

Book Review: *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150–1400*

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ÁRMANN JAKOBSSON AND MIRIAM MAYBURD (eds.):
Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150–1400.

Walter de Gruyter, Boston/Berlin; Western Michigan University Medieval Institute Publications 2020.

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The title of this volume gives the impression that its subject is the experiencing by people in Iceland, between the dates specified, of what has traditionally been regarded as the supernatural: a more accurate title would have been ‘Paranormal encounters in Icelandic written sources, 1150-1400’. The sources in question are almost exclusively literary, though one of the chapters (by Sean B. Lawing) deals with the law code known as *Grágás*. It is difficult not to see this volume, with the word *paranormal* in its title, as a response to *Supernatural encounters in Old Norse literature and tradition*, edited by Daniel Sävborg and Karen Bek-Pedersen (2018), to which both the editors of the present volume contributed. Their contributions to that earlier volume, and their Introduction to the present one, emphasise their preference for the term *paranormal* rather than *supernatural*, for reasons which include the fact that (to quote from the present volume, pp. 2, 3, 4) the former term is ‘intentionally provocative’, prompting the question of ‘what [...] constitutes the normal’, as well as ‘turning the focus away from classifications or categories of paranormal beings and instead concentrating on how they were perceived and narrated’, and involving ‘a focus shift from the paranormal figure towards its audience’.

The volume has twenty-three unnumbered chapters, loosely divided into three Parts. Part I, ‘Experiencing the paranormal’, is concerned with how paranormal occurrences ‘were perceived and narrated’; Part II, ‘Figures of the paranormal’, concentrates on paranormal phenomena as entities in themselves rather than on their witnesses; and Part III, ‘Literature and the paranormal’ illustrates the variety of Old Icelandic literary genres in which accounts of the paranormal may appear. I say ‘loosely’ because the Parts may occasionally depart from their terms of reference as stated here and in the Introduction, p. 5, and because the same work of literature may be treated in more than one Part, from varying points of view.

Njáls saga features three times in the volume: first with Ármann Jakobsson’s chapter in Part I on Hildiglúmr Runólfsson’s report to Hjalti Skeggjason of the vision he has seen of a *gandreið*, or witch-ride,

portending momentous events, and on Flosi Þórðarson's dream, subsequent to the burning of Njáll, which Flosi interprets as foretelling the deaths of some of the burners; secondly, with Christopher Crocker's account in Part III of the brief announcements by Hallgerðr's overseer Kolr and by Flosi's niece Hildigunnr of dreams they have had, Kolr's dream hinting at Hallgerðr's untrustworthiness and Hildigunnr's at her husband's death while she slept; and thirdly with Ingibjörg Eypórsdóttir's discussion, also in Part III, of *Njáls saga's* account of the battle of Clontarf, including the poem *Darraðarljóð* contained in it, as an example of the vision literature known as *leizla*.

Grettis saga also has three chapters to itself. In Part I there is Sarah Bienko Eriksen's brilliant discussion of the Glámr episode, showing how internal focalisation through Grettir, taking the reader into Grettir's mind, also operates through the revenant Glámr in the account of his fight with Grettir, so that the reader is given an uncanny sense of partaking of Glámr's alien otherness. In Part II Rebecca Merkelbach takes *Grettis saga* as the basis for examining Stephen T. Asma's view (*On monsters*, 2009, p. 10; quoted on p. 267) that "monsters" are matters of perception' in arguing that Grettir acquires the status of a monster to the extent that he is perceived as one by society, not least during his outlawry. In Part III Shaun F. D. Hughes argues, with a careful study of the geographical setting of the Glámr episode as it is today, that Glámr's hauntings at Þórhallsstaðir are due to his having taken over those of his killer, the *meinvættir* or 'noxious creature' on whose domain Þórhallr had encroached with grazing for his sheep.

