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Obscurity as heritage

The Þorrablót revisited

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An interview titled “An Authentic Icelandic Þorrablót in London” appeared in the newspaper *Fréttablaðið* around the lunar month of þorri of this solar year AD 2010. There the president of the Icelandic Association in London discussed the upcoming midwinter festival or þorrablót (THORR-a-blote). There had been no þorrablót the previous year and with new board members came new directives. This year there would be none of the extravagance of the period before the Crash. This year it would be a traditional þorrablót with group singing and a country-dance (*sveitaball*). “We decided, in line with the zeitgeist, to get back to our fundamental values,” he said. “It will be an immense party” (“Ekta íslenskt þorrablót í London”, 2010).

Indeed authenticity and reverting to old values seems to be common theme in the retrospective discourse following the failed “Icelandic expansion” on international markets and the collapse of the Icelandic banks. This theme is mirrored in many a þorrablót, both at home and abroad, where national identity is highlighted and the food presented, although sometimes with tongue in cheek, as the food that sustained our forefathers throughout the centuries. Close scrutiny on the other hand would suggest that the traditionality of the þorrablót celebration, as it is practiced in contemporary times, is somewhat dubious or that it at least calls for some qualification. Pundits of all kinds, politicians and scholars alike, are quick to challenge and defend the authenticity and traditionality of the þorrablót and its varying components. But based on what? The rich Icelandic oral and literary tradition offers a somewhat incomplete history of the þorrablót while a look into late 19th and early 20th Century media testifies to its relatively recent revival or indeed invention. Robust surveys and overviews by folklorists such as Jón Árnason and later Jónas Jónasson, Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson and most recently Árni Björnsson’s extensive overview, throw much light on the subject. Yet much remains unclear as to why and how the þorrablót is practiced. Further analysis, such as presented here, of both the historical literary sources and contemporary practices may shed further light on the matter. In this case it will be argued that the practice of traditions, such as the þorrablót, may feed on their obscurity rather than their origin or authenticity.

While the meaning of the word þorri is unknown it was in fact the name of the fourth lunar month of winter in the earliest Icelandic calendar. It began roughly in the second or third week of January but this varied from the 11th Century onwards with the increasing influence from Christian calendars. Already in the 12th Century many other old calendar names had their competitors but þorri has to some extent survived as a vernacular alternative to the period in the Julian and later Gregorian calendar. Today it could be argued that its use is primarily meta-cultural and that referring to the period as such frames the season in a traditional context.

The word blót can be more easily associated with pre-Christian celebrations in Iceland, Old-Norse worship and even sacrifice. The true sacrificial nature of the blót is though somewhat debated. While Árni Björnsson, a specialist in calendar customs, suggests the blót was a trivial set of pagan traditions exaggerated in Christian times others hold that valid accounts of a more significant practices may be read from ancient texts (Árni Björnsson 2008, p. 12). Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson specialized in the

pagan sacrifice from his earliest PhD research in the University of Lund to his last days as Professor Emeritus at the University of Iceland. He saw the blót in terms of animal and, more rarely, human sacrifice. More often bulls, rams, goats or even the sacred horses, were slaughtered and their blood sprinkled over walls, idols and even on people. The purpose of these rituals, Jón Hnefill deduced, are to bring into effect magical powers and attract the gods' favour (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, 1998, p. 38). Nevertheless the celebratory nature of the blót is often evident even in conjunction with sacrifice such as in this 13th Century account of Snorri Sturluson in his *Heimskringla* or the Chronicle of the Kings of Norway:

The sacrificial cup was passed over the fire and consecrated by the chieftain as well as the sacrificial blood. Toasts were drunk and all must join in the ceremonial beer drinking. Toasts of Odinn were drunk for victory and toasts of Njördr and Freyr for fruitful harvest and for peace (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, 1999, p. 20).

