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An Open Secret  
of Icelandic Otherworldly Communication

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Germanic Languages

by

Charles Nelson Robinson III

2017

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

An Open Secret  
of Icelandic Otherworldly Communication

by

Charles Nelson Robinson III

Doctor of Philosophy in Germanic Languages

University of California, Los Angeles, 2017

Professor Timothy R. Tangherlini, Chair

This study examines supernatural references in medieval Icelandic literature in light of modern Icelandic practice of otherworldly communication. Literary motifs are not merely fantastical story elements; rather they reflect a type of reality for participants and perform a social and cultural function in a historical and geographical context. While the manifestations of the supernatural in the medieval literature are many and varied and later inspired a multibillion-dollar entertainment industry, what is examined here is how Icelanders communicate with and interact with the other world, that is, the deceased, guardian spirits, and nature beings through prophetic dreams, mediums, and direct experience in nature and in community. I emphasize the social function of these phenomena over their representation as literary motifs and nevertheless reaffirm the role of literature as a medium of expression. At the same time, I explore the role of



folklore in medieval and modern society and in popularly and scholarly manifestations. Sources and collection methods for the supernatural introduce researchers and methods that describe and document supernatural phenomena in Iceland. Mediation: mediums and media treats the ways experiences are mediated including by clairvoyants, clergy, rituals, dreams, nature, and the literature. Guardian spirits and dreams are cultural features of the Icelandic supernatural in the medieval literature, in personal accounts, and in national insignia. An ethnography of the other world uses accounts from participants and researchers to form a clearer picture of the world beyond. Research is from the humanities, social sciences, cognitive neuroscience and other disciplines, and calls for openness to phenomena that cannot fully be explained by current methods. Syncretic traditions involve a blend of spiritual experience and practice that extend beyond the parameters of heathenism and Christianity, including Sámi shamanic influences and wider research approaches. Literature is considered as an art form with a relationship to landscape and nature that preserves and expresses an open secret of Icelandic otherworldly communication. It is among the durable media in which the old ways thrived. Where nature cannot be captured and not everyone has developed intuitive senses, literature is continually representative, repeatedly accessible, and perpetually open to interpretation.

The dissertation of Charles Nelson Robinson III is approved.

Joseph F. Nagy

Arne O. Lunde

Timothy R. Tangherlini, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2017

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## Preface and acknowledgements

In 2009, while working in acquisitions and cataloging in the Harvard College Library, we received from Iceland a thin paperback by the twenty-year-old Guðni Reynir Þorbjörnsson titled *Dulrænar reynslusögur*, which could be translated as *Stories of Psychic Experiences*. At the time Collection Development was experimenting with approval plans, that is, letting vendors send materials according to profiles of what a large academic research library would deem suitable for its collections. The collection policy was still motivated by energetic acquisitions, rooted in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century efforts by library director Archibald Cary Coolidge not only to develop formidable research collections but also to promote Germanic and Scandinavian studies (Olson 1994, 1995, 1998). This vision to generate a representative collection carried with it the aspiration to let scholarship emerge serendipitously or methodologically by means of access to a wide variety of materials and to examine those materials in an environment of free inquiry and discovery.

At the same time as we obtained Guðni Reynir's book, Iceland was in its financial crisis and the currency was devalued such that what used to be among our most expensive items became our least expensive monograph acquisitions. Some vendors took advantage of the broad scope of Harvard's collections by sending things they thought we wouldn't return. For Icelandic books, we purchased from Eymundsson, one of Iceland's largest and most well-known bookstores. They were proactive about sending us the latest publications. At first one might think that they were trying to maintain earnings during the financial crisis and this speculation would be correct. However Icelanders, except for some of their bankers and politicians, have a high standard of ethics. And being on the receiving end of thousands of international publications

over the course of several years, it was possible to develop an awareness of the preoccupations of a nation through its cultural output. Compared to other countries, it was not unusual to receive books from Iceland about, among other things, psychic mediums or about folklore. It was decided to keep the book. I notice now that Guðni Reynir's publication is well distributed among public libraries and research collections in Iceland, along with numerous other similar published personal accounts.

People often asked me if we read all the books we acquired. Nearing 100,000 items a year in Collection Development for Widener Library, this is impossible. But a year later, when Guðni Reynir's book came across my desk to be cataloged, I couldn't help taking an interest in the content and asked a friend in Iceland to send me a copy. I was surprised to read an account by a young man writing about communicating with the dead, seeing elves and including photographs of them, and encouraging people who have psychic ability not to be afraid of it and to share it with others. One of the most compelling aspects of the personal narrative for me was reading about Guðni's exchanges with a deceased girl from an abandoned farmhouse on his family property and later finding a local history that backed up in detail what he was experiencing. In it he found her picture and information about her farm (Guðni Reynir Þorbjörnsson 2009, 12-16; *Grímsnes: Búendur og saga* 2002, I: 346-347). When I started graduate school at UCLA in autumn 2010, there was an article in the student newspaper, *The Daily Bruin*, in which a recent graduate reported seeing a ghost at the national veterans cemetery that borders the campus on its southwestern side. In the article, she discussed her psychic ability and said she would like to see more interaction among people who are intuitive in this way.<sup>1</sup> I found it unusual that such an article would be included among the news selections; however it

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<sup>1</sup> Devin Kelly, "Alumna in touch with her spiritual side," *The Daily Bruin*, 27 October 2010 [https://dailybruin.com/2010/10/27/alumna\\_in\\_touch\\_with\\_her\\_spiritual\\_side/](https://dailybruin.com/2010/10/27/alumna_in_touch_with_her_spiritual_side/)

was to me in the vein of Guðni reaching out to speak of his experience and to encourage others to do the same. It also testified to this phenomenon more locally for me since I lived in the graduate student housing complex that borders this cemetery.

My research interest is in medieval and modern Icelandic language, literature, and culture. The more I encountered the medieval literary corpus, the clearer the presence and significance of supernatural phenomena mentioned became to me. The more I traveled to Iceland, the more I could see a connection between these phenomena and the behaviors and understandings of modern Icelanders. What continued to strike me is that if one only scratches the surface, Icelanders tell personal, family, or local stories about communication with the dead, information from dreams, and sightings of hidden folk. They do this without any irony. What further activated me was numerous studies carried out over time and published by scholars like William H. Swatos, Jr. and Loftur Reimar Gissurarson (1997), Christophe Pons (2002, 2011), Robert Anderson (2005), Adriëne Heijnen (2013), and Corinne Dempsey (2017). The relationship between the ancient and modern data and its abundance and what it conveys about a culture over time is what I explored for this study.

-- Chip Robinson

Seltjarnarnes 2017

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## Introduction

Every type of medieval Icelandic literature—religious, legal, historical, and entertaining—deals with the so-called supernatural in some manner. This ranges from dreams and prophecies to magical creatures and objects. In our time, Oxford Professor of Anglo-Saxon and scholar of Old Norse J. R. R. Tolkien attempted to process the material for instruction and he also composed stories for his children. He deployed many of the motifs of this literary heritage. Yet perhaps he could not have foreseen the fantasy industry that would result from his efforts. Nowadays, when people consume cultural products of fantasy there is the assumption that they are manifestations of the imagination and that they are not real. However considering such phenomena among modern Icelanders, it can be seen that consulting mediums to communicate with deceased loved ones, receiving dreams from grandparents requesting that names be carried on, and encountering resistance from unseen beings in the landscape to locations being disturbed reflects a type of reality, or understanding or practice, that goes beyond what one might expect from a discussion of belief. In any case, it is evident from tourism, sales, and entertainment media ratings that there is tremendous interest in the supernatural in general regardless of belief. This study examines modern Icelanders' continued otherworldly communication in order to understand these motifs in the medieval literature and to arrive at a view of a culture in geographical context over time. What may result is a nuanced conception of belief, an intellectual openness to bridge disciplines, and heuristics to facilitate emerging approaches. At the same time, such an exploration reveals the capacity of literature to document and to direct human ambition in a social context.

While the representations of the supernatural in medieval Icelandic literature are many and varied, including the practice of magical arts and appearance of mythical creatures, what I

will focus on in this study is how Icelanders communicate with and interact with the other world, that is the deceased, guardian spirits, and nature beings, and through what channels this is accomplished, that is prophetic dreams, mediums, and direct and waking experience, such as in awareness, in nature, or in community. I emphasize the social function of these phenomena over their representation as literary motifs and nevertheless reaffirm the role of literature as a medium of expression. Simultaneously I explore the role of the folklore and the literature in medieval and modern contexts and in popular and scholarly manifestations.

I - Sources and collection methods for the supernatural introduce some of the researchers and methods that make possible an understanding of supernatural phenomena in Iceland and how they are documented. II - Mediation: mediums and media deals with ways experiences are mediated. III - Guardian spirits and dreams are common cultural features of Icelandic supernatural experience. IV - An ethnography of the other world uses documentation from participants and researchers to form a clearer picture of what is meant when referring to the world beyond. V - Syncretic traditions involve a blend of spiritual experience and practice that extend beyond the parameters of heathenism and Christianity and consider shamanism and wider research approaches. VI - Literature is considered as an art form with a relationship to landscape and nature that preserves and expresses an open secret of Icelandic otherworldly communication.

## I - Sources and collection methods for the supernatural

An Icelandic school teacher from Ísafjörður asked French ethnologist Christophe Pons why foreigners travel such a long way to ask such stupid questions about phenomena like communicating with the deceased. She said it would be as if she were to travel to France to ask about the tray of fruit on the table in front of them. “Il y a des morts dans toutes les maisons comme il y a des plateaux avec des fruits . . . ” [There are dead people in all houses as there are trays of fruits . . . ] (Pons 2002, [9]). Further, Pons notes that an abundance of mediums and publications serves to witness that the phenomena are not marginal and, in fact, distinguish individuals in this insular society (Pons 2011, [53]). Katrin Sontag points out that this has little to do with a “ ‘folk-past’ or folklore survival on the verge of extinction deserving aseptic archival storage” (Sontag 2007, 131). It is alive and well.

Far from isolated examples of contemporary sightings of nature beings, testimony of prophetic dreams, and visits to psychic practitioners, the phenomena comprise a dynamic, syncretic, and continuous tradition. I draw examples from medieval literature and modern experience. What constitutes latter-day accounts begins with nineteenth-century national or folk stories called *þjóðsögur*. They tend to be conveyed orally, are passed around informally, and eventually are written down. The Nordic countries, particularly Finland and Sweden, were instrumental in establishing folkloristics as a discipline and preserving cultural heritage. Nineteenth-century folktale collecting prospered with emerging European nations defining their identities by documenting cultural expressions (Tangherlini 2013). A well-known example is the Grimm brothers, philologists Jacob and Wilhelm, compiling local tales. While inspiring, few would regard collections such as these to extend beyond the realm of the imagination. And as

accounts they had been processed considerably from their elicitations so that they are classified among stories. Iceland, however, not only produced a wealth of tale collections at this time (Gunnell 2007b),<sup>1</sup> the documentation of supernatural experiences continues today in the form of, to mention a few examples, audio recordings,<sup>2</sup> video documentaries (Bryndís Björgvinsdóttir 2016; Dorival and Pons 2010; Inalsingh 2006), and continual news reports. Predominant among news reports over several decades is road-building and other construction sites halted or interrupted because of disturbing *álagablettir*, enchanted locations in nature, that are often the dwellings of elves or hidden people (Valdimar Tr. Hafstein 1997; Gunnell 2012). The content is far from fantasy and reflects what I find to be a type of reality because it functions within society, is cross-confirmed by independent and collective testimony, and manifests regularly and consistently through a variety of media. In a historical context, Iceland's economy was long bound to fishing and farming and the island was constrained for resources for centuries into the modern period. Its culture reflects a continuity of tradition that is tied to its landscape. That these behaviors have sustained themselves over so many centuries in similar patterns in a geographically discrete context, an island, makes it possible, in some measure, to enhance understanding of the otherworldly motifs in the rich medieval literature.

Coming from the orientation of a highly secularized culture, even one rich in fantasy entertainment media, it can be difficult to approach a topic like this with any sense of reality. When spending time among Icelanders listening to them talk, watching their television programs, consulting their academic holdings, and reading their news sources, one becomes aware of an

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<sup>1</sup> See Sagnagrunnur, A geographically mapped database of Icelandic folk legends, Terry Gunnell, Trausti Dagsson [http://sagnagrunnur.com/scholarly-work-on-folk-legends/#Main\\_Legend\\_Collections\\_in\\_Iceland](http://sagnagrunnur.com/scholarly-work-on-folk-legends/#Main_Legend_Collections_in_Iceland)

<sup>2</sup> See ÍSMÚS <http://www.ismus.is/l/audio>, including videos, currently numbering 42,160 in *Íslenskur Músik- og Menningararfur* [Icelandic Music and Cultural Heritage] *Þjóðfræðisafn* [Folkloristics/Ethnology Collection] provided by *Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum* [The Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies] and *Tónlistarsafn Íslands* [Music Collection of Iceland]. Mediums also give their clients audio recordings of their meetings with them (Dorival and Pons 2010).

iceberg of testimony. The material is not isolated accounts but a dynamic network of information that is experienced daily and shared culturally. It is rooted in day-to-day life, tradition and folklore, and documented from the settlement of the island around 870 CE. The bulk of the medieval literature focuses on particular people in particular locations at particular times such as *Landnámabók* [*The Book of Settlements*], the sagas about prominent families and holy people, and even the more entertaining legendary sagas. All forms of the literature include some supernatural aspect, some fictional construction or remote reconstruction. And they contain references to real people and places often with a view to a long lineage of characters who came from Scandinavia, Ireland, or through the British Isles. There are influences of the native people of the European north, the Sámi, with their magical and shamanic background, as well as migratory peoples, and learned culture from continental Europe. But what took root in Iceland became its own literary and cultural heritage bound to its landscape, social needs, and political circumstances.

To begin to give an idea of the popular and scholarly descriptions of supernatural phenomena, Unnur Jökulsdóttir comments from her exploration of Icelanders' encounters with hidden people. A native Icelander, she is known for sailing the world's oceans (Unnur Jökulsdóttir and Þorbjörn Magnússon 1989, 1993), for a popular photo book of Icelanders (Sigurgeir Sigurjónsson and Unnur Jökulsdóttir 2004), and for children's books. In her Icelandic travel account *Hefurðu séð huldufólk?* [*Have you seen hidden people?*], she talks about how natural the topic is for her fellow citizens:

En þegar ég fór um landið fyrir nokkrum árum og hitti fólk til að mynda og spjalla við fyrir bókina *Íslendingar* fannst mér það sérstætt hversu margir töluðu um

huldufólk og samskipti sín eða annarra við það eins og um væri að ræða jafnhversdagslegan og sjálfsagðan hlut og fólkið í fréttunum eða nágrannana á næsta bæ. Þessi trú virtist enn lifa góðu lífi og var meira en bara trú og sögur, því ég hitti fólk sem var raunverulega að lýsa samskiptum sínum við huldufólk og álfa. (Unnur Jökulsdóttir 2007, 10)<sup>3</sup>

[But when I traveled around the country a few years ago and met people to photograph and chat with for the book *Icelanders* it seemed unusual to me how many talked about hidden people and their or others' dealings with them as if it were to discuss everyday or obvious things like the people in the news or the neighbors in the next town. This belief appeared still to be alive and well and was more than just belief and stories, because I met people who were really describing their relations with hidden people and elves.]

In an extensive social science study primarily concerning guardian spirits, Hrefna Sigríður Bjartmarsdóttir talks both about the numerous sources and research available and about people's willingness to discuss supernatural phenomena:

Þótt umræðan um spíritismann hafi mest verið áberandi á fyrri hluta síðustu aldar en hljóðnað síðan, þá lifir hann enn ágætu lífi meðal landsmanna. Um það vitnar sá fjöldi bóka um yfirnáttúrleg efni og miðla sem hérlendis hafa verið gefnar út á undanförunum áratugum og notið mikilla vinsælda sem og áhugi á miðils- og skyggnilýsingafundum. Auk þess hafa niðurstöður íslenskra rannsókna um efnið

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<sup>3</sup> Translations are mine unless cited otherwise.

sýnt fram á trú fólks á ýmiss konar dulræn fyrirbæri og þjóðtrú. (Hrefna Sigríður Bjartmarsdóttir 2015, 158)

[Although the discussion about spiritism has been most prominent in the earlier part of the last century and quieted since, it is alive and well among citizens. This is testified by the large number of books about supernatural topics and mediums that have been published in this country in the last decades and have enjoyed much popularity as well as interest in clairvoyance and mediumship gatherings. In addition to this, the results of Icelandic research about the matter has demonstrated people's belief in various kinds of psychic phenomena and folk belief.]<sup>4</sup>

Í viðtölum mínum við fólk segir það frá eigin reynslu og sinna nánustu út frá trúarhugmyndum sínum og lífssýn. Þetta er síður en svo yfirborðslegt spjall um daginn og veginn heldur er fólk þarna tilbúið að tjá sig um málefni sem hljóta að teljast mjög persónuleg. Ómetanlegt er hve fólk er tilbúið að deila af reynslu sinni og trú með öðrum enda er þetta dýrmætt efni til varðveislu og segir margt um trúarhugmyndir manna og lífssýn í nútíma þjóðfélagi og hvernig þær hugmyndir hafa í raun lítið breyst í aldir þrátt fyrir byltingarkenndar breytingar á samfélagi manna. (Hrefna Sigríður Bjartmarsdóttir 2015, 26)

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<sup>4</sup> *Þjóðtrú* I have translated here as folk belief in this context however the term came to cover a range of experience including national faith and was debated among scholars: (Árni Björnsson 1996, 1998; Valdimar Tr. Hafstein 1998a; Christophe Pons 1998; Erlendur Haraldsson 1999) (in Gunnell 2007a, [801]). See also (Matthías Viðar Sæmundsson 1997).



[In my interviews with people they tell of their own experiences and those of their families and friends from their beliefs and points of view. This is far from superficial chat about anything under the sun; rather people are ready to express themselves about an issue that must be considered very personal. It is inestimable the extent to which people are prepared to share their personal experiences and beliefs with others, especially being valuable subject matter for preserving and says a great deal about people's conceptions and outlooks in contemporary society and how these ideas essentially have altered little through the centuries despite revolutionary social changes.]

She goes on to explain that, in line with the work of Gillian Bennett, such personal narratives may be regarded in the same way as traditional tales,<sup>5</sup> and that it is more appropriate to treat them as memorates (first-person accounts of supernatural experiences) rather than fabulates (second- or third-person accounts) according to the denotation established by Carl von Sydow such as it is (Hrefna Sigríður Bjartmarsdóttir 2015, 26-27).<sup>6</sup> What is operative is the expression and recording of first-person accounts that emphasize the documentation of direct personal experience as opposed to second-hand anecdotes or narratives meant to entertain. As published they become social and cultural testimony and heritage and still manage to entertain.

The difference between the seemingly fictional national or folk stories, *þjóðsögur*, and anecdotes and data that continue today is partly the distance from the source and partly editing and presentation of the narrative. That the content would be classified according to motifs is

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<sup>5</sup> Gillian Bennett. 1999. *Alas, Poor Ghost!: Traditions of Belief in Story and Discourse*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press. 3-5.

<sup>6</sup> Carl Wilhelm von Sydow. [1948]. *Selected Papers on Folklore*. Published on the Occasion of his 70th Birthday. Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger.

partly comparative with tales of other traditions and partly a way of organizing experience. This extends back in time to the medieval Icelandic sagas. As they were first composed, originators drew on the experiences of real people and places, particularly tied to a family or lineage.

*Landnámabók* [*The Book of Settlements*], was an early history and directory of the settlement of Iceland and it is rich with supernatural accounts. Editors of the national edition of sagas, Íslenzk fornrit, take care to check and document references to named persons and places. In the later medieval literature, as it became less documentary and more entertaining, it was clear that there were insertions of popular and expected aspects such as dreams and prophecies, mention of characters from the settlement book, and creative invention and description of events. The intertextuality of the content of the sagas as well as the later folk stories reveals shared storytelling. The boundary between real events and narrative craft becomes fluid from account to account and from genre to genre. With the recording of the material taking place a couple to a few hundred years after events, it is natural that they would be more legendary than factual. However current social science methods are making possible careful and accurate documentation of these phenomena.

Christophe Pons recounts that while he was doing ethnographic research in Iceland, he saw a correspondence between what living Icelanders were telling him during the day and what he read in the nineteenth-century folk stories at night. They were the same. Most importantly for him was not to speculate about the nature and import of the stories but to be able to record such events as they were happening in real life according to established social science methodology. Researching a family in the northwest dealing with a haunting (Pons 2002, [17]-49), he observes:

Chaque soir je lisais les *þjóðsögur* de Jón Árnason, de Arngrímur Bjarnason, de Davíð Ólafsson et bien d'autres encore. Et quand je comparais ces deux matériaux, les *þjóðsögur* et mes entretiens, je me demandais quelle était la différence. Il n'y en avait pas, ou plutôt si, une seule différence : je pouvais analyser mes entretiens à la lumière de ceux qui me les racontaient. C'est ce que j'ai essayé de faire ici avec cette famille. J'espère qu'on aura saisi que, appréhendées de cette manière, les *þjóðtrú* ne sont plus simplement des superstitions sans rationalité, mais qu'elles nous donnent accès à des représentations mentales qui nous parlent de la culture islandaise. (Pons 1998, 14-15)

[Each evening I read the folk stories of Jón Árnason, of Arngrímur Bjarnason, of Davíð Ólafsson and many others. And when I was comparing these two materials, the folk stories and my interviews, I was asking myself what the difference was. There wasn't any, or rather yes, a single difference: I was able to analyze my interviews in light of those who were telling them to me. This is what I tried to do with this family. I hope one will have grasped that, comprehended in this way, the folk stories are no longer simply superstitions without rationality, but that they give us access to mental portrayals that speak to us about Icelandic culture.]

Further, the death that is related to the haunting either illuminates folklore or reveals it in a contemporary setting: "Ce décès a ainsi constitué un traumatisme éloquent pour certains des individus. Il apparaît alors que l'aventure spectrale de la famille plonge ses racines dans

l'histoire vécue des individus, et propose une lecture folklorique des scènes de la vie quotidienne” [In this way the death represented an eloquent trauma for certain individuals [in the family]. It seems then that the family’s ghostly incident thrusts its roots into the living history of individuals, and suggests a folkloric reading of scenes of daily life] (Pons 1998, 13). Pons says, “Bien sûr, si on limite son approche des *þjóðtrú* aux recueils des folkloristes du siècle dernier, un tel travail est impossible” [Of course if one limits one’s approach to the folk stories to the collecting of folklorists of the last century, such work is impossible] (Pons 1998, 14). He explains in another example of news reports of Þórbergur Þórðarson about the phantom of a family in Viðfjörður in 1945 that it conveys something but this something is inaccessible because it is no longer possible to perform the sociology of these people (Pons 1998, 12, 14).

Pons observes: “En conséquence, les représentations culturelles qui étaient actives au temps où étaient écrites les *þjóðsögur* sont, dans une large mesure, toujours en fonction aujourd’hui. Le travail de l’anthropologue consiste à les faire resurgir à la surface” [As a result, the cultural descriptions which were active at the time the *þjóðsögur* [folk stories] were written are, to a great extent, still in operation today. The work of the anthropologist consists in making them reappear at the surface] (Pons 1998, 15). As Pons shows, part of the cultural context and where the supernatural functions is in families and generational lineages. In literature this is clear in the sagas, especially those about prominent Icelandic families. Ultimately one liberates oneself from the false problem of belief (Pons 1998, 15). In sum, what Pons suggests is that any focus on trying to explain belief in the supernatural or to engage the metaphysical is out of the realm of anthropology, and as soon as one confronts the irrational, one closes the door on an anthropological approach. Belief is not the issue. Culturally-shared behavior is. Pons explains that what this reveals is an Icelandic mental representation of interactive cultural experience

particularly tied to place and to nature (Pons 1998, 2-3, 15).

The haunting, which Pons uses as the anthropological basis for his 1998 article, is taken up in succession his 2002 monograph *Le spectre et le voyant: Les échanges entre morts et vivants en Islande* [*The Specter and the Seer: Exchanges between Living and Dead in Iceland*]. It is based on several years of master's, doctoral, and postdoctoral research in the remote northwest fjords of Iceland (Pons 2011; 2004; 2002, [5], 20, 21; 1993). The family haunting he describes is based on an infanticide, either disposing of the child or exposing it to die (Pons 2002, 27). The practice was known to medieval Iceland and later when not all mouths could be fed (Pons 2002, 23).<sup>7</sup> Members of the family are troubled by the ghost and the situation is confirmed socially and psychically: more than one member of the family is affected over generations, awareness is part of the family history tied to a farm near Ísafjörður, and because of possession by the bad spirit and communication with a guardian spirit, the affected know what the problem is and finally begin to obtain help (Pons 2002, 25-28). The background of this haunting is also documented in the news (Pons 2002, 30-31),<sup>8</sup> and on the radio (Pons 2002, 48).<sup>9</sup>

This interaction between living and dead is a theme in this discussion. One of the aspects that contributes to the duration of such behavior is that there is a need for each side to help the other. People need answers to life on earth and assistance with daily life and the troubled deceased need to move on or the beneficent deceased need to remain and guide. Pons refers to this as a system of exchange between two communities, the living and the dead (Pons 2002, 13), part of an Icelandic ethos (Pons 2002, 176). This is what becomes apparent in observing reasons

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<sup>7</sup> Hauntings resulting from exposing infants figure in Nordic folklore. See also Pentikäinen (1968).

<sup>8</sup> See Hjalti for Sigurður in “Undarleg sjón og skynjan” part 3 in *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, Ásgeir Jakobsson, 3 September 1994, pp. 5-6. (part 1: 13 August 1994, pp. 4-5 and part 2: 27 August 1994, pp. [1]-2). Also in (Pons 1999, 43).

<sup>9</sup> “Aventures surnaturelles de Sigurður d’Ísafjörður.”

why Icelanders consult mediums or in accepting names that deceased relatives express through dreams, that newborns be named after family members. I draw on this example from Christophe Pons because it shows an anthropologist at work documenting a social phenomenon, it is published in a scholarly work, and provides a pattern for the numerous accounts that have been collected over time in various media and are discussed by Icelanders today. It places ancient and more recent accounts in perspective, if and when such behavior continues in a way that can be witnessed and documented. It is one of numerous examples that contribute to the understanding that there is an active practice in Iceland today, an open secret of Icelandic otherworldly communication.

Concerning the fluid boundary between story and experience is classification of material. The issue about saga genre has raged for decades and is not likely to ebb.<sup>10</sup> The organization of material in the folk stories, *þjóðsögur*, followed a more uniform process from edition to edition. Jón Árnason and Magnús Grímsson planned to collect popular versions of tales of ancient times as early as 1845 (Rósa Þorsteinsdóttir in Maurer 2015, vii), and it was Konrad Maurer who, inspired by the work of the two men, established the scheme for his arrangement of Icelandic tales in German in 1860 that influenced subsequent collections of stories in Iceland (Maurer 2015, viii; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 2003, 18-20). Jónas Jónasson frá Hrafnagili criticized the scheme as obsolete. He also found it difficult because it was divided into different groups with the preference for single story elements (Rósa Þorsteinsdóttir in Maurer 2015, viii). Jón Árnason and Magnús Grímsson's first edition was fairy tales published as *Íslensk æfintýri* in 1852.<sup>11</sup> After Magnús Grímsson's death in 1860, Jón Árnason, with encouragement from Konrad Maurer, continued with the work of collecting that led to the publication of the fairy tales together with

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion about genre see Bampi (2017, 4-14) and Quinn (2006).

<sup>11</sup> For a study on the fairy tales and the craft of storytelling in Iceland see Rósa Þorsteinsdóttir (2011).

the folk stories in two volumes in the edition of 1862-1864 (Gunnell 2007b, 24; Rósa Þorsteinsdóttir in Maurer 2015, vii-viii). The preface to that edition by Guðbrand[u]r Vigfússon speaks of the inherent supernatural content and the almost inseparability of tales from the sagas extending this to say that the so-called true sagas and the so-called superstitious tales, or *hjátrúarsögur*, in essence having grown up together, may be called folk stories, or national tales, *þjóðsögur* (Guðbrand[u]r Vigfússon in Jón Árnason 1862, [v]). As with the conception of myth, which can mean both a false story and a central narrative for a culture, superstition in this sense is not superficial behavior intended to affect an outcome; it is another form of folk belief. If *þjóðtrú* can refer to national faith as well as folk belief, *hjátrú* can refer to superstition generally, where here it suggests belief aside from or by, *hjá*, other forms of faith or belief, *trú*. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson even remarks that “*Hjátrú* er notað um þau fyrirbæri sem fara í bága við ríkjandi trúarbrögð [Superstition is used about those phenomena that go against the dominant religion]” (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1988b, 347 qtd. in Hrefna Sigríður Bjartmarsdóttir 2015, 116). As mentioned in a previous note about the scholarly debate about the nature of the term *þjóðtrú*, numerous terms like *fylgja* [follower, fetch, guardian spirit] in this discussion are ambiguous as seen in divergent attested uses over time. For its part, the word *saga*, related to the verb *segja* [to say] means both story and history. While I see neither a need to belabor terminology nor to parse it for the purposes of this study, I take it up to contextualize its use in particular instances.