Grettis saga also features together with *Eyrbyggja saga* in three chapters. In Part I Miriam Mayburd borrows from Laura Stark (FF Communications, vol. CXXXVIII, no. 290, 2006) the concepts of 'the open body' and 'the dissolving self' in emphasising the special susceptibility of saga characters to the impact and terror of revenant hauntings at times of seasonal change and severe weather, at least in the cases of Glámr's and Þórólfr bægifótr's hauntings in these two sagas respectively (those of Víga-Hrappr in *Laxdæla saga* are here considered from a rather different point of view, with reference to the proximity of his buried body to those haunted). Also in Part I, Anna Katharina Heiniger considers Grettir's doorway encounters with Glámr at Þórhallsstaðir and the *tröllkona* at Sandhaugar, and the two *dýradómr* ('door-court') episodes in *Eyrbyggja saga*, not so much as liminal events in themselves, but as marking off liminal or central stages in the sagas in which they appear. In Part II Kent Pettit sees Glámr's hauntings in *Grettis saga*, and those at Fróðá in *Eyrbyggja*

saga, occurring as they do at Christmas time, as representing a last gasp of defiant paganism in a newly converted Iceland.

Eyrbyggja saga also has a chapter of its own, with Andrea Maraschi's discussion in Part I of its account of Þórgunna's ghost cooking and serving food to those in the process of conveying her corpse to Skálholt for burial. In the light of parallel medieval tales of food serving as mediator between the living and the dead, Þórgunna here emerges as more normal than paranormal, more human than spectral.

Three chapters deal with specifically Christian subjects. Discussing in Part I miracles associated with the Icelandic bishops and saints Þorlákr Þórhallsson (d. 1193), Jón Ögmundsson (d. 1121) and Guðmundr Arason (d. 1237), Ásdís Egilsdóttir writes that since a miracle in the Christian sense is the work of God typically channelled through a saint, the saint is 'not a supernatural or paranormal being' (pp. 40, 45) – from the point of view, presumably, of believing Christians, in this case medieval Icelandic ones. (How far, it may be asked, would even non-Christians today use the word *paranormal* for what Christians regard as divine?) The belief that man is made in God's image, mentioned by Ásdís in her discussion of the miraculous restoration to human shape of bodies disfigured by disease, is what lies behind the provision in the thirteenth-century Icelandic law code *Grágás* for the Christian burial of human body parts if they are known to be those of a Christian, discussed in Sean B. Lawing's chapter, also in Part I. Lawing notes statutes reaffirming this provision issued by Bishop Jón Sigurðsson of Skálholt in 1345 and raises the question of what kind of disposal the limbs of those mutilated in the feuds of the Sturlung Age (1220-62) might have received. Ásdís's emphasis on the joy (as well as fear) provoked by miracles finds an echo in Gunnvör S. Karlsdóttir's chapter in Part III, where Gunnvör claims that something of the spirit of the so-called 'merry miracles' or *joca sanctorum* characterises the story of the priest Ketill's journey to Rome interpolated into the C version of *Guðmundar saga Arasonar* (c. 1330) and most probably deriving from one of the exempla thought to have been collected by Jón Halldórsson, Bishop of Skálholt 1322-39. Ketill travels to Rome with a letter to the pope from Bishop Guðmundr Arason, throws it into a cloth held in front of the pope by two attendants, later hears a voice coming from one of the towers of St Peter's Basilica, hastens there and hears a voice from a window in the tower summoning Bishop Guðmundr's messenger, whereupon he identifies himself and catches in his coat a letter held out from the window. Gunnvör seems more interested in the transmission of this

story than in its paranormal aspects, and it may indeed be asked just how paranormal its events are.

The remaining ten chapters are a relatively mixed bag. *Grettis saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga* appear together with *Egils saga* and *Svarfdæla saga* in Marion Poilvez's discussion in Part I of how experiences of saga characters that seem to be portrayed as traumatic are sometimes, but not always, accompanied by paranormal occurrences, while such occurrences in the sagas, conversely, are not always linked to experiences that might qualify as traumatic. Daniel C. Remein, also in part I, emphasises the implicit as well as explicit presence of ice in settings for the paranormal in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, the Vinland sagas, and *Flóamanna saga*.

