell on an unknown murderer so that no chieftain will ever aid him, and later Gísli, the murderer, can find no chieftain to support him (VI, 56-69). The curse Þórveig lays on Kormákr in Kormáks Saga in retaliation for the killing of her sons also proves effective, for Kormákr rejects Steingerðr three times for no explicable reason. In the Eyrbyggja Saga Arnkell makes an unfortunate remark to the son of the witch he has brought to justice; she in return curses him, saying that more trouble will come to him from his father than ever her son got from her. And so it turns out, for, while alive, Þórólfr sets Arnkell and Snorri at odds with each other, and after death refuses to lie quiet in his grave (IV, 54). In Laxdæla the author says of a curse: "Mjök þykkir þetta atkvæði þá hafa hrinit." (V, 107)

The fourth motif is weather magic. Witches conjure up storms or similar phenomena to avenge themselves on people who have injured them. In Gísla Saga one such vengeful witch sends down an avalanche on the farm of the man who had fought with her son (VI, 59-60). In Vatnsdæla another witch causes a landslide (VIII, 96), and in the same saga a less malicious witch saves her lover from a duel by conjuring up a blizzard (VIII, 89). In Laxdæla there is a description of a family of magicians conjuring up a storm to wreck the boat of the man who had had them outlawed; as it weathers the storm, an uncharted reef suddenly appears and sinks it (V, 99-100). The same family also makes a child drop dead (V, 105-6). In the

Eyrbyggja Saga a betrayed husband pays a witch to conjure up a storm to prevent his wife's lover from visiting her; despite the storm, the lover reaches shelter safely (IV, 109-10).

Once Iceland has been converted to Christianity all these magical manifestations cease. There are no examples in the Family Sagas of darkness being conjured up or sjónhverfingar occurring. There is just one instance in Njála where the motif of the sjónhverfing seems to be taken up and rationalised: Hrappr, who has taken refuge on a ship, is hidden from Earl Hákon three times--once in a water-butt, once in the cargo, once in the sail; each time the earl realises where he had been hidden once he is back on shore--just as the pursuers of Katla's son realised how he had been hidden each time they had left the house. Similarly, despite the frequency with which curses occur in pagan parts of sagas, there is only one instance of one being laid after the Conversion, and then it comes from Glámr in Gretla, a supernatural being and a non-Christian revenant. In the Christian part of Eyrbyggja an element of choice and free will is introduced into what might otherwise be construed as a curse: Þorgunna almost seems to have laid a curse on her bed-clothes; however, had Þóroddr done as she requested and burned the bedding instead of giving it to his wife who coveted it, the household at Fróðá would probably have been spared all the strange events.

The case of weather-magic is similar. Whereas before the Conversion people attributed natural disasters--avalanches, landslides, blizzards, storms at sea--to the ill-will and magic of people who had a grudge against the victim, after the Conversion there are definite indications that believing such phenomena to be due to anything other than natural causes was regarded as smacking of heathenism. When Óláfr Tryggvason was preaching the faith in Norway, it was the pagans who attributed the bad weather at that time to the action of the old gods (V, 118). When a volcano erupts as Christianity is being preached in the Kristni Saga, the pagans attribute this to the action of the old gods, a notion which the more enlightened men of the time dismiss as nonsense (I.S.1, 270). The author of Vatnsdæla appears to be sceptical of a witch's ability to conjure up a blizzard, for he says of the incident, "Svá er sagt."

This notion is further supported by the fact that no examples of weather-magic occur in sagas set in post-Conversion times. Freak weather conditions do occur, but they consist of mild spells in the middle of harsh weather which allow bodies to be brought to church for Christian burial; such is the case of Gestr Oddleifsson in the Laxdæla Saga (V, 197) and the foster-mother in Fóstbræðra (VI, 216). Just as witchcraft was regarded as a reversal of the normal order of things, so what happens with respect to the weather in post-Conversion times is a direct reversal of what happened earlier: mild spells occur to help people, not storms to hinder them.

