

Weather and Witchcraft in the Sagas of Icelanders

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Svanur tók geitskinn eitt og veifði yfir höfuð sér og mælti:

Verði þoka
og verði skrípi
og undr öllum þeim
er eftir þér sækja.

Nú er frá því að segja að þeir riða á hálsinn Ósvífur og hans förunautar. Þá kom þoka mikil í mót þeim.

Ósvífur mælti: 'Þessu mun Svanur valda og væri vel ef eigi fylgdi meira illt.'

Litlu síðar brá svo miklum sorta fyrir augu þeim að þeir sáu ekki og féllu þeir þá af baki og týndu hestunum og gengu í fen ofan sjálfir en sumir í skóginn svo að þeim hélt við meiðingar. Þeir töpuðu af sér vopnunum. (*Brennu-Njáls saga*, chapter 12)¹

Allusions to the creation of fair or foul weather by magical means may be found in many different types of writings – from Homer to Shakespeare. Clearly, the wish to be able to control the weather is a deep-seated human desire. In countries where the weather is capricious and frequently wet and stormy it is not surprising that supposed magical control of the weather has been elevated to a high art. In Scandinavia in general, the use of weather magic is relatively well known: 'Fishermen and sailors employed the services of wise folk to make favourable sailing wind. But beyond that, people quite commonly made use of spells and rituals to influence the weather' (Kvideland and Sehmsdorf, 2002).

This is no less true of Iceland, where the importance of climate and weather in daily life is reflected in numerous literary and historical genres. The 'Sagas of Icelanders' (*Íslendingasögur*) are no exception to this, and they include many references to weather events and climatic conditions. Some few of these may reflect reality (Ogilvie, 1991; Ogilvie *et al.*, 2000). More frequently, weather descriptions appear to be used as a literary device; for example, as a metaphor, or to create a mood (Ogilvie and Pálsson, 2003). There are also numerous references to the control of weather by witchcraft or sorcery. The making of dangerous weather through witchcraft is termed in the sagas *gerningaveður* (literally 'performative weather' or 'weather acts'). The sagas describe two main aspects of sorcery: the ritual act and the magic

¹ The Icelandic texts used for the purpose of this paper are from the edition *Íslendinga sögur og þættir* (1987). English translations are by the authors but note is also taken of *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* published by Leifur Eiríksson (1997) and the Penguin edition translations of *Laxdæla saga* (1969) and *Njáls saga* (1960) by Magnús Magnússon and Hermann Pálsson.

spell. Weather magic could be created by ritual acts and also by spoken spells or chants. Poetry, in particular, could be imbued with magic and hence could influence weather events through language. Some poets, particularly the so-called *kraftaskáld* – the ‘power poet’ or ‘magic poet’ – were believed to be charged with greater powers than others (Bauman, 1992). Sometimes both words and rituals were used together to create weather. Frequently, the sagas describe the conjuring up of foul weather, such as wild storms, bloody rain, or extreme cold, in order to negatively impact a perceived enemy. However, witches’ storms could sometimes be ameliorated by equally powerful counter spells. Occasionally, magic is also used to improve weather conditions.

The term ‘witch’ itself has a great range of meanings in Old Icelandic, and it is not just one word, but a series of concepts which may be translated as ‘witchcraft’. These are *fjölkyngi*, *fyrnska*, and *forneskja*. The latter two have the connotation of ‘old heathen time’ and ‘old lore’. Other concepts, such as *fróðleikur* and *margkunnindi*, refer specifically to the power of the witch. One aspect that is often mentioned is the ability to change shape, literally not being ‘single-shaped’ – *eigi einhamur*. This may involve becoming berserk – *berserksgangur*. Other concepts such as *galdur* and *seiður* refer to what may be termed ‘witch-acts’ – the use of knowledge and abilities pertaining to witchcraft. There seems to be a conceptual distinction between two kinds of witch acts – sorcery and divination – but the distinction is by no means a rigid one. There are many accounts of magic spells inflicted through the act of speaking, including chants, libels and insulting phrases (*söngvar*, *ákvæði*, *áhrinsorð*, *níð*, and *fordæðuskapur*). The words of some speakers are charged with a particular power, as in the words of Þorbjörg aided by the *Varðlokur* recited by Guðrjúður in *Eiríks saga rauða*. One type of divination is also at work here, the *forspá*, as supposed to the discovery of hidden knowledge (*eftirrymi*). The early Icelandic law book, *Grágás* (7.23), written down some time after 1117, defines spells thus: ‘That is *fordæðuskapur* when a man by his words inflicts sickness or kills, whether sheep or humans’. A spell may also involve a ritual, however, as with the actions of Kotkel and his family, described in *Laxdæla saga* (see below). Another term, *sjónhverfingur*, refers to both sight and sound, and means, literally, ‘ocular delusion by spell’. An example of this is the fog and darkness produced by Svanur in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, discussed below.

