HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS
Hugvísindasvið

The Icelandic Folktales about Magician-Priests: Origins and Significance in the Culture

Ritgerð til MA-prófs í Medieval Icelandic Studies

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Um miðja 19. öld safnaði Jón Árnason, flokkaði og birti ákaflega mikilsvert safn íslenskra þjóðsagna. Einn stærsti sagnaflokkurinn var helgaður prestum og biskupum sem fengust við galdra og áttu í samskiptum við alls kyns yfirnáttúrulegar verur. Þessar sagnapersónur samsvara að jafnaði sögulegum persónum, sem áttu heima og boðuðu fagnaðarerindið vítt og breitt um Ísland. En sköpunarmáttur fólks auðgaði líf þessara manna með fjölmörgum fyndnum, háskalegum og spennandi yfirnáttúrulegum atvikum, og eignaði hinum raunverulegu prestum marga aðdáunarverða eiginlega, svo sem yfirþyrmandi fróðleiksþorsta, sveigjanleika, snerpu og frjóa hugsun.

Markmið þessarar ritgerðar er að draga fram hvernig allir galdraprestarnir sameinast í þekkingarleit sinni, snarpri greind og sérstakri afstöðu til lífsins og siðalögmála. Hér er einnig reynt að rekja margskonar heimildir og áhrif sem mótuðu þessa sagnagerð, sérstaklega goðsagnahefðina í kringum Óðin og yfirnáttúrulega þekkingu, og evrópskar sagnir um presta sem iðkuðu galdra. Að auki eru þjóðsögurnar um galdraprestana skoðaðar í samhengi við allt þjóðsagnasafnið og íslenska þjóðernishyggju síðustu tvö hundruð ár.

Aðalhugmyndin í rannsókninni er að þessi sérstaka gerð þjóðsagna falli ekki bara að ákveðnum flokki ritaðra þjóðsagna almennt heldur endurspegli hún séríslenska heimssýn og gildismat sem mótaðist hjá menntuðum þjóðernissinnum. Í þessu samhengi má greina snarpa, greinda og velviljaða galdraprestinn sem hina íslensku fyrirmynd um nær ósigrandi mann sem hefur vaxið af sjálfum sér. Hann lifir í sátt og samlyndi við sitt undraverða land og vegna sérstakra hæfileika sinna tekst honum að feta einstigið milli góðs og ills, hins náttúrulega og yfirnáttúrulega, og ná alltaf sínu fram án þess að þurfa nokkru sinni að gjalda það of dýru verði.

In the middle of the XIX century Jón Árnason collected, carefully categorized and published a monumental collection of Icelandic folktales. One of the big classes of stories included in this collection was devoted to priests and bishops who practiced magic and dealt with all sorts of supernatural creatures. These characters usually have historical counterparts, who once lived and preached in different regions of Iceland. But the imagination of the folk enriched their lives with numerous funny, dangerous and exciting supernatural episodes and endowed the actual priests with many wondrous qualities, among which the overwhelming thirst for knowledge and the quickness and flexibility of mind must be named.

The aim of this paper is to show how all the magician-priests are united by their knowledge quest, their guile and their peculiar attitude to life and to moral laws. It is also an attempt to trace various sources and influences that impacted the formation of this type of plot, primarily the mythological Odinnic tradition about supernatural knowledge and the European legends about clerics practicing magic. Besides, the folktales about magician-priests are viewed in the context of the folktale corpus as a whole and of the Icelandic nationalism of the past two centuries.

The main idea of the research is that the particular type of folktales is characteristic not only of the literary folktale world, but of the Icelandic world-view and values as they had been reconstructed by the learned nationalists. In this context the quick-minded, guileful and benevolent magician-priest might be seen as an Icelandic ideal of a self-made and practically invincible man. He lives in harmony with his wondrous country and by virtue of his talents manages to balance between good and evil, natural and supernatural, always getting what he wants, never having to pay too dearly.

Contents

Introduction 6

1. The world of Icelandic folktales, its genesis and implied contradictions 12
1.1. Sources: preserving and collecting the Icelandic folktales 12
1.2. The ambiguity of religious imagery and values in the folktales 18
1.3. Folktales about magician-priests of Iceland 23

2. Supernatural wisdom in the Icelandic tradition 30
2.1. Supernatural knowledge and active magical power 31
2.2. The wise and the dead: the sources of supernatural wisdom 34
2.3. The concept of wisdom and the evolving masculine ideal 39

3. The Christian tradition about miracles and magic 44
3.1. Hagiography and folklore on the supernatural powers of Icelandic men of Church 45
3.2. The significance of knowledge in the career of a European magician 51
3.3. The ambiguous ethics of the magician-priests 55

4. Constructing identity of Iceland and Icelanders 63
4.1. The modern revival and redefinition of Icelandic culture 65
4.2. The magician-priests and the lesson to be learned from them 70

Conclusion 74

Bibliography 76

Introduction

Folktales are the kind of creative manifestation immanent to any nation: stories told and enjoyed by children and adults alike, filling the world with miraculous creatures and wonderful events. However negligently they might be sometimes treated, they cannot altogether be taken away from a culture, underlying and inspiring many of its best aspirations. For many centuries European folktales had been treated as mere nursery stories, easily told and easily dismissed. But then came the XIX century with its Romantic nationalism, starting in Germany with the Grimm brothers and spreading quickly across Europe. The supporters of this movement rightfully felt that gathering folklore, studying and preserving it is a powerful device of maintaining a nation’s past, understanding its present cravings, as well as securing or even constructing its future. Importantly, the reconstructed, or constructed, singularity of national folklore may help asserting the national identity.

After the Golden Age of sagas and poetry, Iceland experienced several centuries of hardships, decline and foreign rule. By the XIX century the learned men of this country, though for most part receiving their education abroad, came to understand the danger of losing the Icelandic culture altogether and started the work of reviving national language, national culture and the feeling of national self-conscience which comes with it. Collecting and publishing the rich corpus of Icelandic folktales about elves and trolls, ghosts and magicians, strange places and curious happenings was one of the points of interest in this quest for the national spirit. As time showed, the huge work in this field of the men like Jón Árnason, who spent a large part of his life collecting and editing the folklore material, paid off greatly. Today the folktales of Iceland have a distinguished place in its own as well as European heritage, highly appreciated both by locals and by those who read and study them in translation as something truly special – and as one of the true manifestations of the genuine Icelandic identity. New (or previously unrecorded) tales are still told and collected, adding to the source of entertainment, inspiration and tourist attraction.

Any collection of national folklore creates a certain image of the identity, world-view, life-style and aspirations of the nation in the form they are partly perceived and partly constructed by the collectors. For instance, the German folktales collected, edited and published by the Grimm brothers in the first half of XIX century combine the dreams of far-away places and their wonders with a certain ideal of bourgeois well-being.

The Icelandic folktales are different, first of all, in their predominant settings: places mentioned in these stories are mostly parts of actual Icelandic landscape, well-known to those who tell and listen to the folktales. Though the Icelanders also dream and conceive stories about distant kingdoms, the most part of the Icelandic folktale corpus which is passed from generation to generation consists of accounts of numerous wonders which at some time or other reputedly occurred in the immediate neighborhood. Sometimes even a date for those legendary events can be established. Moreover, the characters involved are said to be the real people who lived in those places, having their place not only in the geography, but also in the complex genealogical system of the island. These features put the Icelandic folktales in a curios relation to the great sagas of Icelanders.

The society depicted in the Icelandic folktales is then, unsurprisingly, not an absolute monarchy with warrior aristocrats and peasants clearly separated as, for instance, in Russian or French folklore. Rather it is a quite close reflection of the Icelandic society. The characters of the Icelandic folktales are local farmers and wageworkers, fishermen and shepherds, priests and outlaws. Even if they are said to have some supernatural origin (for example, being of the hidden people who dwell inside hills), their mode of life and social ties mirror closely what the story-tellers know from their own experience. Thus the miraculous events they cause or encounter are weaved into their everyday routine.

In these circumstances the source of supernatural occurrences is naturally often found in the same everyday routine, as a part of the known world reinterpreted rather than some completely alien elements inserted into it. The quite familiar but at the same time uncanny source of the folktale wonders is often religion, or rather the popular image of it. Supernatural power associated with Christian religion either mingles with or opposes popular wit and common sense typical for folktale protagonists, creating a very peculiar picture of the spiritual life, which respects the religion, but has an original understanding of its essence and is seldom afraid to contradict it or bargain with it.

Examining such popular superstitions, beliefs or even pure fantasies connected to the supernatural and, in particular, to religion, its official agents and attributes can provide valuable material for understanding the character of the nation. How the folktale characters interact with the powerful and mysterious forces shows how those telling the story or listening to it perceive their own place in the world largely governed by these forces. Or, perhaps even more importantly, what they would like their place to be. On the one hand, the amount of uncanny features folktales bring into the well-defined and well-known neighborhood convey the common readiness of people to live in the world thus modified, to interact with what is by default unknown, different to them and most likely more powerful than they are. On the other hand, it is significant that the folktales do not create the image of people powerless and having to deal with the supernatural oppression. In contrast, the often ironical tone and the way common sense and natural talents help folktale characters to outwit supernatural beings, fight them, bargain with them or receive their respect and favor make the common people quite equal to the wondrous creatures or forces they encounter. Moreover, the rules of these encounters are often set by the clever mortals, and the whole life of supernatural creatures is largely governed by the rules of (human) Icelandic society, not vice versa.

Among the different types of Icelandic folktales those about priests well-versed in magic are the most prominent examples of humans' not just standing equal to the supernatural, but commanding it through the advantages of talent and education.

The role of a priest in medieval or early modern society is special in several ways. He is endowed with certain power both real and spiritual, stemming from religious, social and political structure. He is by his position made a respected member of society, but he can also be dreaded, disliked or even mocked, for the claimed nature of his position is not entirely understandable from the mundane point of view: he deals with powers and concepts which are different from those which are commanded by most members of the community. When people attribute to a priest some magical powers, they might be struggling to explain his status and his opportunities by means the comprehension of which is far more deeply rooted in the popular tradition than Christian dogmas. Doing this, they in some sense increase his prestige, for the somewhat ephemeral spiritual power is substituted by the active capacity to performing miracles of a kind. His power becomes more demonstrative, for instead of just taking care of the future life of his flock's souls, he can bring actual use to the community in this world, fighting its enemies, dealing with thieves, healing diseases, helping to improve crops and overall the well-being of the community. The priests of the folktales obviously inspire respect as benefactors.

However, this fantastical shift in their images also condemns them from the Christian points of view: doing magic, dealing with the Devil or other evil creatures goes against the principles that the prototypes of folktale priests should be standing for by the obligations of their holy office. Besides, the behavior of folktale priests is often more like that of smart farmers or even mighty outlaws than of exemplary Christians. Overall, though they are respected and sometimes even admired, the image of magician-priests is far from any moral exemplar. They are ambiguous figures, who are given their position by one force and maintain it in the popular mind as something in fact entirely opposite from what they should be. However, there is at least one prominent feature that reconciles the images of a magician and a priest, unites the sources of their special powers at the root. Both magical power and the power of a cleric are strongly connected to specific, practically sacral knowledge, which a common person has no means and often even no desire of acquiring and using. Magic and religion have books or other specific types of learnedness as their distinguishing features. The knowledge which a priest, a magician or a magician-priest has is mysterious to others, and both its essence and the ways of acquiring it are seen as secluded, hard and even dangerous.

In the image of a magician-priest it is in fact the knowledge that is reassessed by the popular mind. The sources, the ways of acquiring this knowledge, as well as its substance and effects are in the focus of the creative impulse turning the real priests, agents of God and Church, into legendary magicians, acting in accord with demonic or otherwise morally dubious forces.

Specific knowledge, demanding and hard to reach, is what brings a folktale character to equality with the supernatural or enables him to get better of the alien forces. In this paper I would like to consider the folklore concept of such powerful knowledge, its roots and significance in the Icelandic folktales, in the culture as a whole and the national identity as it is constructed or re-constructed in the modern times.

The strong focus on knowledge as supernatural power can be seen already in Old Norse myths and sagas, where legendary wizards and witches enter in communication with the Other World to acquire specific type of wisdom, to learn about past, present and future, so that later they can use this wisdom to change the reality. I would argue that the activities ascribed to folktale magicians can be found already in the myths about Óðinn and his continuous wisdom quest, as well as in the figures of witches and magicians drawn out in the sagas.

However, the carriers of the supernatural wisdom as they are portrayed in mythological sources and in the sagas are mostly not the benefactors of the society. Their acts are mostly selfish and often malevolent. There may be a link between the folktales adepts of magic acting for the decisively right cause and the elite warriors dedicated to Óðinn, heroic kings and berserks. The possible curious relation of the Christian priests and heathen aristocrats, representing different faces of the evolving masculine ideal, will also be looked into in this paper.

The more obvious relation that must be accounted for is the broader tradition of portraying priests and monks as magicians of the type outlined above. The legends of men of Church dealing with demons and using magical knowledge to the benefit of human society are spread across European folklore both of medieval and modern times, especially in the countries that have undergone Reformation. The power of knowledge tamed by clerics is not solely an Icelandic motive, and besides its roots in the ancient native tradition the foreign (especially mainland Scandinavian) influence could also play a significant part in the formation of the folktales about magician-priests.

On the following pages I intend to assess the place of the particular type of the Icelandic folktales, those featuring the magician-priests, in three literary contexts. First is the corpus of Icelandic folktales, the bulk of which had been assembled by the second half of the XIX century, but which is still developing practically to this day. Second context is the Old Norse literature, involving mythological and legendary seekers and carriers of supernatural wisdom. The third context is the European tradition of similar stories, looking into which the make-up and significance of the magician-priest motive can be further clarified.

In exploring the possible origins and meaning of the tales about magician-priests, a question beyond the sphere of literature and folklore is to be tried. If national folktales can really be seen as the manifestation of some sort of national spirit, as nationalists tend to see them, or of a desirable construct of such, then it is relevant to ask, what do the tales studied here tell about the nation, its character and aspirations. What is the place of the folktales about the magician-priests, bending the Christian ideals and defying the supernatural forces with the power of talent and knowledge, in the image of the Icelandic nation, largely developed in the course of past two centuries or so, while the country was struggling to gain back its independence and prestige? The attempt at this problem is the most important goal of the present paper, and also the most ambiguous. Before approaching it the validity of the folktale material, its relevance to the concept of national identity must be established with some degree of certainty in the course of three-fold analysis outlined above.

1. The world of Icelandic folktales, its genesis and implied contradictions

Most, if not all, magician-priests of Iceland had their historical counterparts who lived in the real world, preached and took care of their flock. But they also acquired a life in the special world of folklore.

The folktales in the form we can read or occasionally hear them today are products (and perhaps not the final ones) of a long process, starting in the hearsay of the people, passing from one to another, rethought and worked over multiple times. At certain point one or several variants of a tale would be written down by a traveler or a cleric, an antiquarian or a philologist. The conversion of fluid and flexible matter of folklore to literary texts also means changing the tales to some degree, whether intended or unconscious, putting them into a new context and reading new meanings into them. Some important factors and stages of this process in Iceland will be mentioned on the following pages, in the brief historical survey of folktale collecting.

The folktales chosen for a collection form a certain picture of the fantastical world, inhabited by supernatural creatures and governed by its own laws. In the folktales the indubitably real world of humans and the mysterious ethereal sphere of Christian belief encounter the third realm, made up by elves and trolls, ghosts and magicians. A broad look at the folktale material is needed to understand how the boundaries and relations between these three worlds are regulated, and how human, magical and religious collide and influence each other. As will be shown in this chapter, the image of a magician-priest might be a logical result of these three parts of the folktale world communicating and interlacing. In some sense, it can be seen as the example of perfect folktale harmony, balance between human, Christian and magical.

1.1. Sources: preserving and collecting the Icelandic folktales

As Jacob Grimm pointed out in his manifesto of folklorists,[1] there is no inhabited place altogether without folklore,[2] but it is much better to collect folk tales, legends and other kinds of traditional oral lore in provincial towns or in rural areas. Big cities with their constant rush, changing social situation and constantly appearing novelties, do not present very good environment for preserving folktales. In a contrast to this, Iceland, the mostly rural country with long and dark winters and a venerable tradition of telling stories, looks like a perfect place for preserving all kinds of folklore. After all, it would seem that the people who created and preserved the great saga corpus, should be able to manage the shorter entertaining stories about elves, trolls and the like. However, the fate of the Icelandic folktales is far from being smooth and easy.

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[1] Grimm, Jacob, “Circular concerning the collecting of folk poetry,” in *International Folkloristics. Classic Contributions by the Founders of Folklore,* ed. Alan Dundes. (Lanham: Rowman&Littlefield Publishers Inc., 1999), 1–7.

[2] The English term “folklore” itself (introduced in 1846) can be called an anachronism here – however it is used in this paper in connection with such names as Grimm and Herder to avoid nomenclative confusion.

