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Gods of the Shadows

Skaufhalabálgur and the Icelandic Fox

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Abstract

The arctic fox is the only land mammal indigenous to Iceland, yet the animal hardly appears at all in the first few hundred years of Icelandic literature. This thesis examines the references to the fox in the Icelandic literature of the Middle Ages and many post-Medieval folktales, taking stock of the motifs that are consistently represented well into the modern period. In the sagas, the fox hardly appears in physical form, typically confined to the realms of metaphor: character names, dreams, and verbal expressions. Throughout these references, the fox can be seen as a liminal being consistently associated with the borders of its most common motifs: magic (natural/supernatural), queerness (male/female), resourcefulness (power/intelligence), and ultimately survival (life/death). These same motifs are equally present in the later folk traditions. Taking into consideration the place of the trickster archetype in representations of the fox around the world as well as the European beast epic, this research results in a cultural history of the Icelandic fox. This history provides context for the first full English edition translation of *Skaufhalabálkur*, a fifteenth-century poem narrating the final hunt of an anthropomorphic Icelandic fox. The poem has been translated with the specific intent to preserve the alliterative qualities of its original *fornyrðislag* meter. By placing the poem into the history of the Icelandic fox as represented in literature and folklore from the twelfth into the twentieth century, this thesis creates a framework for understanding the relationship between the native inhabitants of Iceland and its European settlers.

Þótt refurinn—eða hinn íslenski melrakki—sé eina upprunalega spendýrið í íslenskri náttúru, er varla hægt að segja að hann komi fyrir í elstu bókmenntum Íslendinga sem nokkru nemi. Í þessari ritgerð er gerð grein fyrir þeim upplýsingum sem finna má um refinn í íslenskum miðaldaheimildum jafnt sem þjóðsögum síðari tíma, með áherslu á þau stöðluðu einkenni sem koma ítrekað fram í gegnum aldirnar. Í íslenskum miðaldabókmenntum er yfirleitt ekki getið um refinn sem dýr í eiginlegri mynd, heldur er vísað til hans í yfirfærðri merkingu: í eiginnöfnum, draumum og orðatiltækjum. Langoftast er refurinn þó sýndur sem einhvers konar jaðarvera, sem tengist þá iðulega óræðum mörkum: galdri (náttúru/yfirnáttúru), kynvitund (karlkyni/kvenkyni), ráðsnilld (valdi/gáfum) og hæfni til að lifa af (lífi/dauða); hið sama á við um síðari tíma þjóðfræðaefni. Með því að setja refinn í íslenskri sagnahefð

Í samhengi við goðsagnir um bragðarefi víða um heim jafnt sem evrópskar dýrasögur, er nú leitast við að draga fram eins konar menningarsögu íslenska refsins. Í þessum tilgangi er íslenskt frásagnarkvæði frá 15. öld, Skaufhalabálkur, nú þýtt í fyrsta skipti yfir á ensku, en þar segir með kómískum hætti frá hinstu veiðiferð íslensks refs, sem hefur þó áberandi mannlega eiginleika. Þýðingin er gerð með hliðsjón af upphaflegu skáldamáli bragarhátarins, fornyrðislagi, þar sem ljóðstöfum er haldið eins og kostur er. Með því að staðsetja kvæðið innan fyrirbyggjandi upplýsinga um vistfræði refsins á Íslandi, bókmennta og þjóðsagna frá tólfu öld og fram til þeirrar tuttugustu, hafa hugmyndir um refinn í íslenskri sagnahefð nú verið settar í það samhengi sem ætti að auðvelda okkur að skilja hið flókna samband þessa frumbyggja landsins og þeirra landnema sem síðar settust að á Íslandi.

Introduction

Foxes were the first Icelanders. The arctic fox had maintained sole dominion over the coastlines and mountainslopes of the North Atlantic island for tens of thousands of years before Ingólfr Arnarson ostensibly set up house in 874. Known in Latin as *Vulpes lagopus*, the arctic fox is the only terrestrial mammal indigenous to Iceland, having essentially been stranded there by receding sea ice at the end of the last ice age.¹ The lemming, the main food source for the entire population of the species outside of Iceland, did not survive alongside it and therefore the Icelandic fox has adapted to vary from its international counterparts in its habits. Due to birds, particularly sea-birds, compromising the main food source for the Icelandic fox, the majority of the population is concentrated along the west and east coasts with the highest concentrations in the Westfjords of Iceland (up to ten times more than the highlands).² Although there are no textual records that could hint at the fox population in Iceland during the settlement age, there are some ecological indications. The populations have radically fluxuated in the past 150 years since documentation of them began, largely due to hunting sponsored by the Wildlife Management Institute, but the relative consistency of their food sources interannually means that the population density changes little over time.³ Considering there are now an estimated 10,000 individuals living in Iceland annually, that is approximately one fox for every 33 humans.⁴ Despite their presence predating human settlement, the sagas do not mention a single Icelandic fox. Along the same lines, there is not a single article ever published on the fox, the only truly Icelandic animal, in Old Icelandic literature. Due to its rarity in the sagas, the lack of research on the fox in this context is unsurprising. It is only by its place in Icelandic ecology that its absence from early Icelandic culture seems conspicuous. The original research questions for this study were thus: 1. Why

¹ Páll Hersteinsson et al., “Elstu þekktu leifar melrakka á Íslandi,” *Náttúrufræðingurinn* 76 (2007): 13.

