

On Supernatural Motifs in the *Fornaldarsögur*

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1. Introduction

The present paper concerns the *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* and their dichotomous worldview, which may be said to reflect ideas about 'this world' and the 'other' and involve frequent changes of scene between these two worlds. This dichotomous worldview is in fact not restricted to the *fornaldarsögur* since it is also characteristic of Norse mythology in a wider context (see for example McKinnell, 2005, 4). This area of contact between the *fornaldarsögur* and Norse mythology is in itself an important research topic, but the focus here is primarily on the *fornaldarsögur*, and a closer study of the characteristics of separate narrative genres is indeed a prerequisite of more detailed comparison.

In the *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, the interplay between the two worlds can be extensive, and the boundary between them can often appear somewhat obscure. In this they differ from other medieval narrative genres, or at least narratives that have a more 'realistic' appearance, such as the Sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendinga sögur*) or Contemporary Sagas (*Samtíðarsögur*).¹ However, in the frequent and apparently natural fusion of the two worlds in the *fornaldarsögur* one can say that the sagas resemble to some extent the worldview of another genre: the folktale or fairy tale. One characteristic of the fairy tale is how the boundaries between separate worlds have been erased so as to create a special narrative world: we can call this a 'fairy-tale world', though that would of course simplify the complex world reflected in these tales. Many folklorists have tried to define the nature of fairy tales and the peculiar world that is characteristic of these tales. Among the best known theories are those of the Swiss folklorist Max Lüthi, who maintains that the world of the fairy tale is governed by its own special principles and distinguished by a certain one-dimensionality that is independent of our definitions of what should be regarded as real or unreal and natural or supernatural (cp. Lüthi, 1986, 6–7). Anything can happen in this world. The hero, who travels through a dark and dangerous forest, is relieved when he meets an animal that speaks, just as he is not at all surprised when he chances upon a tree of bronze, then a tree of silver and finally a tree of gold. The fairy-tale hero would, however, probably be perturbed should he encounter these trees in the reverse order, that is, first the tree of gold, then the tree of silver, and finally the tree of bronze, for this would upset the narrative principles of the fairy-tale world, but that is another matter; such is the world of fairy tales.

The roots of the *fornaldarsögur* lie to some extent in the two aforementioned genres, that is in myths and fairy tales, yet they belong to neither of these genres and form a separate genre where the worldview *resembles* in many ways the dichotomous worldview of myth and the one-dimensional world of the

¹ One should of course bear in mind here that any discussion of genres must allow for exceptions.

fairy tale. The *foraldarsögur* are in fact very far from exhibiting the same ideas about the otherworld as we find in fairy tales, and the mythological worlds are also different in many respects. But how then is the world that distinguishes the *foraldarsögur*? Isn't there a need to define this world and examine whether, and then how, it differs from related narrative genres, oral or literary?

A study of the worldview of the *foraldarsögur* is no simple task to deal with in a single paper. The subject matter is comprehensive and requires both detailed source-criticism and consideration of what has already been studied in relation to the overall picture.² It should be borne in mind that the worldview that underlies and distinguishes the *foraldarsögur* need not reflect historical facts in the Norse past but rather the notions people had about that past. This worldview must be mapped and defined, and that involves examining the two worlds and the boundary between them. The social structure and values characteristic of the everyday world of these sagas or the Scandinavian home of their heroes resembles in many ways the Norse medieval worldview encountered in other kinds of narratives, and so it is necessary to focus in particular on the 'other' world and the manifestation of the 'supernatural' — the unknown dimension — and examine how the other world invades the world of everyday life. One must consider in this connection the role of supernatural motifs and attitudes towards them within the sagas. How pervasive is the other world and what are its distinctive features? Are these features disjointed or do they present a coherent picture? I would now like to discuss the first steps in the research of this matter, a research project that has the working title: *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda: this world and the other*.