On the one hand, it is true that Icelandic folklore was and still is among the really well preserved species in the European community. Throughout its history the island has been densely populated with the hidden people, while the human inhabitants were threatened by trolls or turned into a threat themselves rising from the grave after death. Some of the folk legends and superstitions were preserved in saga literature. Among the most impressive examples in the corpus of sagas about early Icelanders is *Grettis saga*, a large part of which is structured by the laws and with the means of the folktale genre. The characters of *Eyrbyggja saga* were terrorized by numerous ghosts. Even the realistic *Njáls saga* hosts a powerful magician, capable of changing the weather as well as some other less spectacular tricks. Such examples are numerous even among the sagas of early Icelanders, and they are even more prominent and various in the fornaldarsögur, which are largely based on the material of folk legends. Of course, in the saga corpus the folklore material had gone through certain creative remaking and transformation, but the evidence of long history of some superstitions and of a very special attitude towards them is precious.

As Bo Almqvist points out in one of his articles,[3] the clergymen also took part in preserving folklore, sometimes perceiving various wondrous tales not as dangerous superstitions, but as some kind of manifestations of the Heaven’s power or otherwise just peculiar talk of common people. In such cases the plot of a tale would be preserved fairly well, but the set of beliefs and supernatural laws underlying it would be completely substituted by Christian values.

In the XVI century to the sagas and wonder-tales were added, source wise, numerous treatises with descriptions of Iceland and collections of anecdotes about life in Iceland. Interestingly, most of the earlier works of this kind were written by foreigners, though in the late XVI – XVIII century the Icelanders (usually clergymen) picked up this initiative interweaving their historical and geographical narratives with folk legends and poems. These are very often quite abundant but haphazard collections. The folklore material can be found, for instance, in the Latin treatises like *Qualiscunque descriptio Islandiae* written by Bishop Oddur Einarsson in the end of XVI century, or in rather numerous writings of Bishop Gísli Oddsson in the first half of XVII century. The folktales collected by the latter were often included in historical annals on a par with stories from real life, which might be seen as a sign that the readers were ready to accept the wonder-tales as a part of the Icelandic life, probably not as a literary truth, but as something the folk had regard for. In the first learned treatise on Icelandic nature written in the vernacular, *Um Íslands aðskiljanlegar náttúrur* by Jón lærði, the stories of wonders and magic are also fused quite matter-of-factly with the true facts. A substantial part of the Icelandic folklore had been passed on to XIX century in this fashion by learned men (local clerics and traveling scholars from abroad) who wrote the stories down as something peculiar, but quite real – or at least as what they thought was believed real by the Icelandic common folk. The manifestations of the supernatural were taken as superstitions or as miracles of a kind – so that the accounts of them would have to be disregarded as folly or else pass into the domain of religion.

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[3] Almqvist, Bo, “Midwife to the Fairies (ML 5070) in Icelandic Tradition,” in *Legends and Landscape*, edited by Gunnell, Terry (Reykjavik: University of Iceland Press, 2008) 273–324.

With this kind of knowledge of their own heritage Icelanders entered XIX century when the systematic efforts to collect folktales were undertaken. In the meantime, the stories were still told by wise men and women, but were properly heard only by a very restricted number of people. As C. W. von Sydow argued quite rightfully,[4] the tradition actually belongs not to all, but only to a few, and its transmittance and spreading across very narrow boundaries it was born to can be achieved by some abnormal circumstances. Collecting folktales and writing them down is surely one of such powerful factors.

By XIX century, the existing written material was rather vast, but not structured and studied properly, and the writers were mostly distanced from their subject by some kind of bias – Christian attitude to superstition playing an important part here. But probably even more dangerous was the attitude to folklore as to some silly stories not to be taken seriously, the opinion popular among the educated men all around Europe.

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[4] von Sydow, Carl Wilhelm, “Geography and Folk-Tale Oicotypes,” *International Folkloristics. Classic Contributions by the Founders of Folklore.* edited by Dundes, Alan (Lanham: Rowman&Littlefield Publishers Inc., 1999)

Apparently, it was in the XIX century that Europeans started to understand "that what seems to be pure folly to us, was really a serious thing and of enormous importance to those generations who originated the particular form of folly."[5]

By the late XVIII – beginning of XIX century the foundation of the new approach to the past, to the idea of nation and to oral tradition was laid in Germany. The Enlightment brought with it the ideas of popular sovereignty and the fascination with "natural" people, and these were largely exploited in Europe and America. In Germanic and Slav states, however, the concept of nationhood evolved in a different fashion than in France or USA. Here the liberal ideas were not so prominent, and the nation was viewed as prior to an individual. German philosopher J. G. von Herder (1744–1803), developing the ideas of G. Vico, C. Montesquieu and some other prominent figures of European thought, created a theory of nation as a specific unique organism which occupies a particular place in space and time, has a unique character,[6] a unique culture and a unique mission in the world. An individual, according to Herderian point of view, can achieve happiness and self-fulfillment only when the nation achieves its harmony. And the nation must cultivate its own unique character in order to reach its happiness as well as fulfill its mission in the world. "Every nation contains the center of its happiness within itself,"[7] states Herder.

Armed with these ideas as well as the strong opposition against any enforced foreign influence (which ruins the uniqueness of national culture), the new intellectual movement emerged in Germany. It is generally known by the name of romantic nationalism, and the most famous of the early representatives of this movement are, of course, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. Their collections of German folktales and legends, issued in 1812 and 1815, were not only a remarkable event in German cultural life, but also had a great influence upon European intellectuals. In the course of XIX century the collections of folklore were put together, published and studied in Slavonic countries, in France, in Scandinavia.

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[5] "The Practical Use of Folklore. An Interview with Mr. G. Laurence Gomm," in *Folklore. Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies. Volume II: the Founders of Folklore,* edited bu Dundes, Alan (London, New-York: Routledge, 2005), 76.

[6] Herder also called the unique national character the national soul. More than a century later this metaphor played a central part in the philosophy of Oswald Spengler and in the writings of his followers (e.g. Mikhail Berdyajev).

[7] cited in: William A. Wilson, "Herder, Folklore and Romantic Nationalism," in *Folklore. Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies. Volume II: the Founders of Folklore,* edited bu Dundes, Alan (London, New-York: Routledge, 2005), 6.

Iceland experienced the effects of the newly born folkloristics in 1862, when the librarian of the only Icelandic public library at the time, Jón Árnason (1819–1888) published the collection of folktales which he gathered with his friend and colleague Magnús Grímsson. Some attempts to systematically collect folktales (of a certain district or certain theme) had been made earlier in the XIX century, but Jón and Magnús were the most persistent and laborious of all, spending lots of effort, money, and about 30 years on studying various manifestations of Icelandic folklore throughout the country. Initially the stories were Magnús's domain, while Jón wrote down verses, chants and rituals, but in the end the boundaries between their spheres of interest became blurred. Magnús Grímsson had died in 1860, and the final stage of the work on the edition was on Jón Árnason. In the late years of work he was very much influenced and inspired by the famous German philologist Konrad Maurer, who also took great interest in the Icelandic folklore.

The first translators of this fundamental work into English, George Powell and Eiríkur Magnússon also emphasized Jón's "conscientiousness as an editor, for he has published the stories intact as he received them."[8] This statement is very interesting in terms of romantic nationalism and its ideology, as well as in connection with the nature of folklore collectors' work itself.

In fact, the Grimm brothers did not simply collect the indigenous material and write it down. Paradoxically, although their initial ideal was to alter nothing in what they heard from the informants, in their quest for authenticity they were constantly editing the legends they collected, and that can be seen even by simple comparison of the variants of the same texts in the edition of 1812 and those of 1815. This was also the attitude taken by Magnús Grímsson, as he tended to edit his material, work on the style and form. Jón Árnason took more to writing the folktales down as he had heard them, preserving as much of the original as possible. However, even a quite faithful and naïve approach has its limits and its biases. Any collector is not just preserving the items of his collection, but also inevitably taking part in creating the national folklore. This process is more often than not connected closely with the national idea, giving a considerable political aspect to the folklorist's work. Gathering the stories, songs and other forms of folklore is essentially the process of re-contextualizing the raw material, of folklorization and representation. As one chooses what to collect and what to present to the public, he ultimately creates a portrait of the folk culture and of the national character which produced it.[9]

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[8] Eiríkur Magnússon and Powell, George, trans. and ed., *Icelandic folktales* (London: Richard Bentley, 1864), 8.

Jón Árnason's collection is in fact only the early stage of modern Icelandic folklore collecting. In the last decades of XIX and first half of XX century Iceland's struggle for independency speedily progressed. In the domain of culture this meant increase of the interest in national heritage, in the definition of national character, in the uniqueness of Icelandic literature, language, and people. The folklore is an important means of approaching these problems, and many Icelandic scholars developed profound interest to this sphere. Among those who collected, studied and published the folktales at the dawn of Icelandic Republic, were Einar Ol. Sveinsson, Sigurður Nordal, Sigfús Sigfússon and others. As the XX century progressed, both public and scholarly interest in the Icelandic folktales was increasing. As artists were finding inspiration in the national folklore and tourists started coming to Iceland in quest for elves and trolls, philologists and folklorists were developing new approaches and methods to preserving national lore. Among the important lines of work is the use of modern technologies for faithful preservation of oral lore in audio recordings, as well as for simplified access to Icelandic folklore through electronic databases. Nowadays these tasks, as well as collecting of new material, publication of printed editions and scientific research on Icelandic folklore are carried out in the Folkloristics Department of Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies in Reykjavík.

Some specific features of the XX – XXI centuries' development of the Icelandic folklore collections will be addressed later in this paper, in connection with the problems of cultural policy and national soul. However, despite the abundance of more recent editions, the main primary source for this research is the collection of Jón Árnason, the huge corpus of Icelandic folktales published one and a half centuries ago. The reasons for this choice are the following.

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[9] See: Anttonen, Pertti J.. *Tradition through Modernity. Postmodernism and the Nation-State in Folklore Scholarship*. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2005.

While he was collecting the material for his edition of national folktales, Jón Árnason did an enormous job of putting together the miscellaneous evidence of the previous centuries. He used manuscripts of his predecessors as much as contemporary oral accounts, so his work can be seen as a certain sum of what had been known about Icelandic folktales before his time. But all the knowledge accumulated in this collection is not just gathered together, but also cleverly reworked and organized. Though parts of it have been continuously reissued as simple gatherings of amusing stories, the original collection is in fact an encyclopedia of a kind. It contains references to earlier sources and all the reasonably reliable connections of the legendary events to historical times, people and places (it was one of the most important ground principles of the collection; from the very beginning of their work Jón Árnason and Magnús Grímsson agreed to precise and accurate about all their sources). It has also given the guidelines to the organization of numerous later collections and research on Icelandic folktales. Besides a sum of earlier knowledge, Jón Árnason’s collection also represents the frontier of modern principles of collecting and studying Icelandic folktales, as well modern attitudes towards these stories and their characters.

One of the most important objectives of this work is to define these principles and attitudes in relation to the folktales about magician-priests. To understand the separate folktales or a class of folktales it is crucial to find out what kind of fantastic world was revealed, re-created or maintained in the Icelandic folkloristics of the past one and a half centuries.

1.2. The ambiguity of religious imagery and values in the folktales

One of the prominent motives recurring in the Icelandic folktales is the set of relationships between human and supernatural, supernatural and religious, religious and human. The supernatural of the folklore is, from the point of view of the Christian Church, mostly the matter of superstition, sometimes dangerous and sometimes amusing. Monsters or wonderful creatures which appear in folktales might be dismissed as delusions, and the miracles they allegedly cause are then reassessed as the deeds of Christian God or Devil. But from the point of view expressed in the stories themselves the situation is more complicated than that. Elves, trolls and all sorts of wondrous creatures and events not recognized by Christian doctrine are real in the world of folktales, but so are the powers accepted by the Church. Such duality of the supernatural calls for establishing the character of relations mentioned above. How do Christian and superstitious beliefs get on side by side, what is the attitude of one towards the other, and what is the place of humans in the world so inhabited?

It is notable that in the folktales the Christian powers are not the absolute ruling principle. Neither good nor evil characters taken from the religious discourse are singularly dreaded or unreservedly respected by the folktale characters, monsters and humans alike.

As well as in other cultures, in Icelandic folklore there are numerous stories about men who outwit the Devil. No pact or deal can bring him any benefit as he walks around humans: each time man turns out to be more cunning and even more cruel than the representative of Evil. The folktale characters are not said to experience any kind of terror in the face of the Devil himself or minor demons. The figures of the Christian folklore are reduced to something very similar to the native Icelandic trolls and their emerging is in no way connected to sin or temptation of the human soul. Men do not usually try to pray in the face of these creatures, to ask the God for help. In fact, they do not seem to feel an immediate urge to exorcise the Devil; they would rather get some profit from the encounter, and then overcome him with wit, force or some combination of both. The folktales show that there is no danger as long as one knows how to use the situation in their own favor.

As well as the intimidating power of Evil, the absolute authority of the Christian Good is also subject to certain diminishment in the world of folktales. The gatekeeper of Heaven can be outwitted, as in the case with a smith who made a pact with the Devil and still managed to push into Heaven, where he sat on his own sack, reasonably answering to all the attempts to oust him: “Ég sit á mínu”[10]. Curiously, no supernatural powers can prevent the smith once his sack is already there – and there is no way to oust the intruder later. The possibility to trick so patently one of the highly respected Christian saints clearly shows the limits of his power. The motive just described is not unique to Iceland; this element can be found in various stories of the international type "The smith and the Devil"[11]. St. Peter is altogether often made the object of mild mockery in Christian folklore, on the part of humans as well as (even more often) on the part of Christ Himself. Looking at his human weaknesses with certain irony is even useful for the popular faith. However, in some Icelandic stories the irony spreads much wider. It can even be applied to the supposed human weaknesses of Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ, as in the folktale "*Sálin hans Jóns míns"*[12], a humorous account about the woman who pushed the soul of her dead husband into Heaven, arguing in the most unholy way with St. Peter, St. Mary and, finally, with Christ. Such stories should not perhaps be taken as serious evidence for blasphemy of any sort. What they do signify for certain is the ability of popular creativity to be ironical about anything, to question any authorities and ideals, and the tendency to putting humans on equal terms even with the most esteemed of the supernatural powers.

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[10] Árni Böðvarsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, eds, *Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Æfintýri. Safn. Jón Árnason.* (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Þjóðsaga, Prentsmiðjan Hólar, 1956), V. 4, 76.

At least some instances and degrees of its authority over humans being thus questioned, the Christian good is also in danger of losing the power it can use against the supernatural evil, such as ghosts, demons, trolls, etc. Not only humans stop fearing the Christian God in some of the folktales. Ghosts were often said to be in no way subdued by prayers and Christian symbols, and the trickster-spirit of Hjaltastaðir, according to a XVIII century account[13], was even able to mockingly recite sacred texts. Folktale trolls obviously had no awe for the Christian symbols either, for they were often most active at Christmas time, darkening the holy night by the threat of supernatural assault (see the various stories of nátttröll[14]). No less sinister is the

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[11] Hans-Jörg Uther. *The types of international folktales: a classification and bibliography (based on the system of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson)* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeacatemia, 2004), V. 1, 219.

[12] Jón Árnason, safn., *Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Æfintýri* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich, 1862–64), Annað bindi, 39–40.

[13] Jón Árnason, safn., *Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Æfintýri* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich, 1862–64), Fyrsta bindi, 309–311.

[14] Ibid., 151, 208, et. al.

Icelandic variant of the "Mass of the Dead" motive[15], where the Hidden People perform the exact copy of human religious ritual, dealing cruelly with those who witness their Mass uninvited (see the story of *Tungustapi*[16]). A blatant blasphemy involving Christian attributes can be found, for example, in the stories of witch-ride. A story of *Gandreiðin*[17] tells of twelve witches and one man (perhaps an evil wizard – or the Devil himself), who perform a rite obviously modeled on the Lord's Supper, of course perverting its meaning; not only sacred text, ritual and faith are mocked by these witches, but also the Church as human organization, as all the twelve witches are pastors wives, rather than some ordinary women.

In the examples cited above the supernatural beings are either unaffected by the power of Christianity opposing them, or turn the Christian symbols to their own blasphemous use. The power of religion itself is not enough to fight the supernatural evil armed with such devices. The supernatural beings in the folktales, if they are to be defeated, should be fought by their own kind. In other words, magic can most effectively be defeated by magic, monstrous force – by monstrous force, and fiendish guile – by fiendish guile.

To deal with the supernatural foes, the representatives of the Christian Church in the folktale cannot discard the laws by which those foes exist. For example, a troll cannot be simply destroyed by the invocation of Christian God or by manifesting some sort of holiness. As the story of Sifa-nátttröll[18] shows, the divine power can only keep the monster outside till the daybreak. The troll exposed to the sun turns into stone – and though the means of this deliverance apparently come from God, the rules of this encounter are those of the supernatural world.

In some cases, especially when there is no clear mortal danger to humans, a surprising result can come out of an encounter with the supernatural. A representative of the Church – often a bishop, whose judgment would be especially respected – might achieve certain compromise with the creatures that should be considered hostile and demonic from the Christian point of view. For example, it was said of Bishop

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[15] Hans-Jörg Uther. *The types of international folktales: a classification and bibliography (based on the system of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson)* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeacatemia, 2004), V. 1, 437.

