ELEMENTS OF SUPERSTITION
IN THE
ICELANDIC FAMILY SAGAS

by

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PREFACE

The Icelandic family sagas were committed to vellum from oral traditions during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Concerned primarily with actual persons and events from about A.D. 825 to the middle of the eleventh century, they also embody tales of supranatural occurrences and accounts of superstitious beliefs and practices, an analysis of which is the subject of this essay.

A discussion of superstition in the family sagas necessarily entails references to the mythical and heroic sagas, the sagas of the Norse kings, and the Eddic literature.

The appended list of Icelandic MSS. and English translations has been extracted from the bibliographies of classic Icelandic literature compiled by Haldór Hermannsson and published in various issues of Islandica between 1908 and 1920, with supplements by Professor Hermannsson in 1935 and 1937, and by Jóhann S. Hannesson in 1955 and 1957. (Full details of the pertinent issues will be found in the appended list of reference works cited). This list embraces all the family sagas which have been rendered into English, but it includes only those mythical and heroic sagas and those Eddas which are actually cited in the essay, or which have been published in English since the completion of the work of Professors Hermannsson and Hannesson and up to the year 1965, the last year for which information was available at the time of writing.

The historical notes on Icelandic MSS. are all those of Professor Hermannsson, extracted from his bibliographies in Islandica.

Omitted, however, from the Islandica lists of English versions of the sagas are abridgments, adaptations and fragments, except where these are considered by the writer to be of literary interest by virtue of their authorship.

G.J.H.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the Icelandic sagas occurs the leitmotiv of superstition. Not only in the legendary heroic sagas and the fictitious romantic sagas, but "even in the most reliable sagas dealing with the authentic traditions of well known families, the so-called Islendinga sögur," as Margaret Schlauch has noted, "we find a use of the supernatural--witches, trolls, spells, and prophetic visions."[1] Professor Schlauch comments that although these may heighten the dramatic effect of the sagas, they do not heighten the reader's credulity. They do, however, perform another important function, in the insight they afford us into the fears, aspirations, moral judgments, and attitudes toward life and death held by the settlers of Iceland.

A detailed analysis of the old Norse theogony does not lie within the scope of this paper. Since, however, it was the soil in which the Icelandic superstitions were nourished, and from which they grew, we must consider it, if only briefly, because of the light it casts on the supernatural concepts which are our concern here.

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[1] Romance in Iceland (Princeton, 1934), p. 12.

Norse paganism abounds in blurred concepts and contradictions. Thor, the favourite god of the Norwegians and Icelanders, is, according to one tradition, a son of Odin, chief of the gods. According to another tradition, he is one of Odin's ancestors. Snorri Sturluson, the thirteenth century Icelandic scholar, makes use of both traditions, the first in Ynglinga saga[2], the second in his prologue to The Prose Edda[3], a textbook for skalds.

Thor appears to have been a primeval personification of thunder, while Odin was most likely a legendary king, deified during his lifetime, who engrafted the ancient religion of Thor onto his own, when he found it impossible to eradicate it, making of Thor a subordinate deity. Grenville Pigott noted in this respect:

> In many parts of the north, but more especially in Norway and Iceland, Thor was more highly honoured than Odin himself, and . . . there seems to be good ground for the belief that the worship of Thor, as the god of thunder, was established there from the remotest antiquity. Suhm is of the opinion that Thor, at first, was a personification of thunder. In the Scandinavian dialects, Tor-don signifies a dull, rolling noise, and we find that thunder is rendered in Danish Torden; in Swedish, Thordon; in German, Donner; in Latin, Tonitru; in British, Taran; Phoenician, Thorom; Highland Scotch, Toron. Lucan calls Thor Taranis, which still, in Welsh, signifies Thunder. [4]

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[2] Ch. 5, Heimskringla, pp. 9-11. The text is that of Samuel Laing's English translation, Heimskringla: Sagas of The Norse Kings, revised with introduction and notes by Peter Foote (London, 1961). Subsequent references will be to this edition.

[3] Snorra edda: Snorri's Prologue. The text is that of Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur's English translation, The Prose Edda by Snorri Sturluson, 3rd printing (New York, 1929). Subsequent references will be to this edition.

Pigott believed that there must have been more than one individual who bore the name of Odin. Under any other supposition, he claimed, it would be impossible to reconcile the contradictions representing Odin both as ancestor and descendant of Thor. Pigott postulated three Odins, the first of whom was never in Scandinavia, but lived in very remote times on the shores of the Black Sea, and was worshipped as the supreme god of the Scythians. The second Odin, he believed to have been a descendant or priest of the former, who lived about 520 B.C., and emigrated to the north, making himself ruler of a great part of Scandinavia, where he introduced a new worship, of which he and his companions became the chief divinities. The third Odin, according to Pigott, was perhaps a Scythian prince forced to flee his country, who fled to Scandinavia where he found the religion of Odin already established.[5] This would be the Odin of Heimskringla and The Prose Edda, who was endowed with the skills of medicine, astronomy, and the writing of runes, all of which were considered by the Scandinavians, who had no prior knowledge of them, to be forms of magic, and which were elaborated into the characteristics of Odin described by Snorri Sturluson in Heimskringla. Here we are told that Odin taught the Scandinavians arts and accomplishments which he brought with him from his homeland, which Snorri presumes to have been in western Asia. He terrified

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[4] A Manual of Scandinavian Mythology (London, 1839), p. 97.

[5] Manual, pp. 49-51.

his enemies through his ability to change his shape. He spoke only in rhyme, and from him derives the art of song and skaldship in the north. He could make his enemies blind and deaf, or strike them with terror and make their weapons blunt. His warriors wore no armour, were of exceptional strength, bit their shields, acted like mad dogs or wolves, killing people at a single blow, but neither fire nor iron had any effect on them. "This was called the Berserk fury."

Odin understood the art of magic and runes, and had foresight. He knew where all hidden treasure was buried in the earth. Through his runes he could obtain information from corpses hanging on gallows, and could even summon the dead from their graves to give him information. He ordained the sacrifices; a blood sacrifice on winter-day for a good year; one in the middle of summer for a good crop; and a third sacrifice on a summer day for victory in battle.[6]

The feats and adventures of the three Odins, Pigott believed, had been thoroughly confounded, but he was of the opinion that it was the third Odin who introduced into Scandinavia the custom of burning the dead and casting their ashes into the sea or burying them underground, raising barrows over those of important men and monumental stones over warriors. Pigott believed, as well, that it was the third Odin who, upon finding his end approaching, had himself transfixed with spears, stating that he was about to return to his home, Valhall, where he would receive the dead who fell in battle.[7]

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[6] "Ynglinga saga," chaps. 6-7, Heimskringla, pp. 11-12.

The sagas, especially Eyrbyggja saga, provide numerous instances of the veneration in which Thor was held in Iceland and Norway. We read of temples dedicated and sacrifices performed to Thor, but there are relatively few episodes which portray superstitions or folk-beliefs devolving from the tradition of Thor. A particularly vivid illustration of such a superstition does occur, however, in Eyrbyggja saga, in a passage recounting the arrival in Iceland of one of the early settlers, Thorolf Most-beard:

> . . . Then Thorolf cast overboard the pillars of his high-seat, which had been in the temple, and on one of them was Thor carven; withal he spake over them, that there he would abide in Iceland, whereas Thor should let those pillars come ashore. 8

That the great body of Icelandic and Norse folk-beliefs and superstitions should revolve around the attributes of Odin and his followers, rather than around the earlier tradition of Thor, may at first appear anomalous, but it is readily understandable. Often when a new religion supercedes or becomes grafted upon an older religious system, those customs and practices of the older which it would be too difficult to eradicate completely are cloaked with respectability under new names and new explanations to justify to continuance. The saturnalia of the Romans became the pre-lenten carnival of the Christians.

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7 A Manual of Scandinavian Mythology, pp. 49-51.

8 Ch. 4. The text is that of the English translation by William Morris and Eirikr Magnússon, The Story of The Ere-Dwellers (with The Story of the Heath Slayings [Heiðarviga saga] as appendix) (London, 1892). Subsequent references will be to this edition.

The ritual of lighting ceremonial candles at the time of the winter solstice, embodied in the Hebrew feast of Hanukkah, became a feature of the celebration of Christmas, as did the Yule feast of the pagan Germans and Scandinavians.

It is by virtue of written languages that we are aware of these Christian adaptations of older customs. In Scandinavia, however, there was no written language at the time the legendary Odin may have engrafted his religion upon that of Thor. For the purposes of this essay it would be futile to speculate on the possible pre-Odin origin of the superstitions based on Odin and his followers. Our concern is with the nature of those pagan superstitions recorded in the family sagas, their permutation under the influence of Christian thought, and the light they throw on the mentality of the medieval Icelanders.

Chapter II

SHAPE-CHANGERS AND BERSERKS

The belief among the medieval Icelanders and Scandinavians in the ability of some individuals to change their shape and become animals appears to be the result of a blending of two separate superstitions, both very old, widespread, and deeply rooted. The first of these is lycanthropy, the belief that certain persons had the power of becoming wolves, bears, or other fierce animals; the second is the belief that while a man is sleeping his soul leaves his body temporarily and may travel to distant places, sometimes entering the body of a bird or beast, but returning to the sleeper at the moment of his awakening.

In his Eddic Mythology, John Arnott MacCulloch remarks in regard to lycanthropy that its basis "is the belief in transformation, but its special form is due to mental aberration, persons of diseased mind imagining that they were wolves and the like, acting as such, and preying upon other human beings."[9] Robert Burton (1577-1640) also considered

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[9] Boston, 1930. p. 291. (Volume II of The Mythology of All Races (Boston, 1916-1932).

lycanthropy a mental aberration:

> . . . Lycanthropia . . . or wolf-madness, when men run howling about graves and fields in the night, and will not be persuaded but that they are wolves . . . Wierus tells a story of such a one at Padua, 1541, that would not believe to the contrary but that he was a wolf. He hath another instance of a Spaniard, who thought himself a bear. . . . This malady, saith Avicenna, troubleth men most in February, and is nowadays frequent in Bohemia and Hungary, according to Heurnius. . . . They lye hid most part all day, and go abroad in the night, barking, howling, at graves and deserts; "they have usually hollow eyes, scabbed legs and thighs, very dry and pale," saith Altomarus; . . . 10

A classic instance in the saga literature of shape-changing related to the 'malady' of lycanthropy occurs in Völsunga saga, where Sigmund the Völsung and his nephew-son Sinfjotli:

> . . . find a certain house, and two men with great gold rings asleep therein: now these twain were spellbound skin-changers, and wolf-skins were hanging up over them in the house; and every tenth day might they come out of those skins; and they were kings' sons: so might Sigmund and Sinfjotli do the wolf-skins on them, and then might they nowise come out of them, though forsooth the same nature went with them as heretofore; they howled as wolves howl, but both knew the meaning of that howling; they lay out in the wild-wood, and each went his way; and a word they made betwixt them, that they should risk the onset of seven men, but no more, and that he who was first to be set on should howl in wolfish wise . . . And when they were parted, Sigmund meets certain men, and gives forth a wolf's howl; and when Sinfjotli heard it, he went straightway thereto, and slew them all, and once more they parted. 11

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10 The Anatomy of Melancholy, Part I, Sec. 1, Mem. 1, Subs. iv. The text is that of the Dent edition (London, 1932), I, 141.

11 Ch. 8. The text is that of the English translation by Eirikr Magnusson and William Morris, The Story of The Völsungs and Niblungs with Certain Songs from The Elder Edda (London, 1870). Subsequent references will be to this edition.

The power of changing shape was believed to be the special gift of Odin, who was reputed to be the first individual possessed of this ability. In "Ynglinga saga," that portion of Heimskringla which covers the arrival of Odin in Scandinavia and the legendary beginnings of the Scandinavian royal houses, Snorri Sturluson refers twice to Odin's ability to change his shape. The first reference would appear to relate Odin's shape-changing to the lycanthropy theory, the second to the spirit leaving his body and entering that of a beast:

> When sitting among his friends his countenance was so beautiful and dignified, that the spirits of all were exhilerated by it; but when he was in war he appeared dreadful to his foes. This arose from his being able to change his skin and form any way he liked. 12

> Odin could transform his shape; his body could lie as if dead, or asleep; but then he would be in shape of a fish, or worm, or bird, or beast, and be off in a twinkling to distant lands upon his own or other people's business. 13

Although the power of shape-changing was generally considered to be a gift from Odin which was inherited by a son from his father (e.g. Kveldulf and Skallagrim, below), Eddison points out that at times it seems to have been derived from the beast itself. He cites chapter 306 of Landnamabók, where Odd Arngeirson finds his father and brother slain by a white bear and the bear sucking their blood. Odd kills the bear, carries it home, and eats its flesh in the belief that

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12 Ch. 6, Heimskringla, p. 11.

13 Ch. 7, Heimskringla, pp. 11-12.

he has thereby avenged his father and brother. Afterwards, however, apparently involuntarily, he becomes "evil, and ill to do with," and shape-strong to so great an extent that he walked in the course of a single night from Lavahaven to Thursowaterdale "to help his sister, that the Thursodalers were minded to stone to hell." Eddison mentions that this represents a distance of about a hundred and fifty miles "across the howling wilderness of the interior."[14]

Njáls saga affords another instance of what appears to be a reference to involuntary shape-changing, where Skarphedinn taunts Flosi: "Because thou art the sweetheart of the Swinefell's goblin, if, as men say, he does indeed turn thee into a woman every ninth night."[15]

Closely related to the belief in shape-changing was the phenomenon of berserkgang. "That this particular form of furor athleticus was no mere legend," notes Eddison, "is proved by the fact that laws were made against it."[16] We learn from a number of sagas that berserks were found among the retinue of the kings and earls of Norway, to whom they were no doubt useful as soldiers. According to legend, the first berserks in Scandinavia were among the warriors who arrived there with Odin. In Ynglinga saga, Snorri Sturluson

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[14] Egils saga Skallagrimssonar. The text is that of the English translation by E.R. Eddison, Egil's Saga (Cambridge, 1930), pp. 245-46 (Notes).

[15] Ch. 122. The text is that of the English translation by George Webbe Dasent, The Story of Burnt Njal, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1861). Subsequent references will be to this edition.