One must first define and delimit the subject matter. There is no room here for any detailed discussion of genre-analysis aside from noting that the term *foraldarsögur* is applied to stories that originate in or draw on a Norse narrative tradition that was transmitted orally until the thirteenth/fourteenth and even fifteenth century when all of the stories had finally been committed to writing. The term *foraldarsaga* normally refers to the literary genre in question, that is the written sagas. However, it is important to accept that the *foraldarsögur* are a literature primarily derived from a common oral tradition, and one could perhaps call them 'booklore' rather than literature (see for example, Westerdahl, 2004, 116), though the written versions do indeed often exhibit strong authorial characteristics. Thus, the research project is more concerned with the material treated in the sagas than the literature itself. Having given the matter some thought, I decided to include in my research the stories first published in 1829–1830 by Carl Christian Rafn under the title *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, but also four sagas and *þættir* that Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson chose to add to this corpus in their edition from 1943–1944, though these additions differ in some respects from other sagas of the genre, in particular with regard to the time-frame of the events

² For example, much has been written on giants and other supernatural beings. Lotte Motz, for instance, has written a series of articles on this subject in addition to a book (Motz, 1993). Other scholars have studied and written about certain aspects related to the research topic, and there will thus be ample commentary to consult when particular aspects will be examined.

related.³ The research will also include *fornaldarsögur* which are only preserved in the form of *rímur* (and prose derived from *rímur*), and some further sagas are thereby added to the body of texts hitherto classified as *fornaldarsögur*.⁴ The project will begin with a close reading of the texts and consideration of all ideas relating to the dichotomous worldview, and after that the two worlds will be examined from various points of view.

An important part of the research is a comparison of ideas as they appear within the *fornaldarsögur*, and they will also be squared with similar ideas appearing elsewhere. To make this comparison as sound as possible the information and particular concepts that appear in the sagas will be entered into a database that will ultimately form the basis of the research project; everything of importance will be classified and defined. This is in fact a crucial first step since the material studied is extensive and the search for specific items and their connection to other items is thereby facilitated.

2. The Database

Once a practical database program had been selected,⁵ the database had to be designed or defined. Originally, I thought it might be based on the international system of motif-indices and fashioned after the index of Ingrid Boberg, *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature*, so that motifs pertaining to the subject matter would fall mainly into the categories D (Magic), E (The Dead), F (Marvels) and G (Ogres). It became clear, however, that the items I intend to examine pertain to nearly all categories of traditional motif-indices, whose international system comprises 22 categories marked A–Z with innumerable sub-categories. I realized therefore at a relatively early stage that the previously defined categories could not form a sound basis for the project. It has furthermore become apparent that many of the items cannot be defined as motifs proper, as we are often dealing with a quite specific treatment of particular motifs or very minor attendant motifs that are not recorded in the indices. The items in the database do therefore not fit within the categories already in use.

³ Rosemary Power (1985) has treated common characteristics in three of these works, namely *Yngvars saga víðförla*, *Þorsteins þátr bæjarmagns* and *Helga þátr Þórissonar*.

⁴ There has been some discussion about the place of some sagas within the genre and it has been argued that some sagas previously defined as *fornaldarsögur* actually belong to other genres. One might mention, for example, the learned passages *Hversu Noregur byggðist*, *Fundinn Noregur* and *Af Upplendinga konungum*, as well as *Norna-Gests þátr*, *Tóka þátr Tókasonar*, *Helga þátr Þórissonar*, *Sörla þátr* and even *Þorsteins þátr bæjarmagns* (Rowe, 2003). Our research will include these texts since their content is related to the *fornaldarsögur*, but the material to be studied will be defined more closely at a later stage.

⁵ The program referred to is FileMaker pro 8.0v1, which was chosen, among other things, because of the possibility to connect the database at a later stage to the internet and thus give other scholars and readers of the *fornaldarsögur* a chance to search in the database.

