

The Supernatural and other Elements of the Fantastic in the *fornaldarsögur*

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When in *Hrólfs saga kraka* Þoðvarr forces Hǫttir to drink the blood of the dragon he has just defeated, and thereby transforms an utterly pathetic Hǫttir into an heroic, doughty and useful 'new man,' one wonders whether either the dragon or the metamorphosis stood out to medieval audiences as they do to us. After all, blood having a transfigurative effect was quotidian in medieval Christian thinking and dragons play their roles in several saint's lives. On the other hand, the history of how Þoðvarr and his brothers had been conceived, the interventions of Hringr's evil queen, and so on was perhaps as marvelous to the saga's audience as its phlebotomic story is to us today. What I take to be the somewhat ambiguous nature of these marvels suggests the question at the heart of my paper: what sense of the supernatural precipitates out of the *fornaldarsögur*, and how is it used? To modern learned audiences, of course, the supernatural is the stuff of mediocre horror films, or an expression of the belief systems of hopelessly backward rustics. Or, under the right circumstances, it is what members of elite society tell themselves in broad daylight they do not really believe in but cannot quite ignore or fail to respond to as, for example, they walk by a graveyard late at night. The last item underscores the fact that however it is defined, the supernatural derives from a perception of unbridled and unknowable power which in turn gives rise to uncontrollable fear or a sense of awe.

Many modern Nordic locutions of the idea— *yfirmáttúrulegur*, *overtro* and so on— are, like their English counterpart, build on Latin *supernaturalis*.¹ Yet the Old Icelandic terms used to express this idea— *náttúra*, *kraptir*, perhaps even *undr*— are far less explicit than contemporary usage: when, for example, the author of *Asmundar saga kappabana* writes that Hildibrandr Húnakappi had *berserkja náttúru* (Rafn 1829-30, II: 470), it is unclear if we are to understand *náttúra* in its basic sense of 'nature, power, characteristic', or in its much rarer, extended sense of implying that Hildibrandr has the supernatural power of a berserk. Instances such as that in *Eiríks saga rauða* (ÍF 4, 208), where a seeress clearly uses the word to indicate spirits or supernatural beings of some sort (pl. *náttúrir*), are in fact far from commonplace.

Yet even if terminology connected with the supernatural is scarce, saga audiences are no strangers to the idea of the supernatural, given the fact that supernatural creatures and events are common in medieval Icelandic narratives, even in the most sober of texts (see Lindow 1986). The presentation of the supernatural, and the purposes to which it is put, vary greatly however, and can provide insights into

¹ Falk and Torp 1910-11, II: 807-08, favor a derivation in which the Nordic terms, like Dutch *overgeloof*, German *Aberglaube*, would be understood as survivals ('tibriggebliebener glaube, überrest eines alten glaubens'), but cf. Hellqvist 1957, II:1473, who comments, 'möjl. under påverkan av lat. *superstitio* [...] Knappast, ss förmodats, eg.: överleva av gammal tro; snarast till över i bet, 'över el. utanför det normala'...' The inventory of modern lexemes related to superstition can be explained with respect to things that interfere with Christian faith (e.g., *hindrviini*), lack it (e.g., *vantrú*), or are parallel to, or outside of, it (e.g., *hjátrú*; cf. *hjákona*, *hjábu*).

how we ought to read these texts. The relationship of the supernatural (perceived as real) to notions of the fabulous and fantastic (thought to be unreal) is critical, perhaps especially with respect to the *fornaldarsögur*. Indeed, following the theoretical lead of Lauri Honko and others (Honko 1979-80), I argued some years ago that one possibly fruitful approach to the mythical-heroic sagas was what I termed the 'factual-fabulous' axis, yet another mode of expressing 'the fantastic' (Mitchell 1991, 13-18). Others before and since (e.g., Helgason 1934, 195; Clunies Ross 2002) have also looked to employ this feature as a tool in identifying the genre.²

