

## THE SUPERNATURAL IN STURLUNGA: ONE-PAGE SUMMARY

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A preliminary reading of Sturlunga saga (in the two-volume edition of Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason and Kristján Eldjárn, Reykjavík, 1946) shows that the supernatural bulks largest in three narratives: Geirmundar þáttur heljarskinns, which deals with remarkable events of the landnámsöld (involving the poet Bragi and the rowan-tree at Geirmundarstaðir); Prestssaga Guðmundar góða, with its frequent accounts of Christian miracles; and Íslendinga saga, with its similarly frequent accounts of prophetic dreams, which, as Robert J. Glendinning has convincingly argued (in his Träume und Vorbedeutung in der Islendinga Saga Sturla Thordarsons, Bern, 1974), have not only the structural function that dreams have in the Family Sagas of drawing attention to important events (usually battles and acts of violence), but also the interpretative one of providing oblique moral commentary on the action. This might seem to suggest that the authors of Sturlunga saga accepted the supernatural as part of the reality of Iceland's early history and of the Christian culture, at least, of their own times, even if they were more interested in the literary possibilities of accounts of dreams than in whether or not they were true. A second, closer reading of Sturlunga saga reveals, however, that the vast majority of supernatural events, whether past or contemporary, Christian or otherwise, and whether or not in the three works already mentioned, are presented in such a way as to suggest that the events in question existed more in the minds of those supposed to have experienced them (and/or made them known), than in reality. That is to say, they are reported in passages of direct or indirect speech, and are internally rather than externally focalised (i.e., presented as being perceived to have happened, rather than as simply having happened). There are of course exceptions which need to be discussed, and it must be acknowledged that dreams cannot easily be reported otherwise than in the way just described, but the general impression left by Sturlunga is that supernatural events have been included more out of a sense that certain types of event need to be included in certain types of narrative (i.e. out of a respect for tradition, oral as well as literary) than as a result of any serious commitment to a belief in the supernatural. Sturlunga saga indeed raises the question of whether Jacqueline Simpson's statement that 'the objective reality of such phenomena was taken for granted' (in Boris Ford, ed., The new Pelican guide to English literature, vol. I, pt 2, Harmondsworth, 1983, p. 239) should be modified even in relation to the supernatural as presented in the Family Sagas, of which she is here mainly thinking.