[16] Egils saga, p. 244 (Notes).

depicts their behaviour:

> . . . his [Odin's] men rushed forward without armour, were as mad as dogs or wolves, bit their shields, and were as strong as bears or wild bulls, and killed people at a blow, but neither fire nor iron told upon themselves. This was called the Berserk fury. 17

It is apparent that Snorri attributed the appelation berserkr or 'bare-sark' to a belief that these wild warriors scorned to wear the coat-of-mail, or byrny, but fought in their shirts or sarks. Eddison, however, among others, calls attention to another possible derivation of the word from bear-skins or wolf-skins, which, according to other sources, the berserks wore over their armour. To substantiate this derivation he cites Thorbiorn Hornklofi's Raven's Song where:

> . . . the lady asks the raven about the berserks, "men battle-bold that stride among the folk," and the raven says, "Wolf-coats they hight, they that in battle bear bloody shields." And in the same song, singing of the battle of Hafrsfirth, the raven says:
>
> Roared there the berserks,
> Battle-wood was the host,
> Loud howled the Wolf-coats
> And clattered the iron. 18

MacCulloch inclines toward the bear and wolf-skin derivation, and believes that the belief in shape-changing may have been influenced by this custom of wild warriors and outlaws wearing animal skins over their armour while they were

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17 "Ynglinga saga," ch. 6, Heimskringla, p. 11.

18 Eddic Mythology, p. 292.

the victims of frenzy and acting as though they were animals.[19]

If Snorri Sturluson's theory is the correct one, the derivation of the word is bare-sark, implying that these crazed warriors disdained the use of armour. The second theory, that they wore bear or wolf-skins over their armour, would appear to be equally valid, hence the derivation from bear-sark, or bear-skin.

Peter Foote, (Professor of Icelandic Literature at the University of London) has commented:

> Medically it is thought that the berserks were paranoic and sometimes perhaps epileptic, sensitive to suggestion or auto-suggestion, so that they could fall, either at will or under the right stimulus, into a violent fury strictly similar to the running amuck of the Malays and other comparatively primitive peoples. 20

Paranoia or epilepsy might well account for the behaviour of the berserks as it is described in the sagas, but I do not believe the analogy Professor Foote makes between berserkgang and running amuck among the Malays is entirely correct.

Although the berserks were at first warriors, in the later sagas we find them referred to as outlaws and bullies who presumed upon their preternatural strength to rob, plunder, and dominate men who were not so strong as they. We read,

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19 MacCulloch, p. 292.

20 Gísla saga Súrssonar. The text is that of the English translation by George Johnston, The Saga of Gisli, with notes and an essay on the Saga of Gisli by Peter Foote (Toronto, 1963), p. 64 (Notes). Subsequent references to Gísla saga Súrssonar will be to this edition.

however, of the character of the Malay:

> The fundamental traits of the Malay character have much resembling the Mongol; he is gentle, peaceable, quiet and civil, submissive to authorities, and rarely disposed towards crime. But to this must be added a tendency towards suspicion and--its twin brother--lack of frankness.
> . . . . . .
> Concealed savagery often comes unexpectedly to light. . . . The wild fury of the amok runner, blind wholesale murders, are sudden breaches in the cold husk. 21

An eighteenth century geographer noted regarding the amok runners that "they sometimes use a certain Liquor to make them furious, and then run about like Madmen, crying KILL, KILL, and spare nothing they meet."[22]

The late anthropologist, Alfred Russel Wallace, who had an intimate knowledge of the Malay Archipelago and its people, stated that running amuck was "the honourable mode of committing suicide among the natives of the Celebes, . . . the fashionable way of escaping from their difficulties." We can apprehend from Wallace's analysis of an incident of running amuck, how far removed is the figure of the berserk in the sagas, from the standpoint of character and motivation, from that of the Malay amok:

> A Roman fell upon his sword, a Japanese rips open his stomach, and an Englishman blows out his brains with a pistol. The Bugis mode has many advantages to one suicidally inclined. A man thinks himself wronged by society--he is in debt and cannot pay--he is taken for a slave or has gambled away his wife and child into slavery--he sees no way of recovering what he has

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21 Friedrich Ratzel, The History of Mankind, trans. A.J. Butler (London, 1896), I, 398.

22 Herman Moll, Atlas Geographicus or A Complete System of Geography, Ancient and Modern (London, 1712), p. 798.

lost, and becomes desperate. He will not put up with such wrongs, but will be revenged on mankind and die like a hero. He grasps his kris-handle, and the next moment draws out the weapon and stabs a man to the heart. He runs on, with the bloody kris in his hand, stabbing at everyone he meets. "Amok! Amok!" then resounds through the streets. Spears, krisses, knives and guns are brought out against him. He rushes madly forward, kills all he can--men, women, and children-- and dies overwhelmed by numbers amid all the excitement of a battle. 23

We have mentioned how, according to tradition, the first berserks in Scandinavia were warriors who accompanied Odin, and how the kings and earls in Norway utilized their preternatural strength for military purposes. Up to the middle of the ninth century, apparently, it was also possible for a berserk to achieve wealth, respect, and a degree of social position.[24] Also, the distinction between shape-changers and berserks appears to have been less fine than it subsequently became. Of Wolf, the grandfather of Egil, and his relationship with Berdla-Kari, the berserk, it is stated:

Wolf was a man so big and strong that there were none to match him. And when he was in his youthful age he lay out a-viking and harried. With him was in fellowship that man that was called Berdla-Kari, a worshipful man and the greatest man of prowess for doing and daring. He was a berserk. He and Wolf had but one purse, and there was betwixt them the lovingest friendship. 25

Kari, the account continues, was exceedingly wealthy, and Wolf

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23 The Malay Archipelago (London, 1906), pp. 134-35.

24 Eddison dates the birth of Wolf's children between 845 and 850 A.D. See Egils saga, p. 226 (Chronological table).

25 Egils saga, ch. 1.

eventually married one of his daughters. Wolf is described as being very wise, but with a tendency to become sulky every day at the approach of evening. He was said to be "evening-sleepy," and was reported to be exceedingly shape-strong. He was on this account called Kveldulf, or 'Evening-Wolf'.

Kveldulf and Berdla-Kari's daughter had two sons, Thorolf and Grim. Because of his premature baldness, the latter (who became the father of Egil) was called Skallagrim. Believing a scandalous report about Thorolf, King Harald of Norway had his men seize a trading ship belonging to Thorolf, and the king later killed Thorolf in hand-to-hand combat. A year or so after these events, Kveldulf and Skallagrim, along with some forty of their followers, grasp an opportunity to attack the trading ship which the king had confiscated from Thorolf. During this attack, we are told, Kveldulf and many of his company ran berserk. Although the saga writer never specifically calls Skallagrim a berserk, it is interesting to note that in the episode of the capture of the ship, after mentioning that Kveldulf and many of his company ran berserk, he states,". . . in like same manner wrought Skallagrim."[26] After transferring the booty to their own ships, Kveldulf and Skallagrim, each in command of his own ship, set sail for Iceland. Kveldulf, however, died aboard his ship before the end of the journey. He was an old man by this time, and we are given the following explanation to account for his fatal

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[26] Egils saga, ch. 27.

illness. It will be noted that in this account "those men that were shape-strong" and those "on whom was the berserk-gang" are mentioned together without any distinction.

> So it is said of those men that were shape-strong or of them on whom was the berserk-gang, that for so long as that held, they were so strong that there was no holding against them, but forthwith when that was passed over, then were they unmightier than of wont. And it was so with Kveldulf that, as soon as the berserk rage was gone from him, then knew he his weariness after those onslaughts he had made, and then was he altogether without might, so that he laid him down on his bed. [27]

Skallagrim appears to have inherited from his father the preternatural "evening-strength" for which Kveldulf had been renowned. He was a great iron-smith who, after settling in Iceland, built a smithy beside the sea.

> . . . But when he found there no stone that was so hard and so smooth as might seem good to beat iron on (because there is there no sea-worn stone: it is there small sand all beside the sea), that was of an evening, when other men went to their sleep, that Skallagrim went down to the sea and dragged down an eight-oar ship that he had, and rowed out to Midfirthisles: then let drop his anchor-stone at the stem of the ship. And now stepped he overboard, and dived, and had up with him a stone, and brought it up into the ship. And now fared he himself up into the ship, and rowed to land, and bare the stone to his smithy and laid it down before the smithy door, and thenceforward beat his iron on it. That stone lieth there yet, and much burnt slag nigh; and that is seen of the stone, that it is hammered down, and that is surf-worn rock, and nought like to that other rock which is there, and now will not four men lift a greater. [28]

Although Skallagrim apparently did not consider disgraceful the <u>berserkgang</u> coming over his father in Norway, some thirteen or fourteen years later he became furious when it was imputed to himself. When his son Egil was twelve years old,

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[27] <u>Egils saga</u>, ch. 27.

[28] <u>Egils saga</u>, ch. 30.

Skallagrim used often to play ball in the winter with Egil and the latter's friend Thord, who was twenty. Egil at twelve is said to have been big as a man, while Thord is described as "strong of sinew." During the day, Skallagrim "waxed weary" before the boys. But in the evening, after sunset, Skallagrim's strength returned. "Skallagrim became then so strong that he grabbed Thord up and drave him down so hard that he was all to-broken, and straightway gat his bane." He then attacked his son, but Thorgerd, a bondmaid of his, asked him scornfully, "Run'st thou now berserk, Skallagrim, at thine own son?" Skallagrim let Egil go, but started after Thorgerd, a big, strong woman who for a time managed to outrun him, but when he had chased her to the cliff's edge, she leaped into the sea. Skallagrim then "cast after her with a great stone, and set it betwixt her shoulders, and neither it nor she came up again."[29]

The significance of this episode, in my opinion, lies in the indication it affords us of the change of attitude that took place between only two generations towards the berserks. Whereas Kveldulf's partner in harrying, Berdla-Kari the berserk, was termed "a worshipful man," the contempt with which Thorgerd regards berserks is manifest in her remark to Skallagrim. He, on the other hand, might well take umbrage at the presumption of his bondswoman calling him to account for attacking his son, but the intensity of his fury can be accounted for, it would appear, only by the fact that he regarded as an insult her insinuation

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[29] Egils saga, ch. 40.

that he was behaving like a berserk.

Berserks continue to figure in the family sagas, but after the time of the settling of Iceland they fall lower and lower in public esteem, in both Norway and Iceland, until they are considered social lepers and public nuisances.

As Knut Liestøl has noted, in the family sagas the berserk generally bears an unusual name or is called by a descriptive epithet. He cites as examples: Gauss; Moldi (from mold, 'earth', as in the expression svart sem mold, 'black as earth'); Ljotr hinn Bleiki, Svartr Jarnhauss, and Bjorn hinn Blakki. To Liestøl's examples could be added the names of Bjorn with the Iron Skull who appears in Víga-Glúms saga; Thorir Paunch, Ogmund the Evil, and Snaekol of Grettis saga; and Bjorn Pale-face of Gísla saga. Liestol also notes the parallel between the names of the berserks of the family sagas and the names of low-born men in the heroic sagas who come to demand the hand of a high-born maiden.[30]

The berserks, however, appear to have gone around demanding men's wives as well as their sisters and daughter. Pale-faced Bjorn of Gísla saga demands that Ari either give him his wife Ingibjorg or fight him in a holmgang. Ari loses his life in the fight, but his brother Gisli afterwards challenges Bjorn and kills him.[31] In Víga-Glúms saga we read that

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[30] Knut Liestøl, The Origin of The Icelandic Family Sagas (Oslo, 1930), p. 164.

[31] Gísla saga, ch. 1.

the berserk Asgaut challenges Thorstein to a holmgang because Thorstein had refused him his sister.[32]

In the family sagas berserks also appear as robbers. In Grettis saga, Grettir kills the two brothers, Thorir Paunch and Ogmund the Evil, who attempt to rob the island home of Thorfinn while the latter is attending a Yule feast on the mainland.[33] He also kills Snaekol, a berserk who has come to demand the daughter of Grettir's elderly friend Einar:

> Now the bearserk . . . began to roar aloud, and bit the rim of his shield, and thrust it up into the roof of his mouth, and gaped over the corner of the shield, and went on very madly. Grettir took a sweep along over the field, and when he came alongside of the bearserk's horse, sent up his foot under the tail of the shield so hard, that the shield went up into the mouth of him, and his throat was riven asunder, and his jaws fell down on his breast. 34

We will recall Snorri Sturluson reporting that Odin's berserks bit their shields. The above passage, however, incorporates the additional detail that Snaekol roared aloud, bit the rim of his shield, gaped over it, and "went on very madly." This sounds very like the behaviour Tacitus recorded in Germania of the wild Germanic warriors who raised their

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32 Víga-Glúms saga, ch. 4. The text is that of Sir Edmund Head's English translation, Viga-Glum's Saga: The Story of Viga-Glum (London and Edinburgh, 1866). Subsequent references will be to this edition.

33 Grettis saga Asmundsson, ch. 19. The text is that of the English translation by William Morris and Eirikr Magnusson, The Story of Grettir The Strong, 3rd edn. (London, 1900). Subsequent references will be to this edition.

34 Grettis saga, ch. 40.

shields to their mouths so that their howls would reverberate from them: " . . . adfectatur praecipue asperitas soni et fractum murmur, objectis ad os scutis, quo plenior et gravior vox repercussu intumescat."[35]

In the family sagas the use of treachery on the part of one man to gain an advantage over another meets with severe moral condemnation. But, as Sir Edmund Head remarked, the berserks "were probably such a nuisance to society that anything was thought fair against them," even "the most unscrupulous treachery."[36]

Stir, an Icelandic farmer, accepted from his brother Vermund a gift of two troublesome Swedish berserks. They had originally been a gift to Vermund from Earl Hakon of Norway, but Vermund found it too burdensome to keep them. Halli, one of the berserks, who were brothers, began importuning Stir for his daughter Asdis. Stir conferred with his friend, Snorri the priest,, and on Snorri's advice promised Halli he would give him his daughter as soon as Halli and his brother Leikner had cut a road through the lava bed to the boundary of the property, and erected there a boundary wall with blocks of lava. Meanwhile, also in accordance with Snorri's advice, Stir had a bath-house constructed outside his

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[35] Tacitus, Germania, ch. 3. The text is that of the Loeb Classical Library edn. with English translationby M. Hutton (London, 1946). Subsequent references will be to this edition.

[36] Víga-Glúms saga, pp. 13-14 (Preface by Sir Edmund Head).

home. After the two berserks had completed their herculanean task, Stir invited them to avail themselves of the comfort of the bath-house, whereupon he closed them in and roasted them to death. Afterwards, he had their bodies carried out onto the lava field and dropped into a deep cleft in the lava.[37] Since we know that an Icelander would accord the dignity of burial to the corpse of even his most hated enemy, we can apprehend from this manner of disposing of the berserks' bodies that Stir and Snorri considered them in the category of animals.

