

The famous *landvættir* episode (*ÓlTrygg33*): a paradox of Icelandic religious consciousness?*

Let's start with a paradox. The Icelandic historian, the Christian, Snorri Sturluson, tells in his *Heimskringla*, ca. 1230, i.e. almost two and a half centuries after the conversion of Iceland, how Haraldr Gormsson, king of Denmark (ca. 940 – ca. 985), was baptized under the pressure of the German emperor Otto, how he, in his turn, insisted on christening of his vassal, the Norwegian Earl Hakon, how he levied troops and sailed to Norway (according to Icelandic annals, in 982) to punish Earl Hakon who had renounced Christianity. Snorri also tells about Haraldr's further plans that have nothing to do with the above portrayed Christian context.

What kind of plans were those? He “had the intention to sail with his fleet to Iceland to avenge the insult which all Icelanders had heaped on him” having composed lampooning verses. The *níð* was, no doubt, a *heathen* poem, and its composition was even persecuted by the Christian law. The newly converted Christian, and a zealous one, King Haraldr “bade a warlock to journey to Iceland and find out what he could tell him”. The sorcerer, in a whale's-shape, sailed round Iceland and brought back the news that the island was inhabited by monstrous creatures. The latter piece of information discouraged Haraldr, and the *níð* remained unrevenged.

A similar story can be found in *Jómsvikinga saga* (AM 291, 4^o), the only difference being that along with the *níð* there is a strophe by Eyólftr Valgerðarson, testifying the aggressive intentions of the Danish king. The same stories in *Knjóttinga saga* and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* (AM 61 fol.) are considered as secondary and of later origin. In *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* (*Flateyjarbók*) the story is somewhat shorter. No one else but Snorri Sturluson describes the sorcerer's voyage:

He went in a whale's-shape. And when he came to Iceland he proceeded west and north around it. He saw that all mountains and hills were full of land-wights, some big and some small. And when he came to the Vapnafjord he swam into the fjord, intending to go ashore there. Then a big dragon came down the valley, followed by many serpents, toads, and adders that blew poison against him. Then he swam away, heading west along the land, all the way to the Eyjafjord, and he entered into that fjord. Then there flew against him a bird so large that its wings touched the mountains on either side of the fjord, and a multitude of other birds besides, both large and small. Away he backed from there, swimming west around the land and then south to the Breithafjord and entered that fjord. Then came against him a big bull, wading out into the water and bellowing fearfully. A multitude of land-wights (*landvættir*) followed him. Away he backed from there swimming around Reykjaness, and intended to come ashore at Víkarsskeið. Then came against him a mountain giant with an iron bar in his hand, and his head was higher than the mountains, and many other giants were with him. From there he swam east along the whole land – “and there was nothing but sands and a harborless coast,” he said, “with a tremendous surf to seaward; and the sea between the lands is so wide that it is not feasible to sail there with warships.” At that time there dwelled Brodd-Helgi in the Vapnafjord District, Eyólf Valgerðarson in the Eyjafjord District, Thorth Gellir in the Breithafjord District, and Thorodd the Priest in the Ólfus District.

We come across contradictory explanations of semantics of the four *landvættir* in scholarly literature. As Diana Whaley notes, scholars have failed to reveal “where Snorri got the constituent ideas from”, – from “the shapeshifters and fetches of the sagas and Eddaic poems”, or from “the symbols of the four Evangelists”². Both explanations, however, point inevitably to the specific character of Icelandic religious consciousness: the matter is that the learned Christian, which he

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¹ Snorri Sturluson. *Heimskringla. History of the Kings of Norway* / Translated by Lee M. Hollander. Austin, 1964. P. 173-174.

² Whaley D. *Heimskringla: An Introduction*, London, 1991. P. 63.

was, Snorri Sturluson either created a truly pagan narration, or misrepresented the traditional biblical set of those "creatures" that happen to be the symbols of the four Evangelists. In the present lecture we are going to show that the situation is somewhat different. But first let's turn to the historiography of the question.

The first, as far as we know, to touch upon this subject was Matthías Þórðarson, who in 1914 in a guidebook round the National museum of Iceland mentioned casually that the *landvættir* of Snorri Sturluson go back straight to the cherubs of Ezekiel, the forerunners of the four Evangelists (the eagle, the winged man, the winged lion and the winged ox)³.

While analyzing the corresponding story of *Jómsvíkinga saga*, Jón Jóhannesson⁴ pointed out that Snorri had used this story, but supplemented it with some details, among them the episode concerning the whale and the *landvættir*, which happened to be his own invention. Opposite to Matthías Þórðarson he thought that Snorri's *landvættir* go back to the cherubs of the Old Testament not directly, but via the symbols of the four Evangelists that became familiar to Icelanders with Christianity.

