Bernardine McCreesh

An Examination of the Prophecy Motif in Old Icelandic Literature

Prophecy is the art or science of foretelling the future. Over two thousand years ago, Cicero divided it into two major types: divination and inspiration. Divination was, basically, the consultation and interpretation of signs and omens, which included the casting of lots (*sortes*), the study of the heavenly bodies (*astrologia*), the examination of the entrails of a sacrificial animal (*haruspices*), and the observation of the cries and movements of birds (*augures*). Over time, augury broadened to cover the movement and disposition of creatures other than birds. In the case of divination, the signs and omens were believed to have been divinely sent, while the ability to interpret them was, in most societies, restricted to a priestly class and acquired by study. Among the Romans, divination was the preferred form of prophecy, especially in official circles, although many people also believed in inspiration through trances and dreams.

In the case of inspiration, prophets were believed to receive their message directly from a supernatural being. This could come about in one of two ways: either by direct inspiration, or through visions. In the Bible, prophets from the northern part of the Kingdom of Israel, such as Samuel, Elijah and Jeremiah, had the experience of being filled with the spirit of the Lord, while those from the south, such as Amos, Isaiah and Ezekiel, are usually described as having visions (Leavitt 1997: 15-16). Visions could themselves be of two types: those receiving them could either fall asleep and be sent messages in dreams, or else they could go into a trance. In Israel, the trance seems to have been brought on in some cases by listening to music or incantations; other cultures used other means, such as fasting or absorbing consciousness-altering substances such as plants or alcoholic drinks. Old Testament prophets were predominantly male, but there were some prophetesses, such as Miriam (*Exodus* 15:20), Huldah (II *Kings* 22:14), and Deborah in the *Book of Judges*. Inspiration was also found among other ancient peoples, such as the Greeks. The best known of the Greek oracles is probably that of Delphi, where the pythia went into a trance and "prophesied" after absorbing noxious vapours. Her words, however, were interpreted and transmitted by the attending male priest, an example of inspiration tempered by divination.

Casting lots was popular among many ancient peoples. In the early days of their history, the Jews resorted to it, but then more or less abandoned the practice. Even so, lot-casting was used occasionally for determining guilt (1 Sam.14: 42) or the cause of a storm (Jonah 1:7). In the New Testament, the disciples drew lots to decide who would fill the place left vacant by Judas (Acts 1:26), and all four Gospels mention the Roman soldiers' drawing lots to determine who would inherit Jesus' clothes. Drawing lots was also practised by the Germanic tribes. In the words of Tacitus:

> They cut off a branch from a nut-bearing tree and slice it into strips. These they mark with different signs and throw them at random onto a white cloth. Then the state's priest, if it is an official consultation, or the father of the family, in a private one, offers prayer to the gods and looking up towards heaven picks up three strips, one at a time, and, according to which sign they have previously been marked with, makes his interpretation. (*Germania* 9, trans. Birley, p. 42-43)

If the lots were favourable, auspices were then taken, either by studying the call and flight of birds or by listening to the whinnying and neighing of sacred white horses.

In Anglo-Saxon England, augury also seems to have been practised, because it is roundly condemned by Ælfric:

> So likewise he who trusteth in auguries, either from birds, or from sneezings, either from horses or from dogs, he is no Christian, but is an infamous apostate.(*De Auguriis*, ll.88-91)

Interestingly, the casting of lots to distribute land is not condemned by Ælfric, probably because the practice is found in the Bible (*Josh.*18-19):

> Nevertheless, a man may cast lots, in faith, in worldly things, without witchcraft, that he may allot himself pastures, if men wish to divide any thing [i.e. any land]; this is no sorcery, but is very often a direction. (*De Auguriis*, ll.84-87)

Ælfric's theology concerning *augures* and *sortes* is strictly orthodox: the medieval Church condemned all sorts of divination except the casting of lots, which it had appropriated and christianised. Two specific types of *sortes* were common in the Church: opening the Bible at random and taking advice from what was written on the page (*sortes Biblicæ*); and a form of drawing lots, which consisted of writing alternatives on strips of vellum, placing them on an altar, and choosing one after a period of prayer. (Flint 1991: 276)