Further, Guðbrand[u]r Vigfússon speaks of the aspiration to look to folklore happening actively, over and against collecting and preserving relics of the past, expressing that folklore is alive in the context of the nation and its accounts. A nation is fossilized that only remembers (Guðbrand[u]r Vigfússon in Jón Árnason 1862, [v]-vi). This from the nineteenth-century speaks to the work of anthropologists, like Christophe Pons who lives and interacts with people,

observing and taking note of the nature of their existence. His publications become testimony of a people in a time and place that together over an expanse of an island nation may come to form an image, identity, or spirit of a time. In the preface to the folk stories, Guðbrand[u]r Vigfússon refers to an ancient mentality, *fornaldarhug[u]r*, among Icelanders that is sustained across the ages and gives the tales their historic character but not their age (Guðbrand[u]r Vigfússon in Jón Árnason 1862, [v]-vi). With the folk stories as opposed to the sagas, Icelanders were slow to collect and curate their narrative riches compared to other northern and western European nations, keeping stories to themselves remotely and sharing them from person to person, sometimes out of the reach of official culture (Guðbrand[u]r Vigfússon in Jón Árnason 1862, xxii, xxv-xxvi). Early in saga writing it was in fact the official culture of learned Christian clerics that collected, compiled, stored, and distributed the specimens of oral tradition (Sverrir Tómasson 1992, [263]-308; Torfi Tulinius 2002, 65-69). The nineteenth-century folk project, it turns out, was a prominent one, a cultural awakening that, with the assistance of interested international scholars like Konrad Maurer, as well as influential Icelanders abroad like Jón Sigurðsson, began to place the sources within reach of a broader public. Jón Árnason tried to preserve the accounts as they were given to him and they reflect differences in regional expression (Guðbrand[u]r Vigfússon in Jón Árnason 1862, xxxi).

There is tension and ambiguity between how patterns are identified and how to organize the material. If they are motivic, they can be divided into categories according to, say, supernatural creatures like trolls or water monsters. However if they are more contemporary and less remote, then they may still deal with elves and hidden people or they may reflect a need or a function. They reveal the preoccupations of the time and place in which taken and yet certain patterns remain constant. Older narratives have the character of story and newer ones of anecdote



or news. Older ones may tend to entertain and newer ones to inform. The first collection by Jón Árnason together with Magnús Grímsson is organized by individual narratives with some metadata about their acquisition (*Íslenzk æfintýri* 1852). The 1862-1864 collection is categorized as, for example, mythological stories; creatures like elves and sea monsters, trolls, ghosts; and magical stories. Subclasses include types of ghosts like revenants and living dead. Magical matter deals with prodigies, conjuring, and particular magicians. The first of two volumes includes nature stories, animal tales, botanical and mineral entries, and contributions about the sky, moon, seas, and place names. The second volume is largely articles treating sacred stories, holy people, God, the devil, heaven and hell, superstition from Catholic tradition, and accounts about people and events. The content extends from fairy tales and adventure stories to humor and general superstitions (Jón Árnason 1862-1864).<sup>12</sup> It can be seen from the 1852 edition that accounts are elicited from pastors, local people, and storytellers, and from the 1862-1864 edition that a broader range of experience is culled to form a more representative portrayal of the island. The English translation edition of 1864 contains a considerably reduced selection of the tales. Rather than heading subclasses the rubrics gather individual stories: Stories of Elves, Stories of Water-Monsters, Stories of Trolls, Stories of Ghosts and Goblins, and Miscellaneous which contain entries about priests and bishops, wizards and magic. The entries appear to be classified according to supernatural beings. In the preface to these *Icelandic Legends*, George E. J. Powell and Eiríkur Magnússon explain that the translation was prepared for “amusement” and that significant editing was undertaken (*Icelandic Legends* 1864, 6, 9-10).

A significant multivolume latter-day collection of national tales and folk stories came from the east of Iceland, the work of Sigfús Sigfússon (1855-1935) (Sigfús Sigfússon 1922-

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<sup>12</sup> Ármann Jakobsson investigates the classification scheme in relation to the taxonomic and typological spirit of that era (2013).

1958; rev. 1982-1993). This compilation follows similar classification schemes of previously published collections, including religion and guardian spirits, elves and hidden people, and adds sections on dreams and prophecy, visions and revelations, accomplished or remarkable people including outlaws, and rhymes and riddles. Sigfús Sigfússon explains in his preface that he knew the material so well that he could tell when an informant was telling a tale from a previous collection like the one prepared by Jón Árnason or whether the story resided in oral tradition. Further, he could distinguish similar kinds of narratives from newly categorized ones (Sigfús Sigfússon 1922, [5]). To the extent possible, collections name informants and sources. Audio and video recorded entries in a contemporary online collection like ÍSMÚS, *Íslenskur Músík- og Menningararfur* [Icelandic Music and Cultural Heritage] *Þjóðfræðisafn* [Folkloristics/Ethnology Collection], are tagged as numerous access points including informant and location as well as subject keyword like *huldufólk* [hidden people]. Consequently it is possible to listen to or see a recording of a person talking about a personal experience.<sup>13</sup>

Christophe Pons finds one way of looking at the material is as received history vs. lived history, or myth and biography (Pons 2002, [41]). It may very well be that the patterns align with interpretive or comparative approaches and motif analyses at the etic level of the attempted objective description of an outside observer.<sup>14</sup> However viewing the phenomena at the emic level of the insiders' functional relationships among themselves, as well as the succession and consequences of the phenomena, it is possible to distinguish between how meaning is defined for Icelanders and for observers. Pons notes that Icelandic folklorists categorized tales and accounts according to their social function (Pons 2002, 50), and that there is little or no boundary between

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<sup>13</sup> An example of a recording of a man recalling an experience of hidden people: [catalog number HérVHún Fræðafélag 026] <https://www.ismus.is/i/audio/id-1041691>

<sup>14</sup> One example is Vladimir Propp's (1928 [1968]) morphology of the folktale. Others are Boberg (1966) and Uther (2004).

what is experienced and what is told (Pons 2002, 66). In essence, what is expressed is based on what is experienced as part of the cultural heritage going back hundreds of years through a network of family and social lines (Pons 2002, 66, 69).

A recent modern manifestation of folk accounts is the 2016 television production *Reimleikar*, or *Hauntings* or *Haunted*, in six half-hour episodes by Bryndís Björgvinsdóttir.<sup>15</sup> It features prominent people and places in Icelandic society that are linked with psychic phenomena. In the series, people tell of their experiences with supernatural phenomena linked to place and scholars comment on the bases in folklore or psychology. Film and internet are significant information and storytelling media nowadays and this production was available online for a time after broadcast. Originally based on a book about hauntings in Reykjavík (Steinar Bragi 2013), the presentation came to be loosely organized around the established folk-story classification: I - Draugatrú—hinir ódauðu [ghost belief—the undead]; II - Gæfan og ógæfan [Good luck and bad luck]; III - Gamlir draugar á nýjum belgjum [Old ghosts in new skins]; IV - Hús með sál [Houses with soul]; V - Álfar og tröll [Elves and trolls]; VI - Tengingar [Connections (Human)]. Bryndís narrates and guides, telling viewers that some might think that such beliefs find their place in olden times; however what ensues is narratives by actors, mediums, priests, professors, citizens, and others including a publisher, doctors, and a president's daughter. There are stories of haunted places in downtown Reykjavík like the buildings around Tjörnin, The Pond: Tjarnarbíó [the Pond movie theater], the multipurpose Iðnó (Iðnaðarmannafélag Reykjavíkur) [craft union of Reykjavík], Þjóðhúsið [National Theatre of

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<sup>15</sup> The show's blurb reads: "Ný þáttaröð þar sem draugatrú Íslendinga tekin til skoðunar ásamt annarri þjóðtrú, á borð við hjátrú og trú á álfa. Rætt er við ýmsa sérfræðinga og þá sem hafa haft persónuleg kynni af afturgöngum, álfum eða framliðnum. Rýnt er í hvernig draugatrú endurspeglar samfélagið, menninguna og síðast en ekki síst, sálarlíf og samvisku mannsins" [New series in which Icelanders' belief in ghosts is examined along with other folk belief, in line with superstition and belief in elves. Discussions are with experts and those who have personally been acquainted with revenants, elves, or the deceased. The investigation is into how belief in ghosts reflects society, culture, and, last but not least, human inner life and conscience] (*Reimleikar* appeared 3 November 2016; available online until 1 February 2017). <http://www.ruv.is/sarpurinn/ruv/reimleikar/20161103>

Iceland], Bessastaðir [presidential residence], and Höfði [Headland], the house in which American president Ronald Reagan and Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev met in 1986. It was also the British Embassy visited by Queen Elizabeth II and Winston Churchill.

It seems that in these places, rather than trying to encourage the spirits to leave, people have made peace with them, welcoming them in what already are their homes. As with Guðni Reynir Þorbjörnsson mentioned above, these ghost stories come with documented history underlying the people and events surrounding the hauntings. The caretaker of Höfði, Anna Karen Kristinsdóttir, tells of the ownership of Höfði by lawyer, entrepreneur, and poet Einar Benediktsson (1864-1940) and about Sólborg Jónsdóttir whose spirit beset him. Einar investigated the case of Sólborg who had a baby with her half-brother Sigurjón Einarsson. Among other details, Sigurjón disposed of the infant and Sólborg poisoned herself. The complicated case and its consequences were widely covered in literature, arts, and media.<sup>16</sup> The story is also rendered in the painting *Einar Ben og Sólborg - The Haunted Poet* by Þrándur Þórarinnsson (2013).<sup>17</sup> Anna Karen says that Sólborg has caused two former house caretakers to trip on the staircase and that glasses fell and broke in the kitchen. She explains that people, while they do not see her, sense her. Anna Karen says that Sólborg is part of the house and that she takes care of it (Bryndís Björgvinsdóttir 2016, *Reimleikar IV*: 00:15:20 - 00:17:19). A similar historical matter influences the presidential residence of Iceland, Bessastaðir. The daughter of President Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, Ástriður Magnúsdóttir, is interviewed along with author Páll Valsson telling of their experience of the hauntings there by Apollonia Schwartzkopf. She charged Norwegian official Niels Fuhrmann with breaking their engagement and the decision was that he should marry her. In 1722 she moved with him to Bessastaðir and died in 1724 of an

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<sup>16</sup> “Sagan og skáldskapurinn,” *Morgunblaðið*, 10 January 1999 <http://www.mbl.is/greinasafn/grein/442163/>

<sup>17</sup> <http://thrandur.com/einar-ben-og-solborg-haunted-poet/>

unknown illness, seemingly at the hands of Danish friends, mother and daughter Katharina and Karen Holm (Guðbrandur Jónsson 1936-1939; Páll Valsson 2009, 370-371).<sup>18</sup> In *Reimleikar*, President Vigdís Finnbogadóttir is reported to say the first night of her arrival at the presidential residence, “Apollónía Schwartzkopf, ef þú ert hér þá ertu velkomin að búa hérna með mér! [Apollonia Schwartzkopf, if you are here, then you are welcome to live with me!]” (Bryndís Björgvinsdóttir 2016, *Reimleikar* IV: 00:23:16; Páll Valsson 2009, 371).

Certain scholars with ambivalent stances toward these phenomena have made some of the most significant contributions through years of research and they retain their openness. Árni Björnsson devoted a career to folklore studies including three decades as director of the folk customs department of the National Museum of Iceland with numerous publications and radio and television appearances. He established a veritable apparatus for Icelandic folk heritage with his handbook on Icelandic holidays and traditions and released a recent anniversary collection of his works (Árni Björnsson 2000, 2017). He expresses his position: “Sjálfur trúi ég því miður ekki á tilveru huldufólks. Samt mundi ég ekki vilja útiloka með öllu að til gætu verið einhverjar huldur vættir sem ófullkomin skilningarvit okkar næðu ekki að skynja [Personally, unfortunately, I do not believe in the existence of hidden people. Still I would not want to rule out along with everything else that there could be some kind of hidden beings which our imperfect senses do not manage to perceive]” (Árni Björnsson 1998, 169). Robert Anderson says: “I am a skeptic, but I am open-minded. As a professional anthropologist, my job is to learn about other social worlds, other ways of being human, and to write about what I have learned. I have been trained as much as it is humanly possible to avoid ethnocentric closed-mindedness and to try as skillfully as I can to understand how alternative ways of thinking, acting, desiring, and believing can make good

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<sup>18</sup> See also Richard Wallis, “Ghosts, Elves Alive and Well: Iceland’s Belief in Supernatural Is No Fairy Tale,” *Reuters in Los Angeles Times*, Sunday 12 October 1986  
[http://articles.latimes.com/1986-10-12/news/mn-2866\\_1\\_ghost](http://articles.latimes.com/1986-10-12/news/mn-2866_1_ghost)

sense where they occur, no matter how different they may be from my own ways” (Anderson 2005, xv-xvi). He also leaves room for professional flexibility and acknowledged that “this book is a product of serendipity” (Anderson 2005, xvi). Ármann Jakobsson, scrutinized the multiplicity and nature of terms in Icelandic saga literature and folklore that deal with the supernatural, that is creatures and concepts. He concludes: “Thus a new conceptualisation based on the medieval terminology to replace the nineteenth-century categories is neither possible nor even desirable. What this close examination upon the vocabulary of the paranormal tells us instead is that the non-existent will never yield easily to a taxonomy based on the natural world. Paranormal experiences must essentially remain mysterious and occult. The unexplained will not be explained and neither will chaos yield easily to order” (Ármann Jakobsson 2013, 212). In the recent documentary series about hauntings, *Reimleikar*, he characterizes the experiences this way:

Draugar tilheyra í raun og veru þeim fjölmenna hópi af yfirnáttúrulegum verum sem eru í raun og veru manneskjur. Það er að segja draugurinn er ekki utan við okkur sjálf heldur er hann í einhverjum skilningi við, og í draugnum glímir fólk við sitt innra líf á einhvern hátt. Það er að segja að draugar eru ekki aðeins notaðir til að skýra eitthvert náttúru fyrirbæri sem er utan við okkur, heldur birtist draugurinn okkur af því að það er eitthvað hjá okkur sjálfum sem kallar á hann, þannig að skýringanna á draugum held ég að sé ekki síst að leita í mannssálinni. (Ármann Jakobsson in Bryndís Björgvinsdóttir 2016, *Reimleikar* I: 00:24.11 - 00:24:51)

[In reality, ghosts belong to that populous group of supernatural beings that really are people. That is to say that the ghost is not outside of ourselves rather it is in some sense we ourselves, and through the ghost people wrestle with their inner lives in some way. That is to say that ghosts are not just used to explain some natural phenomenon that is outside ourselves, rather the ghost appears to us because it is something inside ourselves which calls it forth so that the explanation for ghosts I believe is not least to be found in the human psyche.]

Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir conceives of it this way: “Regarding the marvellous dimension, it does not really matter whether people believed that some things were possible and others not, whether trolls, dragons, dwarfs and revenants really existed or not, and whether they were of the supernatural or the ‘fantastic’ kind; they simply belong to the language of the mind. While they represent the ‘other’, they represent ourselves and our conception of the world we live in” (Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2014, 36). In such a discussion, these eloquently evoked psychological dimensions are a matter of course and I find that these phenomena reflect additional dimensions, such as sensory, religious, social, natural, and historical. They extend beyond the mind and personal experience and orient and balance, and unsettle, inner and outer experience. And often they are mediated.

## II - Mediation: mediums and media

Supernatural phenomena can be perceived directly such as if one sees a ghost or elf, or has a clear and memorable dream. In Icelandic culture, both in contemporary life and in the medieval sagas, the experiences are often mediated in some way. The literature itself is a medium of signs and symbols, of representations of ideas, that convey meaning, further mediated by the mind, and negotiated by storytellers and listeners and readers. The current running through the ancient material and modern practice is that story is the ultimate medium. If the narrative is oral, then listening is the receptor. This social act of sharing and receiving comforts or provokes, and it promotes social cohesion through collective experience. Indeed, the problem of belief is partly this mediation between inner and outer worlds and how phenomena are accounted for or measured. Spirits and dreams, when not directly accessible, are mediated. It is neither unusual for clairvoyance to run in families nor for Icelanders to visit mediums. One way they do this is by visiting a center such as the Sálarrannsóknarfélag Íslands [Icelandic Society for Psychical Research] or by forming local prayer circles or meetings with psychics (Dempsey 2017; Pons 2011; Anderson 2005; Swatos and Loftur Reimar Gissurarson 1997). Robert Anderson points out that:

Those who are involved in contacting spirits of the dead pick and choose from the cultural menu in deciding what to believe and what to do about death and the afterlife, unconstrained by theological dogma or the authority of a priesthood. Many otherwise quite ordinary people encounter spirits of the dead spontaneously and entirely on their own. Yet functionaries do exist to systematize beliefs,



energize voluntary associations, conduct rituals, and, as their signature responsibility, give voice to the dead. We call them spirit mediums because they mediate between the living and the dead. They not only interact with spirits and ghosts on their own behalf, but on behalf of others. In that sense, they have a ritual function in some ways comparable to that of a priest or minister. (Anderson 2005, 46-47)

Dreaming is another prominent mediating facet of Icelandic culture and is featured in the sagas and in the national tales (Heijnen 2013). Many important communications are passed on through the medium of dreams by deceased family members as well as by guardian spirits or local or nature spirits (Hrefna Sigríður Bjartmarsdóttir 2015). Because these phenomena are closely related to nature it is common to send out a thought or intention to the local nature spirits to touch base before building on one's property. A response will often come by way of a dream. If one attempts some change on a property without consulting the local spirits, a warning may come by way of a dream and a transgression will be punished such as by an injury to person or livestock. Such exchanges are well documented in news reports about people who come in conflict with enchanted spots in nature or rocks or locations that are the dwellings of elves and hidden people [*álagablettir*] (Inga Katrín D. Magnúsdóttir 2016; Fríða Björk Ólafsdóttir 2015, Gunnell 2012). The understanding is that disturbing these spots brings undesirable consequences. Mediums will often say that every person has the capacity to access supernatural phenomena or to rely on inner powers; however it is clear that certain people are particularly adept at seeing, mediating, and effecting results. Such mediation is not about seeking out a fortune teller as an amusement; it is quite practical.

In 1978 the Icelandic road authority (Vegagerðin [Icelandic Road and Coastal Administration]) was attempting to construct a direct route through a pass between two rock formations at Tröllskarð in Hegranes. The intention was to blast rock. Equipment to dig would not work (Valdimar Tr. Hafstein 1997, 126-127). Coming up against the enchanted spots, *álagablettir*, on private or public land, is common in Iceland and well documented in the news. Valdimar Tr. Hafstein chose to write about this incident, among all the sources he was researching, because it was particularly interesting, given the uncanny circumstances and confluence of testimony. Usually when construction equipment stops functioning, people expect that they are disturbing the dwellings of elves or hidden people but this incident was based on a curse of a woman, Gríma, who had been in a disagreement with a neighboring clergyman about grazing in the pasture in the fifteenth or sixteenth century (Valdimar Tr. Hafstein 1997, 116, 122). The information about this situation came not only from consulting a medium, as one does, but from independent psychic accounts. The wife of the district manager of the road authority was at a group meeting with a medium and was asked by him, as well as by the wife of one of the road workers, about the project to build the new road. She had not heard anything about it. She went home to tell her husband (Valdimar Tr. Hafstein 1997, 115-116). Information from the other world about problems with the project appeared to precede communication in this world. The deceased and hidden people were asking for help from the living to alter the plans of the project. The living were going to try to negotiate with the deceased about getting concessions because they wanted to avoid a blind spot in the rise of the road (Valdimar Tr. Hafstein 1997, 123-124).

The district manager was approached in his office by a young farmer who said that his mother, who was visiting him, had had an apparition of a well-dressed gentleman from the

hidden people, who spoke about the road plans and warned that there would be consequences in proportion to the deeds. The mother knew nothing of the construction project and urged her son to speak to the boss. He went to his superior with the information (Valdimar Tr. Hafstein 1997, 117-118). A small group went to meet with the famous medium Hafsteinn Björnsson. One of the road workers said, “Hafsteinn var góður, ég fékk mikla trú á honum eftir þetta. Ég hafði aldrei á tilfinningunni að hann væri að tala við okkur, heldur aðrir að tala í gegnum hann [Hafsteinn was good, I had a lot of faith in him after this. I never had the feeling that he was talking to us, rather that others were speaking through him]” (qtd. in Valdimar Tr. Hafstein 1997, 120). He said he knew one of the deceased people who came through but not another. He confirmed some details with his sister later. The spirit person guiding Hafsteinn told the road worker that there was an important message waiting for him at home. The man said that with all the things on his table, he might have missed it and he was surprised by the accuracy of the information that came up at the meeting (Valdimar Tr. Hafstein 1997, 120-121). The project foreman, for his part, explained that throughout his life he had prophetic dreams that came true. At this time he had two dreams in which a hidden person appeared to him and, physically coercing him, asked him not to disturb anything. He also perceived that he had an advocate on that side, a seminarian whom he identified by name, who was trying to balance the situation (Valdimar Tr. Hafstein 1997, 124-126). After the equipment failure and frightened workers, no significant blast was undertaken and the road was carved out still with a blind spot; people and nature seemed to have compromised. It had come up in one of the meetings with the medium that if there were no explosions then there would be no accidents on that stretch of road (Valdimar Tr. Hafstein 1997, 126-129).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> These happenings were also covered in the national news: “Vegagerð á miðilsfundi vegna meints álagabletts í Hegranesi [Road authority at meeting with medium on account of harming enchanted spot at Hegranes],”

When I was speaking with Jóhanna Katrín Bender (Hanna Kata) of Selfoss recently, I was trying to arrive at an understanding of some of these phenomena from the standpoint of a modern practitioner (Monday 13 February 2017). At one point while we were talking, she gazed slightly past my right shoulder and paused. She said my grandfather was standing there. He died a year before I was born. I never knew him but I saw pictures and heard about him from relatives. I did not visit Hanna Kata to get a reading and if I had the feeling that spirits would interrupt our meeting I would have prevented it because I did not want to waste her time. But this was happening and she was going along with it. My grandfather was telling me about himself and his life through her. As with the previous example of the road authority meeting with Hafsteinn Björnsson the medium, she was not telling me anything, she was relaying information. Some of the things I knew and some I did not. I took notes. Later, in talking with my uncle, I confirmed details that came through that I didn't know about, and my grandfather mentioned particular objects of his that I have in my possession. I was meeting Hanna Kata for the first time. There is no way she could know anything about these details. To compare this reading with the account in Valdimar's story, one of the patterns is that some information is given which is known, some is confirmed with others or remains to be seen, and some identifies or verifies the source. Part of the function of these visitations is to let us know that we are not alone or to share information that will be useful to us. It is not that we don't think about or sense departed loved ones, or even dream about them or get a premonition about something, it is that some practitioners are adept and mediate between the worlds.

Anthropologist Robert Anderson subjected himself to two readings that for him were not

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*Morgunblaðið*, 22 August 1997 <http://www.mbl.is/greinasafn/grein/349435/> and “Vegagerðin vék úr vegi álaganna [Road authority moved out of the way of the spells],” *Morgunblaðið*, 22 August 1997 <http://www.mbl.is/greinasafn/grein/349369/>

successful. He found that the medium prompted too much for information and that the information that did come through did not speak to him.

In Chapter 11, I provide transcripts of two occasions when mediums facilitated supposed conversations between my deceased father and me. Based on those and other personal experiences, I have to conclude that spirits of the dead do not truly communicate with the living and I question whether they can be said to exist at all. I want to emphasize that I do not assume that mediums consciously misrepresent themselves. I prefer to believe that they are self-deceived. I also freely acknowledge that while I found no evidence that the dead survive the grave, it is always possible that someone else will, because I can only deny the specific claims that came to my attention. Note, too, in Chapter 11 and in the concluding epilogue, that I ended up being deeply appreciative of the beauty and value of spirit beliefs that center on the ultimate importance of loving and serving other, the cosmic lesson useful to everyone. (Anderson 2005, xviii)

Because of this process of mediation, a psychic receives information in mediated form, such as images, songs, aromas, impressions, and so forth. Even a conversation between two people is a negotiation of meaning. So the psychic may even receive fragments of names and ask the client if the name as given makes sense. This may seem like baiting to a skeptical participant. Hanna Kata told me that they are trained to ask, “Do you understand?” or “Can you understand that?”

“Vituð ér enn – eða hvat? [Do you know yet – or what?]" (*Völuspá* 2014, 298).<sup>20</sup> *Völuspá* [*The Seeress's Prophecy*] is one of the oldest extant sources of medieval Icelandic literature and

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<sup>20</sup> “Vitu þér enn – eða hvat?” (“*Völuspá*” 2014, 311, 318).

is also one of the most prominent. It is an eddic poem that comprises Norse cosmology and mythology and offers insights into Old Norse religions. It is framed with the god Óðinn in dialog with a seeress, inquiring about the nature of existence, its origin and destiny. “Ein sat hon úti, þá er inn aldni kom . . . Hvers fregnið mik? Hví freistið mín? [She sat out alone, when the old one came . . . Why do you ask me? Why do you try me?]” (*Völuspá* 2014, 298). What is suggested as represented is a twofold prophetic function: *að frétta* or *að ganga til fréttar* [“in a religious sense, *enquiring of gods or men about the future*”] and *útiseta* [“*a sitting out, in the open air, esp. of wizards sitting out at night for the sake of sorcery or prophesying*”] (*Icelandic-English Dictionary* 1957, 173, 671). This impulse *að frétta* [to learn, hear, inquire about news, *frétt, fréttir*] is also a central feature of modern Icelandic language and culture and sheds light on this cultural phenomenon of sharing news for survival and entertainment. It is aligned with oral tradition and storytelling. In the context of this ancient verse it has deeply religious roots as the practice tends to belong to spiritually adept members of the community who mediate between the worlds. An early understanding of obtaining hidden information, *að ganga til frétta*, is sacrificial. The religious gatherings involved dipping twigs in the blood of a slaughtered animal and sprinkling it on the altar and the walls of the temple and on the people within (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1988a, 54-55).

In *Völuspá* the god Hœnir will choose wooden lots for prophecy: “Þá kná Hœnir hl[a]utvið kjósa” (*Völuspá* 2014, 306, 316). In *Örvar-Odds saga*, after the prophetess Heiðr performs the incantation rituals recalling older sacrificial tradition, Ingjaldr asks her what she has learned. This is the social function of asking for news, reflecting both ritual and social aspects. “En Ingjaldr kom til hennar um morguninn ok spurði, hversu at hefði borit um seiðinn. ‘Þat ætla ek,’ sagði hún, ‘at ek hafa vís orðit þess, sem þér vilið vita.’ ‘Þá skal skipa mönnum í sæti,’ sagði

Ingjaldr, ‘ok hafa af þér fréttir’ [Ingjaldr approached her in the morning and asked how the incantations had gone. ‘I think,’ she said, ‘that I have become aware of what you want to know.’ ‘Then people shall be seated,’ said Ingjaldr, ‘and get news from you’]” (*Örvar-Odds saga* 1954, II: 206).<sup>21</sup> Such thirteenth- and fourteenth-century written testimony about Old Norse religions was recorded by learned Christian clerics and it is not clear to what extent the texts are influenced by Christian thinking. It is clearer that the church was more tolerant than elsewhere of the ancient traditions as it worked to establish itself in Iceland. The supernatural data was integrated into the new religious system and not merely dismissed (Buchholz 1980, 80). Storytellers did not do away with the heathen traditions that had been handed down, instead they worked to harmonize them with Christian ones (Buchholz 1980, 114). However, pursuing supernatural means of obtaining hidden information became prohibited, along with other magical practices, although they recur as they are mentioned in nineteenth-century folklore, such as sitting out at crossroads or in conjuring the dead (Hermann Pálsson 1997, [123]-129).

Recalling Sálarrannsóknarfélag Íslands [Icelandic Society for Psychical Research] (1918), spiritism, also spiritualism, such as Anderson observed, became institutionalized from a folk religion to an unofficial national religion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Swatos and Loftur Reimar Gissurarson 1997, 46-50). It was also largely Christian as it played out in and alongside the national Lutheran church and in private practice with regular invocations of Jesus and the heavenly father (Swatos and Loftur Reimar Gissurarson 1997, 105, chapter five [157]-194), and the Lord’s Prayer (Dempsey 2017, 121-122). At this same time Iceland was

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<sup>21</sup> “Um morgininn eptir gekk Ingjaldr til frétta við Heiði, ok spurði, hversu seiðrinn hefði gengit. Þat ætla ek, segir hún, at ek muna vís hafa orðit þeirra hluta, er þik vārðar, ok þær báðuð mik forvitnast. Þá skal skipa í sæti, segir Ingjaldr, ok gánga þaðan sérhverr til frétta [sic] [The next morning Ingjaldr went to get news from Heiði, and asked, how the incantations had gone. I think, says she, that I have become aware of the things that concern you, and that you all most asked me about. Then [people] shall be seated, says Ingjaldr, and each one get news]” (*Örvar-Odds saga* 1829, II: 507).

working to establish its independence from Denmark and the spiritist movement was instrumental in solidifying Icelandic national identity (Swatos and Loftur Reimar Gissurarson 1997, 50-52; Dorival and Pons 2010 opening), even as spiritism was flourishing in Britain and the United States. It is also important to note that in Iceland the spiritist movement was not just of the folk, it operated at the highest levels of society among doctors, professors, politicians, and bishops, and argued openly in the courts and the news media (Swatos and Loftur Reimar Gissurarson 1997, 95, 111, 113-114, 185, 190, 204, 230-231).<sup>22</sup> Even the sagas, in addition to Christianity and the Bible, were reinterpreted in light of spiritism (Swatos and Loftur Reimar Gissurarson 1997, 167).