Not only do this act of cruel treachery and the manner of disposal of the dead bodies entail no moral criticism of Snorri and Stir; both are regarded as highly honourable men. Snorri later marries Stir's daughter, and we are told that among Snorri's progeny are some of the most famous and illustrious men and women of Iceland.

One can only conjecture on the role that Christianity may have played in the change of attitude toward the berserks. Although it is believed that the first attempt to convert the Icelanders was made by Thorvaldr between the years 981 and 985,[38] as G. Turville-Petre remarks, "The Icelanders

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[37] Eyrbyggja saga, chaps. 25-28.

[38] G. Turville-Petre,, Origins of Icelandic Literature (Oxford, 1953), p. 51.

must have known something about Christianity since the beginning of their history."[39] He bases this statement on the fact that a number of the settlers had lived among Christians in the British Isles before they came to Iceland. There can be little doubt that the British Christians held an extremely low opinion of the brutish berserks. While this may have exerted an influence on the public attitude toward berserks which was to prevail in Iceland, it is even more probable that the particular conditions of life in Iceland were responsible for the obloquy encountered there by berserks in even the earliest years of settlement. In the absence of a military establishment such as those maintained by the Norwegian earls and kings, with no constructive end for their special talents, berserks in Iceland soon became regarded as public nuisances.

If, because of their legendary association with Odin, berserks had ever been accorded respect or awe among the Norse peoples, there is certainly no evidence of such an attitude on the part of the Icelanders, even before their conversion to Christianity. The superstitious belief in "shape-changing," on the other hand, did not disappear until after the conversion. Of Thrand the strider, we read in Eyrbyggja saga that he was:

> . . . the biggest and strongest of men, and the swiftest of foot. He had been before with Snorri the priest, and was said to be not of one shape while he was heathen; but the devilhood fell off from most men when they were christened. [40]

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[39] Origins of Icelandic Literature, p. 48.

[40] Ch. 41.

Chapter III

GUARDIAN SPIRITS

Colouring the saga literature equally as influentially as the old belief in the ability of certain individuals to change their shape, was the belief in the existence of guardian spirits. Like that belief, this one, too, underwent changes with the passage of time and the arrival of Christianity. But where the passage of time brought about a sharper distinction between the shape-changers and the berserks, in the case of guardian spirits it resulted in the blurring of outlines and a partial merging of the individuality of one type of spirit with that of another.

Three types of guardian spirits appear in the sagas: landvâettir, or land-spirits; hamingjur, or family spirits; and fylgjur, or following spirits of individuals. The first two types would appear to have been originally regarded as disir, or lesser divinities, while a fylgja (singular) was a part of a man's soul.

Du Chaillu has noted that although the landvâettir were sometimes associated with individuals whom they followed, their association was predominantly with the land rather than with the people. They were, he states:

> . . . subordinate to the guardian gods of each country, and excited dreams in men, and on behalf of the guardian god watched over those places at which they dwelt; they especially liked to dwell on mountains, and sometimes the dead were assigned places with them. [41]

Although belief in the existence of landvættir seems to have been universal among the Scandinavians, the attitudes of individuals toward them appear to have ranged from amused tolerance to scorn.

Eddison calls attention to a passage in Landnamabók:

> where it is said that it was the beginning of the heathen law that men should remove (or cover up?) the dragon-heads on their ships when they came in sight of land, "and not sail to land with gaping heads or yawning snouts, so that the land-spirits should be frightened with it." [42]

The power which these spirits were believed capable of wielding is exemplified in the story of King Harald Gormson of Norway being driven away from the coasts of Iceland by land-spirits which attack him in the form of drakes, worms, paddocks, great fowls and a bull.[43] In Egils saga, however, although Egil acknowledges the power of the land-spirits, he stands in no awe of the spirits themselves. After King Eric,

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[41] Paul B. du Chaillu, The Viking Age (London and New York, 1889), I, 418.

[42] Egils saga, p. 250 (Notes).

[43] Olafs saga Tryggvasonar, ch. 37. The text is that of the English translation by J. Sephton, The Saga of King Olaf Tryggwason who reigned over Norway A.D. 995 to A.D. 1000 (London, 1895). (Northern Library, Vol. I.) Subsequent references will be to this edition. See also Egils saga, p. 250 (Notes).

at the instigation of his evil wife Gunnhild, has Egil declared an outlaw throughout Norway, Egil carves runes on a hazel pole, sets a horse's skull on the pole, and places the pole in a cleft of rock on the shore, with the skull turned toward the land. Then he recites this formula:

> Here set I up a Scorn-Pole, and turn I this Scorn unto the hand of King Eric and of Queen Gunnhild. . . . Turn I this Scorn unto those land-spirits which do these lands inhabit, so that they may all fare on wildered ways, and not one of them reach nor rest in her own home, until they shall have driven King Eric and Gunnhild forth from the land. [44]

Certainly, had Egil been possessed of any awe, or even respect, for the landvâettir, he would have addressed an appeal to them, rather than a command and a threat. Eddison suggests that the theory underlying Egil's procedure "was no doubt that the ugly and ghastly spectacle of the horse's skull would frighten the land-spirits into obeying the injunctions contained in the runes."[45] In view of the previously mentioned law which provided for covering up the dragon prows of ships when approaching land, this theory would appear to be correct.

It must be noted, however, that Egil has in mind land-spirits of a nature quite different from those who drove away King Harald Gormson. Monsters such as they would hardly be terrified by the spectacle of a horse's skull. Egil's land-spirits seem rather to have the nature and temperament of

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[44] Egils saga, ch. 57.

[45] Egils saga, pp. 249-50 (Notes).

timid women. They will be subject to bewilderment, it is implied, if they disobey his command, and, in referring to them, Egil uses the feminine possessive pronoun.

Unlike the hamingjur and fylgjur, which, in a modified form, were able to survive the coming of Christianity, the landvættir were thought to disappear from Iceland upon the advent of the new religion. Their departure is depicted in a curious short tale, "Thidrandi Whom The Goddesses Slew," which seems originally to have been an episode inserted into Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar. Thorhall the seer, while on a visit to Hall of the Side, awakens one morning bursting with laughter. When queried by Hall, Thorhall replies that he was laughing because a hill was opening and all the creatures living in it were packing their bags and making ready to move.[46] Although these creatures are not identified by the saga writer, they would appear to be landvaettir moving away rather than remaining only to be ousted by the new faith.

The hamingjur, or guardian spirits of families, it will be recalled, were also once regarded as lesser divinities. These spirits always appeared in the form of women, sometimes as valkyries, and seem originally to have resembled friendly norns who had the ability to warn their protegés of coming events, to encourage them and inspire them to bravery, but were without the power to avert what had been foreordained

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[46] "Þiðranda þáttr ok Þorhalls," The text is that of the English translation by Gwyn Jones, "Thidrandi Whom The Goddesses Slew" in Eirik The Red and Other Sagas (London, 1961), pp. 158-62.

by Fate. A hamingja sometimes guarded but one individual of a family, and, upon his death, passed from him to one of his kinsmen, as we may perceive from Víga-Glúms saga. In Iceland, Glum dreams that he invites to his home a huge helmeted woman resembling a valkyrie, whom he sees stalking up the valley leading to his home from the sea, her shoulders brushing the sides of the mountains. Upon awaking, he interprets his dream to signify the death of his maternal grandfather, Vigfuss, in Norway, for he recognizes the woman as Vigfuss' hamingja who has now come to take up her abode with him. Soon afterward, with the arrival of ships from Norway, comes news of Vigfuss' death.[47]

The concept of hamingjur was influenced by Christianity in two ways: first, as MacCulloch has shown, by the Christian concept of good and evil angels striving for a man's soul;[48] and second, by the Christian concept of guardian angels.

In Gísla saga, Gisli is visited in his dreams by two dream-women, or hamingjur. In recounting his dreams Gisli describes one of the women as an evil spirit who foretells evil; the other as a milder spirit who counsels him to give up the old faith, to abandon the practices of magic and witchcraft, and to be kind to the poor and weak.[49]

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[47] Víga-Glúms saga, ch. 9.

[48] Eddic Mythology, p. 237.

[49] Ch. 22.

The influence on the hamingjur belief of the Christian concept of good and evil angels struggling for men's souls is even more pronounced in the tale of Thidrandi, mentioned above in connection with the departure from Iceland of the landvaettir. Shortly before Hall of the Side and his family are converted to Christianity, Thidrandi, the son of Hall, hears one night a knock on the door. Seeing no one, but hearing the sound of horses' hooves approaching, he walks out into the garth. Nine women in dark raiment ride in from the north on black horses and attack him with drawn swords. From the south there ride nine women in white on white horses to rescue him, but just before they arrive, one of the women in black wounds Thidrandi with her sword. Before dying from his wound he tells his father and Thorhall the seer what had happened. Thorhall is of the opinion that the women in black were the fylgjur (more properly hamingjur) of Hall and his kinsfolk. He predicts a change of faith among the Icelanders, and says:

> And I believe these spirits of you who have followed the old faith must have known beforehand of your changing, and how they would be rejected of you and yours. They could not bear to exact no toll of you before parting, and will have seized on Thidrandi as their due; but the better spirits must have wished to help him, but did not arrive in time to do so. Even so, those of your family who are to adopt the unknown faith they foretell and follow will be helped by them. 50

Njáls saga provides an instance of the transformation of hamingjur into Christian guardian angels. The same Hall of

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50 Eirik The Red and Other Sagas, p. 161.

the Side pays a visit to Thangbrand, the Christian missionary sent out to Iceland by King Olaf Tryggvason of Norway. Hall arrives while Thangbrand is keeping a high feast, and asks him in whose memory he is keeping the day. Upon learning that the feast is in honour of Michael the Archangel, Hall requests Thangbrand to explain to him the powers and attributes of Michael. Thangbrand replies, "He will weigh all the good that thou doest, and he is so merciful, that whenever anyone pleases him, he makes his good deeds weigh more." These words impress Hall of the Side to the point that he promises to become a Christian on condition that Thangbrand give his word that Michael will then become Hall's guardian angel.[51]

The ease with which Hall transferred his faith in hamingjur to that in guardian angels becomes readily understandable if we remember that a synonym for hamingjur was fylgjukonar, or 'following-women,' while the word for guardian angel was fylgjuengel.

To clarify the distinction between hamingjur and fylgjur, and to account for the sometimes indiscriminate use of these two words, we must, at this point, consider the Icelandic superstitions which surrounded the chorion or foetal membrane and gave rise to the belief that a caul brought good fortune to the child born with one.

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[51] Ch. 56.

The word hamingja is derived, as MacCulloch shows, from hamr, whose primary meaning is 'skin' or 'covering,' in which sense it forms the root of hamrammr, 'shape'changer,' discussed in chapter 2. Hamr, however, also has the secondary meaning of 'caul,' and is used to designate the foetal membrane when it encloses a child at birth, instead of forming part of the after-birth.[52] As the hamr was believed to bring good luck to the child born with one, the word hamingja, because of its association with a caul, came to be used in an abstract sense of 'happiness' or 'good luck,' and the pre-Christian hamingjur were all beneficent spirits.

If the relationship between hamingjur and the chorion is a close one, that between fylgjur and the chorion is closer still, both etymologically and in terms of superstitious belief. Like the word hamingja, fylgja is also rich in connotations. In the sagas it is used in the sense of "following' or 'guardian' spirit, but, as Sir James G. Frazer points out, it was also used to designate the chorion, the foetal membrane which normally 'follows' the birth of a child.[53] It was the ancient belief in Iceland, Frazer explains, that the chorion was the seat of that part of a child's soul which would become its guardian spirit.[54] Hence we can readily

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[52] Eddic Mythology, p. 235.

[53] The Magic Art and The Evolution of Kings, I, 200, (volume one, part one of The Golden Bough, 3rd edition [London, 1911].).

[54] Ibid.

understand the reason for associating a caul with good luck. If a child was born with a caul, his guardian spirit came into the world with him, instead of following behind.

The chorion, according to Frazer:

> . . . might not be thrown away under the open sky, lest demons should get hold of it and work the child harm thereby, or lest wild beasts should eat it up. It might not be burned, for if it were burned the child would have no fylgia, which would be as bad as to have no shadow. Formerly it was customary to bury the chorion under the threshold, where the mother stepped over it daily when she rose from bed. If the chorion was thus treated, the man had in life a guardian spirit in the shape of a bear, an eagle, a wolf, an ox, or a boar . . . while those of beautiful women appeared as swans.[55]

The animal fylgja generally had an aspect or trait which corresponded to the character of its owner. Bulls and bears attended chieftains; foxes people of crafty nature, as MacCulloch has indicated.[56] Oxen and boars were associated with great physical strength, while eagles were identified with nobility and heroic bravery, and wolves with one's enemies.

It is related in Njáls saga that when Hauskuld saw in a dream a great bear followed by two cubs go out of his house and make for the house of his brother Hrut, he knew from the matchless size and strength of the bear that he must have seen the fylgja of the peerless Gunnar of Lithend.[57]

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[55] Frazer, I, 200.

[56] Eddic Mythology, p. 234.

[57] Ch. 23.

In Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu, Thorstein sees in a dream the fylgja of his unborn daughter and the fylgjur of three of her future suitors. That of the daughter is in the form of a beautiful swan; those of Gunnlaug and Hrafn, the poets who compete for her love, are eagles which battle and kill each other, while that of Thorkell, to whom she is married after the deaths of Gunnlaug and Hrafn, appears in the form of a falcon.[58]

On numerous occasions characters in the sagas dream of wolves, the fylgjur of their enemies, and are thereby warned of impending ambushes and attacks. Helgi Droplaugarson dreams that he and Thorkel, while riding towards Eyvindardale, are charged by eighteen or twenty wolves, one much larger than the rest. The wolves attack, and one of them bites Helgi on the chin, upon which he awakens. Thorkel interprets the wolves to be men lying in wait for them. This proves to be the case, and, in the ensuing battle, when Helgi raises his shield to ward off a sword blow the sword glances off his shield, cutting off his lower lip.[59]

Gunnar of Lithend, while travelling with his brothers Hjort and Kolskegg, dreams that they encounter a pack of wolves

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[58] Ch. 2. The text is that of the English translation by M.H. Scargill, "A Poet's Love, The Saga of Gunnlaug and Hrafn" in Three Icelandic Sagas (Princeton, 1950), pp. 8-46. Subsequent references will be to this edition.