In the early days of the Icelandic commonwealth, drawing lots was practised, but it seems to have been nothing more than a way of making an unbiased decision. In *Grágás*, the earliest Icelandic law-code, men are instructed to mark sticks and put them into a cloth, a practice reminiscent of the one described by Tacitus; the sticks are then taken out again at random to establish the order in which legal cases will be heard (K 29). In *Eiríks saga rauða*, lots are drawn to decide which of the crew will be given a place in a seaworthy boat (*I.F.* IV, ch. 13). By the time we get to more specifically Christian works, such as the Old Icelandic life of St. Magnus which is incorporated into the *Orkneyinga saga*, lots are cast to find out what sort of vow should be made to ensure that an injured man recovers:

> En Bergfinnr hét fyrir honum ok hlutað, hvárt heita skyldi suðrgöngu eða mannfrelsi eða gefa fé til skríns Magnúss jarls, ef hann yrði heill. (*ÍF* XXXIV, ch. 57 p.127)
> *But Bergfinnr made a vow on his behalf and cast lots to see whether he should promise to make a pilgrimage south, or set a thrall free or give money for the shrine of St. Magnus, if he were made whole.*

Although there are echoes here of Tacitus' three options, it seems more likely that this vow is related to the Christian practice of choosing strips of vellum laid on the altar. In short, if drawing lots had any connotations in early Iceland, they seem to have been Christian rather than pagan.

In the *Landnámabók*, or Book of the Settlement of Iceland, a second type of divination is found. Among the first settlers of Iceland, men who had a strong belief in Þórr threw their high-seat pillars (*öndvegissulum*) overboard once they were in sight of the new land and built their farmsteads where the pillars landed. Examples of such settlers are Ingólfr Arnarson (*ÍF* I, ch. 7-8 pp.42-43), Þórólfr Mostrarskegg (ch. 84-85 p.124), Loðmundr enn gamli (S. ch. 289 p. 304), Þórðr skeggi (p. 311), Hrollaugr Rögnvaldsson (p. 317). When no high-seat pillars were available, other things would do. Hásteinn Atlason threw his bench-boards (*setstokkum*) overboard (p. 371), and Kveld-Úlfr, suspecting that his death might be close, asked his men to lay him in a coffin, throw it overboard and tell his son to settle where the coffin landed, *ef þess yrði auðit* (if that were possible) (p. 70). Kráku-Hreiðarr Ófeigsson, who had also brought his high-seat pillars with him, did not, however, throw them overboard since he found the practice *ómerkiligt* (stupid), but simply prayed to Þórr to show him where to land (p.232). Þórhaddr enn gamli, who had been a temple-priest (*goði*) in Norway, brought earth and the pillars from his temple with him, but there is no mention that he threw the pillars into the water either (p. 307). We know from the *Eyrbyggja saga* (*I.F.* IV, ch.4, p.7) that Þórólfr Mostrarskegg was also a temple-priest, and Ingólfr appears to have been one as well, since he too sacrificed to Þórr and his son was a *goði*. In fact, all of these men may have been priests of Þórr and the high-seat pillars part of their temple that they brought to Iceland with them. Þórólfr Mostrarskegg's son, Hallsteinn, who apparently had no high-seat pillars of his own, sacrificed to Þórr so that the god would send him some and was rewarded by the arrival on shore of a gigantic tree (p.163-64). Helgi Eyvindarson, who had picked up some Christianity in the Hebrides or Ireland, nonetheless asked Þórr where he should take land and was directed northwards by the god; once settled, he returned to Christianity and called his farm "Kristness" (pp. 251-52).

One other settlement by divination, this time by augury, may have taken its inspiration from the Bible. Flóki Vilgerðarson sent out not his high-seat pillars but three ravens; two returned, but the third pointed him in the direction of land (p.36), a motif similar to the story of Noah's dove (*Genesis* VIII). Yet another example of settlement by divination has a distinctly fairy-tale quality to it and follows on from an improbable prophecy. Grímr Ingjaldsson, who was still looking for permanent quarters in Iceland, caught a merman and tried to make him prophesy. The merman made the rather strange statement that Grímr's son would settle and take land where Grímr's mare Skalm lay down under the weight of her pack (*undir klyfjum* (p.97)). Grímr died that winter, but it took two summers before his mare lay down and his widow and son could make their landclaim, which they did in the appointed spot. The sacred white horses of the *Germania* seem to have become a homely mare.

