

Ármann Jakobsson and Miriam Mayburd, eds., *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150-1400. The Northern Medieval World* (Boston/Berlin: Medieval Institute Publications, 2020). Print, vii + 438 pp, £110, ISBN: 978-1-58044-329-6 (Hardcover)



R e v i e w

That a 'hierarchy' existed in and had an impact on the research in medieval Icelandic sagas has come to the attention of scholars in the field in recent years. This 'hierarchy' is largely determined by the 'historicity' of the Old Norse-Icelandic literary corpus: namely, if, or to what extent, a certain saga or saga corpus might reflect the society it portrays, thereby allowing us a glimpse into what we would comfortably define and accept as 'reality'.

However, 'reality' is a subjective concept that varies from culture to culture, era to era, individual to individual. What one perceives as 'real' may turn out to be but a fraction of the reality of another from another age, culture, and/or region; imposing one's own standard of 'normative' and dismissing the rest as 'non-real' would only lead to an incomplete, biased, and unbalanced understanding, which, ironically, defeats the purpose of any such endeavours.

In the field of medieval Icelandic literature, one of the main *loci* in which this dichotomic way of thinking manifests itself is what is conventionally categorised as the 'supernatural', particularly in a group of *Íslendingasögur* ['the sagas of Icelanders' or 'the family sagas'] where the preminent fantastical elements problematise, challenge, and discomfit the (alleged) 'realness' that supposedly defines the genre. Recent years however, have seen an increasing interest in these elements and their place in the narrative as a whole, and born of it an outpour of scholarship that not only refocuses the scholarly gaze onto them but also invites us to rethink the validity and usefulness of a normative/natural versus supernatural dichotomy.

Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150–1400, edited by Ármann Jakobsson and Miriam Mayburd, is one of the latest contributions to the subject. Consisting of twenty-three articles on diverse topics, this volume not only epitomises the academic discourse on the supernatural but also calls into question the very concept of the supernatural as we customarily understand it. The stance this volume takes is made clear by its choice of paranormal over supernatural. After all, the term *supernatural*, derived from the Latin *super-naturalis*, ‘above or beyond nature’, still indicates a sense of hierarchy and thereby demarcation, whereas the ubiquity of ‘supernatural’ elements within the Old Norse literary corpus – including *Íslendingasögur* – evidences that such elements are by no means perceived as anomalies and rarities that should be set aside in a category of its own. *Paranormal*, on the other hand, levels these elements with the normative and reemerges them into the everyday reality of the people who lived, created, read, and enjoyed them. The term, as the editors point out in the Introduction, ‘exposes the idea of normative reality itself as a socio-historical construct, far from an absolute given and ever contingent upon the particular models used to define it’, and its application to the medieval Icelandic materials ‘serves to remind us that modern understanding of medieval sources remains ever incomplete, and it is this awareness which opens up discursive space for new critical perspectives and theoretical approaches’ (p. 2). Moreover, the term also highlights the human aspect of the supernatural: a paranormal encounter is essentially a life experience; either physical or mental, it is both personal and subjective, therefore ‘inseparable from the human mind and thereby an integral part of what constitutes medieval experiential reality’ (p. 3).

The twenty-three articles of the volume are grouped into three parts. Part I, ‘Experiencing the Paranormal’, investigates the saga characters’ specific, individual encounters of the paranormal and the mental effect they may have upon both the characters and the audience; how such experience on the one hand projects the fears and anxieties hidden deep in the human psyche and on the other fuels them. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the majority of the articles in this section employ

psychoanalytic models to their discussion, thus relocating the haunting from a physical landscape to a psychological one. The second Part, 'Figures of the Paranormal', re-examines a group of ambiguous figures and challenges existing views in the academia; in particular, these figures not only cover the conventional 'supernatural' or 'mythical' but also the social and the ethnical other, further strengthening the volume's stance against the dichotomy between 'natural' and 'supernatural'. Part III, 'Literature and the Paranormal', shifts the focus from intradiegetic onto the extradiegetic aspects, as the articles refocus from individual encounter of the paranormal of the saga character to the texts themselves and the effect and meaning that these episodes may produce on the intended audience and on us.

As it would be too lengthy (and too boring) to summarise each article, and considering the fact that all the articles are furnished with concise, spot-on abstracts, I will instead provide a brief case-study which (I believe) encapsulates one of the strongest points of this volume. Namely, the volume applies a rich variety of theories, interpretative models, and angles to but very few texts or even episodes. Therefore, by offering a panoramic approach to a relatively small target, the volume not only provides the readers with in-depth, full-fledged interpretations of a single saga/episode, but also showcases the possibilities and potentials of analysing literature in the context of the paranormal.

