

The Practitioners of Magic and the Old Norse Concept of Power

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Magic as a Cultural Concept

Magic and its practitioners are frequent motifs in several genres of Old Norse literature, and as such, they are important elements in research on medieval Norse culture and have been studied from various perspectives. If one takes what can be called “a historical, diachronic approach” (Tolley 2014: 16), the texts can be viewed as sources revealing some of the historical reality of magical practice in the pre-Christian North, but since the texts were composed in Christian times, “the picture gained is at best fuzzy, and inadequate in many respects” (Tolley 2014: 15). Another option is the “literary, synchronic approach” (Tolley 2014: 16), based on a perception of the texts as discourses reflecting the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelanders’ interpretation of their past and of the social tendencies and tensions of their own time. From this perspective, Old Norse magic, instead of being perceived either as a strictly historical fact or as a purely fictional literary motif, can be viewed as a cultural concept—as “a socially constructed object of knowledge, actualized as a set of discourses that predicates powers and knowledges construed as extraordinary and illegitimate on particular individuals” (Meylan 2014: 18). What is crucial for the present study is, firstly, the idea that the cultural concept of magic is “socially constructed”; secondly, the connection between magic, power, and knowledge; and thirdly, the notion of magic as an illegitimate or

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socially marginal element. The objective of the study is to show how the motif of magic and magicians in Old Norse literature contributes to the narrative portrayal of various possible relationships between different types and sources of power.

Magic and Power

An interesting paradox is that whereas “in all the Norse sources the practice of magic is presented as a peripheral activity” (Tolley 2014: 20), magic is also often connected with the concept of power in Old Norse literature. This connection has been an object of scholarly interest, with one of the central questions being whether sorcery was “central to the exercise of power in early Scandinavia, or a marginal activity engaged in by those perceived as outsiders” (Tolley 2014: 16). In the present study, which is focused on magic as a cultural concept in the late medieval North, the question will be modified and broadened. It will be asked how the motif of magic is figuratively employed in the conceptualization of various principles of power in the narrative sources.¹

In this context, it must be noted that the concept of power in the medieval North indeed seems to have been quite heterogeneous. Firstly, power could be understood in the narrow sense as political authority wielded by rulers, magnates, and chieftains; this type of power was usually linked to military strength and legal authority. Although this power was institutionalized, it was always to some extent dependent on personal alliances and networks, and thus on non-institutional aspects, such as the leader’s personal qualities and ability to maintain balanced relationships with many different individuals. This applied both to the medieval Scandinavian kingdoms (see Orning 2008) and to the kingless society in Iceland (see Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999). Moreover, apart from this official authority, the concept of power could also include other, less formal, even illegitimate means of asserting oneself in

¹ Since the scope of this study is limited, it is focused on narrative texts that primarily describe the human society at the time that can be broadly defined as the historical past, which I regard as the most relevant sources of the narrative conceptualization of magic in a social context. The Old Norse cultural concepts, including magic, are of course also reflected in mythological texts, texts dealing with the legendary past, and non-narrative texts, such as lawbooks; these sources have partly been included in my more extensive study of magic as a cultural concept (Korecká 2019).

diverse social situations. These were often perceived as a threat to the political and legal system because they could not be fully controlled by it, although they were not necessarily always used with the intention of disrupting the system.

This category includes first and foremost physical violence that is not approved by the wielders of official power and not committed on their behalf. It was an inevitable threat, but it was usually perceived as an inseparable part of power dynamics; medieval social leaders and institutions often directly derived their power from the regulation of violence (see Davies & Fouracre 1986). Another phenomenon that is frequently associated with unofficial power in the narrative sources is magic and its practitioners. As will be shown in the following, these motifs are typically related to other phenomena that are presented in the given sources as being socially disruptive, such as heathenism, thievery, or the refusal to conform to social norms. However, it will also be shown that the practitioners of magic, although they are always described as being socially marginal or marginalized, do not necessarily oppose the official authorities or disrupt the established order; they may even uphold this order, only by unconventional means. An analysis of the literary motif of magic can therefore contribute to a better understanding of the complexity of how power is conceptualized in the Old Norse sources. It can show that the relationship between official and illegitimate power is not always presented as a clearly defined dichotomy between right and wrong.