How mediums generally function in Iceland is documented in a short film by Clément Dorival and Christophe Pons (2010), and in the monographs by Robert Anderson (2005), Christophe Pons (2011), and Corinne Dempsey (2017). People make appointments with a medium either individually, in a prayer group [*bænahringur*], a development circle [*þróunarhringur*], or in a meeting with a medium [*miðilsfundur*], sometimes large, where the medium leads from a stage, a platform, or at the front of a room. In Iceland, a Christian country with the Lutheran church being the national and official faith, meetings are often opened by praying to God, Jesus, Mary, or angels. This is also to ensure that proceedings occur at the highest level of energy and to dispel negative influences. The rooms are often decorated with images and statuettes of these and other religious figures (Anderson 2005, 155-156; Dempsey 2017, 42, 106). Candles are lit. They are ubiquitous in the Nordic countries. I asked Guðni Reynir Þorbjörnsson about this. He said that they may not be so much about a channel to beings of light as much as they are about putting us in a better frame of mind to connect. It is that they

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<sup>22</sup> Haraldur Níelsson was a priest and professor, and nephew of Hallgrímur Sveinsson, bishop of Iceland (Swatos and Loftur Reimar Gissurarson 1997, 66). Björn Jónsson was a newspaper editor who became the prime minister of Iceland (Swatos and Loftur Reimar Gissurarson 1997, 85).



change us, give us peace, and are part of opening us up (Monday 30 January 2017). Hanna Kata also spoke frequently about being open, about children being more open, about burgeoning practitioners having the capacity to be open. So people who visit mediums come to a place of peace and open their hearts. Hanna Kata said that ego obliterates this openness but a healthy confidence in one's self and abilities is advised (Monday 13 February 2017). The medium opens to the spirit and it is then revealed who appears. The spirit guide of the medium facilitates other arrivals. The open channel makes it possible for someone's relative or friend to come through. In the larger meetings, spirits vie to be announced by the medium. In smaller sessions, recordings are produced for the participant to take home. Mediums doubt themselves as any person learning a craft and they apprentice with one another and by attending courses abroad. They are also concerned as anyone else about fraud in themselves and others while also having the courage to trust and work with their abilities (Dempsey 2017, 68-72, 98-104). Some mediums do readings as if in conversation with the client and some are accompanied by associates to protect them if they do trance or physical mediumship. Still other mediums specialize in healing (Dempsey 2017, chapter four). Listening is a powerful form of mediation as it allows people in distress to open up about their concerns as well as to listen to those beyond attempt to work out their unresolved matters and release their attachment to the earthly plane so that both parties can move on (Dempsey 2017, 126-127).

What participants derive is partly continuity in their earthly passage along with the context of their place in a family line in a place and time. As depicted in the Dorival and Pons 2010 documentary there is a woman who is going to school and also finding her way to a career. She visits two mediums and learns not only about her career but also about the significance of a spoon that is handed down among generations of women in her family who also share the same

name (also Pons 2011, 229-239). A shipworker of middle age who has lost his wife to cancer is featured. She had visited a medium, knew of her illness, and made peace with it. Now, through the visits to the medium and a prayer circle, he confirms his inner inclination to change apartments and to think about new directions. Now on the other side she reassures him that he was a good partner to her, that she is well, and that he should go ahead with his plans. A clip shows him talking to his stepdaughter about his wife, her mother. She has been to the medium and they talk about a ring her mother wanted her to have and that this came through from her via the medium. The documentary shows the work of more well-known Icelandic mediums like Skúli Viðar Lórenzson and Þórunn Maggý Guðmundsdóttir. The film portrays the process from the sides of practitioners and participants as a part of Icelandic culture. It shows how the experience promotes social cohesion and adds dimension to daily life so that people find purpose and renewal (Dorival and Pons 2010).

One aspect of mediumship that perplexed Robert Anderson was that larger group meetings had the quality of a show. “I was struck with the extent to which mediumship in Iceland at times can be staged as a kind of theater that resembles vaudeville in being humorous and entertaining. I refer to these theatrical appearances of spirits of the dead in Chapter 10 as staged illusions” (Anderson 2005, xviii). Christophe Pons refers to it as the theater of the dead [*théâtre des morts*] (Pons 2011, 291). He likens it to a liturgy, to a religious ritual, especially with the deceased personalities, often prominent, who manifest (Pons 2011, 187), as well as the extent to which some of them give their bodies over to the spirits (Pons 2011, 186-188). “Dans une société où, de longue date, le peuplement fut extrêmement dispersé sur un territoire vaste et où, par ailleurs, les déplacements étaient délicats pendant de longs mois d’hiver, le regroupement dévotionnel sans pasteur est en réalité une habitude fort ancienne [In a society in which, over a

long period of time, the population was extremely dispersed over a vast territory and in which, besides, the displacements were precarious during long winter months, the devotional meeting without a pastor is, in reality, a very ancient behavior]” (Pons 2011, 188). Further, he affirms its creative potential: “Reste que cela nous conduit effectivement à considérer l’occultisme (les médiums, leurs cosmologies, leurs œuvres) comme le lieu d’une activité créatrice de type artistique [As a result this certainly leads us to consider occultism (mediums, their cosmologies, their works) as a locus of creative activity of an artistic nature]” (Pons 2011, 201).

This concept is significant concerning the work of Robert Anderson in view of traditions of seeresses of the medieval period as documented in the sagas. While he carried out his work with reference to the medieval literary and cultural heritage, he seems not to have been made aware of the tradition of platform mediumship that is described in the sagas. Anderson describes a practitioner, Deborah, explaining these demonstrations to him. There is an entrance fee, advertising, a space that may be private or public but that accommodates a group, and either a corner or an improvised stage. Anderson mentions that Deborah wears a black, long-sleeved pullover, black slacks, and no jewelry. He calls it a costume. The lighting is muted red light directed at her and windows and doors are covered with opaque black material. Anderson even says that the performance is scripted (Anderson 2005, 179). I suggest it might be ritualistic or performative. Anderson intersperses Deborah’s remarks, that she will be in a trance state and that the audience must participate because people’s energy and participation are necessary (Anderson 2005, 180). The events are supposed to be entertaining and in this description, and in the Dorival and Pons 2010 documentary, humor is a natural part of the process (Anderson 2005, 181). Hanna Kata told me she goes to Arthur Findlay College in England where she learns, among other

things, platform mediumship. This practice is recorded in medieval Icelandic tradition with roots in Nordic magic and Sámi shamanism.

Chapter four of *Eiríks saga rauða* describes the prophetess Þorbjörg lítil-völva whose custom of the medieval north was to go to farmsteads to gatherings and read prophecies. She was invited by Þorkell, the head farmer of an estate in the settlement of Herjolfsnes in Greenland, during a famine to offer information about prospects for the coming years. People greeted her respectfully and everyone shared a meal together. A seat of honor, a high seat, *hásæti*, was prepared for Þorbjörg. She is described attired in an elaborate costume: a blue mantle with straps and stones, a glass bead necklace, and a black hood. She carried a staff and wore a belt from which hung her purse of magical items (*Eiríks saga rauða* 1935, 206-207). She spent the night to accustom herself to the farm. When the time came for her to offer her reading, she was given what she needed to practice. She asked if there were women who knew the lore of the spells (*Eiríks saga rauða* 1935, 207). She was encircled by women while she was on a scaffold or platform, *hjallr*.<sup>23</sup> The songs were sung and Þorbjörg said that spirits were summoned who otherwise would not have come, and that things that were hidden were now revealed to her (*Eiríks saga rauða* 1935, 208). This chapter describes ritual in the arrangement of people and objects and in the way the seeress operates. It can be considered scripted as Anderson suggests. The way the episode is rendered in the medieval Icelandic saga account is detailed and is a valuable survival from the past for an insight into how people might have carried out a reading with a medium. It was a performance and a ritual. It was repeated in farmsteads across the medieval north. Again, the purpose was social and practical, in this instance to attempt to

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<sup>23</sup> For a section on the *seiðhjallr* in the context of a platform for peering into the worlds see Tolley (2009, I: 544-549).

alleviate a community's anxieties about their welfare during harsh times in the Norse colony in Greenland. I will return to this episode in the section on syncretic traditions.

In *Hrólfs saga kraka*, treacherous King Fróði presses a seeress, *völva* [*völva* in modern Icelandic], named Heiðr to provide information about his brother Hálfðan. He puts on a great feast in her honor and places her upon a high platform, *seiðhjallr*, an incantation scaffold, for performing magic (*Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappá hans* 1954, I: 7). In *Örvar-Odds saga*, the prophecy of a seeress, *völva*, establishes the destiny of the protagonist of the saga from the beginning. She was also named Heiðr. The host Ingjaldr wants to put on a feast and invite Heiðr because she is at a nearby estate. She and her retinue are well received (*Örvar-Odds saga* 1954, II: 205-206). As with Þorbjörg lítil-völva, here the *völva* Heiðr spends a night in preparation, only she does so outdoors, a form of *útiseta*, or sitting out, “. . . en vólva fór til náttfarsseiðs með sitt lið [but the prophetess went on magical night wanderings with her party]” (*Örvar-Odds saga* 1954, II: 206).<sup>24</sup> Oddr provokes Heiðr who nonetheless utters a prophecy about him in verse after which he strikes her on the nose with a stick until she bleeds. Ingjaldr offers her several gifts in compensation, which she would have received anyway. She accepts them and departs (*Örvar-Odds saga* 1954, II: 208). In *Norna-Gests þáttur*, Gestr tells King Óláfr Tryggvason about his youth, when people used to invite seeresses, *völur*, also called sybils or prophetesses or *spákonur* somewhat interchangeably, who told people of their futures. It was the custom to throw parties

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<sup>24</sup> Carl Christian Rafn's edition provides Rasmus Kristian Rask's redaction as a supplement in which this passage is “Ingjaldr ok völván ætluðu til seiðar mikils um nóttina, gekk hún þá út með liði sínu, er aðrir gengu til svefnis, ok efldi seið [Ingjaldr and the seeress intended great enchantments at night, she then went out with her party, when others went to sleep, and performed incantations]” (*Örvar-Odds saga* 1829, II: 507). *Seiðr*, as glossed by Cleasby Vigfússon illuminates aspects of this practice: “A *spell, charm, enchantment, incantation*, which in the heathen times was solemnly performed at night; the wizards or witches were seated with certain solemn rites on a scaffold (*seiðhjallr*), from which they chanted their spells and songs; the ‘*seidr*’ was performed either to work any kind of good or evil to another person, or to be a kind of *oracle* or *fortune-telling*, to foreshow future events, such as the life and fate of those present, the weather, or the like . . .” (*Icelandic-English Dictionary* 1957, 519).

for them and to offer them gifts in return for their efforts (*Norna-Gests þátttr* 1954, I: 333).<sup>25</sup> In *Völuspá* Óðinn repaid the *völva* with rings and necklaces (*Völuspá* 2014, 298). Recalling Þorbjörg lítil-völva and her costume, the term *völva* is formed of the root *völr*, or staff (Hermann Pálsson 1997, 87). So it can be seen that mediums performed a significant social function in entertaining gatherings, were set apart from society by their abilities, activities, attire and physical placement, and were compensated for their performances.

It is natural to imagine that with people living on remote estates in medieval Iceland where winters are dark and cold that they would resort to storytelling to divert themselves and that supposed ghost stories would be among the topics of narration (Anderson 2005, 194). This was true and yet it was more multidimensional than this. The medieval term was *sagnaskemtan* [now *sagnaskemmtun*] and roughly means storytelling entertainment. It later became known in the nineteenth century as *kvöldvaka* (Magnús Gíslason 1977), roughly meaning evening vigil, in which people would hear stories, sing hymns, read from scripture, or play music. This act of gathering to share in story was one of the most important communal activities for communication and edification. These gatherings were the intersections of oral and written media at the time. Discussing the more entertaining legendary saga genre, as opposed to the more historical, although literary, family saga genre, Hermann Pálsson brings up aspects that medieval compilers and consumers considered valuable to the narrative experience. *Skemtan* refers to entertainment value, however this too was multidimensional and not superficial amusement. *Fróðleikr* means knowledge or information. *Nytsemd* is usefulness (Hermann Pálsson 2002, 20). Entertainment can encompass the delight a listener obtains by the poetic invention of the teller or of the expressive power of the performer. Knowledge or information

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<sup>25</sup> “. . . ok gaf faðir minn þeim [spákonum] góðar gjafir at skilnaði [and my father gave them [prophetesses] good gifts at their parting]” (*Norna-Gests þátttr* 1954, I: 333).

refers to the fact that people who gathered in these cold and dark farmsteads were not settling in for passive reception of pre-packaged media. The people who were assembled brought tasks with them that needed to be done such as working wool or mending tools. Most of them were not educated so this was an opportunity to get news and to learn of the wider world.

In pre-literate circumstances, the storyteller would improvise based on repertoire to suit an occasion. In literate medieval Iceland, the person reading from the manuscript was likely to enhance the reading by animated delivery or with additional information. As mentioned before, these are the situations in which the recitation or reading of genealogies [*áttvísi*, *mannfræði*] and geography was appropriate. Without written histories, this was the way to transmit the information of family lineages, where people settled, and the features of landscapes. Some of these accounts were unreliable partly because the years and facts did not align or because someone in power might have altered the chain of events in order to secure legitimacy in land claims in a given region (Hermann Pálsson 1962, 118, 139; Torfi Tulinius 2002, 60-61). These were the moments when a family history could be rehearsed and exercised in memory, discussed, added to, corrected, or tested against an encounter with a deceased relative by way of a medium. Facts and motifs enhance each other not only in performance but also in the memories of the tellers and the audience. The genealogies were not just tedious lists but opportunities to recall memorable deeds of individuals and the prominence of families. Linking this listening with entertainment, it can be seen that people would be able to situate themselves not only in their family lines but also in their stations in life because what was transmitted was also news of the world abroad, folklore, religion, and social values, among other things. These features constituted the useful aspect (Hermann Pálsson 2002, 21, 22). If such experiences are considered

to be a medium of transmission of lore in a community setting, scholars have been emphasizing the performance traditions behind medieval Icelandic texts.

A poem like *Völuspá* would not have been memorized as such and delivered, it would be part of a storyteller's repertoire and portions of the verses might reside in memory to be uttered. It is more likely that the text as it has come down is a written recording of a performance. Gísli Sigurðsson has contributed to an understanding not only of the oral tradition behind such a text but also how it preserves cosmology with its etiological information and mythological symbolism (Gísli Sigurðsson 2013, 48-49). It also preserves heathen culture arguably in Christian context as there are parallels to biblical *Revelation* and was written down by clerics in Iceland after conversion to Christianity (Gísli Sigurðsson 2013, 52, 54).<sup>26</sup> Recitation of Germanic heroic poetry and stories migrated along with peoples across Europe and the north and settled in Iceland in part via Ireland. Continental and classical literature was translated and copied and found a home in Iceland. Elements of the poetry and stories would be familiar to listeners who enjoyed the way in which the material came to be presented. Gísli imagines the end of *Völuspá* when the *völva*, or seeress, recedes. Does she look like Þorbjörg lítil-völva in a costume on a stage? (Gísli Sigurðsson 2013, 56). One of the ideas that Gísli stresses is that there is not so much a continuity of such a poem as it has come down, rather there is a dynamic transmission of the core material revealing as much about the circumstances in which it is written or performed (Gísli Sigurðsson 2013, 46-47). This is evident in criticism of historical film when preference for how things might have been gives way to desire for how one would like to imagine the past.

Terry Gunnell investigates *Völuspá* as a performance in particular. As the text becomes canonized and even fetishized, one is removed from the opportunity to experience what was a

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<sup>26</sup> For Christian aspects of *Völuspá* see Pétur Pétursson (2013).



living manifestation of ancient lore. There may be barriers to accessing how something was represented in the past and Gunnell likens the remnants to notes of music on a page without sound, butterflies pinned to a board without flight above flowers in sunshine, or Christmas trees and tinsel on the street for pickup without any awareness of the many ways Christmas can be celebrated (Gunnell 2013, [63], 68).<sup>27</sup> *Vǫluspá*'s intricate internal and external assonance and alliteration as examples of meters of eddic poetry reveal a medium that was intended to be recited and not read, and meters were deployed for varying purposes of communication and reception (Gunnell 2013, 69-73). People experiencing a performance are aware that they enter another place and time and the success of this depends on the performer to evoke characters and atmospheres in what was likely a small space illuminated perhaps by a single fire. Because the content deals with gods and cosmic events, people participated in a sacred narrative that had the capacity to reaffirm cultural knowledge and values (Gunnell 2013, 73-74). Compared to now with numerous simultaneous distractions of devices and modern media, along with the availability of more sources of information than ever before, one can scarcely imagine what a performance of an ancient narrative would mean to a community whose daily activities were directly related to their survival.

Nature is a medium not only because Iceland is geologically dynamic and climatically active with ever-shifting light and weather patterns but also because the landscape conceals numerous beings as well as grids relevant to other dimensions.<sup>28</sup> This begins to make sense when mythology represents, among other things, the patterns of the stars in such a way that people would use them to navigate passage among islands and also in planning husbandry and

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<sup>27</sup> Gunnell proposes the useful Christmas metaphor in interlocution and instruction.

<sup>28</sup> See Pétur Halldórsson (2007) based on the work of Einar Pálsson. In a plenary session concluding the conference "Time, Space and Narrative in the Icelandic Sagas" at the University of Iceland on 18 March 2017 scholars proposed considering the prolific work of Einar Pálsson for future directions.

agriculture. This hints at the possibility of a medieval understanding that a person participates in a broader conception of one's place on the land and in the cosmos.<sup>29</sup> That one does not merely farm in the west of Iceland and raise one's family but that one is part of a family that descends from settlers who already had established themselves in Norway, that they would be written about. That one makes a living close to the animals one's farms, even to share space with them and to sleep with them for warmth. That one follows rhythms of light and seasons and slaughters the livestock that one processes, preserves, shares, sells, and consumes. Stories about gods, old ways, ancestors, the church, and continued voyages to Norway are not then psychological, they are part of a grander way of life that is essentially dependent on the land and on cooperation with other families in the region.

Relevant then and now, a Lutheran priest whom Corinne Dempsey spoke to said: "Gradually things slow down and you start to listen and you start to look and you start to feel. And this is a whole new kind of school" (Dempsey 2017, 2). Another priest told her: "My opinion is that this sensitivity to something, you find it in many people who are living very close to nature. They have it. And we were once living very close to nature and perhaps it is dying now. And I think that this gift of seeing something more than what exists is universal but if you are urbanized, then it will die" (Dempsey 2017, 2-3). Robert Anderson interviewed Erla Stefánsdóttir who until her death in 2015 did a tremendous amount of outreach on psychic phenomena.<sup>30</sup> Anderson relayed that a middle-aged woman who went to Erla's school participated in exercises including those to see energy lines. She said: "We live in a material world, but she points out that there is no such thing as dead material. Everything is alive" (Anderson 2005, 160). Anderson identified this as animism, which he said for anthropologists

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<sup>29</sup> For comparisons of Nordic cosmography see Gísli Sigurðsson (2009; 2014) and Thomas DuBois (2014).

<sup>30</sup> See Erla Stefánsdóttir (2003).

may be the oldest faith. The woman explained to Anderson that they were learning to see energy and auras around people and objects (Anderson 2005, 160). A man in the group Anderson interviewed commented about this type of awareness: “We all have it, but we don’t know how to use it. We are programmed from the beginning to close it off because we live in a so-called world of knowledge. But knowledge is not wisdom. We are filled with all kinds of knowledge, but only when we live our knowledge do we acquire wisdom, and wisdom is what we take with us when we pass on” (Anderson 2005, 161).

It may be all too easy to overlook nature talk as useless fantasy claptrap but it is a recurring theme in any discussion of Icelandic mediation, perhaps because survival was and still is linked to an island nation with few but enduring native resources. There is an effort to reforest Iceland.<sup>31</sup> One of Corinne Dempsey’s informants describes taking in the energy from the mountains:

I just bring it into myself. And I try to teach my kids to do that. I tell them, “Feel the energy of the mountain. Listen to the river. Hear the energy of the earth.” You can hear the wind blow through the grass as it goes back and forth. You can hear the birds singing and the river and the mountains. And this gives you so much energy. And always when I am working on the farm, and I’m working like crazy from morning till evening, I’ll come home and I’ll make dinner and I’m still working till two, three o’clock [in the morning]. I’ll still be full of energy.

(Dempsey 2017, 139)

Such a description of natural energy is linked to the medium that is used in healing, called

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<sup>31</sup> Skógræktarfélag Íslands [The Icelandic Forestry Association] <http://www.skog.is/>

*alheimsorka*, or universal energy or cosmic power (Dempsey 2017, 36, 139, 140). This is a sacred conception not unlike Native Americans' reverence for nature. Along with this is the continual refrain of the importance of the healing power of conversation and prayer (Heijnen 2013, 179; Dempsey 2017, 138-139). With Reykjavík having absorbed the greater part of the population that used to be based on family farms, there is an effort to send children to the country in the summer to maintain a connection to nature. “Með því að tengjast jörðinni vakna líka þau hugrenningatengsl að á henni búi líka eitthvað annað—að þar sé einhver önnur tilvera [By connecting oneself to the earth, the associations awaken that on her something else also lives—that there is some other kind of existence]” (Fríða Björk Ólafsdóttir 2015, 5). Many family farms are still available to Icelanders as summer homes. Nature is bound up in the Icelandic mentality and further, an eruption or earthquake is an expected occurrence. Most of the land is uninhabitable and wild, with glaciers, volcanos, and plateaus. Some of the livestock, cows, horses, chickens, and sheep, have been raised there since the settlement period over a thousand years ago; however vegetables are now cultivated in greenhouses using geothermal energy and artificial lighting. Sheeps' heads, lamb soup, and traditional foods from the poverty times do not just emerge at holidays; they are ubiquitous. Along with the folk stories, these are reminders of Icelandic identity, and reports of hidden beings and their goings on are recalled to be just below the surface of daily appearance. Nature is a component of an open secret of Icelandic otherworldly communication. Practitioners learn to capture and use the energy from nature in aligning and healing. This comes with a keen sense of moral responsibility (Dempsey 2017, 178-181). But death is a natural part of life on earth and there is tremendous symbolism in earth burial as a locus of earth-dwelling beings along with native nature spirits. The grave mound mediates the worlds and the folklore and will be discussed in the ethnography of the other world.

### III - Guardian spirits and dreams

Guardian spirits, in their numerous and shifting forms, are tied up with dreams in medieval Icelandic literature and in modern life. Dreams, prophecies, and those who announce them, foreshadow events in narrative and generate expectation. In life, they inform and guide. Guðni Reynir Þorbjörnsson told me that a deceased older farmer he knew appeared to him in a dream to wake him up to go out to help a ewe give birth to a lamb (Saturday 25 June 2016). Dreams may come while asleep or awake, as in visions. An Icelandic word, *berdreyminn*, is an adjective referring to someone who has prophetic dreams that come true.<sup>32</sup> Peter Buchholz explains that “Texts without anyone having a dream are very rare. It is certain that dreams were extremely important in Scandinavian pagan culture. In Old Norse literature, dreams always come true. This is not a literary phenomenon; much more, it is related to the concept of fate, which can be foreseen but cannot be avoided. The symbiosis between the natural and the supernatural was so close that we can claim that in every culture (excepting that of the “global village”?), the supernatural is a natural part of existence” (Buchholz 2005, 240). Lars Lönnroth comments that “Unlike psychoanalysts, saga narrators do not primarily see dreams as a key to the inner soul but as a key to the future” (Lönnroth 2002, 456). And Gabriel Turville-Petre points out that “Belief in dream-symbolism implies a belief in fate and, in Iceland, this belief transcended the religious opinions of pagans and Christians” (Turville-Petre 1958, 95). Turville-Petre explores the possible historicity of dream accounts against formulaic insertions of motifs and he also takes into consideration analogs in medieval European literary tradition. It is inevitable that dream motifs would be part of the storytelling repertoire. But he acknowledges that Icelandic saga writers employed such material because dreams were integral to people’s daily experiences, then

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<sup>32</sup> *sanndrømt* in Norwegian.

and now. He indicates that dreams in folk tales, as prepared by collectors like Sigfús Sigfússon, and examples in medieval Icelandic sagas, may be based on genuine experience (Turville-Petre 1958, 111). In the sagas there are dream interpretations by prophetically-gifted people like Gestr Oddleifsson, mentioned in *Laxdæla saga* and elsewhere, and *Njáll Þorgeirsson* in *Brennu-Njáls saga*. Turville-Petre shows that “At all ages stories have been recorded in which dreamers meet and converse with creatures of the Other World. In later times the elves (*álfar*) or hidden people (*huldufólk*) have appeared most frequently” (Turville-Petre 1958, 102). He talks about the interaction between the worlds, of humans and hidden people helping one another as recorded in the folk stories and in more recent accounts that he had heard (Turville-Petre 1958, 102-103). Turville-Petre also mentions the significance of the interplay between words and symbols, word-play, as he terms it (Turville-Petre 1958, 96-98). Medieval Icelandic eddic and skaldic poetry, with *heiti*, names, and *kennings*, metaphors, increase the possibilities of symbolic representation and expression. Icelandic name etymologies are rather transparent and they come with nicknames (Willson 2007; Peterson 2015). Place names memorialize people and events so there are numerous access points for meaning.

Terminology is rich and confounding because beings and meanings coalesce or collide in context. Karen Bek-Pedersen gives an example concerning norns: “Partly because of the comparatively small number of references, partly because they overlap significantly with certain other kinds of supernatural beings, it makes little sense to look at *nornir* as an isolated group of beings and, although it must form the basis of any exploration, it would be overly confining to focus exclusively on the term *nornir*” (Bek-Pedersen 2013, 13). Sources may be fragmentary such as Snorri Sturluson’s (1178/9-1241) mention of dark elves, *dökkálfar*, in *Gylfaginning* in his *Edda* (Snorri Sturluson 1848, 78), or they are intertextual and recur from narrative to

narrative such as has been shown with traveling seeresses or prophetesses as *völva* (plural *völur*) or *spákona* (plural *spákonur*). Or they change from the age of the sagas to that of the folktales such as *fylgja* (plural *fylgjur*), which are fetches or guardian spirits good or bad, emerging as animals or as the deceased. Turville-Petre says that “In early literature animals are common dream-symbols, and in nearly every case the animal may be regarded as the *fylgja* (sometimes called *hamingja*, *hugr*), the attendant spirit or fetch, more often seen in sleep than in a waking state. The belief in the *fylgja* is remarkably persistent and survives today. The word *fylgja* besides meaning ‘fetch’ also means the ‘afterbirth of a child’ and, in popular belief, the fetch and the afterbirth are intimately linked” (Turville-Petre 1958, 98-99). Children born with a caul were considered lucky and the word *hamingja* also denotes luck and happiness. In modern Icelandic, “Good luck!” is expressed as “*Til hamingju!*” and “Happy Birthday” is “*Til hamingju með afmælið!*” Further, this term and belief are linked to shape-changing in ancient northern tradition (Turville-Petre 1958, 109-110). *Hamr* is a skin or shape (*Icelandic-English Dictionary* 1957, 236-237). Buchholz says this can also refer to the release of the free soul from the body and the shape it takes, as might be practiced by a shaman (Buchholz 2005, 241), even to go out to greet the guardian spirit (Tolley 2009, I: 78). In *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, after Grímr and Lofthæna work to release Lofthæna from the troll-form spell her stepmother Geirriðr Gandvíkrekka placed on her, Grímr burns the form to dispel any further evil influence: “Hann stóð upp skjótt ok dró haminn fram í eldinn ok brenndi upp at kolum [He got up right away to drag the form to the fire, where he burned it to coals]” (*Gríms saga loðinkinna* 1954, II: 193).

The way the roles of terms and beings are construed and researched is open to consideration over time.<sup>33</sup> As terms shift, context and genre can be as illuminating as they are

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<sup>33</sup> Examples of studies that look more deeply into supernatural beings and related conceptions, in addition to the taxonomy of the paranormal by Ármann Jakobsson (2013), are Else Mundal’s 1974 study on *fylgjur*, a

confounding. Lars Lönnroth explains “. . . Thus in the Edda and *fornaldarsögur*, the function of the dream is usually to warn the hero against some impending danger at the hand of an enemy, who will appear in the dream as a wild bear, boar, wolf, snake, eagle, hawk, raven, dragon, or some threatening beast” (Lönnroth 2002, 456). Further he shows that “One reason why protective spirits are more common in the dreams of family sagas is obviously that they are closely associated with the destiny of a particular family and destiny is often exactly what the family saga is all about. . . . Put simply, threatening beasts belong to the heritage of early Germanic heroic poetry while protective spirits and skaldic poetry belong to the narrative heritage of family sagas about the Viking period” (Lönnroth 2002, 457).

In spite of the numerous forms they may take, modern-day practitioners like Jóhanna Katrín Bender (Hanna Kata) and Guðni Reynir Þorbjörnsson assure me that guardian spirits may be considered guardian angels (Monday 13 February 2017). The most common Icelandic term is *fylgja* (plural *fylgjur*), is the verb ‘to follow’ and the noun ‘fetch’ in English. It is a spirit, good or bad, that accompanies a person or family. Guðni Reynir refers to a guardian spirit as *fylgjandi* [follower, supporter] (Monday 30 January 2017). In an article about *fylgjur*, Turville-Petre points to the Cleasby-Vigfússon gloss of *fylgja* as ‘guardian angel’ (Turville-Petre 1945, [119]; *Icelandic-English Dictionary* 1957, 179). In *Þorsteins þáttur uxafóts*, in chapter five, Geitir sees Þorsteinn’s *fylgja* [fetch] in the form of a polar bear cub. “Þá er þú komt í stofuna, fylgdi þér einn hvítbjarnarhúnn ok rann fyrir innar á gólfít. En er hann sá mik, nam hann staðar, en þú fórt heldr geustr, ok fell þú um húninn, ok þat er ætlan mín, at þú sér eigi son Krumms né Þórgunnar, heldr mantu stærri ættar [When you came into the room, a polar bear cub followed you and ran

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reexamination of female representations of *fylgjur* by Zuzana Stankovitsová (2015), and norms and related manifestations of the female supernatural by Karen Bek-Pedersen (2011). Adriëne Heijnen (2013) provides a chapter, 3, on animals and *fylgjur* (89-133). Árni Björnsson’s 2010 *Íslenskt vættatal* lists hundreds of Icelandic supernatural beings by name and includes maps. The data were collected from ancient and modern literary and folkloric sources, documents, and living people. See Kelchner (1935) on dreams.



on ahead of you along the floor. But when he saw me, he stopped, and you rushed in and fell over the cub, and I think that you are neither the son of Krummr nor Þórgunnur, rather you must be of a greater line]” (*Þorsteins þátr uxafóts* 1991, 350). The hidden cub notices clairvoyant Geitir watching this and halts. Þorsteinn falls over the bear. This indicates to Geitir that Þorsteinn, who had been exposed to die as an infant and saved by Krummr and his wife Þórgunna, was part of his own family. The guardian spirit appeared as an animal, literally followed, “*fylgdi*,” Þorsteinn, not only as guardian but also as a part of his family line, and protected him. I will return to this tale later.