[59] Droplaugarsona saga, ch. 9. The text is that of the English translation by Margaret Schlauch, "The Saga of Droplaug's Sons" in Three Icelandic Sagas (Princeton, 1950), pp. 102-35. Subsequent references will be to this edition.

which they keep at bay with their swords. In the dream, Gunnar and Kolskegg slay many of the wolves, but one of them pulls down Hjort, tears open his breast, and begins to eat his heart. On the strength of the dream Gunnar advises Hjort to return home, but Hjort refuses. Soon afterward they are set upon by a group of Gunnar's enemies. Although Gunnar succeeds in cutting off the head of one, another stabs Hjort in the breast, killing him instantly.[60]

While seeing the fylgja of an enemy forebodes an ambush or attack, seeing one's own fylgja, especially if it is bloody, is an omen of impending death, which is met with calm fatalism on the part of the visionary or dreamer. When Thord, the foster-father of Njál's children, sees a goat wallowing in gore, the goat being invisible to Njál, the latter tells him that he must be fey, or doomed to die, since he has seen his own fylgja. Although Njál warns Thord to be wary, Thord replies that being wary will stand him in no stead if his death is doomed for him. A few days later he is slain by Skiolld and Sigmund.[61]

Although in the countries of Europe the pagan land-spirits were supplanted by the Christian concept of patron saints who lent their protection to the countries of their origin, e.g., St. Olaf in Norway, no patron saint was adopted by the Icelanders to replace the landvaettir of their country.

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60 Njáls saga, ch. 61.

61 Njáls saga, chaps. 41-42.

Perhaps this was due to the fact that the role of the landvaettir had, in the minds of the people, become of less and less importance until, as we have noted, at the end of the tenth century they had become merely an object of amusement and laughter.

Hamingjur, on the other hand, along with fylgjur, represented far more deeply rooted concepts, and were so vital a part of Icelandic tradition and contemporary thought that they survived the change of faith. Hamingjur, as we seen, merged easily and naturally into Christian guardian angels. Fylgjur, however, retained their own identity, existing along with Christianity, but in the course of time appeared no longer as animals, but as doubles of their owners. Writing in 1933, MacCulloch stated:

> Such beings as the Fylgja are still known in Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. . . . They are generally good, protective spirits, and care is taken, e.g., when a man leaves the house, to allow his protector to leave with him, lest danger meet him, especially from his evil spirits. Sometimes they are warning spirits, telling by knocking or rattling the latch that their owners are coming, or that death or misfortune is at hand. Such a spirit will appear as a double of its owner, even to the person himself, as his double was seen by the hero of Stevenson's Ticonderoga, giving thus a warning of his death. [62]

The Icelandic fylgja, then, which has survived to our own times, is a close relative of the 'double' of the Highland Scots and of the German Doppelgänger. Since this superstitious belief may account for otherwise inexplicable coincidences, we may conclude that fylgjur will be around for a long time to come, especially in the more remote rural districts of Iceland.

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[62] Eddic Mythology, p. 237.

Chapter IV

RUNES

Long before the beginning of the Christian era the primitive association between the art of writing and magic or religion had been obliterated in the cultures of southern Europe, yet in Scandinavia and Iceland it persisted on into the eleventh century. The cultures of Greece and Rome were, of course, of much greater antiquity than the Scandinavian, but there is, perhaps, another factor which may account for this phenomenon of survival in the north. The Greek and Roman religions, although they did not actually discourage learning, nevertheless existed quite apart from it, and became decadent. The anthropomorphic gods of Greece were fit characters for Greek comedy--the bedroom antics of Zeus in Amphitrion, for example--but, apart from Apollo, they were not associated with learning. In its decadence the Roman religion was based on fear, the reaction to which was Senecan stoicism, where there was no place for gods.[63] The religion of Odin, on the other hand, was a religion of knowledge. According to Scandinavian legend,

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[63] Robert Payne, Hubris (New York, 1960), pp. 55-56.

Odin came from the east, the traditional source of knowledge, and taught the Scandinavians the arts of writing runes, medicine and astronomy.

Modern researchers tend to substantiate the Scandinavian legend concerning the origin of runic writing. Obviously it was not brought to Scandinavia by the original settlers who arrived there at the dawn of the Neolithic Age, with a bone and horn culture, but who were ignorant of agriculture and pottery.[64] It is almost certain, says du Chaillu, that the knowledge of runes did not come to the north before the working of iron, for no runes have been found on objects belonging to the bronze age.[65] That it did not come there from Germany we find evidenced in Tacitus: "Litterarum secreta viri pariter ac feminae ignorant."[66] Tacitus' comment on the illiteracy of the Germans is confirmed by further evidence:

> Runic monuments do not occur south of the river Eider, either on detached stones or engraved on rocks. The few jewels found scattered here and there, either in France or Germany, are thoroughly Northern, and show that in these places the people of the North made warfare, as corroborated by the testimony of the Eddas and Sagas, as well as of Frankish and old English and other records.[67]

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[64] Griffith Taylor, Environment, Race and Migration, 3rd edn. (Toronto, 1949), p. 165.

[65] The Viking Age, I, 155.

[66] Germania, ch. 19.

[67] du Chaillu, I, 159.

Archaeologists and students of linguistics are agreed, says Professor Otto von Friesen of the University of Upsala, that all available evidence leads to the same conclusion: that runic writing originated among the Gothic settlements on the Black Sea, around 300 A.D., in an environment strongly influenced by the Roman civilization of the lower Danube, comprising both Greek and Latin cultural elements. The forms of the runic letters, he continues, are of both Greek and Latin provenance, but, more significantly, derive from the vulgar form of classical writing, the cursive. This, he concludes, is perfectly natural, since the barbarians perforce came into contact only with the lower classes of the Roman Empire.[68] The most widespread use of runic characters occurred, according to Professor von Friesen, between the years 400 and 1100, but, he notes, this form of writing was still in use, altered to a certain extent, of course, but in an uninterrupted tradition up to the end of the nineteenth century in an isolated village of the Swedish countryside.[69]

Discounting the reliability of the legend crediting Odin with having taught the use of runes to the Scandinavians, Frederick Bodmer believes the arrival of runes in Scandinavia

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68 Otto von Friesen, "Rune", Enciclopedia Italiana (Rome, 1936), XXX, 241-42.

69 von Friesen, pp. 241-42.

to have been the result of something much more mundane--their being carried across Europe by migratory Gothic tribes and probably also by Celts, who had learned them through normal trading contacts.[70]

But, as Bodmer notes, "The secular impetus which trading gave to the spread of writing among the Mediterranean civilizations of classical antiquity extended to northern Europe without having a permanent influence on it."[71] No historical or literary work seems to have been preserved in runes. They were used mainly for short inscriptions. Because of their form they were easy to carve with a knife, and were traced or scored on staves, rods, weapons, the stem and rudder of ships, drinking-horns, fish and whale bones, and apparently on teeth and jewels as well, usually to indicate the name of the proprietor or donor of the object.[72] Also, as du Chaillu notes, runes were used as a form of communication by the deaf, and as charms in cases of illness.[73]

It is clearly indicated throughout the family sagas that runes were not used by the people for the ordinary uses of

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[70] The Loom of Language, (London, 1944), p. 75.

[71] The Loom of Language, p. 75.

[72] von Friesen, p. 241.

[73] The Viking Age, I, 164-65.

writing, but as du Chaillu has shown, that they:

> . . . were mystic, being employed for conjurations and the like, and therefore regarded with a certain awe and superstition; just as today writing is looked upon by certain savage tribes, who cannot be made to understand how speech can be transmitted and kept on paper for an indefinite period. 74

There are many instances in the sagas of runes being used to cast spells, and in the "Runatal," Odin's Rune Song contained in The Poetic Edda, Odin is supposed to be instructing Loddfafnir in the magic use of runes. Odin had acquired this knowledge during the nine nights he hung from a windy tree wounded by a spear. Deprived of food or drink, Odin peered downward, caught the runes and learned them by weeping. For the insight it provides into the magic uses to which it was believed runes could be put, the "Runatal" merits quotation in full at this point.

> The songs I know that king's wives know not
> Nor men that are sons of men;
> The first is called help, and help it can bring thee
> In sorrow and pain and sickness.
>
> A second I know that men shall need
> Who leechcraft long to use;
> . . .
> . . .
>
> A third I know, if great is my need
> Of fetters to hold my foe;
> Blunt do I make mine enemy's blade,
> Nor bites his sword or staff.

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74 The Viking Age, I, 160.

A fourth I know, if men shall fasten
Bonds on my bended legs;
So great is the charm that forth I may go,
The fetters spring from my feet,
Broken the bonds from my hands.

A fifth I know, if I see from afar
An arrow fly 'gainst the folk;
It flies not so swift that I stop it not,
If ever my eyes behold it.

A sixth I know, if harm one seeks
With a sapling's root to send me;
The hero himself who wreaks his hate
Shall taste the ill ere I.

A seventh I know, if I see in flames
The hall o'er my comrades' heads;
It burns not so wide that I will not quench it,
I know that song to sing.

An eighth I know, that is to all
Of greatest good to learn;
When hatred grows among heroes' sons,
I soon can set it right.

A ninth I know, if need there comes
To shelter my ship on the flood;
The wind I calm upon the waves
And the sea I put to sleep.

A tenth I know, what time I see
House-riders flying on high;
So can I work that wildly they go,
Showing their true shapes,
Hence to their own homes.

An eleventh I know, if needs I must lead
To the fight my long-loved friends;
I sing in the shields, and in strength they go
Whole to the field of fight,
Whole from the field of fight,
And whole they come thence home.

A twelfth I know, if high on a tree
I see a hanged man swing;
So do I write and color the runes

That forth he fares,
And to me talks.

A thirteenth I know, if a thane full young
With water I sprinkle well;
He shall not fall, though he fares mid the host,
Nor sink beneath the swords.

A fourteenth I know, if fain I would name
To men the mighty gods;
All know I well of the gods and elves, --
Few be the fools know this.

A fifteenth I know, that before the doors
Of Delling sang Thjothrorir the dwarf;
Might he sang for the gods, and glory for elves,
And wisdom for Hroptatyr wise.

A sixteenth I know, if I seek delight
To win from a maiden wise;
The mind I turn of the white-armed maid,
And thus change all the thoughts.

A seventeenth I know, so that seldom shall go
A maiden young from me.
. . .
. . .

Long these songs thou shalt, Loddfafnir,
Seek in vain to sing;
Yet good it were if thou mightest get them,
Well if thou wouldst them learn,
Help if thou hadst them.

An eighteenth I know, that ne'er will I tell
To maiden or wife of man, --
The best is what none but one's own self know,
So comes the end of the songs, --
Save only to her in whose arms I lie,
Or who else my sister is.[75]

Although the ability to score runes was considered a

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75 Saemundar edda, stanzas 147-65. The text is the English translation by Henry Adams Bellowes, The Poetic Edda, 2 vols. in one (New York and London, 1923). Subsequent references will be to this edition.

desirable accomplishment, it was an activity in which great caution had to be observed, for a mistake could lead to disastrous results. Such an error is recorded in Egils saga. Upon coming to visit his friend Thorfinn, Egil finds the latter's daughter Helga gravely ill. He asks whether her sickness has been looked into. Thorfinn replies that runes have been scored for her, but that she became much worse afterward. Egil asks to see the runes, which had been carved on a whalebone and placed in Helga's bed. He reads them, shaves them off, scrapes them into the fire, burns the whalebone, and lets the wind carry off the clothes the women had been wearing. Then he scores new runes which he lays under Helga's bolster. Soon afterward she awakens and begins to regain strength. We learn that the man who scored the first runes had asked Helga to marry him but was refused by her. He thought he had scored love runes, but as he was not very adept, his runes brought on her illness.[76]

There existed two runic alphabets, the earlier of which contained twenty-four letters, the latter but sixteen. As du Chaillu has shown:

> Were it not for the evidence of the finds having runic inscriptions of the fuller runic alphabet, it would have seemed more probable that the less developed one was the earlier; but in the face of the most indisputable proofs of the antiquity of the fuller alphabet, such assertions cannot be made. The only conclusion to which this leads us therefore is, that the runic alphabet must in the course of time have become simplified.[77]

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[76] Ch. 72.

[77] The Viking Age, I, 157.

It is the earlier runic alphabet of twenty-four characters which is our concern here.

Professor von Friesen has provided a lucid explanation of the manner in which runes were used for purposes of magic. In order to follow it, however, it is necessary that we set down the twenty-four character runic alphabet with the letters and their Latin equivalents.

F U Þ A R K G W H N I J P Ė R S T B E M L ŋ D O

In addition to serving as a phonetic sign, each rune also had a magical significance. Runic magic, like its classical counterpart, was based on numerology. Each rune had a numerical value and these numerical values were associated with the spiritual powers which the practitioner wished to invoke. Like the Greek and Semitic letters, each runic character had a name, the initial sound of which was the sound which the rune represented. But, at the same time, the name designated the magic power with which the rune was in accord by virtue of its numerical value. Thus the runes were placed in order from 1 to 24, according to their numerical value, but (probably to prevent the secret from falling into the hands of the uninitiated) one began to count from the letter ᚢ (u) which therefore had the value of one, and counted forward to ᛟ (o) which had the value of 23. The rune ᚠ (f), although it is in the

first position in the runic series (fuþark), had the value of 24.[78]

Professor von Friesen continues by giving several characteristic examples of the names given to the runes. ᚦ with the magic power of 2 was called in Gothic þauris, '(evil) demon'. 2 was a demonic number, portending sorrow and misfortune. ᚨ (a) with the numerical value of 3, the number of the divine, of well being and of happiness, was pronounced ansus, 'god'; ᚾ (n) with the value of 9 signified number, the number of omnipotent fate, was pronounced naubs, 'fate', 'necessity'; while ↑ (t) teiws, 'heavenly god', had the numerical value of 16, which was the number of deus invictus, the day of Mithra in the Mithraic calendar.

With regard to the magic significance of numbers, Knut Liestøl notes that Egil Skallagrimson made his first verses at the age of three[79] (the number of well being and happiness), while Grenville Pigott, noting the mystic properties of the number nine, notes:

> One of their Scandinavian deities, Njord, had nine daughters, another, Heimdall, nine mothers. Odin lay nine nights on the tree of the universe. The number of worlds according to them was nine. At the great feast at Upsala, held every ninth year, ninety-nine hawks or cocks were sacrificed to Odin, etc. [80]

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[78] von Friesen, pp. 241-42. The Enciclopedia Italiana article counts only to ᛞ (d) as 23, but this is obviously a textual error.

[79] The Origin of The Icelandic Family Sagas, p. 193.

[80] A Manual of Scandinavian Mythology, p. 358.

