

**Folklore and Hagiography  
in Arngrímur's *Guðmundar saga Arasonar***

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It is well-known that Arngrímur borrowed text and incidents from extant versions of *Guðmundar saga*. It has also been established that he was idiosyncratic in their use. In borrowing and adapting he applied exegesis and learning. These are the outstanding characteristics that mark his narrative and inform his phrasing. Nevertheless, at pivotal moments he lovingly inserts what are unmistakable folk tales. The question, therefore, obtrudes: Was it mere pleasure that drove Arngrímur to include tales into a learned work or did the tales further his advocacy of Guðmundr as Iceland's primary saint?

Major folktales number five: 1. The banishment of a host of troll women. 2. The abduction and recovery of Gyriðr, Guðmundr's cousin; 3. The seduction of a farmer by the troll-woman Selkolla; 5. The adventurous journey of Guðmundr's emissary to the papal court; 5. The excommunication of a polar fox (chs. 54, 39-43, 66, 61, pp. 334-335, 276-284, 382-384, 354-359, respectively). The relish with which Arngrímur relates these tales is obvious.

Still, hagiography was the form chosen by Arngrímur for his narrative. He had deliberately excluded conventions of historical writing that were non-essential to his depiction of the road on which Guðmundr traveled to sanctity. His inclusion of the folktales suggests, therefore, that also folktales provided insight into Guðmundr's character and deportment and yielded a judgment on actions that, to some, seemed controversial. Not only miracles, but also folktales would substantiate that Guðmundr met the requisite criteria for sainthood. While the tales would reveal the power invested in him by God, they would also anchor his sanctity in a traditional role, that of the hero delivering mankind from monsters.

Syncretism is a well-known phenomenon in mythic and religious conceptualization. The process included the adaptation of images and cultural concepts. Those of a displaced religion or mythology would appear refashioned, but recognizable, in imagery and concepts that came to be accepted as orthodox. Emphasis is to be placed on 'came to be', as this was an ambiguous process fraught with ambivalence. In medieval Europe, the clergy in general harbored grave distrust to what might seem a performance of mere magic rather than of miracles (Kieckhefer, 1994, 368). Also Guðmundr Arason would be accused of unorthodox methods of healing throughout his episcopacy. His sanctification of wells was particularly suspect (Cormack, *The Saints in Iceland*, 100). Among the higher clergy, this distrust, joined to the repudiation of his sanctity, survived for decades after Guðmundr's death. Among the populace, however, trust in his power during his life and after his death was unshakable. I would argue that from the start of his ministry, his devoutness and asceticism inspired a belief in his powers that were rooted not only in Christian religion but also in folk tradition.

'Overt syncretism in folk belief is a sign of cultural acceptance of an alien or previous tradition' ('Syncretism,' *Wikipedia*). Parts of Arngrímur Brandsson's *vita*

clearly demonstrate the cultural acceptance, if not transformation of concepts transmitted from the heroic age. Guðmundr is a hero who delivers man from monsters. Like his pagan predecessors he kills or banishes demons that threaten to devastate the community. Christian thought had long conceptualized a saint as a Christian warrior. While pagan heroes fought with brute, physical strength and sharp, deadly weapons, the saint fought demons with the spiritual power that God had infused in him. The saint's weapons were words, signs and ritual hallowed by God, weapons as strong and powerful as the brute strength with which traditional heroes subdued and killed monsters.

While syncretism refers to the process of adaptation, the term *translatio* or *translation* might be more accurate for the way in which medieval clerics might view the transformative transmission of traditional belief into the normative Christian mold. I shall discuss the features of this translation in all of the five tales. The first four are thematically related. The banishment of troll women, the recovery of Gyriðr, the appearance and riddance of Selkolla, an infamous she-troll with the head of a seal, and the excommunication of the polar fox, center on the ancient theme, deliverance of mankind from monsters. The last, a cleric's journey to the papal court, is an adaptation of the perilous quest. All bear the hallmarks of the miraculous. Some carry a political message superimposed upon the historical record.