Any discussion of the paranormal in medieval Icelandic literature would be incomplete without *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, a saga full of trolls, revenants, and monster slayers. It is, therefore, no surprise that seven out of twenty-three articles analyse this text, to a greater or lesser degree, particularly but not exclusively focusing Glámr the heathen-shepherd-turned-*draugr* [undead or revenant] and his fight with Grettir, the eponymous hero. Among them, three deal with landscapes and physical space of the fight. In her contribution 'It Was a Dark and Stormy Night: Haunted Saga Homesteads, Climate Fluctuations, and the Vulnerable Self', Miriam Mayburd examines the effect of seasonal change and severe weather on the human psyche, thus linking the harsh living condition of medieval Iceland and the creation of the tales of

haunting. It also echoes Daniel C. Remein's article on the paranormality of ice (a symbol of severe winter) in the same volume and Paul S. Langeslag's applications of the concept of psycho-geography to literary monsters in Old Norse and Old English narratives in *Seasons in the Literatures of the Medieval North* (2015), from which, regrettably, Mayburd did not cite. In her article 'On the Threshold: The Liminality of Doorways', Anna Katharina Heininger zooms in on the symbolic meaning of doors and argues that doorways 'acts as a (transitional) place if it is considered to be a space of its own' (p. 115). A close, comparative reading of Grettir's two paranormal encounters – with a *tröllkona* ['trollwoman'] and Glámr, respectively – is offered here to demonstrate the different narrative functions of doorways as indicated by these two episodes and how it has a bearing on Grettir's character development. Shaun F.D. Hughes on the other hand focuses on the geographical side of the Glámr episode: in his article 'Reading the Landscape in *Grettis saga*: Þórhallur, the *meinvættur*, and Glámur', Hughes uses as evidence real-life location of Þórhallur's farm and sheepsheds and, having consulted local traditions and place-names, concludes that the haunting at Þórhallur's farm results from a breach of contract between the farmer and a *landsvættur* [guardian spirit]. From there, Hughes points to the expansion of farming and grazing as the underlying reason behind such stories and, like Mayburd, invites us to (re-)consider the relationship between human activities and the environment.

Whilst the aforementioned three articles deal with the geographical staging of the saga, Kent Pettit's article 'The New Faith vs. The Undead: Christmas Showdowns' focuses on the temporal staging and reads the stories of (triumphing over) revenants as narratives strengthening and re-asserting 'the victory of the Incarnate Christ' (p. 238). Therefore, the choice of Christmastime for these paranormal incidents reflects the uncertainty and anxiety of a transitioning period from one belief system to another. Moreover, reading it alongside Sean B. Lawing's article 'The Burial of Body Parts in Old Icelandic *Grágás*' in the same volume, it also draws the thought-provoking parallel between burials *ad sanctos* (i.e. burying the dead near tombs of saints or other holy sites) and burials of persons suspected of returning as *draugar* and thereby invites

comparison between the incorruptibility of the saints' body and that of the revenants, both being paranormal phenomena.

Last but not the least, Marion Poilvez ('A Troll Did It?: Trauma as a Paranormal State in the *Íslendingasögur*'), Sarah Bienko Eriksen ('Traversing the Uncanny Valley: Glámr in Narratological Space'), and Rebecca Merkelbach ('*Dólgr í byggðinni*: Meeting the Social Monster in the Sagas of Icelanders') draw our attention to the key players: Grettir and Glámr. Poilvez compares the haunting of the *draugr* and its lingering effect on its slayer's mind to the violent and contagious manifestations of trauma, thus transferring the physical landscape of Þórhallur's haunted farm to the figurative landscape of Grettir's mind. That Glámr's continuing haunting in this mental space turns Grettir to a quasi-monster figure and therefore a doubleganger to Glámr is a familiar reading, but Eriksen re-visits it from a narratological angle and, having applied cognitive-semiotic theory to the scene, re-asserts the doubleness of the two characters by analysing the shift of focalisation in the narrative. This identification challenges the boundary between monster and monster-slayer. This is further examined by Merkelbach, who argues for 'a fluid spectrum' through which to measure humanness and monstrosity (p. 263). Using contemporary monster theories, she concludes that monstrosity is behavioural rather than physical and a social monster like Grettir is just as paranormal as a physical one. The mainstream society, therefore, has as much a say in what is a monster as nature.

In conclusion, *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150–1400* is a valuable – even timely – addition to the ongoing discourse on monstrosity and the supernatural in the Old Norse-Icelandic literary corpus. Not only does it advocate the validity and value of these seemingly fantastic elements, but it also offers new, inspiring insights and directions, which would be especially important for students and those who are looking for new research ideas. On the practical side, one of the things that do credit to volume is its readability, as all the articles, all very well written, follow a clear, straightforward structure of introduction, case-study/analysis, and conclusion, and the average length of articles is between four and six pages. One drawback is the

inclusion of block translations in the endnotes, as well as the slight inconsistency in formatting the in-text ones. Inter-volume connections also seem to be lacking, but it is anything but expected from a collaborative project as such. Besides, such responsibility usually falls to the readers: I for one, am very looking forwards to future and further research that may have grown out of this volume.

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