Although the scoring of runic inscriptions for legitimate purposes survived the coming of Christianity to Iceland, it would appear from evidence in Grettis saga that the use of runes for purposes of sorcery was forbidden by law early in the Christian era. In an attempt to dislodge Grettir from the island of Drangey, where he is spending the final years of his outlawry, Thorbiorn Angle buys out the shares of the other owners of Drangey. He takes his aged foster-mother with him in a boat to try to persuade Grettir to leave. We are told that the old woman had once been a sorceress, "but since the land had become Christian all heathen doings were forbidden by law, on pain of the lesser outlawry." Her visit to Grettir on this occasion seems to have been for the legitimate purpose of persuasion, but Grettir angers her beyond measure when he hurls a rock into the boat and breaks her leg. Back on shore she tells Angle to hew her a flat surface on a log. She then takes a knife and cuts runes on the log, cuts herself and marks the runes with her blood, saying charms and spells over it before she has Angle cast it out into the sea. Despite the wind and waves driving toward the shore, the log floats out to the small beach on Drangey where Grettir's serving-man picks up driftwood for their fire. Grettir forbids the servant to pick up the log with runes on it, and orders him to cast it back into the sea. As often as they cast it into the sea it floats back again and one day, during a storm said to be brought on by the former sorceress, the servant disobeys Grettir, since he can find no other firewood, and brings back the log. When

Grettir strikes at it with his axe, the axe glances off sideways, wounding him in the leg. Although the wound heals over at first, it subsequently festers and causes fever, weakening Grettir to the point that when Thorbiorn Angle and his men climb up the rope ladder which the servant had inadvertently forgotten to pull up to the top of the cliff, they are able without difficulty to kill both Grettir and his brother Illugi. Later on, because of his sorcery and for slaying a sick man, Thorbiorn Angle is banished from Iceland as long as any of Grettir's kin are living there.[81]

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[81] Chaps. 13-14.

Chapter V

FATE AND SORCERY

That all the important events of a man's life are foreordained would appear to have been a fundamental tenet of Old Norse religious belief. In chapter 36 of Snorra edda we read:

> Hrist and Mist I would have bear the horn to me,
> Skeggjöld and Skögull
> Hildr and Thrudr, Hlökk and Herfjötur,
>
> Göll and Geirahöd,
> Randgridr and Radgridr and Reginleif--
> These bear the Einherjar ale.

These are called Valkyrs: them Odin sends to every battle; they determine men's feyness and award victory. Gudr and Rota and the youngest Norn, she who is called Skuld, ride ever to take the slain and decide fights. Jörd, the mother of Thor, and Rindr, Vali's mother, are reckoned among the Asynjur.

This belief in fatalism is exemplified numerous times in the family sagas, but nowhere, perhaps, so vividly as in Laxdæla and Gísla sagas. While Thorkell and his shepherd are watching Kjartan approach an ambush laid by the men of Laugar the shepherd suggests to Thorkell that they warn Kjartan, but Thorkell bids him hold his tongue. "Do you think, fool as you are," asks Thorkell, "you will ever give life to a man to whom fate has ordained death?"[82]

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[82] Laxdæla saga, ch. 49.

When Gisli's wife Aud tells her husband that Asgerd, his brother's wife, is in love with Aud's brother Vestein, Gisli says to her, "I can see nothing to be done about it that will help; and yet I cannot blame you, for 'Fate's words will be spoken by someone,' and what is to follow will follow."[83] To avert trouble, Gisli does all in his power to keep Vestein at a distance, but when he learns that despite all his efforts in this direction Vestein is coming to visit him, he says, "That is how it must be, then."[84]

Co-existent with the belief in the immutability of fate, however, was the belief that predestined fate could be ascertained beforehand, and, in certain instances, influenced or averted through the practice of seiðr, or spells, whose origin was popularly attributed to Odin:

> Odin understood also the art in which the greatest power is lodged, and which he himself practised; namely, what is called magic. By means of this he could know beforehand the predestined fate of men, or their not yet completed lot; and also bring on the death, ill-luck, or bad health of people, and take the strength or wit from one person and give it to another. But after such witchcraft followed such weakness and anxiety, that it was not thought respectable for men to practise it; and therefore the priestesses were brought up in this art.[85]

While some scholars attribute a Germanic origin to the concept of seiðr, Peter Foote is of the opinion that the practice was borrowed by the Norwegians from their northern

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83 Gísla saga, ch. 9.

84 Gísla saga, ch. 12.

85 "Ynglinga saga," Heimskringla, p. 12.

neighbours, the Lapps.[86] Lending weight to this opinion is the Vatnsdæla saga account of a feast given by Ingjald in Norway, where the völva is a magnificently arrayed Lapland prophetess for whom a seat of honour is prepared.[87]

The family sagas recount instances of the practice of seiðr for both evil and benevolent purposes. Queen Gunnhild of Norway "let work a spell, and let that be in the spellworking, that Egil Skallagrimson should never bide in peace in Iceland until she should look upon him."[88]

After Egil murders Thorgrim:

> Now Thorgrim's wake is drunk, and Bork gives good gifts, for friendship's sake, to many men. The next thing that happens is that Bork pays Thorgrim neb to work a spell, that there should be no help for the man who had killed Thorgrim, however much men might want to give it to him, and there should be no rest for him in the country. He was given a nine-year old ox for the curse. He goes to work on it at once, and makes himself a scaffold and works this magic with all its obscenity and devilry. [89]

Snorri Sturluson's statement that it was not thought respectable for men to practise the magic art notwithstanding, there appear nevertheless to have been in Iceland at least a few male practitioners of seiðr for the purpose of wreaking evil. Its benevolent aspect, however, divination of the future, seems to have been the exclusive prerogative of women, for the Icelandic word for diviner, volva, is feminine.

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86 Gísla saga, p. 79 (Notes).

87 Ch. 10. The text is that of the English translation by Gwyn Jones, Vatnsdalers' Saga (Princeton, 1944). Subsequent references will be to this edition.

88 Egils saga, ch. 59.

89 Gísla saga, ch. 18.

The Saga of Eirik the Red contains a graphic description of a volva practising her art. The episode takes place in Greenland during a time of famine. Thorkel, a settler from Iceland, gives a winter feast for his friends and relatives to which he invites the volva Thorbjorg. A high-seat is made ready for her, provided with a cushion filled with hen's feathers. Thorbjorg arrives wearing a blue cloak set with stones down to the hem, glass beads around her neck, and on her head a black lambskin hood lined with white cat-skin. In her hand she carries a staff with a knob on it, ornamented with brass and set around with stones below the knob. Around her waist is a belt made of touchwood, from which is suspended a large skin pouch in which she keeps the charms needed for her magic. She wears hairy calf-skin shoes with long thongs, with big lumps of lateen on the thong-ends. On her hands she wears catskin gloves, "white inside and hairy." She requires special food, porridge made of goat's beestings, and for meat the hearts of all living creatures available in the vicinity. She refuses to do anything the first night but is the next day fitted out with all the necessary apparatus. Then she asks to have procured all the women who know the lore necessary for the spell, the Varðlokur. No such women were found, but a Christian guest from Iceland, Gudrid, announces that although she is not versed in magic and not a seer, she had learned from her mother in Iceland the chant known as Varðlokur. Because she

is a Christian she objects to chanting it, but is prevailed upon to do so as it might be helpful to people. The women then form a circle around the platform on which Thorbjorg is seated. Gudrid recites the chant. The volva thanks her, stating it was so pleasing to the spirits that they have made many things clear which were hidden before. She predicts an end to the famine before spring and a quick end to the epidemic of sickness which has been plaguing the colony. She foretells for Gudrid a fine match in Greenland, but states that it will not last long, for Gudrid is to return to Iceland for another marriage from which will spring an illustrious family. She then answers individual questions from other guests.[90]

Peter Foote explains that the purpose of the platform was to remove the volva from disturbing influences. While she was in trance her soul was believed to be freed from her body to go seeking information about the future. In the case of a wizard, such as Thorgrim neb, performing an evil spell, his soul was believed enabled through the magic rites to leave his body and go to 'attack' "the object of the rite, whose mind and body could be enfeebled and killed."[91]

At the close of the third chapter it was noted that about the year 1000 the scoring of runes for purposes of

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90 Eiriks saga rauða, ch. 3. The text is that of the English translation by Gwyn Jones, "The Saga of Eirik the Red," in Eirik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas (London, 1961). Subsequent references will be to this edition.

91 Gisla saga, p. 79 (Notes).

sorcery appears to have been forbidden by Icelandic law. No doubt the practice of _seiðr_ for similar purposes was also forbidden by law. But while the scoring of runes for legitimate purposes survived into the Christian period, the reluctance of the Christian Gudrid to recite the _Varðlokur_ would appear to indicate the discontinuance of the practice of _seiðr_, even for benevolent purposes, after the Christianization of Iceland.

Chapter VI

ÁLÖG

Correct performance of the seiðr ritual appears to have been an indispensable prerequisite to the exercising of a volva's prophetic powers. But prophetic gifts were not the exclusive possession of the volvas. The family sagas depict two additional groups of individuals possessed of this ability; these, however, did not require recourse to the performance of magic rites.

One of these groups comprised mainly witches and wise-women, who, according to Margaret Schlauch, made use of "a curious and potent charm known as álög, . . . a combination of a wish and a behest."[92]

> When a witch or a wise-woman is the speaker, it is sometimes difficult to discriminate between a simple prophecy of what fate has already decreed, and an active compulsion by the speaker. Does a witch who foretells evil also initiate it? The sagas are not clear on this point. At times they imply that she does both, since they explain that she was angered before she made the prophecy. If the matter lies in her power, then her speech is a type of álög. . . . 93

In the previous chapter, it will be recalled, mention was made of the episode in Egils saga Skallagrímsonar

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92 Romance in Iceland, p. 125.

93 Ibid., p. 131.

where Queen Gunnhild of Norway caused seiðr to be performed to the end that Egil should never know peace in Iceland until she should see him again. In Njáls saga this same queen is depicted pronouncing an álög on the Icelander Hrut, with whom she fell in love while he was on a visit to Norway to claim his inheritance before marrying Fiddle-Mord's daughter Unna, whom he had left in Iceland. Gunnhild's álög takes the following form:

> If I have as much power over thee as I think, I lay this spell on thee that thou mayst never have any pleasure in living with that woman on whom thy heart is set in Iceland, but with other women thou mayst get on well enough, and now it is like to go well with neither of us; - but thou hast not believed me what I have been saying. 94

Hrut laughs at Gunnhild, returns to Iceland and marries Unna. Shortly afterward, however, Unna seeks out her father at the Thing and complains to him that she is unhappy; that she and Hrut cannot live together because he is "spell-bound," and she wishes to leave him. Their marriage is subsequently dissolved.

The 'spâewife' Oddbiorg in Víga-Glúms saga provides another striking instance of the ambiguous quality of álög. Of Oddbiorg, the writer of this saga declares: "A feeling existed that it was of some consequence for the mistress of the house to receive her well, for that what she said depended more or less on how she was entertained." 95 In this

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94 Ch. 6.

95 Ch. 12.

episode, Saldis, the grandmother of Steinolf and Arngrim, appears to believe firmly in Oddbiorg's power to influence the future by her predictions. When Oddbiorg comes to Upsal, the home of Saldis, the latter asks her to predict something good for Steinolf and Arngrim, cousins, between whom there is deep affection and love. Oddbiorg replies,"Hopeful are these lads; but what their future may be it is difficult for me to discern." This does not satisfy Saldis, who remarks somewhat caustically that Oddbiorg must be displeased with the treatment she has received. Oddbiorg replies that Saldis must not let the prediction affect her hospitality, nor take the matter so to heart, but Saldis, not to be mollified, retorts that unless Oddbiorg can say something good, the less she says the better. Reluctantly, then, Oddbiorg tells Saldis that she does not think the present love between the boys will last. Saldis, irate, threatens to turn her out of doors, whereupon Oddbiorg, goaded to anger herself, retorts that because of the behaviour of Saldis she sees no need of sparing her, and blurts out that the boys will be the death of each other, "and one mischief worse than another for this district will spring from them."

Some eighteen or twenty years later, after Arngrim has been married, the cousins quarrel. Apparently persuaded by a malicious neighbour to believe that Steinolf has attempted to seduce Arngrim's wife, Arngrim murders Steinolf, setting in motion a blood feud throughout the district, thus fulfilling the final portion of Oddbiorg's prophecy.[96]

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[96] Viga-Glums saga, chaps. 12-21.

Chapter VII

FORESIGHT

Seiðr, it will be recalled, although sometimes performed with the benevolent intent of simply foretelling the future, at other times took the form of a malediction believed capable of influencing fate. In the more ambiguous álǫg, both these functions appear to have been combined. With the phenomenon of foresight, however, we encounter a more sophisticated concept of prophecy. The element of magic has disappeared, to be replaced, in part, by psychological insight. While in the sagas foresight is frequently associated with wisdom,[97] never with wizardry or magic, this gift was apparently considered to entail a supra-human element in addition to wisdom, for in Njáls saga occurs this statement about Snorri the priest: "Snorri was the wisest and shrewdest of all these men in Iceland who had not the gift of foresight."[98]

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[97] Njáls saga, ch. 20: "There was a man whose name was Njal. . . . He was so great a lawyer that his match was not to be found. Wise too he was, and foreknowing and foresighted." See also ch. 99: "Gest Oddleif's son dwelt at Hagi on Bardestrand. He was one of the wisest of men, so that he foresaw the fates and fortunes of men."

[98] Ch. 113.

The nature of foresight as depicted in the Icelandic family sagas seems to have been akin to the second sight of the Scottish Highlands, Ireland, the Isle of Man, and the Scottish islands described by a Scottish clergyman:

> This is the faculty of seeing otherwise invisible objects. It is neither voluntary nor constant, and is considered rather annoying than agreeable to the possessors of it. . . . The gift was possessed by individuals of both sexes, and its fits came on within doors and without, sitting and standing, at night and by day, and at whatever employment the votary might chance to be engaged. The visions were usually about funerals, shrouds, the appearance of friends who were at the time absent in distant countries, the arrival of strangers, falls from horses, the upsetting of vehicles, bridal ceremonies, funeral processions, corpses, swamping of boats, drowning at sea, dropping suddenly dead, and numberless other subjects. [99]

Although the fulfillment of prophecies undoubtedly subserved an artistic end in the sagas--particularly in Gísla and Njáls sagas--it cannot be dismissed purely as a literary convention, for, as Knut Liestøl points out, "In Iceland a belief in warnings, prophecies, dreams and ghosts has been prevalent in all ages."[100]

The foresight of some individuals appears to have been limited or highly specialized, e.g., that of Spa-Gils, of whom it was said that he had second sight "and was a dab at tracing thefts or anything else that he wanted to find."[101]

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[99] Rev. Alexander MacGregor, Highland Superstitions, 1922 reprint (Stirling Scotland, 1891), p. 33.