I shall precede those tales with a brief discussion of a mythologem that illuminates the ease with which such traditional narratives can be translated from epic accounts to hagiographic writing. Among the monsters in heroic epic there are demons that live in the sea. Beowulf prided himself of having dispatched monsters that inhabit the ocean. The feat was enormous. As the Anglo-Saxon scholar, Haruko Momma, points out in 'The Education of Beowulf', 'he was able...to eliminate water menaces from the area and to guarantee safe navigation for everyone' (*Verbal Encounters*, 2004, 171). Also Guðmundr did so, twice. In Northern Iceland, the deliverance is observable ex post facto. He calmed the seas around the polar island of Grímsey, thus benefiting anyone who sailed from there in the direction he had taken. The other time he killed a sea dragon in Norway, when in exile from his see (chs. 8, 62, pp. 173, 368). Beowulf had used his physical prowess; Guðmundr drew upon the strength God had endowed. The heroic deed assumed the features of a miracle. Yet the effect was the same. Both heroic deed and miracle delivered the community from monsters that pounced and killed at will.

Slaying monsters was usually a solitary act, a feat too dangerous for ordinary mortals to observe even from a distance. This held true for some, but not all of Guðmundr's acts of deliverance. Two took place in deserted areas, even though, as usual, a crowd surrounded Guðmundr. I shall first discuss a female troll episode after his rescue from imprisonment by Eyjólfur Kársson. They had traveled to Eið, a place so haunted that it was deserted (see also ch. 63, pp. 370-371). At night, the men in their tents were awakened by a commotion that sounded like bouts of violent wrestling. They heard distinctly female voices evidently rejoicing: 'Here sleep men. Men sleep here.' This was unmistakably a threat, as anyone familiar with Guðmundr's life and other tales would recognize. The notorious troll woman named Selkolla had first seduced, then attacked a farmer so mercilessly that his strength failed and sickness turned him into a pitiful invalid. Tales of the heroic past are full of encounters with

giantesses, some amorous, others deadly. The fear in the tent, among Guðmundr's companions, was palpable.

The description emphasizes Guðmundr's heroism. He jumped up, admonished his companions to stay inside the tent, and sallied out with holy water and relics. The men heard screams, the thunderous violence of a stampede that shook the earth, rocked the tent and filled the air with stench. At that, they leapt outside and saw Guðmundr far from the tent. Asked what had happened, Guðmundr replied in the understated manner of the traditional hero. The news was insignificant although he had never before come across so many monsters. Nevertheless, he believed, that the haunting had ceased. In this tale, Guðmundr had been the deliverer of a community. Alone, powerfully armed with the sacred weapons of faith, he had vanquished the female trolls, monsters, who in their deportment and desire for men are undeniably Nordic but whose relationship to the devil is unmistakable in the noxious stench they exuded. This filiation between the devil and monsters recurs, explicitly or implicitly, in the tales of Selkolla and the polar fox.

In the second tale, he rescued from certain death his beloved cousin Gyrðr, wife of the chieftain Kolbeinn Tumason. The tale is in its outlines a typical troll abduction story, in which a woman or man is kidnapped by a troll in an isolated area away from home. Alarmed by his wife's sudden and unexplained disappearance from the tent in which she had been, Kolbeinn sent for Guðmundr. It is obvious that Kolbeinn expected Guðmundr to rescue his wife. Unlike modern stories, in which every detail sequentially develops the story line, the tale has for us an aura of mystery. Neither Kolbeinn nor Guðmundr referred to the cause of her disappearance. The cause was all too well understood. The lie that Kolbeinn conceived to ensure Guðmundr's help revealed the sheer terror that had seized Kolbeinn. The message was that Kolbeinn had fallen sick and requested the ministrations of a priest. Thus, Kolbeinn summoned Guðmundr by appealing to Guðmundr's function as priest. Although Guðmundr saw through the lie, he also recognized the urgency of the message. Departing immediately in the morning, he rode up into the mountains throughout the night until he arrived early the next morning.