These are, however, modern perceptions—are they also medieval? And in what ways does the supernatural shape our understanding of the medieval text? By way of example, let us consider briefly several Icelandic narratives concerned with restless ghouls. Many saga champions have encounters with revenants and a variety of Otherworldly beings, and typically, saga heroes put these creatures to permanent rest through their bravery and strength. Thus, Grettir Ásmundarson dispatches the *haugbúi* Kárr inn gamli by cutting off his head and so on, and then takes from the mound a sword and other treasures, with important narrative consequences (ÍF 7, 57-59). Against this story, I find it helpful to place *Kumlbúa þáttur* (ÍF 13, 455), which tells the story of Þorsteinn Þorvarðsson, who discovers skeletal remains and a sword in a howe, and takes the sword. He does not, however, undertake measures to put the spirit there to rest, and is subsequently troubled by encounters in his dreams with a revenant (*kumlbúi*) with whom he exchanges verses, poetry principally concerned with the battle-tested sword Þorsteinn has taken from the burial mound and what each claims he can do with it. The next morning, Þorsteinn searches for the cairn, presumably in order to further ransack it or to replace the blade, but fails to locate it and goes home. In the end, *Kumlbúa þáttur* is a story that achieves neither a satisfying nor harmonious conclusion: after his failure to find the howe, Þorsteinn simply returns home and relates his mystifying encounters with the supernatural world to his wife and to others without elaboration on his, or the saga writer's, part about the meaning of his experience. Unlike the account in *Grettis saga*, where Grettir's Theseus-like qualities in cleansing the land of monsters — since his death, Kárr's ghoul has frightened all the other farmers off the island — inspire confidence in the capacity of human behavior to counter the power of the supernatural world, *Kumlbúa þáttur* tells us instead that we are exposed to the perplexing power of a world outside our senses without the hero's ability to penetrate its mysteries or resolve the dilemma it presents.

Against the stories of the restless dead in *Grettis saga* and *Kumlbúa þáttur*, it is instructive to set similar reports connected to the cult of St. Magnús of Orkney. The various miracles associated with St. Magnús typically underscore his helpfulness in healing leprosy, curing the loss of sight or of hearing, saving people from shipwrecks, and other standard feats for a saint. In one of the miracles associated with St. Magnús in the Icelandic biographies he visits a farmer named Gunní in his dreams. He asks that his bones be moved to Kirkwall, eventually threatening Gunní that if does not do as he is asked, he will be punished both in this world and in the next (ÍF 34, 326-27; cf. 124-25). The thirteenth-century Old Swedish legendary, *Fornsvenska legendariet*,

² Cf. the comment by Margaret Clunies Ross (1998, 50-51) that, 'The dominant modes of the saga genre [...] are realistic/historical, genealogical/biographical, fantastic/ supernatural and prosimetric.'

attributes to Magnús a remarkable event, like those in *Grettis saga* and *Kumlbúa þátr*, directly concerned with revenants. According to this story (Stephens and Dahlgren 1847-74, I: 876), following widespread deaths in a plague, the deceased begin to rise up out of their graves through diabolical power, return to their former homes, and create havoc. After prayerful entreaties to St. Magnús, he appears in a gold crown with a royal scepter in his right hand, which he points at the ghouls, saying, “flee hence, evil spirits”. As soon as he had said this, those dead men who had appeared like the living disappeared.’ From this miracle, of course, the audience is to understand that whatever the horrible power of the living dead (and of the demonic force behind it), the power of Christian magic is greater still. By contrast, *Grettis saga*, in the best heroic tradition, shows us that special humans can defeat otherworldly forces that threaten us. But unlike either the miracles about St. Magnús or Grettir’s heroic efforts, *Kumlbúa þátr* provides its audience with a different message, i.e., that there are forces at loose in the world which cannot be countered, whose source of power is unclear, and whose design we do not understand. These differences detail, of course, the fundamental distinction between saint’s legend, heroic legend, and local legend. With respect to the first and last of these types, it is instructive to recall Max Lüthi’s memorable words: ‘The saint’s legend ends in splendor and glory, the local legend in dust and ashes. The saint’s legend reveals a glorious religious truth, whereas the local legend revolves around an uncanny event which shocks or confuses us’ (Lüthi 1970, 44). Such narratives are, of course, built on shared if differing understandings of the supernatural, a term encompassing all kinds of experiences outside the observable world, whether, as we have seen, for good or ill.