Hrefna Sigríður Bjartmarsdóttir shares a modern-day example of genealogical continuity and guardianship: “Salka sagði mér frá því að hún hefði beðið langömmu sína að láta sig vita ef líf væri eftir dauðann. Nóttina eftir að langamman lést dreymdi Sölku hana og hafði hún þær fréttir að Salka yrði bráðum barnshafandi og myndi eignast dóttur. Það gekk eftir og lítur Salka á þetta sem sönnun um líf eftir dauðann [Salka told me that she had asked her great-grandmother to let her know if there were life after death. The night after her great-grandmother died Salka dreamed of her and she came with the news that Salka would soon be pregnant and have a daughter. It turned out as expected and Salka looks at it as proof of life after death]” (Hrefna Sigríður Bjartmarsdóttir 2015, 165). This recalls the phenomenon mentioned earlier, the process by which Icelanders carry on family given names, generation after generation, such as visiting with a name recommendation by way of a dream, *draumarnafn* or dream name (Pons 2002, 183), *nafns vitjað* (Pons 2002, 75-83, 127-129), or *að vitja nafns* (Hrefna Sigríður Bjartmarsdóttir 2015, 209-210; Heijnen 2013, 182-199; Dempsey 2017, 78). A grandparent will appear in a dream or vision and request that the unborn child be named after a relative. One of the controls is the expectation of unfortunate results, based on centuries of testimony, if one does not carry on

the tradition (Pons 2002, 183; Heijnen 2013, 192-194). In a personal recollection that exemplifies Icelandic folklore as experience, Hrefna Sigríður Bjartmarsdóttir says “Snæbjörg Sigríður Aðalmondardóttir (1896–1989) amma mín sagði mér frá því að hún hefði leikið sér við hulduborn í bernsku. Huldukonan, móðir barnanna, var henni mjög góð og sagði henni að ef hún myndi einhverntíma á lífsleiðinni eiga erfitt þá skyldi hún hugsa til sín og strjúka á sér ennið á ákveðinn máta. Amma sagði að það hefði ætíð reynst sér vel [My grandmother, Snæbjörg Sigríður Aðalmondardóttir (1896–1989) told me that she had played with hidden children in childhood. The hidden woman, mother of the children, was very good to her and told her that if ever she would have difficulty on life’s path, then she should think of her and stroke her brow in a certain way. Grandma said that that had always turned out well]” (Hrefna Sigríður Bjartmarsdóttir 2015, 190).<sup>34</sup>

For all the categories of beings, essentially Hrefna explains that angels, saints, hidden people, and *fylgjur* are beings that, according to folklore, have something in common with the deceased (Hrefna Sigríður Bjartmarsdóttir 2015, 198). She finds that the initiative for dealings between the living and the dead is mutual. People go to meetings with mediums or in groups to initiate contact with the other world and to get news, *fá fréttir*, of deceased loved ones. But in dreams it is they, the deceased, or the spirits, who take the initiative when there is something particular that needs to be conveyed to the dreamer (Hrefna Sigríður Bjartmarsdóttir 2015, 199). In addition, Hrefna notes that Icelanders, according to research, have always been free and ready to express themselves with others about their psychic experiences and folk beliefs. “Að sama skapi hefur ekki þótt tiltökumál að hafa frumkvæði að sambandi við framliðna líkt og íslensk þjóðtrú er til vitnis um [At the same time, however, it has not been thought to be surprising to

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<sup>34</sup> Examples like these, in which people interact with and help hidden beings, represent corpora of more recent testimony such as are curated in the work of folklorists like Júlíana Þóra Magnúsdóttir (2008).

take the initiative to make contact with the deceased, as Icelandic folk belief has proven to witness]” (Hrefna Sigríður Bjartmarsdóttir 2015, 203).

Adriënnne Heijnen, who studied dreaming in Iceland, explains that recent studies in the vein of American cultural anthropology try to mediate between personal psychology and social anthropology. She notes: “Dream experiences cannot be observed; the anthropologist is dependent on what people say, and not what they do, and in many societies, dreams are narrated in private spheres, difficult to access” (Heijnen 2013, 45). For Icelanders, dreaming is social. This continual discussion of direct experience as a facet of Icelandic culture facilitates the study of dream phenomena that are not restricted to sleeping states (Heijnen 2013, 45-46, 48-50). Dreams reveal fate and destiny; they form part of the structure of sagas because talking about dreams was a part of the culture and would be reflected in the literature. Moreover, the literature had credibility and the elite knew this and could use sagas to enhance the reputation of prominent figures (Heijnen 2013, 64, 69-71). The motivations were multifaceted because literature served, among other purposes, to deliver exempla or to recall great deeds of courageous individuals in the service of their communities as much as it could legitimize the power of a clan in a region. However, every community and age in Iceland had to contend with hidden neighbors.

Elves and hidden people inhabit the peripheries of human settlements at the boundaries with nature. Heijnen says “Dreaming enables persons to look through the surfaces of the natural features, and to discover that the knolls and the rocks are actually the buildings of the *huldufólk*” (Heijnen 2013, 141). I asked Guðni Reynir Þorbjörnsson why they tend to live so closely to us and not in the more remote parts of Iceland. His reply was that they were here before we were. They control where we live, not we control where they live. This explains why they live where they do, near human habitations (Monday 30 January 2017). Part of the control function is the

prohibition of disturbing certain places in the landscape. When humans encroach on their habitations the hidden folk make themselves known, among other ways, through dreams. Construction around elf settlements in Kópavogur and Hafnarfjörður are well-known examples. That is an open secret, when there is a space on one's property or in one's town that defies human attempts to alter it or results in punishment by illness or injury. In conversation with Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson, the leading priest and chieftain [*allsherjargoði*] of the society of heathen belief in the Nordic gods [*Ásatrúarfélag*], Unnur Jökulsdóttir says “En við erum sammála um þá staðreynd að sagnir um huldufólksbústaði og álagabletti séu oft skilvirkasta náttúruverndin og kannski sú elsta í landinu [But we agree about the fact that reports about hidden people's residences and enchanted spots are often the most effective nature conservation and maybe the oldest in the country]” (Unnur Jökulsdóttir 2007, 54). They are guardian spirits of Icelandic nature.

Hanna Kata told me that elves and hidden people inhabit a different dimension or expanse, *vidd*. They want nature and they want some connection with us however they don't connect with bad people. They see our souls rather than our bodies. They don't live in rocks per se but down below. The rock is the roof of their home. When we ask them to move, and they consent, they ask us to move the rock, as numerous municipal and road authority workers have done for them, and they move with the rock (Monday 13 February 2017). One of Katrin Sontag's informants, Sigríður, told her that *huldufólk* [hidden people] are of a different frequency and that they live in rocks because people can't enter them to disturb their spaces (Sontag 2007, 92-93). I asked Guðni Reynir why so many supernatural creatures live in rocks, cliffs, or underground. He told me that that is how humans first sheltered themselves on earth. It is natural that people would live in caves (Monday 30 January 2017). While he does not share the view, Einar Ólafur

Sveinsson points out that some scholars of mythology find a connection between spirits and the deceased, such that dwelling below the earth is symbolically linked to burial (Einar Ól.

Sveinsson 2003, 170-171). This idea figures in lore about grave mounds.

One distinction that can be made about earth-dwellers is that between elves and hidden people. Elves and hidden people are not the same, although these terms are used as a convenience to refer to hidden beings. Snorri Sturluson, in his *Edda*, transmitted this medieval mythic knowledge: “Sá er einn staðr þar, er kallað er Álfheimr, þar byggvir fólk þat, er Ljósálfar heita, en Dökkálfar búa niðri í jörðu, ok eru þeir úlíkir þeim sýnum, en miklu úlíkari reyndum. Ljósálfar eru fegri en sól sýnum, en Dökkálfar eru svartari en bik. = Una ibi regio est, Alvheimus dicta; ibi habitant homines, dicti Alvi lucidi: nam Alvi fuscí sub terra habitant, qui quidem ut his sunt specie dissimiles, ita re sunt multo dissimiliores. Alvi lucidi specie sunt sole splendidiore, Alvi fuscí pice nigriore [There is a place called Elf World where folk called light elves live, and dark elves live down in the earth. And they are unlike them in appearance and even more dissimilar in their nature. Light elves are more beautiful to the sight than the sun, but dark elves are blacker than pitch]” (Snorri Sturluson 1848, I: [ch. 17]:78, 79).

Guðni Reynir Þorbjörnsson tells me that there is a difference between elves [*álfar*] and hidden people [*huldufólk*]. Elves are small and good [*ljósálfar*], except for the dark ones [*dökkálfar*]. Huldufólk are larger, our size, and stricter, meaner, more natural, closer to nature, spiritual, like an avatar, with a slightly darker energy. He said he feels well around the elves and has a less well feeling near hidden folk. The elves are more developed [*þroskaður*]. Elves trust (Monday 30 January 2017). Hanna Kata says that hidden folk are on a different level and they show themselves to us in a certain way (Monday 13 February 2017).

Once on a walk on a June evening on Guðni Reynir's farm, he had me stop a moment and sense the peace of the place and take in the Icelandic nature. There is a river bordering the old moss-covered lava fields. His sheep had open access to the expanses. It was quiet and there were some small birds flitting about and chirping. Guðni pointed to a nearby peak in the landscape and showed me other features to say that we were in an elf city. There are numerous such places in Iceland and are called *Álfaborg*[ir]. They are also referred to as elf settlements, *álfabyggð*[ir]. He said the high peak was the elf church. He pointed to where there were what would be similar to power lines underground only they represented the energy grids. I asked him if he could see the elves at this moment. He paused. He said he could sense his spirit guide but he could not see the elves. I asked him what it would take for me to see them. He said if I camped a week I would definitely see something (Saturday 25 June 2016). Although unplanned, light elves manifested in numerous photographs in his book. He said his grandmother was on a walk with him and took pictures of him with his dog in the elf city. They were not really aware of the elves' visual presence and were surprised to see them in the pictures afterward (Guðni Reynir Þorbjörnsson 2009, 41-44).<sup>35</sup>

Many of the accounts in the sources mention the interaction between these communities, natural and supernatural, among other things, concerning helping and exchanging gifts. In early religious practice in the north, people would cast animals, food, goods, and valuables into ponds and lakes, and into the landscape, as offerings known as ritual deposits or hoard depositions (Andrén 2007, 108-110; Hedeager 2008, 14-15; Price 2008, 270). Nineteenth-century accounts mention hidden people borrowing tools and returning them later cleaned up, or asking for milk. There is a comparative correspondence to leaving cookies and milk for Saint Nicholas and

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<sup>35</sup> Pictures of elves in the news together with those of British university professor John Hyatt: "Náði mögnuðum myndum af álfum í Grímsnesi [Got exciting pictures of elves in Grímsnes]," *Pressan*, 7 April 2014 <http://www.pressan.is/Frettir/Lesafrett/nadi-mognudum-myndum-af-alfum-i-grimsnesi-->

carrots for his reindeer. What we get in return are gifts. Native Americans offer spirits tobacco or leave out small spirit plates of the meals they are consuming so that they can share in the communal ritual of nourishment with those who have gone beyond and maintain their favor. Helping hidden people leads to protection and prosperity. Not acquiescing leads to bad luck and suffering. Scandinavian folklore includes the motif of leaving butter or cream for elves on farms. I asked Guðni about this and he told me that for him it is just a story element to help people be aware of that aspect of existence. He said that hidden people and elves don't need objects; what they really want is patience and respect (Saturday 25 June 2016). Whether one can see hidden realms or not, awareness becomes useful, a recognition that people are gifted with capacities that others are not, and that these people mediate among the dimensions. Whether one can see or not, one can be receptive and perhaps detect an open secret of Icelandic otherworldly communication.

Adriëne Heijnen addresses awareness through the concept of *berdreyminn*:

Berdreyminn refers to the ability to perceive, while dreaming, with clarity and vision, those things, beings, elements, relationships and powers, which in waking life do exist, but are hidden. This hidden dimension of life is both of a temporal and spatial nature. Dreamers may cross spatial boundaries that in waking life are experienced as impassable. Thus, dreams are valued for their potential to reveal events that happen in the parallel waking universe at the time the dream is dreamt. Dreaming may also imply moving beyond temporal boundaries, disclosing knowledge of the ways in which events are related and, therewith, about the waking past and future. Relationships with the dead are significant in this respect, because the dead are thought to use dreams to reveal underlying causes of events,

giving insight into how life will unfold, or to inform the living of their condition, which might inflict problems on waking life. The important implication for anthropology is that the knowledge generated through dreaming is often used to direct and motivate actions in the waking lives of dreamers, or of their friends and family. (Heijnen 2013, 18-19)

This characterization comes across almost as shamanic and I will mention shamanism in the section on syncretic traditions. In terms of the tradition of naming newborns that comes through dreams, Heijnen shows that the Icelandic sense of time is less chronological than what she refers to as “temporal continuation” (Heijnen 2013, 197). Time is genealogical by which, in lineages, the living and the deceased maintain contact (Heijnen 2013, 197). The *fylgjur*, or the guardian spirits, accompany and guide individuals and families. Settlers of Iceland found that the island came with its own protective spirits, *landvættir*. It is mentioned in *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts* and elsewhere that “Þat var upphaf inna heiðnu laga, at menn skyldi eigi hafa höfuðskip í haf; en ef menn hefði, þá skyldi þeir af taka höfuð, áðr þeir kæmi í landssýn, ok sigla eigi at landi með gapandi höfðum né gínandi trjónu, svá at landvættir fældist við [The beginning of the heathen law stated that people should not have ships with figureheads at sea; but if they did, they had to remove them before they came in sight of land, and not sail toward land with gaping prows and yawning snouts, so that the land spirits not be frightened]” (*Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts* 1991, 342).

A principal narrative concerning the Icelandic guardian spirits is from Snorri Sturluson in *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* [*The Saga of Óláfr Tryggvason*] in *Heimskringla* [*The Orb of the World*]. Danish King Haraldr Gormsson wanted intelligence on Iceland in a dispute. He had a magician travel there in the form of a whale. The magician found numerous animal spirits



everywhere he went. However there were four significant creatures in the four directions of the island: in the northeast in Vápnafjörður he found a dragon; in the north in Eyjafjörður, a large bird; in the west in Breiðifjörður, a bull; and in the southwest around Reykjanes at Víkarskeið, a mountain giant (Snorri Sturluson 1941, 271). These beings came to represent the four quarters, *ffjórðungur* (plural *ffjórðungar*), of the island: *griðungur* [bull] in Vestfirðir [the west fjords], *gammur* [vulture] in Norðurland [the northland], *dreki* [dragon] in Austfirðir [the east fjords], and *bergrisi* [mountain giant] in Suðurland [the southland]. Árni Björnsson explains that there is a conceptual correspondence to cherubim in Hebrew tradition who were divine protectors. They were winged mythical beings with four aspects: man, lion, ox, and eagle. They were later associated with the four Christian gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (Árni Björnsson 2008). The four guardian spirits of Iceland are part of the national coat of arms and also adorn the coinage.<sup>36</sup>

The settlers, their lineages, and their supernatural aspects harmonize with the core corpus of the Icelandic sagas, the family sagas, or sagas of Icelanders, *Íslendingasögur*; *The Book of Icelanders*, *Íslendingabók*, and *The Book of Settlements*, *Landnámabók*. This recalls the local history book, mentioned at the beginning, in which Guðni Reynir Þorbjörnsson was able to recognize the deceased girl who contacted him. It was one of the local history books so common to northern European regions in which families, their farms, and pictures are documented for the ages. Readers unacquainted with medieval literature marvel at the lengthy genealogical summaries and wonder if they are not superfluous. Remnants of oral tradition in which the record was retained in memory, the literary moments of recollection document living and

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<sup>36</sup> Forsetaúrskurður um skjaldarmerki Íslands [Presidential ruling concerning the coat of arms of Iceland] <http://www.althingi.is/lagas/nuna/1944035.html>  
Seðlabanki Íslands [The Central Bank of Iceland], Mynt í gildi [valid coins] <http://www.seðlabanki.is/fjarmalainnvidir/sedlar-og-mynt/mynt-i-gildi/>

deceased tied to place who bear on the narrative at hand. To some extent, those responsible for compiling the sagas stretched their legitimacy, aligning themselves with heroes and royalty (Hermann Pálsson 1962, 117). The Icelandic sense of honor is one of the bases validating the spoken and written word. Such a value was carried into the era of written laws and was influenced by the acceptance of Christianity around the turn of the millennium. General credibility in the oral and written accounts comes from statements such as those made by Ari hinn fróði [the knowledgeable] Þorgilsson (ca. 1068-1148) when he mentioned his sources and their reputations. Writing in Icelandic and not in Latin, he said: “. . . at ætlun ok tölum þeirra Teits föstra míns, þess manns es ek kunna spakastan, sonar Ísleifs byskups, ok Þorkels föðurbróður míns Gellissonar, es langt munði fram, ok Þóríðar Snorradóttur goða, es bæði vas margspök ok óljúgfróð . . . [ . . . according to the calculation and account of Teitr, my foster father, son of Ísleifr the bishop, and the wisest man I have known, and of my father’s brother Þorkell Gellisson, who remembered far back, and of Þóríður [Þuríðar] daughter of Snorri [Þorgrímsson] the chieftain, who was both very wise in many things and truthful . . . ]” (*Íslendingabók* 1968, I: 4). Today there is an application program called *Íslendingabók* that allows Icelanders to check their relatedness as well as their family history.<sup>37</sup> It is a remarkable continuation of a tradition of record keeping spanning a millennium.

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<sup>37</sup> <https://www.islendingabok.is/> Íslensk erfðagreining ehf. og Friðrik Skúlason. Its description is available in English: “The database *Íslendingabók* contains genealogical information about the inhabitants of Iceland, dating more than 1,200 years back. *Íslendingabók* is a collaboration project between deCODE genetics, a research company in the field of medical genetics, and Friðrik Skúlason, an anti-virus software entrepreneur. The project’s goal is to trace all known family connections between Icelanders from the time of the settlement of Iceland to present times and register the genealogical information in a database. In the creation of the *Íslendingabók* database we have used various sources and both unpublished and published documents. Most of the genealogical information comes from sources such as church records, national censuses, inhabitants registers and other public documents, but in addition to these sources there are chronicles, books of convictions, various publications on genealogy, books about individuals within specific occupations, lists of descendants and ancestral records as well as memorial articles to name but a few. The database is in Icelandic and is unfortunately not available in other languages. Access to the genealogical database *Íslendingabók* is currently limited to Icelandic citizens and legal residents of Iceland who have been issued an Icelandic ID number (kennitala)” <https://www.islendingabok.is/English.jsp>

Along with *Íslendingabók*, *Landnámabók* is a social medium with its descriptive genealogies, mini-biographies, and local facts. There are five chief versions compiled by various chroniclers, some named. The content deals with the descendants of settlers and the boundaries of farms. Numerous nicknames are preserved. Heathen and Christian practices are described, and the details generally were used in many sagas. The supernatural is evident among what are, for all intents and purposes, historical accounts. I include a selection dealing with the north of Iceland in two versions, from *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók*, as they are informative in their variation:

(S259) Arngeirr hét maðr, er nam Sléttu alla milli Hávararlóns ok Sveinungsvíkr; hans börn váru þau Þorgils ok Oddr ok Þuríðr, er Steinólfr í Þjórsárdal átti. Þeir Arngeirr ok Þorgils gengu heiman í fjúki at leita fjár ok kómu eigi heim. Oddr fór at leita þeira ok fann þá báða ørenda, ok hafði hvítabjörn drepit þá ok lá þá á pasti, er hann kom at. Oddr drap björninn ok færði heim, ok segja menn, at hann æti allan, ok kallaðisk þá hefna fõður síns, er hann drap björninn, en þá bróður síns, er hann át hann. Oddr var síðan illr ok ódæll við at eiga; hann var hamrammr svá mjök, at hann gekk heiman ór Hraunhöfn um kveldit, en kom um morguninn eptir í Þjórsárdal til liðs við systur sína, er Þjórsdællir vildu berja grjóti í hel.

(*Landnámabók* 1968, 285-286)<sup>38</sup>

[There was a man named Arngeirr who settled all of Slétta between Hávararlón and Sveinungsvíkr; his children were Þorgils and Oddr and Þuríðr, whom Steinólfr in Þjórsárdal married. Arngeirr and Þorgils went out from home in a snowstorm to look for sheep and did not return. Oddr went to search for them and

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<sup>38</sup> *Sturlubók*, AM 107 fol. (uppskrift Jóns Erlendssonar)

found them both dead. A polar bear had killed them and was on its prey when he arrived. Oddr killed the bear and brought it back. People say that he ate the whole thing. It is said that he avenged his father when he killed the bear and his brother when he ate it. Oddr was evil after that and not easy to get along with. He was so capable of shape-changing that he left home in Hraunhøfn one evening and arrived the next morning in Þjórsárdal to aid his sister when the men there wanted to stone her to death.]<sup>39</sup>

(H223) Arngeirr hét maðr, er nam Sléttu alla á millim Hávararlóns ok Sveinungsvíkr; hans börn váru þau Þorgils ok Oddr ok Þuríðr, er Steinólfr í Þjórsárdal átti. Oddr var eldsætr í æsku ok seinligr ok var kallaðr kolbítr. Hvítabjörn drap þá báða, Arngeir ok Þorgils. Oddr fór at leita þeira, ok var björninn at ok só ór þeim blóðit. Oddr drap björninn ok færði heim ok át allan ok kallaðisk þá hefna fòður síns, er hann drap björninn, en þá bróður síns, er hann át hann. Oddr var síðan illr ok ódæll við at eiga; hann var svá mjök hamrammr, at hann gekk heiman ór Hraunhøfn um kveldit, en kom um morgin eptir í Þjórsárdal til liðs við Þuríði systur sína, er Þjórsdælir vildu grýta hana fyrir fjölkynngi ok tröllskap. (*Landnámabók* 1968, 287)<sup>40</sup>

[There was a man named Arngeirr who settled all of Slétta between Hávararlóns and Sveinungsvíkr; his children were Þorgils and Oddr and Þuríðr, whom Steinólfr in Þjórsárdal married. Oddr liked to sit by the fire in childhood; he was

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<sup>39</sup> One of the ways to deal with a wizard or a person who practiced dark arts (*Landnámabók* 1968, 286).

<sup>40</sup> *Hauksbók*, AM 371, 4to (skinnbókin) and AM 105 fol. (uppskrift Jóns Erlendssonar)

reluctant and was called a coal biter.<sup>41</sup> When a polar bear killed both Arngeirr and Þorgils, Oddr went to look for them. He found the bear there sucking the blood out of them. Oddr killed the bear and brought it home. He ate the whole thing and it was said he avenged his father when he killed the bear and his brother when he ate it. Oddr was evil after that and not easy to get along with. He was so capable of shape-changing that he went from home in Hraunhöfn one evening and arrived the next morning in Þjórsárdal to aid his sister when the men there wanted to stone her for dark magic and witchcraft.]

After mentioning genealogical information, an incident is presented about father and son, Arngeirr and Þorgils, embarking on a chore and it is mentioned that they pass through a snowstorm. Storms or whirlwinds represent entering an enchanted or liminal space (Feilberg 1910, 23). Not only can the polar bear be a threat to a community's livestock and welfare, it can also symbolize an animal or nature spirit. In the Hauksbók version, Oddr is described as a male Cinderella. That his father Arngeirr and brother Þorgils did not return and that Oddr is shown changing so significantly generates interest in a short span. Oddr reacts viscerally and responds valiantly according to the code of the time by slaying the beast. The Hauksbók version contains a vivid line about the bear sucking the blood out of the victims. Oddr's deed exceeds heroism into the abject when, in turn, he consumes the bear and pays a permanent price. The anecdote points to other narratives like *Beowulf* and *Grettis saga* in which Grettir slays an impossible revenant and is forever changed. He is cursed. Oddr consuming the bear and being mentioned as shape-

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<sup>41</sup> *kolbitr* is the motif a young man who is lazy and likes to sit by the fire or in the kitchen with his mother. Also called an ashlad or male Cinderella, other men make fun of him. When duty calls, he rises to the occasion and performs heroic deeds on behalf of others, often exceeding the capacities of those who mock him. See Ásdís Egilsdóttir (2005; 2009).

changing recalls the tribal shamanism of the Sámi people of northwestern Europe whose magic influenced the Norse people with whom they interacted. Finally Þuríðr is about to be stoned as a witch and Oddr goes to help. It is ambiguous whether there is a Christian aspect to this, whether Oddr can be considered a noble heathen (Lönnroth 1969), or whether he is doing his familial duty by defending her. Invoking another important motif in early Germanic heroic poetry, did he become berserk? This is a family story in a genealogical work and in a short space delivers messages, including supernatural ones, about local values and cultural practices. People then were speaking and it is now we who attempt to listen.<sup>42</sup>

It is difficult to penetrate the medieval mind, let alone one of our own age, however medieval Icelandic poetry, sagas, folk stories, and accounts like these, leave much to think about. These entries are intertextual with the other genres of medieval Icelandic literature. It would be easy to discard the content as fiction. However people then expended great efforts to preserve material like this. It was a costly prospect to slaughter a calf or sheep and process the skin for writing on. The writing was dense and abbreviated to maximize the use of precious space. The documentation goes beyond genealogy to include facets of communal life in relationship in a place and time. If the information preserved is metaphorical then it may convey levels of meaning that underpin or transcend the text. If the information is packaged and preserved like seeds for future germination, then it may be dispersed in the wind, perhaps that of translation or of *translatio studii*, and find fertile ground in another place or time as happened when Iceland was settled by the Norse with their traditions. Or it takes root as it did in Iceland with a millennium of continuity of tradition and of family lines. If there is communication and continuity among family members, living and deceased, then there is perhaps a larger narrative. Margaret Clunies Ross refers to “narrative icebergs” (1994, 25) and Carol Clover speaks of the

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<sup>42</sup> I am grateful to Ásdís Egilsdóttir for this conception of reading the past.

“immanent saga” (1985, 293; 1986, 24). Clunies Ross explains that a reference in a text could recall for a listener or reader another narrative already known. Clover encourages an understanding that such specimens are parts of a greater narrative and that they can be used in different stories or in different orders to meet the needs of an occasion. People would be familiar with their relationship in a given context (Clover 1986, 36). This reformulation of material or repertoire is exactly what happened with sources like *Landnámabók*, as oral accounts took written form, as saga composers copied manuscripts, and as storytellers selected the theme for a performance. Later, saga material developed into ballads as *rímur*. Digital humanities are improving access to the plethora of works and fragments and making it possible to relate and connect parts not only to one another but also to other disciplines to facilitate new understandings of the medieval milieu.<sup>43</sup>

Technology is not entirely at odds with ancient media. Overall I am looking at patterns that remain relatively constant over time. So if guardian spirits manifest in varying ways, the issue is generally not that in a given instance whether a guardian spirit is female or animal, it is that guardian spirits, so prominent as motifs in medieval literature and early modern folk stories, continue to function in contemporary society. The reports about the changes in technology show varying stances on both sides of the existential border. I see systems in flux. The National Museum of Iceland sent out a questionnaire in 1993: “Huldufólk og skyld fyrirbæri” [*huldufólk* and related phenomena] (Sontag 2007, 24). Respondents varied in their views with one saying that electricity was driving away the hidden people, another saying that the *huldufólk* had electricity before islanders did, and another pointing to evidence of parallel progression (Sontag 2007, 99). Jóhanna Katrín (Hanna Kata) Bender says the hidden folk have no need of tech; they

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<sup>43</sup> Two examples are Icelandic Saga Map, Emily Lethbridge, <http://sagamap.hi.is/is/> and Sagnagrunnur, Terry Gunnell, Trausti Dagsson, <http://sagnagrunnur.com/en/>

are more powerful (Monday 13 February 2017). Valdimar Tr. Hafstein, and those who see or interact with the hidden people, say that they notice a common way in which hidden people portray themselves. It is in a nineteenth-century Icelandic idyll in traditional costumes with people who tend farms and livestock and attend church and sing hymns. They also continue to reckon with our modernity (Sontag 2007, 100-101; Valdimar Tr. Hafstein 2003b; 2003a). However the opportunity for cooperation remains (Sontag 2007, 101-105). And whether one is clairvoyant or not, or receptive or not, the channel is always open for being contacted through a dream by guardian spirits about an admonition or request. This is an ancient medium, abundant in the sagas, and continues to be viable today.

Fríða Björk Ólafsdóttir compiled a handbook about elves that takes into account not only historical and contemporary aspects but also cross-cultural ones and at length identifies the implications of hidden beings. She was spurred on by international interest in Icelandic elf belief and noticed outsiders' hesitation to admit their own beliefs. As an Icelander she said that it didn't make any sense to take a position on the matter of belief because she found elves to be as natural as mountains, valleys, and the ocean around Iceland. This became her reason for compiling a reference work on elves—to evaluate their status in Icelandic culture. An oblique question was why the interest in elves and not ghosts and trolls. She wanted not only to catalog details about hidden beings, she wanted to explore why the belief was a living one (Fríða Björk Ólafsdóttir 2015, 3). She expresses concern about the commercial aspect that has cropped up along with the growing tourist industry. She says it is evident that there is sincerity on the part of tourists and locals to share interest and information however she cautions about the dangers of excessive motivation to profit from a natural facet of Icelandic tourism. By collating many sources and perspectives on the matter she is affirming that elf belief is cultural heritage in continual



development worthy of reinforcement (Fríða Björk Ólafsdóttir 2015, 7). The import of her efforts is expressed in terms of nature and respect:

Markmiðið er að báðir heimar nái að búa saman í friði og spekt. Niðurstaðan mín er sú að kjarni álfatrúarinnar sé virðing fyrir fegurð og leyndardómum náttúrunnar. Álfatrúin á rætur í dulvitundinni, hún tengir okkur við jörðina, við tengjumst henni með því að segja sögur. (Fríða Björk Ólafsdóttir 2015, 23)

[The goal is for both worlds to manage to live together in peace and tranquility. My conclusion is that the essence of elf belief is respect for the beauty and mysteries of nature. Elf belief has roots in the subconscious; it joins us with the earth and we are joined to her by telling stories.]

