

Þórhalls þáttur knapps

A Re-evaluation of the Portrayal of Magic and Otherness

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Readers and researchers of the sagas of Icelanders alike have since long been fascinated by the representations of people with magical abilities and the depictions of magical knowledge that are found in the rich saga literature. The question of medieval magic and witchcraft and, more specifically, the question of Old Norse magic and witchcraft is, however, also one of potentially unreliable sources. The sagas of the Icelanders recount Iceland's Nordic—and pagan—past from around the time of Iceland's colonisation by Norse settlers, the so-called Saga Age, but were written down by Christian saga writers more than 200 years after the sagas' narrated time. The social, religious, and cultural differences between the time portrayed in the sagas and the saga writers' contemporary time are significant. Not only does this constitute a considerable gap in time, but this period also coincides with substantial societal changes in Iceland, such as the collapse of the Icelandic commonwealth following a period of unrest and civil war-like power struggles between families of power brokers and the establishment of a Christian infrastructure that also facilitated the writing of the sagas (Glauser 2011: 13-14). These changes greatly impacted the saga writing and, subsequently, what we can learn about the Saga Age through the lens of saga literature. Although the historicity of saga literature remains a contentious topic, especially the historicity of individual episodes, the consensus is that the sagas of Icelanders are

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neither purely fictional nor entirely historically accurate sources and that saga writers were aware that the literature they were producing was an interpretation and reimagination of the past (O'Connor 2017). This specifically must be taken into account regarding elements of the sagas that do not portray the saga writers' contemporary reality, such as the practicalities of pagan religion or practices tied to certain forms of magic. As Korecká points out in the context of magic in saga literature:

We must indeed doubt that the picture of magic presented in the saga narratives is a trustworthy depiction of historical reality, but on the other hand it is also unlikely that it was seen by the sagas' creators and audience as pure literary fiction. (Korecká 2019: 6)

Whatever we can learn about magic using the sagas as a source is mediated by the Christian saga writers who may or may not have been aware of the truthfulness of their accounts, were simply not concerned with historical realism regarding magic or used magic entirely as a narrative device in the bigger plot of the saga.

Even here, the concession must be made that the question of what magic is and what constitutes magic is nearly impossible to answer. Any approach to defining magic is ultimately grounded in the observer's understanding of what is or is not magic (Mitchell 2020: 341-342). In particular, the differentiation of magic, religion, and medicine is ultimately based on our Western, post-Enlightenment perception of what constitutes one or the other. In the context of Old Norse studies, the question of magic has since long also been treated as a question of Otherness and Othering based on presumed negative conceptions of magic. This article is not the place to discuss the historical accuracy of the accounts of magic and depictions of practitioners of magic in the saga literature, nor is it the place to tackle the long-standing question of what (Old Norse) magic is.

Instead, this article seeks to evaluate the perception and reception of magic and practitioners of magic by the Christian saga writers, and, perhaps more importantly, the perception and reception of magic in the saga literature by modern readers through the narrative of *Þórhalls þáttr knapps* and the lens of Otherness as a starting point for this evaluation. Since the aim of this article is not to explore what the Christian saga writers or the pre-Christian society the sagas refer to understood as magic, more straightforward means of identifying magic

have been used for this article. Magic, or more accurately, practitioners of magic, will therefore be identified using Old Norse terms belonging to the semantic field established for the domain of magic. In the context of this article, the defining term *ffölkunnig*, which has been identified as denoting magical knowledge or “involv[ing] any attempts at affecting reality by supernatural means” (Korecká 2019: 21), has been utilised to identify practitioners of magic.

What is Otherness, and Why is It Magic(al)?