The database is in Icelandic⁶ and designed in such a way that search-words are divided into main categories (*Flokkar*) and items (*Atriði*). At present, the main categories are thirty-eight in number, but once all the data has been entered the categories will be refined and possible overlaps reduced, though it will no doubt be difficult to eliminate them entirely. The categories are as follows in alphabetical order:

Álög	Fjölkyngisbrögð	Kristin áhrif
Andleg birtingarmynd	Forlög	Líkaminn
Annar heimur	Forspá	Lækning
Augu	Fyrirboðar	Meinvættir
Berserkir	Fæðing	Menn og dýr
Blót	Galdrabúnaður	Mögnuð orð
Dauði	Goðin	Ógæfuhlutir
Drykkir	Gæfa	Rúnir
Dýr	Hamför	Töfrahlutir
Eitur	Hamskipti	Vopn og herklæði
Eldur	Haugur	Vættabyggðir
Fjölkyngur	Jurtir	Vættir
Fjölkyngi	Kjöt	

The number of categories might very well increase, but one can assume that the main outlines are established. Each of these thirty-eight main categories has some — indeed even as many as twenty-six — sub-categories or items, which involve a more detailed analysis of each category, for example:

Fjölkyngur	hálftröll	kvöldriða
Bjarnar	hofgyðja	myrkriða
drotning	illvættur	seiðfólk
dvergur	jötunn	stjúpmóðir
Finnar	karl	tröll
flagð	kona	valkyrja
fóstra	konungsdóttir	viðhorf
fóstri	konungssonur	vísindamenn
galdramaður	konungur	völva

Thirty sagas have already been entered into the database, and the total number of items is now 386. The data is entered in such a way that scenes relating to the subject matter are entered in their entirety. Here is one entry by way of example:

⁶ An English version of the database is possible at a later stage, but depends upon financing. Since many *foraldarsögur* exist in more than one version, not all of which have yet been edited properly, the database has to be kept open so that it can be modified in the future.

Saga: Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra

FN bindi og bls.: III, 656–658

Vinnuörk: k. 5

Flokkur: Fjölkkunnugir, Meinvættir, Eitur, Álög, Dauði

Atriði: *stjúpmóðir, tröll, drykkur, umbreyting, gagnálög, frelsun, brenna*

Lýsing: Grímhildur stjúpa Signýjar var fögur að sjá, en að innan hið mesta flagð. Hún á sjö dætur, allar hinar mestu flagðkonur. Grímhildur étur menn, og byrlar manni sínum eitur vegna aldurs hans. Hún leggur á Signýju að hún verði að tröllkonu og skuli berjast við stjúpsystur sínar sjö. Hildur, dóttir Signýjar, leggur fram gagnálög. Illugi frelsar Signýju úr álögum og vill hún launa honum fyrir það. Stjúpsysturnar sjö (flagðkonurnar) eru drepnar og brenndar.

Kyn: kvk

Tími:

This means that each entry may include more than one category and an even greater number of items. It will be possible to search for all words that have been entered into the database; for example, if one looks up the item *gagnálög* or 'counter-spell' in the field *Atriði* or 'Items', the search will yield information about the number of entries involving the word and allow one to examine the relevant entries.

The research project will also examine how clearly the stories manifest the dichotomous worldview, that is how prevalent the 'other' world is in the material and whether, and then to what extent, the sagas differ in this respect. Once the material has been entered into the database, the database should be able to inform us about the extent to which these items appear, as a whole as well as in particular sagas — and it has already become apparent that the sagas differ considerably in this respect. One can, for example, mention *Völsunga saga*, which receives 71 entries, whereas *Áns saga bogsveigis* only has 4, as does *Friðþjófs saga hins frækna*:

71	Völsunga saga [120 p.]
66	Göngu-Hrólfis saga [128 p.]
46	Örvar-Odds saga [162 p.]
31	Hrólfis saga kraka [107 p.]
30	Sturlaugs saga starfssama [56 p.]
24	Hervarar saga [102 p.]
23	Hjálmþérs saga og Ólvés [66 p.]
20	Hrólfis saga Gautrekssonar [134 p.]
18	Hálfðanar saga Brönnufóstra [33 p.]
15	Þorsteins þáttur bæjarmagns [21 p.]
14	Hrómundar saga Gripssonar [16 p.] / Sörla saga sterka [45 p.]
13	Bósa saga og Herrauðs [42 p.] / Hálfis saga og Hálfisrekka [36 p.] / Ketils saga hængs [31 p.] / Norna-Gests þáttur [30 p.] / Ragnars saga loðbrókar [63 p.] / Yngvars saga víðförla [p.32]
10	Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar [40 p.]