#### IV - Ethnography of the other world

In medieval Icelandic literature, in folk tales, and in popular accounts, the recurring motifs reveal people's conceptions about the world beyond and how they interact with it. From Old Norse mythology to modern anthropology, patterns emerge that make it possible to refer to an other world that for some is conceptual and for others is real. By interviewing mediums and practitioners, Robert Anderson forms what he calls "an ethnography of the spirit world" (Anderson 2005, 81). "Above all, of course, I have tried to give university students and other readers a sense of how one professional anthropologist works and thinks" (Anderson 2005, xviii). Anderson calls his project to understand spiritism in Iceland a comparative study of the popular religion against the institutionalized one: "But perhaps the most provocative potential of this study will be for students in courses on the philosophy of religion, because this ethnography provides students with a pragmatic basis for challenging or making sense of truth claims relating to the immortality of the soul or life after death" (Anderson 2005, xix). He says his book is about spiritism, which he would characterize as the unofficial religion of Iceland (Anderson 2005, 2). "I remain a complete skeptic about the reality of God, angels, spirits of the dead, life after death, and conversations with my dead father and mother" (Anderson 2005, 4). In a rubric entitled *L'espace partagé* [Shared space], Christophe Pons poses the question:

Existe-t-il un espace des morts, un endroit, topographique ou symbolique, qui serait leur lieu de résidence? Si la réponse est délicate, c'est qu'elle est certainement plus caractéristique d'un souci ethnographique que d'une réelle préoccupation indigène. En effet, les Islandais ne se posent pas ce genre de

questions; pour eux “les morts sont là,” et ce “là” est à leurs yeux une réponse suffisante. (Pons 2002, 88)

[Does there exist a space for the dead, a place, topographic or symbolic, which would be their place of residence? If the answer is tricky, it is because it is certainly more characteristic of an ethnographic concern than a genuine indigenous preoccupation. Indeed, Icelanders do not ask themselves these kinds of questions; for them “the dead are there,” and this “there” is in their eyes a sufficient response.]

With a less scholarly and more popular audience in mind, Guðmundur Kristinsson explains the purpose for his work, with occasional references to Christianity and scripture, in a spiritist context:

In this book my main endeavour is to render an account of what happens when a person “dies” and what follows. To that end I have, during sittings with mediums, asked many who have passed on what actually happened and what they had experienced. That I have done for forty years in sittings with five illustrious trance-mediums: Famous British medium Horace S. Hambling, and Icelandic mediums: Hafsteinn Björnsson, Björg Ólafsdóttir, Sigríður Jónsdóttir and Garðar Jónsson. I have asked hundreds of deceased people, close relatives, good friends, clergymen and bishops what actually happened and what they experienced. It is my hope that these accounts of our friends in

the Beyond in this book will shed some light on their passing into the World of the Deceased, and will give some comfort to those who are mourning a beloved one, and will encourage them to seek for more knowledge about our nature and destiny. (Guðmundur Kristinsson 2005, 13)

Guðmundur Kristinsson's book bears the title *Sumarlandið = The Summerland*. It is one of the ways Icelanders refer to the other world.<sup>44</sup> They also refer to it as *hinum megin*, the other side. As with related phenomena discussed here, belief in the afterlife has been researched and surveyed. Some of the most extensive, long-range, international, and interdisciplinary work has been accomplished by Erlendur Haraldsson. A monograph came of his survey into Icelanders' latter-day psychic experiences, beliefs, and folklore (Erlendur Haraldsson 1978). He says that "Það mun alkunna að trú á yfirnátúrleg fyrirbæri virðist hafa verið landlæg hér frá fyrstu tíð. Fornsögurnar bera því vitni [It is known that belief in supernatural phenomena appears to have been endemic here from the beginning. The ancient sagas bear witness to that]" (Erlendur Haraldsson 1978, 7). In line with the traditional classification scheme mentioned above, the contents include a chapter addressing mediums, hauntings, past-life recollections, a look at the deceased in light of hidden beings, *fylgjur* or guardian spirits, elves and hidden people, and *álagablettir* or enchanted spots in the landscape (Erlendur Haraldsson 1978, 94-112). He released results of studies of Icelanders' varied experiences of the deceased among the living (Erlendur Haraldsson 2005), and then prepared it in English for an international audience (Erlendur Haraldsson 2012). This work takes into account such topics as tragic deaths, widows and widowers, sensory phenomena, apparitions, healings, and arguments for and against the afterlife. He also published a book of research results with Karlis Osis on near-death experiences

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<sup>44</sup> See also Anderson (2005, 75-79).

in an international perspective (Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson 1997 (1977)). Patterns of descriptions are largely consistent however there can arise variations on themes. Most who see beyond say reincarnation is certain as souls develop there and here although some disagree (Anderson 2005, 70, 83). Descriptions come from testimony of those who have had near-death experiences and returned or from mediums reporting information from people or spirits beyond. A recent book by an American neurosurgeon, Eben Alexander, describes his near-death experience in a coma during bacterial meningitis. It includes two appendices with testimony from his physician as well as his own neuroscientific hypotheses that the parts of his brain that would account for hallucinations were impaired and would not have been the source of the type of phenomena he reported (Alexander 2012, 181-186).

Robert Anderson contextualizes and summarizes Icelandic perspectives on the other world:

Anthropologists agree that belief in a supernatural world is ubiquitous. It is also good anthropology to point out that how the supernatural world is described and addressed varies from one culture to another. In Iceland, I found it useful to identify two cultural patterns that characterize spiritist concepts relating to that world. One is the highly elaborated and thoroughly narrated cultural pattern of mediumship . . . The other . . . is a sketchy, weakly articulated ethnography of the afterlife that describes what life is like in the spirit world. It reveals a cultural pattern delimited by six characteristics, each of which is acknowledged by some and contested by others. (Anderson 2005, 86)

The characteristics are that spirits have ephemeral bodies and behave as we do, they inhabit another dimension, their activities are the same as ours only they tend to smell and sense nourishment rather than consume it, they live in a utopia without pains or stresses although some souls are in development and transition, the purpose of life is to grow spiritually and in love, and spirits advance by performing good works for people on earth. As far as Icelanders' concerns, Anderson relays that they want to know that people live after death, that their loved ones are well, and that they solicit help from the other world (Anderson 2005, 86-87).

One example of the supernatural other world aligning with the natural world is the presence and assistance of deceased physicians. Anthropologist Robert Anderson is himself a physician. In interviewing Icelanders he discovered that there are reports of what he calls spectral surgeons helping during procedures, whether the attending personnel are aware of them or not, and there are reports of doctors explicitly working with mediums to communicate with spectral doctors on a weekly basis (Anderson 2005, 40-42). A craniosacral therapist says that a spirit helps her work every time she treats a patient: "I don't know who it is, I am just thankful. I am never alone when I am working" (Anderson 2005, 41). Corinne Dempsey tells of respondents sharing their healings and the extent to which they admit to their physicians that they were working with a spiritual practitioner, living or deceased. A car mechanic she interviewed had metastasized cancer and a six-month prognosis. She said that when she visited him several years later he told her that he had been working with a living spiritual practitioner and his cancer went into full remission. His doctor, however, was not keen on spiritual healing and, finally, at this late date, the mechanic intended to speak to his physician (Dempsey 2017, 150). Christophe Pons interviewed a woman who told him that her husband was in a Reykjavík hospital with a serious kidney condition. The doctor told him he could no longer stay, rather, he had to come for dialysis

two or three times a week. One night in the hospital while he was sleeping, he felt that there were people behind him who were pressing his back forcefully. They were deceased doctors. After this he was well and the medical staff thought it was a miracle (Pons 2011, 142).<sup>45</sup> A similar healing is recorded in *Maríu saga*:

54. Arnbjörg þaa Kalafell helbredes (Fra konv at Kalfafelli) Maríu jartegnir I. Þessa atbvrði ok iartegnagiorð frv sancte Marie vilivm ver feginsamliga a loptt hallda, gvði almatkv m til lofs ok sælli hans moðvr, er mesta liknn veitir avllvm þeim er hana sækia af ast að arnaðarorði við almatkan gvð. Kona het Arnnbiorg, er vanheil var, hon vackti j kirkiv vm nott fyrir Birgitar messv aa bæ þeim er at Kalfafelli heitir. Enn henne vitraðizt Maria drottning með liosi ok ilm ok spvrði, ef hvn þættiz illa heil. En konan svaraði ok kvezt sva þickia vist. “Nv mvntv, kvat hin dyra drottning Maria, verða heil heðan ifra, ok hefvir þer þess arnað Nicholas byskvp ok Thorlakr byskvp.” Þaa tok annarri hendi sæl Maria drottning vm kviðinn, en annarri vm lendarnar ok stravk ofan, sva at henni varð sartt við, ok þaa hvarf Maria fra henne at syn, en hvn konan vaknaði alheil. (Maríu saga 1871, I: 154-155)<sup>46</sup>

[We wish to gladly proclaim these events and performance of miracles by Our Lady Saint Mary in praise of God Almighty and his blessed Mother, who grants the greatest mercy to all those who approach her with love for intercession with

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<sup>45</sup> Christophe Pons produced an article on the topic of helpful deceased medical staff in Iceland (2006).

<sup>46</sup> Manuscripts of Mary's saga and miracles originated in Latin in the thirteenth century (Unger in *Maríu saga* 1871, I: [iii]; Heizmann 1993, 407-408).

almighty God. A pregnant woman called Arnbjörg held vigil in church the night before the Feast of St Brigid [1 February] on the farm called Kálfafell. Queen Mary appeared to her with light and fragrance and asked if she thought she was ill/pregnant. The woman answered and said she certainly thought so. ‘You will be healthy from now on,’ said the glorious Queen Mary, ‘and Bishop Nicholas and Bishop Þorlákr have obtained this for you.’ Then Blessed Mary put one hand around her belly and another around her loins and squeezed down her body, causing her pain, and then Mary vanished from sight and the woman awoke, completely cured.] (Translated by Margaret Cormack 2008, 347-348)

Pons and others talk about doctors making rounds on the other side however when it is difficult for people on this side to address the many needs on earth, people make due with prayer lists [*bænalistar*], prayer books [*fyrirbænaþækur*], and prayer circles [*bænahringir*], sometimes online (Pons 2011, 143).

Pons finds that the phenomenon of these deceased doctors is a recent one and he sees it detached from the tradition of the connection of the living and the dead in family lines however he sees it functioning in the larger Icelandic family of the nation (Pons 2011, 143-144). Seen from the examination thus far of guardian spirits is that they tend not to be family members but people who are called to serve the living as guardians (Anderson 2005, 77). And while Pons frequently notes the continual interaction of generations across the divide through dreams, among other forms of mediation, the healing aspect, that of the deceased and the living cooperating, in fact, has a long tradition. An episode in *Þorsteins saga uxafóts* is rich in symbolism about a medieval conception of the other world. It exercises many of the themes



discussed here, including otherworldly healing on earth, and gives a broader view of Icelandic cultural participation in psychic phenomena to redress wrongs. At the time a core ethic was to uphold a sense of personal and family honor.<sup>47</sup>

*Þorsteins þátrr uxafóts* [The Tale of Þorsteinn Ox-foot] is considered to be a late composition, even a generic hybrid, that collates styles of legendary saga, family saga, king's saga, and possibly romance or knightly tale. It is less historical than entertaining, although both Þorsteinn and Ívarr are historical figures mentioned in Icelandic settlement accounts, and they only appear in association with the Battle of Svǫldr (Würth 1991, 81). Alan Binns points to historical accounts of Úlfljótr the lawspeaker however there does seem to have been a Þorsteinn uxafótr on the Long Serpent at the battle of Svǫldr. In Oddr Snorrason's version of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, and elsewhere, Þorsteinn survives the battle and there is no evidence he was an Icelander. Otherwise all accounts concur that his father Ívarr ljómi in the tale perished on the ship Long Serpent (Binns 1953-57, 38-39). *Þorsteins þátrr uxafóts* is only found in *Flateyjarbók* and *Íslenzk fornrit* uses F: *Flateyjarbók* Gl. kgl. sml. 1005, fol. It is to have been written by two priests: Jón Þórðarson and Magnús Þórhallsson between 1387-1390. Magnús illuminated it and prepared a preface about the contents and authorial responsibility for the parts (Kolbrún Haraldsdóttir 1993, 197). It preserves ancient lore, or lore as people conceived it, predating the time in which it was written, and it does so in a Christian context mentioning the desideratum of baptism. Were such saga authors in some cases trying to lend an air of authenticity to the narrative? In view of the opening of the *þátrr* [tale, literally thread or strand] citing Úlfljótr's Law, Alan Binns mentions *Landnámabók* as a possible source for saga writers (Binns 1953-57, 47), and it also includes placenames that the editors of *Íslenzk fornrit* made sure to check. Vésteinn Ólason by way of Stefanie Würth points out that even an author who seeks realistic depiction of

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<sup>47</sup> For a cultural view of medieval Iceland and the code of honor see Miller (1990).

historical characters simply cannot have access to adequate sources and therefore the *þættir* are not reliable sources for a royal character for example. Further, the texts were likely intended to entertain (Würth 1991, 20; Vésteinn Ólason 1985, 67). Joseph Harris cautions about a complex of motifs, borrowings from international tales, and various origins (Harris 1980, 172). He says that “Too many motives for a given action look like a sign of an author who is fabricating a single story from diverse, pre-existing materials” (Harris 1980, 173). While Alan Binns finds the historical kernel in place, he thinks that it has been overcome by increasingly motivic and folkloric features. He does not think there was Christianization of the folk matter but does surmise an intention to edify listeners. He calls them improving tales (Binns 1953-57, 60). Elizabeth Ashman Rowe and Joseph Harris proclaim the goings on being the Icelanders and Norwegian kings stylistically realistic but are really projections of the concerns of Icelanders regarding Norwegian royal authority (Ashman Rowe and Harris 2005, 464). In addition to this is the Christian preoccupation with reflecting the past in coordination with the divine and ecclesiastical aims for soul and society (Ashman Rowe and Harris 2005, 464-465).

Porkell's sister Oddný was attractive and talented yet from birth she was unable to speak. Brother and sister loved each other very much however Þorkell was a tough man. They had a slave, Freysteinn, who was well disposed and not unpleasant in appearance. A poor, childless neighbor Krummr lived with his wife Þórgunna who was wise and knew sorcery. Þorkell asked Oddný to see to Ívarr who had come from Norway. She cut runes to tell Þorkell that she had a premonition about Ívarr that would lead to unfortunate complications. Later Þorkell confronted Ívarr for making Oddný pregnant. Ívarr denied it, blaming slaves, attacked Þorkell with a knife, and left Iceland. At midsummer Oddný gave birth to a large child. Þorkell wanted to expose the child to die. Geitir, Þorkell's father, said the child should not be exposed and had a premonition

about the promise of the boy. Freysteinn the slave went to Oddný to get the child, put bacon in its mouth, and made a shelter. Krummr went into the forest for wood and found the boy. When he realized what was going on he took the child home and raised him with Þórgunna who taught him secret lore. Geitir discovered the full truth of the family relationship when he recognized the child's bear *fylgja*, or animal spirit guardian, mentioned earlier. Then there were local family revelations and eventual reconciliation with Ívarr. In chapter six, Þorkell and Þorsteinn, father and son, go to gather sheep. One dark night, seeking repose near a mound, Þorsteinn asks Freysteinn to watch over him while he sleeps (*Þorsteins þáttur uxafóts* 1991, [339]-370).

Þat er sagt eitt haust er menn skyldu á fjall ganga, beiddi Þorkell Þorstein, frænda sinn, fara með þeim. Hann játtaði því, hann var tíu vetra gamall þá. Freysteinn kveðr hann til ferðar með sér. Þeir fara sem þeim liggja leiðir, finna margt fjár. Ok er þeir fara heim á leið, koma þeir í einn dal djúpan; eru þá tveir saman, Þorsteinn ok Freysteinn. Þá kveldaði mjök. Þeir sá þar einn haug stóran. “Hér ætlak í nótt at vera,” segir Þorsteinn, “ok skaltu vaka í nótt, Freysteinn, ok vekja mik eigi, hversu sem ek læt í svefni, því at þar þykki mér á liggja.” Freysteinn játtaði því. Síðan sofnaði Þorsteinn; ok er á leið nóttina, lét hann illa í svefni, því at hann brauzt um á hnakki ok hæli; því gekk allt til dags. Freysteinn efaðist í, hvárt hann skyldi vekja Þorstein eðr eigi; miklu váru hans læti erfiðligri. En er lýsti af degi, vaknaði Þorsteinn, ok var þá sveittr mjök, ok mælti: “Dyggiliga hefir þú enn vakat, Freysteinn. Hefir þú nú gert þá tvá hluti, at hvárrtveggi væri launa verðr: í fyrstan tíma, er þú fórt með mik ok nú. Skal ek nú því launa þér, at ek skal fá fyrir þik frelsi af Þorkatli frænda mínum, ok hér er tólf merkr silfrs, at ek vil gefa þér.

En nú vil ek segja þér draum minn. Mér þótti haugr sjá opnast, ok gekk þar út ór maðr rauðklæddr; hann var mikill maðr vexti ok ekki aðalliga illiligr.” Hann gekk at Þorsteini ok heilsaði upp á hann. Þorsteinn tók honum vel ok spurði hann at nafni eðr hvar hann ætti heima. Hann lézt Brynjarr heita, ok eiga heima í haugi þeim, – “er þú sér standa hér í dalnum. En veit ek, hvat þú heitir ok svá hvers kyns at þú ert ok svá þat, at þú mant mikill maðr verða fyrir þér, eðr villtu fara með mér ok sjá hýbýli mín?” Þorsteinn játtaði því, ok stóð upp ok tók öxi sína, er Þorkell hafði gefit honum; <þeir> ganga inn í hauginn. En er Þorsteinn kom þar, sýndist honum þar vel fyrir búit. Hann sá þar til hægri handar sitja ellifu menn á bekk. Þeir váru allir rauðklæddir, ok heldr fáligr. Öðrumegin í hauginum sá hann sitja tólf menn. Þeir váru allir bláklæddir. Einn var þeira mestr ok mjök illiligr. Brynjarr laut at Þorsteini ok mælti: “Sá er bróðir minn, inn mikli maðr, ok erum vit þó ekki skaplíkir. Hann heitir Oddr ok vill flestum illt. Hann veitir mér þungar búsifjar, en hann er því öllu sterkari en ek sem hann er meiri vöxtum; en ek hefi orðit at játta því ok mínir menn at fá honum hverja nátt mörk gulls eðr tvær merkr silfrs eðr einnhvern grip jafnan þessu. Hefir nú svá fram farit inn næsta mánuð, ok gerumst vér nú farnir at lausafé. Oddr hefir at varðveita gull þat, er sú náttúra fylgir, at hverr maðr, sem mállaus er ok leggr þat undir tungurætr sér, þá tekur þegar mál sitt, ok af því gulli má móðir þín mál fá; en Oddr geymir þat svá ríkt, at þat gengr aldri af honum, hvárki nótt né dag.” Nú sezt Brynjarr niðr hjá sínum kumpánum, en Þorsteinn sitr þeira yztr. En er þeir hafa setit um hríð, stóð Brynjarr upp ok gekk yfir at Oddi, bróðr sínum, ok afhendi honum einn hring digran. Oddr tók við þegjandi, en Brynjarr gekk aptr til sætis síns. Svá stóð upp

hverr at öðrum, ok færðu Oddi allir nokkurn grip, en hann gaf öngum þökk í móti. En er þeir höfðu þetta allir <gert>, þá mælti Brynjarr: “Þat mun þér ráð, Þorsteinn, at gera sem aðrir ok færa Oddi nökkut gjald; eigi mun annat duga, með því at þú sitr á várn bekk.” Oddr var yggldr mjök ok sat upp mjök gnæpr ok heldr ófrýnligr. Þorsteinn stóð þá upp ok helt á öxi sinni. Hann gekk yfir at Oddi ok mælti: “Ekki er ek plaggamargr til, Oddr, at lúka þér gjald þetta; muntu ok ekki mikilþægr at við mik, því at ek er óríkr.” Oddr anzaði, ok heldr stutt: “Ekki er mér um kvámu þína hingat, en muntu eigi frammi láta þat, er þér líkar?” “Ek hefi ekki til nema öxi mína, ef þú vill hana taka.” Oddr rétti höndina í móti, en Þorsteinn högggr til hans; kemr þat á höndina ofan olnboga ok tekr af. Oddr sprettr þá upp ok allir þeir, er <í> hauginum váru. Vápn þeira hengu uppi yfir þeim; grípa þeir þau; slær nú með þeim í bardaga. Þat sér Þorsteinn at nú er ekki fjarri um með þeim Þorsteini ok Oddi, er Oddr var einhendr. Allir lítast honum inir bláklæddu menn harðfengari. Þat sér hann ok, þó at þeir höggist af hendr eðr fætr eðr særíst öðrum stórsárum, þá eru þeir á annari stundu heilir. En þat, er Þorsteinn hjó, þá var þat eptir eðli. Eigi linnti Þorsteinn fyrr, ok þeir bræðr allir saman, en Oddr var drepinn ok þeir allir kumpánar. Þorsteinn var þá mjök móðr en ekki sárr, því at Brynjarr ok hans félagar höfðu hlíft Þorsteini við höggum öllum. Brynjarr tók nú gullit af Oddi dauðum ok fekk Þorsteini, ok bað hann færa móður sinni. Hann gaf honum tólf merkr silfrs í sjóði ok mælti: “Mikit frelsi hefir þú unnit mér, Þorsteinn, því at nú ræð ek hér haugi ok eignum; mun þetta upphaf þinna þrekvirkja, er þú munt vinna utanlendis. Þú munt ok taka siðaskipti, ok er sá siðr miklu betri, þeir sem hann mega hljóta, en hinum er erfiðra um, sem eigi eru til

Þess skapaðir ok slíkir eru sem ek, því at vit bræðr várum jarðbúar. Nú þætti mér miklu máli skipta, at þú kæmir nafni mínu undir skír, ef þér yrði þess auðit at eiga son. “Síðan leiddi hann mik út or hauginum, ok áðr vit skildum, mælti hann: ‘Ef mín orð mega nökkut, þá snúist þér þín verk öll til heiðrs ok hamingju.’ Eptir þat snéri Brynjarr inn í hauginn, en ek vaknaða; ok þat til marks um, at hér er nú bæði hjá mér sjóðrinn ok gullit.” Síðan fóru þeir ok ráku heim fénað þann, er þeir höfðu fundit, ok heimtu menn vel. Sagði Þorsteinn þenna atburð allan, ok færði moður sinni gullit, ok tók hún þegar mál sitt, er þat kom undir tungurætr henni. Stendr þessi haugr í Jökulsdal ok er kallaðr Brynjarshaugr, ok sér enn í dag merki. (*Þorsteins þátr uxafóts* 1991, 351-355)

[It is said that one autumn when people had to go to the mountains (to gather sheep), Þorkell asked his son Þorsteinn to go with them. He agreed. He was ten winters old by then. Freysteinn asked to go with him as well. They went where the roads led and found many sheep. And when they were on the way back, they came into a deep valley. It was the two of them together, Þorsteinn and Freysteinn, when it grew very dark. There they saw a large mound. “I intend to spend the night here,” Þorsteinn said, “and Freysteinn you will keep watch and do not wake me however I act while asleep, because I think something will come of it.” Freysteinn agreed. Then Þorsteinn went to sleep. As the night progressed he slept restlessly because he jerked from head to toe. It went like this until morning. Freysteinn doubted whether he should wake Þorsteinn or not; his movements became more agitated. And when day broke, Þorsteinn awoke, and was very

sweaty. He said: “You have kept watch faithfully Freysteinn. In this you have done two things, both of which deserve reward, the first in accompanying me and the second now. I will now reward you by getting you your freedom from my father Þorkell and here are twelve marks of silver which I want to give you. But now I want to tell you my dream. It seemed to me that I saw a mound open and out of it walked a man dressed in red. He was built large and not very hideous.” He went up to Þorsteinn and greeted him. Þorsteinn received him well and asked him his name or where he called home. He was called Brynjarr and lived in that mound, – “which you see here in the valley. And I know what you are called as well as from what family you come, and even that you will be a great man. Will you come with me and see my home?” Þorsteinn agreed, got up and took the ax which Þorkell had given him, and the two went in to the mound. When Þorsteinn went in, it seemed well arranged. On the right he saw eleven men seated on a bench. They were all dressed in red and rather reserved. On the other side in the mound he saw twelve men seated. They were all dressed in blue (black). One of them was the largest and very ill-looking. Brynjarr bent toward Þorsteinn and said: “That is my brother, the large man, and we are not similarly disposed. He is called Oddr and means ill toward most. He is very troublesome to me and he is stronger than I am as he is larger. I and my men have had to agree to give him, every night, a mark of gold or two marks silver or some similar treasure of equal value. It has gone like this for the last month and we have almost exhausted our property. Oddr holds on to some gold which has the quality that any person who is unable to talk who places it under the roots of the tongue will speak. Your

mother could have some of this gold but Oddr hides it so well that it never leaves him, neither night nor day.” Then Brynjarr sits beside his companions and Þorsteinn sits at the end near the entrance. After they had sat for some time, Brynjarr arose and went to Oddr, his brother, and handed him a prodigious arm ring. Oddr received it without a word and Brynjarr took his seat again. In this way each arose in turn and handed Oddr some valuable to which he offered no thanks of any kind. And when they had all done this, Brynjarr said: “It would be advisable, Þorsteinn, to do as others have done and hand Oddr something of value. Nothing else will do since you are sharing our bench.” Oddr was frowning a great deal, sat so as to tower over everyone, and very offputtingly. Then Þorsteinn stood up with ax in hand. He went over to Oddr and said: “I don’t have much in possessions to pay you your fee, Oddr, so please do not be too exacting with me for I am poor.” Oddr replied, and rather abruptly: “Your presence here means little to me but will you offer what you are able?” “I have nothing except my ax, if you will take it.” Oddr extended his hand and Þorsteinn hacked at him and hit his arm above the elbow until it came off. Oddr sprang up along with everyone else who was in the mound. They grasped the weapons that were hanging above them and struck with them in battle. Þorsteinn saw that now there was little difference in strength between him and Oddr now that Oddr had one arm. But all the blue-(black-)clad men seemed to him to be hardier. He also saw that although they struck off hand or foot, or inflicted great wounds on one another, they were then whole again. But whatever Þorsteinn struck went according to nature. Þorsteinn and all the brothers did not stop until Oddr was



brought down along with all his companions. Þorsteinn was worn out but not wounded because Brynjarr and his fellows had shielded Þorsteinn against all blows. Brynjarr took the gold from the dead Oddr and gave it to Þorsteinn, asking him to hand it to his mother. He gave him twelve marks of silver in a pouch and said: “You have won great freedom for me, Þorsteinn, because now I prevail here in the mound and over the property. This is the beginning of your great feats which you will accomplish abroad. You will also convert and that belief is much better for those whom it benefits but more difficult for others who are not suited to it and such am I because my brother and I were earth-dwellers. Now I think it very important that if you are fated to have a son that you baptize him in my name.” “Then he led me out of the mound, and before we parted, he said: ‘if my words mean anything, then all your efforts will turn into honor and good luck.’ After that Brynjarr turned back to the mound and I awoke. And as a sign of it, here I now have both the pouch and the gold.” Then they departed and drove home the sheep they had found and it went well. Þorsteinn reported the whole event and presented his mother the gold. When she placed it under her tongue roots, she was able to speak. The mound is in Jökulsdal and is called Brynjarshaugr (Brynjarr’s mound), and there is a landmark there still today.]

The references, intertextual correspondences, and folkloric motifs in this short excerpt are abundant. The passage represents medieval Icelandic literature as well as contemporary Icelandic culture concerning the basis for and understanding of the supernatural. It is always open to the reader to devise his or her own interpretations however I will comment on some features.

Recalling the earlier *Landnámabók* excerpt, here a father and son head out to the mountain pastures. When they end up by a grave mound at night, they are in a liminal space. When Þorsteinn is referred to as ten winters old it shows that medieval Icelandic years were counted by winters which were split into winter and summer, shifting in October and April (Árni Björnsson 2000, 15, 31-33). Ten years old is an age of majority and also suggests that the protagonist is gifted or is about to be prominent. The laws administering maturity and inheritance in medieval Iceland, such as according to the laws of *Grágás*, denote the expectations for men in their mid-teens (Percivall 2008, 134-137). Saga literature often represents the early to mid-teens as the period of coming-of-age (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2008, 229-233). Þorsteinn is prescient when he asks Freysteinn to keep watch. His coming to rest at a grave mound may be considered to be a form of *útiseta*, or sitting out, with the intention to obtain supernatural knowledge. It is suggested that the eponymous protagonist is supernaturally attuned when he expects to enter a dream space and it is a motif not to disturb the sleep of a dreaming person. In keeping with the code of honor, Freysteinn proves his loyalty and is rewarded. Þorsteinn tells his companion his dream. Such dream sharing is not only a structural feature of saga narrative, it is covered as a social phenomenon of contemporary Iceland by Adriëne Heijnen (2013). The folk stories of Iceland, the *þjóðsögur* of Jón Árnason and others and researchers like Henning Frederik Feilberg preserve the folklore of human and hidden person interaction in earth dwellings and grave mounds. In the nineteenth century there were stories of intercourse with hidden beings as well as the resulting children. There are also stories of changelings; hidden people supposedly replaced human babies with theirs in the hopes of getting them baptized.