[16] Jón Árnason, safn., *Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Æfintýri* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich, 1862–64), Fyrsta bindi, 31.

[17] Ibid., 440–441.

[18] Ibid., 216–217.

Brynjólfur of Skálaholt that he managed to make a deal with a horse-stealing giantess so that she was given horses to ride out at Christmas Eve, and no one of the bishop’s household (surprisingly, not even the animals) was harmed.[19] Another famous story of negotiation with supernatural is connected with the exorcising of spirits or monsters which haunted the island of Drangey. As almost all the territory was cleared from the supernatural creatures, a voice was heard: “Vígðu nú ekki meira, Gvendur biskup; einhverstaðar verða vondir að vera.”[20] And the place was left for the enemy to dwell there. The very possibility of a negotiation of this kind – and in such a striking wording – means a lot in the system of relationships between the Church and the supernatural creatures, the good and holy on the one hand and what should be considered demonic and evil on the other. As far as folklore is concerned, these two spheres are not complete opposite, and neither are they irreconcilable enemies. And they often tend to be mutually distorted to a certain degree, rather than destroy each other.

After noting this, a reader or listener of the Icelandic folktales should not be too surprised as he finds out that the borders between Christian and magical can be blurred even further. In the cases mentioned above the bishops were, of course, negotiating with the demonic creatures. But in doing this they acted in accord with the Christian values and manifested the honorable features of character which would ideally be expected in the men of their status. They showed kindness, mercy, forgiveness. However, such meekness is not always enough in the dealings with the supernatural beings, especially the actively hostile ones. When any fair negotiations are unrealizable and the power given to the clerics by the Christian God is not enough to secure a victory, a man of Church might choose to come even closer to the supernatural. He does not only take into account the laws of the alien world. He starts to use the same methods as his enemies, and succumbs to their sources of power. In other words, he acquires guile and magic. A priest becomes also a master-magician, the complex, controversial and charismatic character of numerous folktales.

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[19] Ibid., 159–160.
[20] Ibid., 146.

1.3. Folktales about magician-priests of Iceland

In the world of folklore the power driven from Holy Spirit and the power of magic do not necessarily stand in direct opposition, as they should do from the point of view of the Christian Church. The power to perform miracles or magic in the folktales is more often judged by its intent and effect, by how harmful or useful the actions of a wonder-worker are. As many of the folktales (and Icelandic folktales in particular) show, the most effective way to overcome supernatural enemies of mankind and to make the life better and safer would be a clever combination of religious and magical devices. The Church of the folktales often employs this kind of combination. While in some cases it might be enough to understand the laws of the supernatural world to efficiently use the holy power of the Church against it (as in case of Sifa-nátttröll), it is even better to master the sources of hostile power and learn to fight magic with magic. This is the way followed by the numerous master-magicians of the Icelandic folktales. Many of these interesting characters belong to three different spheres at the same time: they are men of the Church; they are familiar to the supernatural forces and practice magic; and they are also human, acting on behalf of the community and from time to time showing quite human faults and weaknesses.

The folktales of Icelandic magician-priests have been conceived, told and written down in different periods, from the Middle Ages to relatively recent times, and practically in all regions of the country.[21] Wherever there ever was a parish, there almost certainly would be a legend about at least one mysterious magician-priest who used to live, preach and do magic once at this very area. Sometimes the collectors and editors of folktales manage to gather whole narrative series devoted to the same figure. Some of the legendary magicians were mostly known in their native districts, while others became widely known throughout Iceland. Stories of Sæmundur inn fróði present an excellent example of the latter type, as the learned Catholic priest of the late XI – early XII century is one of the most famous of the Icelandic magician-priests, as well as apparently the oldest of them.

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[21] Einar Ol. Sveinsson. The folk-stories of Iceland (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2003), 197–204.

In the middle of XVI century Reformation came to Iceland, and among the legendary magician-priests there are both Catholics and Protestants. There is, however, no specific difference between the ministers of two different branches of the Christian Church, as far as the folktales are concerned. Although many of the magician-priests of the Icelandic folklore correlate quite precisely with the real historical priests, there is certain quality of timelessness about these folktales: in the popular accounts the conditions of life, problems and methods of the XII century do not differ significantly from those of the XVIII century. Boundaries between different ages become blurred, so that, for instance, Hálfdan of Fell, who lived in the XVI century, is sometimes said to be a classmate of Sæmundur[22] – of course, if a collector is trying to build a reasonably coherent corpus of legends, he would often try to silence such obvious temporal discrepancies. But even if a magician-priest stays in the time and place where he is believed to belong historically, there still would be much in common between him and other characters of the kind: each of them is at the same time a vivid personal image and a representative of a general folklore archetype. The object of this research is the general type rather than its individual representatives, and it is necessary to understand what are the common characteristics of the folktale magician-priests, as well as what kinds of variations in their fate and character are important for them as a group.

First of all, any magician-priest obviously must combine the features of a cleric and a supernatural personage. He is believed to be equally good at reading sermons and spells. He is fair and kind to the good Christians, but he can also show guile and cruelty towards enemies. The balance between the good priest and the powerful supernatural creature varies from one magician-priest to another. For example, Sæmundur inn fróði of the folktales is a wise and balanced man. He repeatedly plays tricks on demons, but usually does not allow his magical activities to cause any trouble to his flock. Many people seek his counsel, coming to him with both natural and supernatural problems – one of the latter cases is the story of Kálfur Árnason, who got into a deal with the Devil and had to ask the more skilled magician to think of a way around it[23]. Some other magician-priests, however, cannot be so easily trusted: for instance, people who worked for Rev. Hálfdan of Fell took his words with caution, as he used to play many harmless magical tricks on them. According to the folktales about him, he was as much a joker as a priest. Apart from amusing themselves, the magicians could also use little tricks to protect their own property and to give the flock lessons in ways less traditional than a sermon. For example, Rev. Eírikur of Vogsós once charmed his horses[24] so that the boys trying to steal them got stuck to the horseback. As the story goes, the priest kindly forgave the frightened thieves as soon as he was sure they learned the lesson. However, not all the priests are that benevolent when their property or life is threatened. The legendary grim priest from Selárdal, called Árum-Kári, mercilessly killed the thieves he found with the help of his magical skills. On other occasion Kári's life was in danger, as his enemy Kolbeinn from neighboring dale set his mind on killing the priest. However, the ship of the assailants was drowned under mysterious conditions, and as Kolbeinn's body was washed ashore Kári used powerful necromancy to ride his dead enemy and thus complete the revenge.[25]

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[22] Jón Árnason, safn., *Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Æfintýri* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich, 1862–64), Fyrsta bindi, 515.
[23] Ibid., 503

Among the magician-priests, Sæmundur might represent the type of artful, but essentially benevolent priest, whose priorities are the well-being of good Christians and disrupting the Devil's schemes – even though these are often achieved by means of magic, priests like Sæmundur do not really give in to the magical (or, in fact, demonic) part of their nature. The opposite pole of the general magician-priest type can possibly be represented by Árum-Kári, whose morals and methods bring him closer to a heroic outlaw than to a kind and selfless Christian priest. Many others can be placed in between of these two extremities. Encounters with demons or trolls are good indicators of a priest's character. Those to whom magic is entirely alien would pray to overcome the enemy. The less dogmatic and more familiar with the supernatural would try to talk to the monster, and most likely outwit him. The grim and cruel figure like Árum-Kári would choose to wrestle with an inhuman force and skill. Admittedly, such cruel and reckless extremes are rare among the folktale priests, but there are also more intricate ways for a magician to give up the Christian values for the sake of demonic side of his nature. Among the most sinister of the Icelandic master-magicians are the most powerful of them, those who gave up the Christian values and morals altogether, as they devoted their lives to collecting and practicing the most terrible forms of magic. Somewhat paradoxically, the darkest of the master-magicians of Iceland was also one of the highest Church officials. The bishop of Hólar Gottskálk Nikulásson, who lived in the early XVI century, became notorious in the folklore for gathering the most powerful of dark spells into a mysterious manuscript Rauðskinna (the "Red Skin").[26] He and some other bishops who used dark magic and never repented the sin, apparently retained some of their power even after death, making strong and horribly bad-tempered ghosts, thus passing completely and irrevocably from human and religious domains into the darkest spheres of supernatural.

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[24] Ibid., 560

[25] Ibid., 505–506

As even the few examples can show, the range of different shades of the magician-priest's character is quite wide. And just as wide is the assortment of emotions that they might stir in the audience, and of the lessons they might teach. The tales of master-magicians can inspire fear, awe or amusement, admiration, respect or deprecation. They can show an example (metaphorical only to a certain degree) of how to succeed in life, how to bend some rules in one-s favor without getting caught, and what might happen if the rules are bent too much. The details of a magician's career demarcate the various attitudes and meanings each individual character might convey.

The legendary life of a folktale magician-priest can be divided into certain periods. First, there is the magician's life before acquiring supernatural knowledge and skills. Unlike the hagiographies or religious tales of pious Christians, the folktales are usually not interested in the childhood of their characters. Unlike the holy grace and the vocation to serve God, magic, as it is presented in this kind of folktales, is not a gift innate, or spontaneously immanent to a person's nature. One does not possess magic as a talent, but he can acquire it if he has enough curiosity, diligence and courage. In Icelandic tradition there is one interesting exception from this general tendency: if a magician is kraftaskáld, his magic is an inspirational power. The spells of a magician such as Rev. Páll skáld are efficient when they are improvised under the influence of a truly strong emotion (such as rage)[27]. This idea, though it appears a comparably late motive in folklore, can possibly be traced to the traditional belief in the supernatural power of poets and their strong connection to Óðinn. But otherwise, there are several known ways to get the supernatural knowledge.

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[26] Ibid., 514–515

[27] Bauman, Richard. *A World of Others' Words: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Intertextuality* (Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 16–20.

Books seem the main medium of passing the magical lore from earlier generations of magicians to younger ones. One might study the less harmful books of spells and supernatural wisdom just as he studies any other codices. The legendary Gráskinna (the "Gray Skin"), containing a lot of material vital for a young magician, was apparently believed to be available somewhere around Skálholt[28], but some other books of magic were more difficult to obtain. For example, a young priest could go to a Black School, where demons and even the Devil himself would be the professors. According to the stories of Sæmundur inn fróði, the main part of the education in the Black School he attended in Paris was again reading books of magic.[29] In other cases books could be obtained from the damned magicians of old, who had the powerful manuscripts buried with them. Among the magician-priests who acquired some of their knowledge from the dead was Rev. Eiríkur of Vogsós (historically 1637/38–1716), who resorted to this dangerous device when he was still young but already well-versed in the lessons of Gráskinna. Galdra-Loftur, a famous magician-priest of the early XVIII century, tried to wake none other than Bishop Gottskálk, but his daring attempt to acquire Rauðskinna failed for a number of reasons.[30] It is interesting to note that such rites of necromancy were said to take place inside a church at night. Thus all the forms of getting the magical knowledge (books, schools, rituals conducted in a church) were to some extent reminiscent of the activities of the real people who were becoming priests. On the other hand, the wisdom quest of folktale magicians has much in common with the pagan mythological tradition. The details and significance of these relations will be closely addressed in the following chapters of this paper.

Although becoming a magician is in fact a quest for knowledge, it is hardly idle curiosity that drives a man of Church to seek and study the dangerous and (from the Christian point of view) sinful lore. As a magician-priest takes an office in a parish, he also starts his supernatural practice. It has already been described above how magical skills help magician-priests to prevent thefts or catch the criminals. Milk-stealing or otherwise malevolent witches can also be caught through the magician's clairvoyance, and his own skill can help him fight off all sorts of supernatural assailants. If he cannot always change weather, he can predict it – and so perhaps save the harvest, warning the community of the coming storm. He can summon demons to do all kinds of tasks – for instance, building a church. More specific analysis of the magician-priests' activities is to be found later on in this paper, but for the moment there are two important points to be noted about most of these stories. First of all, the magician-priests are usually acting to the benefit of their flock, improving the life of the community. In fact, they do more or less the things that are expected from a human leader, but their connection with the supernatural helps them to do their duties more efficiently, get the results which cannot be achieved naturally. Secondly, during his whole life a magician-priest has to fight off the Devil or other supernatural creatures which are connected in some way with the source of his power and thus have certain claim on his soul and even the souls of his flock.

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[28] Jón Árnason, safn., *Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Æfintýri* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich, 1862–64), Fyrsta bindi, 555.

[29] Ibid., 493.

[30] Ibid., 583–586.

Throughout their lives, many of the folktale magician-priests repeatedly cheat the evil spirits. However, as they come closer to the end of their mortal existence, they seem to run out of tricks. The collections of folktales do not give us an account of every single Icelandic magician-priest's death. But those stories that we have show considerable anxiety on the part of the magicians who had been so powerful and self-assured throughout their lives. Deathbed is not the place for tricks, and all that a dying priest has is his faith. And he has a reason to be genuinely terrified; he prays to God and hope for salvation, understanding that his former magical activities do not exactly speak in his favor. He had most likely preached the evil nature of witchcraft among other things, as well as used his powers to find a witch and subsequently punish her. So he approaches the just punishment with full learned understanding of the situation. However, in the folktales the faithful magicians are miraculously saved. The account of Rev. Eírikur of Vogsós and his anxiety is among the most dramatic ones. In the end the renowned magician seems to lose all the confidence in his own powers and to regret the way of life he had been leading. He prays and hopes for the Lord's mercy, but is completely unsure of the outcome. So he tells his flock to look at the first bird which sits on the church roof after Eírikur's death. If it is white, the God has forgiven him, but a black bird would mean an eternal damnation of the magician's soul. As the story goes, the bird was white – that is to say, Eírikur was admitted to Heaven and his body was subsequently buried in the consecrated land.[31]

The fate of a magician-priest, especially his death (and reconciliation with God, or eternal damnation as in the case of Bishop Gottskálk), indicates how his actions and values are assessed by the people who conjure and retell the folktales. Indeed, the men of Church have a chance for a positive estimation and the salvation of the soul, which some malicious milk-stealing witch does not have. But the formal attachment to the Church does not in itself secure impunity. To live and die really well, a magician-priest has to use the sinful methods cleverly and only to good ends. Besides, repentance is absolutely required. A magician-priest is constantly balancing between the Christian good and the human benefit that are his ultimate goals, and the supernatural power to secure them. His mind is also a precise balance, including the understanding and respect for both Christian and magical laws, wisdom and craftiness, and, above all, absolutely human common sense. Most of the magician-priests are not condemned sinners, and none of them is a saint. They represent a type of pragmatic men, smart, daring and laborious enough to get the best out of life by the means of knowledge and its clever application. This type of character is shown in the Icelandic folklore as one certainly deserving appreciation.

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[31] Ibid., 580–581.

2. Supernatural wisdom in the Icelandic tradition

Wisdom is one of important concepts and constantly recurring topics in the Norse mythology. Vast knowledge, ability to remember it and, to some extent, to use it, are vital parts of wisdom, but not its only components. Magic is also wisdom, and so is the ability to see what has not yet happened, and to get in touch with the world of supernatural. For the characters of Eddic lays being wise apparently meant to defy the limits of time and space, life and death, natural and supernatural.

Supernatural wisdom, as it is shown in the Nordic sources, is in many ways similar to shamanistic practices.[32] The Scandinavians dealt extensively with other Northern peoples, including the Finns, traditionally associated with shamanism and magic, so the similarities might be partly due to the external influence, as well as to the native heritage.

Shamanism is, above all, a rather specific technique of ecstasy.[33] Shamans are able to establish a bond with spirits from the other world (including the spirits of the dead) and make use of their powers without being possessed by them, that is, to exist on the border between worlds, and still retain control. The written sources dealing with the Nordic concept of seiðr suggest that it also implied certain rites conducted in an ecstatic state and directed to communicating with spirits. There is also evidence of intoxicating drinks which were given occult meaning (mead), and of belief in shape-shifting, another feature common to shamans of many nations. Unlike those traditional societies in which shamanism plays (or played recently) an important and respectable part, the Nordic societies yield information about their putative shamanistic practices mostly in the form of mythical stories, or otherwise in the form of legal prohibition and condemnation of such activities.

Another influence which should be kept in mind is the Christian set of beliefs connected to witchcraft and magic. After the Scandinavian world was first exposed to Christianity during the Viking travels and then converted, the native Nordic ideas of supernatural wisdom blended in a particular way with the Christian ones. This specific blend of beliefs later reflected in the folk-tales of Late Middle Ages and Early Modern times.

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[32] Simek, Rudolf. *Dictionary of Northern Mythology,* trans. Hall, Angela (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer: 1993), 281.

[33] Jones, Lindsay, ed. in chief, *Encyclopedia of Religion, Second Edition* (Thomson Gale, 2005), V. XII, p. 8269.