According to the index in *Íslendingasögur og þættir* (1987) on ‘witchcraft and supernatural qualities’ (III, xxii-xxiv), seventy-eight people in the *Sagas of Icelanders* are named as witches. The sagas with the greatest number are *Vatnsdæla saga* (nine people), *Eyrbyggja saga* (six people) and *Bárðar saga* (six people). Of the seventy-eight witches, fifty-three are accused of using their powers. In fourteen cases the person uses his or her power only to predict the future or to reveal some hidden truths. There are forty-one accounts of sorcery carried out for the purpose of manipulating persons, things or states of affairs. Roughly the same number of men and women are labelled as witches – thirty-nine men and thirty-eight women. Males are accused of twenty acts of sorcery and women of twenty-one.

Of the thirty-eight women labelled as witches, ten are identified as widows or heads of households and, in at least three cases, the saga-writer makes specific mention of the woman’s property. Thus, in *Gunnars saga Keldugnípsfjfls* (chapter 1)

it is said: *Kona er nefnd Þórdís. Hún bjó að Fossi og átti auð fjár. Þórdís var fjölkunnug.* In other words, Þórdís was wealthy as well as skilled in magic. In *Harðar saga og Hólmverja* (chapter 3) a woman named Þorgríma is said to have been *fjölkunnig mjög*. She also became rich and powerful – *Hún gerðist auðig kona og mikil fyrir sér*. In *Kjalnesinga saga* (chapter 2) the woman Esja is said to be *ekkjá og mjög auðig* – a widow and very rich.

Some of the witches described in the sagas are non-Icelandic. Thus Esja, noted above, was from Ireland. In *Laxdæla saga*, for example, it is said of Kotkel and his family: *Þessir menn voru suðureyskír*; in other words, they were from the Hebrides. *Svada þástur og Arnórs kerlingarnefs* (chapter 1) mentions Þórhallur the diviner, a man of 'Nordic' (*norraen*, i.e. non-Icelandic) descent. The social status of male witches or sorcerers was very variable, however, from poor farmers like Kotkel, to wealthy chieftains like Dýri in *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* (chapter 19), of whom it is said that he was *mestur höfðingi* 'a great chieftain'. He was also *mikill og sterkur, fjölkunnigur og hinn margvísasti og gerði margt með göldrum*. In other words, he was big and strong, skilled in ancient arts and he did many things with witchcraft.

Witches, whether male or female, are not necessarily noted as sinister in any way. Indeed, approximately one-third (twenty-five) of the people described as witches in the *Íslendingasögur* are not reported as using their powers, and in these cases their supposed witchcraft is merely alluded to by the saga-writer, often in a positive way as with Dýri, described above. In *Viga-Glúms saga* (chapter 12), for example, Oddbjörg is described as a *gleðimaður, fróð og framsýn* 'a cheery, knowledgeable prophet'. In *Fóstbræðra saga* (chapter 9), a woman named Gríma is described thus:

Það var mælt um Grímu að hún kynni sér mart og það töluðu menn að hún væri fjölkunnig. Nú fyrir því að kristni var ung og vanger þá syndist það mörgum mönnum atgervi að maður væri fjölkunnigur.

'Gríma was said to be knowledgeable regarding many things and people spoke of her as a witch. As Christianity was new to the country and had not fully taken hold, many people considered it an advantage that a person was skilled in magic'.