When Brynjarr greets Þorsteinn, he identifies himself as supernatural by being all-knowing. Troll women as supernatural creatures greet heroes by telling them that they know

their names and their family history. Brynjarr speaks a prophecy for Þorsteinn and then invites him in to the mound. How one is to behave and survive a visit to a mound is covered in the folklore. Sometimes people become lost for time and it is recommended that one leave something behind, like a glove, so that one will find one's way back. Sometimes it is said that one should not consume food there. Here, Þorsteinn knows to take his ax along. Inside he sees two sets of twelve champions arrayed against each other in threat of conflict. Perhaps they are fallen warriors in Valhøll [Valhalla]. The battle is repetitive yet finite, like heroes waiting for the final battle of *Ragnarøk*, or like ghosts who haunt until they are able to move on. Twelve is multivalent and here may suggest a complete team of fighters. The amount of money offered in compensation is also twelve pieces of silver, meaning a full payment (Li Tang 2015, 26-29). When the colors of the attire are mentioned, it may indicate something not unlike black and white, or good and evil. Brynjarr's cohort is dressed in red. It may be that they had success abroad and were donned in colorful clothing or that because of the color they achieved rank. Oddr's group in blue, which also means black, represents people prepared to kill. When a vengeance killing was carried out, often lawfully, the avenger would wear blue clothing (Crawford 2014, 20, 35-37, 45, 156-157).

The depiction suggests ghosts who are still contending over an unresolved issue, here brothers Brynjarr and Oddr. Brynjarr means breast shield or coat of mail and Oddr means the point of a weapon. Brynjarr's men are trapped in giving away their wealth. When Þorsteinn arrives it may symbolize the living and the deceased cooperating to resolve a matter so that parties can move on. Each has something to offer the other. Þorsteinn is able to inflict effective wounds and Brynjarr's men are able to shield Þorsteinn. Oddr withholds a treasure of gold that can heal Þorsteinn's mother Oddný from her inability to speak. This is a healing medium and a

supernatural one. It is won by struggle and yet uncannily it is preordained. There is a whole folklore about buried treasure in mounds (Lindow 1982). The way Þorsteinn deals with Oddr signifies the heroic Norseman who presumably is acting on behalf of his people and upholding social values. Here again one could imagine the motif of the noble heathen who challenges the embodiment of evil although not Christian himself (Lönnroth 1969). After all, Brynjarr is a noble heathen in search of an elusive conversion for he is still an underground dweller. This refers also to elves, hidden people, or nature spirits intimately part of the landscape. It refers further to the other world and whatever inhabitants may be there including ghosts still earthbound.

When Brynjarr asks Þorsteinn to baptize and to name a son after him, this is the practice I mentioned before of the visitation of the name, *að vitja nafns*. Perhaps Brynjarr is a deceased family member who is trying to advance spiritually. Or maybe is a guardian spirit who is tasked with helping the family, as he does Þorsteinn's mother Oddný. In any event he intervenes to make a request of this generation on behalf of himself and his fellows. The exchange happens by way of a dream. Þorsteinn fulfills the request by naming his son Brynjarr. This selection is an example of later saga writing and is, as said, more fictional than factual, nevertheless it reveals no small amount about Icelandic culture. It includes Christian influences however allows the cultural facets to shine through. The final editorial note about the final line of the tale explains that the mound, Brynjarshaugur [Brynjarr's mound], exists today on the road over Helligheiði in Jökuldalur which is a tributary valley southwest of Fagradal in Vópna fjörður. The editors note that the saga author may have had Reyðarfjörður in mind which is over a hundred kilometers to the south of Vópna fjörður on the east coast of Iceland (*Þorsteins þáttur uxafóts* 1991, 355). Often such touches are added to legends either to affirm a fact or to bolster a tenuous tale. This one has troll vomit in it and it seems that the writer left no literary or folkloric stone unturned in mining

the tradition for a good tale (*Þorsteins þátrr uxafóts* 1997, 351).<sup>48</sup>

Corinne Dempsey describes the perspective of medical professionals about some of the mental health aspects of such phenomena:

Iceland's mental-health and social-work fields reserve a special place for open-minded skepticism. A number of social workers and psychiatrists I met, most of whom had little room for spirits themselves, acknowledged *andleg mál's* [spiritual matters'] benefits for their grieving clients. Some described young-adult clients who, alarmed by voices and/or visions, held out hope that spirits were causing them, rather than mental illness. In some cases, family members brought the afflicted to a *miðill* [medium] who would either assure them that the experiences were spirit-driven or, to their dismay, advise them to seek professional help. Several mental-health professionals recalled for me instances when a client's family contacted them or a colleague for a second opinion after a *miðill* had diagnosed a young person's voices or visions as spirit-induced. In such cases, although unwilling to recognize spirits as the cause, they agreed that he or she was not mentally ill. (Dempsey 2017, 49-50)

As with guardian spirits, some of them are beneficial and share their energy and expertise to guide those on earth. Anderson interviewed a Lutheran pastor who explained that his grandfather, also a priest, is with him: "Many clairvoyants have said to me, 'there is another priest standing behind you. He is very tall and stout. He is sending light from himself to you.' I

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<sup>48</sup> For an English translation see George Clark's in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, 4, (*Þorsteins þátrr uxafóts* 1997, 340-354).

am sure it is my grandfather: He was a very big man, and he was a clergyman” (Anderson 2005, 112). Children are sensitive to ghosts and to what some would call invisible playmates and the topic of playing in childhood with hidden people in Iceland has been mentioned. In a discussion with a young man who had been told by a medium that his deceased father was close to him, Anderson gleaned more about Icelandic culture. The young man said he always felt well looked after, as if his father were his guardian spirit. When Anderson asked him if he had ever discussed this with his mother, he said, “You talk about it when things come up, but, you know, Icelanders live a double life. We are a rational society. Very modern. But we live a second life with our ancestral spirits, the hidden people, elves,” Anderson noted that the young man stopped talking. Prompting him, Anderson said: “I responded by saying that it is not necessarily irrational to believe that your father lives on as a spirit. It could be a perfectly natural occurrence that we simply do not yet understand in objective, scientific terms.” The young man said: “Yeah. To many Icelanders, this is normal” (Anderson 2005, 97-98).

The early ethnography of the other world in Old Norse-Icelandic literature originates in Old Norse mythology and includes gods like Óðinn, Þórr, Loki, Baldr, and Freyja. It mentions supernatural creatures and objects. Its cosmology is partly embodied in the world tree Yggdrasil. The order delineates worlds such as Ásgarðr, Útgarðr, Miðgarðr, Hel, and Valhøll, often referred to as Valhalla. Valhøll is one of the heavens where warriors slain in battle are gathered by Valkyries, the choosers of the slain, to await the final contest at Ragnarøk. It is also a cosmography, an etiology, that has become world mythology. Few things could be argued to be possessed of more unreality and yet it remains viable today in the form of the multibillion-dollar comic book, film, and television fantasy industry. New manifestations and reinterpretations of Norse mythology continually emerge. Something resides within the lore to continue to inspire

millions of people across linguistic and cultural borders. And nonetheless it can be argued that it harbors some element of reality. Myth, in its earlier meaning, involves sacred origins, cultural identity, and ritual behavior, for which blood, sacrificial and martial, has been poured out. Margaret Clunies Ross has observed that in spite of how medieval Icelandic literature evolved, one could not see it detached from the mythological patterns that underlie the narratives (2000; see also Vésteinn Ólason 1994, 112-113). And because the rich and varied corpus was written post-Conversion (1000 CE), it is inevitably reflective of medieval Christian society, whatever interest the society clearly had in its heathen Nordic past. Clunies Ross says: “Individual myths cannot be considered on their own or out of the more general context of early Norse society’s view of itself. Myths function as both cognitive and communicative systems and need to be understood within a contemporary social context” (Clunies Ross 2000, 120; 118-123). The legendary sagas, for example, not only take the mythic patterns of the gods fighting the giants to maintain cosmos over chaos, they transfer them onto heroes fighting trolls and conquering the landscape. They insert eddic poetry into the texts, sometimes improvise them, and rehearse the content in prose form, so not only is the content mimicking the mythic pattern, the form is as well. Insertions of poetry were suggestive for listeners. Since some of the characters and verses were familiar to them, such insertions would instantly recall an atmosphere of the remote past. In this mode, it was customary for heroes, gods, and supernatural creatures to be given voice through the poetry (Clunies Ross 2012, 125). For the ensuing discussion it is useful to call forward some of the themes that Clunies Ross recognizes for their role in the larger context:

The foregoing summary of some of the major social concerns of Old Norse myths are the conclusions of a modern analytical method that is able to bring together all

the extant texts and examine them as a whole to detect repeated themes. It is unlikely that medieval Icelanders were fully aware of the meanings of these structures. The modern reader also needs to realize that the forms in which mythological texts were available to medieval people were significant in their influence on their perception and understanding of myths. The actual forms in which Icelanders and other medieval Scandinavians knew their myths in the age before writing are not fully recoverable, and the written texts of medieval provenance that we know today as the output of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were almost certainly different in a number of ways from their oral antecedents. (Clunies Ross 2000, 123)

What should have become clear by now is that Iceland is a nation composed of syncretic traditions that appear to operate harmoniously and yet there is a dimension that has yet to be taken into account.



## V - Syncretic traditions

The immediate association with syncretism in Icelandic tradition is the seeming concord between heathenism and Christianity, not always harmonious, along with the various phenomena under consideration here, in their eclectic manifestations, including shamanic, to be discussed.

However another faith, or science, as it were, is the thinking of our time that regards or disregards these phenomena, categorizes them, and overlooks something that has been and continues to operate just as much at the surface if not immediately apparent. Clive Tolley looks for a more precise definition: “Connected with religion are terms used when two religions come together. Baird (1971: 142-4) has pointed out the need for a more precise terminology here; thus, when elements from different religions come together in a harmonious unit then the term *synthesis* is appropriate; when the elements co-exist without consistency, we have *syncretism*; when an element is absorbed from outside and the borrowing religion changes as a result, we have *reconception*. Yet determining which process is at play in any given instance requires an objective knowledge of the history of the religions in question, which is rarely available in the case of Norse paganism” (Tolley 2009, I: 8). The actual process as it happened in Iceland over time and continues today eludes precise terminology. I look at the heathen and Christian heavyweights as well as influences from Nordic shamanism as well as the evolving research methods that investigate them.

As Christianity took hold, it tried to promote interest in the cults of saints and their intercession to work miracles rather than the local, land, and guardian spirits. Hrefna Sigríður Bjartmarsdóttir shows the syncretic aspect of this: “Í tengslum við spíritisma og nýaldarhugmyndir hafa einnig verið nefnd tengsl framliðinna manna og engla. Dýrlingar sem

framliðnar verndarvættir hafa lifað langt fram eftir öldum í þjóðtrúnni [In connections with spiritism and New Age ideas there has also been mentioned a connection between deceased people and angels. Saints as protective spirits have survived for ages in folk belief]” (Hrefna Sigríður Bjartmarsdóttir 2015, 178; 220-223, 227). The miracles recorded in the bishops’ and saints’ sagas were local to Iceland (Cormack 2008, 340), as seen earlier in the healing of the pregnant woman Arnbjörg by the Blessed Virgin Mary through the intercession of Bishop Nicholas, and Bishop Þorlákr, later canonized as the patron saint of Iceland. The power of magic was believed in by heathen and Christian alike, and was part of the religion and science of the time. And it is for this reason that, when it was not demonized outright, the church, and the law codes, attempted to show, through the medium of writing, the shortcomings of magical practices as less prestigious, less natural, and less desirable than what the church had to offer. There was common ground on the matter of peace and social justice as shared ethics (Nedkvitne 2009, 273-300). On the one hand, the accounts of magic, generous and even tolerant as they are, were formulated by Christians. On the other hand, Buchholz reminds about what is difficult to know:

In addition, we have to be aware of one aspect of the selectivity of our sources, that is, silence. Especially in stories related to our topic, no one was interested in teaching and propagating the magical arts, which would be used to cause harm. Church and secular authorities regarded magic with contempt and awe, and they saw in it demonic deception and a very dangerous thing. That such things should not be talked about, or that spells are forbidden to be recited, are recurring remarks in texts. Indeed, it is really surprising that medieval Scandinavian literature still contains so many references to magic (cf. Boyer, 1986, *passim*).

However, the explanation is simple: this was the reality. Life was full of magic. This view is proven, if it needs proof at all, by the historical fact that according to all sources magic had played a major role in the rural environments of Europe until the previous century. (Buchholz 2005, 238)

An example of syncretism between heathenism and Christianity is found in *Eiríks saga rauða*, during Þorbjörg lítil-völva's public reading, and it continues the example already introduced in the section on mediation. The community was presumably a mixture of Christian and pre-Christian Norse settlers in Greenland, however Þorbjörg asked in particular for women who had the knowledge or lore, *fræði*, which was necessary for incantations and which was called *Varðlokur*.<sup>49</sup> They could not find anyone. They looked all over the farm. Then a woman among them, Guðríðr, said: "Hvárki em ek fjölkunnig né vísindakona, en þó kenndi Halldís, fóstira mín, mér á Íslandi þat kvæði, er hon kallaði Varðlokur [I am neither skilled in magic nor am I a wise woman, but yet Halldís, my foster mother, taught me in Iceland the verses which she called *Varðlokur*]" (*Eiríks saga rauða* 1935, 207-208). Guðríðr then said that she did not want to have anything to do with this because she was Christian. Þorbjörg told her that she could be of help to people and not be any worse off. She agreed, the women assembled around the platform, and it was said that she sang the songs beautifully. As mentioned before it attracted spirits that Þorbjörg said had not intention of approaching and that now things were revealed to her (*Eiríks saga rauða* 1935, 208). This relates to the claptrap that I also mentioned before, about energy. Ritual bears within it power not only to summon others but also to change oneself. Through habitual practice one improves oneself. Verse, repetition, music, movement, dance, and the like

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<sup>49</sup> The etymology and correspondences, including classical, of *varðlok[k]ur* lead one into a rich exploration of Germanic philology and medieval magical practice. See Olsen (1916), *Icelandic-English Dictionary* (1957, 679-680), and also *urðr* and *wyrd* in Bek-Pedersen (2011).

can also place a participant in a medial, liminal, receptive, or open space. The rosary is a repetitive prayer on the lives and mysteries of the larger Holy Family, focusing on Jesus, Mary, Joseph, God the Father, angels, and the Holy Spirit. Verses of devotion, such as to the Blessed Virgin Mary (Wrightson 2001), were not unfamiliar to medieval Icelanders hearing historical lore like that of Eiríkr rauðr [Eric the Red]. According to practitioners, thinking of, and, certainly, calling by name, invokes, thus, the presence of spirits. From Latin *incantare*, incant, chant, intone, enchant, charm, sing, are included. The practice of incantations, with their vibratory power, forms a bond for a community of prayer and with the other world and provides a channel for the transmission of energy, assistance, love, or intention.

Such incantation embodied in the word *varðlokur*, or *varðlokkur*, poses a linguistic quandary that reveals cultural information. It has come to mean incantations, charms, or a magical song, even guardian songs and weird or fate songs, and later in Scottish, warlock (Icelandic English Dictionary 1957, 679-680). The note in *Íslensk fornrit* about it says “Með Varðlokum varð *vörðurinn*, verndarandinn (sagnarandinn, einn eða fleiri) lokaður inni í hring þeirra, er sungu (og sem voru ef til vill einnig nefnar varðlokur) [With *Varðlokum* became *vörðurinn*, guardian spirit (prophetic spirit, one or several) closed in in a circle of those who sang (and who were perhaps also called *varðlokur*)]” (*Eiríks saga rauða* 1935, 207). In the note, the reader is referred to an article by Magnus Olsen (1916). Olsen examines the first part of the double compound *vörður*, ward, protector, or guardian spirit (Olsen 1916, 3-4). The spirits the seeress or *völva*, Þorbjörg lítil-völva, is trying to summon are not only the individuals’ guardian spirits, but also those of the local and larger land (Olsen 1916, 4-5). Olsen summarizes the understanding of the first part of the compound *vörður*: an individual’s guardian spirit that is

separated from his or her body but is part of his or her soul and the local nature spirit attached to the property or local area (Olsen 1916, 5). Olsen quotes Hyltén-Cavallius on the basis for *vordr*:

Vården är ett personligt väsen, en ande, som följer människan hvart hon går, och stundom uppenbarar sig, antingen som ett *lyse* (∴: litet ljus) eller såsom människans hamn eller skenbild. Vårdens närvaro kan till och med förnimmas, icke blott af andra, utan ock af människan sjelf, då hon vandrar ensam ute nattetid. Man nyttjar härom talesättet: ‘det följer honom’, ‘han har lyse med sig’, ‘han har vård med sig.’ ”

(Hyltén-Cavallius 1863, I: 356 in Olsen 1916, 5)

[The guardian is a personal being, a spirit, that follows a person wherever he or she goes, and sometimes manifests itself, either as a light (∴: little light) or as the person’s phantom (shape or guise) or shadow. The guardian’s presence can be perceived not only by others but by the person him or herself when he or she walks outside at night. One uses the proverbial phrase: ‘it follows him’, ‘he has light with him’, ‘he has protective care (guardian) with him.’]

Here, the description of light emanating from a being, calls to mind light elves, among other possibilities. In nineteenth-century folklore there are stories about lights in marshes or near certain rocks at night that help guide people (Boberg 1966, 113; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 2003, 269, 270, 276). Olsen traces the use of *vord* in Norwegian dialects and finds that the belief came with people from Norway. It signifies a supernatural being as a type of *fylgja*, a guardian spirit, that

watches over a property. The word is also related to Scandinavian *nisse* or *tomte* to recall the first person to settle a property, *tomt*. It is further related to *haugbuen* or mound dweller, the family's deceased (Olsen 1916, 6-9). Less likely is the suggestive second element in the compound form with the verb *lokka*, to allure or entice,<sup>50</sup> in favor of *loka*, a feminine noun, a bolt (Olsen 1916, 10-12). A comparison is made to *Urðar-lokur* in *Grógaldr*, verse 7, in *Svipdagsmál*. Lotte Motz notes that “In *Grógaldr*, a young man approaches the grave of his mother, Gróa, to seek her protection, because a spell has been laid on him and he must proceed on a long and dangerous journey to win a bride Menglǫð. In answer to his pleading, his mother rises from the grave and chants nine charms to protect her son. The bulk of the poem is made up of these charms” (Motz 1993, 629). This is in the tenor of the practice. *Urðar-lokur* here may suggest to keep out evil, to shelter, to fence in fate. In this compound it is not clear (Olsen 1916, 12).

Olsen looks to Scottish and Anglo-Saxon sources for meanings of warlock. It is “a wizard, a man who is supposed to be in compact with the devil, or to deal with familiar spirits” (Jamieson 1882, IV: 736 in Olsen 1916, 14-15) and “a witch or wizard; also, a magic spell or incantation” (*Webster's* 1911 in Olsen 1916, 15). The warlock is supposed to have dealings with the devil and his host of helpers, trows or drows, both sea-trows and hill-trows, which harmonizes with Icelandic folklore classification of sea monsters and earth dwellers. The hill-trows are the hidden people in Icelandic, *haugfolk* in Norwegian or mound dwellers, and *huldre*- or *huldufolk*, or hidden folk (Olsen 1916, 15-16). Drow is related to Icelandic *draugr*, a ghost but one related to a family line. Olsen draws the connection of *Varðlokur* to warlock (Olsen 1916, 16), via Anglo-Saxon *wærloga* signifying warlock, sorcerer, or deceiver (Olsen 1916, 17), for which he finds the word *varðlokur*, incantation, referring to that of a supernatural creature, or spirit such as guardian or nature spirit, whereas warlock is a person who could be feminine

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<sup>50</sup> Although see Tolley (2009, I: 506) for a discussion favoring the connotation of enticement in the form *-lokkur*.

(Olsen 1916, 18). He arrives at a feminine noun *varðloka* (*varðlokur*, feminine plural), that encloses spirits. He concludes that it represents a *völva* who was enclosed by a circle of singing persons (Olsen 1916, 19-20). And here he finds a correspondence to the Greek chorus, with its choreographic aspect of singing and dancing, and perhaps gathering around an altar (Olsen 1916, 20).<sup>51</sup>

The saga about Eiríkr rauður [Eric the Red] was taken down on parchment by Christians, likely clerics, and suggests that, in compiling such narratives, they had not only tolerance of the old traditions, but also interest. The legendary sagas, for example, were popular and numerous, in evidence by the number of manuscripts that survive (Gottskálf Jenson 2009, 85; Torfi Tulinius 1993, 165-245, 184). Torfi Tulinius says that in a western Christian context, saga writers in medieval Iceland approach the content in a way that differs from continental Europe. “Although Icelanders do not seem to have been less Christian than other peoples, they pursued the lore of their pre-Christian culture when other Christianized peoples were doing everything they could to forget or disguise theirs. An author such as Chrétien de Troyes would systematically Christianize the characters in his romances even though they were more or less directly inspired by pagan legends” (Torfi Tulinius 2002, 66, and note 103; Clunies Ross 2000, 118). Gottskálf Jenson points out that: “The powerful entertainment value of *fornaldarsögur* [legendary sagas] and especially their ability to delight royal and ecclesiastical dignitaries are the qualities emphasised in the very earliest testimony about such narratives that we possess” (Gottskálf Jenson 2009, 85). Torfi Tulinius notes that it is not apparent why this took place as it did in Iceland and not elsewhere. Benedictine monks from England may have played some role in this. They were instrumental in the conversion of Iceland to Christianity. An English Benedictine named Rudolfus taught in the first Icelandic school, at Bær in the Borgarfjörður

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<sup>51</sup> For another discussion about “*Varðlokkur*” see Tolley (2009, I: 501-507).

region, from about 1030 to 1050. Through education these monks may have promoted an interest among the Icelandic clergy about the past (Torfi Tulinius 2002, 66-67). Another clerical connection is that the legendary sagas were preserved in church libraries. Abbot Nikulás Bergsson includes references to heroic legends in his pilgrim's guide (Mitchell 1991, 136 note 104). Icelandic writers were interested in their native gods and tried to compare them with classical ones in such texts as *Clemens saga* (Torfi Tulinius 2002, 67).

Snorri Sturluson provided one of the most abundant sources of ancient lore when in *Edda* he preserved it in order to instruct poets. He took care to situate it in the new religion. He also said that one of his purposes was to provide information and entertainment. This speaks to the social function of narrative at the time.

En þetta er nú at segja úngum skáldum, þeim er girnast at nema mál skáldskapar, ok heyja sèr orðfjölda með fornum heitum, eða girnast þeir at kunna skilja þat, er hulit er kveðit: þá skili hann þessa bók til fróðleiks ok skemtunar; en ekki er at gleyma eða úsanna svá þessar sögur, at taka or skáldskapinum fornar kenningar, þær er höfutskáld hafa sèr líka látið; en eigi skulu kristnir menn trúa á heiðin goð, ok eigi á sannindi þessar sagnar, annan veg en svá sem hær finnast í upphafi bókar, er sagt er frá atburðum þeim, er mannfólkit villtist frá rættri trú, ok þá næst frá Tyrkjum, hvernig Asiamenn, þeir er Æsir eru kallaðir, fölsuðu frásagnir þær, frá þeim tíðindum er gerðust í Trójo, til þess at landfólkit skyldi trúa þá guð vera. (Snorri Sturluson 1848, 225-226)



[And now this must be said to young poets, who desire to acquire the language of poetry, and to amass a store of words with ancient names, or who desire to be able to understand what is hidden in poetry: then may that person obtain this book for knowledge and entertainment; yet neither forget nor hold as untrue these stories, removing the poetry of ancient kennings, of which great poets made use; and Christian people must not believe in heathen gods, and not in the truth of these tales, other than that which is found here in the beginning of the book, which tells of those events, when humankind erred from the true faith, and then of the Turks, how the people of Asia, who are called Æsir, falsified their accounts, from the tidings that happened in Troy, in order that the local people would believe that they were gods.]

The interest of Icelanders in their heathen antiquity was due partly to sanction by clerics, to writers' inclusion of Norse gods in their description of classical ones, and to a desire to further economic and political relations with Norway by sharing their common cultural history. But the greater context of this past was lost regardless of whatever details were found at the time and whatever remains of the mythic past that is preserved today. This understanding of the ancient past forms part of the mentality of medieval Iceland that survives today. As far as heathen and Christian tensions are concerned, literature allowed these tensions to be worked out more indirectly (Torfi Tulinius 2002, 68). Sverrir Jakobsson makes the observation that the genre of the legendary saga was one area in which people could find an outlet for their interest in heathen customs, superstitions, and magic. Since the introduction of the Christian faith, an interest in these phenomena was not allowed and on the surface there was contempt for them. But there

must have been room for them before Iceland's Christianization. So it was legitimate to study such customs in connection with the study of ancient times, even if one could not interest oneself in them directly then (Sverrir Jakobsson 2003, 229-230). “. . . the ancient pagan gods actually increase, rather than diminish, in appearances in the legendary sagas . . . And therein lies the story,” Stephen Mitchell asserts, “for the Icelanders of the late Middle Ages were also looking backward, albeit at not so great a distance as we do today, at a Scandinavian “Golden Age” in which they could take much pride and in which they could, perhaps, place their hope of a better future society” (Mitchell 1991, 134). Peter Buchholz looks backward and forward: “With the partial exception of this subgenre [knights' sagas], all of this literature [medieval Icelandic literature or corpus, in short, sagas] is more or less based on oral transmission, which often goes back to the pagan periods of Scandinavian history. The bulk of the texts were written down only in the thirteenth century or later, that is, at least two hundred years after the conversion of Iceland in 1000. Even though it may be based on ancient traditions, it is evident that a medieval text written by a cleric is quite different from e.g. a modern scholarly description by an ethnologist” (Buchholz 2005, 237 [brackets mine]).

One of the aspects of the past that influenced medieval Icelandic culture was Norse contact with the Sámi people of northern Scandinavia. Norsemen from the south wintered with Sámi people in the north and this is reflected through anecdotes of their interactions that are recorded in the sagas. In particular the references were to the magic of the Finns.<sup>52</sup> The influence extended to Iceland: “A Sámi woman Lekný/Leikný/Lækný is mentioned in *Finnboga saga* ch. 9 and *Landnámabók* S244, H208. She was the mistress of an Icelandic chieftain, with whom she had a son Finnr/Finni, nicknamed *draumspeki*, ‘dream-interpreter’ ” (Tolley 2009, I: 59).

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<sup>52</sup> Tolley finds a counterpart to the wandering fortune-teller in *Eiríks saga rauða* in a Finnish account of the sorceress Pykly recorded in 1955 (Stark 2006, 173 in Tolley 2009, I: 495; 495-498).

Shamanism as it has survived has found new guises also to the extent that it has experienced an intercultural and popular revival in esoteric circles. What concerns this inquiry is mediation, that a medium or priest initiated into practices or rites goes between the worlds on behalf of the communities to foster communication, cooperation, and harmony. Almost facetiously, Peter Buchholz comments that “Since then [1951 Mircea Eliade’s *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l’extase*], the topic of shamanism has enjoyed the attention of scholars of different disciplines, and its attraction is apparently ever increasing. It is an interesting topic for the public, probably because people are searching more and more desperately for a way out from the -cul-de-sac- of sterile rationalism; they might also be guided by the less noble aim of providing a respectable legitimization to drug addiction” (Buchholz 2005, [234]). Some of his pique might come from general forgetfulness that these ancient traditions arise out of survival and sacrifice, including human (Adam of Bremen 1917; 2002; Montgomery 2000), and pertain to tribes, kin groups, struggling to manage an existence in a harsh environment with animal and human threats.

The Ásatrú or heathen faith in Iceland today no longer engages in blood sacrifice, and the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins essentially released Christians from their Judaic heritage of burned temple offerings when it became the sacrifice of the Mass. People still sensed a need to reconcile with the other world. Whether comparative or syncretic, or both, Óðinn and Jesus hung from a tree in an initiation that prepared them for their roles as mediators for their peoples and provided a channel for linking the worlds. Considering that the guardian spirit or *fylgja* has aspects of a spectral body accompanying the physical one, Buchholz acknowledges “Of course, it was thought that death is not the end, and in the body or close to it there still remained something that gave a kind of life to it. Thus, for instance, the dead

guard their treasures in the grave, they keep on existing as the *living dead* (Old Norse *draugr*), and visit their neighborhood as ‘returning dead’. This belief can certainly be traced back to the cult of ancestors, with its duality known from other cultures as well: the ancestor is not always benevolent, and has to be put in a good mood” (Buchholz 2005, 239). Thus, Tolley brings up Anna-Leena Siikala’s definition: “Siikala (1978: 16) notes that the tasks assigned to the shaman differed in different areas, but that ‘the central task of the shaman remains above all the handling of crises threatening the normal life of the tribe, i.e. the shaman is the prophet and remover of danger threatening the life of the individual and the community. One feature typical of the religious systems of shamanic cultures is that a crisis is regarded as being caused by representatives of the Beyond, various spirits, supernatural beings and demons’ ” (Siikala 1978, 16 in Tolley 2009, I: 72-73).

Sámi shamans were medicine people who healed clan members and who also mediated in trance with the spirit world and with deceased relatives, conveying visions, messages, and wisdom (Morset 2009, 53-54). In medieval Norse literature the Sámi people were widely referred to, especially as trolls, because in many depictions they were large and dark-haired. A Norseman, for example, who wintered in the north, might bond with a Sámi woman and have a child with her. This child was referred to in Norse literature as half-troll (Hermann Pálsson 1997, 16-18). References in medieval Norse sagas to travels to the north meant entering a magical realm. *Ketils saga hængs* reflects many of these cultural themes and descendants of the line of Ketill hængr and his father Hallbjörn hálftröll settled Iceland and are mentioned not only in *Landnámabók* but also in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* (Hermann Pálsson 1997, [38]-44).