The only saga in which magical practices are not depicted as ceasing with the Conversion is Fóstbræðra; the author explains away the inconsistency thus: "Nú fyrir því at kristni var ung ok vangor, þá sýndisk þat mǫrgum mǫnnum atgórvi, at maðr væri fjǫlkunnigr." (VI, 161) Historically speaking, although Iceland was converted in 999 A.D., pagan practices were still legal, provided they were not carried out in public, until 1014, when they were officially outlawed by St. Óláfr. This explains why the Icelandic Gríma can continue to practise magic in the early days after the Conversion; no mention is made of pagan practices in Iceland after she sends her slave abroad in approximately 1015. On the other hand, pagan practices are still going on in Greenland in 1027 or thereabouts, which is when Þormóðr's adventures there take place. Greenland, however, was converted later than Iceland; according to the earliest sources it may not even have been converted by Óláfr Tryggvason's missionaries.<sup>4</sup> Both Eiríks Saga Rauða and Grænlandinga mention Greenlanders who cling to their old beliefs (IV, 206; 222; 258). In other words, the author of Fóstbræðra is not subscribing to the literary convention adhered to by the rest of the authors of the Family Sagas but is presenting a state of affairs which is probably more historically accurate.

In the other sagas the only type of person with magical powers who appears after the Conversion is the fóstra, the old woman who acts as a harbinger of fate. Although usually regarded by other members of the household as unreliable and in her dotage, she has an uncanny knack of prophesying correctly. Examples of this type

of woman are Sæunn in Njála, Þoroddr's foster-mother in Eyrbyggja and Þórdís's servant-woman in Fóstbrœtra. In Grettis Saga there is an intimation that old women of this type may once have been witches. Of Þorbjörn ongull's foster-mother it is said: "Hon hafði verit fjölkunnig mjök ok margkunnig mjök, þá er hon var ung ok menn váru heiðnir; nú þótti sem hon myndi öllu týnt hafa." (VII, 245) Her powers are not lost, however, merely dormant, for she takes credit for a gale that springs up and causes a tree-stump to sail against the tide. People believe that it was her magic that enabled Grettir to be overcome and despise Þorbjörn for having recourse to such practices. Bringing about a man's death by witchcraft is considered an offence deserving of the death-penalty, and a law is passed banishing all magicians from Iceland (VII, 268-69).<sup>5</sup> Two other sagas also suggest that a fóstra may have been a witch before the Conversion: in both Kormáks Saga and the Heiðarvíga Saga there are pagan foster-mothers who can tell if a man will be wounded in battle (VIII, 204: III, 281). Also in Kormáks Saga, Þórdís of Spákonafell, who is very definitely conceived of as a pagan witch, is addressed as "Fóstra" (VIII, 283). In short, the foster-mothers appear to be witches who, having lost their credibility and hence their source of income with the Conversion, are obliged to take refuge in richer households, as Þorgríma galdrakinn does in Eyrbyggja (IV, 139). They do not lose their powers, especially their foresightedness, which they can still exercise in Christian times since prophecy is condoned by the Bible; people, however, no longer give credence to what they say.

What we seem to have here is the saga-writers' interpretation of history. According to them, witchcraft ceased with the Conversion, not because witches lost their powers, but because men no longer had recourse to them. Yet magical practices must still have been going on in the twelfth century since laws condemning them are to be found in Grágás.<sup>6</sup> The saga-writers have altered history so that it conforms to their view of the world, a world in which 999 A.D. marks a turning-point in the history of magic in Iceland.

999 also marks a turning-point in the world of ghosts. Pagan ghosts, or draugar, are animated corpses, often larger and uglier in

death than they were in life. They are so substantial that men can engage in combat with them, and so insubstantial that they can vanish into the earth. The way in which they are normally prevented from walking is by having their bodies reduced to ashes; once the corpse is destroyed, so is the ghost. Christian ghosts, on the other hand, are simply the bodies of people who have not yet received proper burial; once laid in consecrated ground with hymns sung over them, they stay put. This is consistent with Christian tradition, which maintained that it was the souls of the damned who walked the earth. Non-believers would be damned, and it was they who gave Christian Icelanders trouble after their interment.

