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Folklore in Old Norse – Old Norse in Folklore

Edited by
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Folklore in Old Norse – Old Norse in Folklore. Introduction

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For a long time, supernatural elements in the Old Norse saga literature (from the 13th and 14th centuries) were highly neglected among scholars. The sagas were famous for their "realism" and most scholars tended to focus on aspects and elements that would fit this view, which included valuable studies on feuds and the social and societal structure of the sagas, but left little room for encounters with Otherworld beings. Works and genres that incorporate more than sporadic supernatural and fantastic motifs were seen as peripheral anomalies and were tucked away in the background. Such elements were usually explained as late features and were, in fact, seen as signs of the degeneration of Old Norse Literature (see for example Sigurður Nordal 1953: 261). At least part of the explanation for this focus can probably be found in the contemporary trends and personal views and convictions of the scholars behind such studies. During the last few decades, however, this has changed. The *fornaldarsögur*, with their focus on encounters with giants, trolls and other monsters, are the subject of recent studies collected in the three volumes in the series edited by Ney *et al*. 2003, 2009 and 2012, and the Otherworld motifs were likewise discussed in many of the contributions in McKinnell *et al*. 2006. Several articles and monographs on giants (Schulz 2004), trolls, dwarves (Ármann Jakobsson 2008, 2005) and other similar beings have been written in recent years, and this clearly bears witness to the new interest in these aspects of Old Norse literature. Moreover, it also reveals what can be gained from a more nuanced approach to the study of saga literature; despite the many overlaps and dividing lines between the genres into which sagas have traditionally been grouped in the academic context, it is only fair to say that sagas broadly speaking present a world-view that pays attention to much more than realism, hard facts and objective truths. Supernatural,

fantastic, symbolic and metaphorical aspects are present with what one might justifiably call folkloric tenacity.

There is no doubt that studies such as those mentioned above have deepened our understanding of especially the *fornaldarsögur*. The *Íslendingasögur*, however, have not been examined as fully and have not been equally successfully explained regarding the supernatural motifs that also these texts contain. One of the main reasons for this is their "realistic" character and their setting in an Icelandic society, which has in the eyes of many a scholar seemed difficult to reconcile with encounters with Otherworld beings. Scholars tend to divide the *Íslendingasögur* into two groups, one "classical", consisting of sagas based on oral tradition, perceived as fundamentally historical and focusing on socially orientated conflicts between Icelanders, and one "post-classical", consisting of sagas that are regarded as fictitious works written by creative authors, focusing on fantastic events and influenced by the *fornaldarsögur*. Vésteinn Ólason 2007 is a typical representative of this view. The basis of this view is that supernatural elements in *Íslendingasögur* are seen as exceptions and as signs of fiction. Other scholars, however, have noted that supernatural beings could just as well have been regarded as reality by medieval Icelanders and these scholars have questioned the exceptional character of this type of episodes. Ármann Jakobsson 1998 represents this view. Ármann and Vésteinn nonetheless share a literary-comparative method wherein Otherworld motifs in the *Íslendingasögur* are analyzed in the light of other sagas, both *fornaldarsögur* and other *Íslendingasögur*. This has resulted in a significantly increased knowledge of the sagas as literary works, but it has not solved the problem of how Otherworld stories were conceived.

During the 20th century, Old Norse philology has been strongly textually oriented. This is especially evident in saga scholarship where the book-prose ideology of the "Icelandic School" turned the question of the origins of individual sagas into an issue of direct influences from other written works. This focus has had certain methodological advantages in terms of reducing the scope for unwarranted assumptions and speculative reconstruction. But it has also meant that folkloristic knowledge and methods have been neglected. Scholars have generally failed to take account of the extensive material of later records of folk belief and folklore. An important purpose of the present volume is to emphasize the relevance of these sources and methods for Old Norse studies, to disclose what sorts of results may be achieved this way, but

also to maintain an awareness of what the limitations are and through discussion try to solve the problems inherent to this approach.

The traditional type of comparative method in Old Norse thus concerns comparison of texts to other texts, and the texts discussed are Old Norse texts that are compared to each other in order to establish relationships; one of the texts is supposed to throw light on the other and make an interpretation possible as well as function as the starting point for the analysis. This is the basis of the so-called *rittengsl* method, which is employed in all the saga introductions to the standard Íslenzk fornrit editions of saga texts, and this has been the standard method in saga research in general.

This method has, as mentioned, been successful and has made it possible to establish certain relationships and fixed points for interpretation and understanding, not least with regards to some patterns in the descriptions of the Otherworld (for example Ármann Jakobsson 2008, 2009, Schulz 2004). But it also leaves numerous aspects unexplained. In many cases, motifs and concepts cannot be explained by merely pointing to influences from other preserved texts, but they can in several cases be greatly clarified by being considered in the light of recordings from much later periods instead. One example of this is the Ingjaldr episode in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, which lacks Old Norse parallels, but has close parallels in Norwegian folk legends recorded in the 20th century (edited in Strompdal 1939: 49). In some cases, specific textual parallels from other sagas have been suggested by scholars, while much closer parallels are found in later records, and the Old Norse texts which have previously been seen as having influenced one another directly should rather be regarded as oral variants of the same story, also recorded at a later stage. One example is the Járngrímr encounter in *Sturlunga saga*, which Jonna Louis-Jensen claimed was influenced by the description of the encounter between the blacksmith and Óðinn in *Böglunga sögur* (Louis-Jensen 2009), although much closer parallels are found in folk legends from Bohuslän and Värmlandsnäs, recorded in the 20th century (edited by Bergstrand 1947: 11–12 and Bergstrand 1962: 12–14); *cf.* Sävborg 2014 [in print]). These Swedish legends probably represent a story that was known in medieval Iceland and which constitutes the common root of the Járngrímur and the Óðinn episodes in the two separate sagas. Generally, an oral background to motifs and episodes in the sagas seems likely much more often than is indicated in the saga introductions of Íslenzk fornrit.