Of course, vernacular concepts of ‘the supernatural’ are at odds with the stricter views of theologians, just as in spoken English, for example, use of the term differs sharply from its various prescribed dictionary definitions, which emphasize the word’s deistic and theological frames of reference. Yet in everyday speech, the term far more commonly suggests the world of giants, fairies, dragons, revenants, and other beings from outside the observable natural world. Apparently troubled by the term’s inherently triumphalist perspective, most modern social scientists in recent decades have avoided it altogether,³ yet folklorists and students of religion have been particularly loath to relinquish this useful concept (e.g., Pentikäinen 1997). As we have seen, English ‘supernatural’ derives from the Latin term used to describe divinely granted understanding of Christian truths, a fact that raises interesting questions about the nature of the supernatural in the folklorist’s sense versus that of the theologian. The Church, especially as realized by such medieval theologians as Thomas Aquinas, viewed the idea of a miracle in strict terms, arguing it consists of an extraordinary event which:

- 1) transcends the normal order of nature so far as it is known to us,
- 2) is perceptible to the senses, and,

³ See, for example, Barnard and Spencer 2002, 624: ‘supernatural That which cannot be explained with reference to ‘nature’, as this concept is socially constructed. Important in some nineteenth-century definitions of religion, the term is now usually avoided by modern anthropologists, except in the context of indigenous ideas about the natural’ [emphasis added].

- 3) most importantly, is produced by the interventions of God in a religious context (cf. Cross and Livingston 1997, 1091).

The great distinction for the Church has to do with *power* and where it comes from—does the supernatural event derive from a kind and benevolent God interceding on behalf of His people, or from demonic powers who use, or are used by, a human to accomplish these goals? In her treatment of magic in the early Middle Ages, Valerie Flint comments on this distinction as it relates to the magical and the miraculous, saying, 'Augustine recognizes that magicians and good Christians may do similar things. The difference lies in their means and ends.'⁴ It also lies, she might have added, in the interpretative frameworks of the observer. This latent polysemy led historically, for example, on the one hand, to the canonization of Birgitta of Sweden during the Middle Ages, and, on the other, to the demand by some within the Church hierarchy and among the populace that she be declared a witch and heretic. Thus, interpretations of an event, or a report of an event, varied according to the observer, and the influence of the Church meant that medieval audiences came to texts prepared to find in them the plain sense of *mirabilis* 'wonderful, marvelous, extraordinary, unusual,' on the one hand, or the miraculous, as the term has come to be meant in Christian contexts, on the other.

As a further example from among the *formaldarsögur*, let us consider *Ketils saga hængs*, a text famously dense with supernatural encounters. The modern literary fate of this late saga does not suggest that it has been seen as a work of the first water—it does not, for example, so much as merit a single mention in Stefán Einarsson's *A History of Icelandic Literature*, even though the saga was first published outside of Iceland as early as 1697. On the other hand, the saga has inspired considerable scholarly attention in recent years, particularly with respect to Ketill's many journeys to the north and to the saga's relationship to mythic patterns.⁵ Indeed, Ketill's career is overwhelmingly defined by his numerous trips north and especially by his many encounters with the Other: among his nemeses are a dragon (*dreki*), a man-eating giant (*jötunn*), a half-dozen or so giants (*jötnar*) and trolls (*tröll*) of various sorts and both genders, and a witch. To the extent that such adversaries as non-Nordic peoples and pre-Christian gods help create an image of Ketill as a champion who defends 'us' against those abnormal creatures that threaten 'normal' society, he also fights berserks, a Sámi warrior, and a follower of Óðinn (see Lindow 1995).

Yet the diversity of adversaries notwithstanding, we are hardly ever, as Marlene Ciklamini notes, in doubt about the outcome of Ketill's adventures (Ciklamini 1966, 155). Indeed, despite the hero's frequent interactions with the supernatural world, modern readers of *Ketils saga hængs* rarely experience a sense of suspense or mystery, except in a few instances. When, Ketill travels north and explores some large storage

⁴ Flint 1991, 33, prefaces this remark by noting, '...in these chapters of the *City of God* we have a summary of where lay, for Augustine, the dividing line between condemnable and essential magic. 'Veneficia', 'maleficia,' 'malefici' diminish, defraud, give pain. In league with demons, they conceal the true good from humankind. 'Mira' and 'miracula,' on the other hand, overcome fear and pain, and encourage hope and open happiness.' For a review of theories on 'wonder,' see Bynum 1997.