Instead, the dichotomy can rather be conceptualized as one between public and secret sources of power. Official power is derived from “public” knowledge in the form of genealogies, stories of ancestors, law, social norms, combat skills, or political abilities. By contrast, the unofficial tools of power, including magic, are based on secret knowledge. The connection between magic and knowledge is also reflected in some of the Old Norse terms denoting sorcery: *ffölkynngi* (literally “much knowledge”), *ffölkunnigr* (“much knowing”), and other similar expressions. These terms show that “the boundary between wisdom and magical power was not easily drawn” (Hastrup 1990: 388). They always denote a qualitatively specific—magical—kind of knowledge (Dillmann

2006: 207-08), so they “convey the idea that the object of the discourse wielded qualitatively extraordinary power” (Meylan 2014: 31).²

The relationship between public and secret tools of power is closely but ambiguously connected with the dichotomy between order and chaos. On the one hand, magic in Old Norse culture is often related to the establishment of social structures and to ancient wisdom and customs, which are linked to order. This conceptualization is associated with the idea that “tangible disruptions of the assumed order can never be ruled out; magic as the art of transformation is meant to correct the resulting ‘disorder’” (Schulz 2000: 382).³ Conversely, magic can also be presented as a disruptive force that threatens the established order and must be suppressed by the social leaders. In the narratives, these diverse concepts are reflected in the different possible relationships between official and secret sources of power. If those who wield official power feel that their position is threatened, they can either turn to unofficial power for help, or turn against the wielders of illegitimate power to demonstrate their own superiority by defeating them. The practitioners of magic, in turn, can use their sorcery either to defend and uphold the existing social order, or to defy or oppose the established social leaders.

Significantly, these two groups are usually characterized by the gender of the practitioners of magic. The magicians who disrupt the social system are typically men. Female magicians can also behave disruptively, but it is typically not opposition to the social system and its representatives, only to the witch’s or her family’s personal enemies. More importantly, female sorceresses sometimes use magic to uphold the social system. The basic underlying logic behind this division is that the men who oppose the established social leaders can never be superior to them in terms of official power—military strength or political influence—, so they must turn to illegitimate, secret sources of power. Women, by contrast, wish to uphold the established order by protecting their family’s social status, property, or other attributes of power. Nevertheless, they cannot use the most efficient tools of official power offered by Old Norse society—physical combat or active

² Other categories of magic can be related to power as well, but they are beyond the scope of the present study. I have discussed the connotations of various categories of Old Norse magic elsewhere (Korecká 2019).

³ [...] reale Störfälle der geglaubten Ordnung sind niemals auszuschließen; die Magie als die Kunst der Veränderung soll die entstandene „Unordnung“ wieder zurechtrücken.

participation in legal cases—, so they must turn to sorcery as “a weapon available to women in order to pursue their own ends” (Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2009: 425). Apart from this simple dichotomy, however, the relationship between public and secret tools of power employed by saga characters of different genders can be more complex in some cases, as will be shown in the following. The sagas may thus indirectly present a complex image of medieval Norse power dynamics in general.

Male Magicians Using Sorcery to Defy or Disrupt Order

Saga episodes depicting male sorcerers typically construct a clear-cut, easily definable boundary between official power and the forces of chaos. Across several saga genres, “male witches are overwhelmingly portrayed as villainous characters set in opposition to the hero” (Mitchell 2011: 190). The hero, whether he is a Scandinavian king or an Icelandic chieftain, usually represents not just individual virtue, but also order in the sense of law, justice, and protection from disruptive forces, which are embodied by wielders of the illegitimate, secret power of sorcery.

Such a relationship between the two types of power is presented for example in *Vatnsdæla saga*, in which the main theme is the role of the social leaders as the community’s protectors against villains and hostile supernatural forces. In one of the episodes that illustrate this theme (xxix), the antagonist is the sorcerer Þorgrímr, who is “very skilled in magic and evil in other respects” (*fjolkunnigr mjök ok þó at öðru illa*, 76).⁴ He disrupts social harmony by causing disputes between the local leaders Þorsteinn and Jökull, sons of the chieftain Ingimundr Þorsteinsson, and their kinsman Már Jörundarson. The brothers explicitly blame Þorgrímr for causing the conflict: “that wretch Þorgrímr Leatherhood does us a great disservice by stirring up conflict between us, and it would be appropriate to make him pay for it” (*dregsk sú mannfýla mjök óþarfi til, hann Þorgrímr skinnhúfa, at reita oss, ok væri hæfiligt, at hann tæki gjöld fyrir*, 77). They repeatedly attempt to attack Þorgrímr, but he seeks shelter with Már, so the chieftains “are not able to reach Þorgrímr due to his sorcery and Már’s opposition” (*máttu eigi ná Þorgrími fyrir fjolkynngi hans, en mótgangi Más*, 78). The sorcerer’s intervention into