9	Sögubrot af nokkrum fornkonungum í Dana- og Svíavelði [26 p.]
8	Gríms saga loðinkinna [15 p.]
6	Ásmundar saga kappabana [41 p.] / Sörla þáttur [17 p.] / Þáttur af Ragnars sonum [16 p.]
5	Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra [13 p.]
4	Áns saga bogsveigis [38 p.] / Helga þáttur Þórissonar [6 p.] / Friðþjófs saga hins frækna [38 p.]
1	Af Upplendinga konungum [4 p.] / Tóka þáttur Tókasonar [4 p.]

It should be noted in this connection that the sagas differ in length,⁷ and particular entries can also vary in their extent and involve, for example, one to ten main categories and up to a total of nineteen items (these numbers might eventually change). The comparison nevertheless reveals how the importance of the 'other' world varies. The next step is to examine each item by itself and consider whether similar ideas and attitudes are reflected elsewhere in the database in connection with the same items.

The number of search-words in the categories *ffölkynngi* 'magic', *ffölkunnugir* 'skilled in magic' or *ffölkynngisbrögð* 'magical acts' is conspicuous, and magic is very often connected to other categories. Accordingly, it must be important to consider more closely the role of magic in the sagas, and magic seems in fact to play a significant role in connecting the two worlds, with persons skilled in magic assuming major roles. Magic therefore, like any other categories/items, must be examined closely within the primary texts and one must define basic questions such as: What does it mean to be *ffölkunnugur* in the sagas? Do the sources provide a coherent image of those skilled in magic or must we turn to other medieval texts to complement the fragmentary information obtained in the *fornaldarsögur*? One must of course be wary of assuming here that ideas about magic were more clear-cut in medieval times than today, and it is uncertain whether the ideas reflected by the sagas can be elucidated or complemented by other sources. It should also be taken into consideration whether the magic itself presupposes the dichotomous or dualistic worldview previously discussed, as in notions about black and white magic.

It is important to remember that the *fornaldarsögur* are not merely narratives since they also adhere to certain narrative principles. It is necessary therefore to question in this context whether and then to what extent magic and other supernatural motifs are employed for narratological purposes. Do characters skilled in magic or supernatural beings from another world to some extent serve to provide some kind of magical solutions and thus have a specific function in the narrative pattern of the sagas? We might ask, for example, whether a magical sword — and thus also the person(s) skilled in magic or the supernatural being(s) that give it power — only has the narratological function of creating the

⁷ See the page-numbers within brackets. We follow here the edition of Rafn (1829–1830), with the exception of *Helga þáttur Þórissonar*, *Tóka þáttur Tókasonar*, *Yngvars saga víðförla* and *Þorsteins þáttur bæjarmagns*, where we use the page numbers in the third volume of the edition of Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (1944).

preconditions for certain circumstances or scenes, such as the demise of a certain hero? Put another way, what is the narratological role of items pertaining to the supernatural world of the sagas? Can one say that a narratological function is characteristic of the supernatural motifs, or do the underlying ideas somehow pertain to the society of the audience when the sagas were told or written? Can we presume that they attest to actual folk beliefs or have some of these ideas perhaps already become fixed narrative motifs during these centuries? — motifs that are to some extent characteristic of the genre? Lynette R. Muir, who has studied medieval French stories, thinks that non-Christian marvels serve either a practical role determined by the plot or that the authors use such motifs only to decorate their stories (Muir, 1985, 83–85). Does this also apply to the *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*?