The pagans who become draugar after death do so for one of two reasons. The first is that they had been murderously inclined--or at least an unneighbourly nuisance--while they were alive. Examples of this type of ghost are Hreppr in the Laxdæla Saga, Þórólfr bzi-fótr in Eyrbyggja, Klaufi in Svarfdæla and Sóti in Harðar Saga ok Holmverja. These revenants all behave in a similar fashion: they destroy animals, kill or terrify the housewife and the servants, and, when they are finally dug up again, their corpses are found to be undecomposed. It is only after the body has been reduced to ashes that the haunting finally stops. These ghosts seem to walk because they were such unpleasant and overbearing characters in life that in death they could not bear to leave their neighbours and relatives in peace.

The other reason why some ghosts walk is that they have connections with the world of magic. Gyða, a witch in the Flóamanna Saga, cannot be kept in her coffin after death and has to be burned (I.S. 12, 21). Þormóðr, a shape-shifter in Hávarðar Saga Isfirðings, also refuses to lie quiet (VI, 292-93). Hallbjörn of the malicious Kotkell clan of witches in Laxdæla also haunts the area where he was killed (V, 109). On the other hand, Svánnr in Njála, a magician óðall ok viðreignar and apparently an excellent candidate for ghosthood, does not walk after death; this is presumably because he vanished into the mountain of Kaldbakshorn and his corpse was never found (XII, 46). A draugr cannot exist without its body.

There are certain indications in the Family Sagas that draugar were felt to have pagan connotations. Ghosts are often described

in terms of heathen otherworld creatures: Sóti was a tröll, Þórólfr bægifótr was inn tröllsligsti at sjá. In Flóamanna Saga the ghost is actually said to be Þórr, who, angry that Þorgils has adopted Christianity, fights with him one night and leaves him black and blue (I.S.12, 36). The scene seems to be partly symbolic, putting into concrete form the fears and doubts Þorgils had about how the old gods would treat him after he renounced his religion, with the buffeting he receives from Þórr standing for his mental struggle. However, the fact that one saga-author can actually equate a ghost-figure with one of the ancient gods suggests that in people's minds there was felt to be some connection between draugar and paganism.

This premise is further supported by the fact that, in sagas and parts of sagas set in post-Conversion times, the draugr is replaced by more innocuous but less colourful revenants. These new ghosts are of two types: the vision, seen by only one or two people, and the unburied dead, a creature somewhat similar to the draugr, larger than life, visible to many, but of a kindly disposition. The Christian draugr-type is different in several ways from its pagan counterpart: it walks before burial, not after; is not particularly horrifying to look at; and rises mainly for charitable motives. For instance, Þorgunna in Eyrbyggja wishes to provide food and warmth for her pall-bearers (IV, 144). Þorsteinn Eiríksson in Eiríks Saga Rauða wants to tell her widow what her future will be, to urge her to give her money to the Church or the poor, and to tell her what to do to stop the hauntings (IV, 215-16).

The only Christian ghosts that walk are those that have not yet been buried according to the laws of the Church. Examples of this are found in Eiríks Saga Rauða (IV, 216) and also in Eyrbyggja, where the hauntings stop only after a priest has been sent to Fróða (IV, 152). In this saga, too, a contrast is made between Christians and pagans who die in similar circumstances. When Þorsteinn Þorska-bitr is lost at sea, his shepherd sees the mountain of Helgafell open up and Þorsteinn and his companions welcomed inside; the pagan dead are presumably happy with their lot, for they do not return to trouble the living. On the other hand, when the bodies of Þóroddr and his companions are lost at sea, the Christian ghosts do not seem to be at rest, for they return to the feasts and fires of their

former dwelling-place.