While the question of who the Other is and what Otherness entails is seemingly straightforward and self-explanatory, in reality, it is anything but. The complexity of Otherness and the Other is further exacerbated by the lack of consistent terminology as concepts of Otherness and the Other are used in various academic disciplines but denoted by different terms, such as otherhood, alterity, outsiderhood, or difference (Aalto 2010: 14). Despite the differing terminologies, the various concepts of Otherness simply denote someone or something as strange or different to the beholder. Our conception of what Otherness is and what or who the Other is, is most often established in contrast to the subject (Hylland Eriksen & Sivert Nielsen 2013: 157; Dervin 2015: 2). Most concepts of Otherness and the active process of Othering individuals due to their deviation from what is considered the subject, or the norm, focus on the negativity of this Otherness and Other. The Other is what the subject is not—and this deviance is negative since the subject sees itself as good, or at least as the norm.

In a modern, everyday context, the subject is most often us, ourselves, which within the framework of academia frequently also entails a predominantly white, Western, and potentially binary perspective (Said 2010: 1868, Knight & Merkelbach 2020: 10). In a historical context, especially in a literary-historical context as the Icelandic saga literature, this adds another layer of complexity: are the subject and the Other characters in the literature as they meet and establish boundaries? Is the subject the Christian saga writer from whose perspective some or all saga characters may have been perceived as the Other? Is the subject the researcher to whom both the saga writers and the saga characters are strange and ultimately Other (Gurevich 1992: 49)?

While there are no definitive answers to these questions, they do highlight the need for an awareness of oneself as a subject that constantly negotiates its identity by perpetually establishing boundaries between oneself and others, as well as the need for an understanding that the subject and its identity, and therefore the Other it uses as reference, are highly dependent on the social, cultural, and religious context. Very plainly, what constitutes Otherness and who or what assumes the role of the Other change over time and develop with societal changes and can often be arbitrary and reflect earlier societal or cultural assumptions of Otherness. This change in what Otherness is and the potentially arbitrary perception of Otherness and who or what the Other is creates a problem: if most theories assume that the Other and Otherness are perceived negatively, simply because they diverge from the norm, how can these theories account for arbitrary Otherness and anachronistic reflections of Otherness? Suppose we instead assume that the subject constantly renegotiates its identity by comparing itself to Others and, therefore, is afforded fluidity and change. In that case, we must consider the same to be true for Otherness and Others. Otherness and the perception of the Other should, therefore, not be assumed to be static and purely negative but should be considered to be as fluid, arbitrary, and positive or negative as the subject's identity. This is especially important in the context of historical literary material, as perceptions of the Other and Otherness may be anachronistic, fictionalised, or edited to fit contemporary perceptions and assumptions about this Other.

Otherness in the sagas of Icelanders is often based on the assumption that the Old Norse society described in the literature is based on and functions with strong binaries. Characters either belong to the Norse cultural sphere—or they do not and are therefore Other; they are either (physically) located within the borders of civilisation—or they are outside of civilised society; they are either Christian and thus assumed to be closer to the Christian saga writers and consequently more positively coded—or they are pagan and therefore assumed to be perceived as more negatively coded by the saga writers (Gurevich 1969, Hastrup 1985). This view of the society described in the sagas and the presumed mentality of the Christian saga writers has also influenced how magic and practitioners of magic are perceived. The destructive potential of characters possessing magical abilities and skills, the potential of social and political subversion, and the social marginality of magic

practitioners and, therefore, the Otherness of magic and practitioners of magic have been described by numerous researchers (Lindow 1995, Merkelbach 2019, Dillmann 2006). While these generalised readings are of importance to approach the representation of magic and practitioners of magic across a large corpus of literature and genre boundaries, there is also value in focusing on individual narratives and specific characters within a narrative, especially if these narratives and characters do not seem to subscribe to this generalised Otherness of magic and practitioners of magic.

The following analysis examines Otherness in the context of magic based on the assumption that Otherness is fluid, susceptible to change, and potentially arbitrary and anachronistic.

The Other in *Þórhalls þáttur knapps*

In this article, the presumed conflation of magical knowledge, Otherness and paganism in the sagas of Icelanders is to be analysed intently using the lesser-known short tale *Þórhalls þáttur knapps*. This *þáttur* is part of a compendium of several sagas and *þættir* that are only preserved in *Flateyjarbók*, which was compiled between 1387 and 1390 by two saga writers for Jón Hákonarson, a wealthy farmer in Northern Iceland (Simek & Pálsson 2007: 93).