⁵ E.g., Ciklamini 1966; McKinnell 2005. Concerning the northern journey theme especially, see Ólason 1994 and the literature cited there.

pits, he tosses out of them various stores including the meat of whales, bears, seals and all kinds of animals. But at the bottom of each pit he finds 'salted human flesh' (*mannakjöt saltat*). Ketill goes on, of course, to defeat the monster whose larder he has pilfered, but not before Surtr, as the farmer is called, reveals unsettling intelligence: he calls Ketill a 'Cinderfella' and 'Ashlad' (*eldhúsfliit*, lit., 'the fire-side fool'; *kolbitr*); and he announces his superior knowledge by saying, without having laid eyes him, that Ketill is there at his farm; moreover, he refers to Ketill's father, Hallbjörn, as 'my friend' (*vinr minn*), lending credibility to his father's sobriquet 'half-troll' (*hálftröll*), and helping explain Hallbjörn's uncanny knowledge of this area (Rafn 1829-30, II: 114). Most disturbing perhaps, the story refers to Surtr's size, strength, and mien—large, great, gloomy and evil—without ever actually stating that he is an ogre of some sort until the final line of the episode, when Ketill manages to behold Surtr: *Fell jötunninn þá dauðr á skálagólfrit*. But the most chilling part of the story comes when Surtr realizes his stores have been assaulted, and laments the loss of supplies, especially the destruction of the *mannakrof* in the storage pits. This term might be rendered 'human flesh', but such a translation fails to capture the eerie undertones of the phrase: *krof* refers to the butchered carcass of a slaughtered animal.⁶ Thus, the well-informed Surtr regards humans not merely as enemies of the giants but as prey animals, food to be hunted, slaughtered, stored. More than most of Ketill's adventures, this episode manages to develop an aura of mystery and fear, wrought less through what the text says, than through what it does not say, as the terror of the salted human flesh is given shape in the horrible man-eating giant who regards Ketill's father as his friend.

This episode is, it seems to me, a pretty good beginning, but the saga is soon freighted with many further encounters of this type, so many that they are not easily kept separate, and most of the ogres Ketill meets resemble, in the words of one noted scholar, '...the overgrown boneheads of *märchen*, not the hidden people of folk belief' (Lindow 1986, 280). Some of these creatures quite clearly respond to long-standing traditions—such as the Bear's Son episode involving the giant Kaldrani—while others are underdeveloped ciphers for the strangeness of the northern journeys on which Ketill periodically embarks. Or how else does one explain the events following Ketill's defeat of Kaldrani, for example? Ketill leaves Hrafnista and goes on a fishing expedition to Finnmark. His sleep is disturbed by the ship being shaken by a giantess (*...at tröllkona tók í stafninn ok hristi skipit*), and he escapes by rowing away using the lid-flaps of his butter-chest as oars, soon to see a whale with man's eyes, yet no part of this unusual series of events is developed further.

What sort of role then does the supernatural play in sagas like *Ketils saga hængs*? Some writers have argued that the intrusions of the spirit world and other supernatural features into Old Icelandic narrative tradition would not have been understood as exceptional or outside reality by the medieval audience, so accustomed were they to these themes in everyday life. The defense of such elements was advocated already at the end of the nineteenth century, when W. P. Ker defended the

⁶ Cleasby and Vigfusson 1982, 356, suggest it is built on a lost verb *krjúfa* 'to gut, disembowel', but Vries 1961, 331, does not note this possibility. The use in *Ketils saga hængs* parallels such terms as *sauðarkrof*. My comments here *contra* Hume 1980, 3-4, 7-8, who uses this episode as a model of a 'flat job' in describing a giant fight.

'fantastic passages,' as he called them, in *Grettis saga* as neither 'irrelevant' nor 'obscurations of the tragedy' (Ker 1957, 197). It is easy to accept Ker's judgment, especially if it is tempered with Vladimir Propp's view that a genre is largely defined by its treatment of, and relationship to, reality (Propp 1984, 41). In that context, one can easily wonder when reading a text like *Ketils saga hængs*, a narrative that might generously be described as a supernatural picaresque, if even the most folklorically-imbued medieval audience could accept as normal the eponymous hero's repeated encounters with the supernatural.