The mere existence of the word þorrablót in medieval texts might suggest some form of worship or celebration in pre-Christian times. However, medieval references to a þorrablót are rather obscure and oddly out of sync with each other. Among the oldest known sources is a short chapter in the *Orkneyinga Saga*, from around 1300, about the “discovery” of Norway. It refers to a king of Finland and Kvenland and his sons who's names correspond with forces of nature. Among them is Logi, meaning fire; Kári, meaning wind, Frosti meaning frost, and Þorri who is described as “[I translate:] a great blót man, he had blót every year in mid winter, what they called the þorrablót; from this the month took its name” (*Orkneyinga saga*, 1965, p. 3). In his own reading of the source Árni Björnsson sees this account as an origin legend of the term þorri whose meaning has been forgotten. He also finds that the personification of þorri as a force of nature lifts him to the status of a winter spirit or winter god (2008). But one might add that the þorrablót seems already an obscure term as well though the word þorri seems to be well known as a term for a month. Indeed as it phrased: this particular blót is “what *they* called the þorrablót”.

Evidence for both a godly Þorri and the þorrablót itself in medieval Iceland is scarce. As Árni Björnsson (2008) notes in his book *Þorrablót* it is in fact not until the 17th Century that sources on the personification of Þorri appear in the form of Þorrakvæði or Þorri poems. In the many Þorri poems collected onward through the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries Þorri may appear as an grey bearded elder or a Viking chieftain but is just as likely to turn into a pillar of ice. The Þorri of the poems demands respect and is often greeted welcome with a plea of mercy for mild weather. “[I translate:] “Welcome Þorri”, was always said after crossing oneself in the morning”, stated a farmer born in South –East Iceland in 1884: “Don’t be cruel”” (National Museum of Iceland Ethnological Archives). In modern times the act of bidding the þorri welcome is by many thought to be a time-honoured tradition. So too is commencing the þorri month with Farmer’s Day (Bóndadagur) in which the male farmer of the house is treated to ‘breakfast in bed’ or other luxuries. But in fact the oldest printed source for these traditions appear in the late nineteenth Century folktale collection of Jón Árnason in 1864. He is also the oldest source for the curious, but evidently elaborate, act of running half naked around the farmhouse:

[I translate:] Therefore it was the duty of the farmers “to greet þorri” or “bid him welcome into the farm” by being the first to rise in the morning that þorri began. They should get up and out in their shirt alone, with bare legs and feet, but with one leg in the trousers, go to the door, open it, hop on one foot around the whole farmhouse, dragging the trousers behind him on the other and bid the þorri welcome to the farm and into the house. Then they should host a feast for

other farmers in the community; this was called “to greet the þorri” (Jón Árnason, 1954 – 1961, vol. II, p. 550-551).

Jón Árnason’s source for this curious custom of “greeting the þorri” is unclear. But he himself remarks that on the temporal and regional variation of the tradition, for example that “[I translate:] in some places in the north of the country the first day of þorri is still called bóndadagur when the lady of house should treat her husband well and these festivities are still called þorrablót” (Jón Árnason, 1954 – 1961, vol. II, p. 551). Here it seems that the term bóndadagur or “Farmers Day” is an obscure one only surviving in certain remote places where the celebration of this day and the þorrablót are one and the same. While Árni Björnsson takes sources such as these critically he does, with some qualification, hold that the tradition of the þorrablót is an established, enduring and yet struggling tradition rooted in pre-Christian festivities of some sort. He offers a down-to-earth theorem to that effect:

[I translate:] It must therefore be held true that through all the centuries the Þorri was bid welcome and “secretly worshiped” either with fearful respect or festive joyfulness. This is much more likely than that the thread had indeed been entirely cut. Then it would have been a bigger effort to revive the tradition and even life threatening to do so in the 17th and 18th Centuries. Participants in such merrymaking could of course be as devoutly Christian in their heart as anyone else though they allowed themselves to play around (Árni Björnsson, 2008, p. 17-18).