² Karin Norén, Anders Angerbjörn and Páll Hersteinsson, “Population Structure in an Isolated Arctic Fox, *Vulpes Lagopus*, Population: The Impact of Geographical Barriers.” *Biological Journal of the Linnean Society* 97 (2009): 18.

³ Ester Rut Unnsteinsdóttir et al., “The Fall and Rise of the Icelandic Arctic Fox (*Vulpes Lagopus*): A 50-year Demographic Study on a Non-Cyclic Arctic Fox Population,” *Oecologia* 181 (2016): 1129.

⁴ Andrew Mellows et al., “The Impact of Past Climate Change on Genetic Variation and Population Connectivity in the Icelandic Arctic Fox,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 279 (2012): 4568.

are foxes not represented in Old Icelandic literature? and 2. Why does a stigma against the fox continue to this day?

Despite Iceland's origins as an agricultural settlement founded on animal husbandry and "animal studies" coming into practice more frequently in the humanities, there remains no foundational study of the representations of animals (generally or specifically) in Old Icelandic literature. Eduardo Ramos has noted the resilience of the animal motifs inherited by Icelandic literature from pre-Christian beliefs as they adapted but essentially remained throughout the development of saga literature.⁵ As early as *Landnámabók*, certain figures are associated with specific animals. Many of the plots of the *Íslendingasögur* are driven by farming disputes involving sheep or horses and the *fornaldarsögur* by shape-changing. While these aspects have been studied in their specifics, there are few studies that zero in on various animals that are associated with Iceland or with Norse culture.

Because there is little research on either animals generally or foxes specifically in Icelandic literature on which to build, as I began to look for them and find them in unusual ways, my preoccupation changed from "why or why not" to "where and how" the fox was represented. Thus, I have traced nearly every reference to foxes throughout the sagas and many later Icelandic folktales to provide a wide overview of the fox in Icelandic literature and culture from the Middle Ages into the twentieth-century. *Skaufhalabálkur*, a folk poem written by Svartur of Hofstaðir in the mid-fifteenth century is the only narrative in the entire Old Norse corpus to not only address the fox specifically, but to center on it and even characterize the fox in its Icelandic context. It tells the story of an anthropomorphic old fox who must brave his last hunt in order to feed his starving family, which results in his mortal wounding by a shepherd and his dog. Because this poem is clearly a cornerstone to understanding the traditions of the Icelandic fox, I have completed the first (to my knowledge) full English translation of the poem. Because the poem is linguistically simple in *fornyrðislag*, devoid of kennings, and minimal in *heiti*, I have provided two alternate translations. In one I have sacrificed the alliteration of the meter in favor of literal accuracy and I have translated the other more liberally in an attempt to preserve the auditory aspects of the original Icelandic verse. In order to understand the poem's association with the Icelandic fox, however, the translation is preceded by a

⁵ Eduardo Ramos, "Dreams of a Bear: Animal Traditions in the Old Norse-Icelandic Context," (MA thesis, University of Iceland, 2014): 6.

thorough study of the fox as represented in Icelandic sources. Founded firmly in literature and philology, this research has expanded where necessary to include folkloristic, historical, anthropological, and even ecological and biological sources in order to create a framework for understanding both the poem and the context that produced it. The result is essentially a cultural history of the Icelandic fox.

Just as the Icelandic fox adapted biologically from its international population to create the unique subspecies that it is today, so did the Icelandic fox adapt culturally from its European origins to include some distinct qualities in response to the Icelandic environment. The fox is so prominent in European folklore that *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography* by Hans-Jörg Uther classifies the first 99 categories as Animal Tales, the first 69 of which are “The Clever Fox” specifically.⁶ Because of this, there are two interconnected concepts that must be mentioned in the context of the fox: the universal archetype of the trickster and the European beast epic.

Most critically associated with North American mythology by the French “father of modern anthropology” and structuralist scholar Claude Lévi-Strauss, the trickster figure appears in mythology, folklore, and literature around the world. Tricksters are characterized by a particular cleverness or higher knowledge that allows them to challenge or circumvent the conventions that surround them, thus giving them a mediatory quality.⁷ They appear in the same animal fables that are considered the foundations of the European beast epic, most particularly with the fox. The most prominent example of the beast epic is the cycle of French, Dutch, German, and English poems about Reynard, the iconic trickster figure and anthropomorphic fox. While *Skaufhali* of *Skaufhalabálkur* is the only fox in Old Icelandic literature to be characterized with human traits, both elements of the trickster and even the beast epic are present in some saga characters. Frederic Amory is the only scholar to undertake any study on *Skaufhalabálkur* specifically and published the only article on its origins. He has also written on *Króka-Refs saga*, which is another key text in my research, and so I am indebted to his work for what little foundations have been laid

⁶ Hans-Jörg Uther, *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography, Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 2004), 16.

⁷ Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 68, no. 270 (1955): 442.

for mine. Jón Árnason and Sigfús Sigfússon are also key figures here as their folktales collections provide the major evidence of the transformation of the fox in Icelandic culture after the Middle Ages.