Þórhalls þáttur knapps tells the story of Þórhallr, who is said to be virtuous and from a good family but heathen, as, according to the *þáttur*, most people were during this time. Þórhallr contracts leprosy and falls sick. According to the author, Þórhallr sacrifices to idols (*skurðgoð*) at the nearby temple that regularly holds sacrificial feasts. One night, Þórhallr encounters a man in his dream, riding a white horse and carrying a gold-decorated spear. The man in his dream approaches Þórhallr and promises him health and happiness, given that Þórhallr follows his instructions. Þórhallr is supposed to build a house “*einum ok sönnum guði til sæmdar*”¹ (Halldórsson 1987: 2266) first thing in the morning, using the wood from the nearby temple and to give up the gods he had been sacrificing to before. Marking the place where Þórhallr is supposed to build the house, the man in Þórhallr’s dream

¹ “in honour of the one true god” (Porter 1997: 462).

vanishes, and Þórhallr, waking up, starts to set his workers onto the task of dismantling the temple.

At the same time, on a neighbouring farm, Þórhildr, who is said to be a “mikil fyrir sér ok mjög fjölkunnig”² (Halldórsson 1987: 2266), wakes up her men and tells them to round up all livestock out from the pastures and to lock all animals securely away as Þórhallr had gone mad, that he “er orðinn og vitlaus” (Halldórsson 1987: 2267) and had started to destroy the temple. According to Þórhildr, the gods that had been worshipped at the temple were now forced to flee from there and were on their way to Siglunes to seek shelter there, but on their way they would destroy what got in their way as their anger raged. All animals, apart from one pack horse—that later is found dead—are locked away, and after completing the building of the house, Þórhallr’s sickness wanes. After riding to the Þing, accepting the Christian faith and being baptised there, he convalesces completely.

This *þáttr*’s narrative is interesting in the context of Otherness and Othering. Þórhallr is ascribed mainly positive qualities: he is virtuous and from a good family. These positive features are contrasted by his heathenism and his willingness to sacrifice to pagan gods. However, the author of the *þáttr* is diligent in pointing out that this indeed was the norm during Þórhallr’s time, which undoubtedly influenced the reader’s judgement of Þórhallr’s person. More importantly, however, Þórhallr suffers from leprosy; various scholars have debated the marginality of individuals suffering from leprosy during the Middle Ages, and more recent scholarship tends to point out that leprosy, although certainly stigmatising for the individuals, may also have been understood as a burden imposed by God that made it possible for the individual to attain salvation (Brenner 2017). The *þáttr* does not go into further detail about Þórhallr’s social standing or if and how his leprosy affects his position in society. Still, since the *þáttr* states that he sacrifices to idols “að sið frænda sinna”³ (Halldórsson 1987: 2265) and since he later enlists the help of his workers to build the house for God, it does not seem as if he was excluded from society. Thus, his social standing does not seem to be remarkably affected by the Othering and potentially ostracising quality of his sickness. It can, therefore, be concluded that Þórhallr’s suffering

² “powerful woman and skilled in magic” (Porter 1997: 463).

³ “like his kinsmen” (Porter 1997: 462).

of leprosy indeed bears a religious association foreshadowing his later salvation from both heathenism and leprosy.