An interesting feature of the *Landnámabók*, and of Old Icelandic literature in general, is that the *goðar* do not appear to have been trained in divination--looking for one's high-seat pillars is not exactly a highly skilled occupation--or to have indulged in other forms of augury. In this respect, pre-Conversion Iceland seems to have been similar to the Kingdom of Israel but different from many other pagan societies, in which rituals leading to predictions about the future were carried out by priests or diviners who were also state functionaries. Icelandic priests seem simply to have taken care of the temples of the old gods, leaving prophecy to others. Later on, with the coming of Christianity, the *goðar* lost their functions connected with the old religion, if they were still carrying them out, and became simply powerful chieftains with no pagan connotations. As Iceland became more Christianised and the need for native-born clergy made itself felt, bishops were drawn from the ranks of these wealthy families, who could afford to send their sons abroad to study. In fact, in many cases a Catholic priest was also a *goði*, since there was no separation of Church and State in early Iceland. This could explain one of the reasons for the separation of priesthood and prophecy in the *Landnámabók* and the Family Sagas. Since one of the attributes of many Christian saints was the ability to see into the future, Icelandic saints would need to have this ability too. However, since the ability to see into the future continued unbroken from pagan to Christian times, at least in Old Icelandic literature, there had to be some way of ensuring that there was no way that the Christian prophesying of Iceland's first saints could be linked to pagan prophesying, hence the pagan *goði* were not depicted as practising divination or having the gift of foresight.

Among the Germanic tribes described by Tacitus, there seems to have been a gender division between the practicioners of divinational and inspirational prophecy. Divination was a male preserve, while women were believed to have "something holy and an element of the prophetic" in them, so that men "neither scorn their advice nor ignore their predictions." Tacitus mentions highly respected women such as Veleda and Albruna, who were presumably prophetesses (*Germania* 8, trans. Birley, p. 41). Similarly, in Old Icelandic literature describing distant pagan times, prophecy by inspiration seems to have been practiced by seeresses called *völur*. One such *völva* appears in the *Landnámabók*:

> Heiðr völva spáði þeim öllum at byggja á því landi, er þá var ófundit vestr í haf, en Ingimundr kvezk við því skyldu gera. Völva sagði hann þat eigi mundu mega ok sagði þat til jartegna, at þá mundi horfinn hlutr ór pússi hans ok mundi þá finnask, er hann grœfi fyrir öndvegissúlum sínum á landinu. (*ÍF* I, p. 217)
> *The seeress Heid made the prophecy that all three would settle in a still undiscovered country, west in the ocean. Ingimund said he would make sure that would never happen. The seeress told him he couldn't prevent it, and as a proof she said that something had vanished from his purse and wouldn't be found till he started digging for his high-seat pillars in the new country. (p.83)*

Since Ingimundr was restless and unable to settle in Norway, King Harald suggested he try his fortune in Iceland.

> Ingimundr lézk þæt eigi ætlat hafa, en þó sendi hann þá Finna tvá í hamförum til Íslands eptir hlut sínum. þæt var Freyr ok görr af silfri. Finnar kómu aptr ok höfðu fundit hlutinn ok nát eigi; vísuði þeir Ingimundi til í dal einum milli holta tveggja ok sögðu Ingimundi allt landsleg, hvé háttat var þar er hann skyldi byggja. (*ÍF* I, p.218)
> *Ingimund said he'd never intended to go there, but all the same he sent two Lapps on a magic ride to Iceland to look for the object he'd lost. It was an image of Frey, made of silver. The Lapps came back–they'd found the image but couldn't get it–and told Ingimund that it was in a certain valley between two hillocks. They described to him in detail how the land lay, and all about where he was to make his home. (p.83)*

At that point, Ingimundr set off for Iceland, where he found the valley described by the Finns; he also found his lost talisman when he started digging the hole for his high-seat pillars.