Although the fox never appears as physically present in Iceland in the sagas, a thorough examination of the words for fox as they appear has allowed me to categorize their scant appearances into three main categories. The first are characters who are either named or nicknamed after the fox, usually Refr but occasionally Melrakki. Each of the more important characters have demonstrably fox-like traits while the minor ones are likely named such coincidentally. The second category are foxes that appear in dreams, symbolizing a sorcerer and foreshadowing an attack. The last category is verbal expressions, most notably a call to action which insinuates a shameful death “like a fox in a den.” This hints not only at the mediatory aspect of the fox as heavily associated with its den, neither quite below the earth nor above it, but also provides strong evidence for the systemic killing of foxes in their dens where the sagas themselves fail to describe such an activity. There are also several episodes that include two or all of these categories simultaneously.

Some notable concepts run through all three categories of these references. The first is a preoccupation with gender, primarily with masculinity or lack thereof. Multiple characters named Refr are embroiled in scandals related to accusations of sodomy, male villains who utilize the culturally feminine power of *seiðr* appear in dreams as female foxes, and characters express how “*lítilmannligt*”⁸ [unmanly] it is to be taken like a fox in a trap. Through these same episodes, the fox or the character associated with it is identified with a constant threat of death. By establishing these motifs distinctly associated with the fox in Medieval Icelandic culture, many of these same motifs are easily found throughout later folktales where foxes come to represent many of the same characteristics in physical form instead of the purely metaphorical appearances in the sagas. By this period, they have even been occasionally transformed into monsters, a perverse and infernal hybrid of foxes and cats known, amongst other names, as the *skuggabaldur*. By tracing the fox from Medieval literature through modern folktales, I hope to place *Skaufhalabálkur* neatly into the center of the traditions of the Icelandic fox, literarily, culturally, folkloristically, and chronologically.

⁸ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, “Laxdæla saga,” in *Íslenzk fornrit V* (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzk Fornritafélag, 1934): 119.

The Fox in Icelandic Culture

Literature of the Middle Ages

Skaufhalabálkur [Poem of a Sheaf-Tail] exists in only two manuscripts and is titled *Refsbálkur* [Poem of a Fox] in the later witness. The main character, who will be called Skaufhali here, is goaded by his wife into going out to find food for their starving children. This results in his fatal injury, which is recounted and lamented in a long epic and comprises the majority of the stanzas. The poem is not quite so distant from the sagas, however, as Armory notes that both the whetting and the *ævikviða* aspects of the poem can be seen as parodies of saga writing conventions.⁹ While the poem demonstrably engages with both the indigenous Icelandic animal and the Icelandic indigenous literary genre, it doesn't explain why the animal is never really addressed by the genre. In fact, there is only one single episode in all of the *sagas* in which an arctic fox is physically present. Ironically, the foxes in question are seen in Canada. They are only mentioned in *Eiríks saga rauða* in the brief description of "Helluland," a region of Arctic North America in which they saw many foxes. Beyond this, the only references to the fox are purely metaphorical and fall into the three main categories listed above: names, dreams, and verbal expressions.

Although many synonyms exist for the fox in the Icelandic language, the two main terms used in Old Norse are *refr*, the general word for fox, and *melrakki*, the specific word for the arctic fox, comprised of *melr* [reed grass] and *rakki* [dog]. *Tófa* or *tóa*, the word for vixen, does not appear in the sagas but is present in *Skaufhalabálkur* and later becomes a common word for a fox of either sex in the modern period.¹⁰ A search in the Dictionary of Old Norse Prose for *refr* returns nearly twice as many results as *melrakki*, the earliest being in the Homily Book c. 1200. The next is in *Fagrskinna* (c. 1220), which includes two different instances. One is simply the name of a disease called "refofr" [fox-worm, today called "ring-worm" in English], and the second an expression: "tækit i halann a refenom er nu dregr skaftet [var. skaufit] inn her með lannde"¹¹ [taking the fox by the tail as he now drags his

⁹ Frederic Amory, "Skaufalabálkur, Its Author and Its Sources," *Scandinavian Studies* 47, no. 3 (1975): 298.

¹⁰ Richard Cleasby and Guðbrand Vigfusson, "Tófa," *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957).

¹¹ Finnur Jónsson, *Fagrskinna: Nóregs kononga tal* (København: Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur, 1902-1903), 91.

sheaf along the shore]. The first appearances in a saga are two more metaphors in *Sverris saga*: “ótrygð sem refrinn” [false like the fox] and “mest í málinu, sem refr í halanum” [most in talk like the fox in its tail, implying all appearance and no substance].¹²

A search in ONP for *melrakki* reveals its earliest extant usage in two entries of *Grágás*. The first is in the Christian Laws section and forbids them to be eaten; the second is in the section on property laws and allows them to be killed on another man’s land.¹³ These references show an established negative association with the animal from a Christian perspective. The earliest extant reference for *melrakki* in a saga is *Heiðarvíga saga* (c. 1300),¹⁴ which contains a character named Þórðr who has the byname *melrakki*. As the name uses the less common and more Icelandic-specific synonym for the animal and appears to be related specifically to a verbal expression, it will be addressed here instead of later alongside the many characters named *Refr*. Although the byname’s origins are not explained, it is likely related to and later exploited in the use of a joke at his expense, to which he sassily replies in kind:

Barði mælti: “Dregr Melrakki eptir sér halann sinn nú.” “Svá er,” segir hann Þórðr, “at ek dreg eptir mér halann minn, ok ber ek lítt up eða ekki, en þess varir mik, at þú dragir þinn hala mjök lengi, áðr þú hefnir Halls, bróður þíns.”¹⁵

[Barði says: “Now Fox drags his tail behind him.” “So it is,” says Þórðr, “that I drag my tail and stick it up or not however I like, but I think that you’ll drag your tail even longer before you avenge your own brother.”]¹⁶

¹² Gustav Ludvig Indrebø. *Sverris saga: Etter Cod. AM 327 4to* (Oslo: Norske Historiske Kildeskriftkommission, 1920): 138, 153.