⁴ All translations of primary sources are the author’s own.

the social relations in the district finally leads to an armed clash, in which Þorgrímr's magic blunts Jökull's sword and makes fallen fighters rise up again. The brothers find Þorgrímr and wound him with a sword, after which the effect of his magic subsides. The local farmers then intervene and stop the fight, the kinsmen are reconciled, their dispute is solved by agreement, and Þorgrímr is expelled from the district. This ending shows the social leaders' superiority over the sorcerer who destabilizes the community. The episode expresses the idea that it is the chieftains' task to suppress the disruption, so that order and harmony can be renewed. If it is understood as social commentary in a broader sense, the sorcery can figuratively represent all kinds of disruptive forces. On the level of cultural concepts, the association of such illegitimate sources of power with witchcraft emphasizes the idea that they are deviant and anti-social, whereas the values embodied by the chieftains accord with the natural order.

A similar contrast between social order and the disruptive role of a sorcerer occurs also in a *samtíðarsaga* ("contemporary saga," a text describing events from the twelfth or thirteenth centuries), *Sturlu saga*. It is the only mention of a magician in the *samtíðarsögur*,⁵ which makes it a unique occurrence of a theme that is otherwise typical of other genres. In this scene, a character named Þórir the Sorcerer (*inn fjölkunngi*, 82) is rightfully accused of mistreating people and stealing. He is captured by the men of the district, and they intend to kill him. When his friend tries to persuade them to set him free, they reply that "there is no chance they would let a thief and a sorcerer go, for he has forfeited his life by his deeds" (*kvað eigi þat efni at láta lausan þjóf ok fjölkunngan mann, en unnit nú til óhelgis sér*, 82). Sorcery, alongside other types of anti-social behaviour, such as thievery, is thus presented as a disruptive activity, due to which the offender is deemed unworthy of being a member of the community. It is contrasted with official power, which is not represented by individual leaders in this case, but rather by the local community as a collective unit, denoted as "the men of Hváll"

⁵ In Mitchell's words, the *samtíðarsögur*, despite their "evident fascination with premonitions and the prediction of things to come," do not contain "any sort of decisive intrusion by sorcerers, witches, or magical practices to set the course of the narrative or turn the tide of events". "The world projected by the *samtíðarsögur* is largely one of power politics, human cruelty, and human frailty, but interestingly, indeed even suspiciously, never one where witches or witchcraft play a significant role" (2011: 98).

(*Hválmenn*). This underlines the idea of their shared responsibility for upholding order in the district. Although they are not chieftains, they represent official power in the sense of the laws and norms that uphold social stability. This stability is threatened by those who disregard the laws and norms, but the community can protect itself by expelling such outsiders and suppressing their secret powers.

In other cases, the sorcerer threatens an individual leader's authority by refusing to abide by his rules. The most striking example is a conflict between King Haraldr and his son Rognvaldr in *Haralds saga hárfagra* (xxxiv) in *Heimskringla*. At the beginning of the episode, the opposition between royal power and magic is highlighted when it is stated that Rognvaldr "learnt magic and became a sorcerer" (*nam fjolkyngi ok gerðisk seiðmaðr*, I: 138), whereas "King Haraldr hated sorcerers" (*Haraldi konungi þóttu illir seiðmenn*, I: 138). When another sorcerer disregards the king's ban of magic, arguing in a verse that ordinary people can be sorcerers when the king's own son is a sorcerer as well, Haraldr realizes how much his son's wizardry threatens his royal authority. He then commands his other son, Eiríkr blóðøx, to kill Rognvaldr, whereupon Eiríkr "burns his brother Rognvaldr in a house together with eighty other sorcerers, and this deed is praised greatly" (*brenndi inni Rognvald, bróður sinn, með átta tigu seiðmanna, ok var þat verk lofat mjök*, I: 139). Having one's own son killed is an extreme act even by the standards of the kings' sagas, so the shocking nature of the episode emphasizes the seriousness of the king's opposition to sorcery. Since Haraldr is not a Christian king, his condemnation of magic is clearly not based on opposition to heathenism. Instead, the episode seems to reflect the idea that a monarch is obliged to protect his kingdom from disruptive forces, here represented by magic, and that he must be willing to disregard even his family ties for the sake of upholding his royal authority that secures stability and order. Again, magic can be understood as a cultural concept that figuratively illustrates the contrast between royal authority as a natural state of affairs and opposition to royal authority as aberrant behaviour.