Frequently, the practitioners of witchcraft or sorcery are not accorded any kind of moral judgement. There is no specific comment regarding Svanur in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, for example. It is true, however, that a few are described as wicked or evil. An example of this is Kotkel and his family in *Laxdæla saga*, thus: *Þóttu það ólífismenn er slíka fjölkynngi frömdu sem þau Kotkell höfðu þá lýst*. However, others, such as Þorbjörg in *Eiríks saga rauða*, are described as performing good and noble deeds.

In the sections following, instances of the use of weather magic will be discussed and compared. Examples of the use of weather magic may be found in several sagas, among them *Laxdæla saga*, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, *Eiríks saga rauða*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, *Fóstbræðra saga*, *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Víglandar saga*. For the sake of brevity only the first three in this list are discussed here.

The discussion of individual sagas will begin with *Brennu-Njáls saga*, from which the epigraph of this paper is taken. The relevant passage occurs fairly early in the saga. The scene is set with the first marriage of the beautiful but hard-hearted Hallgerður, daughter of Höskuldur, who, later in the saga, will marry Gunnar of

Hliðarendi. Her father does not consult her regarding her first marriage to Þorvaldur Ósvífursson. She is both angered and depressed (*skapþung*) and unburdens herself to her foster-father, Þjóstólfur. He has previously been described as being from a Hebridean family (*sudureyskur að vett*) and someone who had 'killed many men but had paid no compensation for them'. Þjóstólfur tries to lift Hallgerður's spirits by telling her that she will be married a second time and that she will then be consulted.

Soon after these exchanges we are told of a man named Svanur who is Hallgerður's uncle, her mother's brother. He lives on a farm called Svanshol to the north of Steingrímsfjörður. He is said to be *ffólkunnigur mjög* – skilled in magic – but he is also unpleasant. Hallgerður invites him to her wedding feast, and he and Þjóstólfur get on well. Later that winter, an angry exchange between Hallgerður and Þorvaldur leads to his striking her in the face. When he is informed, Þjóstólfur says he will avenge her, and subsequently he kills Þorvaldur. Returning to Hallgerður, Þjóstólfur asks for advice. She says that she will send him north to Bjarnarfjörður where Svanur will greet him with open arms – as indeed he does. Svanur also promises Þjóstólfur that if he is followed by Þorvaldur's men he will ensure that they are humiliated (*þeir skulu fá af því hina mestu svivirðing*). In the meantime, Þorvaldur's companions go to see his father, Ósvífur, and they gather a force to go after Þjóstólfur. As they come into Bjarnarfjörður, Svanur is aware that they are there. He has 'a fit of yawning' and announces that Ósvífur's 'fetches' are attacking them. The 'fetch', or *fylgja*, may be termed a person's 'following spirit', perceptible only to those with second sight or magic power. Þjóstólfur springs to his feet and seizes his axe. Svanur tells him to come outside and that they will not have much need of the axe. He takes a goat-skin and swings it around his head, chanting,

'May there be fog
And may there be phantoms
And may there be strange happenings
Against all those who hunt you.'

As Ósvífur and his men ride over the hill a great fog advances to meet them. Ósvífur says, 'This must be caused by Svanur and it will be well if nothing worse than this happens.' A little later a great darkness appears in front of them, so that they are not able to see anything. They fall off their horses and lose them, and some of the men stray into boggy ground or the woods so that they are in danger of injury and they also lose their weapons. Then Ósvífur says, 'If I could find my horses and weapons, I would turn back.' When he has said this, they are able to see a little and they find their horses and weapons. Then many want to resume the attack and this is done, but then the same strange events occur. This happens three times before Ósvífur finally gives up. Ironically, Svanur is later said to have been drowned in a 'great storm', his skills seemingly of no avail to him against this natural weather event.

In the case of Ósvífur and his companions, they are given what might be termed a magical weather warning; but the warning is heeded, and no one suffers serious injury or death. The incident involving weather magic in *Laxdæla saga* has more serious consequences, however. Nonetheless, there are certain parallels between the two sagas. Thus, for example, in both sagas, the chain of events leading to the performance of *gervingaveður* begins in the context of the unhappy first marriage of a strong female character. Guðrún, the daughter of Ósvífur of Laugar in Sælingsdalur, is,

like Hallgerður, not consulted when she is married young to another Þorvaldur, this one the son of Halldór. The young Guðrún, although described as a paragon among women, also shows certain parallels with Hallgerður in the early days of her first marriage. Hallgerður is said to be extravagant and a spendthrift, and of Guðrún it is said: *Voru engar gersemar svo miklar á Vestfjörðum að Guðrúnu þætti eigi skaplegt að hún ætti*. As with Hallgerður and Þorvaldur, the end of the marriage between Guðrún and Þorvaldur is presaged by the husband slapping his wife's face. After the divorce between Guðrún and Þorvaldur, and that of her friend Þórður Ingunnarson and his wife Auður, Guðrún and Þórður are married. It is said that it is a happy marriage, but it is not fated to last long.