¹³ Gunnar Karlsson et al., *Grágás: Lagasafn íslenska þjóðveldisins* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1992): 32, 349. It does not specify why they could not be eaten, although its inclusion in this section indicates an association with pagan practices.

349. It does not specify why they could not be eaten, although its inclusion in this section indicates an association with pagan practices.

¹⁴ Matthew J. Driscoll, *The Unwashed Children of Eve: The Production, Dissemination, and Reception of Popular Literature in Post-Reformation Iceland* (Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1997), 102.

¹⁵ Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, “Heiðarvíga saga,” in *Borgfirðinga sögur* (Reykjavík: Hið Íslensk Fornritafélag, 1938), 270.

¹⁶ Unless stated otherwise, all translations are my own.

The fox's tail is one of its features most relevant in Icelandic literature, as it is the point of reference in many of proverbs, including those in *Fagrskinna* and *Sverris saga*, as well as possibly playing a role in the source of its Icelandic name. Although Málið.is cites that the origins are in the fox making its dens amongst the reed grass,¹⁷ the reed grass in bloom also resembles a fox's tail.

This connection is also evident in the title of *Skaufhalabálkur*, where *skauf* [sheaf, ie. of wheat] is nearly synonymous with the blooming *melr* compounded with *hali* [tail]. This association of the fox tail with a phallus is made even clearer as Málið.is also notes a connection with *skaufi*,¹⁸ a modern synonym for a penis,¹⁹ which may be related to the Old Icelandic *skauf*. It certainly adds a layer of humor to the modern Icelandic reader of the poem and is inkeeping with the traditions of the fox being referenced as an insult or call to action, implying cowardliness, emasculation, or shame.

Names of Foxes

Several characters throughout the sagas are named or nicknamed after foxes. Þórður *melrakki* is the only one to use the word specific to the fox indigenous to Iceland, while all the others use the generic Icelandic term for fox. In addition to Þórður, Þórólfr refr in *Hænsna-Þóris saga* and Ketill refr Skíðason in *Njáls saga* are the only other characters nicknamed for the animal, although like the rest of the characters, they use the more common term. Also in *Njáls saga* is Skáld-Refr, whose proper name is *Refr* and whose nickname defines him as a poet. Both characters are barely mentioned, neither being involved enough to consider the reasons behind either of their names. *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, on the other hand, has two minor characters named Refr who each exhibit traits that fit neatly into the traditions of the Icelandic fox already established. Early in the saga, a fight is incited between Gisli and Skeggi by Skeggi's insistence that his smith, Refr, carve the likenesses of Gisli and Kolbjörn in the act of sodomy as an insult. It introduces the act of wood-working, something

¹⁷ "Melrakki," Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, Málið.is, <http://malid.is/leit/melrakki>.

¹⁸ "Skaufhali," Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, Málið.is, <http://malid.is/leit/skaufhali>.

¹⁹ "Skaufi," Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, Málið.is, <http://malid.is/leit/skaufi>.

heavily associated with Refur from *Króka-Refs saga* and discussed below, but it also involves many of the other factors associated with foxes: homosexuality, emasculation, and a severe call to action resulting in death. The second Refur hides Gisli in his home late in the saga. He is described as “*allra manna slægastur*” [slyest of all men],²⁰ using the same adjective *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* and the name of one antagonist from *Nítíða saga*, both of which will be addressed below. His wife is described as a downright shrew, but that they get along well regardless. In exchange for total control of the situation, he hatches a plan that involves his wife’s unpleasantness to distract the search party from the hidden Gisli. Aside from the explicit reference to his slyness, his quick decision-making, and his hiding something in his home away from some kind of hunters, there are implications of gender and masculinity in considering what kind of man could pair so well with a wife so horrible.

There are only two major characters who are named Refr, Króka-Refr from *Króka-Refs saga* and Gjafa-Refr from *Gautreks saga*. Based on its close analogy in Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum* (c. 1200),²¹ the first to be addressed will be Gjafa-Refr. Initially known as Refr Rennisfífl [Rennir’s fool], his story fits into a rags-to-riches folktale pattern. He is a coal-biter figure who lazes around his father Rennir’s farm and is eventually sent away in shame. He convinces his father to let him take their family’s prize ox, which he takes to Earl Neri in northern Norway and gives it to him without expecting a gift in return. Even when he does receive a shield in return, he returns it because he can see Neri’s distress in losing it. Instead, Neri gives him a whetstone and instructs him to give it to King Gautrekr, who gives him a gold ring. Then Neri instructs Refr in a series of further exchanges with various other kings who come to know him as Gjafa-Refr [gift-fox]. This also involves some military intervention and deception against the evil advisor named Refnefr [fox-nose] and King Gautrekr himself, who ends up marrying off his daughter, giving lands, and bestowing the title of earl to Refr. So Neri ultimately repays the debt of the ox and Refr makes his way from peasantry to earldom.