As can be expected, the opposition between royal power and sorcery is even stronger in the sagas of Christian kings, which are characterized by a "military-like use of magic to prevent the Christianizing king from advancing his hold on Norway" (Mitchell 2011: 191). Many

examples are found in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*,⁶ which describes the Christianization of Norway and the consequent strengthening of royal rule. In this process, the king must defeat opponents who are often presented as heathens and sorcerers. One of them is Eyvindr kelda, “a sorcerer very skilled in magic” (*seiðmaðr ok allmjök fjölkunnigr*, I: 311), a grandson of the aforementioned Rognvaldr. King Óláfr Tryggvason first attempts to burn Eyvindr and his companions in a house (Ixii), but Eyvindr escapes and insists that “he will continue with all his sorcery in the same manner as before” (*hann mun alt fara á sömu leið sem fyrr gerði hann um alla kunnostu sína*, I: 311). The next time they meet (Ixiii), Eyvindr arrives on an island where the king is staying; “he had a longship with a full crew, all sorcerers and magicians” (*hann hafði langskip alskipat; váru þat alt seiðmenn ok annat fjölkynngisfólk*, I: 312).

Eyvindr gékk upp af skipi ok sveit hans, ok mögnuðu fjölkynngi sína; gerði Eyvindr þeim huliðshjálms ok þokumyrkr svá mikít, at konungr ok lið hans skyldi eigi mega sjá þá. En er þeir kómu mjök svá til boejarins á Qgvaldsnesi, þá gerðist ljóss dagr; varð þá mjök annan veg, en Eyvindr hafði ætlat; þá kom mjörkvi, sá er hann hafði gert með fjölkynngi, yfir hann ok hans fíruneyti, svá at þeir sá eigi heldr augum en hnakka, ok fóru alt í hring ok kring.⁷ (I: 312)

The focus of this scene is the sorcerer’s powerlessness against the king, because even his own magic turns against him and blinds his own companions. They are captured, taken to a skerry that is flooded at high tide, and left there to drown; “the place has been called the Sorcerers’ skerry since then” (*Er þat síðan kallat Skrattasker*. I: 312). The contrast between the magicians’ powerlessness and the king’s victory emphasizes the idea that the king’s authority is divinely predetermined, so any attempts at overthrowing it are destined to fail because they oppose the natural order of the world. This is an important element of the broader cultural concept that is presented in the scene. Moreover, the

⁶ The version analysed here is from *Heimskringla*, but the other versions contain similar episodes as well.

⁷ Eyvindr and his companions went ashore and unleashed their sorcery; Eyvindr created helmets of invisibility and a foggy darkness, so that the king and his troop could not see them. But when they arrived near the farm at Qgvaldsnes, it became bright daylight. It went much differently than Eyvindr had intended: the darkness that he had created by magic shrouded him and his followers, so they could see no better with their eyes than with their necks, and they walked around in circles.

scene mentions a placename derived from the event, which highlights its significance: the king symbolically appropriates the land by naming a place after his defeat of the original masters of the place. The position of the place in the far north underlines the idea that the king's power reaches all the way to the remote outskirts of Norway.

Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar contains multiple similar episodes; among the king's heathen opponents described as sorcerers (*fiðlkunnigr*) are Eyvindr kinnrifa or Rauðr the Strong of Hálogaland, who are both tortured to death after rejecting baptism. The frequent repetition of such scenes emphasizes the theme of official power as a force that rids the kingdom of disruptive elements. It is typical of all these episodes that the king always defeats his opponents, establishes firm royal rule in the regions that were previously controlled by sorcerers, and unifies the kingdom by laws and norms based on Christianity. In this context, Christianity is not only spiritually significant—although that is also presented as an important aspect—, but also socially significant. It introduces and reinforces values that increase social stability and strengthen royal power, which in turn is presented as being essential for unity and order. This conceptualization was probably socially relevant not only for the memory of the conversion as a past event, but also for the time when the kings' sagas were written, as royal ideology became more directly derived from the idea of divine predestination than before (see Bagge 1996).