Einar Ólafur Sveinsson⁵ agrees that the *landvættir* of Snorri bear traces of Icelandic popular beliefs reflected in the sagas, but finds it possible to connect the *landvættir* with the Christian symbols of Evangelists, sweeping aside all arising contradictions.

Bo Almquist⁶ is decidedly against the identification of Snorri's *landvættir* with the symbols of Evangelists. He asserts that all the four main creatures, a big dragon, a large bird, a big bull and a mountain giant, often occur in the sagas, and gives numerous examples. The scholar suggests his own explanation of the fact that there are *four* creatures in Snorri's description. He turns to the history of Iceland, to its subdivision into four quarters in 960 (by the way, on the suggestion of one of the four Icelanders mentioned by Snorri, Þórðr gellir) and claims that the four creatures appear as a result of Snorri's desire to name the leading representatives of the four quarters of Iceland familiar to us from other Old Norse texts. Thus, we know from *Landnámabók* that all of them lived in the second half of the 10th century, and this was evident to the 13th-century Icelanders keen on genealogies. One of Snorri's aims in naming them was to make it clear for his audience the chronology of Haraldr Gormsson's military plans. Almquist, however, thinks these four men to have been deeper involved in the events described: they might have played a leading role in the resistance against Haraldr's assault. One of these men, Eyólfir Valgerðarson, is mentioned in *Jómsvíkinga saga*, where he is told to have composed a strophe (*vísa*) urging Icelanders to meet Haraldr with weapons in their arms. So we see that in Almquist's view the four main creatures named by Snorri are the *symbols*, but the symbols not of the four Evangelists, but of the four outstanding Icelanders, representatives of the four quarters of Iceland.

A choice of these particular creatures (a dragon, a bird, a bull, and a giant), according to Almquist, is not accidental, but follows the tradition. Thus, Snorri told in his *Ynglinga saga* how "Óðin could shift his appearance. When he did so his body would lie there as if he were asleep or dead; but he himself, in an instant, in the shape of a bird or animal, a fish or serpent, went to distant countries on his or other men's errands"⁷. In *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* Snorri substituted the fish for the giant, because, on the one hand, there was "a fish" already in his story – a whale who the sorcerer had turned into, and, on the other hand, according to *Landnámabók*, a giant appeared to be the leader of *landvættir*. Disagreeing with Almquist, we shall later return to this

³ Matthías Þórðarson. Þjóðmenjasafn Íslands. Leiðarvísir. Reykjavík, 1914. Bl. 8.

⁴ Jón Jóhannesson. Íslendinga saga. I. Þjóðveldisöld. Reykjavík, 1956. Bl. 267–268. *Idem*. A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth. Íslendinga saga / Translated by Haraldur Bessason. Manitoba, 1974. Bl. 222–225.

⁵ Einar Ól. Sveinsson. Landvættisagan. // Minjar og Menntir. Afnáðlistrit helgað Kristjáni Elfjárm. Reykjavík, 1976. Bl. 117–129.

⁶ Almquist B. Norrøn niddiktning. B. I. Nid mot furstar. Stockholm, 1965. S. 119–184.

⁷ Snorri Sturluson. Heimskringla. P. 10.

passage from the *Ynglinga saga* and give our own interpretation of it. We shall also try to explain why the giant appeared in Snorri's text in a company with the dragon, the bird and the bull.

According to Almquist, Snorri's story (supported by two skaldic stanzas) of Haraldr Gormsson's desire to sail with his fleet to Iceland and of a *níð* against him might have had a real basis and was borrowed from *Jómsvíkinga saga*. There had been no narration of the sorcerer's voyage and of *landvættir* in Snorri's source. Nevertheless, not all parts of the episode in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* are the fruit of his imagination: his additions concerning the whale and the *landvættir* go back to oral tradition which had been transmitted from generation to generation together with the *níð*-story. Still, the description of the four fabulous creatures, identical with the four Icelandic leaders, is a deliberate and sophisticated construction of Snorri himself.

Almquist's theory is well reasoned and, no doubt, more preferable than the identification of *landvættir* with the symbols of Evangelists or with Ezekiel's cherubs, but, nevertheless, it provokes certain objections.

The first thing to be discussed is the character of Snorri's authorship, his attitude towards the reliability of his work, and towards his source material. As has been pointed out, Snorri takes trouble about the trustworthiness of his data. He always, where possible, indicates where his information comes from: thus, telling about the miracles of St. Olaf, he tries to name the eye-witnesses; speaking about heathenism and witchcraft he is highly cautious. He often minimizes the miraculous element, trying to find a rational explanation. A good illustration to this is his *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* which can be compared with one of its main sources, namely *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* by Oddr Snorrason.