²⁰ Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson ed., “Gísla saga Súrssonar,” in *Vestfirðinga sögur* (Reykjavík: Hið íslensk fornritafélag, 1943), 86.

²¹ Frederic Amory, “Pseudoarchaism and Fiction in *Króka-Refs saga*,” *Medieval Scandinavia* 12 (1988), 19.

The structure of *Gautreks saga* is unusual. Each half of the story centers on a different character, first Starkaðr and then Refr, each loosely connected to the kings Vikar and Gautrekr, who themselves are the minor characters. This implies that the saga was agglomerated from separate materials, likely two individual *þættir*. Michael Chesnutt has traced the manuscript history of both redactions of *Gautreks saga* to isolate what he calls *Gjafa-Refs saga*.²² By looking at the narrative patterns of *Gesta Danorum* (8,16,1-4), *Gjafa-Refs saga*, and *Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka* (which features another profitable series of gift exchanges by an otherwise unpromising character), he postulates that the Icelandic texts are not derived from the older Danish one but that all three derive from common folk source. He believes this to be an exemplum emphasizing the main character's conformity to the parable of talents, "which teaches that every man is under the obligation to make use of the gifts that God has granted him, and that failure to do so is a sin."²³ Although Gjafa-Refr and Auðunn each use some element of trickery, it is actually either luck, perserverance, or a combination of that two which is shown as their natural ability, distancing them somewhat from the trickster archetype of their namesake. If any, it is Saxo's version (whose Refo [the fox] not only tricks kings but actually kills Ulvo [the wolf]), which adheres best to both the trickster figure's more vicious nature and the beast epic or fable traditions. Gjafa-Refr, however, is notable as the only Old Norse example of pitting one Refr against another, essentially creating a good-fox/bad-fox dynamic that is absent from the rest of the tradition. They typically include fox characters as purely antagonistic, or, less often, anti-heroic as in the cases of *Skaufhalabálkur* and *Króka-Refs saga*.

For that purpose, *Króka-Refs saga* occupies a particularly interesting place in the representation of foxes in Icelandic literature. Aside from the possibility of the existence of a separate *Gjafa-Refs saga*, it is the only entire saga whose eponymous character is named for the fox. While *Skaufhalabálkur* is the most literal example of the beast epic as transmitted into Icelandic traditions, *Króka-Refs saga* can be seen as a variant of the Icelandic beast epic as well, and moreso than *Gjafa-Refs saga*. As is evidenced by the conventions of the *riddarasögur*, many different European literary

²² Michael Chesnutt, "The Content and Meaning of *Gjafa-Refs saga*," in *Fornaldarsagaerne: Myter og virkelighed: Studier i de oldislandske fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, ed. Agneta Ney et al. (København: Museum Tusulanums Forlag, 2008), 96.

²³ *Ibid.*, 103.

traditions, both prose and poetry, were translated both in language and genre into the Icelandic saga. Many of these are direct translations which can be attributed to a specific source, like Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae* into *Breta sögur* and the *lais* of Marie de France into *Strengleikar*.²⁴ Others were more indigenous reinterpretations of nebulous foreign traditions, such as *Tristrams saga og Ísöndar* from the many continental variants. As the Reynard cycle has a similarly or even more complex history of transmission through French, English, Dutch, and German literature, there is a good chance that the tradition influenced the writing of *Króka-Refs saga* to some extent. While some similarities between *Króka-Refr* and Reynard will be considered here, a thorough investigation of the possible influence is beyond the scope of this paper. (The similarities to the beast epic tradition will be considered moreso in relation to *Skaufhalabálkur*.)

Króka-Refs saga tells the story of yet another coal-biter figure who discovers his preternatural skills as a wood craftsman in hiding after his first killing. He travels to Greenland where he starts a family. In declining to fight a polar bear unarmed, he reveals his lack of “drengskapr”²⁵ [manliness] to a rival family, who then slander him. They repeatedly refer to him as “Refr inn ragi”²⁶ [Refr the faggot]²⁷ and claiming he was paid to leave Iceland because he was well known as a sodomite. Any man accusing another of *ragr* [queerness] could be killed in retaliation with impunity.²⁸ Refr slaughters the entire family in the night in revenge and then goes into hiding, protects his family from an attempted arson by building a sprinkler system, and eventually escorting them safely away all through his craftiness and quick wit. He flees to Norway, where he uses the arts of disguise and wordplay to avenge an attempted rape of his wife and escape yet again, this time to Denmark. Having made enemies with the Norwegian royalty through his clever killings, he is welcomed in

²⁴ Vésteinn Ólason, “Family Sagas,” in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005): 113.

²⁵ Hermann Pálsson, ed., “*Króka-Refs saga*,” in *Íslenzk fornrit XIV* (Hið Íslenzk fornritafélag, 1960): 134.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ I have chosen to translate the word as “faggot” as a contemporary analogy to communicate how offensive the term was considered. It could mean either “queer” or “coward” and while both are implied by his accusers, I have chosen to the former due to their explicit and multiple references to Refr’s alleged sodomy.