The situation is more complicated in *Óláfs saga helga*,⁸ where the king is also opposed by adversaries who are often described as being magicians or being assisted by magicians, but he does not always defeat them. Also here, however, the motif of magic plays an important role in the narrative construction of a socially relevant image of the historical events. At the beginning of the saga, Óláfr Haraldsson is, just like his namesake Óláfr Tryggvason, victorious. A good example is a scene in which Óláfr is confronted by a group of Finn sorcerers (ix) who “cause a terrible gale and a sea storm by their magic at night” (*gerðu um nóttina æðiveðr með fiðlkynngi ok storm sjávar*, II: 11), but the king's voyage is not thwarted. In the narratorial comment it is concluded that “as ever, the king's luck was more powerful than the Finns' witchcraft” (*mátti þá*

⁸ Again, the examples are taken from *Heimskringla*, but similar scenes are included in the other versions as well.

enn sem optar meira hamingja konungs en fjölkynngi Finna, II: 11). The contrast between the king's luck (*hamingja*) and his opponents' sorcery is significant in the sense that the Christian monarch's luck is associated with the will of God, so royal power is again presented as being divinely predetermined and naturally beneficial.

In the later sections of the saga, King Óláfr Haraldsson is, similarly to Óláfr Tryggvason, opposed by influential adversaries from the northern regions of Norway. His fiercest opponent is Þórir hundr from Hálogaland, who is not described as being a magician himself but seeks the Finn sorcerers' help in his opposition to the king (cxci). He "trades much with the Finns" (*átti margs konar kaup við Finna*, II: 344-45) and "has twelve reindeer furs made for himself with so much witchcraft that no weapon could pierce them any easier than chainmail" (*lét þar gera sér tólf hreinbjálba með svá mikilli fjölkynngi, at ekki vápn festi á ok síðr miklu en á hringabrynju*, II: 345). Þórir then uses these magical furs in the decisive battle of Stiklastaðir (ccxxviii). When King Óláfr hews at Þórir, "the sword did not bite, but it looked as if dust rose from the reindeer fur" (*sverðit beit ekki, en svá sýndisk sem dyst ryki ór hreinbjálbanum*, II: 383). The description is accompanied by a stanza by Sighvatr Þórðarson, which directly refers to the "powerful sorcery of the magic-wielding Finns" (*meiginrammir galdrar [...] fjölkunnigra Finna*, II: 383). In this case, the motif of magic serves as an interpretative device. The defeat of King Óláfr in the battle of Stiklastaðir is a historical fact that cannot be denied or concealed in the saga, but it can be described in a way that does not diminish the king's glory in the audience's eyes. This is achieved primarily by a contrast between the rebels, who turn to dishonourable, illegitimate tools of power, and the king and his allies, who fight by fair means and rely solely on their own skills and on the will of God. The opponents' physical victory over the king is thus overshadowed by their moral inferiority (see Meylan 2014: 84-89). Despite the king's defeat, his power is still presented as a force of order. Like in the previously discussed examples, this can be understood both as part of the narrative portrayal of Saint Óláfr and as a more general image of monarchy as an institution, which was doubtlessly relevant to the interpretation of both the past and the current situation at the time of the sagas' origin.

These examples have illustrated the double function of the literary motif of magic as a story element and as a cultural concept. On the story level, this motif contributes to the characterization of individual antagonists, throws light on the origins of conflicts, or explains the possible (usually temporary) success of opponents who are clearly inferior to the protagonist in all the socially acknowledged qualities. As a cultural concept, magic can construct a general, figurative image of a constant opposition between the natural, divinely planned order and the disruptive forces that threaten it. This image can transcend the meaning of the individual stories and shape the overall interpretation of history in the sagas where the motif is employed.

In the instances discussed here, “it is noteworthy that those who champion witchcraft and paganism in opposition to the heroes of the kings’ sagas are exclusively males” (Mitchell 2011: 191). It has been shown here that the same mostly applies to other saga genres as well, but it must be kept in mind that this is not the only possible image that can be found in the sagas. Interestingly, the sagas also present more ambivalent depictions of the relationship between official and secret power, which show that the medieval Norsemen’s perceptions of the concept of power may have been more complex and nuanced than they seem at the first sight. These multi-layered attitudes to power are the focus of the following discussion of the female magicians’ roles in the sagas.