At the end of chapter 34, some time before the wedding takes place, we are informed that Þórður's mother, Ingunn, has moved from Króksfjörður to a place named Skálarnes. We are also told that, at that time, a man called Hallsteinn goði lived at Hallsteinsnes west of Þorskafjörður. *Hann var ríkur maður og meðallagi vinsæll*. This sets the stage for a description of a family of sorcerers and the events that will take place.

Kotkell hét maður er þá hafði út komið fyrir litlu. Gríma hét kona hans. Þeirra synir voru þeir Hallbjörn slíkisteinsauga og Stígandi. Þessir menn voru suðureyskir. Öll voru þau mjög fjölkunnig og hinir mestu seiðmenn. Hallsteinn goði tók við þeim og setti þau niður að Urðum í Skálmarfirði og var þeirra byggð ekki vinsæl.

In the spring, Þórður's mother comes from her farm at Skálarnes to visit him. She tells him that Kotkel and his family are making her life unbearable *í fjárránum og fjölkynngi*. However, they enjoy the protection of Hallsteinn goði, and she wishes to place herself under Þórður's care. He says that he will not allow these thieves to get away with this even if Hallsteinn opposes him. He gets ready to travel west immediately with Ingunn and nine others to accompany him. He takes a ferry from Tjaldanes and continues west to Skálarnes.

In this place Þórður has all the property which belonged to his mother loaded on the ferry and orders men to herd the livestock overland. There are twelve of them aboard the boat, including Ingunn and one other woman. Þórður rides to Kotkel's farm with nine other men. *Síðan stefndi hann þeim Kotkeli og Grímu og sonum þeirra um þjófnad og fjölkynngi*. They will have to answer the charges at the *Alþingi*. Then he returns to the boat. Hallbjörn and Stígandi return home just after Þórður has set sail, and are only a short distance from shore. Kotkel tells his sons what has happened. The two brothers are furious and claim none of their enemies has ever dared treat them like this.

Síðan lét Kotkell gera seiðhjall mikinn. Þau færðust þar á upp öll. Þau kváðu þar fræði sín en það voru galdrar. Því næst laust á hrið mikilli.

Þórður and his companions at sea feel how the force of the blizzard (*hrið*) is directed at them and steer the ship west beyond the headland at Skálarnes. Þórður struggles valiantly aboard the ship. People on shore see him throw everything overboard that could weigh the ship down except the travellers themselves. They expect that the ship will be able to make land after that, as they have passed the worst of the skerries, but all of a sudden a breaker rises where no one can recall having seen a skerry and rams the ship so that it capsizes at once. Þórður and all his companions

are drowned and the ship is smashed into small pieces, the keel washing ashore on an island which has since been called Kjalarey (Keel Island). Þórður's shield drifts ashore on an island called Skjaldarey (Shield Island). His body and the bodies of his companions drift ashore immediately and are buried in a mound at Haugsnes.

In *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Hallgerður has, in the form of her foster-father, Þjóstólfur, an ally who is an undesirable character, to say the least. When he kills her second husband she finally disowns Þjóstólfur and sends him to her uncle Hrótur, knowing he will kill him. In *Laxdæla saga*, Guðrún is able to consult a friend who is a more honourable person. This is Gestur Oddleifsson, possessed of second sight himself, who now tells Hallsteinn goði that he will either have to get rid of the sorcerers or he will kill him.