2.1. Supernatural knowledge and active magical power

As shown by examples of the societies which are actively practicing shamanism, a shaman needs two kinds of teaching. On the one hand, he receives some instructions from the spirits, experiencing trance and ecstatic dreams. On the one hand, the old shamans teach their young colleague, passing on the knowledge of techniques, charms, myths, information about genealogy, hierarchy and names of the supernatural beings, as well as humans.[34] In a similar way, the wisdom which characters of Old Norse myths manifest or strive to acquire is twofold. Firstly, it is the knowledge of things which are hidden from most people. Secondly, it is the active skills derived from this knowledge.

The "passive" wisdom is knowledge in the proper sense of this word: the prophetesses of *Völuspá*, the jötunn Vafþrúðnir, or Óðinn passing his knowledge to young Agnar, know things. Their knowledge relates to events and creatures, mythological time and space, and it can be narrated in one way or another, rather than demonstrated. Knowing the future does not let one change it, just as knowing the past does not mean bringing the past back. However, the ways of performing this kind of wisdom, of sharing it can differ substantially from one case to another.

For instance, as Judy Quinn pointed out in her article on Eddic dialogues with völur,[35] it makes the real difference whether the speaker of wise words is male or female. A völva is recounting a linear narrative: a chain of events, a fragment of world history, a genealogy. Her recital can comprise the story of the whole world of gods being born and then destroyed (as in *Völuspá*), or it can have a more modest scope, but in any case it should have a beginning and an end, and be ruled by certain inner logic. The jötnar, as well as Óðinn (who apparently learnt much from this wise race), are more given to mind games, to exchanging riddles, trading discrete facts. Besides, a völva does not get anything for her service, as if simply doing her job, or rather performing her part in a ritual, her actions being compulsive and unavoidable, however unwilling they sometimes seem:

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[34] Ibid., 8270.

[35] Quinn, Judy, "Dialogue with a volva: Voluspá, Baldrs draumar and Hyndluljóð." In *The Poetic Edda. Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, ed. Acker, Paul, and Larrington, Carolyne (New York & London: Routledge, 2002), 245–274.

nauðug sagðak,
Nú mun ek þegja[36], -

as the völva of *Baldrs draumar* says (stopping, however, only when her prophecy is actually finished). In the case of giants and Óðinn, however, the exercising of wisdom adopts a semblance of gambling of sorts, a quite voluntary game with rather tempting high stakes (the utter impossibility of beating Óðinn in this game, for example, shown in *Vafþrúðnismál*, does not remove the illusion of such a chance to influence the game's end).

The knowledge attributed to mythical characters can be either experiential, or acquired from other representatives of wise folk, or else be a result of some clairvoyant practice. While the source of Vafþrúðnir's knowledge is personal experience, Óðinn often has to question a diverse range of supernatural creatures to get the desired information. As for völur, the interpretation might be debated: the source of their wisdom can be either clairvoyance or personal experience (or even personal experience acquired on the spiritual level, by means of ecstatic practice). In later times characters of the folk-tales would derive their wisdom directly from experience quite rarely and only in very specific circumstances (for instance, studying in the Black School, which was perceived as at least touching to the other world). Many of the magicians would derive their supernatural knowledge from books (like bishop Gottskálk or Eírikur of Vogsós did), but the cases of clairvoyance were also known (for example, Árum-Kári discovering the ongoing sheep-theft while he was sleeping).

One of the important kinds of knowledge is that of magical charms, chants, and runes. The ability to actually remember and enumerate the lists of spells (like those in *Hávamál, Gróagaldr, Sígdrifumál* etc) would in itself be a remarkable feat. However, those who knew the spells and the runes were most likely also capable of applying this knowledge. The "active" side of supernatural wisdom would thus allow its master to avoid harm and to inflict it on his enemies, to heal the wounds and to fool the senses, to change shape and to endear, to ensure victory or loss in battle.

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[36] Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Eddukvæði (Sæmundar Edda). Síðari hluti* (Reykjavík: Íslendingaútgafan, 1949), 468.

It is interesting to note that the particular type of charms, galdr, later gave its name to magic as a whole. The discredited appellation “seiðr” was not used in connection with the “good” magicians of Christian times: the magician-priests are traditionally called galdramenn, and the collections of stories about them are often united under the heading *galdrasögur*.

The multiple usages of supernatural wisdom and power do not fall neatly into the categories of morally good and evil. Mostly their application depends on rather selfish interest of the particular magician. The stories of Óðinn using magic provide a number of such examples, and so do some of the episodes from sagas (e.g. the magician Svanr from *Brennu-Njáls saga* using spells to confuse his opponents). In the folk-tales which are the object of this paper, the situation changes: as the characters are Christian priests in Christian society, their cause in most cases is either the just one or at least is presented as such. Thus, the priests gifted with supernatural power and wisdom use these for fighting all kinds of trolls and ghosts, or for counseling their flock wisely. They even employ the evil spirits for purely philanthropic tasks, including mowing, harvesting or doing some other tasks for the benefit of the household.

Of course, as Christian priests, even those who are using magic, can afford much less degree of pronounced moral ambiguity than the heathen magicians (not mentioning the gods), for them the problem of using their bond with the supernatural world carefully is even more substantial. Even to a pagan careless and ignorant use of runes could result in disaster (as it is shown, for example, in *Egils saga Skalagrímssonar).* For a Christian it was a constant threat to his soul, the threat avoided only by his skillfulness and caution. The means of acquiring supernatural wisdom and the proper conditions of its application would be among primary concerns of a magician, who must be both ambitious and cautious to achieve his goals in the most efficient, as well as the safest possible way.

2.2. The wise and the dead: the sources of supernatural wisdom

Clive Tolley enumerates twelve traditional ways of becoming a shaman, which essentially fall into three categories: the divine origin, vocation and initiation.[37] The traces of each of these three ways can be found in Nordic mythological accounts of acquiring supernatural power and wisdom, though the quantity of evidence can differ considerably.

The idea of divine origin implies that the supernatural wisdom or power, as well as their carrier, initially spring from the other world (or worlds), that of gods or other supernatural beings. Magic knowledge is subsequently brought to the human world and becomes a part of hereditary knowledge.

As the importance and the general appeal of genealogies for Norsemen (and, in particular, the Icelanders) is outstanding,[38] the idea of supernatural power and wisdom as objects of inheritance, depending on the lineage, could not be neglected in the Nordic sources. For one, those capable of using magic, accumulating vast supernatural knowledge, seeing the past and the future, could be presented as the members of particular generic lines. For example, the völva in *Hyndluljóð* talks about the decent of sorcerers and prophetesses, those using magic spells and the wise jötnar in the same stanza:

Eru völur allar
frá Viðólfi,
vitkar allir
frá Vilmeiði,
skilberendr
frá Svarthöfða,
jötnar allir
frá Ými komnir.[39]

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[37] Tolley, Clive. *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic. Volume One* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, Academia Scientarum Fennica, 2009), 414.

[38] See, for example, Anthony Faulkes. “Decent from the Gods.” *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 11 (1978–1979): 92–125.

[39] Möbius, Theodor, ed., Edda Sæmundar hins fróða (Leipzig: J.C.Hinrichs‘sche Buchhandlung, 1860), 86.

All the four progenitors mentioned here can, with some measure of confidence, be identified as jötnar. This assumption has different consequences. On the one hand, jötnar are usually portrayed in myths as the antagonists, threatening the order established by the gods and responsible for all kinds of offences against the gods' law. These creatures are marginal to the society of the Æsir, and it is quite plausible that their descendants are just as marginal to the human society. In support of this hypothesis, Tolley suggests the etymology for one of the names mentioned above. In his interpretation, Viðólfr must be connected to woods (OIcel. "við") and wolves (OIcel. "úlfr"), possibly also to some destructive powers or spirits, and to outlaws (traditionally called "skógarmenn" – "men of woods").[40] This latter suggestion, combined with some other pieces of evidence which will be discussed later on in this chapter, gives an interesting picture of the practitioners of seiðr and their place in respect to the Old Norse society. This picture would seem a remarkable contrast both to the societies with a strong and socially approved shamanistic cult, and to the Icelandic folklore involving the highly respected members of the Christian society (priests and bishops) practicing magic rather openly.

Another aspect of the tradition connected with jötnar (which was superficially mentioned above) is that these beings are often the owners of great supernatural wisdom. As Lotte Motz shows in the article on jötnar and Óðinn, the wisdom of the latter is very similar to the one possessed by the former. The important difference, however, is the fact that jötnar possess it initially, while Óðinn has to undertake all kinds of journeys, rituals and tricks to acquire the wisdom.[41] Tolley summarizes a similar point even more emphatically, stating that the jötnar (or giants) "are both ancestral and magically potent beings; contact with such beings must have ensured access to the primeval power they possessed, to the extent that "giant" and "magician" become almost synonymous."[42]

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[40] Tolley, Clive. *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic. Volume One* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, Academia Scientarum Fennica, 2009), 420.

[41] Motz, Lotte, "Odinn and the giants: a study in ethno-cultural origins." *Mankind Quarterly, 25* (1985): 387–418.

[42] Tolley, Clive. *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic. Volume One* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, Academia Scientarum Fennica, 2009), 421.

The jötnar are thus strongly connected to two other means of becoming a shaman – or to acquire the supernatural wisdom – which were named above: to initiation and to vocation.

The rituals of initiation, as well as myths connected with them, exist in the abundance of world cultures. As Margaret Clunies Ross notes, the initiation ritual is often felt as a sacrifice by the young men undergoing the torturous or frightening ordeal.[43] Indeed, sacrifice and initiation are two concepts closely related and associated with each other, and this connection is often developed in the studies on Scandinavian mythology. One of the most striking examples here is the sacrifice that Gabriel Turville-Petre called the most powerful of all, namely the one that Óðinn made, sacrificing himself to himself, god to god. What this ordeal gave him (as it is related in *Hávamál)* was the access to a wealth of supernatural knowledge:

Þá nam ek frævask
ok fróðr vera
ok vaxa ok vel hafask;
orð mér af orði
orðs leitaði,
verk mér af verki,
verks leitaði.[44]

This ritual, where the god played the roles of a victim, a priest and a receiver of the sacrifice all at the same time, can thus be interpreted as an act of initiation into the other world, the world of the wise and the dead. To make the resemblance to initiation rites even closer, there is one more participant in the scene of Óðinn's hanging. The son of Bölthorn is the witness to the symbolic death, as well as the actual giver of some of the knowledge Óðinn gains. According to the genealogy known to us from Snorri, this jötunn is the maternal uncle of the god, so his presence might reflect both the important feature of family bonds in a traditional society, and the role of the jötnar as a whole in the continuous quest for wisdom.

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[43] Clunies Ross, Margaret. *Prolonged Echoes. Old Norse myths in medieval Northern society. Volume 1: The myths* (Odense University Press, 1994), 227.

[44] Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Eddukvæði (Sæmundar Edda). Fyrri hluti* (Reykjavík: Íslendingaútgafan, 1949), 60.

Æsir are also reported to have performed some less fatal acts of self-sacrifice. As Clunies Ross discusses at some length, there are three important episodes of this kind: Óðinn sacrificing his eye, Heimdallr giving away his hearing, and Týr deliberately giving a false oath and losing his hand to Fenrir. The sacrifice made by Týr stands slightly apart from the other two, but the body parts or senses given away by Óðinn and Heimdallr have a clear connection to the supernatural wisdom. Each of the two gods mutilates one of his five senses in order to get an analogical supernatural sense to replace it. The receiver of these offerings is the source of wisdom, Mímir's well, the content of which "is knowledge that is suitable to the watchman of the gods and to the god who communes with the dead and seeks constantly to discover the future",[45] as it carries memories and skills of the jötnar, with their understanding of the past and the potential power over the present and the future.

Besides self-sacrifice, ritual killing described in the myths can sometimes be interpreted in terms of shamanistic practice. For example, some scholars see traces of such practice in Baldr myth. However, this myth does not fit into the traditional frame completely, as Baldr, unlike his father, fails to return to the world of the living.[46] Much more relevant to the discussion would be the fate of Gullveig, whom the Æsir apparently killed in their halls and who was burnt not once, but three times. If this mysterious female figure can really be identified with Freyja and Heiðr (as, for instance, Gabriel Turville-Petre suggests), she must have returned from the dead safe and sound, most likely also having augmented her magic powers. A similar kind of experience is probably shared by the völur as a class: while a living woman could be a spákona, she could become a powerful völva only after death, or at least after experiencing death in some way which put her on the border between two worlds.[47]

Coming to the border of the other world and communicating with its inhabitants was considered another way to acquire supernatural knowledge, without actually dying, mutilating oneself or performing a ritual killing. While a god could sometimes cross the border of the other world or wake the dead to talk to them (as Óðinn did with the hanged men), a practitioner of seiðr could establish this kind of communication during an útiseta. Literally the name of this practice means "sitting outside", which summarizes rather accurately what someone not privy to the secret of art would know for sure about the ritual.

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[45] Clunies Ross, Margaret. *Prolonged Echoes. Old Norse myths in medieval Northern society. Volume 1: The myths* (Odense University Press, 1994), 222.

[46] Simek, Rudolf. *Dictionary of Northern Mythology,* trans. Hall, Angela (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer: 1993), 281.

[47] Lionarons, Joyce Tally, "Dísir, Valkyries, Völur, and Norns: The Weise Frauen of the Deutsche Mythologie," in Shippey, Tom, ed., *The Shadow-Walkers: Jacob Grimm's Mythology of the Monstrous* (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies and Brepols, 2005), 271 – 297.

We do not have that much evidence of actual use of útiseta. However, the fact that Christian law all over Scandinavia kept prohibiting the technique[48] suggests that at a certain point it was both put to use and considered effective (or, from the point of view of the Church, dangerous). Going away from human dwelling and staying awake at night (time not appropriate for decent human business) would mean coming in contact with the supernatural forces as close to their own territory as a living human could get.[49] The time and space chosen for útiseta provides the symbolic piece of The Other World, detached from This World, but leaving a way for a safe return. In other words, it creates certain liminal condition necessary for an initiation rite, an act of driving knowledge and power from The Other World.[50] And if even the "god of the hanged" could get some useful knowledge from the dead men, for someone practicing útiseta such a meeting would be a treasure of information. The supernatural beings – dead or in other way inhuman – could yield the knowledge of the past and the future, as well as teach their human companion all kinds of charms and spells. The spirits were probably also responsible for some kind of trance or ecstatic experience, which helped the practitioner of seiðr (as it is common to shamans of many cultures) to see the other worlds or other ages as if with one's own eyes. This might be exactly what makes possible the most famous and most important prophecy of the Old Norse corpus, that of the *Völuspá.* There the circumstances are peculiar in the sense that the supernatural being participating in the ritual is Óðinn himself. However, as Gísli Sigurðsson shows in the recent article on *Völuspá,* the situation seems otherwise absolutely typical: the spirit comes at the völva’s summons, asks what her purpose of calling on him was, then gives her presents and opens the future for her.[51]

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[48] e.g. Gulathingslǫg 32.

[49] Simek, Rudolf. *Dictionary of Northern Mythology,* trans. Hall, Angela (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer: 1993), 344.

[50] Schjødt, Jens Peter. *Initiation Between Two Worlds: structure and symbolism in pre-Christian Scandinavian religion*, trans. Hansen, Victor (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2008), 60.

This way of acquiring supernatural knowledge is almost surprisingly close to the ways used by the magician-priests of Icelandic folk-tales. For example, in the days of his youth Eírikur of Vogsós was said to get his magic wisdom in a rite of invoking the dead bishop. In a similar way Galdra-Loftur tried to increase his own knowledge and power by invoking the dead bishop Gottskálk and getting hold of his legendary book of spells. Such episodes can also be interpreted as the claiming of magic inheritance (the relationship between the living and the dead participants of the ritual being not that of kindred, but of the shared position in the Icelandic Church), but in its form it corresponds to the útiseta model almost perfectly. The peculiar change occurred in the choice of place for the invocation. Now it is not performed “úti”, outside, but inside a church, which in the context of Christianity would be considered much closer to the other world, than the open air.

The use of initiation for becoming a magician does not seem a popular motive in the folklore of Christian times, though the attendance of the Black School might be seen as a visit to the other world (i.e. a symbolic death). It would probably be seen as inappropriate for a priest to undergo a shamanistic initiation, for he had already been initiated into a completely different system when he became a man of Church. But even without a shamanistic initiation, isn’t the very existence of a magician-priest a paradox? Even more surprisingly, how could he be a positive character, well-liked and respected in the society and occupying a social position that is in no way marginal?

2.3. The concept of wisdom and the evolving masculine ideal

As was discussed earlier, one of the important sources of supernatural wisdom is the obtainment of this wisdom directly from an otherworldly being. The Icelandic tradition suggests that seiðr comes directly from Freyja. In *Ynglinga saga*, stating the euhemeristic image of pagan gods, Freyja is a priestess, who brought the knowledge of rituals and magic skills to the North. The practice of útiseta is then a part of her heritage. In *Völuspá* two female figures represent the source of seiðr. These are Gullveig and Heiðr (the first associated with gold, the second with brightness), who may be interpreted as aspects of Freyja. If the fertility goddess, who wandered in our world crying her golden tears, was also passing on her gifts to humankind, this gift would most likely be seiðr.[52]

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[51] Gísli Sigurðsson, “Vǫluspá as a product of oral tradition: What does that entail?” In *The Nordic Apocalypse, Approaches to Vǫluspá and Nordic Days of Judgement*, eds. Gunnell, Terry, and Lassen, Annette (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 51.