Four chapters in each of Parts II and III remain to be mentioned. In Part II Andrew McGillivray draws on Snorri's prose *Edda* and the eddic poems *Skírnismál* and *Grímnismál* in illustrating the various functions of Hliðskjálf, the 'gateway shelf' used by Óðinn, Freyr, and Óðinn's wife Frigg as 'a site of paranormal encounters' (p. 185) (but paranormal from whose point of view? Are not these three pagan deities themselves paranormal beings? The chapter's discussion of the earthly as opposed to the heavenly Hliðskjálf needs to be developed). Sandra Ballif Straubhaar argues that the description in the late medieval *Hrólfs saga kraka* of the beast eventually killed by Böðvarr bjarki as having wings on its back and always flying is inspired by continental Romanesque-style images of winged dragons, knowledge of which could have reached Iceland 'on the wings of chivalric narratives' (p. 197). Arngrímur Vídalín shows, with a detailed study of the word *blámaðr*, glossed by the Cleasby-Vigfusson-Craigie dictionary as 'a black man', that its usages reflect at least twelve of the seventeen semantic categories of the word *tröll* identified by Ármann Jakobsson (in Torfi Tulinius, ed., *Galdramenn: galdrar og samfélag á miðöldum*, 2008, pp. 95-119), so that the *blámaðr* emerges as a demonic, magical, and monstrous figure. (Given that the element *blá-* derives from the adjective *blár* 'blue' as opposed to *svart* 'black' it may be of interest to note that in the Irish language *gorm* 'blue' rather than *dubh* 'black' is the adjective specifying black skin colour.) Zuzana Stankovítsová, after a careful search for the word *fylgja* (pl. *fylgjur*) in the Old Norse-Icelandic literary corpus, finds that it means, at its least abstract, little more than 'paranormal attendant' (p. 254), and makes use of the brief prose narrative *Þiðrandi þáttr* and the eddic poem *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* in criticising Else Mundal's study *Fylgjemotiva i norrøn litteratur* (1974) with regard to its distinction

between animal and female *fylgjur* and its presentation of the latter as a distinct category of paranormal being.

In Part III, Þórdís Edda Jóhannesdóttir discusses *Jómsvíkinga saga* from two perspectives, first that of the modern reader who would see this saga as largely fictional but nevertheless mostly lacking in accounts of the paranormal, and would consequently find exceptional its account of Hákon jarl's sacrifice of his son to the mysterious þorgerðr Hølgabrúðr (his female *fylgja*?) in order to defeat the Jómsvíkingar at the battle of Hjörungavágr, which she enables him to do. The second perspective is that of the thirteenth-century audience who would have seen the sacrifice as just one historical event among others, exceptional only as an instance of paganism lingering on from the pre-Christian past. Martina Ceolin studies the treatment of the paranormal in two sagas from different genres: *Gull-Þóris saga*, also known as *Þorskfirðinga saga* and a family saga, and *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, one of the sagas of antiquity, finding that each of them shows, on occasion, characteristics of the genre to which the other belongs, the occasion depending on the 'narrative world' (or setting? See pp. 356-57) in which the action finds itself. joav tirosh writes on the paranormal defamation of Guðmundr inn ríki in *Ljósvetninga saga*, most especially in the chapter numbered 11 (21) in the Íslenzk fornrit edition, the numbering reflecting the saga's two redactions which are assumed to be largely in agreement in this part of the saga, even though one of them breaks off in the course of this chapter. In addition to the famous humiliation of Guðmundr by Ófeigr Járngerðarson, in whose place he had been sitting, this chapter shows Guðmundr in the shaming situation of asking Drauma-Finni, for the death of whose brother, Þorkell hákr, he had been responsible, to interpret a dream he has had of Þorkell's head appearing first on one side of his own head and then on the other, a likely sign of mental torment. Guðmundr's brother Einarr dreams in this chapter of an ox dying in Guðmundr's high seat, but the most sinister of the three dreams in the chapter is that of the farmer Þórhallr, the content of which we are never told, but which Þórhallr tells Guðmundr after Drauma-Finni has refused to be told it, and which it turns out after Guðmundr's death at the end of the chapter had portended the death of the person to whom it was told. Védís Ragnheiðardóttir, finally, writes on the chivalric saga *Viktors saga ok Blávus*, showing that according to the chivalric honour code, exemplified in this saga, it is acceptable for the sworn brothers Viktor and Blávus to use magic when fighting against monsters, as they do when contending with the berserkers Falr and Sóti, but not when fighting against honourable men, as they do when contending with the

warrior kings Randver and Qnundr. In this latter case they show a lack of *karlmennska*, or manliness, and come near to partaking of the nature of monsters themselves.