It is not clear what exactly *völur* were. They appear to have been seeresses who were invited to various households to foretell the future and were paid for their trouble. Attempts have been made to link their practices to those of Saami or Finnish (i.e. Lappish) shamans, who would apparently visit alien worlds while in a trance, as the Finns in the above extract seem to be doing (Pálsson 1996, 24-27). However, as Dubois has pointed out, *völur* differ from Saami shamans in three important ways: first, Saami shamans were always male; second, a drum was an essential part of their ritual; third, although shamans did practice divination and manipulation, the primary purpose of their art was to heal the sick (Dubois 1999: 130, 133). From what we can gather about the *völur*, a magic staff (*völr*) rather than a drum was part of their accoutrements, and they were involved in fortune-telling, not healing; the one example in the *Prose Edda* of a *völva* singing spells to loosen a whetstone from Þórr's head seems to be the exception that proves the rule (p.104). An accompaniment of singing rather than drumming seems to have been necessary for *völur* to carry out their functions. Whether these incantations helped to bring on a trance in which the women prophesied, or whether the songs formed part of an indispensable religious ritual, is not clear from the examples in the Family Sagas. We also do not know from whom the *völur* received their inspiration. A detailed description of a *völva* and her practices is found in the person of Þorbjörg litilvölva in the *Saga of Erik the Red* (*I.F.* IV, ch.4, pp.193-237). Unfortunately, the historicity of this lady is decidedly suspect. She does not appear in the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, which is generally thought to be one of the sources of *Eiriks saga* (Wahlgren 1968: 26-35), and she herself seems to be a literary pastiche made up of motifs from various sagas, probably for the purpose of glorifying Guðríðr, who is in many respects the chief character of the saga (Strömback 1935: 57). It is probably coincidence that the *völur* have certain traits in common with the earliest Jewish prophets, those who exercised their calling before the establishment of the Kingdom of Israel. Both appear to have travelled from place to place and have been marked as prophets by the way they dressed; both expected to be paid for their services; both seem to have needed music to attain a prophetic state. As time progressed and society changed, both the early Jewish prophets and the *völur* became obsolete. Prophecy, however, did not die out, either in the Bible or in Icelandic literature.

The most famous *völva* in Old Icelandic literature is the seeress of the *Völuspá*, who, in an apocalyptic vision, relates the pagan myth of the birth of the world, the fight between the old gods, the Vanir and the Æsir, and the eventual destruction and rebirth of the world. McKinnell (1994: 120-24) and Pálsson (1996: 28) have already pointed out that there are many echoes of *Revelation* in the poem. Even so, we can glean some information about the *völur* and their practices from the *Völuspá* and the Eddas. For example, we know that it was disgraceful for Óðinn, a male god, and by extension any other male, to indulge in *seiðr* or magic. We do not know who gave the seeress of the *Völuspá* the ability to see into the future; all that we know is that it is evidently not one of the pagan gods since she can see things which are hidden from them. Óðinn appears to have raised her from the dead to prophesy, with the implication that the religion she was part of is also dead and gone, an assumption that is borne out by the fact that *völur* are not even mentioned in *Grágás*, even though all other heathen and magical practices are condemned. The authors of the Family Sagas also place *völur* only in sagas and parts of sagas set in pagan times. In addition, they are found outside Iceland–in Norway for the *völur* of *Landnámabók-Vatnsdæla* and *Norna-Gests þattr*, in Greenland for Þorbjorg litilvölva, in Denmark for the *völur* of *Orms þáttr Storolfssonar*--the main exception being the blackened bones of a dead *völva* in *Laxdæla Saga* (*I.F.* V, ch. 76), who, figuratively, stands for the old religion which cannot coexist with the new, and, structurally, counterbalances Unnr, the Christian woman who lived in pagan times (McCreesh 1978-79: 277). *Völur*, then, belong to pre-Settlement days and have come to Iceland only in old tales and half-forgotten memories.

The demise of the *völur* did not, however, bring about the end of inspirational prophecy in Scandinavia. From the time of the Settlement onwards, there seem to have been people in Iceland with the gift of foresight. Unlike the *völur*, who were female only, this category of prophet included both men and women. The gift of foresight seems to have come to them in the same way that inspiration came to the prophets of the northen part of Israel, directly, without any need for incantations or rituals. These wise men and women had two specific abilities: they could see things about certain people which they might or might not choose to reveal to the people concerned, and they were able to interpret dreams. An example of this type of prophet is Gestr Oddleifsson, also known as *inn spaki* (the wise), who appears in the *Landnámabók* and some sagas. In *Laxdæla* he is described thus:

> Hann var höfðingi mikill ok spekingr at viti, framsýnn um marga hluti, vel vingaðr við alla ina stœrri menn, ok margir sóttu ráð at honum. (*I.F.* V, ch. 33, p.87)
> *He was an important chieftain and especially wise man, who could foretell many events of the future. Most of the foremost men of the country were on good terms with him and many sought his advice.*