[100] The Origin of The Icelandic Family Sagas, p. 238.

[101] Eyrbyggja saga, ch. 18.

While many of the predictions of Gest Oddleif's son are founded on profound psychological insight, not all of them can be accounted for on this basis alone. Such depth of insight could conceivably account for Gest's foreseeing the falling out within three years of the Haukdalers,[102] but not for his interpretation of Gudrun's dreams,[103] nor for his foreboding that one day Bolli should have at his feet the head of Kjartan slain and by that deed bring about his own death.[104]

The predictions of Njal, however, appear all to be based on his solid knowledge of tradition and law as well as the profound psychological insight he has into the minds of his kinsmen and enemies, and, perhaps to a certain extent, on mental telepathy. It is the canny lawyer who advises Gunnar that if he slays more than once in the same stock it will lead him to his death;[105] who foresees that quarrels will turn toward his own sons when Gunnar is dead and gone;[106] and who tells his sons Grim and Helgi that although they will find a foreign voyage hard work, they will get some honour and glory out of it, but that it is likely a quarrel will arise out of it when they return.[107]

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102 Gísla saga, ch. 6.

103 Laxdæla saga, ch. 33. See also pp. 70-71 below.

104 Laxdæla saga, ch. 33.

105 Njáls saga, ch. 66.

106 Njáls saga, ch. 74.

107 Njáls saga, ch. 74.

In the exchange between Njal and Thord Freedmanson (see p. 33 above), it is because Njal is steeped in tradition that he recognizes the bloody goat of Thord's vision as the latter's fylgja, and admonishes him to be careful, as he must be fey.

Njal's foreseeing the deaths of himself and all his family at the hands of Flosi and his followers as a consequence of Skarphedinn's killing Hauskuld the priest requires no supranatural explanation. Psychological insight enabled Njal to perceive the course of action a man of Flosi's temperament would naturally follow under such circimstances.[108]

On the night of the burning, Bergthora, Njal's wife, to whom no prophetic ability had previously been attributed, tells her family when they are seated at table that each one should choose his favourite dish, as this was the last time she would set a meal before her household. To the remonstrance of her sons, she replies:

> It will be though, and I could tell you much more if I would, but this shall be a token, that Grim and Helgi will be home ere men have eaten their full to-night; and if this turns out so, then the rest that I say will happen too. 109

This premonition on the part of Bergthora, and the ensuing vision of Njal, who seems to see the gable wall pulled down and the board and meat covered with gore, would appear to be the result of mental telepathy on the part of two very

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108 Njals saga, ch. 110.

109 Njals saga, ch. 126.

sensitive people, for earlier that day their sons Grim and Helgi were told by some women that their enemies had gathered and were proceeding in the direction of Bergthorsknoll. Grim and Helgi arrive home before the board is cleared and relate in person the information that Bergthora and Njal had apparently received from them telepathically before and during supper.[110]

It must appear to many readers of Njáls saga a curious anomaly that although in every other respect the scope of Njal's foresightedness appears to be unlimited, it is not Njal, but the carline Sâevuna, who foretells the actual instrument of the destruction of Njal and his household--the stack of vetches above the house. Skarphedinn finds her one day beating it with her cudgel; he laughs at her and asks why she is so angry with the vetch-stack.

> "This stack of vetches," said the carline, "will be taken and lighted with fire when Njal my master is burnt, house and all, and Bergthora my foster-child. Take it away to the water, or burn it up as quick as you can."
> "We will not do that," says Skarphedinn, "for something else will be got to light a fire with, if that were foredoomed, though this stack were not here."
> The carline babbled the whole summer about the vetch-stack that it should be got indoors, but something always hindered it. [111]

That this prophecy is made by Sâevuna, rather than Njal, is, I believe, the consequence of a literary convention. By virtue of Skarphedinn's refusal to take Sâevuna's words seriously the dramatic tension of the saga is considerably

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[110] Njáls saga, ch. 126.

[111] Ch. 123.

heightened. Had the ultimate use of the vetch-stack been foretold by Njal, it is inconceivable that his warning would have been disregarded, but through the use of this convention the saga writer was able to heighten the tension without disregarding the actual historical facts.

Apparently the gift of foresight was believed to diminish or disappear with old age. In Eyrbyggja saga there is a parallel to Skarphedinn's refusal to take seriously the prediction of Sæ̂vuna regarding the vetch-stack. In Eyrbyggja, Thorolf Halt-foot's corpse is being burnt when a cow comes and licks some of the ashes. The cow afterward gives birth to a bull calf which Thorod's blind old foster-mother advises to have killed immediately. This is not done, and when the calf is grown it gores Thorod, killing him. It is said here of the foster-mother: "She was deemed to have been foreseeing in her earlier days, but as she grew old, all she said was taken for doting; nevertheless things went pretty much according to her word."[112]

While predicting the future by means of spells was either forbidden by law, or frowned upon by custom after the Christianization of Iceland, there is no indication in the family sagas that individuals deemed to be possessed of the gift of foresight suffered any disrepute under the new religion. As belief in foresight has survived to the present time in the more remote parts of Scotland, Ireland and the Scottish islands, so it has survived in rural Iceland.

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[112] Ch. 63 Eyrbyggja

Chapter VIII

DREAMS

The interpretation of dreams is a component of all folk-literatures, but nowhere has it been accorded a more important role in the day to day life of a people than in the family sagas of Iceland; in no other national literature does it subserve a more intensely dramatic function.

That this is true should not elicit surprise, for, prior to the modern psychoanalytic interest in dreams, the preoccupation of a people with dream interpretation appears to have been in direct proportion to the degree of isolation in which they lived and the precariousness of their lives. In Scandinavia and Iceland not only were settlements isolated and life precarious, but from ancient times there existed among the Norse an intimate relationship between dreams and their religion. In this connection du Chaillu has noted:

> The faith of the Northmen in dreams was almost as great as that which they placed in their gods; like the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Jews, and other earlier nations, they believed that by them they were informed of coming events. Instances frequently occur in the Sagas of men wishing to dream in order to know the future. Those dreams which were of the greatest importance were believed to be influenced by the revelation of the gods to the sleeper. Odin in a dream showed King Eirik the Victorious how it would go in the battle of Styrbjorn. 113

Even the coming of Christianity to Iceland did not dispel the ancient faith in dreams; it served rather to confirm, if not strengthen it. Just as the early converts to Christianity were able to make an easy transition from belief in hamingjur to the concept of patron saints, so were they able to attribute divine inspiration in the Christian sense to dreams formerly considered to be revelations from Odin.

In the Summa Theologiae (generally referred to as Summa Theologica), written between 1266 and 1273, St. Thomas Aquinas formulated the medieval Christian attitude toward divination in general and divination by dreams in particular. His statements in this work appear to echo the beliefs of the Christian Icelanders of the eleventh century as reported in the sagas, not only on the subject of dream interpretation, but their attitudes toward seiðr, álǫg and foresight, as well.

Divination, according to Aquinas, is of two kinds: lawful divination based on divine revelation, and superstitious and unlawful divination based on false opinion. Divination from dreams is lawful if the dreams are due to divine revelation or some inward or outward natural cause; it is unlawful only if the dreams be a revelation of demons with whom the dreamer has entered into an unlawful compact. Dreams may be legitimate signs of future happenings to the extent that they are referable to some common cause of both the dream and the

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[113] The Viking Age, I, 456.

future occurrence. But St. Thomas acknowledges that apart from being predictions of future events, dreams can also be the cause of them, citing as an example the case of an individual whose mind has become anxious through something that he has seen in a dream and, on this account, is led to do something or avoid something.[114]

Hence the Christian converts among the Icelanders who were gifted with foresight or had the ability to interpret dreams were able, so long as they eschewed the practice of witchcraft, on acceptable theological grounds to reconcile these gifts, originally considered gifts from the pagan gods, with acceptance of the new religion.

As possible keys to an understanding of the dreams recorded in the family sagas, neither the Freudian nor the Jungian theories of the significance of dreams will be found to be of value, the first teaching that dreams are expressions of man's irrational, asocial and infantile sexual nature, the second holding that "dreams are revelations of unconscious wisdom, transcending the individual."[115] The writings of Erich Fromm prove far more fruitful in this respect.

Insight is closely related to prediction. To predict means to infer the future course of events from the direction and intensity of the forces that we cannot see at work at present. Any thorough knowledge, not of the surface but of

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[114] St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London, 1922), Part II, Question 95, Article 6.

[115] Erich Fromm, The Forgotten Language (New York, 1951), p. 1091.

> the forces operating beneath it, will lead to making predictions, and any valuable prediction must be based on such knowledge. No wonder we often predict developments and events which are later borne out by the facts. Quite regardless of the question of telepathy, many dreams in which the dreamer forecasts future events fall into the category of rational predictions as we just defined them. 116

Fromm agrees with Jung that we are often wiser in our sleep than when we are awake. But where Jung explains this by assuming that in our sleep we are subjected to a transcendant source of revelation, Fromm says:

> . . . I believe that what we think in our sleep is our thinking, and that there are good reasons for the fact that the influences we are submitted to in our waking life have in many respects a stultifying effect on our intellectual and moral accomplishments. 117

Although no single theory can explain to our satisfaction the nature of all the prophetic dreams recorded in the family sagas, Fromm's hypothesis does provide a rational explanation for many of them.

In view of the prominence of fylgjur and hamingjur in Icelandic folk-belief, it is not surprising that the overwhelming majority of dream symbols recorded in the family sagas should be birds, animals, and cloaked women; and, because of the elemental nature of life in Iceland, that these should be regarded as omens, not of romantic fancies, but of the fundamental events of life: birth of children, courtship,

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116 Fromm, pp. 38-39.

117 Ibid., pp. 96-97.

marriage, the falling-out of friends, intrigues of enemies, and the constant proximity of violent death.

Because of their association with guardian spirits, several instances of animal dreams were cited in chapter 3, among them Thorstein's dream of the swan, eagles and falcon in Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu (p. 32 above), and dreams in which wolves appeared as fylgjur of the dreamer's enemies. Thorstein's dream is of interest, however, in still another respect--its similarity to the dream of Kriemhild in the Middle High German epic Das Nibelungenlied, in which a falcon also represents a future husband.[118] Rather than considering Thorstein's to be an archetypal dream, most authorities regard it as a borrowing from the German epic, for, as Liestøl has indicated, the German dream was evidently known in Iceland, since there is an incomplete prose version of it in the twenty-fifth chapter of Völsunga saga. "In both these cases," says Liestol, "the dream concerns a woman's destiny, and the falcon is the man she marries; for the rest, the details are utilized in Gunnlaug's Saga in a way which fits in with the plot of that saga."[119]

Associated at times with the wolf as a dream symbol of impending evil is the figure of the viper. Although neither the wolf nor the viper was found in Iceland, they were, as Peter Foote mentions:

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[118] Das Nibelungenlied, ed. Helmut de Boor (Wiesbaden, 1961), 1st Aventiure, pp. 6-7.

[119] The Origin of The Icelandic Family Sagas, pp. 176-77.

> . . . the classical Scandinavian embodiments of the beasts foe to men. Two of the monsters who are to bring about the doom of the pagan gods are the World-serpent Miðgarð sormr, and the great wolf, Fenrir. As symbols of evil they are associated with witches: a witch woman is described as riding a wolf with a snake for reins, and a figure is pictured in this way on one of the Hunnestad-stones in Skåne, carved in the first half of the eleventh century. . . . 120

This concurrence of symbols occurs in Gísla saga. Gisli has learned from his wife Aud that Asgerd, wife of his brother Thorkell, has been having an affair with Aud's brother Vestein. Thorkell, having learned of his wife's affair, moves out of Gisli's house and establishes his own homestead nearby. Vestein, who has been away for some time, returns to Gisli's home to attend the winter feast. While he is there, Gisli sleeps badly for two nights. The first night he dreams that a viper slid out of a certain house and stung Vestein to death. The second night he dreams that out of the same house there ran a wolf which bit Vestein to death. Vestein is murdered in his sleep by Thorkell. Gisli, however, does not tell anyone his dreams until the funeral preparations for Vestein are under way. "And I have not told either dream before now because I wanted nobody to interpret them," he says.[121]

This would appear to be a classic example of a prophetic dream embodying a rational prediction, but we may also perceive here an instance of the belief that dreams turn out according to their interpretation, which belief, according to

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120 Gísla saga, pp. 75-76 (Notes).

121 Chaps. 13-14.

Peter Foote, is held even in modern times in Iceland.[122]

Wolves and vipers were not the only harbingers of evil or death in the dreams of the Icelanders; large birds might figure in this respect as well. Just before his enemies arrive to kill Gisli, he dreams "that big birds came into the place, bigger than cock-ptarmigans; and they screeched horribly; and they had been wallowing in blood."[123] Before he has finished recounting this dream to his wife, they hear the men coming up to the cave.

Inanimate objects, too, sometimes in conjunction with blood, were symbols of approaching conflict or affliction. Viga-Glum tells his son Marr of two dreams in which such objects figure. In the one, he dreamed that, going out of his house unarmed, he saw Thorarin coming towards him carrying a large whetstone in his hand. Seeing another whetstone lying near, Glum picked it up to use to attack Thorarin. Each tried to strike the other and the whetstones came together with a tremendous crash. Marr asks his father whether this might forebode a conflict between the two houses, but Glum replies that it signifies more than that--a conflict between the two districts, because of the distance at which the crash might be heard. In the second dream Glum saw two women carrying between them a trough and sprinkling the district with blood. Although he realizes that this dream

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122 Gísla saga, p. 76 (Notes).

123 Gísla saga, ch. 34.

portends something about to happen, he is unable to specify the exact nature of the event. It is, however, a battle which ensues between the family of Glum and that of Thorarin and Thorvald.[124]

The hamingjur who appeared to Gisli six years after his outlawry for the death of Thorgrim were mentioned briefly on page 27, above. This episode, which occurs in chapter 22 of Gísla saga, is, however, of additional interest in the present context and merits quotation:

> Gisli was a wise man, and one who dreamed dreams that had true meanings. . . . The story says that one autumn Gisli had a struggle in his sleep one night, when he was staying at Aud's steading; and when he awoke, she asked him what he had been dreaming.
>
> He answers. 'I have two women in my dreams,' he says, 'and one is good to me, but the other always tells me something that makes me feel worse than before, and she foresees nothing but bad for me. And this time in my dream I seemed to come to a house, or a hall, and I seemed to go into the house, and there I recognized many of those who were inside, kinsmen of mine, and friends. They were sitting by the fires and drinking, and there were seven fires--some were nearly burnt out, and some were burning very brightly. Then came in my better dream woman and said that these marked my life, what I had yet to live; and she counselled me that while I lived I should give up the old faith, and have nothing to do with magic or witchcraft, and deal kindly with the blind and the halt and the poor and the helpless. There was no more to the dream.'