Both Gullveig and Heiðr seem hostile to the Æsir and to the men in general. The Æsir resort to violence in order to defeat Gullveig, but are apparently unsuccessful, and her more earthly aspect, Heiðr, teaches human females her art, thus setting them in opposition to males (both divine and human). In this case magic must be associated with femininity, strongly opposed, as well as unattainable, to men. That would concord with the gender-based duality which Margaret Clunies Ross sees in the Old Norse tradition: while life, order and creativity are the masculine functions, all the chaos, destruction, death and, of course, magic are connected to femininity.[53] It must be noted, that Clunies Ross assigns the jötnar to the feminine field.

The feminine practitioners of seiðr, including hostile women and the jötnar would thus make a completely marginal group, which is not allowed into the society governed by creative and orderly males. Moreover, they should have been prosecuted, just as witches commonly were in the Christian Europe. To be sure, some measure of contempt can be seen in the interaction with the völur and jötnar. And of course the jötnar were often killed for threatening the gods' peace and order. Moreover, it is quite evidential that an accusation of practicing seiðr could be equaled with the accusation in passive homosexuality, the one considered the gravest for a Norseman of the past.

However, the extreme marginality of seiðr and its restriction to feminine field do not fit so well with the abundant traces of shamanism found in the Óðinnic myths and (possibly) cult. Even less does it fit with a Christian priest openly practicing magic in the later tradition. It can be argued, that seiðr is "a force which destroys both religion and the society. And yet it is one whose power has to be recognized and incorporated within the socio-religious system."[54] Or one might see Æsir as "opportunists", for whom seiðr was too profitable a facility not to use it in some way (as Clunies Ross puts it). Óðinn would thus seem a single figure, bargaining with his own consciousness (if he ever had one) and resorting to an evil necessary for maintaining the cosmic order.

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[52] Tolley, Clive. *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic. Volume One* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, Academia Scientarum Fennica, 2009), 422.

[53] Clunies Ross, Margaret. *Prolonged Echoes. Old Norse myths in medieval Northern society. Volume 1: The myths* (Odense University Press, 1994), 187.

The ambivalence of Óðinn's standards is probably not a novelty. However, his singularity in this particular sphere is rather problematic. As the god of war and of aristocracy, he engaged his worshipers in his own involvement with the allegedly disgraceful practice. The poets were believed to compose their verses in a sort of trance state, associated with ritual intoxication. The most fierce and devoted warriors turned into wolves or bears in their berserk rage – a belief decidedly shamanistic. And in ancient times the kings probably were sacrificed in a way similar to the hanging of their favorite god. So would this make the warriors and even the kings of pagan times disgraced by the standards of their own society? This seems a highly doubtful suggestion. A more logical deduction here would be to assume the connection between shamanistic practices and war, which can be seen in many other cultures and apparently was also present in Scandinavia – as Lotte Motz showed in a convincing way through a comparative analysis.[55]

Even the quest for supernatural knowledge itself could assume a form of an antagonism if not equal to an actual battle, still related to it in spirit. The hostility between the seeker of knowledge and the jötnar or völur is often obvious – and in fact natural. Interestingly, in *Hyndluljóð* Freyja, who is in this case rendered as a clear ally of her male minion, experiences this hostility. The striking detail here is the fact that the goddess did not manage to get what she wanted from Hyndla without threatening the völva with brutal force.

In connection with the gender identification of seiðr, it is especially interesting to look into the "reverse" examples of warrior maidens. For example, the Valkyrie of *Sígurdrífumál* is the giver of supernatural wisdom to the hero Sigurd. Though she is female, she is strongly connected to the otherwise male sphere of war. In the beginning of her dialogue with Sigurd, Sígrdrifa mentioned that the punishment Óðinn wanted to impose on her for her insolence was giving her out in marriage. This would symbolically take away her warrior nature, and most likely would subsequently strip her of her supernatural powers. Interestingly, another famous female figure known to have the power of invoking the supernatural powers, the maiden warrior Hervör who woke her own dead father, was at the time dressed as a man and living the life of a warlike Viking. Such examples of masculine females making contact with the supernatural can be viewed in connection with the myths of Óðinn the warrior hero Sigurd, who also have the property of actually coming in touch with the supernatural, or with the berserks whose supernatural might manifested itself in the battle frenzy. All these amplify the impression that the bond between war and seiðr actually existed, and had a rather straightforward character.

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[54] Tolley, Clive. *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic. Volume One* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, Academia Scientarum Fennica, 2009), 422.

[55] Motz, Lotte, "Odinn and the giants: a study in ethno-cultural origins." *Mankind Quarterly, 25* (1985): 387–418.

Apparently, while the feminine practitioners of seiðr were considered marginal to the Old Norse society, their masculine counterparts could retain both supernatural wisdom and earthly honor. Their glory could even be enhanced with the help of shamanistic practice. However, the distinguished skalds, the famous berserks and the aristocrats otherwise intimate with Óðinn and his tricks, were of course just a part of the society, and what was granted to them could be considered abnormal and inappropriate for the rest of Scandinavian men. The connection with supernatural was included in the concept of masculinity in this specific way, and it was available only to a specific group. After the Conversion, when the cult of Óðinn gradually lost its positions, this niche could stand empty or even be forgotten. However, the folk-tales show that it did not disappear altogether, but rather shifted, or was re-evaluated.

The very strong connection to death and the ability to exist on the border between the world of humans and the supernatural world, became associated with Christian priests rather than with the warriors and the kings (who were probably perceived as priests at some point in the pagan past[56]). Besides, his whole agency was naturally seen as dealing with mystery and the other world, and that could be conveniently explained through the concepts familiar to the population since the heathen times. Of course, a learned priest was much more rational than an ecstatic prophetess, but they shared the extensive knowledge, which was supernatural (or at least was seen as such by common people). Finally, he was not so obsessed with his masculine identity as opposed to femininity, as the heathens seem to have been: the ideal brought to the North by the Christian Church was an ideal of a gentle male, much less aggressive and moderate.[57]

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[56] See for example: Steinsland, Gro, "Rulers as offspring of Gods and Giantesses: On the mythology of Pagan Norse Rulership." In *The Viking World*, ed. Price, Neil (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 227–230.

But even if a priest was a member of just that kind of elite whose honor could only be enhanced by practicing magic, the new age, governed by Christian laws, should have arisen new questions, those connected with the morality of such behavior.

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[57] Yershova, Yelena, "Men's Laments. Christianization and the Image of Masculinity." In *Scandinavia and Christian Europe in the Middle Ages: papers of The 12th International Saga Conference. Bonn/Germany, 28th July-2nd August 2003*, eds. Meurer, Judith, and Simek, Rudolf (Bonn: Universität Bonn, 2003), 539–548.

3. The Christian tradition about miracles and magic

As the previous chapter suggests, even though the Icelandic folktales about priests practicing magic have some features which relate them to the Nordic mythological tradition (most important of these being the connection with death, the necessity to look for supernatural knowledge and power in the Other World), a lot in these tales contradict the antecedent tradition. Primarily, the social status of priests seems to differ dramatically from that of the seiðr practitioners. A priest is a respected man vested with certain social influence and supposedly conforming to rather high moral standard. On the other hand, a practitioner of seiðr would have been either a woman or a dishonorably feminized man, holding only a marginal position in the society, very unwillingly allowed into it by other people and morally damnable. It is plausible that the cult of Óðinn introduced a part of male aristocracy into the realm of magic as well, and this might help to bring the ideas of masculinity and respectable social status into accord with magical or shamanistic activities. However, if kings, warriors or even poets of the pre-Christian times could rise over general public damnation of seiðr (in case such damnation actually existed), any good Christian, and especially any bishop or priest, should have encountered grave moral obstacles on his way to acquiring and using supernatural wisdom.

Christian attitude towards magic is clearly negative, as it is considered the demonic sphere, completely incompatible with pious life and the salvation of the soul in the face of eternity. This view is sufficiently attested by the numerous trials of witches in Medieval Europe: those who were suspected to practice magic were considered allies of the Devil and severely punished – or rather cleansed, most often by fire. It would be natural for the clergymen to be the worst of enemies of any magical activities. And many of them of course were such. All the more puzzling is thus the strong and fruitful folk tradition imagining priests, monks and even men of highest church rank (up to the Pope) as powerful magicians, almost routinely interacting with all kinds of demons and even the Devil himself. Stories of this kind were particularly popular in England and in Germanic lands, and Scandinavian folklore also shows considerable influence of such ideas.

In this chapter the Icelandic magician-priests will be put into the broader perspective of the European Christian tradition. There are several important issues that such comparative study will hopefully help to clarify. First of all, as has already been mentioned, these tales let the men of church to commit what is considered a terrible sin. Moreover, the characters are often praised for their great skill in the demonic business. The attitude to the magicians is at times discouragingly similar to the way saints or pious men of Church are referred to in hagiography or in Icelandic sagas. And not only the attitudes, but much of the outward appearance unite the stories about saints and magicians. It is important to understand what brings the morally opposite activities so close together, and what essential difference between the magician-priests and their saintly colleagues still separates them.

A look at the geographical (or, rather, geopolitical) spreading of the plot in question suggests that the Reformation and its ideological as well as psychological circumstances possibly played an important role in the development of the ambiguous magician-priest image. Finally, this type of legend or folktale was plausibly much more than an entertainment. In the last part of this chapter an attempt will be made to show the place of magician-priest stories in the formation of the modern European ideal, namely of a man endowed with superhuman qualities, who is constantly on the quest for knowledge of the world and of the power this knowledge promises him.

3.1. Hagiography and folklore on the supernatural powers of Icelandic men of Church

Magician-priests are not the sole men of Church in the Icelandic popular tradition who are capable of doing wondrous, superhuman things. An extensive universal tradition of hagiographic writings, with miracles necessarily embedded into the vitae of saints, found its way to Iceland rather soon after the Conversion in 999/1000. As new churches were built and consecrated, they were dedicated to one or more saints, and a church normally owned a copy of its patron's vita,[58] thus giving a start to the acquaintance of the Icelandic Christians and the universally accepted saints of the Catholic Church.

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[58] Kirsten Wolf, "Pride and Politics in Late-Twelfth-Century Iceland: The Sanctity of Bishop Þorlákr Þórhallsson," in *Sanctity in the North: Saints, Lives and Cults in Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. DuBois, Thomas A. (University of Toronto Press, 2008), 242.

In this country of vernacular rather than Latin learning many of these compositions were rather soon translated into Old Norse. And already by the XIV century the Icelandic sagas about saints were often literary works with a life of their own, different in structure and style from any single Latin original.[59] Besides compiling and revising the evidence of different sources with a rather free hand, Icelanders working on these sagas could also add new miracles, usually situated in their native country, thus expanding the grace of the particular saint to Iceland (as it was done in *Maríu saga*). The tradition of revering saints and telling stories about them seems to become deeply rooted in the Icelandic culture, so that after the Reformation in 1540–50s in Iceland, unlike some other newly Protestant countries, this "emotional heritage" of the previous ages was left scarcely changed.[60]

As the Icelanders learned the art of hagiographic writing by translating Latin compositions into vernacular, the need and inspiration for completely new works of the same kind arose. Sagas were to be written about some most respected and pious men of Iceland, their virtues and miraculous deeds, so that they could be justly revered and officially accepted as saints. The most prominent candidates for this were the bishops, two of whom eventually became recognized saints. In their search for a patron saint for the comparatively new Christian state of Iceland, the Icelanders were not too eager to embrace the Norwegian patron, St. Olaf Haraldsson, and the feeble attempts to promote his predecessor, Olaf Tryggvasson, to sanctity, were unsuccessful, so Iceland was in both spiritual and political need of its own native, someone pious and influential enough, and able to fulfill the requirements for sanctity.[61] Among the most important of these requirements were the miracles attributed to the candidate.[62] In 1098, as the first miracles were attested and the relics disinterred, the bishop of Skálholt Þorlákr Þórhallsson (1133–1193) was proclaimed a saint at the Althing, and in the same year the northern bishopric of Hólar attained its own saintly bishop, Jón Ögmundsson (1052–

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[59] Cormack, Margaret. "Christian Biography." In *A companion to Old Norse-Icelandic literature and culture*, ed. McTurk, Rory (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 27–42.

[60] Hood, John C. F.. *Icelandic Church saga* (London: Society for promoting Christian Knowledge, 1946), 159.

[61] Kirsten Wolf, "Pride and Politics in Late-Twelfth-Century Iceland: The Sanctity of Bishop Þorlákr Þórhallsson," in *Sanctity in the North: Saints, Lives and Cults in Medieval Scandinavia,* ed. DuBois, Thomas A. (University of Toronto Press, 2008), 243.

[62] DuBois, Thomas A., introduction to *Sanctity in the North: Saints, Lives and Cults in Medieval Scandinavia,* ed. DuBois, Thomas A. (University of Toronto Press, 2008), 10.

1120). Both St. Þorlákur and St. Jón Ögmundsson received their share of attention in the saga literature. In the later generation Bishop Guðmundur Arason of Hólar (1161–1237) was perhaps the closest to a popularly revered saint, and even though he did not eventually make it into the ranks of official saints, the stories about his miracles and encounters with the supernatural are quite abundant.

According to the sagas about Icelandic saints, these pious men, both during their lives and after death, proved extremely useful to common folk. Invoking them in prayers helped to cure the sick, find lost cattle, or stay safe during bad weather. In the end of the saga about St. Þorlákr there is a detailed list of such services.[63] The general idea that can be driven from it is that the saint bishop was a friendly companion to whom common people could turn in their everyday lives to miraculously solve the most pressing problems. He is neither arrogant nor intimidating, and is never squeamish about the most mundane tasks like finding a valuable chain lost in the fields, as long as he is asked in a right way. Of course, any Christian saint is an intercessor between God and men, an example of good life and a medium of holy grace. However, the focus of the stories about miracles in the sagas of bishops is mostly on the domestic convenience of having a supernatural helper and certain instruments (in this case – prayers) to solve the problems of household, health, private and social life in a miraculous way. In fact, in this sense the role of saints and magician-priests in the community is quite similar, with the difference that a saint's miraculous powers are useful for a practically eternal span of time, while the magician-priests are active only during their lives and are only believed to preserve their magic posthumously in case they are cursed and become restless spirits – and then can only be helpful to some skillful magicians as the sources of knowledge. After a magician dies, common people need another one to take his place, while with saints they can turn to the same one that used to help their forefathers.

Of course, while the practical outcome of a saint's and a magician's activities might seem quite the same (a dying man is healed, a scattered cattle is found, a ship survives a storm), it must not be forgotten that the sources of their powers are drastically different: the grace of God in one case and the assistance of the Devil, the dead or old pagan lore in the other. This fundamental difference might even be quite enough to put the two kinds of miracle-makers in two worlds, contrary and hostile to each other. However, in the Icelandic sagas and folktales this does not happen.

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[63] Þorláks saga byskups in elzta, k. LXXXIII.

On the one hand, the magicians are driven closer to the saints by their attachment to the Church. They are not only Christians, but the formal representatives of Church. As priests, they are also intermediaries between God and men, though of course less revered ones than the saints.

On the other hand, the sagas of the saintly bishops, as well as legends of other man of Church, who were remembered for some miraculous deeds procured by prayer rather than magic, unfold in the same literary world as the folktales about magician-priests. The common folk can be assaulted by walking dead, the curses of evil magicians bring disease and crop failure, terrible troll-women try to bring down churches or carry away good farmers. For example, in her article on Arngrímr Brandsson's *Guðmundar saga Arasonar* Marlene Ciklamini shows how the story of one of the most pious and revered Icelandic bishops can be told as a folktale, complete with magical encounters and wonderful adventures.[64] In this world full of supernatural creatures and alien forces a saint or a pious priest has to adjust in order to become a successful champion of humankind. Even without turning to magic himself, he does not only admit the power of hostile spirits, but adapts to the rules of their existence and their battles, as has already been briefly discussed in chapter one of the present paper. And the saintly bishops are no exception here.

The popular tradition about Sæmundur inn fróði contains a curious example of folktale and hagiography, sainthood and magic merging. Both the sagas of St. Jón and folktales of Sæmundur tell of these two famous men of Church meeting in a situation rather tough for the latter. As the young magician had undergone his education in supernatural lore, he became eager to get away from his teacher, some powerful wizard according to *Sæmundar þáttr*, or the demonic master of the Black School, as the folktales[65] put it. Both traditions agree that at this point Sæmundur met Jón

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[64] Ciklamini, Marlene. Folklore and Hagiography in Arngrímr's Guðmundar saga Arasonar (Materials of International Saga Conference 2006). Accessed at http://web.archive.org/web/20080926185006/http://www.dur.ac.uk/medieval.www/sagaconf/ciklamini.htm

[65] Jón Árnason, safn., *Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Æfintýri* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich, 1862–64), Fyrsta bindi, 486.