The figure of Þórhallr is contrasted by Þórhildr, who arguably is the more important figure in the context of this article. Joseph Harris interpreted the contrast between Þórhildr and Þórhallr as a didactic tale featuring the good—Þórhallr, dreaming of the arrival of the new God and being rewarded for the acceptance of the new faith, and the evil—Þórhildr, acquiring knowledge of the exodus of the old gods and being punished by losing a pack horse (Harris 1975). This interpretation is too binary and rooted in the assumption that magic per se must have been seen as evil. Instead, the *þáttr* suggests that Þórhildr and Þórhallr are of similar social standing; they are neighbours, she seems to own a considerable number of livestock, has workers to task with rounding up the livestock, and is described as “mikil fyrir sér” (Halldórsson 1987: 2266), as capable or important. Since the *þáttr* mentions that the temple where Þórhallr sacrifices is jointly owned by the people of Fljót, it can reasonably be assumed that Þórhallr and Þórhildr travel in the same social and religious circles. Her social status is undercut by the author stating that Þórhildr is “mjög fjölkunnig” (Halldórsson 1987: 2266). The *þáttr* does not expand upon what constitutes her magical abilities, nor does she perform any action that can be read as some form of active magical skill. Her skill in magic is only expressed in her knowledge of Þórhallr’s dismantling of the temple and the gods’ reaction to the destruction of their temple. Her actions upon gathering this knowledge—however she acquires it—are more telling, though. Her response upon learning that her neighbour is in the process of dismantling the temple that she is socially and religiously connected to is not to try to stop Þórhallr in any way; she instead seems to accept that the destruction of the temple, and with it the arrival of the new Christian God is inevitable. While she evidently condones Þórhallr’s actions, stating that Þórhallr “er orðinn og vitlaus”⁴ (Halldórsson 1987: 2267), she instead focuses on salvaging the situation by making sure that the livestock and thereby not only her own livelihood but that of her dependants is securely locked away. This can be interpreted as a total helplessness of the old faith and magic before the new faith, but the issue appears to run deeper. While the gods that both Þórhildr and Þórhallr worshipped and—at least Þórhallr

⁴ “has gone mad and lost his mind” (Porter 1997: 463).

sacrificed to indeed are banished due to Þórhallr's destruction of the temple, they are not entirely gone. Þórhildr is not only aware of the gods' exodus from Fljót but also knows where the gods are now seeking shelter, namely in Siglunes. The temple's destruction does not entirely remove the gods but merely moves them geographically, which Þórhildr is very aware of.

Similarly, the punishment of evil that Harris sees as a didactic focal point of the *þáttr* in Þórhildr's loss of a horse does seem minor and narratologically primed. Þórhallr dreaming of a white riding horse is mirrored by the pack horse's death, symbolising the advent of something more valuable, namely Christianity, in exchange for something less valuable, namely the belief in the pagan gods. Additionally, while the loss of livestock, specifically a horse, unquestionably is substantial, in the context of the *þáttr*, it does not appear to be a severe punishment. On the contrary, Þórhildr's knowledge of what would happen to the livestock in the region if left without protection saves her livestock, herself and ultimately everyone depending on her from the loss of all livestock left outside. The death of the one horse forgotten outside in the pasture does not suggest a judgement of Þórhildr and her magical abilities and knowledge—which prove to be correct in this instance—but serves as a reminder of the nature of the old gods. This constitutes a parallel to the promise of health and happiness made to Þórhallr for dismantling the heathen temple and erecting a house for the new Christian God; instead of healing and bringing health and happiness to their believers, the old heathen gods kill in their rage even their most loyal believers' livestock and therefore negatively impact their livelihood. The Christian author's and, thus, the audience's judgement is not explicitly directed at Þórhildr but at the heathen gods that, in their rage, react so cruelly to their expulsion from their temple that it risks the lives of their loyal believers. This is then contrasted with the arrival of the Christian God, as Þórhallr's sickness wanes, and his strength improves every day after building a house for the new God. While he is only wholly cured of his leprosy after accepting the Christian faith and getting baptised, the arrival of the Christian God is also the arrival of health and, therefore, life for Þórhallr. Put simplistically, the didactic message of the *þáttr* is that the old heathen gods bring death to their believers and that the new Christian God brings health and life to even those who are not

yet baptised and, therefore, officially Christians but who believe in the vision of prosper brought by the new faith.