Indeed, we should consider the possibility that the medieval audience might have found the events in the sagas improbable, even 'irrational,' just as modern audiences often do, a possibility that does not detract from the authenticity of the world presented in the sagas but rather suggests that to the extent the *fornaldarsaga* texts are mirrors of reality, they are a more all-encompassing kind of ethnography than has generally been acknowledged.⁷ Thinking of the *fornaldarsögur* with respect to modern ethnographies is helpful in that it focuses our attention on them both as process (i.e., what it meant to perform such narratives, to recite them, to write them, to tell them, to listen to them, or to sponsor their composition) and as product (i.e., a description and an analysis of a culture, that is, 'writing culture'). In recent years, it has been objected that early ethnographic work might more aptly be described as what one observer has termed 'the 'salvage ethnography' of 'memory cultures'.'⁸ In other words, even though such descriptions could depict elements of culture drawn from everyday life, the emphasis of informants and ethnographer alike was likely to have been of a recalled, idealized, and generally bygone world (cf. Mitchell 1991, 134-36). The most profound mediating factors between the cultural moment projected in texts like *Ketils saga hængs* and their audiences in medieval Iceland were, of course, the settlement of Iceland and its subsequent Christianization, offering a situation parallel to the one adduced from modern ethnography— i.e., that *fornaldarsögur* writers, consumers, and so on were also participating in the 'salvage ethnography' of a 'memory culture'.⁹ The presentation of, and the role accorded, the supernatural under such circumstances is bound to be complex.

Rather than seeing in sagas like *Ketils saga hængs* a reflection of belief in the supernatural, as some would have it, we should consider the reverse: an attempt at its proof. Like, indeed, curiously like, even suspiciously like, the succession of wondrous episodes heaped up in the miracle collections of saints' lives, whose purpose is generally to prove the sanctity of the person and his miraculous power even in death, the author of *Ketils saga hængs* piles one fantastic tale on top of the other, with little concern for narrative development. And just as the gallimaufry of miraculous episodes

⁷ The view that the *fornaldarsögur* should be regarded as 'fantastic ethnographies' was argued by Margaret Clunies Ross in her paper at the August 2005 'Fornaldarsagaer: Myter og Virklighed' conference in Copenhagen. My remarks in this section build on and extend my formal response to her essay at that time.

⁸ Sanjek 2002, 194. Examples of such projects would include Franz Boas's studies among the Inuits and the Kwakwaka'wakw (i.e., Kwakiutl).

⁹ Cf. the remarks by Clunies Ross that 'Much recent scholarly work on medieval Icelandic sagas has concerned itself, in one way or another, with the saga genre as a medium of cultural memory' (Clunies Ross 2002, 443).

in the *jarteinabækur* are meant to prove both by their contents and their bulk the holiness of a saint, the purpose of this tale seems to be to lend credibility to the reality of the supernatural world, of an irrational world that threatens humanity, to provide a textual corollary to the tactile value of the Sigurör materials, for example, on churches and baptismal fonts where they vividly demonstrate that which imperils us (see, e.g., Byock 1990). Structurally, despite such differences as the vernacular roots of the material, there exists an uncanny similarity between the supernatural picaresque that *Ketils saga hængs* represents and the nature of miracle collections (cf. Lönnroth 1999). But whereas in the *jarteinabækur* the effect is meant to be an encounter with 'splendor and glory,' to return to Lítthi's words, in *Ketils saga hængs*, it is all, if not quite 'dust and ashes,' then in any event a series of encounters with the marvelous, the extraordinary and the other meanings derived from *mirabilis*, what, if to a lesser degree than here, one often encounters in the *fornaldarsögur*. In other words, I am suggesting that the effect here is to move the unreal, the fantastic elements, toward the believed, the supernatural. Although I make no pretense in this short consideration of having penetrated the mysteries of the supernatural in the *fornaldarsögur*, this much is, I believe, clear: the presentation of the Other, of unknowable power, in them is not to be explained solely as a reflection of existing folk belief but rather by understanding its value as a manipulative propaganda tool.

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