Ögmundsson, and the future saint, at that time already a much revered man, helped the magician-priest in his escape. The two men set out together and designed certain tricks so that their pursuer lost track of Sæmundur: for instance, putting a bowl of water on the young priest's chest at night made the Devil (or the wizard foster-father) believe that Sæmundur was drowned by his companion. The performance of such tricks obviously requires guile and magic skill, and while the actor of the necessary magic rites seems to be Sæmundur himself, the pious Jón played an important role in inspiring and designing the trick. However saintly this man was, according to the popular image of him he was no alien to deceit and not unwilling to use magic, if the goal achieved by these dubitable means was undeniably good. And so it was, for before consenting to help Sæmundur Jón made sure that the young man was not going astray as soon as his freedom was secured, but set out for their native Iceland to become a good priest and a devoted servant of God and men there.

This sort of apparent discrepancy between the strong intention to serve God as a rightful Christian priest and the use of magical tricks and guile is a common characteristic of many legendary Icelandic men of Church, both those who were magicians as well as priests and those who possessed no outspoken magical skills themselves. In the folktale Iceland, where various trolls and wizards were practically a reality of everyday life, a pious priest had to assume some of their ways and devices in order to successfully fight them.

Both contrasts and similarities between malevolent magicians and the good priests or magician-priests can be traced in the stories of their encounters. Rev. Vigfús Benediktsson, who lived in the second half of XVIII century, was believed to be unafraid of evil wizards and often gave them hard times.[66] Although he was not said to practice active magic, he displayed both possible ways of fighting supernatural enemies in his confrontation with Ólafur galdramaður, a powerful wizard in Einholt. The first way, natural for a priest, was prayer: for instance, when Ólafur made some girl mortally ill by kissing her, Rev. Vigfús prayed for her health and cured her with the help of God. Moreover, the curse was not just lifted, but stroke back upon its creator, making Ólafur himself sick instead of the innocent girl. Thus the second way of fighting against magic was involved in this wondrous cure: magic successfully beat magic, though in this case the priest did not have to say any spells. In another encounter with Ólafur Vigfús was saved from his malevolent schemes not by God, but by supernatural knowledge and peculiar magic tricks of his wife. First the woman had a premonition of the wizard poisoning her husband, and then she managed to enter (apparently in some spectral form) the room where the two men were having dinner and neutralize the poisoned beverage.

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[66] Ibid., 589–592.

In some other instances the folktale priests fought supernatural evil with supernatural means directly, not through any mediation of either God or humans. For example, Rev. Snorri of Húsafell was once blinded by the force of some hostile wizard. The magician-priest did not try to pray or sick any other external help, but used his own powers to charm the same object that did the damage and make it produce an opposite effect. His eyesight was thus restored in the very same fashion that had taken it away, turning the bad force into a good one without changing its nature in any way.[67]

Priests could use supernatural tricks not only to strike back at some enemy well-versed in magic or to neutralize some supernatural damage. Magic could be an answer not only to magic, but to quite natural problems which could not be solved by simple human powers. For example, when a bell had fallen in the church at Hólaskóla, one of the students called Sæmundur (a namesake of the famous XII century magician-priest) took up the task of hanging it back. No man could lift the bell, and the folk tradition does not attribute its miraculous restoration to the power of God, but at night, while Sæmundur was apparently resting peacefully in his own room, some force serving him lifted the bell back to its place.[68] Certain magic or alliance with a supernatural force is suggested by this story, and here it seems just a convenient instrument, which has mysterious and rather dubitable nature, but is good enough as long as young Sæmundur uses it to the benefit of the School and t the glory of God.

Wonderful healings, construction or repairs of church buildings, exposure of thieves and restitution of lost things, protection from bad weather and from evil magicians, and many other actions of good service to the people are among the deeds of folktale priests as well as renowned saints. The difference between a magician-priest and a saint is very often not in what he is striving to achieve, but in his methods. A man of exemplary piety turns to God or to saints and prays for a miracle, or becomes the medium of this miracle, if he is himself a saint endowed by God with accordant powers. Another man turns to books of magic, ancient spells, charmed objects and obedient demonic spirits. The effects of these two ways of action are often similar or even identical. The specific essence of a magician-priest's nature thus lies not in what he is doing, but in how he is doing it. His methods, together with the logic and ethics of their application, make him different from saints or exemplary Christians of the religious tradition, as well as give his character and all his career complexity and ambiguity.

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[67] Ibid., 586–587.
[68] Ibid., 601–602.

3.2. The significance of knowledge in the career of a European magician

Some effects of their activities and the goals they pursue might associate the magician-priests of the Icelandic folktales with the pious men or even saints performing their miracles for the sake of humankind. However, certain essential attributes of mind and of fate put the magician-priests in a tight relation with a group of legendary European magicians, whose lives were far from blamelessness or sainthood, despite their connection with the Christian Church.

Some of the magicians of mainland Scandinavia bear considerable resemblance to their Icelandic colleagues. The magician-priests of the folktales like the Norwegian Rev. Petter Dass (the actual counterpart lived in Northern Norway in 1647–1707) or the Danish Doctor Kongsted of Ballerup (very likely a collective image) combine the values and activities of a magician with those of a good Christian priest, alternately preaching and chanting spells, invoking the God or seeking help from the Devil, as a particular situation demands.[69]

In medieval Europe magicians were naturally believed to have some sort of connection with the Devil or with lesser demons. The evil spirits could help the men, even serve them (of course in hope for a reward), or they could cause trouble to a magician, who would have to lose his soul, his possessions and his dreams, or otherwise deal with the enemy using his own methods. Of course, the connection to the Devil, in the form of a contract or some other kind of agreement, was also imputed to witches.

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[69] Simpson, Jacqueline, trans. and ed., *Scandinavian Folktales*. London: Penguin, 1998.

However, the malevolent women endowed with certain supernatural power were not capable or not daring enough (or very likely both at once) to oppose the force which had given them the power, to avoid the terrible consequences of the demonic deal, or to outwit the Devil in any way. On the other hand, some of the legendary male magicians, especially those who were ordained priests or monks, could hope to do all these things. Not only did they have a chance for miraculous salvation in the after-life, but they could also interact with the guileful evil spirits on fairly equal terms.

As a result of clever and daring actions on the part of legendary magician-priests the Devil was not only tricked out of getting their souls, but could also become an unwilling tool of improving the lives of humans and even of promoting Christianity. For example, both Petter Dass and Sæmundur inn fróði used the services of the Devil to travel across the sea – Sæmundur returning back home from the Black School, and Rev. Petter Dass explicitly going to preach in Denmark. Of course, the cheated Devil did not initially plan for either of the passengers to ever reach their respective flocks with their souls intact. Neither did he intend his work to be of any true use for the good Christians when he agreed to build a bridge to the church for Sæmundur's flock – waiting to get the souls of three first people who step on that bridge, but having to be satisfied with three puppies, as the Icelandic priest was very good at finding loopholes in such contracts. The Devil receives similar kind of treatment in the tales known in the folklore of many nations: he agrees to build a church for a good payment, is tricked by a wise priest or a smart commoner in the priest's service, and eventually finds himself having worked for the benefit of the community for free and often barely avoiding physical damage or loss of freedom. It is both curious and crucially important in such bargains, that neither priests nor other human characters of the folktales shun the use of the Devil's services as long as these services can be turned to the benefit of the community and of the Christian Church and the payment can be avoided. The means to achieve the goal are thus perceived as rather unimportant, while the actual result of using them is what matters. The significance of the stories about magicians and devils are affected considerably with such a non-dogmatic approach.

The Devil and his taint do not seem to be a crucial part of a magician's power. Unlike the tales of witches, who are almost unavoidably exposed and rather dreadfully punished, many stories about magicians are not primarily focusing on sin and temptation. The points of great importance in the plots of the latter type are the wisdom of the magician, his various skills, his wit and his courage. And his magical power does not come as a direct abstract gift from other magicians or supernatural creatures, but as a result of knowledge acquired with some exertion and applied with skill. It is quite telling that, for instance, in Scandinavia, while female witches were normally trialed for their use of magic and connection to the Devil, male magicians were more commonly accused of heresy.[70] In other words, women were trialed for deed and men had to answer primarily for their thoughts. This is in fact quite sensible, considering that sometimes it is not outward appearance, but the underlying motives and sources that separate magic of a crafty magician-priest from a miracle performed by a saint (as was discussed above), and the official Church, unlike the audience of the folktales, would not be satisfied with the good results achieved by sinful means.

The core of a magician’s difference from other people, of his mystery and his sin can be found in his relation to knowledge. He desires to know what most people do not even dream about, he acquires the wisdom which seems to others practically unattainable, and he uses it with a dazzling effect which looks superhuman, supernatural and, in the minds of common folk, might as well be such. In the Middle Ages such a grand learnedness is most characteristic for the men of church, from priests and monks to the high Church officials, whose memory as well as access to knowledge could reach limits unthinkable even to the comparatively literate of laymen. Social status and the position in the Church hierarchy might give one authority and public respect, but it is the supernatural knowledge reputedly available to the men of Church that draws a line between them and other people. And this knowledge is the feature that makes the legendary magicians what they are.

Being a minister of religion is not a necessary requirement in itself: as long as a character has enough curiosity and diligence to amaze others with his knowledge, he has a certain chance of being remembered as a magician. A skilled poet can become a master magician, as he has the knowledge of language and thus a power over it.[71] Thereby Egill Skallagrímsson acquired the reputation of being skilled at rune charms –

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[70] Mitchell, Stephen A.. *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania press, 2011.

[71] Gurevich, Elena, and Matyushina, Irina. *Poezija skaldov*. Moskva: RGGU, 1999.

and as is stressed in his saga, the difference between failure and success in the rune magic is precisely the difference between ignorance and knowledge. Another pagan poet, who lived across the whole continent and several centuries earlier than Egill, the Roman Publius Vergilius Maro (70–19 BC) became famous in French, English, Celtic and other folk traditions as a powerful magician. Characteristically, his legendary magical activities include both skillful command over natural elements and construction of uncannily clever mechanisms for protecting and making comfortable the city of Naples. In the Christian society the supernatural power of knowledge could also be discovered by those who studied religious literature without being ordained as a priest. One of the most famous European magician of all times, Doctor Johann Faust learned his magical tricks while studying theology. Interestingly, when Faust acquired the demon for his servant he used the new opportunities not only for blasphemous and obscene tricks, but for learning more about the universe and seeing every possible part of it, thus continuing his lifelong quest for knowledge. The legends about both Vergilius and Doctor Faust found their way to Iceland, the former becoming a character of rímur, while the story about the latter lived as a folktale, so it is not implausible that these traditions could have a part in forming (or at least supporting) the Icelandic idea of a magician who is empowered by his knowledge.

Magic, religion and science can go together when a man of Church chooses to take interest in the laws of nature and in possibilities of artificial marvels as well as in ancient spells. According to popular legends, English philosopher and friar Roger Bacon (ca 1214–1294), as well as Pope Silvester II (Gerbert d’Aurillac, 946–1003) chose this kind of across-the-board development of their knowledge and skills. As a result, they became famous for their half-magical and half-mechanical inventions (for instance, a talking mechanical head, a device alternately attributed to both Roger and Gerbert) in addition to their knowledge of spells and numerous encounters with unlucky demons. Legendary characters originating from Scandinavia do not usually show great interest in mechanics, but can become supernaturally good at other sciences and crafts which were of great use to them and to the community – for instance, in medicine (as many of the Icelandic magician-priests or the Danish Doctor Kongsted), or in construction engineering (as Árum-Kári with his complicated system of secret tunnels). Such achievements can have fantastical, magical nature, or be quite natural results of extraordinary diligence and thoughtfulness, – most likely they involve both – but in any case they are manifestations of inquisitive and creative minds, which strive to amass various sorts of knowledge and are able to convert it into practical benefit and power.

The Icelandic tradition of associating the quest for supernatural wisdom with book learning is in no way unique: it has been the most general tendency across Christian Europe to build the legendary education of a magician after the model of the real religious, theological or scientific education.[72] There is an ample number of continental counterparts to the Icelandic legends of Black Schools and books of dark magic – to pick just one national tradition as an example, in Danish legends the Black School was placed somewhere in Norway, and the most powerful and dangerous book of magic was the Book of Cyprianus, allegedly written by three famous magicians of old.[73] Even though summoning a demon and signing a condemning contract with him (as in the legend of Doctor Faust) could arguably be called an impulsive act, the whole way leading to this move cannot possibly be impulsive. The education of a magician requires ambition, conscious decision, courage and patience. If the quest for knowledge and its most efficient uses are indeed unattainable features of a magician's career, he must be a very specific type of character to make such a career possible.

3.3. The ambiguous ethics of the magician-priests

It has been discussed above that the quest for knowledge is what makes the magician-priests who they are. As this pursuit becomes the center of his career, it influences the magician's priorities and values, dictates the necessity of certain methods of action and provokes the development and manifestation of specific traits in his character. The ethics of a magician-priest, principles and moral laws according to which he acts are drastically important for understanding of the nature and significance of this type of characters.

The actions of the magician-priests in legends and folktales can be considered ambiguous in two different ways. On the one hand, a magician is in contact with demonic beings and forces. His being a man of Church makes his sin even more vivid. However, in the folklore he is believed to have a chance of reconciliation with God, his soul can be saved and enter Heaven despite his magical actions and communications with evil spirits. On the other hand, in his interactions with the Devil a magician-priest also demonstrates a peculiar kind of ethics. He does not resist the temptation, but is often willing to make a deal and take the best he can from it. However, after getting all the benefits or luring the Devil to do what the magician wants, he uses his wisdom to avoid carrying out his own part of the bargain. In such cases it is the magician who acts with almost demonic guile, while his counterpart is sincere, naïve and faithful to his own word. Of course, in this way the magician saves his soul (or the soul of someone of his flock), but meanwhile he manages to benefit from both good and evil. A priest, whose behavior should be exemplary, seems to violate his moral duty before God, then break the promise he had voluntary made to the Devil, and get away without any consequences from either. Moreover, the use he makes of religious attributes and practices in his activities are precariously close to cunning ploys rather than genuine manifestation of faith: Sæmundur uses his Bible to beat the Devil at the head; Roger Bacon retires to the specially made room in the monastery where his bargain with the Devil is logically rendered invalid; even the remorse comes to most magician-priests at the very moment where not to repent would mean damnation. The underlying logic and significance of this situation calls for an investigation.

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[72] Hayes, Kevin J.. *Folklore and Book Culture.* Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1997.

[73] Simpson, Jacqueline, trans. and ed., *Scandinavian Folktales*. London: Penguin, 1998.

It is both rational and useful to review the ethics in the spirit of which the legendary characters act, in connection with the ethics of the real society preserving those legends. The tales of the men of Church practicing magic mostly flourished in the northern part of Europe: in Scandinavia, Germany, England. While the actions of some legendary southern magicians could be partly justified by their mingling with forces of alien religions (for instance, the Pope Silvester supposedly drew much of his knowledge and skills from Arabic spirits), their northern colleagues did not have to betray their own religion in such an obvious way. In their quest for knowledge, their sin and their reconciliation with God they stayed in the boundaries of Christianity. More specifically, their ethics and mentality can be explained from the postulates of Protestantism, the religion many of them did really profess in their lifetime, while others adopted some of its features posthumously, already as the characters of folktales and legends told in the Protestant environment.

The Reformation, starting in 1517 in Wittenberg, reached Iceland in the middle of XVI century, Skálholt accepting its basic principles in 1541 and Hólar, due to its more distant position, yielding to the continental influence of the new type of Christianity in 1551.[74] Protestantism brought new understanding of some fundamental concepts of the Christian doctrine, as well as new ethics and values. Arguably, the new ideas might really be more fitting[75] for the Germanic and Nordic environment, which sprung from the ancient myths and legends very different in many aspects from the Mediterranean ones and thus connected to different kind of mentality.

Two basic concepts common to most Protestant thinkers already at the early stages of the doctrines' development are especially important for understanding the behavior of the legendary magician-priests.

First of all, in Protestantism the blind faith makes room for deep realization of the fundamental ideas explaining and supporting the religious doctrine. Faith cannot be based on ignorance; it requires learning and understanding, as well as educated assent and acceptance of both cognoscible aspects of God and faith and aspects which are in principle imperceptible and incognizable.[76] Thus a believer is also necessarily a scholar of a kind, not satisfied with unclear, unsupported or impenetrable statements given to him in a fixed and vague form by an authority. He can become a true Christian only after his own quest for knowledge is completed, supported by such statements, but not restricted to them. This is especially true for priests, who must be constantly guiding their flock on such a quest. A priest strives for knowledge and understanding of difficult and mysterious matters, as his natural propensity to learning is enhanced by the requirements of his holy vocation, the responsibility in the face of God, of his flock and of himself as a faithful man. In the Icelandic culture and mentality this ethical necessity to seek and comprehend wisdom fits quite naturally with the much more ancient tradition of pagan quest for knowledge, peculiarly likening a Christian priest with his flock to the pagan gods and heroes, particularly to Óðinn and his followers. Thus the importance given to the wisdom quest on the earliest stages of cultural development is endowed with new layers of significance in the late medieval and modern Christian culture.