It is at this juncture that the folktale assumes hagiographic features, while still implicitly upholding the notion that this was a troll abduction. The hero charged with freeing the victim from the trolls was now an intercessor with God. His mission was to restore at least the body of Kolbeinn's wife so that it might receive a Christian burial.

The very phrasing, burial of the abducted victim's bones in consecrated ground, recalls a famous episode in *Grettis saga*, in which Grettir retrieved the bones of two men who had been abducted by a giant[ess] and cast them into a church to be buried later in sacred ground (chs. 66, 67, pp. 216-218).

What follows is not only the retrieval of Gyrðr's body, but her resuscitation. But the heroic feat was accomplished not in the troll's cave, but in a sacred place, the tent transformed temporarily into a chapel. Bidding all to leave, Guðmundr recovered his cousin's battered body in the course of three hours. In this scene, there is no description of Guðmundr's prayer or supplication. There is also no visible presence of God or of the deadly foe. As customary, the champion is alone and on his own. But her physical condition upon her recovery alludes once again to the physical harm

inflicted by a brutish pagan foe. Gyrðr's body was a sorrowful sight to behold, particularly in a Christian. She looked monstrous.

The second scene speaks to the enormous difficulties in restoring Gyrðr's person to her old self. Kolbeinn beseeched Guðmundr to revive his wife. At this point, the narrative is suffused with Christian thought. Guðmundr considered this request to be beyond his powers to fulfill. His phrasing indicated physical coercion although Kolbeinn's plea was solely verbal: 'You are beating me, Kolbeinn, [into assuming] an unbearable burden for which I lack merit.' The very words indicate that a translation of power has taken place. The physical mission assumed by the hero of tradition has been transformed into a spiritual mission, as daunting as the physical quest had been.

Still, the wording also refers to Guðmundr's understanding of the twin spiritual requisites for intercession with God, humility and merit. His initial refusal to bow to Kolbeinn's pleading had expressed his humility while his subsequent yielding manifested charity. Guðmundr willingly attempted a feat he clearly thought was beyond his capacity. It was a precarious undertaking. Two or more hours elapsed before he achieved her resuscitation. His was a miracle: Gyrðr recovered her human appearance though she was exhausted and so weak that life was tenuous. Kolbeinn attested to the miraculous nature of the feat. When he was called back into the tent, he saw in the restoration of his wife the brilliant power of God shining over Guðmundr's prayers.

Arngrímur also intended to convey a retrospective political message that, concomitantly, pointed to the blind nature of sin. He expressly referred to Kolbeinn's ingratitude. Although Kolbeinn had repeatedly expressed his appreciation for the recovery and resuscitation of his wife, he all but forgot the nature and meaning of Guðmundr's feat. Kolbeinn's assault on the see of Hólar that fateful September day in 1208 was explicable only by the blindness and presumption of sin. Also the avengers of Kolbeinn's death on the battle field were blind to his sin and its contagion. Rebellion against Guðmundr and the authority of the universal church that he represented spread like a disease.

The Seikolla episode, so notorious that it received notice even in Sturla Þórðarsson's *Íslendinga saga* (ch. 25, p. 255), bears distinct hagiographic features from the very beginning. The prologue to the tale describes the abortive taking of an infant to be christened. On the way to church, sin beset the couple. They placed the infant by a rock and had fun. When they got back to the infant, it was a changeling. It looked blue and monstrous. When they decided to return, the infant cried and looked so terrifying they dared not approach it, but abandoned it to go home. A search party, looking for the infant, found it had vanished.