Female Magicians Using Sorcery to Defend Order

Since “the social evaluation of its outcome, not Christian doctrine, is what determines how magic is ethically viewed” in the sagas (Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2009: 412), the interpretation of sorcery always depends on its effect on society. That applies to the sagas of Icelanders and related texts in general, but the narrative portrayals of female magicians tend to be more varied than those of their male counterparts. Sorceresses can represent the stereotypical image of “evil women” in Old Norse culture (Mitchell 2011: 176-80), in the sense that they disrupt the order that is upheld by official power. In other instances, however, magic is presented as a means through which “a female desire for power, autonomy and subjectivity operates in a patriarchal world

dominated by male violence and a legal system to which women had no formal access,” so the motif expresses “women’s desire to be able to affect events and people, to gain agency through the use of magic” (Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2009: 431).⁹ It can thus be associated with “women arrogating to themselves a level of authority they would not normally exercise” (Tolley 2014: 22). Such elements doubtlessly appear in some depictions of female magicians, but it would be a simplification to assume that magic is always presented in the sagas just as a female counterpart of other, distinctly male tools of power.

Some examples show that women’s sorcery can also be presented as a unique type of power, employed in instances when the official, primarily male sources of power prove insufficient. In these cases, sorceresses use their magic on behalf of men who wield official power, typically in situations when their power is threatened. As mothers or foster-mothers, the female practitioners of *ffjolkynngi* defend the social status of their families, from which their own prestige is derived. Nevertheless, the practice of magic makes the social position of these women ambiguous, because witchcraft—as “that which subverts the established norms” (Tolley 2014: 20)—is inevitably associated with marginality. This combination of official and unofficial power on the same side in a saga conflict can be regarded as a narrative reflection of the complex principles of power in Norse society.

An illustrative example is the story of Hildigunnr Beinisdóttir in *Landnámabók* (H, lxiii). The brief information provided in the text implies that Hildigunnr, as the wife of Sigmundr Ketilsson, an important settler’s son, belongs to an influential family. The family claims local power and must defend it against their rival, Lón-Einarr. In a dispute concerning a whale that is at first stranded on Lón-Einarr’s land but then carried by the sea to Sigmundr’s land, Lón-Einarr claims that this was caused by Hildigunnr’s witchcraft (*talði ffjolkynngi Hildigunnar því valda*, 107) and summons her to court for sorcery (*stefndi Hildigunni um ffjolkynngi*, 107). Her son Einarr responds by a violent attack and defeats the accuser with the help of a shirt from Hildigunnr, which “could not be pierced by iron” (*kyrtíl Einars bitu eigi járn*, 109).

⁹ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir relates these formulations to *Fóstbræðra saga* specifically, but they apply to episodes from many other sagas as well.

The characterization of Hildigunnr as an agent of magic is deliberately ambiguous, as the text neither confirms nor disproves the idea that she actually caused the storm that moved the whale. The reality of magic thus seems to be less important than its social implications: the contrast between the woman's high social status and the accusation of practising the illegal art of *ffjolkynngi*. It can be assumed that the primary purpose of the accusation is "the discrediting of mother and son with the probable ulterior motive of taking over their land" (Clunies Ross 1998: 34). The ambiguity of the account then continues in the description of the shirt, which does not contain any word directly denoting magic, only a reference to its special quality. Despite the absence of such a word, however, the narrative obviously shows a paradoxical situation when the shame of an accusation of magic is averted with the help of magic. The former emphasizes the aspect of illegality, the latter the aspect of power: Hildigunnr's supernatural skill confirms her kin's advantage over their opponents (Clunies Ross 1998: 35).

Significantly, the sorceress and the representative of official power are not opponents but share the same side in the conflict. The mother and son defend their privileged status, which is acknowledged by society and defined by its hierarchical structure, by a combination of official means—combat—and unofficial means—sorcery. It is subtly implied, albeit not directly stated, that the son's power would have been insufficient without his mother's covert, inconspicuous help. The episode thus reveals the interrelatedness—or even interdependence—of public and secret sources of power, implying that both are indispensable. This idea transcends the meaning of the individual story and can be understood as a general comment on the concept of power, in which the motif of magic plays a figurative role, representing all kinds of unofficial power.

Other stories are more direct in showing that the wielders of official power are dependent on help from those who have access to secret sources of power, especially when they are facing adversaries who openly disregard social norms. Such episodes typically occur in the sagas of outlaws, where the sorceresses are presented as the outlaws' opponents. In these cases, both the female magicians and the outlaws are portrayed as strikingly ambiguous figures. The outlaws are a disruptive force in society but also the central characters of these sagas, praised for their

courage and tenacity. The sorceresses, as mentioned before, are marked as socially marginal figures due to practising the secret art of witchcraft, but at the same time, they protect the established order from threats by working on behalf of the social leaders or other respectable members of the community.