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[74] Hood, John C. F.. *Icelandic Church saga* (London: Society for promoting Christian Knowledge, 1946), 157–159.

[75] Ibid., 143.

[76] Cameron, Euan. *The European Reformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 117–118.

The second feature of Protestant ethics important to the image of a magician-priest is the idea of justification.[77] In its treatment of the nature and implications of sin the Catholic doctrine is both more favorable and more demanding to mortal men. A Catholic can be considered absolutely pious, purified of the consequences of the original sin. He can be condemned irrevocably due to his ungodly behavior, but he can also achieve total redemption; it is in his own hands to follow all the necessary rules and commandments, to become a model Christian and perhaps even a saint. For a Protestant the situation is different. No one is free from the mark of the original sin, and no penance can remove this mark. Moreover, while the difference between great sins and minor misdeeds is in fact removed, no action on the part of a sinner, no piety or penitence can actually make up for his personal sins. The complete fulfillment of the moral law and spiritual purification are perceived not as difficult tasks, but as something a human being (however good and faithful) cannot achieve on his own, as the supernatural gifts given to humans by God at the time of creation and bringing the nature of man close to the nature of God were completely destroyed in the act of the original sin. Everything that is left in terms of pursuit of the moral ideal is the faith in God and His mercy, and the complete confidence (achieved by faith and learning) that God would forgive the sinner, save and spiritually transform his inherently corrupted soul. Even before the Holy Spirit completes such a transformation of a man’s soul, the man who has faith and confidence is reckoned as justified. Both the faith and justification are gifts from God, while only the understanding of their consequences is product of the man’s own work. One of the most important things that one must find on his quest for knowledge is the fact that he can really do nothing to save his own soul and redeem his own sins, except for relying entirely and genuinely on the benevolent impact of the Holy Spirit.

Taking into consideration these views on sin and forgiveness, it is not at all inexplicable that even a priest can lead a life that does not seem at all exemplary (after all, he is a human being and naturally incapable of being exemplary) and still be reconciled with God, as he turns for mercy with genuine faith and hope.

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[77] Ibid., 121–123.

Armed with these principles as well as his own aims and inclinations, a magician-priest would not (and cannot) become an ideal personification of moral law and rightfulness. However, there is much good to be said about his life, though his goodness is not the goodness of a saint or a model monk. The important things that should be credited him are his good intentions and his usefulness to the community. As has been discussed above, a magician who puts his selfish thirst for knowledge and power above everything else does not get the reconciliation with God and the happy end reserved for the favorites of the folk. The condemned magicians might be dreaded for their enormous powers, but most part of public respect, as well as the holy salvation, are given to those who set and achieve altruistic goals, using their supernatural wisdom to the benefit of the common folk.

While a magician-priest with his dealings with supernatural and his guile absolutely cannot claim the title of a saint, he fits quite neatly into the mythological category of culture heroes. He is among the most educated people of his society, having access to all sort of knowledge which is not available and at times rather obscure to its other members. Besides, he is exposed to the light other than the light of knowledge, that of divine grace, and sharing this with the flock. The most important objective of a priest, as well as of a culture hero, is the improvement of living conditions in the world made by gods (or the God), the adaptation of this world to the needs of humans who live in it. Initially a culture hero appeared in the scientific discourse under the name of Heilbringer (the term introduced by German historian K. Breysig in 1905 literally means “giver of boons” or “savior”).[78] This term is used to designate a class of mythological beings (usually primary humans, super humans, titans) who bring culture to mankind, invent crafts, language, and the art of writing, and found all kinds of political and social institutes. Thus, culture heroes stand at the origin of human history and civilization. The classical example of a culture hero in Greek mythology would be Prometheus, who brought the fire of the sun to people.

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[78] Jones, Lindsay, ed. in chief, *Encyclopedia of Religion, Second Edition* (Thomson Gale, 2005), V. III, 2090.

In a symbolic way the function of the priest is rather similar to that of a culture hero like Prometheus. But then there is the question of the means that are used to perform this function. While a priest is supposed to act in accordance with the will of Christian God, Prometheus (as well as other heroes of his kind) angered his gods and was severely punished. He is not only a benefactor, but also a thief, a breaker of most sacred laws of his society, a troublemaker. This sort of duality, ambiguity is characteristic of many culture heroes. They often behave in all sorts of funny, foolish and dangerous ways, taking on the features of jokers and fraudsters. It is thus unsurprising that in many mythological systems (including Scandinavian mythology) the figure of a culture hero can be merged with the trickster figure. And the priest of folk legends, as he is turning to the Devil, to demons or to the spirits of the dead for assistance and knowledge, is also trespassing the border between the two classes, those of culture heroes and of tricksters.

But what exactly is a trickster, and how can a troublemaker serve a positive function, especially if he is (at least in some cases) to be associated with a dignified image of a Christian priest?

As the Jungian philologist and student of religious science K.Kerényi noted, a trickster can hardly be associated with a simple hero carrying a bludgeon, like Hercules.[79] The word “trickster” in itself suggests a close correlation with such ideas as trickery, bluff, joke, or characteristics like tricky, unreliable, cunning, and even sophisticated.[80] This term refers to a whole family of mythological creatures who are especially good at all sorts of fraud and deceit. His very essence is that of a mischievous spirit of disorder and chaos. He acknowledges no rules and no boundaries, and by his own life principles he is forced to play the part of a thief, a joker and an actor. His main function is putting together the cosmic (and social) order and the elements of chaos, thus coming up with a new sort of whole, including the inappropriate and forbidden into the frame of commonly accepted and allowed.[81]

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[79] Kerenyi, Karl, „Trikster i drevnegrecheskaja mifologija.“ In *Trikster. Issledovanija mifov severoamerikanskih indeizev*, ed. Radin, Pavel (Saint-Petersbourg: Evrazija, 1999), 247.

[80] Davydov, Dmitry, “K opredeleniju trikstera i ego znachimosti v soziokulturnoj realnosti. In *Pervaja Vserossijskaja nauchnaja konferenzija “Filosofija i sozialnaja dinamika XXI veka: problemy i perspektivy,” 15 maja 2006 g. [materialy]* (Omsk: SIBIT, IPEK, SRSB (kolledg), 2006), 359.

[81] Kerenyi, Karl, „Trikster i drevnegrecheskaja mifologija.“ In *Trikster. Issledovanija mifov severoamerikanskih indeizev*, ed. Radin, Pavel (Saint-Petersbourg: Evrazija, 1999), 258.

A trickster image is in fact much deeper and much more indispensable than it can seem from the first sight. In the introduction to D.A.Gavrilov's book "Trickster. An actor in the Eurasian folklore" the psychologist V.V.Minkina shows the similarities between a trickster and a child. A trickster is both very old and very young, as he is both keeping all the wealth of human experience and giving this experience a new understanding, making everyone in touch with him to see the world in a different way. He does it in a way similar to that of a child, who "makes an adult see the world in a new way, creates his own world, however clumsily, as he might be destroying more than he is creating. In this way the child achieves his task, being motivated to get acquainted with things and amass experience. A child is almighty, as he is producing whatever he wants out of anything else."[82] Due to similar features in the character of a trickster he often becomes the cause for moving forward, the source of new and daring beginnings and altogether nontrivial solutions. But the superficial lack of seriousness in trickster's attitudes, his apparent thoughtlessness can also make his actions cruel, as well as extremely ambiguous in ethical sense

In Christian culture the archetype of a trickster is still remembered, but it is mostly given a negative shade: the role of a trickster is usually given to a demon, to the Devil himself, or other unholy supernatural being. A good example of a trickster in a Christian legend is the demon Mephistopheles, with whom the most famous of the magician-priests' continental counterparts, Doctor Johann Faust, made his pact. It is interesting that Doctor Faust gradually assumed the role initially assigned to his demonic companion. The two opposites come closer and closer to each other, until each of the two assumes so many of the other's features that it becomes hard to tell who is who. Eventually, the merging of culture hero and trickster reaches the stage when the two become just masks alternately worn by the same character. He is the cultural hero, the titan, the reflection and the benefactor of mankind. But he is also the reckless, cunning and often flippant joker, who can make fun of the Devil himself. The guileful spirit which used to be a threat becomes simply assimilated by his former victim, which gives up the naïveté and innocence for the wisdom of a demon, a joker, a cheater. Of course, the benefaction of such a hero also assumes an often ambiguous character. He is the one able to laugh at the old order and to defy it; he can doubt the commonly revered truths, and even commit sacrilege without actually crossing the line and coming to the side of evil.

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[82] Gavrilov, Dmitry. *Trikster. Lizedej v evroaziatskom folklore* (Moskva: Sozialno-Politicheskaja Mysl, 2006), 7.

While some features of Faust as a trickster came to light only in some modern interpretations of the plot, the Icelandic magician-priests assumed the strength of a guileful and somewhat demonic, easy-minded and canny character already in the Middle Ages. They play tricks on common people and demonic creatures with equal ease, they often act recklessly; they may be mischievous but always manage to get away with it. And with all the passion for knowledge and power that many of them possess, they are still preserving the qualities of a culture hero, his ultimate purpose. Mostly they do not seek only fun or pleasure, but act as benefactors for the community, using their demonic and tricky resources to improve the state of local economy, to find cure for the sick, to catch thieves, to defeat malevolent magicians. They have the childish charm and peculiar ability to defy the established mores, and they make these useful both to the flock and to themselves.

Although a magician-priest is mingling with evil spirits and dangerous supernatural wisdom, he manages to stay on good terms with God as a faithful Christian of a Protestant kind; he also avoids giving away anything to Devil, as he learns to trick the trickster; and he also gains a venerable reputation among the humans, who are amused by his feats and grateful for the results that his actions bring.

4. Constructing identity of Iceland and Icelanders

The fruitful motive of magician-priests, their quest for wisdom and their exploits is not a random element in the Icelandic folklore. The belief in the power of knowledge, the peculiar ethics of benefit and common sense, as well as the outward effects of magic and the relationship of equals between humans and the supernatural – all these characteristic features of the motive in question have their roots and parallels both in the heathen Nordic tradition and in the Christian culture of the more recent centuries. At least, such a conclusion can be made after a brief survey of the Icelandic and foreign narrative evidence of magic meeting religion, in the variety and form such evidence is preserved up to our day.

The previous chapters give an outline of a magician-priest's image and show that this image might possibly be a representation of a national character, taking in the most important, the most respected and treasured qualities and values of a certain national ideal in their most vivid form. The concept of folklore containing such an ideal and, in more general terms, reflecting the very "soul" of the nation is one of the most important foundations underlying Romantic Nationalism and the massive movement of collecting and studying the European folklore, active since the early XIX century onwards. Due to the social and political development of Iceland in the XIX–XX centuries, the nationalistic movement, including the preservation of cultural heritage and the revival of traditional Icelandic culture, has been playing a particularly important role in the history of this country. The collections of folktales are only a part of a much larger campaign, of a long quest for national identity and pride. Editing, publishing and popularizing the sagas, reconstructing mythology and rituals of the ancient past, reviving old arts and crafts, reclaiming the Icelandic manuscripts and other major ambitious undertakings are all parts of this quest, striving to assert who the Icelanders really are.

However great the effort to retain the cultural heritage might be, it would be quite naïve to examine this heritage for absolute objective truths about the past of a nation. Valdimar T. Hafstein, professor of Folkloristics in the Universities of Iceland and of Gothenburg, warns his readers: "Don't be fooled by the talk of preservation: all heritage is change."[83] The notion of heritage, as well as the notion of tradition itself, was in a sense created by the modern society, or, more specifically, "society on its way into the modern age."[84] Singling out certain objects, or customs, or narratives, classifying them and labeling them as the cultural heritage, the embodiment of national tradition, changes these parts of the culture's past, enrooting them into its present, with the new attitude and significance attributed to them. In fact, a study of a nation's heritage, its most valued customs and works of art, narratives and beliefs, can tell us not less, and very likely much more, about the nation's present, than about its past.[85]

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[83] Hafstein, Valdimar T., "Cultural Heritage." In *A Companion to Folklore,* eds. Bendix, Regina F., and Hasan-Rokem, Galit (Blackwell, 2012), 502.

It is most possible that as a narrative is born, it reflects the reality contemporary to it: if not the strict facts, then its values, aspirations and dreams of the people who conceive and enjoy the stories might find their way into the creative designs. As time passes, reality inevitably changes, and so does the narrative – it is especially true of a medieval narrative, which has no fixed authorship or form, and at all times it is true about folklore. Not only the form or some details are transformed, but the perception of a cultural text can vary considerably from one age to another. The tracks of the reality and the cultural text first born of it can finally get drastically separated. But at A certain point, as the problems of heritage and preservation arise, a certain state of a custom, or a narrative, or some other fluid form of folk culture, is sought out, frozen and taken as a solid residue of the long-gone Golden Age. Then it becomes part of the foundation on which the reconstruction of the past is built, and a lens through which the present is seen, and even an element of the ideal future. Although presented and usually quite sincerely perceived as a reconstruction of the past, it is largely an original and highly significant creative construction.

This, in rather rough terms, is the process undergone by the Icelandic folktales. And if the previous parts of this research mostly addressed the links of the stories about magician-priests to the traditions of the past, the focus of this chapter is on their significance in the modern times, when they were collected, repeatedly published and re-evaluated, and their place in the modern image and self-conscience of the nation.

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[84] Selberg, Torunn, "Folklore and Mass Media," in *Nordic Frontiers: Recent Issues in the Study of Modern Traditional Culture in the Nordic Countries*, eds. Anttonen, Pertti J., and Kvideland, Reimund, (Turku: Nordic Institute of Folklore, 1993), 201.

[85] Anttonen, Pertti J., "Folklore, Modernity, and Postmodernism. A Theoretical Overview," in *Nordic Frontiers: Recent Issues in the Study of Modern Traditional Culture in the Nordic Countries*, eds. Anttonen, Pertti J., and Kvideland, Reimund, (Turku: Nordic Institute of Folklore, 1993), 17 – 18.

4.1. The modern revival and redefinition of Icelandic culture

It is largely believed and understood from the classic Icelandic literature that for a comparably brief period in the Middle Ages Iceland lived in its “Golden Age”[86], in many aspects leaving the larger continental countries behind, producing great literature, mature laws and political system, and exercising a truly independent proud mentality. However, many centuries after were marked by stagnation, foreign rule and lack of national consciousness. In the beginning of the XIX century bright Icelandic youngsters still had to leave Iceland to study, as there was no university on the island and only one public library. Very few cultural institutions were established in Iceland during the foreign rule, so that theatres and exhibitions were mainly available to those who worked and studied abroad.[87] The precious manuscripts containing sagas and medieval poetry had been moved to mainland Scandinavia to avoid obscurity and destruction, as well as to promote Danish or, to a smaller extent, Swedish national heritage. The Icelanders still lived in turf houses and went on with everyday jobs, in terms of economics scarcely changed from the times of their forefathers, in most respects strongly depending upon the neighboring states.

However, those scholars who had left Iceland to study in Denmark did not easily forget their motherland. It was by their efforts that in the XIX century Iceland started to undergo “a phase of therapeutic redefinition”[88], finding its place in the much-changed modern world, remembering its history and paving the way into the future. The national identity and cultural waymarks had to be built practically from scratch by the new intellectuals, influenced by the Romantic Nationalism and eager to be proud of their native land and show the whole world that the small northern island on the outskirts of Europe in fact used to be and may still become again a great country to be reckoned with. By the second quarter of the XIX century the definition of Iceland’s own way formed the debate between traditionalists and futurists, the former seeing the nation’s future in reiterating its past, returning to the ideals and forms of the Commonwealth era, while the latter promoted a modern urban society as an exemplary model.[89] The traditionalist movement (starting with such groups as the Fjölnismenn) proved stronger and resulted in the revival of many medieval symbols and cultural elements on the way to independency. The most important parts of the Icelandic identity were finally defined as "land, nation and language", as it was expressed by Snorri Hjartason. More specifically these can be understood as "the Icelandic language, Icelandic history preserved in literary sources, and the country of Iceland itself."[90]

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[86] This name for the period became a fixed phrase after the publication of a popular history book “Gullöld Íslendinga” (1906) by Jón Aðils Jónsson.

[87] see: Gestur Guðmundsson, “Cultural Policy in Iceland,” in The Nordic Cultural Model, ed. Duelund, Peter (Copenhagen: Nordic Cultural Institute, 2003), 113–145.

[88] Byock, Jesse L., “Modern Nationalism and the Medieval Sagas,” in *Nothern Antiquity. The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga*, ed. Wawn, Andrew (Enfield Lock Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1994), 168.