Normally, it is well-nigh impossible to get rid of a changeling. In this tale, however, a sexual sin begets a sexually charged monster. The Christian message is that one sin engenders another, often one more dangerous and harmful. For this more perilous state of sin, the tale exploits the traditional belief in multiple shape-changing, a belief that still informs nineteenth-century Norwegian tales (Hult, 2003, 156). Soon after an unknown woman appeared in the region. She was sometimes beautiful, but other times she was seen with a seal's head. She turned up day and night and was therefore called the Midday Devil, a term that situates her in a decidedly Christian

world. Arngrímur in no wise notes that the changeling had turned into Selkolla. She does, however, appear upon the changeling's disappearance. That sequence indicates causality, intensifying the sense of horror and suffering by the very fact that only the mind of the reader links the two fearsome figures.

Selkolla was thus born, in the shape of a beautiful woman, because of sexual sin. Sexuality was central to her monstrous being. She seduced a farmer, visiting him in his boatshed near the sea and assuming the guise of his wife. Shape-changing is part of her nature. Her beauty and sexual allure were solely a temporary guise, a means to seduce. Shortly after their intercourse, she discarded her guise. With looks apparently as fearsome as that of the changeling, she so terrified the farmer that he sought to make his way home. Besetting him in the manner of a troll (see also ch. 16, p. 188), he arrived home barely alive and took to his bed. She continued to attack him violently day and night. Death usually follows an assault by a troll. The farmer, however, contracted a paralyzing disease. To clerical readers and to those instructed by the church, the paralysis of the farmer was the outward sign of the debilitation caused by sin.

But Selkolla was more than a plague to one individual. She had taken hold of the farmer, the farmstead and the region. Like all trolls, she was indiscriminate in her attacks. She waylaid everyone who attempted to use streets and paths in the region. She blinded some, she broke the bones of others, and left some for dead. This battering recalls the bludgeoning Gyríör, as other troll victims, had suffered. Once again people beseeched Guðmundr to apply his skill in getting rid of the fiend. Once again, he declined, stating that it was beyond his power to war against the devil's might, but once again he yielded. In his humility he recognized that God's will may run counter to his own and that of the community.

While the attack of a traditional monster follows his entrance into the hall, Selkolla had assumed ownership of the farm. Thus, the struggle and her defeat will take place in the traditional manner, first within, then without. Guðmundr, though, expected her, as trolls normally do, to enter from the outside, ordering that his bed be at the right side of the door. She, however, as the owner of the place and true to her nature, sought to practice her art in the guise of a normal woman. Since the servants had neglected to help him out of his shoes and stockings, she rushed forward to remove his hose. Recognizing her for what she was, he ripped the stockings from her, struck them around her head, and commanded her to sink into the earth and cease her doings. As in the beginning of the tale, where she is called a midday-devil, she has lost the autonomy that, in pagan times characterized her kin. She is no longer solely a troll, she is part of the hellish host.

In his conjuration, Guðmundr had called her a *fiandr*, fiend, a term for the devil. The term is well-chosen, as her multiple reappearance denotes a phenomenon peculiar to the devil, his ubiquitous nature. The appellation also explains the difficulty Guðmundr had in her banishment. This is visible not only in repeated banishments, but also in an elaborate public ritual that effected a drastic limitation of her appearance in the region. Guðmundr had six crosses made, took them to church and doused them with holy water. Then he set up the largest cross where Selkolla had reappeared in the farm house, placed one cross each at the four corners of the dwelling and one on its roof. Twice she attempted to make a reappearance at the outskirts of the region. But

Guðmundr's blessings of his parishioners kept her at bay both on land and on sea. As Arngrímr phrases it: he exiled and fettered her so that she no longer harmed a Christian.

Perhaps the most extraordinary tale is the killing of the polar fox. Its dual aspect as a miracle also bears a distinct political meaning. In this tale Guðmundr delivered the community, a prosperous farm, from the depredations of the beast by the rite of excommunication. The political meaning relates to this rite. Excommunication had been the sanction that had caused so much bitterness and hatred during Guðmundr's episcopacy. It was a weapon he had often used, if counterproductively, to constrain his enemies. In its aspect as a miracle, the tale contains an exculpation of Guðmundr's use of the rite. Excommunication was not, as his enemies had charged, an arbitrary retribution, but a legitimate weapon to defend the rights of the church. Guðmundr used excommunication as a valid and efficacious means to halt attacks or encroachments upon the liberty of the church. The tale, therefore, conveyed a retroactive and final judgment on a major controversy that had roiled Guðmundr's episcopacy.