With the exception of the shepherd in the Eyrbyggja Saga, the only murderous pagan-type draugar to be found in Christian parts of sagas are the unconverted. In the Flóamanna Saga, for instance, Jósteynn and his men continue with their pagan practices and become ghosts after death (I.S.12, 40-41). Glámr is another obdurate heathen who becomes a draugr and refuses to lie quiet; all attempts to bring his body to church or a priest to it fail. On the other hand, when the new shepherd is found crushed to death, people have no trouble giving him proper Christian burial. The contrast between his behaviour after death and Glámr's is obvious: good Christians, properly buried, lie quiet, whereas heathen spirits can still roam the earth and harm the living.

A variation on the theme of the troublesome pagan and the draugr occurs in Njáls Saga. Valgarðr inn grái is an unpleasant and overbearing man who remains a heathen after everybody else has been converted. In a saga set in pre-Christian times, one would expect a man like Valgarðr to walk after his death. Valgarðr does not, however, walk in the literal sense of the word: he merely plants in his son's mind the seeds of a plot which leads eventually to the death of Njáll and his sons. Would Morðr have hatched such a scheme without his father's suggestion? Valgarðr killed Njáll and his family as effectively as he would have done had he risen from the grave and physically attacked each one of them. What the author of Njála seems to have done is to rationalise the motif of the murderous draugr, as he did with the motif of the sjónhverfing, and to show how a man, although dead, can bring about the demise of others.

What we have here is a literary motif being altered to fit new social conditions. As the religion of Iceland changed, so too did the saga-writers' representation of the supernatural world. After the Conversion, anti-social, overbearing men no longer walked after death. Those who did walk were either Christians who had not yet been properly buried or pagans who refused to accept the new religion. The motif changes to conform to the teachings of the Church.

The fylgja-motif also changes depending on whether the action is taking place in pre- or post-Conversion days, although the



distinction is not as clear-cut as it was in the case of the other two motifs. Fylgjur in the Family Sagas are of two types--female figures and animal-figures. The former is a protective spirit associated with a particular family; she appears most commonly when a man is in danger of death or dying. The latter is attached to one specific person and the form it assumes is based on the character of the man it represents; for example, Þorðr in Njála, who is not particularly brave or outstanding, has a goat for his fylgja. The animal-fylgja does not have an independent existence, for it usually appears only in a symbolic function in dreams, heralding the death of somebody close to the dreamer.

The use of the fylgja-motif in Njála suggests that the animal type may have had pagan connotations. In the pre-Christian part of the saga there are five occurrences of fylgjur, when men are given intimations of the fate about to befall them or their kin (XII, 37; 64-65; 106-07; 155-56; 170); there are no occurrences, however, after the Conversion. Animal-fylgjur may have been felt to have some connection with shape-shifting, which was forbidden by law, even though the fylgjur appear in dreams before the incident which they describe, whereas the shape-shifter in his animal form moves around in the "real" time in which the saga is taking place.

As for the fylgja-woman, the authors of the Family Sagas do not seem to be altogether certain whether or not she is acceptable in a Christian context. She seems to have been to pagan Icelanders what a guardian angel was to Christians. When Síðu-Hallr embraces the faith in Njála he wants an assurance that he can have the Archangel Michael as his fylgjuengill (XII, 257). This suggests that he believed he had forfeited the protection of his own fylgja by becoming a Christian. On the other hand, a scene in Hallfreðar Saga suggests that Icelanders did not automatically lose their fylgjur by becoming Christians but had to reject them deliberately, as Hallfreðr does his as he lies dying. Yet fylgja-women cannot have been totally unacceptable to Christians either, since one of Hallfreðr's sons is prepared to accept the woman and all she stands for (VIII, 198).

An element of free will is added to the fylgja-motif after the Conversion. In a pre-Christian context a fylgja intervenes to

prevent the man she protects from walking into danger, afflicting him with sore eyes so that he cannot travel (VIII, 95). In the Christian Laxdæla a large woman appears urging Þorgils not to ride to the þing. Although filled with foreboding, he does not heed her warning and is killed at the þing (V, 197-98).