In the course of political struggle the Althing was reinstituted and the independency regained, from the Constitution in 1874 and home rule in 1904, sovereignty in 1918 to the full independency in 1944. The literary and linguistic struggle for national identity went parallel to the political one and was decidedly not less (at times maybe more) persevering. With regard to the language the prevailing tendency was its "purification": the riddance of foreign influence and in many aspects the return to the more ancient forms of grammar and pronunciation. In the light of Romantic Nationalism the main significance of such changes in the language was to move away from the language of the official classes and go back to what was reconstructed and understood as the authentic tongue of the common people of Iceland, the tongue in which the great literary sources were written and the native stories were told. The development of a human language does not normally go back, so in a way this part of the cultural revival was artificial, though its effect is remarkable, the Icelandic language today being so close to the language of medieval literature. The reevaluation of the native literature comes more naturally, especially as the stories of Viking or Commonwealth ages' heroes never died out completely. What the learned Icelandic nationalists had to do in order to make the medieval literature part of their project, was to systemize and popularize it stressing its value for independent Iceland and to give it the new meaning with regard to the past, present and future of Iceland and the Icelanders. In other words, the old stories needed to be redefined as national heritage to take up their rightful place in the (re-) construction of the Icelandic identity.

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[89] Ibid., 173–174.
[90] Gísli Sigurðsson, "Icelandic National Identity: From Romanticism to Tourism," in *Making Europe in Nordic Contexts*, ed. Anttonen, Pertti J. (Turku: Nordic Institute of Folklore, 1996).

In the context of this paper the most important part of the national heritage construction is the stories, their content as well as the way in which they are told. The tradition of telling and reading traditional stories is inherent to Iceland as it is seen in the recent centuries. Literacy and cultural memory of the Icelanders, even during what came to be remembered as the hard times of the foreign rule and general decline, was remarkable. In the end of the XVIII century the percentage of literate people was much higher in Iceland than in the continental Nordics.[91] Having no chance for a higher education in their native land, most Icelandic children still learned how to read and write. The important part of the material upon which the public literacy was based was the corpus of national literature. The tradition of reading sagas and epic poetry aloud was strong till very recent times, and the kveldvaka, winter evening filled with such story-reading and story-telling, easily became as much of a symbol as the stories themselves. In the quest for identity nationalists could naturally notice and emphasize the way the Icelanders composed and preserved stories and made them a part of their everyday lives, passing long winter nights in the company of old heroes, keeping up the fire of creative spirit through many centuries and many hardships. Although this tradition waned considerably in the beginning of the XX century,[92] even now it is still maintained and promoted on various meetings of students and enthusiasts, where the natural and even routine entertainment is developed into a tourist attraction and a decisive part of national heritage. The value of a written text has seen even more attention in the past century, when the Icelandic manuscripts were returned triumphantly to their homeland and the culture of publishing and reading traditional texts evolved into a matter of nation-wide importance, the government taking part in editing the sagas that children read at schools and every Icelander with any self-respect has on his bookshelves.[93]

A lot has been done in the past century in the field of editing and publishing the sagas, standardizing and promoting their texts, producing adequate translations into many languages. The collections of sagas, the most prominent of them the editions of the Íslensk Fornrit, complete with references, explanations and historical and philological surveys, make the sagas both an accessible entertaining read and a cultural artifact strongly tied to the Icelandic history and ideologically charged. Reading of the sagas and the impression they produce on the readers are not quite spontaneous, but to a certain extent controlled by the form in which the texts are presented, by the context in which they are carefully placed.

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[91] Hallgrímur Hallgrímsson. *Íslensk alþýðumentun á 18. öld* (Reykjavík, 1925), 85.

[92] Jón Karl Helgason, "Continuity? The Icelandic Sagas in Post-Medieval Times." In *A companion to Old Norse-Icelandic literature and culture*, edited by McTurk, Rory. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, 72.

[93] see: Wawn, Andrew, ed., *Nothern Antiquity. The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga*. Enfield Lock Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1994.

One does not only necessarily know the sagas of Njall, Egill, Grettir, but is proud of them, learns to value them higher than any foreign masterpieces and to draw inspiration from them, first in the childish games and ideals, and then in the adult works, be it novels or poetry, music or pictures, newspaper articles or even scientific research. The old stories teach their readers and listeners to love their native land (Gunnar unwilling to leave the beautiful island even on the threat of sure death becoming a symbol of this love in the XIX century) and respect the particular qualities immanent to the great heroes. The characters of the sagas, half-believed to be real historical people show what an Icelander should really strive to be, sometimes unconsciously (when children play Vikings and valiant farmers, as in other countries they act kings and knights), and sometimes purposefully (when respected scholars and writers explain these ideals, like Sigurdur Nordal who made Egill his model Icelander in the *Icelandic Culture*). The sagas, viewed as heritage, both tell people of their past and show what their present and future should be, of Iceland itself and of its culture, as modern art and literature give new life to old forms and plots (the novels of Halldor Laxness being the most prominent, but far from the only one of such revival feats in the XX century).

Like the sagas (and also like any folklore of any nation that is not artificially suppressed), the folktales were never completely lost or forgotten. However, they needed much systematization if they were to be used in developing and enhancing the national idea. Adults and children alike never stopped telling stories, but the learned collections show people what and how they should be told. They develop the system and style of the folklore; put together the world in which the scattered tales take place. Even more importantly, the publication of the vast collections, starting from the one by Jón Árnason, united the traditions of different regions, showed their similarities and wove the loose oral patrimonies into the solid heritage of the nation as a whole. Such a process cannot be completed in a natural way, and it is always an important part of a folktale collection, serving to underline the unity of the nation building its universal heritage.[94] The Icelandic scholars are going on with collecting and systemizing the folktales (new or newly discovered) in this fashion up until now.

The material of the folktale collections, as well as the sagas, does not serve only for entertaining and inspiring the Icelanders. Numerous translations of chosen folktales are published and sold to tourists and enthusiasts from all over the world. Moreover, characters, plots and various superstitions are made into symbols and actively promoted as something specifically and authentically Icelandic. Apart from numerous souvenirs supporting this promotion, the landscape is used as symbol and attraction: mountains, hills, old farms, waterfalls, fjords are advertised as places inhabited by elves and trolls or witnesses to wonders that had once happened there. Of course it is a certain game, but it is well-liked and accepted by thousands of Icelanders willing to tell stories and feel proudly special about themselves and their native land, and by millions of tourists flooding the sites of elfish towns, haunting and mysterious events. The world of intertwining reality and fantasy, characteristic of the Icelandic folklore, gushes out of the old tales and is purposefully given a new life in the real modern Iceland.

Icelandic sagas and folktales are in many aspects parts of a whole, being learned and passed on in much the same fashion, sharing the same worldview, admitting the same artistic or imaginative conventions, building the same picture of an ideal Iceland with its true inhabitants. Both sagas and folktales are strongly connected to geographical and historical coordinates of the real country, giving it a living history full of wonders and heroic feats. The country of old stories is inhabited with supernatural creatures and people of flesh and blood who are proud, witty, creative, and able to solve any problem and achieve any goal. As well as the sagas, the folktales give Icelanders a legendary past and, more importantly, an image of what they are, what makes them different from others but similar to their own ancestors, and an idea of what they can and should be.[95] The world of the stories and its inhabitants give the basis for formulating the ideals of the nation, as well as a very important means of passing these ideals on to other people, both the insiders and the outsiders of the society which generates and cherishes these stories.

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[94] von Sydow, Carl Wilhelm, “Geography and Folk-Tale Oicotypes,” *International Folkloristics. Classic Contributions by the Founders of Folklore.* edited by Dundes, Alan (Lanham: Rowman&Littlefield Publishers Inc., 1999), 143–144.

[95] Mathisen, Stein R., “Folklore and Cultural Identity,” in *Nordic Frontiers: Recent Issues in the Study of Modern Traditional Culture in the Nordic Countries,* eds. Anttonen, Pertti J., and Kvideland, Reimund, (Turku: Nordic Institute of Folklore, 1993), 37.

4.2. The magician-priests and the lesson to be learned from them

The question as to which plots and characters are the most accurate representations of the national spirit cannot be answered with absolute objectiveness. However, if the folktales, as well as the sagas, live in the memories of many generations, preserve their attraction and, moreover, are specifically revived by people concerned with the quest for national identity, there is a certain ground for viewing them as a part of this identity. Folktales as cultural heritage are not just stories, but a way to tell how the nation sees itself and how it wants to present itself. The presentation in such case is a two-way process, creation of a myth about Iceland, aimed both at outsiders and at the Icelanders themselves.[96] On the one hand, an image created in such a myth influences the way others see a nation, on the other hand it forms the nation's opinion of itself, stresses the important traits and values and creates a basis for the future evolvement. A strong connection to history and geography of Iceland and constant development of new stories, as well as their popularity among the natives and active promotion among foreigners asserts the role of folktales as such a national mythology.

Earlier in this paper it has already been shown what the world of the Icelandic folktales looks like. Geographically, historically, economically and culturally it is a copy of the country that can be found on the maps, but it is also inhabited with various wondrous creatures and is open to magic powers and events. The laws of the human world transfuse the life of supernatural creatures (like the Hidden People whose society copies the human one rather closely), and the laws of magic enter the lives of men, as they interact actively with the uncanny. The borders between natural and supernatural, real and fantastic are blurred, and sometimes they are altogether non-existent. Clever and resourceful humans stand on equal terms with elves, trolls and ghosts.

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[96] Byock, Jesse L., "Modern Nationalism and the Medieval Sagas," in *Nothern Antiquity. The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga*, ed. Wawn, Andrew (Enfield Lock Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1994), 164.

The Icelandic folktale corpus includes various groups of stories, featuring different kinds of supernatural creatures and forces. Each of them can be taken as an illustration of some side of the folktale world and the ideas and sentiments it arises from. The folktales about magician-priests which were chosen as a subject for the present paper demonstrate several important aspects immanent to the Icelandic culture and character.

First of all, the diffusion of different worlds, the in-betweenness of the Icelandic folk characters is at its strongest in the magician-priests. They are not only accepting the supernatural and freely interacting with it. They are containing the different and contradictory circumstances and laws of reality, magic and religion inside themselves, becoming a living mixture of all three. And the supernatural is not just accepting them; they are themselves a part of the supernatural realm. Many human folktale characters balance between This and the Other World (falling in love with elves, hiring demon workers, making deals with trolls), but in the case of the magician-priests this balancing is perhaps of the most spectacular and precarious kind. For them it is a part of their own nature, inseparable from it and thus constant, from the moment when a priest chooses to study magic until the day he dies. A lot of wisdom and caution is needed to keep the contradictory pieces of his life and nature together, not to lose his connection either to men or to the Church while getting the best of the connection to magic forces. Humans who go to live with elves often have the same problem, but they usually have to choose their sides at some point and end up losing their human nature, human connections and possessions, even the whole human world they had known (if their feasting with the Hidden People leaves them lost in time). As has been shown above, the magician-priests manage to lose nothing.

If there is a lesson to learn from the magician-priests, it is the way to successfully survive in the dangerous and contradictory world. This way is twofold. The first part is the quick mind and the knowledge it strives to take from all possible sources and apply to the most difficult situations. The second part is the amazing flexibility towards all kinds of laws that rule the folktale world, to the teaching of the Church, to morals, to the principles guiding humans and supernatural creatures alike. The wisdom of a magician-priest helps him to see how the rules can be bended to his benefit and to the benefit of those who depend on him, how he can get what he needs from all the available sources and get away without paying the price that might first seem inevitable. His nature is that of a trickster, but as he learns to use it wisely it brings no harm either to him or to the humans he is placed to care for. He knows where to stop and how to do it correctly, and unlike the most famous of the Scandinavian mythological tricksters, Loki, he avoids the punishment for his tricks.

The Icelandic magicians are not all similar. But those who get the respect and gratitude of the folk, those who finish their lives in reconciliation with God and are remembered as powerful benefactors of the community, are never malevolent. However, even as they end up admitting the ultimate power of God and the indispensability of forgiveness, during the much longer periods of their career they show the example of a very different attitude. As they demonstrate the flexibility of various laws and rules, they also teach the folk to value and respect irony. The consequences of the gravest breaches of law can be avoided by a wise human, the end of the story can still be happy, and the protagonist himself can get all the respect and glory. Then are the laws all that serious? Are there really any taboos strong enough not to be got around by someone truly bright? Strictly speaking, humans in the folktales are not omnipotent, even if they are powerful magicians. However, it is possible for them to use the more powerful forces to their benefit, to trick them into doing exactly what is needed for the good of the humans. The magician-priests know the ways of such trickery, and the stories about them give the clearest explication as to why the folktale Icelanders can feel and act as equals to the supernatural creatures.

The men who have conquered the morals, the wisdom and the supernatural powers are in fact a symbol of the human force, of the ability to survive and to win any battle, real or metaphorical. The magician-priests are born of normal human men and women, there is no inherent otherworldly power in them; they achieve everything on their own, learning to use their human resources to reach inhuman heights. They show that everything is possible, that there are no boundaries for a man who is willing and able to learn.

Of course, any entertaining stories about authorities are to some extent ironical. The common folk is mocking the powers to which it has to subdue in the real life. When a priest becomes a subject for an anecdote, he loses some of the respectability and eminence that his holy office usually gives him. His authority makes him alien to the commoners, and in the folktales this authority is twisted and in fact ridiculed. The very existence and the fruitfulness of the magician-priest plot can be seen partly as a consequence of the rejection of the Church’s omnipotence. However, the magician-priests are not mocked together with the institution they belong to. By alienating the Church officials from the Church the people who tell these tales are in fact elevating their protagonists. The magician-priests with their moral ambiguity are driven closer to their flock and presented as the best of men, the ones to be respected and awed. Their lives are exemplary, but not in the Christian sense: they give the example of men respected not for their office and authority, but for what they are, what they achieved themselves. A man listening to the folktales or reading them might not seriously believe the supernatural component, but he can find reassurance in the notion that everything is in his own hands, that nothing can frighten him, stop him or overpower him as long as his mind is quick enough and his judgment is unclouded. It is not a priest or a magician, but a self-made man that holds the place in the folktale corpus, fitting comfortably into the tradition of the valiant Vikings, glorious poets and independent farmers, who always managed to have their own way.

Conclusion

The object of this research was to explore the cultural and ideological significance of the Icelandic folktales about magician-priests by viewing them in the contexts of the folktale corpus as a whole, of the Icelandic mythological tradition, of the Christian legends about Church officials possessing magical skills, and of the Icelandic struggle for independence and self-identification in the recent centuries.

The stories about magician-priests are not the most popular or the most numerous among the various groups of Icelandic folktales. However, their inner structure and significance make them interesting for a researcher, just as their humor and wisdom make them entertaining for any reader or listener. Lives of the half-historical, half-legendary characters of these tales summon up some truly fascinating qualities which are characteristic of the world of folktales as a whole. They reveal and sharpen the conflicts and contradictions of reality and fantasy, providence and calculation, profit and moral law, heathendom and Christianity, as all the ambivalent forces are carefully balanced in the nature of one person, who manages to take the best of each, and suffer harm from none. This difficult, often precarious position is rendered with exceptional harmony, turning a sinful trickster into an ideal of graceful survival in the complicated world of supernatural threats and temptations, in the mysterious Iceland of folktales. The subject chosen for this paper is only one part of the huge and still increasing heritage, but the vividly condensed and wisely resolved ambivalence of this one part makes it hugely demonstrative as of the meaning the whole heritage might carry.

The folktales have been carefully collected, catalogued and promoted in the obvious situation of a struggle for identity, a quest for what the Icelandic people really wanted to be, to think of itself and to show to outsiders. The image that has been thus created combines the very special mystery of a haunted land, the fearlessness in the face of the unknown and the overpowering, the unfailing common sense, and the trust in the omnipotence of human wit and spirit. It is shown (however roughly) on the preceding pages how a magician priest can be seen as a symbol of such attitude to life and to the world. This image is powerful and attractive, something to willingly associate with. But it is not an empty claim to say that the Icelandic folk have a full right to such an association.

The tales about magician-priests and, primarily, their very core, the quest for invaluable knowledge, are deeply rooted in the Icelandic culture. They echo the everlasting quest of Óðinn and his dedicated servants, reiterating the ways by which Nordic magicians and shamans reputedly acquired knowledge. They also absorb the values of the later book culture in which the highest knowledge was made more obviously accessible, but no less challenging. At this stage they find parallels in the broader context of European legends about the daring self-made magicians, drawing powers primarily from the resources of their own minds, from their ability to learn and to stretch the boundaries of possible. The fulfillment of this sophisticated task, especially tricky for the representatives of the official Church, called for yet another cultural source of justifying ploys. And the magician-priests fitted easily into the doctrine of Protestantism, which could rightfully explain many ambivalent choices and moral stretches that their turbulent, ever-balancing lives required.

Overall, the life and evolution of the plot briefly sketched here weaved through the important milestones which constitute the history of Icelandic culture, going from the heathen Viking myths and legends through the cleverly adapted foreign influences all the way to the modern era, when such a compilation of various authentic layers could give food to the nation yearning for ideals, for something naturally justifying and illustrating its struggling pride. The folktales of magician-priests can surely be read as rather simple and linear, but extremely engrossing stories. But they can also be broken down and put together again in order to be viewed as cultural myths, as condensed and beautifully tangled history of a nation’s hopes, dreams and aspirations. The latter approach is exactly what has been attempted in this research essay on the origins, structure and cultural significance of the particular type of Icelandic folktales.

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