That the author's judgement is indeed not directed towards Þórhildr, and her abilities can also be affirmed by examining Þórhildr's and Þórhallr's motives for their actions. Þórhildr's acquisition of knowledge leads her to wake up her men to round up and ultimately save her livestock that she and all her dependents rely upon for survival. Þórhildr states: "Nú vil eg eigi að minn fénaður verði á vegum þeirra því að þau eru svo reið og í beiskum hug að þau munu engu eira því sem fyrir þeim verður."⁵ (Halldórsson 1987: 2267) and that the round-up is necessary "því að það mun ekki líf hafa er hér er úti í högum vorum í dag"⁶ (Halldórsson 1987: 2266-2267). Her primary concern is the survival of her livestock and, therefore, the protection of animals and humans under her care. Þórhildr's motive for her actions, her concern for the animals and ultimately the people under her care is contrasted by Þórhallr's motives. Þórhallr, who initially fears the man that has appeared in his dream and tries to run from this dream apparition, follows the man's orders to follow him to the place where the new house for the new God is supposed to be built after the man refers to Þórhallr's sickness and his wish to convalesce. The man clad in white promises Þórhallr "heilsu ok gleði"⁷ (Jónsson 1947: 347) if Þórhallr does as he says and offers Þórhallr "öruggt heilsuráð"⁸ (Halldórsson 1987: 2266) in case Þórhallr followed him. After having shown the place for the new building that Þórhallr is supposed to erect, the man explains that the God Þórhallr is supposed to build the house for will be made known at the Alþing and promises:

Nú ef þú dýrkar með hreinu hjarta þann guð er þér mun þar boðaður vera þá muntu verða heill og með heilleik líkamans muntu gleðjast í friði ok farsæld þessar veraldar. En í ókominni veröld njóta eilífrar sæmdar og sælu.⁹ (Halldórsson 1987: 2266)

⁵ "I don't want my cattle to be in their path, because they are so angry and bitter that they will spare nothing that gets in their way." (Porter 1997: 463).

⁶ "because any that are out here in the fields today will lose their lives." (Porter 1997: 463).

⁷ "health and happiness" (Porter 1997: 462).

⁸ "a certain cure" (Porter 1997: 462).

⁹ "Now, if you worship with a pure heart the god who is revealed to you there, you will recover your health, and with a healthy body you will rejoice in the peace and

The focus lies distinctly on Þórhallr's personal situation. The man appearing in Þórhallr's dream exclusively references Þórhallr's health and well-being as motivators for the actions Þórhallr is supposed to perform. At no point does the dream figure offer a reward that is directly beneficial for anybody else apart from Þórhallr, and neither does Þórhallr request a reward for dismantling the old temple and building the new house for the new God that would benefit the people in his surroundings as greatly and directly as the reward he is offered for himself. Therefore, Þórhallr's actions seem motivated solely by his desire for health, personal happiness, and honour. The desire for health is universal, predictable, and understandable, given Þórhallr's suffering from leprosy. In his striving for the promised health and happiness, Þórhallr also acts against the wishes of his kinsmen, though. The *þáttr* goes on to say that the workers Þórhallr tasks with dismantling the temple and erecting the new building

En þó að þeir mögðu í mót og töluðu með sér að slíkt væri órar þá þorðu þeir allt að einu eigi móti að mæla hans boðskap ok gerðu fylliliga það er hann hafði fyrir sagt.¹⁰ (Halldórsson 1987: 2266)

This is not in and of itself surprising, as it highlights the predominance of paganism and shows Þórhallr having to overcome the obstacle of differing opinions about the dismantling of the temple and ultimately about Þórhallr's change of faith. This episode inadvertently also shows Þórhallr prioritising his own health and well-being over the opinions of his workers and kinsmen by disregarding their protest against an action that, according to the *þáttr*, has real-life consequences, as illustrated by the threat of loss of livestock due to the anger of the pagan gods. Surprisingly, the *þáttr* does not directly mention Þórhallr's workers changing their opinion regarding Þórhallr's change of faith. Instead, the focus of the last section of the *þáttr* is again on Þórhallr. The *þáttr* describes Þórhallr's improving health after the construction of the new house of God and mentions that Þórhallr indeed goes to the Alþing as the apparition in his dreams had told him to do, where he ultimately accepts the Christian faith and is baptised which causes him to be

happiness of this world. In the worlds to come you will enjoy everlasting honour and bliss." (Porter 1997: 462).