Árni Björnsson therefore seems to suggest that the þorrablót was indeed practiced in early Iceland and continued through the middle ages and into early modern times when the sources again mention them. Furthermore Árni suggests that the þorri customs were more likely practiced in playfulness than devout faith (whether in Christian or pagan times). Here I believe he might be on to something that holds a key to understanding the practice of þorrablót rather than its origin. So if playfulness might be the answer what is the question? The question of whether or not the people practiced the þorrablót devoutly or not is as unanswerable as asking whether its practice went uninterrupted throughout the middle ages. For lack of adequate sources any claim for or against would simply be conjecture. But a more interesting and pressing question is: why did early modern people engage in this activity and why is it practised today? Could it be that the obscurity of the þorrablót and near absence in medieval sources may tell us something significant about the practice of this tradition? In context to the practices of the þorrablót today I believe it speaks volumes. All together, and counter to Árni’s argument, what I find the most striking feature of the underlying sources on the traditionality of the þorrablót is how inconsistent, varying and regional they are within Iceland. Also significant is how many accounts seem to exoticise them as either remote or ridiculous.

When it comes to early modern practices of the þorrablót *revival* and *reinvention* seem like useful but are indeed problematic terms. Because the ancient practice of the þorrablót was unknown or unclear any true revival would be suspect. But in retrospect a set of traditions was set in motion on the grounds of a perceived traditionality although with humorous undertones. The first indication of the þorrablót in modern times, outside whatever celebrations took place in the private homes, can be found in the rising nationalism of the mid- 19th century intelligentsia (Árni Björnsson 2008, p. 32–39). Through the registries and records of student associations and drama clubs (mostly in Reykjavík from 1867 – 1873 and two in Akureyri 1873 and 1874) it is clear that student drinking parties held on the coming of the þorri month were taking on the somewhat humorous air of the Saga age. This tradition was extended to the heart of the colonial power, Copenhagen, where Iceland’s nationalism movement partly

originated. Þorri poems and rhymes referred to the heroics and drinking of Saga heroes leaving much space for the elaborate toasting of pagan deities (Björn M. Ólsen, 1873, pp. 128–129).

In the following decades the þorrablót spread, albeit thinly, throughout the countryside but did not seem to catch on in urban areas where foreign novelty were often favoured by a modernising population. In fact it was not until the 1960's that the rustic Þorrablót is "revived" in Reykjavík and gains widespread popularity (Árni Björnsson, 2008, p. 69–78). From the 1940's Homeland associations (Áttthagafélög) had begun to prefer more traditional food for their events rather than the modern and imported foods more available in the city. In 1958 a restaurant proprietor began to pick up on this and decided to provide the þorri food (þorramat) that he had seen advertised by the Homeland Associations. Indeed *þorramatur* was a novel term then but commonplace today. In order to boost business in a difficult season other restaurants began to advertise þorri food: a selection of whey-soured meats, cured shark, rye bread and flatbread served on square-shaped wooden platter based on an item on display in the National Museum. Guests at the þorrablót were invited to wash this down with light beer and a shot of Black Death (a popular Icelandic schnapps).

After 1960 the þorrablót spread throughout the country. Today urban areas as well as most larger towns or farming communities have þorrablót in varying forms. The þorri food may in some cases supplemented with a more modern dish for those whose pallets do not approve of the sour tastes and smells of the food. Mock toasts and heavy drinking are regular features of these events and in the countryside organised satirical plays mocking individuals in the community are quite popular. The 1960s wave of þorrablót was not limited to Iceland but spread to many of the expatriate associations of Icelanders around the world. Like the menus of the Homeland associations these events promise a variation of the same theme: traditional food, Icelandic food; þorri food in the ancient tradition. Much effort is put into importing the odorous and sometimes gassy agricultural products and often Icelandic entertainers are brought in as well. But as the examples show the þorrablót and þorri food traditions are practiced in multitude of ways and can be applied to different contexts.