The web of sorcery continues. The same Hrótur, now aged over eighty according to the saga, is unwittingly drawn into the quarrel with Kotkel and his family, and Hrótur's young son Kari is killed by them. The consequence is that Kotkel and his wife Gríma are stoned to death. Hallbjörn is drowned at sea by Hrótur and his other sons but not before he manages to pronounce a final curse. Stígandi escapes and becomes an outlaw, but he too is eventually captured. A sack is put over his head so that he cannot see anything to curse. However, there is a tear in the sack through which he can see the slope opposite him. The saga says that it was attractive and with plenty of grass *fagurt landsleg og grasloðið*. Stígandi's final curse is of a meteorological nature as he conjures up a whirlwind, *hvirfilvindur*, which destroys the grass – causing the place to be named thereafter *Brenna* – the 'burnt place'.

The third saga to be considered here has been chosen because its element of weather magic is very different from that described in *Brennu-Njáls saga* and *Laxdæla saga*. This is an incident in *Eiríks saga rauða* where magic is used, not to cause weather which will harm people, but to ameliorate a time of dearth associated with bad weather. As the saga states, *Í þenna tíma var hallæri mikið á Grænlandi*. The saga continues with the introduction of Þorbjörg. She is a prophetess and is called the 'little sybil': *Hún var spákona og var kölluð litilvölva*. We are told she has had nine sisters, all of them gifted with second sight, and now she is the only one left alive. Unlike the wizards noted above, Þorbjörg uses her powers to help others and we are told that Þorkell, a man living at Herjólfssnes and *hinn besti bóndi*, invites her to his house in order for her to tell them when the present hard times will cease. The saga sets the scene for her rituals by carefully describing how she is dressed, including a skin pouch in which she keep the charms she needs for her spells. The special food prepared for her is also described. The saga makes it clear that she is treated with great respect. She sleeps through the night, and towards the end of the next day she asks for help from women who have knowledge of the special *Varðlokur* or 'ward' songs or chants which will help attract spirits to the sorceress. There are no such women to be found. Then Guðríður speaks up:

Hvorki er eg fjölkunnig né vísindakona en þó kenndi Halldís fóstura mín mér á Íslandi það fræði er hún kallaði Varðlokur.

However, she protests that she cannot play any part in this as she is a Christian woman. Þorbjörg says that she could help people here if Guðríður participated; Þorkell also pleads with Guðríður to help, and she says that she will do as he wishes.

The other women now form a circle around Þorbjörg as she sits on the platform raised for sorcery. The word used is *seiðhjall* and we are reminded of the *seiðhjall mikinn* raised by Kotkel when Þórður and his men are drowned in *Laxdæla saga*. Clearly the mood here is very different; indeed it is said that Guðríður recites the chant so beautifully and so well, that no one had heard it recited before by a lovelier voice.

Kvað Guðríður þá kvæðið svo fagurt og vel að engi þóttist fyrr heyrta hafa með fegri raust kvæðið sá er þar var.

Þorbjörg thanks Guðríður and says that many spirits have been attracted, who thought the chant beautiful. Now many things are clear to her that have been hidden before. She states that the dearth will not last longer than this winter and that the season will improve as spring comes. The sickness that has afflicted people will also abate sooner than expected. Þorbjörg then turns her attention to Guðríður, saying that she wishes to reward her for her help and that her fate is now clear to her. She will marry well in Greenland, but it will not last because her fate lies in Iceland – *vegir þínir liggja út til Íslands* – where she will be the founder of a great progeny ‘over whom a bright ray of light will shine’. She concludes: *Enda far nú vel og heil, dóttir mín*. After this, many people ask Þorbjörg questions concerning their future and it is stated that little of what she tells them fails to come true. As she has predicted, the weather improves as spring sets in: *Veðráttu batnaði skjótt þegar er vora tók sem Þorbjörg hafði sagt*. Part of the function of the Þorbjörg episode in *Eiríks saga rauða* is presumably to illustrate the character of Guðríður, to emphasise her fate and also her moral rectitude.

The references to witches and witchcraft clearly play an important part in the Sagas of Icelanders. They may be seen as a literary convention of saga-writing, a narrative technique to create tension. In addition to this, sorcery appears to be closely tied to what may be termed the micro-politics of the community. Personal misfortune may be seen in the context of the malignancy of neighbours, a witch works some sorcery, someone is accused and finally punished. As the participants in the events mobilise kinsmen and dependents for support they are drawn into the large-scale framework of Commonwealth Iceland. When weather is involved as well as politics, the spell is potent indeed.

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