¹⁰ "Although they muttered in protest and told each other it was madness, even so they did not dare to disobey him and they fully carried out his orders." (Porter 1997: 463).

completely cured of his leprosy, “og varð þá hið fyrsta fullkomlega alheill að líkam”¹¹ (Halldórsson 1987: 2267). Thus, the *þáttr* emphasises the positive change the change of faith can bring, even to someone so ill and suffering as Þórhallr had been. Neither Þórhallr’s men nor Þórhildr appear in this last part of the *þáttr* as the narrative ends with Þórhallr returning home “fór hann heim fagnandi til bús síns og dýrkaði alla daga lífs síns með hreinni þjónustu allsvaldanda guð í þeirri kirkju er hann hafði honum helgað”¹² (Halldórsson 1987: 2267). It is to point out that this change of faith only directly influences Þórhallr—the *þáttr* at least does not include any mention of either Þórhallr’s workers or other members of the community, such as Þórhildr, adopting or practising the Christian faith alongside Þórhallr. Even more importantly, neither Þórhallr’s workers nor Þórhildr are reprimanded or punished for their doubt of Þórhallr’s vision or their actions following the old gods’ exodus. The *þáttr*’s writer(s) does, therefore, not seem to condemn the belief in the pagan gods, doubt in Þórhallr’s vision, or magical skills and knowledge in and of itself, but rather seems to emphasise the positive change for the individual that follows the change of faith as a reassurance of the Christian audience.

While the belief in the pagan gods certainly must have had an Othering quality to the Christian writers, it should not be forgotten that most saga writers would have had non-Christian ancestors and that the sagas were a literary exploration of their ancestral beliefs and assumed skills. Having ancestors believing in non-Christian gods and/or being skilled in magic or having other paranormal abilities must have been a very acute reality for Christian writers. It would, therefore, be presumptuous to assume that Christian writers conflated paganism, magic, and negative Otherness. On the contrary, *Þórhalls þáttr knapps* exhibits a very intricate understanding of faith, magic and change of belief systems. Both Þórhallr and Þórhildr are described as heathen or as skilled in magic in the *þáttr*, which potentially would have made them Other in the eyes of the Christian writers. Still, the narrative’s focus does not seem to be the vilification of paganism or magical abilities and skills but rather the potential benefits of adopting the Christian faith

¹¹ “his body was completely cured” (Porter 1997: 463).

¹² “rejoicing [...], and all the days of his life he worshipped almighty God with pure devotion in the church which he had dedicated to him” (Porter 1997: 463).

in contrast to the damage inflicted by the pagan gods. Both Þórhallr and Þórhildr possess traits, skills, or attributes that could potentially be identified as Otherness or as potentially Othering either within the society described in the *páttr* or by the Christian writer(s). Despite this, both characters are depicted as well-established in society, powerful and fully accepted. It can, therefore, only be concluded that it is not the potentially Othering qualities of the characters—such as skills of magic—nor the punishment of pagan individuals or practitioners of magic that are of importance in this narrative, but the value of the Christian faith and the harm done by the pagan gods as a whole. It is not the individual with their traits and transgressions who is at fault but the system of wrong belief.

While an analysis of a larger literary corpus from the perspective of fluid Otherness certainly would yield different and potentially more convincing results, the results of this re-evaluation of Otherness and magic in *Þórhalls páttr knapp*s showcases the need for not only generalised research on magic across a large corpus of Old Norse literature but also the necessity to closely analyse the circumstances surrounding the practitioners of magic within the narrative to not superimpose modern assumptions about how the Christian saga writers viewed magic and its practitioners. Certain types of magic and magical knowledge, as well as religion and social circumstances, were undoubtedly subject to arbitrary and anachronistic assumptions and perceptions, and to generalise the mentality surrounding these factors may misrepresent the intent of the saga writer(s) or the narratological function within the given literary source.

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