In Christian parts of sagas there is a tendency for the fylgja-dream to be replaced by the symbolic dream-vision, a motif which is widely used in European literature. In Laxdæla Saga, for example, Guðrún has her future marriages revealed in a series of dreams which are interpreted for her by a wise man; in this instance her husbands are represented by valuable possessions--rings, a head-dress and a helmet. In Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu, on the other hand, the fylgja-dream and the European dream-vision are combined, when Þorsteinn Egilsson sees his as yet unborn daughter as a beautiful swan which is fought over by two eagles; the man who interprets the dream calls the birds fylgjur, but the story is a common folk-tale type, in which parents try to avoid predicted misfortunes by exposing their children--witness the stories of Oedipus and Moses (III, 55). In Njála the author modifies the motif he had used in pagan contexts so as to bring it into line with Christian teaching, using as the basis of Flosi's dream of the man in goatskins at Lómagnúpr one of the Dialogues of Gregory the Great.<sup>7</sup> Also in Njála there is a dream-vision of the Continental type, when Kolskeggr answers the call to become a soldier of Christ (XII, 197).

What we seem to have in the case of fylgjur and dream-visions is a combination of native and foreign elements. The Icelandic concept of fetches appearing in dreams or to foresighted men so as to give warning of imminent danger is giving way in Christian parts of sagas to the symbolic dream-vision of the Continental literary tradition. The native stock is being enriched by outside influences.

It is difficult to say if the change in the representation of supernatural figures after the Conversion represents a genuine belief on the part of the people or is merely a literary convention. No doubt there were some as sceptical as Snorri goði who attributed natural phenomena to natural causes, but there were no doubt many more who did believe in witches, ghosts and fetches. If this is

borne in mind, then one may admit the likelihood that the Family Sagas were written on two levels--the literal, for the superstitious who would enjoy the sensational aspects of the supernatural; and the figurative or literary, for those who were trained in the techniques of saga-writing and would be able to pick out the motifs and appreciate the skill with which pagan and Christian were contrasted. It should also be noted that authors are completely consistent in their use of Christian and pagan motifs, and that any variation from the norm is explicable, either because the saga is taking place in a country other than Iceland, or because the author is striving for greater historical accuracy. By the time the Family Sagas were set down in writing there was a set of conventions current which governed the types of supernatural figures which were permissible in pre- and post-Christian contexts.

For such a literary convention or set of folk-beliefs to have arisen, there must have been a widespread conviction that the Conversion was of singular importance in the history of Iceland, that it had a profound effect on the cult-practices and beliefs of men who were living at that time, and that it in some way influenced the intangible world of the supernatural. Thirteenth-century Icelanders, convinced that the coming of Christianity was a turning-point in the history of their country, gave expression to this belief in the way they structured the Family Sagas, the Sagas of the Icelanders.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Mediaeval Scandinavia, 11 (1978-79), 271-80.

<sup>2</sup>I am deliberately omitting the völur since there are only two examples of them in the Family Sagas.

<sup>3</sup>Quotations are taken from the Íslensk Fornrit edition of the Family Sagas (Reykjavík: hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933--). References are to volume (Roman numerals) and page (Arabic numbers). I.S. refers to the Íslendingasögur, ed. Guðni Jónsson, 13 vols. (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnautgáfan, 1953). References are to volume and page.

<sup>4</sup>Jón Jóhannesson, Íslendinga Saga: A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth, trans. by Haraldur Bessason, U. of Manitoba Icelandic Studies, vol. 2 (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1974), p. 62.

<sup>5</sup>Paganism was not condemned by a decree of the Alþing in 1032 but by a decree of St. Óláfr in 1014. For a further discussion of this point see my article, "Grettir and Glámr--Sinful Man versus the Fiend: an Allegorical Interpretation of a Fourteenth-Century Icelandic Saga," University of Ottawa Quarterly 51 (1981), 180-88.

<sup>6</sup>Grágás: Skáiholtsbók, ed. Kommissionen for det Arnarnagnæanske Legat (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1883).

<sup>7</sup>Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Njáls Saga: a Literary Masterpiece, ed. and trans. by Paul Schach (Lincoln: U. of Nebraska Press, 1971), pp. 12-16.