The banishment of the polar fox (ch. 66, pp. 382-384) is remarkable also for a lesson, which if learned, secures the well-being of the community. The tale is not solely one of deliverance, but one of reciprocal obligation, the obligation between community and saint. Guðmundr conditioned the banishment, or eradication, to a huge donation of wethers, castrated male-sheep, twenty all told, for his retinue of paupers, a proposition Guðmundr's host accepted only under duress: the beast was destroying his herd and livelihood. Guðmundr's demand that charity for the destitute be paid in exchange for the extermination of the beast suggests that he expected a transformation of a social reality: The community was to realize that the exercise of a saint's power was contingent upon society fulfilling its obligation to the poor. The saint will not act solely for the benefit of the wealthy, but only for the benefit of all.

The signification of the tale lies, however, in the rite of excommunication. Excommunication meant the ejection of an unrepentant, inveterate sinner from the community. It was a drastic measure that ensured that the sinner was excluded from communal life in order to preserve the community from contagion. Thus, the delivery from the polar fox involved a deliberate, unorthodox change in the function of the mass and hence of the rite of excommunication. This constitutes, as Bruce Lincoln has noted, a 'marking', a conscious 'deviation from the standard ritual scenario... for it calls attention to itself and constructs a novel meaning in contrast to the established norm.' That this was a marked ritual in contradistinction to its normal and orthodox exercise is evident in the formalities observed and in its charged function. Guðmundr, clothed for mass, accompanied by his clerics and by laymen, went to church, intoned the rite of excommunication, but not against an individual, as prescribed by canon law, but against a beast of prey. While excommunication signified the spiritual death of the excommunicated and his/her exclusion from the community, the rite killed the polar fox. Its corpse was found, a clump of flesh seemingly without bones or sinews, next to the herd of sheep.

To those familiar with Guðmundr's turbulent episcopacy, the tale/miracle was freighted with an assessment of the periodic unrest and mayhem caused by Guðmundr's constant distribution of the see's wealth to the poor. The farmer's initial

refusal of Guðmundr's demand was symptomatic. Like Guðmundr's parishioners, the farmer appeared blind to the divine command of practicing charity. The tale, accordingly, functioned as a retrospective indictment of those who had persecuted him for his charity and, likewise, of those who had accused him of misusing the weapon of excommunication. Because the ritual of excommunication effected the killing of the beast, the tale reveals what Guðmundr had previously expressed in words: Guðmundr's power was derived from, and was sanctioned by, God. The banishment of the polar fox signaled divine approbation as well as that of his patroness. He held the Virgin's enduring affection and support.

In characterizing sacred biography, Heffernan (1988, pp. 70-71) observed the essential unity of 'the worlds of fact and fantasy; both were signs...revelatory of truth'. For that very reason, Arngrímur delights in importing an improbable tale of adventure from *Vita C*, an account ascribed by C's hagiographer to a knowledgeable, old priest (Karlsson, 1985, 997). The tale is a variant of the perilous, seemingly impossible quest. Guðmundr, for the second time, was exiled to Norway. Shunned at the Episcopal court, he impatiently awaited a papal ruling on his case, which the archbishop had submitted to Rome. Taking matters in his own hands, Guðmundr decided to send a simple-minded priest to Rome with his petition for a ruling, knowing full well that, without money and backing, the success of the mission was in doubt. The luck that accompanied the impossible mission was a sign that God's judgment favored Guðmundr's cause. Dogged in his determination the cleric succeeded, primarily because of serendipitous timing. On the very day the papal court was collecting petitions, he slipped into the French king's retinue, which was on its way to the papal court. Seeing a cardinal who was accepting petitions, he flung his plea on the cloth held by the official. He received the papal bull in a like manner. On the Day of Ascension, he wandered to a window in St. Peter's at the very moment a papal administrator appeared to inquire if the delegate of Bishop Guðmundr was present. The fact that the papal bull was flung to the cleric from the window emphasizes the unexpected and miraculous nature of the enterprise. His case was evidently in God's hands. Of equal importance was the meaning attached to the day, the commemoration of Christ's ascent into heaven. Ultimately, Guðmundr's continual martyrdom would also be crowned with eternal life (chs. 59-61, pp. 350-62).