²⁸ Richard Cleasby and Guðbrand Vigfusson, “*Ragr*,” *An Icelandic-English dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957).

rival Denmark and aided, provided security and fortune, and renamed Sigtryggr, leaving behind the unusual associations of his namesake.

The post-classical *Íslendingasögur* have received less and later scholarly attention and *Króka-Refs* is no exception. Most of the critical work written on it has focused on its particularly post-classical elements as influenced by the *fornaldarsögur*, *riddarasögur*, and other continental European influences. Although few scholars have studied its potential as an Icelandic variation of the beast epic, Örnólfur Thorsson has noted some similarities. He notes that although the social criticism typically explicit in the beast epic is missing from the saga, that the tradition “also provided an outlet which could entertain without the shackles of religious dogma, and the world of Ref with its relish for the funny and the peculiar seems closer to the licence which was often granted to animals but denied to men.”²⁹ Another notable narrative aspect shared between Refr and Reynard is the frequent engagement with and outsmarting of the royalty to which they are subjected, rather than the simple fight-or-follow patterns of many other saga heroes in relation to their monarchs.

Frederic Amory has written on the fictionality of *Króka-Refs saga*, elaborating on how consciously it fits Theodore Andersson’s six-part archetype of saga structure and noting elements of fictionality and wordplay. He argues that although it conforms to the saga conventions clearly established as canon by the time of its writing, that its confusion about historical dates and its lack of genealogical connections to the Icelandic settlement give it a thin veneer of historicity which he identifies as “pseudoarchaic.”³⁰ In addition to noting the analogies between what he refers to as the generic “Refs saga” (the predecessor to Chesnutt’s *Gjafa-Refs saga*) in *Auðunar þáttr*, *Gautreks saga*, and Saxo, he makes an important point about Króka-Refr mediating “between the worlds” (peasantry and royalty, Iceland and Scandinavia, etc).³¹ This is to be expected with the most important fox character in the sagas as this liminal aspect is a key one in the representations of the fox in Icelandic culture. Króka-Refr can also be seen as a sort of mediatory figure between human and animal, as Kendra J. Willson has alluded by noting that in “a reversal of the usual *nafngipt* [name-gift]

²⁹ Örnólfur Thorsson, *The Sagas of Icelanders: A Selection* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001): 596.

³⁰ Amory, “Pseudoarchaism and Fiction,” 19.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

pattern, the new name [Sigtryggr] is a more usual personal name than the original, perhaps marking Refr's transition from extra-societal fox to member of human society."³² The main consideration of her study, however, is the notable absence of magic in the saga and its replacement with Refr's futuristic technological achievements such as the sprinkler system, resulting in elements of science fiction within the saga. Kroka-Refr's ingenious plans and structural feats are neatly in keeping with the trademark cleverness of trickster aspect of the fox in European literature, but their replacement of the supernatural is uncommon in the fox traditions in Icelandic literature. This conscious avoidance of the supernatural is not only notable for its divergence from post-classical saga writing conventions, which relies heavily on those motifs, but as will be demonstrated in the following section, it also diverges from the frequent association of foxes in Icelandic culture with magic and those who use it.

Dreams of Foxes

The traditions of foxes in Iceland undoubtedly incorporate many of the associations that came with Norse culture from Scandinavia and Europe beyond, but it does not begin and end with the trickster archetype. Because the tradition of animal tales or fables is mainly absent from Icelandic literature, the notable characters who are associated with the fox by name have been considered. The next category to be considered concerning references to the fox in the Old Norse contains the only instances in which the fox is actually described. The only instances of this are *fylgjur*, the Old Norse analogue to the spirit animal. More specifically, the only foxes existent in this context are specified as being female and, most importantly, associated exclusively with male magic users.

Synonymous in the singular with the verb for "to follow" and the noun for "afterbirth," a *fylgja* is a spirit that is connected to a particular person or a family. It is more specifically associated with the fate of its mortal counterpart, spanning from birth (as its name suggests), following through life (as its name also suggests) and to death, as they are typically revealed in the foreshadowing of a death, most often in a

³² Kendra J. Willson, "Kroka-Refs saga as Science Fiction: Technology, Magic and the Materialist Hero," *The Fantastic in Old Norse / Icelandic Literature: Sagas and the British Isles* (Durham: The Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006): 1069.

dream.³³ It can take the form of a (frequently female) human or an animal, typically associated metaphorically with some quality of the person or family to which it is attached. Certain animals are repeatedly associated with certain types of characters or scenarios, such as wolves nearly always signifying violent opponents and swans as beloved women. Outside of the roles of farm animals in the social structure and economy of Iceland, the *fylgja* is the primary source of systemic animal representation in Old Norse prose. In terms of narrative functionality, William Friesen draws attention to “the fundamental notion that, in most sagas, *fylgjur* are neither wholly earthly nor entirely divine, operating as interstitial beings between the spiritual and mundane world.”³⁴ Like Gjafa-Refr and Króka-Refr’s mediatory roles in their sagas, the *fylgjur* fit perfectly into the liminal zone between animal and human as well as between dream and reality. They manifest themselves to a human character in animal form within the realm of dreams to warn of misfortune in reality. More specifically, they transfer some kind of otherworldly knowledge to the dreamer through ambiguous means.