I many cases, the folkloric parallels might supplement the investigations founded on more traditional philological methods. Ármann Jakobsson 2008 has listed and examined the different descriptions of trolls in the saga texts and tried to establish and analyze the Old Norse conception of the look, peculiarity and function of trolls. This investigation significantly increases our knowledge, but an inclusion of later Scandinavian material and theoretical concepts from folkloristics (not least the distinction between *Sage* and *Märchen*) would most probably solve several of the remaining questions.

Folkloristics also supplies us with theoretical models created for the kind of material encountered in a living tradition, which means that it has the potential to provide greater knowledge of how the stories were perceived by contemporary narrators and audiences. This gives the theory and the conception of the supernatural a stronger basis in empirics and certainty of knowledge than does the literary theory usually used in examinations of the supernatural motifs in Old Norse literature. Old Norse scholarship has, in short, much to gain from becoming a great deal more familiar with the folkloristic concepts and models.

A few scholars have gone about analyzing the basic view of the supernatural in Old Norse literature and interesting contributions have been produced by e.g. Mundal 2006 and Mitchell 2006, who have used the concepts of 'supernatural' vs. 'fantastic' to explain different perceptions of truth. An approach that has been rare in these contexts is, however, the folkloristic approach. There are scattered references to Max Lüthi in Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2006 and Mitchell 2006, mainly to describe the distinction between *fornaldarsögur* and *Íslendingasögur*, but folkloristic concepts have hardly been used in the analysis of *Íslendingasögur*. An interesting attempt made by John Lindow 1986 to use Lauri Honko's description of the Otherworld encounter in the Ingrian memorats was never followed up. Daniel Sävborg (2009) made an analysis of the Otherworld encounters in the *Íslendingasögur* using Max Lüthi's analysis of One-dimensionality (vs. Two-dimensionality). Sävborg 2014 argues for the use of late-recorded folk legends as comparative material in the study of *Íslendingasögur* in addition to the contemporary saga literature. These approaches are to a large extent followed up in this volume.

In the present volume, eight articles are collected all of which develop further the bringing together of Old Norse philology and folklore studies and they discuss and test methods in order to shed new light on the supernatural in Old Norse literature. The articles all treat the issue

of literary/learned/written tradition on the one hand vs. oral/folk tradition on the other. All of them also deal, completely or partially, with supernatural motifs and beliefs in Old Norse. The ways in which these eight articles approach and combine these issues are nonetheless different. Thomas A. DuBois, Stephen Mitchell and Karen Bek-Pedersen examine these matters from a general point of view albeit through concrete examples, while the remaining five authors focus on specific genres or works: Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir on the genre of *fornaldarsögur* broadly speaking and Ralph O'Connor, Camilla Asplund Ingemark, Eldar Heide and Annette Lassen all focus on one individual Íslendingasaga, namely *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*. In the case of this particular saga, which is a striking example of how easily the saga genre incorporates both literary and folkloric elements side by side, Lassen mainly conducts the traditional literary study of textual comparison but, less traditionally, emphasizes the supernatural elements, which are frequently neglected in the studies of the genre of *Íslendingasögur*, while Asplund Ingemark, on the other hand, avoids this kind of textual comparison and instead analyzes the supernatural motifs and story patterns from the point of folkloristic theory. O'Connor tries to establish the balance between written and oral sources for the saga and its supernatural motifs, while Heide examines a possible ancient and pre-Christian tradition behind the same motifs. When presented side by side, as they are here, these four articles on *Bárðar saga* illustrate just how greatly our knowledge about one saga can be enhanced by shining light onto it from all different disciplines: folklore, philology, history of literature and of religion.

Notable are the attempts from two of the authors to use folkloristic theory to throw light onto the supernatural within Old Norse sagas. This is the main object of Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir's analysis of the *fornaldarsögur* as a genre and this is also the object of Camilla Asplund Ingemark's article on the allegedly "post-classical" *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*. Both these authors are pioneers in using this theoretical approach on a genre and on a saga, respectively, traditionally seen as fundamentally literary, but discussed in these articles also in terms of their oral character.

The long-term perspective in itself, which is a condition for connecting medieval Norse texts with later folklore records, is discussed in the volume by three of the authors. Stephen Mitchell focuses on the degree of continuity of beliefs in Scandinavia and examines the sources where such continuity seems to be present. Karen Bek-Pedersen and

Eldar Heide both discuss the possibilities for reconstruction. Heide focuses mainly on the potential reconstruction of pre-Christian beliefs about guardian spirits, local deities and supernatural beings by combining high medieval saga texts with late-recorded folklore and later learned information. Bek-Pedersen raises a number of fundamental theoretical questions about reconstruction of lost stories, traditions and beliefs on the basis of combining Old Norse texts and fragments with later sources.

By presenting these eight articles together here, we hope to make clear that there are still many avenues to explore, that well-known approaches and methodologies from other disciplines can be useful and valuable to the study of saga texts and, indeed, that much can be revealed by research that is open to this blending together of traditionally separate disciplines. It is obvious that the various academic fields each employ useful and valuable methods and strategies. We hope herewith to show that not one field is more useful or more valuable than any other but, indeed, that the way forward towards a more nuanced, more comprehensive and better understanding of the sagas lies in the combined forces of different disciplines.

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