Improbable circumstances characterize the perilous journey as do the hero's enterprise and, ultimately, good luck. These are the features that make also this tale entertaining. But the hero is not worldly. He is called simple-minded, therefore unschooled in the ways of the world and of the papal court. As in a fairy tale, this naïve cleric is the one emissary pleasing to God. He succeeded where all others would have failed. The tale has become the means to demonstrate that Guðmundr's exile was unwarranted. As with the polar fox tale, the cleric's mission functions as an interpretive marker. The successful quest brands Guðmundr's prolonged exile as unwarranted and unjust.

In his adaptation of folktales, Arngrímur integrated traditional features into ecclesiastical thought patterns. He also invested them with a layer of exegetical meaning that is foreign to ordinary folktales. Guðmundr's task, ridding the community of the supernatural manifestations of evil, is one that is the traditional mission of a hero. But the attitudinal perspective and means of dispatch are diametrically opposed

to those that characterize folktales. Guðmundr's department is requisite to a Christian hero, whose humility recognizes that God's will may run counter to his own and that of the community. The traditional hero has no such qualms, knowing it is up to him to cleanse the countryside. No one else in the community has the power, expertise and will to assume the task. Impervious to the perils that will confront him, he seeks out, even challenges the monster, as Grettir does when Glámr initially defers his attack on the sole opponent whose strength he fears.

Accordingly, the means of defeating supernatural foes are, for the traditional hero, physical strength and intelligence, for Guðmundr, the rites of the church (Lincoln, 2000, 492) and, thereby, the display of God's spiritual strength. Divine spiritual strength, however, has a physical extension, a corporeity of its own. Corporeity is the link that binds the folktale to hagiography. In the folktale, corporeity means physical strength, in Arngrím's hagiographic adaptation, spiritual strength is transmitted physically. This miraculous corporeity effects the bodily subjection or destruction of mankind's foes. Throughout his *vita*, Arngrím points to a paradox in miracles that run *counter to nature*. In the analogous thought pattern that characterizes his writing, the conversion of incompatible substances is analogous to the physical manifestation of spiritual strength. Just as the conversion of water into oil or into a nourishing soup is counter to nature, so is the force of spiritual strength that destroys monsters in the flesh.

In speaking of folkloristic motifs in exempla, Jean-Claude Schmitt remarks that a *culture savante* imposes itself on popular culture by adopting narrative motifs. The intent in the reception of folkloristic motifs is to transform them in order to subject them to objectives set by clerical culture (Schmitt, 1985, 12). Arngrím has thus coopted traditional features of folklore to represent Guðmundr as the successor to the traditional hero. More powerful than the hero of yore, Guðmundr draws his strength from an omnipotent God. While the hero commands the physical strength and the requisite intelligence to kill monsters, Guðmundr resorts to spiritual weapons, which are as effective as formerly physical strength and intellect. Since his rites, spiritual in nature, emanate also physical strength that conquer or kill mankind's supernatural foes, his power is superior. In the typological thinking of the era, Guðmundr's succession to the traditional hero is, hence, one of superiority. His spiritual strength encompasses supreme physical force as well. In his hands, mankind will be secure, freed from the threat inherent in the physical world. In his authority as intercessor, he is also a guide to the hereafter.

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