A useful contemporary comparison can be made between media representations, and reactions to them, before and after the so-called Crash in Iceland: the ruin of Icelandic banks and the following socio-economic developments. In the Icelandic film *Mýrin* or *Jar City* (Agnes Johansen & Lilja Pálmadóttir, 2006), adapted from the crime novel and directed by Baltasar Kormákur, there is a scene where the protagonist Erlendur is seen digging into a particularly gelatinous dish of singed sheep's head or svið (pronounced svith, meaning something singed). Far from appetizing the scene drew some criticism from, among others, the Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries at the time, Einar K. Guðfinnson. A known admirer of traditional food and agricultural produce the Minister seems slightly bemused in his personal blog:

[I translate] We know well that many do not like whaling, have reservations to the invasion of Icelandic companies, do not appreciate our dams. And perhaps detective Erlendur feasting on svið in Arnaldur's and Baltasar Kormákur's film, *Jar City*, gives a worse image than before; this is, at least, not the image of "gourmet" Iceland – the modern Iceland (Einar K. Guðfinnson, 2006, p. 699).

The Minister seems to be suggesting here that this alleged antithesis of gourmet Iceland has little basis in contemporary reality or that, if it does, then it is not an image to be heralded. Indeed the Icelandic government, at both a local and international level, had invested heavily in the promotion of Icelandic cookery as gourmet and high cuisine and its produce, mainly dairy, fish and lamb, as "natural" and clean.

In that light it is interesting to compare Einar's statement to a recent comment made by the current Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries. In a speech at the national farmers' congress (Búnaðarþing) February 28th 2010, the new left wing government's Jón Bjarnason strongly criticized a television commercial for the telephone company Síminn, that showed young men shunning Icelandic "þorri" food with disgust and opting for pizza. The Minister described it as "[I translate:] some sort of humourless 2007 presentation in the spirit of the venture Vikings [Icelandic businessmen abroad] where traditional Icelandic national food is belittled" ("Síminn lítilsvirðir ekki þjóðlegar íslenskar afurðir", 2010). In comparison, the former Minister finds the presentation of traditional, rather than more modern Icelandic food, an embarrassment. But the current minister speaks in defence of the traditional food and puts the mockery into the context of a passé neo-liberal period. The Ministers also contrast in the immediacy of their comments. The former Minister's comment betrays a certain lack of forcefulness in his concerns for the modern 'image' of Iceland. While the latter staunchly defends the traditional against what he perceives as an ironic attack.

By a "2007 presentation" the current Minister, Jón Bjarnason, may be referring to the extravagancy and "internationalism" of bankers and businessmen abroad. This may include the þorrablot of Glitnir bank in London in which prospective clients and employees were ironically presented with kitsch Viking paraphernalia and traditional Icelandic food and schnapps having been plied with continental h'orderves and fine wine. Food traditions are a well-documented way of presenting oneself transnationally. But interestingly the Icelanders abroad in general, not just "venture Vikings (útrásarvíkingar)", have long and often presented food traditions, especially the so-called þorri food, in an ironic light. While food irony is by no means uncommon or particular to Icelanders the applicability of the þorrablot to humorous contexts is illuminating. This is particularly true when attention is drawn to why the tradition was practiced.

Through my fieldwork, much of which has been a collaboration with Katla Kjartansdóttir, on the practice of food traditions at home and abroad, participants often stressed the humorous element of surprise and even shock that can be induced by subjecting guests to the þorri food (see Kjartansdóttir 2009; Kristinn Schram 2009; Schram 2009a & 2009b). The Glitnir bank manager Bjarni Ármannsson for example explained that their þorrablot was a way of capitalizing on the sensational elements of ethnic difference. The authenticity of the þorrablot tradition was in fact secondary to the attention-grabbing aspects they contain. Bjarni puts this in more colourful terms: "[I translate:] If it is a part of the ancient culture all the better. It can just as well be applied to the business world. You need people to look at you. Then you can start doing business."