In a modern adaptation of an ancient Sámi tale that respectfully encapsulates and enlivens these traditions, Nils Gaup’s film *Ofelaš* [*Pathfinder*] is one of the first notable artistic works that

stands for a revitalization of Sámi culture. The language used in *Ofelaš* is Northern Sámi, and is widespread in such a way that it could be used to represent the Sámi people without alienating some members. In *Ofelaš*, Gaup tries to tell an ancient story without modern-day social commentary. It was carried in oral tradition, then in writing, and now finds expression in the medium of film. As cinema, it is an example of an earnest and successful attempt to represent the past, both conceptually and traditionally. It is also an attempt to reach across Sámi cultural variations in an inclusive way while at the same time allowing Sámi culture to be represented to outsiders. The legend is known to most Sámi people and the film appealed to a broad audience (DuBois 2000, 258, 259, 261).<sup>53</sup>

To arrive at an understanding of the Sámi view of life is to see that they believe in an indwelling life force, *mana*, in all creatures. This is expressed not only in the shaman Raste's meeting with the young initiate Aigin in the hut but also in the bear hunt. A claw or tooth on a necklace possesses power and brings luck to the bearer. This extends to the power of names and is why in the film the bear's name, Darffot, cannot be uttered except in appropriate circumstances (Morset 2009, 54-55).

A central symbol in the film and in Sámi culture is the sacred drum. It is not only an instrument, it is the shaman's means for navigating the cosmos on soul journeys. The symbols on the drums represent several things: the community around the fire in the circle of life; the gods, spirits, and animals who follow the tribe; and even the planets in the cosmos, places on earth and beyond, all of which help the shaman navigate among psychic and physical worlds.<sup>54</sup> The ring

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<sup>53</sup> New scholarship is appearing about the religions of Northern Europe. See Juha Pentikäinen, ed. 2000. *Sami Folkloristics*. NNF Publications 6. Turku: Nordic Network of Folklore, Åbo akademi and Catharina Raudvere and Jens Peter Schjødt, eds. 2012. *More than Mythology: Narratives, Ritual Practices and Regional Distribution in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religions*. Lund: Nordic Academic Press.

<sup>54</sup> Compare explanations of this symbolism for Norse culture by Gísli Sigurðsson (2014) and Thomas A. DuBois (2014).

placed on the drum while the *noaide* [Sámi shaman] taps the bone hammer indicates responses from the various figures represented on the decorated skin. Music and chanting facilitate the visionary experience with their rhythms (Morset 2009, 56-60).

Animals figure really and symbolically in force, showing the heritage of the Sámi with majesty. A raven flies, a sign of warning, when the Tchudes are afoot. Sámi tradition looks upon such appearances as an omen of danger (Morset 2009, 139). Raste receives a vision of a white reindeer bull only three times in his life. These mark steps and rites of passage. He sees it in his youth, his prime, and just before he is called into the next life. One of the central moments of the film is devoted to the bear hunt. The spirit of the bear is feared and revered; its name cannot be uttered. This is also considered an ethnographic moment in the film, a representation of Sámi culture. The ritual is guided by Raste as *noaide*, or shaman in Northern Sámi. It is important to understand that the animal is a spirit incarnated, and it is to be guided to its place with the astral bear Ursa. The meat would be consumed but the remains would be buried. In a ritual of male hunters, after interpreting a received vision from Raste, one man is chosen to drive the stake into the bear (Morset 2009, 135).

Before the turning point of the film, Aigin, about to become the shaman, has a vision. He sees his deceased sister, whom the Tschudes killed along with his parents, and then receives counsel in dialog with Raste, who visits him in an elevated trance state, giving him an important message that expresses Sámi worldview:

At daybreak, head for the coast.

There are other villages there.

Not for me, I have no village.

Your mind is clouded  
with thoughts of revenge.

You must remember,  
we are all but parts of the whole.

We are children  
in a greater family.

The Tchudes have forgotten this.  
Don't you forget it.

My family is dead. I am all alone.

You may feel that way, but you  
are bound up in the greater family.

You are not free,  
unshakable bonds hold you to us.

How do I trust something

that can't be seen?

- Look up there. What do you see?

- Only the tent.

But what is there between you

and the wall of the tent?

- You mean there's something there?

- You see nothing?

No.

You still can't see it?

During the exchange Raste suffocates Aigin to illustrate the lesson.

But now you can feel

that something is there.

You can't see it in the air, but

your very existence is tied to it.



In this way all things  
are bound together, intertwined.

No man can ever tear himself apart  
from the whole.

But it can happen  
that he loses sight of the whole.

When he does, he is like the Tchudes.  
Men who have lost the path.

They stumble blindly  
toward self-destruction.

Then Raste utters the words that open the film:

Listen now,  
and remember what I say.  
Today, I saw the reindeer bull  
for the third time in my life.  
I saw him first when I was your age.  
Then a second time,

in the prime of my years.

This morning I saw him once again.

Young friend, I grow old. The reindeer

and I will not meet again.

Among the Lapp [Sámi] people,

this story has been passed on

from generation to generation

for almost 1000 years. (*Ofelaš* 2005 (1987), 00:38:35 - 00:41:10)

Aigin asks Raste what all this means but Raste vanishes.

This look at Sámi culture also shows a relationship of patterns and influences with medieval Icelandic culture and the message in the tale is a modern Sámi film director's attempt not only to represent his culture but also to revitalize it. It is one of the plethora of coexisting worldviews that operate in the syncretic constellation in Iceland. This expression of a broader vision of interconnectedness may approach the medieval mindset and I will turn to this in the next section. In any event, today in Iceland there is an affinity for Native American culture in spiritual circles as well as the broader population and recently sweat lodges have begun to operate in Iceland (Gunný Ísis Magnúsdóttir 2016), even though Iceland has a centuries-old bathing culture in its countryside of hot springs. Native Americans have figured in spirit work in Iceland for over a hundred years (Dempsey 2017, 165-174). Why would Native American spirits be attracted to Iceland? Sigrún Elva Gunnarsdóttir told me that Icelanders respect nature and are connected to it. When I asked why the phenomena such as enchanted spots seem to be more prevalent in Iceland

than elsewhere, her response was that there are far fewer people in Iceland than other places and nature dominates (Monday 30 January 2017). Hanna Kata told me that they gravitate toward Iceland because of the people's openness to nature (Monday 13 February 2017).

Gro Steinsland explains significant features that distinguish the ancient nature religions and the learned ones that encountered them. She characterizes them as folk or ethnic religions in the face of universal or salvation religions. Norse religion is a folk religion and Christianity is a universal religion. While she offers a working typology she cautions against oversimplification of complex and changing processes that make up religion. Briefly heathendom vs. Christianity would pertain to the local group vs. all humankind, non-proselytizing vs. proselytizing, earth-bound vs. transcendental, peace-oriented vs. salvation-oriented, cult-oriented vs. faith-oriented, non-dogmatic vs. dogmatic, tradition vs. doctrine, polytheistic vs. monotheistic, male and female leadership vs. male leadership, less emphasis on houses of worship vs. emphasis on houses of worship, honor-shame ethic vs. sin-grace-salvation-loss ethic, and collective orientation vs. individual life orientation (Steinsland 2005, 31-34). Concerning houses of worship as opposed to worship in groves, for example, in spite of the fact that the current Ásatrú community of Iceland is constructing a temple, many of their proceedings, such as weddings, are photographed outdoors.

What should be clear from what has been presented so far is that aside from the apparent traditions through medieval Iceland to the present time, Icelanders have availed themselves of numerous influences that seem less to shape their worldview than to reflect how it functions organically from individual to individual. Robert Anderson interviewed leaders of various religious organizations in Iceland and found that while mainstream Christian denominations shun contact with spirits, citing the Bible that tells people not to conjure spirits, it is such an integral

part of Icelandic culture that there is evident tolerance. For one example, during its early twentieth-century heyday, an impulse like spiritualism was evinced and debated in the national Lutheran church (Anderson 2005, 108-128; Hrefna Sigríður Bjartmarsdóttir 2015, 138-139).

Hrefna Sigríður Bjartmarsdóttir characterizes a current view:

Ekki er að sjá af framangreindri umfjöllun að nútímasamfélag með öllum sínum tækninýjungum og framþróun hafi dregið úr trú manna eða reynslu af hinu dulræna svo vísað sé til hugmynda manna um afhelgunarkenninguna svonefndu. Heimildarmenn mínir trúa á líf eftir dauðann og nærveru látinna ástvina og ættingja sem verndarvætta sinna sem margir telja að séu ætíð í nánd við menn en búi ekki í fjarlægum handanheimum. Sú hugmynd þekkist bæði meðal innlendra heimildarmanna og erlendra að þar gangi lífið fyrir sig á svipaðan hátt og gerist meðal jarðneskra manna. Heimildarmenn mínir eru nær allir jákvæðir gagnvart mismunandi trúarhugmyndum svo sem kristni, þjóðtrú, spírítisma og nýaldarhugmyndum. Flestir eru þeir í þjóðkirkjunni en sjá lítið því til fyrirstöðu að þessar hugmyndir geti farið saman.

(Hrefna Sigríður Bjartmarsdóttir 2015, 225)

[It is not evident from the foregoing discussion that modern society with all of its technological innovations and evolution has exhausted people's belief in or experience of the psychic, as far as is known, to people's ideas about so-called secularization. My informants believe in life after death and the presence of deceased loved ones and ancestors as their protective spirits whom many reckon

to be always in people's proximity and do not live in a distant other world. This idea is held among domestic and foreign informants that there is life of varying kinds and happens among earthly people. My informants are almost all in agreement about different belief perspectives such as Christianity, folk belief, spiritism and New Age concepts. Most of them are in the national [Lutheran] church and see little hindrance in these ideas working together.]

The Reformation was more demanding of its faithful than the Catholic authorities, actively rooting out practices and religious iconography, and transforming public and private worship (Hjalti Hugason 1988, 82-87, 160-177; Hrefna Sigríður Bjartmarsdóttir 2015, 119-122, 230). But traditions lived on and not always hidden from the church, which contributed both to and against the folk traditions. People were burned for practicing witchcraft (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 2003, 91-92). Jón lærði [learned] Guðmundsson 1574-1658, called learned more for his autodidactic tendencies than his informal education, collided with church authorities for his apparent dealings with magic. He was prosecuted, imprisoned, and had to flee Iceland. He was later harbored by Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson and continued to write (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 2003, 99). Einar Ólafur Sveinsson recounts about Jón lærði that:

It is clear from his writings that all his miscellaneous knowledge of ancient Icelandic stories and Norse translations of Latin saints' lives, wonder-tales and *rímur*, native superstitions about ghosts, elves, spirits, magic and so on, and beliefs from many sources about animals, ran together in his mind, and that he tried to form a syncretic whole from it, making tremendous efforts to provide a

classified system for this miscellaneous material. Unfortunately, his credulity was great and his critical sense small (defects which he shared with many of his contemporaries), but for his capacity for observation was tremendous, and it is difficult to avoid the feeling that he knew something of what are nowadays known as parapsychological phenomena. (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 2003, 97)

Scholars have increasingly tripped over and expressed their frustration with the obstacles that positivistic views have placed before the study of otherworldly phenomena. Margaret Cormack addresses the problems some readers have with supernatural material, trying to reconstruct the phenomena in a modern scientific worldview. She finds this futile: “One of the purposes of this study is to encourage readers to examine the social and literary contexts of ‘miraculous’ stories in order to find out what their authors are trying to tell us, and what the narratives themselves can tell us about the authors’ lives and beliefs” (Cormack 2008, [334]). She goes on to remark that miracles were for medieval people not contrary to the laws of nature and that what is essential is that they were trying to solve a basic human problem (Cormack 2008, [334], and 350 note 2). Robert Anderson’s observation might provide a modern perspective on a human problem: “I would suggest that spiritism, in a sense, is a secular religion that is unrestrained by theological dogmatism, and in that way is quite suited to the Icelandic mentality” (Anderson 2005, 90). He also says that syncretism took the form of New Age spirituality in the latter part of the twentieth century (Anderson 2005, 174).

Christophe Pons says one will not resolve the problem of incredible beliefs by isolating them into a category that has seemed to be an aberrant hoax of popular credulity. He proposes more discernment by seeing where such beliefs function according to other laws than the “*ratio*”

of positivistic sciences (Pons 2002, 11). However he notices an incongruity with Icelandic spiritism in all its early efforts to establish itself on empirical bases, positivistic ones, because in so doing it distanced itself from its essentially religious function. He finds a certain righting of this in that people continue to practice it, especially people who are not mediums. He points out that while cognitive anthropologists might find such behavior counterintuitive, what he finds counterintuitive is how spiritists could approach the religious impulse from a positivistic perspective, in part because it is in fact a matter of belief for the participants. Here, he says, the scholars or scientists dissociated the act from its religious expression (Pons 2011, 208-209). In other words: “Le concept de contre-intuitivité, sur lequel on place parfois de grands espoirs de compréhension, repose pourtant lui aussi sur cette dissociation curieuse qui ampute l’acte (de croire) de son identité (religieuse) [The concept of counterintuivty upon which one places perhaps great hopes of understanding, rests all the same, it too, on this strange dissociation which cuts the act (of belief) from its identity (religious)] (Pons 2011, 208). Analysis facilitates understanding yet sometimes obscures the larger picture when one neglects to put the parts back together again. Adriëne Heijnen recalls Victorian anthropologists referring to so-called primitives telling of their dream experiences in such a way that there was for them no boundary between waking and dreaming lives whereas for the observers there was a problem of not recognizing reality against illusion. She said this led to a perceived conceptual divide between Western and non-Western thinking such that it led to a cultural division in anthropology (Heijnen 2013, 46; 43-50).

Katrin Sontag cautions against too much objectivity that overlooks the fact that a human being is researching human beings and that some self-reflection, subjectivity, and empathy are worthy of inclusion in any approach (Sontag 2007, 33). She found that positivist approaches,

objectivity, formed a barrier and so she ventured to take her informants seriously, to interact with them, and even to believe them. She too found a problem with the faulty need to explain why people believe in elves. There needs to be a shift away from fitting concepts into categories that end up separating them from their contexts. “ ‘Explaining’ perceptions in a way that would deny the existence of the perceived or even hold mental problems accountable seemed impossible and patronizing to me – especially in a period that is characterized by the deconstruction of openly or subtly patronizing colonial, racial and gendered concepts in the humanities and social sciences” (Sontag 2007, 126). Sontag turns the focus around saying that “functionalist theories largely leave the basis of their own explanations unquestioned” (Sontag 2007, 127). There is a problem both with attempting prove the existence of a phenomenon (Sontag 2007, 128; Löfstedt 1996), as well as denying its existence (Sontag 2007, 128; Hufford 1995), or attributing it to chemical or psychological influences (Sontag 2007, 128). She explains:

These ideologies, I believe, still structure our academic worldview and in my view they have become so internalized within academic work that they represent a general and tacit agreement, if not a universal Truth, that marginalizes and blocks out ways of seeing the world. In fact, I wonder whether this belief in scientific results in combination with a lack of critique regarding its foundations does not come close to the kind of religious adoration that enlightenment originally set out to fight. In that case, the critical spirit that was supposed to shed “light” may be stuck once again in a static mindset supported by strong power structures.

(Sontag 2007, 130)



I include these scholarly approaches among those that form part of the larger syncretic picture of Icelandic otherworldly communication. Empiricism is a necessary tool that was a response to undisciplined thinking, rigid doctrines, and power structures, and, even when applied to the spiritist efforts to document the phenomena, it has produced tremendous results, particularly in the relevant sciences. What is desirable is to shift the balance back to the type of collaboration and results that interdisciplinary and comparative approaches have yielded in linguistics, religion, literature, archeology, cognitive sciences, and forensics, among others, to reconstruct or to reveal broader and intertwined processes. I would like to consider the medium of medieval Icelandic literature and contemporary narrative, with a relationship to nature, as one of these approaches, here an artistic medium, that has long functioned to bridge yawning gaps.

## VI - What the literature can do

Medieval Icelandic literature can serve as a medium for the transmission of cultural values that hover above or underlie the apparent details and motifs of the content. Far from a means of entertainment, what came to be formed was a product of circumstances that served to express social aspects that reflect, then and now, what for the local population functions as a type of reality. Among these circumstances were oral tradition and the transition to a written one, a shift of faith from heathenism to Christianity, and collective efforts to thrive in a continually-changing landscape and climate. The supernatural was pervasive and it is reflected in the literature. It reveals an open secret of Icelandic otherworldly, and otherworldly, communication. The modern phenomena in practice appear to be so robust and sustained over time that they can offer some understanding about what medieval writers were taking the trouble to copy down about their culture. Although manuscripts were in demand, people were not amassing entertainment per se, they had something to say, and that something was so compelling that learned clerics took it upon themselves to record it. What came to be recorded revealed layers of medieval conceptions about an inherent, pervasive, or omnipresent whole and how people interacted with their environment and with one another.

Archeology is one of the material disciplines that has bolstered literature, and vice versa, backing up accounts that one might consider historical fiction at best while also providing avenues of further exploration. There have also been found objects and stone carvings that support references to gods and mythological patterns. One example of the intersection between literature and archeology is the discoveries of the settlement in L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland that bear out the literary accounts of the travels recorded in the Vinland sagas.

Gísli Sigurðsson points out that there was documentary evidence that the accounts of the voyages west were known before they achieved saga form (Gísli Sigurðsson 2005, 295-296). They were neither eyewitness accounts nor were they legends; they were accounts transmitted orally over time. And no archeological evidence is necessary to attest to the facts of the travels. What's more, *Grænlandinga saga* and *Eiríks saga rauða* were written independently of each other (Gísli Sigurðsson 2005, 296). Gísli observes that had the accounts not existed, no one would have investigated that there was a colony in the place mentioned. Further, descriptions of the vegetation and fish found there, as well as the details of navigation were shared and formed part of the larger picture while also offering evidence that later could be corroborated. Subsequent explorations and explorers' experiences confirmed the accounts (Gísli Sigurðsson 2005, 297-299). His conclusion, in addition to the mutable boundary between oral and written traditions, is that research into current experience can be used to consider the past, in particular to glean a view of the social reality in a living tradition (Gísli Sigurðsson 2005, 299-300).

John McKinnell delineates between archeological and mythological uses:

Some recent books on Old Norse mythology have made extensive use of picture-stones and archaeological finds, which appeal to modern taste for two main reasons. Firstly, our society has a thirst for the new, and it is relatively easy to make new discoveries in archaeology. Secondly, these sources direct attention towards physical objects, and chime well with the common modern belief that physical 'reality' is the only reliable truth. But mythology subsists in the imaginative mind, and requires narratives about a mythic reality distinct from that of the physical world. Iconography can convey myth only together

with narrative that can explain its symbols, while archaeological finds reflect the physical actions that result from religion rather than the myths that inspire it. (McKinnell 2005, 48)

In speaking about what artistic monuments of the past convey to later ages, Steblin-Kaminskij makes an observation about literature: “It is a completely different matter with literary monuments of the remote past. A literary work does not act immediately on our sense organs. It is not a visible and tangible object. It is a spiritual entity. And we apprehend this spiritual entity through signs and symbols of something in our consciousness – symbols apprehended moreover in their symbolic reflection, symbols of symbols. These symbols are words, and the symbols of symbols are written words (Steblyn-Kaminskij 1973, 12). Further, he explains just what he means about how literature can be a spiritual entity: “For instance, progress in the means of expression in literature may be accompanied by regression in its content. Spiritual values which have been lost by the human race in its development may be forever preserved in ancient works of literature. If this is not so, is there any point to the history of literature? But only concrete investigations of ancient works of literature from the point of view of the conceptions presented in them can prove that this is indeed so” (Steblyn-Kaminskij 1973, 20).

Jens Peter Schjødt notes that when speaking of inner and outer realities, one is no less real than the other:

Der er altså flere slags virkeligheder, nemlig de, som har med den ydre verden at gøre – begivenheder, økonomi og politik etc., og de, som har med en form for indre virkelighed at gøre, nemlig fortællinger, ideer og en lang række

forskellige former for fantasiprodukter. Disse sidste begreber er ikke mindre virkelige end de første, idet de uomtvisteligt eksisterer, men de kan ikke måles på, om de korrelerer med ydre begivenheder, men snarere på, om de passer ind i en given periodes 'mentalitet', hvordan vi så ellers kan finde frem til den. (Schjødt 2009, 169)

[There are really several kinds of reality, that is, those that have to do with the outer world – events, finances and politics etc., and those that have to do with a form of inner reality, that is, stories, ideas and a long line of different forms of products of fantasy. These latter concepts are no less real than the first, in that they indisputably exist, but cannot be measured by whether they correlate with outer events, but rather by whether they fit within a given period's 'mentality', such as we otherwise have access to it.]

In the previous section I pointed to Christophe Pons's criticism of Icelandic spiritism when it tried to establish itself along empirical lines when for him it was a practice that was religious in nature. Miriam Mayburd also finds empirical bases upon which to ground literary studies however what she ends up doing is recovering a medieval mindset that may put one in touch with the spirit, even numinous (Mayburd 2017, 267), of the era of the saga writers. She finds that "Despite the increasing interest within current saga scholarship in engaging and problematizing the conceptual elements of the fantastic and supernatural, there is still an ongoing tendency to rationalize or explain away encounters with otherness, whether through psychoanalysis or the use of symbol and metaphor. This takes for granted modern cognitive

structures and applies them to a culture and mentality of the past, thereby limiting what may be considered supernatural under this approach” (Mayburd 2017, 266; Vésteinn Ólason 2007).

Mayburd takes into consideration empiricism as documented in the work of Finnish folklorist Lauri Honko who examined sensory experience among people who report encounters with paranormal beings (Mayburd 2017, 267; Honko 1962, 89). She calls forward John Lindow’s study on verisimilitude and how the memorate, a person’s first-hand encounter with the supernatural, mentioned in the beginning of this study, may be recognized in saga narrative (Mayburd 2017, 267; Lindow 1986).

Lindow explores aspects of reality in saga narrative using methods of folklore with *Þorsteins þáttur skelks* as an example. An Icelander, Þorsteinn, visits Óláfr Tryggvason in Norway and disobeys the king by going to the outhouse alone where he converses with the nocturnal demon there. The saga narratives do not lack humor and the ensuing gravity of the plot generates entertaining contrasts. Hearing the spirit’s shrieks, the king rings the church bells to make it withdraw. The next morning he asks who went out alone. After admitting his fault, Þorsteinn redeems himself with his host through his courage and wits, earning a place as one of the king’s men. What Lindow focuses on is the conversation between Þorsteinn and the king, in which he reports his encounter with a supernatural being (Lindow 1986, 269-270). Lindow points out that such an account would not have been out of the range of experience for medieval listeners (Lindow 1986, 270), and that there may be understood to be the “empirical supernatural” in line with Honko, in that members of the community suffer “psychic stress” from “corporate encounters” with powerful revenants (Lindow 1986, 279). Lindow also notes that the account deals with particular people in particular places at a particular time, however is neither explicitly legendary nor historical (Lindow 1986, 269). Here I recall Christophe Pons’s work of capturing

such experiences as they happen while encouraging consideration of retrospectivity with this contemporary research result. I also take into account Katrin Sontag's preferred research approach of listening to informants. What it reveals for Pons is the Icelandic ethos. The tale, and many others, exemplifies the social aspect of story sharing with a purpose. It is not a sole report of an isolated event but confirmation of shared experience. The king and the retainers knew about the haunting and the king made an announcement about it. It was a social problem with a social solution. And such events and the responses to them have generated tremendous amounts of data over centuries, continuing to be collected. In a summary of research on afterlife encounters, Erlendur Haraldsson mentions the heritage of saga accounts and indicates that, based on recent foreign and domestic, Icelandic, data collections, sometimes an event was seen by more than one person so such a shared experience reduces the likelihood of a hallucination and suggests a type or reality (Erlendur Haraldsson 2012, 1, 232). His summation is: "The fact is that now – in the author's view – there are from different areas of empirical research, rational reasons for taking the possibility of life beyond bodily existence seriously. The time has passed when we only had philosophical or religious arguments" (Erlendur Haraldsson 2012, 236). While it is interesting to consider the role of empiricism in a literary discussion, as if this would somehow legitimize literature among the sciences, this may be either only a facet of literature's role or it may sidestep other facets that are germane to literature.

Mayburd finds that there is an intrinsic and necessary ambiguity to paranormal phenomena that eludes the current approaches: "There is an inherent risk of losing the very specimen under investigation, as the more it is subjected to analysis, the more domesticated it becomes, broken up into smaller explicable parts whose sum does not quite add up to the whole" (Mayburd 2017, 269). Some of the experiences people were trying to express on parchment then

and to each other and to researchers today may have been and are greater than the sum of their parts. Taking medieval philosophy into account, Mayburd attempts to reconstruct the zeitgeist of wholeness and transcendence. The limitations are not in nature, rather they are in people as they respond to it. She relays how the term supernatural was a late addition to the discourse for there was still room in early scholarship for unanswered questions (Mayburd 2017, 270). Mayburd identifies an open secret when she says about medieval Icelandic literature that there is less concern with categories and more with a mystery that, “Things in the sagas, simply put, are not always what they seem. Their narrations of paranormal encounters are apophatic; speaking-away from explicitly depicting and instead performing a referential openness, allowing the unspoken and undescribed to emerge, as it were, on its own” (Mayburd 2017, 271). She revivifies the medieval mentality, examined in continental and classical traditions, of the whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, and sees that, as observed by the modern anthropologists already discussed, it is less a matter of belief than of people inhabiting their environments (Mayburd 2017, 271). The categories can be useful in their native contexts, restoring the relationships of the parts to their wholes, and remaining open to new understandings (Mayburd 2017, 272).

Mayburd speaks of the dead who continue to inhabit the landscape along with all the other beings that are already there. In an altered state. “Instead of dichotomous opposition between this-world and other-world, I propose that the Icelandic landscape was perceived in the sagas to be *both* at the same time: not as a bridge from one to the other but as a tangible space where such boundaries are confused and do not apply. . . . It is my hypothesis that ‘supernatural’ and ‘natural’ in this case are one and the same; in other words, it is the natural physical tangible environment itself that is charged with this aura of otherness and unfamiliarity, not as a mere background setting for saga narratives but as the very stage itself on which the



events play out” (Mayburd 2014, 131). Burials were in raised ground, in or near to estates, bounding the farms, a part of the farmstead.<sup>55</sup> The deceased become mound dwellers; they keep on living there (Mayburd 2014, 144-149; also Hrefna Sigríður Bjartmarsdóttir 2015, 73-91, 94). This harmonizes with the earlier discussion about the proximity of such entities to communities and that they represent people and beings who lived there before on either side of the existential divide. Guðni Reynir Þorbjörnsson tells me that hidden people are supposed to have been the long dead, not the recently dead (Tuesday 18 April 2017). Valdimar Tr. Hafstein refers to seers’ accounts of hidden people appearing as nineteenth-century rural folk rather than recognizable recently departed, and even ways in which they seem to have changed (Valdimar Tr. Hafstein 1998b, 394-396).

Today it is a feature of the Icelandic urban landscape that rather than clearing, mowing, and pruning; yards, parks, and public spaces are full of rocks, grassy mounds, and tufts of vegetation such that it is difficult to know where elves might reside and where locals are providing a pastoral touch. Or perhaps they are meant to be welcoming, encouraging nature spirits to take up residence there. Turf roofs, *torfbæ[i]r*, continue to be built on new constructions, whether in traditional wooden houses or modern concrete and other structures. As with the landscape, so with the literature. Iceland is caricatured to have emerged from the Middle Ages during World War II. There was such continuity of rural orientation and of literary heritage that the medieval sagas as forms of entertainment predominated through the nineteenth century including forming the basis and content for the *rímur* or ballad tradition (Hughes 2005, 205-222). This continuity and late development has assisted the study of Icelandic literary and spiritual

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<sup>55</sup> Tolley explores the symbolism of the raised platform and the raised burial mound as a portal for the seeress, a world tree for the shaman, a throne for kings, to access spiritual sight (2009, I: 544-549).

traditions in context. And it is a matter of interest the extent to which they continue in practice and new media today.

As modernity changes Iceland, as more Icelanders move to urban areas, as they are influenced by foreign media and fashions, as English threatens its language as Danish once did, as tourism challenges its infrastructure, there may less threat to its belief system, as has been demonstrated, and more of a threat to literature and culture. While the content of medieval Icelandic literature as filtered through Tolkien and the fantasy media industry continues to obtain abroad, there appears to be increasingly less reverence at home for the old ways and less fidelity to how it is represented in the latter-day productions abroad. There is a risk that something may be lost. Something must be preserved from the past that is taken into and along with the new.

This is the case as medieval Icelandic stories were taken into writing during periods of tremendous shifts. Norwegians and others were settling a dynamic landscape. They were leaving an increasingly stratified society for a more level one. While kings were contending for loyalty and territory in Norway, medieval Icelanders remained a rather even society of farmers (Vésteinn Ólason 1994, 124). Heathen beliefs were yielding to Christian ones without people having to leave behind their old stories. In fact, the development of the genre of legendary sagas was a late medieval revival of the lore from the Norway they left centuries earlier. Oral tradition was giving way to a written one. Gísli Sigurðsson explains that “The conclusion must be that it is impossible to distinguish the oral from the written in saga texts because they are all eventually written down in a literary style” (Gísli Sigurðsson 2005, 291). What became oral tradition at such a point was reading aloud from manuscripts during evenings on the farmstead. Nevertheless, with certain narratives like *Völsunga saga* or *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappá hans*, it can be seen that they unite fragments of legends of real people in real places pieced together with references to ancient

practices of magic, insertions of eddic poetry, and inclusion of the places from which then-current Icelanders descended. It is one reason why legendary sagas have been criticized for being episodic. And individual narratives are intertextual with other ones, emphasizing aspects of events and characters over others in each case. The literature inevitably was constructed and simultaneously displayed the thinking of the time in which it was written, among other preoccupations, medieval Icelanders' recollections and projections.