The story told about him in the *Landnámabók* runs as follows. In the course of an autumn-feast he is giving, Ljótr inn spáki Þorgrimsson asks Gestr what sort of man his son will turn out to be. Gestr replies that Ljótr's foster-son will be the more famous of the two. The next morning Ljótr again asks about his son's future and is once more told that his nephew will be the more famous of the two. Ljótr then wants to know his own fate:

> Gestr kvazk eigi sjá ørlög hans, en bað hann vera vel við nábúa sína. Ljótr spurði: "Munu jarðlýsnar, synir Gríms kögurs, verða mér at bana?" "Sárt bítr soltin lús," kvað Gestr. "Hvar mun þat verða?" kvad Ljótr. "Heðra nær," kvað Gestr. (p. 185)
> *Gest said he couldn't see Ljot's future, and advised him to be kind to his neighbours.*
> *Ljot asked, "Will the earth-lice, the sons of Grim Kogur cause my death?"*

> *"A hungry louse can give a nasty bite," said Gest.*
> *"Where will that happen?" said Ljot.*
> *"Not far from here," said Gest. (p.69)*

The other prophet who is mentioned frequently is a woman, Þordís, who gave her name to Spákonafell (wise woman's mountain). The description of her in the *Vatnsdæla saga* is similar to that of Gestr:

> Hon var mikils verð ok margs kunnandi.
> *She was a worthy woman and wise in many ways.* (*Í.F.* VIII, ch. 44, p.119)
> Hon var forvitra ok framsýn ok var tekin til þess at gera um stórmál. (*Í.F.* VIII, ch. 44, p.120)
> *She was very wise and could see into the future and was thus chosen to act in major cases. (p. 61)*

The second part of the wise man's or wise woman's ability was that of interpreting other people's dreams, which is actually a form of divination. An example of this also appears in the *Laxdæla saga*. Guðrún, the heroine, has had a set of four strange dreams which nobody has been able to interpret to her satisfaction. In the first she was wearing a head-dress which she felt did not suit her, and so she threw it into a stream. In the second, a silver ring which she really liked slid off her arm into a lake, causing her a sense of great loss. In the third, she had a flawed gold ring which broke when she put out her hand to break a fall. In the fourth, a heavy gold helmet fell from her head into the waters of Hvammsfjord. Gestr interprets these dreams as referring to Guðrún 's future husbands, and things do indeed turn out as he predicts: Guðrún divorces her first husband to whom she had been married without her consent (ch. 34); her second husband dies at sea (ch. 35); her third is killed in a fight (ch. 55); her last perishes in Hvammsfjord (ch. 76)

The symbols in Guðrún's dreams--the rings and head-dresses--are unusual in the Family Sagas. People are normally represented by animals called *fylgjur* or fetches. According to Kelchner,

> The fetch is the inherent soul, the accompanying counterpart or representation of a living person. Usually invisible, it may, nevertheless, be seen in dreams and visions, almost always in the form of an animal. The possession of a fetch is universal, and it coincides, in some salient feature or features, with the qualities and characteristics of the person to whom it belongs, or, especially in cases of hostility, with the attitude of its owner toward the dreamer. (Kelchner 1935: 17)

There are three possible reasons why symbols rather than fetches appear here. Firstly, most dreams in the sagas are dreamed by or about men, not women, and so the change in symbol may indicate a change in gender. Secondly, these particular symbols are especially appropriate for young Guðrún, who, as her marriage-settlement and treatment of her first husband show, is extremely fond of finery and jewellery. Thirdly, they have no pagan connotations, and so are suitable for a woman who ends her days as a staunch Christian.

Guðrún takes care to mention to Gestr that she does not insist on these dreams being favourably interpreted:

> Ok bið ek þó eigi þess, at þeir sé í vil ráðnir (*Í.F.* V, ch. 33, p.88)
> *I don't insist that they be favourably interpreted.* (p.44)

This is because people do not always take kindly to unfavourable predictions. Ljótr, for example, is not happy with what he is told about his son:

> Óvirðing þótti Ljótr þetta ....Þá varð Ljótr reiðr. (*Í.F.* I, p.185.)
> *Ljot took offence. .Then Ljot got angry..* (p. 69)

In the *Laxdæla saga*, Gestr nuances his answer slightly when Óláfr asks him which of the young men of the neighbourhood will be the most worthy, so that, while telling the strict but ambiguous truth, he still manages to give Óláfr the answer he is hoping for:

> Gestr svarar: " þat mun mjök ganga eptir ástríki þinu, at um Kjartan mun þykkja mest vert, meðan hann er uppi." (*I.F.* V, ch. 33, p.92)
> *Gest replied, "It will be much as your own affections predict, as Kjartan will be thought the most outstanding of them, as long as he lives. (p.46)*

Gestr is particularly careful to avoid references to death wherever possible. For this reason, he tells Ljótr that he cannot see his fate, although, as can be seen from his next statement, that may in fact have been a lie, since he seems to know both where and by whom Ljótr will be killed. He also sees more about Kjartan's future than he has told his father:

> En nökkuru síðar ríðr Þórðr inn lági, sonr hans, hjá honum ok mælti: "Hvat berr nú þess við, faðir minn, er þér hrynja tár?" Gestr svarar: "Þarfleysa er at segja þat, en eigi nenni ek at þegja yfir því, er á þínum dögum mun fram koma; en ekki kemr mér at óvörum, þótt Bolli standi yfir höfuðsvörðum Kjartans, ok hann vinni sér þá ok höfuðbana, ok er þetta illt at vita um svá mikla ágætismenn."(*I.F.* V, ch. 33, p.92)
> *A short while later his son Thord drew alongside him and asked, "Why, father, are there tears in your eyes?"*
> *Gest answered, "No need to mention it, but since you ask, I won't conceal it from you either, as you'll live to see it happen. I wouldn't be surprised if Bolli should one day stoop over Kjartan's corpse and in slaying him bring about his own death, a vision all the more saddening because of the excellence of these young men."* (p.46)

There are two possible reasons for this silence. The first is that, whatever chance there might be of something evil not coming to pass while it is still unspoken, once it has become a prophecy, the future cannot be altered, as the *völva* above pointed out to Ingimundr. The second is that an ill-favoured prophecy could easily be construed as a curse and its utterer acquire a reputation for witchcraft.

In the Family Sagas, the line between prophecy and curse is a thin one. The main difference between them is that prophecies are made by people who are respected, and curses are laid by people with bad reputations. Prophecies are made at the request of friends of the *spámaðr* or *spákona*, who, if they see something unpleasant in store, will either avoid mentioning it, as Gestr does above, or at best couch the prophesy in such ambiguous terms that it can in no way be construed as a curse. Interestingly enough, the same person can be revered by one family and reviled by another, as is the case with Þordís of Spákonafell. In *Vatnsdæla*, she is represented as a highly respected lawyer. In *Kormáks saga*, on the other hand, she is described as *illa lynd* (of evil character) (*I.F.* VIII, ch. 9, p.233) and is shown performing magical rites (ch.22). Witches and wizards seem in many cases to be little more than foresighted people who are enemies of the person they apparently curse. Like the *spámaðr*, they see what is to come, but, instead of telling the good and keeping quiet about the bad, they do the opposite, so that, when the worst does come to pass, they are accused of having cast a spell to cause it. For example, in the *Eyrbyggja saga*, when Arnkell remarks to the son of the witch he has brought to justice that not much good has come to him through his mother, she retaliates thus:

> "Matt eigi af þinni moður illt hljóta, er þu att enga á lifi, en um þæt vilda ek at min á kvæði stœðisk, at þu hlytir því verra af feðr þínum en Oddr hefir af mér hlotit." (*I.F.* IV, ch.20, p.54)
> *"You cannot get an evil end from your own mother because she's no longer alive, but I want my curse to work on you so that you come off worse because of your father than Odd has because of me."* (V, p.155)

Although Katla's words sound like a curse, in other circumstances they could easily be a prediction based on common sense. Arnkell's father had always been a troublemaker; shortly after he arrived in Iceland, he challenged an old and childless man to a duel to get his land, and the author of the saga comments that he was *inn mesti ójafnaðarmaðr* (the greatest troublemaker)(*I.F.* IV, ch.8, p.14). Such a person would probably have created trouble for Arnkell at some point in his life with or without a curse. In the same way, Kormákr's refusal to marry the woman he loves is ascribed to a spell cast by Þorveigr, the woman whose two sons had been killed by Kormákr; there was, however, a secondary reason why Kormákr's feelings about Steingerðr changed: there were some disagreements about financial matters (*nokkurar greinir um fjarfar*) (*I.F.* VIII, ch. 6, p.223)

Once we move into specifically Christian literature such as the Bishops' Sagas, dream-interpretation and prophecy are the prerogative of the Church. Some future bishops have prophetic dreams shortly before they hear they have been elected to a see. Þorlákr, for example, has this one:

> Hann þóttist ganga frá kirkju þar á þinginu heim til búðar sinnar ok bera höfuð ins heilaga Martini í faðmi sér. (*Bysk.* I, ch.17, p.68)
>
> He thought he was walking from the church there at the Thing to his booth carrying the head of St Martin in his arms.