The first significant point to be noted is the relationship in the mind of the saga writer between wisdom and "dreams that had true meanings." The depth of psychological insight on the part of the writer, implicit in this observation, is revealed in the passage from Erich Fromm's The Forgotten Language cited above.

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[124] Víga-Glúms saga, ch. 21.

Recognition of departed kinsmen, usually seen drinking or feasting, is a feature of Icelandic dreams which will be discussed in the following chapter. In the present context it is the seven fires of the dream which is of interest. In folk-belief, fire or flame is a common symbol of life. If the fire burns brightly, it signifies good fortune, and the dreamer may hope to hear news of a wedding or the birth of a child, or to receive unexpected money or gold. A dark, smoky flame, on the other hand, foretells affliction and death.[125] In Gísla saga, the seven fires signify the years Gisli has yet to live, but the saga does not specify the proportion of good years to bad.

Gisli, Viga-Glum, and certain wise old women such as Helgi's foster-mother in Vapnfirðinga saga,[126] although not gifted with foresight, were regarded as draum-spekingar, or 'dream-wise.' In other words, they were capable of interpreting their own prophetic dreams. All dreamers of prophetic dreams did not have this power, however. Hence they related their dreams to another, who was either 'dream-wise' or foresighted, the interpretation of dreams being one aspect of foresight. We find, therefore, in Laxdæla saga, Gudrun recounting four of her dreams to Gest Oddleif's son, who was

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[125] Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens (Berlin & Leipzig, 1929/30), II, 1397.

[126] Ch. 4. The text is that of the English translation by Gwyn Jones, "The Vapnfjord Men," in Eirik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas (London, 1961), pp. 39-77.

foresighted. In Gudrun's first dream she tore from her head an ill-fitting hood and cast it into a stream; in her second, she lost a silver ring from her arm in the water; in the third she fell and broke a gold ring, the two parts of which afterward bled; in the fourth, she had on her head a heavy gold helm which tumbled off into Hvammfirth. According to Gest, the dreams signify four marriages which she will make and the manner in which she will lose each of her four husbands. The ill-fitting hood signifies that her first husband will not be of her own choosing, and her casting it off means that she will leave him. The silver ring falling into the water indicates that her second husband will lose his life by drowning. The third husband will meet a violent death, partly as a consequence of something Gudrun will have done, while the fourth will be drowned in Hvammfirth. Gest's predictions come true in the main, except for one small detail which lends a note of realism and credibility to the tale: Gudrun's fourth husband is drowned in a squall, not on Hvammfirth, but on Broadfirth.

There is, of course, always the temptation to attribute the prophetic dreams of the sagas to literary convention, to think of them merely as a device utilized by the writer to dramatize the relationship between cause and effect. Particularly with the dream of Herdis, the granddaughter of Gudrun, might this at first appear to be the case. Herdis often accompanied her grandmother to church for prayers after the death of the latter's fourth husband. She dreamed one night that a

woman in a woven cloak came to her complaining that Gudrun crept over her every night and let drop on her tears so hot that she was burning all over. When Herdis told her dream to her grandmother, Gudrun had the planks taken up from the church floor where she was accustomed to kneel on her hassock, and in the earth beneath they found some old bluish bones, a brooch, and a wizard's wand. As it was believed that the tomb of some sorceress must have been uncovered, "the bones were taken to a place far away where people were least likely to be passing."[127]

The sincerity and integrity of the saga writer in recording this dream would appear to be strengthened by virtue of a recent case in Iceland, a matter of public record, detailed by Horace Leaf, F.R.G.S. In this instance, the body of a suicide of long ago was discovered as the result of a dream. The suicide, a woman, begged the dreamer that her bones be disinterred and reburied in consecrated ground in order that her soul might find peace. The facts of this case were placed before the Lutheran Church and ecclesiastical permission was given for the reburial of the body in a churchyard.[128]

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[127] Laxdæla saga, ch. 76.

[128] Horace Leaf, F.R.G.S., Iceland Yesterday and Today (London, 1949), pp. 191-94.

Chapter IX

DEATH, AFTER-LIFE, AND REVENANTS

Imparting a mordant pungency to the family sagas is the Icelandic belief in the powers of the dead to return and belabour the living. Far from being merely disembodied spirits, pagan Icelandic ghosts are solid, animated corpses which have not decayed. Perhaps it was upon encountering this belief in Scandinavia that the third Odin instituted there the practice of burning the dead as the most efficacious means of preventing their return. This is not at all unlikely, for the belief was of great antiquity even at the time of Odin. Margaret Schlauch states:

> It is associated with the "preanimistic" view of nature which preceded the division of the world into two categories, the living (persons and things having "spirits") and the inanimate, on the part of primitive people. Thus the strange part played by animated corpses in Icelandic sagas, and even in modern folktales, preserves a very ancient point of view with surprising fidelity. 130

Although the practice of burning the dead on pyres prior to interment of the ashes in barrows or under stones appears to have become quite widespread in Scandinavia, it

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130 Romance in Iceland, p. 140

was apparently discontinued by the settlers of Iceland, save under exceptional circumstances. No doubt one reason was the scarcity in Iceland of native timber for construction of pyres. Hence the early Icelanders were, as a rule, buried under mounds near their homes, and disinterred for cremation or reburial at a more remote place only if their corpses proved troublesome. This seems never to have been necessary after the death of a man whose life had earned him the respect and affection of his kin and neighbours, but only with the corpses of notorious evil-doers, berserks, shape-changers, and sorcerers.

In all cases of death in Iceland, except the execution of a sorcerer, it was the duty of the next of kin to perform the rite of lyke-help to the corpse. This consisted of closing the eyes and nostrils and also, apparently, wrapping a cloth about the head. It seems to have been the custom that no one, except the next of kin, was to look on the face of a corpse before lyke-help had been given.

Burial of the dead in a prone position in a coffin appears to have been a fairly general, although not exclusive, practice in Iceland. The body of Thorvald was sewn up in a skin by Viga-Glum's men, but this may have been only a temporary procedure until such time as his own relatives could call for the body and bury it.[131] In compliance with her husband's request, Vigdis had Viga Hrapp buried in a

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[131] Viga-Glums saga, ch. 23.

standing position under the doorway of his fire-hall so that he could keep a searching eye on his dwelling.[132] Here no mention is made of a coffin. Gunnar of Lithend was buried without a coffin, sitting upright inside a cairn.[133]

Under ordinary circumstances a corpse was carried to the place of burial through the door of the house in which death took place, but there are in the family sagas two notable instances where one of the house walls was broken through for this purpose: on the death of Skallagrim[134] and that of Thorolf Haltfoot.[135] Skallagrim, it will be recalled, was shape-strong in his youth, while Thorolf was a notorious trouble-maker throughout his adult life. Eiríḱr Magnúśson has commented in this respect:

> In both these cases the proceedings are practically the same. Both these men died within the same century [the tenth], Skallagrim early in it, Thorolf late. It would seem that in those times it was customary to teach him who was supposed to be likely to walk again a way to the house which did not lead to the door of it, but to the obstructing wall--a custom which seems to trace its origin to the imagination that ghosts being brainless were devoid of initiative. To this day the belief exists in Iceland that the spirit of the dead visits all localities on earth where the person has been, before it passes to its final destination. This journey is supposed to take a miraculously short time. 136

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132 Laxdæla saga, ch. 17.

133 Njáls saga, ch. 77.

134 Egils saga, ch. 58.

135 Eyrbyggja saga, ch. 33.

136 Eyrbyggja saga, p. 282 (Notes).

In Iceland execution appears to have been limited to outlaws and sorcerers.[137] The usual method was by stoning to death after a bag had been tied over the victim's head, to avert the influence of the "evil eye." Stoning, according to Peter Foote, was "the natural form for a collective penal action, partly because it was a collective action and responsibility was shared, and partly, because stones were felt to possess earth's inherent magic power, more effective than weapons." Such execution was often carried out on the foreshore between high and low water mark, and this, Professor Foote states, "had a neutralizing effect: it was a no man's land, where sometimes malefactors were buried, and they were believed to be bound by the movement of the tide." The body of the executed sorcerer was generally buried on a ridge between two valleys, or in uninhabited land between two settlements but belonging to neither of them. Burial there, according to Professor Foote, "had the same intention; in land uninhabited and indeterminate, belonging to neither settlement, the dead could do least harm."[138]

Pagan Icelandic beliefs as to the nature of the after-life appear to have been somewhat ill-defined. The episode in Gísla saga where Thorgrim, after having killed Vestein in his sleep, comes with his men to the mound-making and insists that he alone shall tie on the Hel-shoes for

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137 Gísla saga, ch. 19, also Laxdæla saga, ch. 38.

138 Gísla saga, p. 81 (Notes).

Vestein would seem to indicate a belief that the dead Vestein had a long journey ahead of him to the realm of the dead, ruled over by the goddess Hel.[139] Peter Foote suggests that it was Thorgrim's intention to make Vestein's journey there as easy as possible, since, once there, he could not return as a reanimated corpse.[140] Since tying Hel-shoes on the corpse is not mentioned in all accounts of death in the sagas, it may be the practice was peculiar to certain localities. On the other hand, it may have been so general a custom that many of the saga writers did not deem it worthy of special mention.

The paradise for warriors was Valhall, the Hall of Odin, to which they were carried from the field of battle by the Valkyries, and where they fought by day and feasted at night. This appears to have been a fairly late concept, possibly introduced into Scandinavia by the third Odin, and one which held little meaning for the Icelanders.

Of far more concern to the Icelanders, and apparently of much earlier origin, was a belief concerning the fate of those drowned at sea. The drowned were said to have been caught in the net of Ran, 'Robbery,' a demonic sea-goddess who apparently was the personification of the sea in storm. She was the wife of the sea-god Aegir, who represented the sea in its calmer aspects. MacCulloch shows the

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139 Ch. 14.

140 *Gisla saga*, p. 75 (Notes).

relationship of the personal name Aegir and aegir, 'sea,' to the Gothic ahva, ON a, 'water' or 'river,' and the Latin aqua. The ON name of the river Eider (Egidora), Aegisdyr, he points out, is literally "door of the sea."[141] Ran caught the drowned sea-farers in her net and carried them to her halls, where they feasted on the delicacies of the sea, lobsters and the like. This ancient belief, together with a related one-- that it was a good omen if the ghosts of men drowned at sea attended their own funeral feast-- survived into the Christian era, as the following passage from Eyrbyggja saga recounting the appearance of Thorod and his men after their drowning at sea attests:

> . . . But the first evening whenas men were at the feast, and were come to their seats, in came goodman Thorod and his fellows into the hall, all of them dripping wet. Men gave good welcome to Thorod, for a good portent was it deemed, since folk held it for sooth that those men should have good cheer of Ran if they, who had been drowned at sea, came to their own burial-ale; for in those days little of the olden lore was cast aside, though men were baptized and were Christian by name. [142]

Icelandic beliefs were curiously free from dogmatic interpretations. The belief that the drowned were caught in the net of Ran is a case in point, for despite its antiquity and the respect accorded it in the Christian era, such a fate for the drowned was apparently not considered to be inevitable. In an earlier passage of Eyrbyggja saga, Thorstein Codbiter and his men perish at sea, but they are seen by

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[141] Eddic Mythology, p. 171.

[142] Ch. 54.

Thorstein's shepherd being welcomed by the ghost of Thorstein's father in a hill near Thorstein's dwelling which opened to receive them.[143]

The reappearance of the dead was not necessarily an occasion for terror on the part of the beholders. When the drowned Thorod appeared at his funeral feast, "he was given good welcome." There is no suggestion of terror on the part of Thorstein Codbiter's shepherd when he saw the ghost of Thorstein received by that of his father in the barrow. There is a somewhat similar episode in Njals saga. On a bright moon and starlit night Skarphedinn and Hogni pass by the south side of the cairn of Gunnar of Lithend. Suddenly they think they see the cairn stand open and Gunnar inside looking at the moon. They think they see four lights burning inside the cairn, none of them casting a shadow. Gunnar looks merry and joyful and sings a song which they interpret to mean that he wants them to avenge his death.[144]

In marked contrast to ghosts who quietly attend their funeral feast or are merely seen sitting, singing, or feasting in a cairn are the "violently active corpses . . . known as draugar," of which Margaret Schlauch has written:

> Berserkir, magicians, and gigantic champions are especially prone to continue their existence in this unlovely form; but even admirable warriors may be transformed into sinister draugar while they sit bloated, rigid, and balefully alive, within their burial mounds. If they issue forth and seek human habitations, they are apt to indulge in a violent

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[143] Ch. 11.

[144] Ch. 77.

> sport known as "riding the roof," which reduces the house to ruins, or nearly so. They also kill cattle and men. The danger from them is greatest around Yule eve, in midwinter, when the nights are longest. 145

Laxdaela saga recounts the activities of a particularly violent ghost, that of Viga Hrapp, who was Scotch on his father's side, but whose mother was from Sodor in Norway, where he was raised. He was a big, strong, overbearing man who was forced to flee from Sodor to Iceland because he would never atone for any wrongs he committed. He was disliked by most people as he was overbearing to his neighbours around Thorsness in Iceland, where he had his homestead. He became violent in his behaviour and did much harm to his neighbours. As noted earlier in this chapter, when he became ill he commanded his wife Vigdis that she have his grave dug in the doorway of the fire-hall and that he be buried there in a standing position so that he could keep an eye on his dwelling. Vigdis did not dare do otherwise. Evil as he was in his life, he was even more so when he was dead, for he walked a good deal after his death, and people said he killed most of his servants in his ghostly appearances. He caused trouble to those who lived near, and his house of Hrappstead became deserted when his wife went to live with her brother, Thorstein Swart. The farmers of the vicinity consulted one of their number, Hoskuld, who went to Hrappstead with some of his men, had Hrapp's body dug up and taken away

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145 Romance in Iceland, p. 140.

to a place "near to which cattle were least likely to roam or men to go about." After that, the walking abated somewhat, and the following spring Sumerlid, Hrapp's son, set up housekeeping at Hrappstead, but soon afterwards he was "seized of a frenzy" and died. His mother Vigdis inherited all his wealth, but refused to return to Hrappstead. About twelve years later, Olaf Peacock, who had purchased the property of Hoskuld where he was living with his wife Thorgerda, decided to purchase Hrappstead, which had lain waste since the death of Sumerlid. On it he built a new home which he called Herdholt. But the first winter of his residence there, one of the men who looked after the cattle came to Olaf and asked permission to change his work with someone else. He would not explain his fears to Olaf, but that evening Olaf went with him to drive in the cattle. The man came running to Olaf, saying that Hrapp was standing in the doorway of the fold, and that he had had his fill of wrestling with him. Olaf went to the door and struck at the ghost with his spear. Hrapp took the socket of the spear in both hands and wrenched it aside so that the spear shaft broke. Olaf was left holding the shaft and Hrapp the head. The next morning Olaf went to where Hrapp was buried and had him dug up. The body, as was generally the case with draugar, was undecayed, and with it was found the spear head. Olaf had a pyre prepared, the body burned, and the ashes flung out to sea, after which Hrapp's ghost walked no more.[146]

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[146] Chaps. 10, 17, 24.