One important aspect of animal motifs in Old Norse literature can also be seen as a crossover of the *fylgjur* with Iceland’s farming culture in the form of the *landvættir*. The latter are the symbols immortalized as national symbols of Iceland; they appear around the official coat of arms as well as across the top of the parliament building. They are primarily attested in *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* by Snorri Sturluson as the four beings (bull, eagle, dragon, and giant) who rise up to defend Iceland from wizardly espionage on behalf of the Danish king. Although the *fylgjur* and the *landvættir* are generally distinct phenomena, there are intersections. Jamie Cochrane uses multiple examples from *Landnámabók* and the *Íslendingasögur* to draw connections between “supernatural prophesy, a settler, his livestock and his subsequent success.”³⁵ Cochrane’s most notable example is the episode in *Laxdæla saga* after Ólafur pái slaughters his special ox that ensured the survival of his flock over winter. He is visited by a woman in a dream who identifies herself as the mother of the ox and warns him that he’ll lose that which to him is most dear, which turns out

³³ Kaaren Grimstad, “Fylgja,” in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages Vol. 6*, ed. Joseph Strayer (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1982): 335.

³⁴ William Friesen, “Family Resemblances: Textual Sources of Animal Fylgjur in Icelandic Sagas,” *Scandinavian Studies* 87, no. 2 (2015): 257.

³⁵ Jamie Cochrane, “Land-spirits and Iceland’s Fantastic Pre-conversion Landscape,” in *The Fantastic in Old Norse / Icelandic Literature: Sagas and the British Isles* (Durham: The Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006): 190.

to be his son, protagonist Kjartan Ólafsson. Although Cochrane uses this episode as evidence for “land-spirits” choosing either prosperity or adversity for the farmers with whom they come into contact, it also demonstrates a connection between the two main spheres of animal representation in Old Norse as well as the *fylgjur*’s ability to deliver a warning to the dreamer, however cryptic. Being both a common *fylgja*, the only true “spirit” of the land, and undeniably connected to farming success (or lack thereof), one would expect foxes to be present in this context but, yet again, they are conspicuously absent.

Where it has been touched on are in studies of the *fylgjur*, and while most of them have mentioned the fox as being the typical *fylgja* of sorcerers, that is usually all that is mentioned.³⁶ What is particularly interesting about this association is that every instance of a fox as *fylgja* is specified as appearing female whereas its human counterpart is always male. It is unusual for the gender of a *fylgja* to be specified at all. Helga’s swan *fylgja* in the dream in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* is often translated into English as a pen swan, possibly because the Icelandic text uses the feminine noun *álpt* (more common in Old Icelandic) rather than the male *svanur* (more common now), but this distinction is purely linguistic and does not denote the sex of the bird.³⁷ So even as *fylgjur* can occasionally symbolize women, their animal doubles are still not specified as such and neither is the gender of any man’s *fylgja* specified either. Additionally, as *fylgjur* are typically associated with specific people, or classes of people like kings, princes, or warriors, the fox appears to be the only *fylgja* specifically associated with any class of supernatural being within the sagas.³⁸

The obvious source of gender discrepancy with the fox *fylgja* would be the practice of *seiðr* [sorcery]. A magical practice traditionally associated with women, the use of *seiðr* by any man was generally considered shameful and effeminate, worthy of accusations of *ergi* [queerness], other sexualized insults, and punishable by

³⁶ Georgia Dunham Kelchner, *Dreams in Old Norse Literature and Their Affinities in Folklore: With an Appendix Containing the Icelandic Texts and Translations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935): 19-20.

Gabriel Turville-Petre, “Dreams in the Icelandic Tradition,” in *Folklore* 69, no. 2 (1958): 99. Ramos, “Dreams of a Bear,” 28.

³⁷ Richard Cleasby and Guðbrand Vigfusson, “Álpt,” *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*.

³⁸ There is one she-wolf *fylgja* associated with a magical queen in *Úlfhams rímur*, probably composed in the late fourteenth century on the basis of a now lost prose version. See Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, *Úlfhams saga* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 2001).

death.³⁹ In this case, it's no wonder that the typical *fylgja* of a male magic user would be the female of a species generally reviled for its craftiness and destructiveness. That still doesn't explain why it is the only extant *fylgja* in the sagas to specify its gender, let alone a reversal. Friesen writes about this at length, suggesting that the origins of the Icelandic association of foxes to wizards may be influence from Middle English bestiaries, which also inform the gender issue at hand. He references the thirteenth-century MS British Museum Arundel 292, which associates the fox with the devil, nocturnal activity, and a *modus operandi* "to achieve by trickery and deception what he cannot with valour."⁴⁰ These attributes are also closely associated with magic. While all of this fits neatly into the wider traditions of the fox in European literature and folklore, he notes a very important feature of the Middle English bestiary: they frequently refer to the fox as *hire* [her] instead of the grammatically generically masculine pronoun of Middle English, Latin, and French bestiaries.⁴¹

This may provide a satisfactory route of transmission for the motif from Middle English to Old Norse but it remains difficult to place its first usage in the sagas. The vixen *fylgjur* only appear in two sagas, although under remarkably similar circumstances: *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* and *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*. At their earliest, both sagas have been dated to the first part of the fourteenth century,⁴² making it nearly impossible to determine which, if either, would have been the original source of the episode. *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* will be addressed first as it is likely older in origin for three reasons: 1. It is a reworking of the earlier and now lost *Ísfirðinga saga*; 2. It includes verses possibly composed by a skald named Hávarðr attested in *Snorra Edda*;⁴³ and 3. It contains the less developed version of the motif. The text is relatively late for an *Íslendingasaga* and its awareness of the already long-developed conventions of the genre are apparent, its parodic, nearly slapstick elements. If it is the earlier, then it is the first association of the vixen *fylgjur* to sorcerers in the sagas. Coincidentally, a man's bravado is called out early in the saga

³⁹ Jenny Blain and Robert J. Wallis, "The 'Ergi' Seidman: Contestations of Gender, Shamanism, and Sexuality in Northern Religion Past and Present," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 15, no. 3 (2000): 399-400.