The function of literature in the society was much deeper than entertainment; it was linked to survival. However inaccurate we might view the literature to be, for the people of the time it was valued as a collation of information and narrative, it was regarded as possessing some form of truth, and people believed it, however we are able to conceive their belief. The four sagas of the people of Hrafnista in Norway, *Hrafnistumannasögur: Ketils saga hængs, Gríms saga loðinkinna, Örvar-Odds saga, and Áns saga bogsveigis* provide an excellent view of these issues because, although all classed as legendary sagas, they straddle generic and historic boundaries and exemplify many of the literary features mentioned: oral and written stories, heathen and Christian themes, settlement history, deeply entertaining content with trolls, battles, and political intrigue, and copious representations of the supernatural. When people heard these stories they were hearing about surviving with the livestock they brought with them and bred in Iceland. They had better and worse conditions for growing vegetation and burning material for heat. They heard about fishing expeditions and sailing the coasts, seeking where to put in. When they heard about Ketill hængur, they were hearing about a reluctant boy, a *kolbitr* [coal-biter, male Cinderella], who rose to heroic accomplishments when called upon. People could relate to hesitance to act and the responsibility to do so on behalf of members of others. These were

stories of the Norse who settled Iceland and some of the people listening were their descendants and the legendary heroes embodied the values to which the chieftains aspired.

Dealing with monsters like trolls and dragons may have been real in some dimension and they also represent dealing with supernatural threats in the landscape if not the landscape itself. When Ketill killed a dragon, he did it in direct disobedience of his father and it his humorously described in the saga. He may have been battling a creature, the landscape, something in himself, or on some dimension, a dragon. It defines him as coming of age and leads to his nickname because his father Hallbjörn hálftröll mocked him by giving him the name salmon, as if he had hunted small fish. Ketill goes on to confront neighbor bullies and even supernatural threats when he outwits evil human-flesh-eating monsters and powerful trolls. There is a descriptive section of Ketill meeting a Sámi family, falling in love with a troll daughter, as it were, and helping her father Brúni subdue his evil brother Gúsi. This parallels Þorsteinn uxafótr subduing Oddr in the mound and obtaining relief and status for Brynjarr. It shows peaceful and not-peaceful relations between southern Norse and northern Sámi and reflects for listeners how to distinguish between honorable alliances and treacherous usurpers. Frequently the hero was setting out during a famine and this recalls the later chieftains calling seeresses like Þorbjörg lítil-völva to provide information, *fréttir* [news], from the other world about the prospects for the season so that they could provide for their households.

Narratives like *Ketils saga hængs* and *Gríms saga loðinkinna* culminate in climactic duels that not only dispel evil threats, they reaffirm the values of the community and exemplify for them what is expected of an honorable neighbor, whether noble heathen or exemplary Christian. The patterns were in continuity with those of the gods of myth fighting giants and establishing order over the seemingly uncontrollable forces of nature. People retained in

awareness the knowledge about the stories of the gods. In a pre-legal society the stories also suggested what was appropriate in given circumstances and the information was delivered by way of realism with names of known people and places while at the same time entertaining with mentions of monsters, hidden lairs, and voyages to faraway places most would never see. It was a time of gathering in community, obtaining knowledge, and entering into another conceptual space than they had been in during the day tending to the needs of the estate. The narratives blended real and metaphorical content and were so popular that manuscripts were in demand, were in transit from farm to farm, and were found in monasteries well worn. Most Icelandic manuscripts are smoky, dirty, and functional, far from the fine documents of the continent, because the content was functional to people's survival and therefore communal, and they were popular.<sup>56</sup> They were treasured and used. They later became instrumental in reaffirming Icelandic national identity.

Currently there is another shift of media in which, arguably, new realities are being formed through technology. Using neurological approaches to reading, Maryanne Wolf has drawn attention to the ways children's reading brains are being formed in a way that is different from those of previous generations. She shows that reading was an invention that changed intellectual development (Wolf 2008, [3]), and the reading brain is still wired through evolution to continue to generate problems for many current readers (Wolf 2008, 4). While the transition from an oral society to a written one came late to Iceland, and while it coexisted for a time, Iceland is now one of the most literate nations on earth with a strong reading culture. Before writing, medieval Icelandic lawspeakers memorized the laws which they read in three parts every three years at the annual national assembly at Þingvellir. Rather than memorize texts, storytellers kept repertoires and techniques at the ready and deployed them in more improvised and

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<sup>56</sup> I take up these issues of a literature of survival in Robinson (2015, 40-47).

spontaneous ways at each occasion. Listeners were aware of a larger narrative, not all of which could be performed. About a millennium earlier, as expressed in Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates was advocating against the new medium of writing much as people today caution about plunging too quickly into a digital world (Wolf 2008, 70). For Socrates, written speech was pale and lacked the dynamic of live delivery and active cognition. For him, written words lacked dialog and process and he could perhaps not foresee the dialogic nature of written responses (Wolf 2008, 73-74). Socrates thought writing would be an artificial reality lacking the fullness of understanding that comes in the process of dialog and inquiry. Wolf says that parents express similar concern when they see their children absorbed in online worlds (Wolf 2008, 74). With the free and broad dissemination of information without certain inherent controls, Socrates was concerned about content reaching inappropriate audiences, no less a concern today when information can be taken out of context and mashed up with other content to engender increasingly morphing perspectives if not realities (Wolf 2008, 77-78). Ironically, were it not for the medium of writing, we would not know of Socrates, who therefore became and continues to be a central and pivotal figure in the history of ideas. In a medieval Icelandic irony, Snorri Sturluson cautioned readers of his poetical and mythological treatise, *Edda*, "en ekki er at gleyma eða úsanna svá þessar sögur [yet neither forget nor hold as untrue these stories]" (Snorri Sturluson 1848, 225-226). He preserved the lore at the same time as he changed it, from poetry to prose, ostensibly to teach about poetry. For it he is owed a great deal because his work is one of the main sources of Norse mythology. And still scholars question his method.

In advancing technologies, researchers are sequencing ancient genomes along with modern ones. "As DNA data flood in, researchers say, the mass-genome approach will paint an increasingly accurate picture of the past and show how ancient events shaped modern

humanity—from what we eat to the diseases that ail us” (Callaway 2015, 140). Interestingly, this focus concerns itself to some degree with Indo-European migration (Callaway 2015, 141), and such migration is part of the picture of how stories traveled with people westward and of how *Völsunga saga* was told in Iceland and *Nibelungenlied* was recited in central Europe. Greger Larson exclaims: “It’s an interesting time, because the technology is moving faster than our ability to ask questions of it. Let’s just sequence everything and ask questions later” (Greger Larson in Callaway 2015, 141). This is what folklorists have been doing with story motif indexes and what Icelanders have been doing with their saga and folk story accounts. Perhaps with the assistance of other disciplines it will go beyond sharing story into analysis with broader application.

For Iceland, nature and culture are integral to literary mediation. Being outdoors in Iceland means watching skylines shifting continually with uncommon clouds formed by changing wind directions and light as the masses alternately obscure and reveal the sun and as the sun plays on and behind the clouds. The bodies of water on all sides and within the land reflect patterns from the wind and tides and give off mists and fogs as temperatures rise and fall. Seabirds flock and fly, communicating, and rush onto water. There are things to be seen that are not entirely in front of the eye and the lengthy and lingering twilight on either side of a day adds to the palette. In reflective and oblique moments is when things are perceived because the entire experience is not just being outdoors, it is a liminal space of elements ever in motion. It will rain, snow, blaze, and calm in an hour. Hilmar Páll Jóhannesson told me that some of the things seen are just because it’s dark and people are afraid while Inga Lóa Guðjónsdóttir said that on other occasions there are things you cannot grasp but they exist and are perceived by other senses: “Það er ekki áþreifanlegt [It is not tangible]” (Friday 10 March 2017). Not just senses but time

shifts. Ásdís Egilsdóttir reminds me that spring is not a date on a calendar but when the plover comes and when the lambs give birth (Wednesday 29 March 2017). Nature is a repository of an open secret, these moments, when can be seen, sometimes recognizing with inner vision, an experience occurring in the landscape, which may be held in an open palm for a while and then goes away. If seized, it falls away. Or it is like when the northern lights occur. There are forecasts but they are not as reliable as weather forecasts. They only predict likelihood. Sometimes there are faint glimmers of a green and shifting haze indistinguishable from clouds. Sometimes the sky is ablaze with reds and blues that come and go, moving, dissipating and regathering as one looks from one place to another in the sky. It seems that one does not look with the eye but with an inner eye. Or both. Which sense? Sixth sense? If one does not seem to have it there are other means available. Perhaps letting go of categories and criticism and looking and listening both to phenomena and to people. So in these moments it seems possible to access something that is in front of one by means of something else. Nature and the arts mediate different dimensions but they are still apprehensible. But nature changes and what is apprehended is transitory. Literature is lasting but incomplete. It requires humanity to be brought to life. In preserving it, it may be the way humanities scholars record methods and replicate results and yet the end results are mutable with openness to new times and methods.

The arts are not ideal media for representing the ineffable but they are able to be preserved and reencountered and meditated upon, permitting endless possibilities of interpretation depending on the methods and times in which they are performed. Performance is key. Arts too are transmitted by artificial means like Laban notation, musical staves, and theater scripts with stage directions and lighting suggestions. They are performed by people who are infused with spirit. Literature, art, music, and drama mediate. They are in this world and not



entirely of it. A symphony orchestra is an uncanny collection of complicated and anachronistic instruments that when heard defies the parts of which it is comprised. When apprehended through the medium of recording the whole is truly something other than the seeming of its parts. Such technologies are taken for granted because they can be explained. The oblique moments are the revealing ones. When passing through an art gallery and seeing a sculpture or painting not face to face but in passing from one hallway to another by way of the perspective of the open door makes possible another experience. Or in a ballet studio, seeing the dancers reflected in the wall mirrors enhanced by the piano accompaniment. Indeed mirrors and reflections, particularly in dim or flickering light, are a form of scrying in a glass. In performance, if the hall allows, seeing the reflection of the Boston Ballet on an angled surface or nearby window is often more alluring and suggestive as stage lights and motions of the costumed ensemble dancers along with the orchestra generate some other type of reception than the one on stage in front of one. Or unexpectedly crossing the lawn at Tanglewood and being in between outside and inside while approaching the Shed with its amplificatory acoustics and hearing the Boston Symphony Orchestra rehearse is unusual and not the same experience as sitting in a concert hall before the stage. It is neither the same as sitting in the Shed nor sitting outside on the lawn. Nature and art merge as birdsong accompanies the music. The moments occur in coordination with the placement or arrangement of certain elements, objects or circumstances, that make possible the emergence of something other. These are moments of revelation in which one may access interconnected dimensions and discover previously unforeseen correspondences. Once apprehended, these approaches may be applied to interdisciplinary collaboration.

Literature still informs, teaches, and helps people to survive. As I became preoccupied by modes of interaction in Iceland, I asked Timothy Tangherlini about the role of narrative in

folklore and the role of folklore in culture. He told me about official and unofficial cultures, how people and institutions present themselves to one another, how they represent themselves to outside constituencies, and how boundaries of insiders and outsiders shift. He explained how tradition is continually changing and how it is negotiated. What he revealed to me is that daily discourse is based on narrative. Legal arguments, business contracts, and medical diagnoses are potent forms of narrative that define, maintain, and change the structures of organizational cultures, and it is how people survive. Folklore and narrative continue to function to mediate and structure social exchange and to generate meaning. Ásdís Egilsdóttir says: “Það er nauðsynlegt að skilja eitthvað eftir sem við skiljum ekki, getum ekki útskýrt. Grundvöllur tilvistar okkar ef til vill. Við spyrjum, leitum svar, en eitthvað verður að vera eftir. Eins og trúin. Við skiljum hana ekki til fulls [It is necessary to leave something behind that we do not understand, cannot explain. The basis of our existence perhaps. We ask, seek for answers, and something must be left behind. Like faith [belief]. We do not understand it fully.]” (Friday 10 February 2017). Ásdís explained the survival instinct in terms of the impulses that drive us forward as a species. That we are continually searching for answers and that there is no end to knowledge. And as a mother she said that when you promote life into the next generation you give everything you have and more. Even popular escape and fantasy literature fulfills a survival need only perhaps not as well. In building tension in the literature we go in the face of fear and that function is necessary even in a peaceful society (Friday 10 February 2017).

Literature and the arts allow people to exercise their creativity, creative expression, usually on the part of the creators, and imagination, generally on the part of the audience; however I find much of medieval Icelandic literature to be socially functional and to reflect an aspect of reality, even and especially the supernatural. It was a part of medieval life and it is still

a part of modern life. The creators of content have something to say and the audience has some benefit, not without entertainment. And through the literature the community is also expressing and identifying itself, participating. An example comes both from *Eyrbyggja saga* and also what is perhaps a modern-day analog. Written in the middle part of the thirteenth century, it speaks of events during the settlement of Iceland in the ninth century. The saga is intertextual with *Laxdæla saga*. The content is predominantly heathen yet displays a solid layer of Christian influence, presumably because the saga is thought to be the work of a Benedictine monk at Helgafell on Snæfellsnes. The work appears to lack a particular organizing principle or decisive structure (McCreesh 1993, 174). Chapters 50-55 tell of the acceptance of Christianity, provide a portent and an omen, recount the unfulfilled wishes of a dying woman, Þórgunna, report disturbing hauntings, and describe a communal and religious resolution for both worlds (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 137-152). When Þórir viðleggr was coming back inside the house after relieving himself at night he was stopped by the recently-deceased shepherd and thrown against the door. Shortly after that he died and then was haunting with the shepherd. More deaths followed and the community was distraught (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 146).

On an evening before Christmas a seal's head emerged out of the floor and it took a great deal of beating back to make it go away (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 147). Snorri the chieftain went to Helgafell to see a priest who offered advice. The people then fulfilled Þórgunna's wishes by burning her bed furnishings and sheets (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 148-149). The priest said mass, blessed holy water, heard confessions, and the community held court, conjuring the spirits and bidding them go their ways. Then peace and prosperity were restored (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 150-152). A creature emerging from the earth is not only symbolic it is real, urgent, and has to be dealt with. As has been seen, something not only lurks under the surface, something is inhabiting

the landscape. It is possible to try to live in alignment with nature. An unresolved issue, a haunting, or an unhappy ghost needs help to move on so that all can regain peace in both worlds. Whether real or metaphorical, such narrative representations of a spirit in the shape of a seal can communicate old lore as well as suggest about an emotional rupture, a communal one, or even the possibility of an evil spirit (Kjartan G. Ottósson 1983, 90).<sup>57</sup> Burning accursed objects, among other methods, was an ancient way of dispelling their evil power, such as when Grímr burned Lofthæna's troll form in *Gríms saga loðinkinna*. So too was conjuring to reconcile with the deceased and encourage them to move on. The new religion offered purification through repentance and the sacraments. The community worked together, using the means of their traditions, perhaps syncretically, to set things right. The saga continues to be a major and popular narrative in the medieval Icelandic family saga corpus.

An analogous modern narrative is the hauntings in the hut in Hvítárnes in the Icelandic highlands. The hauntings have been recorded by numerous hikers in the guest books there since the hut was built in 1929-1930. As in *Eyrbyggja saga*, in addition to hearing noises in the kitchen, several people have been forcibly removed with a kick and thrown from one of the bunks upstairs. Earlier I mentioned ghosts who have been welcomed in their haunts. Here is a revenant perhaps in as much need of resolution as the hikers who overnight there. People have also reported seeing a woman's face in the window. There is a folk story that tells of farm ruins near the hut called Tjarnarkot. The river Tjarná runs there. On this farm a boy and girl had been in love and she disappeared. It is said that he killed her because he got her pregnant. The haunting is well known by Icelanders and was featured in a news article,<sup>58</sup> a radio broadcast,<sup>59</sup> a news

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<sup>57</sup> For a study on the symbolism of the supernatural in *Eyrbyggja saga* see Kjartan G. Ottósson (1983).

<sup>58</sup> Sunna Karen Sigurþórsdóttir, "Reimleikinn í Hvítárnesi: Sparkað úr rúminu og greinilegt kvenmannsandlit í eldhúsglugganum [Haunting in Hvítárnes: Kicked Out of the Bed and Clear Female Face in the Kitchen Window],"

video,<sup>60</sup> a television series episode,<sup>61</sup> and a bachelor's thesis.<sup>62</sup> From saga times through the folk stories to modern media the phenomena continue in narrative and life and draw popular and scholarly interest.

When we are indoors fully connected to digital devices, social and entertainment media, and processed foods, we are fully living in the new reality. It makes the old reality outdoors of looking at the stars in silence, conversing with a sister, and growing food in the earth or sacrificing a lamb to eat, truly otherworldly. In such a modern existence we appear to have lost our connection to nature. Guðni Reynir Þorbjörnsson, an Icelandic farmer, tells me of these lost arts and says that we used to be more developed (Monday 13 February 2017). With certain advancements come other retreats and we can balance and coordinate our human arts and technologies. It is not to engage in magical thinking but to engage intellectual openness. The literature is not fantasy stories, not just human creativity and invention, but something organic coming from within a people having to do with orienting oneself in the environment, in community, and surviving into the future. Sometimes we need to disconnect from the so-called media to connect to nature, ourselves, and others. Reactivate story—intuition and relationships. Because all these aspects are interconnected and in dialog we negotiate meaning for ourselves

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*Vísir*, 20 February 2015,  
<http://www.visir.is/reimleikinn-i-hvitarnesi--sparkad-ur-ruminu-og-greinilegt-kvenmannsandlit-i-eldhusglugganum/article/2015150229930>

<sup>59</sup> “Okkur var öllum þremur sparkað úr rúminu [All three of us were kicked out of the bed],” *Bylgjan*, *Vísir*, 19 February 2015 <http://www.visir.is/section/MEDIA98&fileid=CLP33809>

<sup>60</sup> “Sá kvenmannsandlit í eldhúsglugganum [Saw Female Face in the Kitchen Window],” *Vísir*, 20 February 2015 <http://www.visir.is/section/MEDIA99?fileid=CLP33837>

<sup>61</sup> “Dulda Ísland - Hefst í vetur á Stöð 2 [Hidden Iceland - Begins this winter on Channel 2],” television series, 12 September 2014 <http://82.221.81.10/section/MEDIA99&fileid=CLP29594>

<sup>62</sup> Halldór Óli Gunnarsson (2012).

and others and can progress together, new media and old, in this world and an other one. That is what the literature can do.

## Conclusion

This study has sought to examine the basis for the supernatural aspects of medieval Icelandic literature in relationship with supernatural understanding and practice in Iceland today. It finds that story elements are not fantastical; they reflect a type of reality for those who write and tell them and it finds that the literature performs a social function of expression, identity, and cohesion, thus revealing facets of medieval and modern Icelandic culture in continuity. While the supernatural manifests in numerous forms, I focused on communication and interaction with the other world by way of dreams, clairvoyant mediation, and waking experience, and I focused on the other world as the deceased, guardian spirits, and nature beings. I identified the context of the communities of Icelandic settlers in the Icelandic landscape and nature engaged in storytelling and sharing in popular and scholarly media as living folklore.

I - Sources and collection methods for the supernatural show some of the researchers and methods used to apprehend the supernatural phenomena in Iceland and how they are recorded over time. Significant contributions come from ethnologists and anthropologists who interview Icelanders and regard the heritage of stories and literature in light of ongoing sharing of experience. This occurred when folkloristics became a discipline, developing in the Nordic countries, and in turn became an approach for the collection and analysis of stories. Today, broadcast and news media, film productions, and continued book publication of the subject matter of the supernatural keep the data archived, curated, and in circulation. So the repository of knowledge began in oral tradition, became written sagas in the Middle Ages, gave way to large collections of folk stories, and later found its audience in broadcast and entertainment media as news, television series, radio broadcasts, books, and films, both documentary and feature. What

can be seen in Iceland is a balance of secular and sacred traditions. The content was categorized and classified partly according to international motif standards and partly according to how the elements had come to be referred to in Iceland over time. The scheme remained intact. Traditions and practices appear to be alive and well and some scholars who are ambivalent about them have provided some of the most substantial study and documentation.

II - Mediation: mediums and media deals with the many ways experiences are mediated, not just by way of clairvoyants known as mediums. This includes the literature itself. It also includes anyone who mediates spiritually including the clergy. The experiences mediated are not hallucinations but people dealing with real experiences either within themselves or in the landscape such as when one is contacted in a dream by a nature spirit or relative or such as when one runs up against an interdiction in the landscape, the enchanted spots, *álagablettir*. Then other mediation is necessary to bring about accord with the other world as happens when road projects are halted. Or when there is a haunting that disturbs the living. The deceased need help to move on and there is mediation between the dead and the living to bring about a resolution for those in this world and in the other one. Old Norse mythology and medieval Icelandic literature show examples of seeresses and prophecy, of mediation for people in this world seeking information about the future and possible courses of action. The literature and language reveal practices of the past such as sitting out to go after news of the other world. The behavior was not frivolous. It was an existential matter of survival in a challenging landscape and climate and it was grounded in community and social expectations. It involved people affirming their place in society and cosmos. In more recent times Icelanders participate in prayer circles or in meetings with mediums to establish communication with the deceased. I have explained how people work with mediums and how mediums work with people, how they integrate various belief and religious



systems, how the practices are documented, and how such activities operate in people's lives. There is unusual continuity of tradition evident such as in the ritualistic and performative nature of some of the more public meetings. It is tempting to view reports as isolated but the understanding and practice are pervasive in the old literature and in modern practice. Even though people, then and now, are entertained, they come together in community to receive news, to learn, and to derive something of use. The meetings are reinforcing of community, social values, and collective identity. Recitation, sharing, speaking, listening, and being listened to are part of the ritualistic basis of such gatherings and also restorative as performance. Nature figures centrally in any discussion of Iceland and its faith traditions. The early mythology was, among other things, etiological, and transmitted lore about the worlds beyond. In such a way people could locate themselves among these worlds and construe their place in the social order. There was more of an animistic worldview with respect for nature and its creatures. Nature mediates supernatural experience. Husbandry involved necessary sacrifice for the survival of the community. Today there is an ecological approach of balancing one's behavior to find harmony with the earth and to promote a sustainable planet for children and for future generations.

III - Guardian spirits and dreams are prominent in medieval Icelandic literature and in personal accounts of contemporary Icelanders. Numerous types of beings manifest and change over time, however it appears to be their function that is constant. The *fylgja*, or follower or guardian spirit, emerged early as animal spirits, later, occasionally, as forms of goddesses or fates like *disir* or *nornir*, then as saints and guardian angels, and today include spirits, good and bad, who accompany families and individuals. They are sometimes reported in shape-changing manifestations. When guardian spirits communicate with the living, it may be in dreams, such as requesting that a child be given a particular name, or in warning or protection, through signs or

symbols that are relevant to the individual. Communication may be made through a medium. Elves and hidden folk inhabit the landscape and communicate with people when their habitations are disturbed. They may move if requested, however there is pushback from the other world when there is a violation to their homes that may be identifiable features, like rocks, caves, and impressions or textures in the landscape. They dwell nevertheless in a different dimension and are not immediately perceived by corporeal senses. It is necessary to awaken other capacities. There is powerful symbolism in these earthly dwellings including burial sites; they become loci for contacting the other world and also symbolize the long deceased who continue to remain close to the earth. Elves and hidden people are some of the beings most encountered and are linked to other nature and guardian spirits of the land who are mentioned in the ancient literature who embody Icelandic identity as seen in symbolic representations like currency and the national insignia. Medieval Icelandic literature and modern experience document the experiences of guardian spirits and dreams. By considering what they report from anthropological perspectives it is possible to read accounts to ascertain the meaning of symbols and practices of the old lore in national sources such as *Landnámabók*. Among the wonders that are communicated, a consistent theme is respect for nature and for others, be they otherworldly others or the order of life.

IV - An ethnography of the other world involves the patterns that emerge from people who can see or from people who have had near-death experiences and reported back. These accounts have been the subject of several social science studies in an international context, have involved cognitive neuroscience and other disciplines, and have concluded that there needs to be room for phenomena that cannot fully be explained by the methods employed today. The results of this research suggest that there needs to be a measure of openness as data continue to be collected at the same time as assumptions continue to be tested. One example that arises in

testimony is the presence and influence of deceased physicians who attend and assist during procedures. There are also reports of healings when guardian spirits are invoked. Such stories are not new. They are recorded in the miracles in the corpora of sagas of holy people, of saints and bishops, and in the folk stories. When there is an exchange between worlds, including the giving of gifts, uncanny results have been reported. Indeed, as anthropologists have shown and Icelanders have recounted, there is an exchange between the communities of the living and the dead, especially among generations of families. Such cultural continuity on both sides of the divide is part of the structural basis of family saga accounts exemplified in numerous prophecies. Genealogical continuity not only describes social life, it legitimizes great families and their deeds in line with mythological stories of the gods, either as history or as idealized promotion meant to influence outcomes. In Iceland there is some openness on the part of mental health professionals to allow for the possibility of spiritual rather than psychological distress, as in circumstances of oppressive spirits. Various patterns pervade mindsets be they the mythological ones that influenced medieval literature or traditional folk ones that blended in latter-day practices.

V - Syncretic traditions have been evident in Iceland since settlement and they go beyond the apparent poles of heathenism and Christianity. The church condemned some behaviors but also applied its learned culture to the acquisition and distribution of medieval Icelandic accounts and stories. Compared with other places where it held sway the church seemed to tolerate the local beliefs of Iceland more than elsewhere. If anything a Christian layer was added to the narratives to show society in the context of the new faith. On the one hand the old traditions were recorded with an interest in the past, including the Sámi and shamanic influences, while on the other hand it was unavoidable that people would continue to speak of experiences of dreams and interactions with the deceased and with beings in nature. The church with its saints had room to

accommodate varied experiences of God's creation. The pervading rites of human passage could be enacted in the sacraments of the church. And some cultural themes, such as honor, were part of the landscape, of family identity, or of survival, while others were slow in adaptation as was clear with people close to the land, having to administer their own justice and encountering learned culture from abroad. Early modern forms of Christianity and learned culture like Enlightenment views attempted to do away with faulty or incomplete modes of seeing the world as well as unwieldy power structures. While they allowed great advances in human achievement and material betterment, they also loosened touch with ways of coping that could continue to be useful.

VI - Literature was among the durable media in which the old ways thrived. The sagas were popular for centuries, written and read, and folklorists were taking down people's stories for preservation and distribution. People continued to experience dreams, of hidden beings, of nature, and they met together with or without mediums while they continued to go to church. They were open to beliefs and practices of cultures abroad and found harmony with them along with their traditional practices. Archeology and new disciplines were coming together to shed light on the old literature and the cultural remnants preserved in it, filtered through the ages in which recorded, to support a larger picture of shared experience and acceptance of broader modes of existence. And hauntings did not go away with modernity neither were all of them dispelled conceptually or really as attested by continued modern media reports of their presence. Icelandic nature continues to be featured in such experiences and has enchanted a growing tourist industry with its northern lights tours, city maps of hidden folk, and saga tours in the landscape. Nature cannot be captured and not everyone has developed intuitive senses however literature and arts are media that are continually representative, repeatedly accessible, and perpetually open

to interpretation. They are not superficial means of entertainment; they come from the deepest expression of human experience and aspiration and emerge like seeds broadcast in the hope of fruitful future life, for essential information from both worlds is preserved and transmitted through them.

While Icelanders may find continued affirmation in their rich heritage, open society, and cultural promise, the point is not to seek answers in Iceland, but to take the example of respect for nature in an open secret of Icelandic otherworldly communication and apply it to wherever one happens to be.

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#### Personal communications

Ásdís Egilsdóttir, Friday 10 February 2017 and Wednesday 29 March 2017, Reykjavík

Guðni Reynir Þorbjörnsson, Saturday 25 June 2016, Monday 30 January 2017, Tuesday 18 April 2017, Grímsnes with

Sigrún Elva Gunnarsdóttir, Monday 30 January 2017, Grímsnes

Hilmar Páll Jóhannesson with

Inga Lóa Guðjónsdóttir, Friday 10 March 2017, Reykjavík

Jóhanna Katrín Bender, Monday 13 February 2017, Selfoss

## Online resources

Forsetaúrskurður um skjaldarmerki Íslands

Skrifstofa Alþingis

<http://www.althingi.is/lagas/nuna/1944035.html>

Icelandic Saga Map

Emily Lethbridge

<http://sagamap.hi.is/is/>

Íslendingabók

Íslensk erfðagreining ehf. og Friðrik Skúlason

<https://www.islendingabok.is/>

ÍSMÚS - Íslenskur Músík- og Menningararfur, Þjóðfræðisafn

Tónlistarsafn Íslands, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, Kópavogsbær

<https://www.ismus.is/>

[catalog number HérVHún Fræðafélag 026] <https://www.ismus.is/i/audio/id-1041691>

Sagnagrunnur

Terry Gunnell, Trausti Dagsson

<http://sagnagrunnur.com/en/>

Main Legend Collections in Iceland

[http://sagnagrunnur.com/scholarly-work-on-folk-legends/#Main\\_Legend\\_Collections\\_in\\_Iceland](http://sagnagrunnur.com/scholarly-work-on-folk-legends/#Main_Legend_Collections_in_Iceland)

Mynt í gildi

Seðlabanki Íslands

<http://www.seðlabanki.is/fjarmalainnvidir/sedlar-og-mynt/mynt-i-gildi/>

Skógræktarfélag Íslands

<http://www.skog.is/>