By studying these ideas and analyzing them through comparison with other literature one might ask: What ideas underlie the conception of the other world in the *fornaldarsögur*? Are they comparable to ideas characteristic of other medieval literature from Iceland or even the literature of other European nations? One must here bear in mind that ideas, for example about magic, vary considerably between nations and one must therefore establish which of them — if any — originate in the cultural heritage of Icelanders, the people who wrote the sagas, and which of them do not.⁸ The origin of the ideas must in other words be considered along with their connection to pagan tradition.

As previously mentioned, it is necessary to examine the world of the *fornaldarsögur* from various viewpoints, and two of these have now been discussed briefly, i.e. the narratological role of supernatural motifs and their origin. Another viewpoint to be considered concerns the audience, since it is also important how the audience was in the past supposed to understand the supernatural world of the sagas. How did these sagas reach their audience? What in their cultural background determined whether they believed or disbelieved supernatural events and how did these factors accord with the common knowledge we assume people had at the time? The medieval audience of the sagas did of course view the world differently than readers in the twenty-first century and their ideas about the supernatural reflect attempts to explain unknown phenomena. Some of these phenomena were explained in terms of magic, but fear of magic and witchcraft caused people to view these phenomena as real threats because they arose — like religion — from a set of beliefs.

One can continue along these lines and ask whether there is any indication that the genre itself, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, determined the understanding of the audience so that people understood the ideas of one saga in light of other *fornaldarsögur* they had read? If so, then one might also ask whether we are dealing with a demarcated narrative world familiar to the audience. An author could obviously have avoided explanatory asides by using well-known motifs that referred to the knowledge of the audience (cp. Sweeney, 2000, 18), but the sagas also gain a certain depth by referring thus to the knowledge of the audience and

⁸ The ongoing international discussion about magic or witchcraft must be considered here, and a fair deal has been written about supernatural elements in romances (in particular French and English romances, cp., for example, Sweeney, 2000).

this is likely to have increased their enjoyment. We can imagine that those listening to a fairy tale had certain expectations and approached the fairy-tale world accordingly; a world that opened up with the formula 'Once upon a time ...'. The audience would know that when two brothers have sought their fortune the third and youngest brother must follow in their footsteps; that when the hero has completed two tests of strength a third test must follow. The fixed formula shapes in other words the expectations of the audience, and it also has a decisive effect on their understanding of the content. Did the audience of the *fornaldarsögur* have similar expectations — and can we determine these expectations by examining the world view of the sagas? Or can we at all assume that the audience of medieval literature opened one door to enter the world of fairy tales and another to enter the world of the *fornaldarsögur*? And did other doors similarly lead to a demarcated world in other literary or oral genres? These are big questions, and readers of the present paper have no doubt noticed that many questions have been posed with few answers. Our excuse is that this is the nature of research projects in their initial stages and that there will be no answers without questions.

3. Conclusion

The research project described in this paper involves many problems concerning the worldview of the *fornaldarsögur*, and here is a list of the main questions our research is meant to answer, i.e. the main questions at this initial stage of the research:

- What elements compose the supernatural world of the *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*?
- In what way is this world characteristic of the genre itself?
- How important is the narratological role of supernatural motifs?
- What is the origin of these ideas?
- What attitudes did the authors/audience have towards the 'supernatural'?

The research can obviously become rather extensive, but its overall aim is to cast light on the dichotomous worldview of the sagas, examine the narratological roles of the two worlds and trace the underlying ideas to other literary or oral genres and folk belief.

It does not seem unlikely that the research can also sharpen genre-analysis in relation to the *fornaldarsögur*, for it is likely that the results will either reveal specific characteristics of the genre or more general characteristics that also apply to other types of literature. The research will at all events cast light on the ideas characteristic of this delimited body of sagas, and these results can presumably be compared to other Icelandic literature from the Middle Ages.

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