An example is Þorbjörg in *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja* (xxiv-xxv), who is “very skilled in magic and a mighty witch” (*fjölunnig mjök ok in mesta galdrakona*, 63), but she is a member of an influential family: her son, Refr Þorsteinsson, is “a powerful chieftain and a great fighter” (*goðorðsmaðr ríkr ok garpr mikill*, 63). These are the main types of medieval official power: inherited political influence and prowess in combat. The chieftain must nevertheless turn to the secret power of his mother’s magic when he is dealing with opponents who ignore the social norms and rules: the outlaw Hqrðr and his band of rovers, who cause harm in the district by stealing cattle. The sorceress “relies on her witchcraft” (*treysti hon fjolkynngi sinni*, 63) to protect her family’s lawful property from these otherwise unstoppable thieves. When she “finds out through her magic and prophetic abilities” (*varð hon vís af fjolkynngi sinni ok framvísi*, 66) that they are approaching, she creates magical darkness that blinds the outlaws, so that her son and his companions can attack them. Þorbjörg is later defeated by Hqrðr, who is not affected by her magic due to his own extraordinary abilities. However, what matters to the present study is that the sorceress defends order—represented by legal ownership of property and by her son’s official power—by her secret power that lies beyond society’s borders, just like the power of the outlaw. Due to her witchcraft, she is the only person capable of opposing anti-social forces that are otherwise invincible.

A similar scene is repeated in the following chapter of *Harðar saga* (xxvi). This time the outlaws threaten the property of Þorsteinn of Saurbær, “an influential farm owner” (*mikill bóndi*, 29) and “local chieftain” (*heraðshqfðingi*, 79). Despite his substantial official power, Þorsteinn is helpless against the outlaws who do not respect such power or abide by society’s rules, so he must rely on “his foster-mother Skroppa, who is skilled in magic” (*Skroppa, fóstura hans fjölunnig*, 67) to protect him “by her witchcraft” (*með fjolkynngi sinni*, 67). She performs “visual illusions” (*sjónhverfingar*, 67) to hide herself from the outlaws and to

make them believe that a crowd of armed men is approaching them, but Hǫrðr is not affected by the illusions. He kills the witch in her magically acquired animal shape, the effect of the magic subsides, and the outlaws can see that the armed men are in fact a herd of cattle. Despite her failure, however, the sorceress is presented as the only person who is even considered capable of trying to stop the invincible marauders. That is clearly based on the idea that the anti-social force can only be opposed by another force that lies beyond the usual social mechanisms. Again, the old woman uses secret tools of power to protect the public position of her foster-son. The repetition of the same type of episode in two consecutive chapters of the same saga emphasizes the theme of opposition between different wielders of unofficial power.

A similar opposition between a sorceress and an outlaw is also found in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* (lxxviii). The outlawed Grettir is a threat to the community, so people aim to have him killed. This task is given to Þorbjörn, who is “a big and strong man” (*mikill maðr ok sterkr*, 25) and a brother of the local leader Hjalti, “a chieftain and a very influential and popular man” (*høfðingi ok gøfugmenni mikit ok vinsæll*, 226). Þorbjörn thus represents both aspects of official power—physical prowess and hereditary authority—, and yet he fails to defeat the outlaw, so he must turn for help to his old foster-mother, the sorceress Þuríðr:

Fóstru átti Þorbjörn ǫngull, er Þuríðr hét; hon var mjök gomul ok til lítils fœr, at því er mǫnnum þótti. Hón hafði verit fjólkunnig mjök ok margkunnig mjök, þá er hon var ung ok menn váru heiðnir; nú þótti sem hon myndi ǫllu týnt hafa. [...] Ok svá sem Þorbjörn ǫngull var þrotinn at ráðagörðum, leitar hann þangat til trausts, sem flestum þótti ólíkligast, en þat var til fóstru sinnar, ok spurði, hvat þar væri til ráða at taka hjá henni.¹⁰ (245-46)

The text repeatedly emphasizes that people do not expect the old woman to be capable of anything significant, but that contrasts with Grettir’s own perception of her when he predicts that “she and her sorcery will cause me something bad” (*af henni ok hennar fjólkynngi*

¹⁰ Þorbjörn ǫngull had a foster-mother named Þuríðr; she was very old and not capable of much in people’s opinion. In her youth, when people were heathen, she had been very skilled in witchcraft and had known many things. Now she seemed to have forgotten everything. [...] And since Þorbjörn ǫngull had run out of other solutions, he sought help from the person who to most people seemed least likely to be able to help him, and that was his foster-mother. He asked her what advice she would give him.

leiðir mér nökkut illt, 248). The invincible outlaw understands that he can only be defeated by somebody who transgresses the social rules just like he does—and he is right, Þuríðr's magic indeed eventually leads to his defeat and death. It is then stated in the saga that the community condemns the use of magic, even against the publicly despised outlaw—both from a Christian viewpoint and from a social viewpoint based on the dichotomy between public and secret sources of power (see Meylan 2014: 51-57). This underlines the paradox of the sorceress protecting the community from a threat while being perceived as a threat as well.

