

**Daniel Sävborg and Karen Bek-Pedersen, eds, *Supernatural Encounters in Old Norse Literature and Tradition, Borders, Boundaries, Landscapes 1* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2018). Print. vii, 265 pp., € 75.00 excl. tax, ISBN: 978-2-503-57531-5 (hardback).**



*Review*

Recent decades have seen an increasing interest in the study of the ‘supernatural’ in Old Norse literature. Born of it is an outpour of scholarship focusing on subjects hitherto understudied or dismissed due to their ‘fantasticalness’, as opposed to, for instance, the (alleged) ‘realness’ of *Íslendingasögur*. Indeed, the ubiquity of ‘supernatural’ elements within the Old Norse literary corpus – including *Íslendingasögur* – evidences that these elements are by no means anomalies and rarities; rather, as Sävborg and Bek-Pedersen point out in their introductory chapter, they are part of what is considered ‘natural’ and therefore should be discussed alongside with the ‘real’.

To push the point even further, the present volume problematises the term ‘supernatural’ from the beginning, despite its application throughout the volume for convenience’s sake (except in Ármann Jakobsson’s contribution, who prefers ‘paranormal’). If only one word were allowed to describe this volume, it would be ‘bridge’, for it aims to establish connections between other areas, thus enabling interdisciplinary dialogues. Two such ‘bridges’ are particularly noteworthy, as they thread through the entire volume and strengthen its structural integrity: one between the texts originally composed in a Christianising Iceland and the pagan past, the other between these materials and the folklore recorded centuries after. The volume sheds light not only on the centre but also the gaps in between. This is clearly stated in the Introduction, which provides an overview of the previous scholarship as well as pointing out new directions.

The first two articles represent these two approaches, respectively. Ármann Jakobsson analyses *Bergbúa þáttr*, a short episode recounting a chance meeting between Þórðr, a pious Christian, and a creature that only manifests in a pair of glowing eyes; three times the mysterious creature recites a skaldic verse loaded with pagan references while gradually receding into the darkness of the cave. Headed by a comprehensive introduction to the Christianisation of Iceland, it perhaps comes as no surprise that Ármann Jakobsson's analysis is anchored in a Christian framework. The paranormal encounter reflects the psyche of that transitional period, when the past, materialised in the creature, becomes undefinable yet lingering on. However, a role model may be found in Þórðr, whose firm stance on Christianity allows him to conquer the fear of (corporeal) death and ensures his survival.

Bettina Sommer's contribution showcases how folkloric sources from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries may throw light on the pre-Christian *jól*, which is scarcely mentioned in medieval materials. She refutes the conventional theory of *jól* as a festival to commemorate dead ancestors. Rather, she argues, *jól* is a New Year festival, a liminal period during which the coming year may be shaped and predicted. In addition to the rich materials it contains, her article also testifies the value of folklore, harking back to the Introduction.

The next four chapters form an interesting cluster, as they all focus on *Guðmundar saga biskups* (albeit of different versions and perspectives) and the bishop's confrontation with *selkolla*, 'seal-head'. From a folkloristic approach, Af Klintberg's chapter seeks to understand the medieval saga by comparing its key elements to later Scandinavian traditions. He also points out the Christian message highlighted in the episode ('it is laymen who are attacked by demons while the holy men solve the problem', p. 67) and sees the period of Christianisation as a liminal stage during which these stories take shape. Cormack expands her sources into including folklore up to the

twentieth century; she traces *selkolla*'s development and shows how the monster is repurposed in different context. This is further explicated by Kuldkepp, who, focusing on *Selkolluvísur*, reads *selkolla*'s transition as a case of remediation. By remediating the folktale into a *dróttkvætt* poem, the poet reconciles on the one hand folk tradition and “high” Christianity’ and on the other Guðmundr as a monster-fighting folk hero and as a miracle-performing Christian bishop whom the poet wished to see canonised. This dual image is furthered by Marteinn Helgi Sigurðsson, who offers a comparison between Guðmundr and Grettir and discusses the relationship between the two sagas. Both characters belong to a monster-fighting folkhero type, but whereas Grettir relies on physical strength and eventually falls victim to dark forces, Guðmundr resorts to spiritual weapons and triumphs. That Grettir’s strength leads him into *superbia* also offers an excellent comparison point to Beowulf, as discussed by Andy Orchard in *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (2003).

Arngrímur Vídalín offers an overview of the Icelandic world view and, from there, discusses how this view affects the medieval Icelanders’ perception, construction, and placement of the monstrous race: that Iceland itself is geographically marginal makes the need more urgent to define and displace the real ‘other’. Nevertheless, this closeness causes anxiety and uncertainty, which is evidenced in the following two articles. Hagland discusses the notion of trolls and other supernatural entities/activities in medieval Scandinavian law codes, centring especially on the phrase *at vekja tröll upp*, ‘to conjure up trolls’. Mayburd, focusing on *forndaldarsögur*, discusses the ambiguous nature of the Old Norse *dvergjar* in light of their role as skilful craftsmen and the transformability of natural resources, putting under scrutiny the very concept of materiality.

Last but not least, Heide and Lavender return to the three-point comparison between older material, high medieval sagas, and later folkloric traditions. Concentrating on *Þorsteins þátrr*

*Bójarmagns*, Heide first analyses the saga and examines its reuse and repurpose of myths and semi-mythological stories (mostly Þórr-related). Then he zooms in on the saga's blind motifs and compares them to an elf queen legend recorded in the 1840s, demonstrating once more how the medieval texts and folklore may shed light on each other. Lavender, too, focuses on a single saga, *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, arguing for the saga being remediated from a now-lost Faroese ballad. He further argues for the relevance and important of the inset autobiographical story of a princess cursed to become a troll, previously dismissed as extrinsic. The trollish transformation – itself a boundary-breaking act – not only allows the princess-troll to disrupt the normative expectation of female behaviour, assuming more agency, but also allows textual variance.

Overall, the volume is a boundary-breaking endeavour. Both provocative and inspiring, it draws attention to hitherto understudied or little-known texts and calls into re-examination established views. This, and the fact that each article is furnished with detailed literature review, will prove particularly valuable for students and early career researchers in the field; further research will be surely generated from the volume.

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