Similar in most respects to the tale of Hrapp's ghost is that of the ghost of Thorolf Haltfoot in Eyrbyggja saga, but the latter contains several interesting details not present in the Laxdaela saga account of Hrapp. Thorolf's body was taken on a sledge drawn by oxen from his home to Thorswaterdale, where he was laid in howe. As the summer wore on, the oxen which had been yoked to Thorolf became troll-ridden and all cattle that approached his howe went mad and bellowed until they died. During the next winter Thorolf was often seen at the house. He hurt many people, among whom his wife suffered the most. She died as a result of the haunting, and was buried beside her husband. After her death, Thorolf's ghost did not confine its activities to the homestead, but laid waste farms far and wide. In the spring, his son Arnkel summoned neighbours to rebury Thorolf. They laid the undecayed corpse on a sledge yoked to two strong oxen, but the corpse became so heavy that the oxen foundered before they had reached their destination. Other oxen were used to draw the body up a neck of land to the headland, or ness, but when they came to the brow of the hill these oxen went mad, broke loose, and jumped into the sea. So the men bore Thorolf to the headland, buried him there, and raised a wall across the end of the headland. Thorolf lay there quiet as long as Arnkel lived, but some time after the latter's death a thrall of Thorbrand's who was herding sheep saw an erne fly from the west over the firth. The erne swooped down on a deerhound which was with the thrall, and flew back with the dog in its

claws straight for the howe of Thorolf Haltfoot, vanishing there under the mountain.[147]

The appearance of the erne in this tale is somewhat anomalous. It would appear to be the fylgja of Thorolf, yet nowhere else in the sagas is there any indication of the belief that a man's fylgja survived his own death. We are told here only that Thorbrand, when the thrall told him of the occurrence, considered it a foreboding of news.

After the appearance of the erne Thorolf's ghost took to walking again, slaying men and beasts, until it was deemed necessary to dig up his corpse for the second time and destroy it by fire. The corpse was still unrotten, "as like to a fiend as like could be, blue as hell, and big as a neat." It was so heavy that it could be raised only with lever beams. The body was rolled down the hillside, wrapped in a bale, and set afire. Although the bale soon burned to coals, it was a long time before the body would burn. Those ashes that were not scattered by the wind were cast into the sea.

The baleful influence of Thorolf's ghost did not end here, however. It will be recalled from page 61 above that a cow which licked some of his ashes later gave birth to a bull calf which gored its owner to death. The calf, Glossy, then disappeared into a fen, never to be seen again.[148]

Ghosts were apparently believed capable of laying

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[147] Chaps. 33, 34, 35.

[148] Ch. 63.

curses on the living. In Grettis saga the ghost of the evil shepherd Glam attacks Grettir and wrestles with him. After being thrown by Grettir, the ghost lays a curse on him, a form of álög:

> Now we have measured our strength, Grettir, and now I lay my wierd on thee. Thou hast only half the strength which would have come to thee hadst thou not put thyself in my way; now it shall never grow greater, though many will call thee strong enough. And now has thy luck turned, and whatever thou doest after this shall go against thee. Thou shalt be outlawed, and wilt dwell much alone; then often shalt thou see my glaring eyes, and dread to be alone, and that shall be thy death.

Upon this, Grettir cut off the head of Glam's animated corpse and laid it at his feet. Then the corpse was burned, and the ashes placed in a skin and buried in a remote place. Although Glam walked no more, Grettir developed a neurotic fear of the dark. Throughout his outlawry and until the time of his death he had hallucinations of Glam's eyes and other horrors when he was alone at night, and this, the saga writer states, was the origin of the proverb "that Glam lends eyes, or gives Glamsight to those who see things nowise as they are."[149]

Although the Glam episode appears to be the only instance in the sagas where a ghost actually casts a curse, there are other instances where an individual, while still alive, gives instructions to be carried out after his death, threatening that much trouble will befall if his requests are not carried out. The account of the hauntings at

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[149] Ch. 35.

Frodiswater seems to be basically a case of this nature, even though it includes other supernatural elements as well.

In the summer of the year 1000, among the passengers who came to Iceland aboard an Irish ship was a certain Thorgunna, who had brought with her goods which were rare and difficult to obtain in Iceland. As she refused to sell any of them, Thurid, the wife of Thorod of Frodiswater, invited her to stay with her and her husband at Frodiswater over the winter. Thorgunna accepted the invitation, and made up her bed there with particularly fine hangings, quilts and English sheets, which, despite all Thurid's importuning, she refused to sell. One day in the autumn while all the household were getting in the hay, a dark cloud appeared, from which it rained blood. Afterward, the blood dried off all the hay, except that which Thorgunna had spread. Later that evening she became ill and requested of Thorold that, in the event she died of her illness, he bury her at Skalaholt, where there was a church and a consecrated burial-ground. She also bade him and Thurid to take all her goods except a gold ring which was to be buried with her, and the bedding so much coveted by Thurid, which she asked to have burned, threatening trouble for them if her wishes were not carried out. She died shortly afterward, but Thurid refused to permit the bedding to be destroyed.

There is in this tale a curious element which seems to bridge the gap between the pagan Icelandic concept of solid ghosts or animated corpses and the subsequent Christian

concept of duality of spirit and body. The actual solid ghost of Thorgunna appears but once, and that, it should be noted, prior to her body being given Christian burial. Her corpse, placed in a coffin, was carried by a group of men to Skalaholt, where, in compliance with her request, she was buried with the rites of the church. On the way, so as not to have to cross the treacherous Whitewater at night, the funeral party put up at a bonder's home on the shore, leaving the coffin outside the house. Although he permitted them to pass the night there, the bonder refused them the hospitality of food. During the night a clatter was heard in the buttery, and when the men looked, they saw a naked woman whom they recognized as Thorgunna bearing food onto the table. When the bonder bade them eat and drink, Thorgunna's ghost walked out the door and was not seen again.

Upon their return to Frodiswater, however, while sitting by the meal fires, the corpse-bearers and others in the house saw a half-moon go back and forth and widershins around the house. Thorir Wooden-leg, who with his wife, Thorgrima Witchface, and their son Kjartan, was staying with Thorod and Thurid, proclaimed it the "Moon of the Wierd," and predicted that the deaths of men would follow it. Soon afterward the shepherd at Frodiswater died and was buried, but one night Thorir Wooden-leg, upon going outside, was attacked by the ghost of the shepherd, which tried to prevent him from reentering the house and cast him against the door. Thorir died a short time later, and after his death his ghost

was frequently seen in company with that of the shepherd. By Yule six of the house carles had died. Such deaths and the appearance of the ghosts appear to be conventional elements of Icelandic folklore, but with the "Moon of the Wierd," we are confronted with another supernatural concept. This is a type of witchcraft called sjonhverfingar, or ocular delusion.[150] It is continued in the saga when, a little before Yule, the inhabitants of the house see a seal's head come up through the floor of the fire-hall. Although a house carle beat it, it continued to rise, and disappeared only when Kjartan hit it with a sledge hammer and drove it down through the floor like a peg. Some time after this a noise was heard in the stock-fish heap. Out of the heap seemed to come a great tail, which the people pulled until the skin came off the palms of their hands. Every fish in the heap was found torn from the skin so that there was not a single fish intact in the lower part of the heap, yet nothing alive was found which might have been responsible for the destruction.

The story of the hauntings at Frodiswater continues with the onset of an epidemic of sickness which carried off most of the household, including Thorgrima Witchface, whose ghost was afterward seen together with that of her husband. Eventually, at the request of Snorri the priest, a mass-priest came to Frodiswater. Thorgunna's bed gear was burned, the house blessed, and all those living there shriven.

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150 du Chaillu, I, 444.

A door-doom was held on the ghosts, who then departed. Mass was sung there, after which Thurid was healed of her sickness, and Kjartan enabled to dwell there in peace for a long time afterwards.[151]

While the ghost of Thorgunna, prior to her burial, appears to be as solid as those of earlier Icelandic tradition, it is apparently her disembodied spirit which is responsible for the ocular-delusion type of witchcraft, and which is laid with the burning of her bed clothes and the service of exorcism performed at Frodiswater by the Christian priest.

The Christian influence on the story of Thorgunna is subtle, almost subconscious. In the Saga of Eirik the Red, however, a conventional Icelandic ghost story appears to have been tampered with by someone not of Icelandic origin, for it contains elements quite foreign to other Icelandic tales of the same era.

An Icelandic woman, Gudrid, marries Thorstein Eiriksson, son of Eirik the Red and brother of Leif Eiriksson, in Greenland, and they go to live at an estate in the western settlement which Thorstein owns in common with another man also named Thorstein, whose wife is Sigrid. They go there in the autumn, but sickness soon attacks the farmstead. The foreman, Gardar, is the first to die. Then Thorstein Eiriksson falls ill, as does Sigrid, the wife of his namesake. One evening when the two women are outdoors,

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[151] Eyrbyggja saga, chaps. 50-54.

Sigrid cries out that she sees the entire host of the dead before the door of the house, and, among them, Gudrid's husband. The women return indoors, but by morning Sigrid is dead and a coffin is made for her. Earlier that morning Sigrid's husband had gone down to the sea with some men, but Thorstein Eiriksson sends word for him to return, as his wife's corpse was trying to get on her feet and get into bed with him. When Sigrid's husband returned to the house, the corpse was sitting on the side of the bed, whereupon he drove a pole-axe into her breast. This is reminiscent of central European vampire stories rather than of Icelandic tradition.

Near the close of the same day Thorstein Eiriksson dies. The other Thorstein tells Gudrid to lie down, that he will watch over the two bodies. But during the night the corpse of Thorstein Eiriksson sits up and asks to speak to Gudrid. She is fetched, whereupon her husband's corpse, which appears to be weeping, gives her a Christian homily on repentance for past sins and faith as a means to salvation. He then tells her that it is not good that Christian men should be buried in unconsecrated ground on their farms, as was the custom, and asks to be taken to church along with all the others who had died, except Gardar, whose body is to be burned, as he was responsible for all the hauntings which had taken place. He predicts a notable future for his wife and warns her not to marry a Greenlander, but urges her to bestow their money upon the church and

some of it upon the poor.[152]

The departures here from Icelandic tradition--driving the pole-axe into the breast of the corpse and the reanimation of a corpse before burial--together with the utilization of a ghost story as propaganda for financial support of the church, make it practically certain that we do not have the story here in its original form, or that the entire episode was a later interpolation in the saga, probably by a monkish transcriber of European origin and education.

Such tampering with Icelandic traditions was but one step towards the incorporation of foreign material of all sorts into the sagas. It signified the beginning of the end of the robust solidity which characterizes the family sagas and the inception of a new type of Icelandic literature which we know as the romantic, or lying sagas.

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[152] Eiríks saga rauða, ch. 4.

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2. Hálfdanar saga svarta
3. Haralds saga harfagra
4. Hákonar saga goða
5. Haralds saga gráfeldar
6. Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar
7. Ólafs saga helga
8. Magnús saga goða
9. Haralds saga harðráða
10. Ólafs saga kyrra
11. Magnús saga berfæ̂tts
12. Sigurðar saga Jorslafara, Eysteins ok Ólafs, bræðra haus
13. Magnús saga blinda ok Haralds gilla
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known of that portion (the Víga-Styrs saga). It was found afterwards, that the whole MS. had not been sent to Copenhagen, so the latter part of the saga (the larger part of Heiðarvíga saga proper) is still preserved in the Royal Library, Stockholm (No. 18.4° cf. Kålund's Palæografisk Atlas, 1905, No. 39), but even this portion has a lacuna.

(For English version see Eyrbyggja saga).

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Óla̋fs saga Tryggvasonar. Óla̋fr Tryggvason, king of Norway 995-1000. - I. Saga written in Latin by Oddr Snorrason, a monk of Þingeyrar cloister, c. 1190; the Latin original is lost, but three recensions of an Icelandic translation are known: AM. 310.4° (latter half of the 13th cent.; defective; facsim. in Kålund's Palæ̂ografisk Atlas. 1905. No. 19); Cod. Holm. perg. 4°, no. 18.5 (formerly no. 20.2; defective; c. 1300); Dellagardie Coll. (Upsala Univ. Libr.) perg. 4-7 I, fol., a fragment (c. 1250). II. See: Heimskringla VI. III. See: Fagrskinna (1902-03. chaps. 21-22). IV. The larger Óla̋fs saga, probably composed in the 14th cent. from various sources, among which was an Óla̋fs saga by Gunnlaugr Leifsson (d. 1219), a monk of Þingeyrar cloister, written in Latin and later rendered into Icelandic, but which is now lost. This saga with numerous additions is also found in the Flateyjarbók.

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Ragnars saga loðbrokar ok sona hans. MSS.: Ny kgl. Sml. 1824 B.4°(c. 1400); AM. 174.4°(15th cent.), and paper MSS. AM. 6-7, fol., etc. The original saga was probably written in the latter half of the 13th cent.; the recension which in complete form has been preserved, is from the 14th cent.

The Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok. (For English version see Völsunga saga).

Reykdæ̂la saga. (See Ljósvetninga saga).

Sæ̂mundar Edda. (The Poetic Edda, a.k.a. The Elder Edda). The two principal MSS. are Codex Regius, Gl. kgl. Sml. 2365.4°, dating from the end of the 13th cent., and the fragmentary codex AM. 748.4°, from c. 1300, but neither contains a complete collection of the poems now generally included under the name of Eddic poems.

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