According to Theodore M. Andersson, "Snorri sacrificed no fewer than twenty-five of Oddr's chapters". "Not surprisingly, the most common exclusions have to do with the magical arts, prophecies, visions, and miracles". "Another prominent category of exclusions relates to the spread of Christianity"⁸. For instance, the story of the conversion of prince Vladimir and Old Rus was created by Oddr Snorrason. The author of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* follows Oddr and even adds some extra details. Snorri's rationalizing tendency, on the contrary, leads to the fact that the most incredible details are omitted, among them the story of Olaf's *prima signatio* in Greece, his conversion of the Russian king, his trip to Greece or Syria after the battle of Svöldr. Instead of Oddr's narration of Olaf's voyage to Greece and his return to Russia with bishop Paul Snorri first narrates how Olaf was baptized himself, and then tells that the skalds and written sources know a lot about his great deeds. He names the lands baptized by Olaf, and there is no Russia among them.

In his striving for maximum objectivity, Snorri leaves out the details inherent in his sources that he considers unreliable. Moreover, as a rule, he does not invent anything himself. Nevertheless, he retells the story of Icelandic *landvættir*. It is not likely that this Christian author, sceptical of witchcraft, prophecies, visions and miracles, could have created this heathen *landvættir*-story. We are prone to think that Snorri could only, for some special reasons, preserve this old story, borrowed by him from an earlier source. Sigurður Nordal thinks that two reasons enabled Snorri to make an exception for this episode and to include it into his narration. Firstly, this story had never been written down before him, and secondly it had to do with the conflict between the Icelandic state and a foreign ruler, and thus concerned Snorri personally. Bo Almquist also stresses Snorri's patriotic feelings, but he denies Snorri's ability to create, even under their pressure, such a fantastic narration.

There is no doubt that the *landvættir*-story should have belonged to a source, oral or written, used by Snorri. It is a different question what made Snorri (his patriotic feelings or the

⁸ Andersson Th.M. The Conversion of Norway according to Oddr Snorrason and Snorri Sturluson // *Medieval Scandinavia*. Odense, 1977. Vol. 10. P. 83-95.

beauty of the image) preserve it in his text. What matters for us is the fact that Snorri Sturluson could not be its author. Snorri's tendency for objectivity might have found reflection in his specification that the four main *landvættir* were not merely the *landvættir*, but the four outstanding leaders of the 10th-century Iceland. In fact, our position is close to that of Bo Almquist who considered this story a part of the tradition familiar to Snorri. However, our point of view differs considerably, and will be discussed further.

Let's pay attention to the fact that the dragon, the bird and the bull in Snorri's story are related to certain cardinal points of the compass. Approaching Iceland from Norway, the sorcerer sailed up to its eastern coast. Proceeding west and north around the island, he came to the Vápnafjörör (in the Eastern quarter of Iceland), where he met a big dragon. Heading west along the land, all the way to the Eyjafjörör (in the Northern quarter), he encountered a large bird. Swimming west around the land and then south to the Breiðafjörör (in the Western quarter), he saw a big bull. Finally, swimming around Reykjanes (in the Southern quarter), he intended to come ashore at Víkarsskeið, and there came against him a mountain giant. So, the dragon belonged to the east, the bird to the north, the bull to the west, and the giant to the south.

A corresponding correlation of living creatures with cardinal points of the compass is well known both in archaic mythical traditions and in later cultures, where these creatures appear as patrons of the four cardinal points (directions)⁹. To prove it, we would like to give two examples from two different and distant parts of Eurasia.

In the Book of Ezekiel in the Old Testament we meet the four cherubs holding the firmament, each having four faces, one of a lion, one of an ox, and one of an eagle (*Ez* I, 4–28). It has been demonstrated that these cherubs are patrons and symbols of the four cardinal points, even though their correlation with particular cardinal points is not quite clear.

A classical example of zoanthropomorphic symbolics of the four cardinal points is found in Ancient China where each cardinal point of the compass has its constant patron. These patrons are called "the spirits of heavenly directions": the east is associated with a dragon, the south with a bird, the west with a tiger, and the north with a warrior. This interrelationship has for centuries been used in many spheres of Chinese culture, sciences, geomantics, architecture, arts, and everyday life.

The examples show that in China a set of creatures is practically the same as in the Icelandic saga and in the Old Testament. Close analogies can be found in many other archaic cultures of the Old and the New World.