In both *Harðar saga* and *Grettis saga*, it is of significance that by turning two socially peripheral characters against each other, the narratives underline their ambivalent position. Instead of showing evil villains being defeated by perfect representatives of order, these sagas thus imply that the principles of power are not always so straightforward. In these cases, the sorceresses' witchcraft can be categorized as “hostile magic” (Ellis Davidson 1973)—in the sense of transgressing the rules and norms upheld by official power—but at the same time it is presented as the only available force capable of protecting the community from other disruptive figures who transgress the official norms as well.

Outlaws and sorceresses are specific character types, associated with specific expectations on the story level. On a deeper level of meaning, however, both can be understood as figurative embodiments of the diverse forces that affect society but lie beyond its boundaries, norms, and rules. Such forces are typically automatically perceived as threats, and they are indeed usually potentially disruptive, but they can also be irreplaceable in protecting the community from threats that are resistant to the official defensive mechanisms. Magic thus serves as a cultural concept reflecting the idea that the dominant, public sources of power can be simultaneously threatened and supported by their secret counterparts—and, most importantly, that official power is not always sufficient on its own.

Conclusion

The present study has shown that the saga literature can depict different relationships between magic as a secret source of power and the official tools of power employed in medieval Norse society. In episodes

where the practitioners of magic—typically male sorcerers—oppose or defy the established social leaders, the motif of magic serves as a means of conceptualizing the official power as being synonymous with order and harmony. The central idea is that the leaders—chieftains and kings—unconditionally uphold order, protect society from disruptive forces, and embody values that are naturally beneficial for the community. In a sharp contrast to the leaders, their magic-wielding opponents are unambiguously depicted as a force of chaos that disrupts social harmony. Such a conceptualization is expectable in sources reflecting medieval attitudes, as it supports the established social structures and ideologies of leadership.

Nevertheless, this clear-cut image of a distinct dichotomy between official power as a force of order and unofficial power as a force of chaos is challenged by another type of depictions of magic. Some practitioners of magic—typically female sorceresses—are presented in the sagas as characters who defend the established order by protecting their families' power, property, or prestige from usurpers, thieves, and outlaws. The present analyses of such episodes have shown that the sorceresses, especially in confrontation with outlaws, do not use witchcraft only because the tools of official power are not available to them as women. First and foremost, they turn to magic because the public power of their male kinsmen cannot defend the community from forces to which the social norms and rules do not apply. The texts thus imply that although the secret sources of power always mark their wielders as socially marginal figures, official power is not always automatically superior to secret power, cannot fully replace it, and can even be dependent on it.

These various possible conceptualizations of the principles of power do not, however, necessarily contradict each other. They coexist alongside each other in the sagas, which may imply that they also existed parallelly in the society that produced the sagas. I believe that the narrative depictions of complex and diverse principles of power in the context of magic do not express opposition or distrust toward the official social leaders,¹¹ but that they rather reflect the reality of the official power not being omnipresent. In Iceland, the geographical distances between

¹¹ As suggested by Meylan, who states that “magic became part of the discursive arsenal mobilized by Icelanders in the thirteenth century in response to the Norwegian Crown’s encroachment on their kingless and armyless island” (2014: 126).

individual human settlements were long, and personal contact with the chieftains, or later with the royal representatives, was probably quite scarce. The law held the community together but was certainly not always efficient in protecting individuals from various unpredictable dangers. This means that while the official power was probably generally trusted and relied on, it did not always reach everywhere and could not possibly suppress all threats. The mechanisms of defending the community from threats therefore must have included a broad range of other, less official means as well, but the individual elements were not inevitably mutually contradictory. In the historical reality of the time when the sagas were composed, the central idea probably was that apart from relying on the representatives of public power, all members of society can contribute to defending the community from disruptive forces, each by their own means. In the sagas, these principles are conceptualized with the help of the literary motif of magic and its practitioners, which can thus serve as a significant cultural concept that contributes to the interpretation of real social concerns in the narratives.¹²

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