The volume could have been better edited. There is a lack of consistency in the way translations of passages quoted from Old Icelandic are presented. In most cases, it is true, the quotations appear in the text of each chapter and are translated in the Notes (each chapter is followed by numbered Notes and then by a Bibliography); Christopher Crocker's chapter, in which the translations immediately follow the quotations in the text, is a harmless exception to this. In some cases, however, quotations are given in the text with no translation, either there or in the Notes (see e.g. pp. 43, 45, Notes 18, 24); in others, passages are quoted in translation but not in the original (e.g. pp. 301, Note 32; 314, Note 12); and in Ingibjörg Eypórsdóttir's chapter all the quotations with the exception of one verse passage are from Robert Cook's Penguin translation of *Njáls saga*, acknowledged in the Notes but mostly without reference to the original. In some chapters the translations appear to be the authors' own; in others they are from published translations. In Andrea Maraschi's chapter on *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 49, a lengthy prose passage from the saga, central to her argument, is not so much translated as paraphrased in English and is given, inexplicably and misleadingly, the printed form of what looks like verse, with a reference to the original but no quotation from it.

Some of the contributors show a poor grasp of Old Icelandic. The quotation *slíkt hǫrmung at sjá* on p. 156, translated in Note 27 on p. 166 as 'Such a grief to see', presents neuter *slíkt* 'such' as if it were being used attributively (and of course wrongly) with feminine *hǫrmung* 'grief', rather than as belonging to an earlier part of the sentence which has not been translated. The adjective *styggur* 'shy', appearing in the nominative in the first verse quotation on p. 177, is wrongly treated as if it were in the genitive in the translation on p. 187, Note 9. The English phrase 'at Nesi' on p. 232, referring to an unspecified part of *Eyrbyggja saga*, does not inspire confidence; nor does the translation in Note 31, p. 241, of one of the passages quoted on p. 232. More serious than any of these is the case of the stanza from *Eyrbyggja saga* quoted on p. 78, where the wrong stanza from the Penguin translation of this saga is given in the Notes as its translation (on p. 85, Note 71)! Another such case, not so serious because likely to have arisen by accident, is that of the second of the first two quotations from *Grettis saga* on p. 116, where the translation

given for the first quotation in Note 32 on p. 125 is repeated for the second in Note 34.

The editors can no doubt be forgiven for not noticing the incomplete reference to Torfi H. Tulinius's 2018 discussion of trauma, memory, etc. on p. 81, Note 3, and p. 88 (the book in which it appears is in fact the *Handbook of pre-modern memory studies*, reviewed in *Scandinavica* 59, Issue reviews, December 31, 2020) or the lack of bibliographical follow-up to the reference on p. 301 to the work of Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson. They could and should have noticed and corrected at least some of the inconsistencies and errors noted above, however. As for their stated preference for the word *paranormal* over *supernatural*, also noted above, I would say that while most of the contributors to this volume have dutifully used the former term, as I have done in this review (I have not counted instances of the term *supernatural*, though they seem to increase in frequency in the second half of the volume, occurring on e.g. pp. 232, 295, 300, 331 (twice), 338, 339 (three times), 351), the volume as a whole does not seem to me to work out enough of a distinction between the two terms to justify the overall preferability of *paranormal*. I have hinted above that I have reservations about the use of this term in a Christian context, and that one does not need to be a believing Christian to have them. Martina Ceolin refers on p. 351 to Ármann Jakobsson's article in *Fabula* 54, nos 3-4 (2013), 199, note 2, where Ármann takes exception to the term *supernatural* on the grounds that it 'takes its stance in terms of nature and suggests something that is above or beyond it, rather than a part of it.' But Christians believe (or so I understand) that God is above and beyond nature, as well as within it, and I see no objection to the use of the term *supernatural* in an objective discussion of such a belief. In the same place (though this is not quoted by Ceolin) Ármann claims that this term 'cannot be entirely discarded' and it would be interesting to know for what kinds of context he would reserve it.

I fully agree with the editors' view that any discussion of what they call the paranormal in the sagas must begin with a close study of how it is narrated and how it is presented as being perceived. I have argued elsewhere (as Sarah Bienko Eriksen kindly acknowledges, p. 100, note 6) that such a study can be greatly assisted by the narratological concept of focalisation, and would suggest that Eriksen's chapter in the present volume, with its subtle use of that concept, is the one best suited to showing the way forward to further analysis of the supernatural and/or paranormal in the Icelandic sagas. Whether further analysis will throw up reasons for replacing, or supplementing,

one of these two terms by the other remains to be seen, but this volume has given us, in the meantime, a wealth of examples and approaches on which to ponder.