Exoticising representations such as this are not confined to corporate behavior as many examples exhibit. For one: a student in Helsinki attempting to integrate into Finnish society, expressed her desire to put locals off balance with the traditional food: a curiosity from an "[I translate:] island way out in the ocean (lifts up her hand, pointing, looking up) where the natives eat shark and sheep's heads (laughs)." In this clarification of how she effectively and quite deliberately "distressed" her dinner guests, she elaborated on the archaic and primitive image projected, something further illustrated by her self-effacing laughter and hand gestures as if pointing to the north on a wall map. Iceland's position on the global northern fringe of habitation only further exoticises her role and position in these transnational exchanges.

A mathematician and computer specialist living in Scotland presents another example. He stressed the exoticness of traditional Icelandic food, as well as its wholesomeness, as he gained access to an exclusive hillwalking society. In what he refers to as an "old tradition" of his, he presented traditional þorri food to his

mountaineering friends. He also made a point of telling them tall tails of “[I translate:] how one should eat shark with brennivín and then I completely exaggerated the shark's production process. That's a real fountain and I've done that for the men, yes. I would just really like to be able to bring over some shark (laughs) to show the men that it isn't just some fairy tale.”

A corresponding example was presented to me by Icelanders who studied in Dublin in the 1980s. Soon after their arrival they were formally invited to host a cultural event and asked by persons within the University to bring “[I translate:] something traditional from Iceland.” The result was an impromptu þorablót attended by about a dozen Irishmen and two Icelanders where the former were introduced to such Icelandic food as dried cod and cured shark. “And it was received remarkably well,” my informant says and continues: “[I translate:] They understood that this was just old-fashioned traditional food (laughs) and ate it with an open mind.” The laughter, in parenthesis, represents the situational context of the interview. While it might seem out of place it does point to a humorous incongruity: the central irony of an exaggerated tradition. My questioning and his elaboration cast much light on this practice of irony:

[I translate:] Of course the shark astounded them and the hardest would maybe eat it. And people got to know each other a little bit. [...] Men were astounded by the shark and asked what on earth this was. But of course one capitalized on this sort of eccentricity (note the use of the English word), the absurdity of it, and blew it so out of proportion that men really didn't get a chance to add to it.

KRISTINN: Why does one do that?

I just did it. I enjoyed it. I said (deadpan tone) this is shark and usually its buried and sometimes they pissed on it in the old days. Then you would go into the biology of it: that there was ammonia breaking down and there was a certain cultivation going on. And... I took it to the deep end. You know. And men thought this was fantastically strange – and fun.

In what can be seen as an act of preemptive irony the Icelanders so deprecated and exoticised the food and its preparation that there would be no room for ridicule on behalf of the dinner guests. Interesting is the explicit statement of “capitalizing” on “eccentricity” and the use of the English term rather than Icelandic. While he matter-of-factly explains that he did this because he enjoyed it further questioning cast light on these underlying motives. He refers to this event as a þorablót and the food as þorri food. As the fieldwork reveals the heritage status of the so called þorri food and the þorablót is, unlike more banal traditions such as a Sunday roasts or birthday celebrations, essential to its practice and performance. Yet the origin, authenticity and particular components of the tradition take second place to effect. The obscurity of the tradition at home, and more so abroad, provides the space necessary to perform and adapt the tradition to the respective contexts and underlying strategies and tactics.

All in all the þorablót isn't, and has perhaps never been, a devoutly practiced tradition. Contemporary fieldwork indicates that it is not simply practiced to pass on tradition, nor does the þorablót follow a strict set of antique rites. In fact the only aspect it is sure to have in common with ancient practices, as they appear in medieval sources, is the traditional and exotic context thrust upon them. If the þorri has any consistency as a tradition then that it lies in its playfulness and in its constant state of revival and variation. There lies its power: in its folkloric obscurity and adaptability to different contexts. It would therefore be difficult to support claims of a more or less authentic or Icelandic þorablót. Whether it is preceded by h'orderves or followed by a country dance the þorablót remains obscure heritage – obscurity as heritage.

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