How do we explain the choice of these particular creatures and the differences in their sets? According to the Old Testament, Jahve, having created a man, gave him domination over three spheres of the newly created world, the sea with its fish, the sky with its birds, and the earth with its terrestrial animals (*Gen* 1, 26, 28, 30). It is evident that fish, birds and terrestrial animals symbolize the tripartite vertical structure of the world. Comparative mythology and ethnology demonstrate that this tripartite vertical zoomorphic system is inherent to cosmological concepts of nearly all archaic cultures: *birds* become associated with the top of world, the sky, *animals* with the middle part of the world, the earth, and *fish or serpents* with the bottom part, the underground and underwater sphere¹⁰. A good example is a description of the Scandinavian *arbor mundi* Yggdrasil, with an eagle sitting in its top, a squirrel and four stags running in its branches, and a serpent named Niðhöggr gnawing the bottom of its root.

The same three symbols of the three spheres of the world, a bird, an animal and a fish, started being used for the designation of three cardinal points, i.e. already in the horizontal coordinate system. The cosmologies of many archaic cultures give numerous examples when a

⁹ Röck F. Die Kulturhistorische Bedeutung von Ortungsreihen und Ortungsbildern // *Anthropos*. 25. Wien, 1930. S. 255–302.

¹⁰ Meleinskij E.M. The Poetics of Myth. Moscow, 1976. P. 214 (in Russian).

vertical division of the world is easily transformed into a horizontal one and vice versa¹¹. The three creatures, after having been associated with three cardinal points in the horizontal space structure, were supplemented with a man who occupied a vacant position of the fourth cardinal point. It is worth mentioning that Iahve initially created the three kinds of creatures living in the sky, on earth and in the sea, and after that gave domination over them to a man.

A type of an animal can, of course, be different, depending on the natural environment of certain peoples (their cultures, religions, etc.), but one idea remains constant: they have to symbolize three cosmological spheres. This explains why the Icelandic bull, within the limits of a principally tripartite vertical structure, corresponds to the Chinese tiger – they are both terrestrial animals. By the way, the remaining creatures, a dragon, a man and a bird, coincide in Chinese and Icelandic systems.

The four zooanthropomorphic protectors of the four cardinal points can appear both as separate images (in Iceland), and as a unified syncretic image (in the Book of Ezekiel) symbolizing the unity of a four-partial horizontal space. Still, there is another way of demonstrating the four-partial structure of the world, i.e. diachronically, via consequent transformation of a man into different animals.

Indeed, in myths and fairy tails of many peoples of the world we come across transformations of a hero (God) into different creatures symbolizing the three spheres¹². Thus, in the above mentioned story of the *Ynglinga saga* of how Óðinn could shift his appearance (“When he did so his body would lie there as if he were asleep or dead; but he himself, in an instant, in the shape of a bird or animal, a fish or serpent, went to distant countries on his or other men’s errands”) we find the same set of creatures, namely a fish (or a serpent), a bird, and an animal.

Earlier we expressed our disagreement with Bo Almquist, who claimed that Snorri in his *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* had chosen a dragon, a large bird, a big bull and a mountain giant as symbols of the four noble Icelanders following a tradition reflected in the discussed here passage from the *Ynglinga saga*. Snorri, according to him, had to substitute a fish for a giant, because a fish could not appear in front of the sorcerer from inside the island, because a sorcerer in a whale’s-shape was himself “a fish”, and because a giant had been mentioned by *Landnámabók* as a leader of *landvættir*. We believe that in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* a giant is not a substitution, but a creature occupying his “legal” fourth position, that of a man (a god, a giant). Along with him, in full accordance with other cosmological traditions, we find representatives of three spheres, a dragon (= a fish = a serpent), a bull (= a terrestrial animal) and a bird.

Through the above discussion and the comparative material we were trying to show that the *landvættir* in Snorri Sturluson’s *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* are the symbols, but not the symbols of the four Evangelists and not the symbols of the four leading Icelanders of the 10th century, but the symbols, the patrons of the four cardinal points. They could by no means have been created by a Christian Icelander of the 13th century, but are a manifestation of an independent local tradition that owed its origin to the existence of symbolic classifications typical to all archaic cultures. Thus, we assert that the legend accompanying (according to Bo Almquist) the story of a collective *nið* against Haraldr Gormsson and included by Snorri Sturluson into his saga comprised, from the very start, a story of a sorcerer in a whale’s-shape and the *landvættir*, headed by a dragon, a bird, a bull and a giant. A combination of this legend and a realistic story, supplemented with the names of the four outstanding Icelanders who used to live in the four

¹¹ Ibidem. P. 216–217.

¹² Röck F. Die Kulturhistorische Bedeutung, S. 293–298.

Quarters of Iceland, was, no doubt, intentional. By means of this deliberate contrast Snorri Sturluson managed to create a poetical image of independence of his motherland.