Like many of the characters in the Family Sagas, the future bishop is unable to interpret his dream and has to call upon a wiser person for assistance. In the Bishops' Sagas, wise people, including one anchoress (*Bysk.* II, ch. 45, p. 266), are in holy orders. It is Páll the priest from Reykjaholt, *dýrðligr maðr* (a worthy man), who explains to Þorlákr that his dream means that he too will bear the head of (i.e. be) a holy bishop. The imagery in these dreams is religious, with no hint of fetches or other pagan creatures: in all instances, the priest sees himself in or near a church, manipulating holy objects. Out of the dreams in the Family Sagas, the ones which bear the closest resemblance to those in the Bishops' Sagas are probably Guðrun's quoted above.

The gift of prophecy is also attributed to the higher clergy in the Bishops' Sagas. Once they are back home after their consecration, Icelandic bishops suddenly acquire the ability to see into the future. For example, the author of *Jóns saga* states:

> þessi inn heilagi byskup Jóhannes var prýddr af guði mörgum merkiligum hlutum ok fögrum vitrunum. (*Bysk.* II, ch.34, p.51)
>
> *This holy bishop John was then granted by God many remarkable things and fair visions.*

Then, to back up his claim, the author quotes three foresighted dreams of Jón's. In two cases, Jón knows of the passing of a priest before word has arrived of his death (ch.8, ch.21), and in the other he has a vision inspired by the the contents of a holy book two days before the book arrives (ch.19). As for Bishop Guðmundr's prophetic ability, it seems more like a capacity to lay curses: when a farmer refuses hospitality to the bishop and his followers, Guðmundr foretells that something evil will befall him:

> En þat spámæli gekk svá eftir, at annat sumar fyrir Máríumessu ina síðari brann upp bærinn allr at köldum kolum. (*Bysk.*II, ch.69, p.315)
>
> *And that prophecy proved true, for the following summer, before the Feast of the Virgin Mary [8 Sept.], the homestead burned to the ground.*

Again, the line between prophecy and curse is a thin one.

Once dead, holy bishops and other saints are credited with the ability to perform miracles, often miracles of healing. This is in direct contrast to the abilities of both the *völur* and the wise men and women of the Family Sagas, who have no medical powers. The example of healing which occurs in *Egils saga* is not so much an example of curing the sick as a cautionary tale against trying to win a woman's affections by magic: the lovesick swain who carved magical runes accidentally made the object of his desire ill by using the wrong signs (*ÍF* II, ch. 72, pp. 229-230). Incidentally, resorting to love-philtres and consulting witches about health are also condemned by Ælfric (*De Auguriis*, ll. 374-75, ll. 372-73). Healing, especially miraculous healing, is the prerogative of the Church.

The coming of Christianity does not, however, seem to have had much effect on the often commented on fatalism of the Family Sagas. The fact that Icelanders normally knew the outcome of a saga explains in part this fatalism. In addition, the Icelanders did seem to believe in an immutable fate, to which not only the statement of the pagan *völva* above but also a remark of a Christian chieftain bear witness:

> þu munt biskup vera, svá hefir mir dreymt til. (*Bysk.* II, ch 42, p.260)
> *You will be bishop, as I have dreamed it.*

For this reason, stories in Icelandic literature of people trying to avoid their fate, like Oedipus' father in Greek mythology and Pharaoh and Herod in the Bible, are rare. One example is, however, found in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstunga*. Þorsteinn Egil-Skalgrimsson has a dream about birds which is interpreted thus:

> Austmaðr mælti: "Fuglar þeir munu vera stórra manna fylgjur; en húsfreyja þín er eigi heil, ok mun hon fœða meybarn fritt ok fagrt, ok munt þú unna því mikit. En göfgir menn munu biðja dóttur þinnar ór þeim ættum sem þér þóttu ernirnir fljúga at ok leggja á hana ofrást ok berjask of hana ok látask báðir af því efni; ok því næst mun inn þriði maðr biðja hennar or þeirri ætt er valrinn fló at, ok þeim mun hon gipt vera." (*I.F.* III, ch.2, p.55)
>
> *"These birds must be fetches of important people," said the Norwegian. "Now, your wife is pregnant and will give birth to a lovely baby girl, and you will love her dearly. Noble men will come from the directions that the eagles in your dream seemed to fly from, and will ask for your daughter's hand. They will love her more strongly than is reasonable and will fight over her, and both of them will die because of it. And then a third man, coming from the direction from which the hawk flew, will ask for her hand, and she will marry him."*

To avert such a catastrophe, Þorsteinn orders his wife to have the child exposed if it should be a girl. She pretends to do his bidding, but in reality sends the child to Þorsteinn's sister, who has her brought up in secret until she is six. At that point, Þorsteinn's sister shows the child to her father, who regrets his past stupidity and takes her home with him, saying, "veltr þangat sem vera vill um flesta hluti" (*In most cases, what will be will be.*) (*I.F.*III , ch.3, p.58)

In this respect, Biblical prophecy and Icelandic prophecy are diametrically opposed. For the prophets of the Bible, what they had foretold would come about only if the Israelites or their kings refused to mend their ways. Many Biblical prophets were shrewd tacticians and politicians who saw where a king's course of action would lead him, and so were able to make "prophecies" based on common sense which had a reasonable chance of coming true (Porter 1989: 104-107). If, by any chance, the Israelites or their king did not change their ways and the disaster still did not come to pass, that was because Yahweh was giving His people a second chance. If the Israelites changed their ways, then the disasters which had been foretold would normally be averted. In Icelandic literature, on the other hand, nothing can change fate. The best Icelandic wise men and women can do is keep quiet about tragedies they have foreseen, give good advice, and hope.

Not only are Biblical and Icelandic prophecy different, the wise men and women of early Icelandic literature are also different from their counterparts in the Bible. Both the Biblical prophets and the Icelandic seers came from outside the established priestly class, but the Biblical prophets believed that they had received a special call from God to proclaim His word to the nation. The sphere of action of the Icelandic seers, on the other hand, was limited: they normally put their gifts at the disposal of a few families, not the whole commonwealth. But what is even more unusual about these pre-Conversion seers is that their inspiration does not appear to have been sent by any supernatural being, either pagan or Christian. The reason for this undoubtedly has its roots in Christian teaching. Prophecy is a gift of God and as such was sent to Old and New Testament prophets and Christian saints. Noble heathens such as Gestr, however, did not yet know God and so were not able to receive their gift from Him. Receiving the ability from one of the old pagan gods would go against Christian teaching. The only way around the problem was to make second-sight a natural gift, like the ability to sing, to shoot well or to tell stories.

To sum up, although divination may have been practised by some colonists in the early days of the Settlement of Iceland, the practice seems to have been rare and limited to land-taking. Drawing lots was practised, but seems to have lost any pagan connotations it may once have had. Inspirational prophesy was common. In pre-Settlement days it seems to have been practised by professional seeresses, who needed some sort of ritual for their performance to take place; such practices appear not to have taken place in Iceland. Even so, prophecy did not die out, since, according to the sagas, there were people in Scandinavia who possessed an innate ability to see into the future and to interpret dreams. In specifically Christian literature such as the *Byskupa sögur,* these people were usually members of the clergy.

What is striking about the literary representation of prophecy in Old Icelandic literature is the extent to which it conforms to Christian teaching. Seers and seeresses are not inspired by pagan gods. Deliberate attempts to see into the future, such as those found in the practices of the *völur*, are restricted to pre-Christian times, or, if they are still carried out in Christian times, are relegated to distant lands. Inspirational prophecy and the ability to interpret dreams, which were considered natural gifts and had their counterparts in the Bible, exist both before and after the Conversion. Healing magic belongs to the Church. Divinational practices are limited to drawing lots, condoned by the Bible and the Church Fathers, and to choosing land, a practice approved of by Ælfric, although perhaps not in the form in which it was carried out in the *Landnámabók.* As far as prophecy is concerned, the *Landnámabók* and the Family Sagas are theologically sound.

Translations from the Family Sagas are taken from *Complete sagas of Icelanders,* 5 vols., Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997. Other translations are my own.

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