⁴⁰ Friesen, "Family Resemblances," 268.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 270.

⁴² Hermann Pálsson, "Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages Vol. 12*, ed. Joseph Strayer (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1982): 47; Paul Schach, "Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages Vol. 6.*, ed. Joseph Strayer (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1982): 114.

⁴³ Schach, "Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings," 115.

using the same expression as in *Sverris saga*, that he is “most in talk like the fox in its tail.”⁴⁴ In a typical saga feud, a rival chieftain’s son Þórgrímr, who happens to be well versed in magic, leads an army against Steinþór and his silly sidekick, Atli. Þórgrímr is overcome with sleepiness before the attack, a common feature of *fylgja* episodes, and lays down with a *feldr* [cloak, often of fur] over his head to sleep. Although an animal fur is not specified, it harkens to the Icelandic tradition of shape-shifting in which the shifter dons the skin of the animal into which they will transform.⁴⁵ That night Atli has the following dream:

ek þóttumk ganga út ór búrinu, ok sá ek, at vargar runnu sunnan á völlin átján saman, en fyrir vörgunum rann refkeila ein. Þat var svá slægligt kvikendi, at slíkt hefi ek aldri sét fyrri; þat var ógurligt mjök ok ílliligt. Þat skyggndisk víða, ok á öllu vildi þat auga hafa, ok öll sýndusk mér dýrin grimmlig.⁴⁶

[I thought I went out of the storehouse and saw that eighteen wolves were running together across the plains and ahead of them ran one vixen. It was so devious a creature I had never seen the likes of it before. It was utterly hideous and sinister as it peered around and wanted to have its eyes on everything; and all the other animals seemed fierce to me.]

This includes many of the stock elements of *fylgjur* dreams, most notably the oncoming wolves and the pre-dream drowsiness, although it is more often the dreamer who is overcome by sleep and warned rather than the attacker who visits his future victim in a dream as is implied by Þórgrímr’s actions. Atli does not describe what physical features make the fox so repulsive to behold (nor the determination of its sex), but he makes it very clear by the use of three strong adjectives that it gave him more than just unpleasant feeling. He is utterly repulsed by them.

Being a very classic example of the *fornaldarsögur* conventions without the traces of irony present in *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, the corresponding scene in

⁴⁴ Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson ed., “Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings,” in *Vestfirðinga sögur* (Reykjavík: Hið íslensk fornritafélag, 1943), 302.

⁴⁵ Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, “The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 106, no. 3 (2007): 279.

⁴⁶ Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson, “Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings,” 349.

Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar contains nearly double of every aspect. Jökull, the leader of one band of brothers has enlisted the help of two sorcerers named Gautan and Ógautan, and the night before they plan to attack the opposing band of brothers in their feud, Þorsteinn has the following dream:

Mik dreymdi, segir Þorsteinn, at hingat runnu 30 vargar, ok voru sjö bjarndýr ok inn áttundi rauðkinni, hann var mikill ok grimmligr, ok at auk tvær refkeilur, þær fóru fyrir flokkinum, ok voru heldr illiligar, ok á þeim var mér mestr óþokki.⁴⁷

[I dreamed, said Þorsteinn, that thirty wolves ran here and with them seven bears; the eighth was a red-cheeked bear, massive and fierce, along with two vixens. They went ahead of the herd and were quite sinister; it was they who were the most loathsome to me.]

He goes on to describe the animals' attack, accurately predicting who dies and who lives in the following battle. Atli's dream contains nineteen animals including one vixen, while Þorsteinn's contains forty with two vixens. Although Þorsteinn is less enthusiastic than Atli in his repulsion toward the vixens, he clearly states using the same term (*ílliligt*) that, even surrounded by an onslaught of bears and wolves, it is the vixens that seem the absolute worst. This doubling is also seen in the indigenous romance *Nítíða saga*, dated to the fourteenth century,⁴⁸ which includes a pair of villainous wizards named Refsteinn [fox-stone] and Slægrefr [Sly-fox] (calling to mind *slægligt* from Atli's description). They each aid the evil King Ingi in planning magical deception against the maiden-king upon being asked whether they "live up to" their names,⁴⁹ implying "practice witchcraft." In yet another aspect of doubling, common in the *fornaldarsögur* and particularly in *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, one of the sorcerers survives the battle and sniffs out the protagonists again—but this time he has taken the physical form of a vixen who sinks into the earth after being

⁴⁷ C. C. Rafn, ed., "Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar," in *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda eptir gömlum handritum Vol. 2* (København: C. C. Rafn, 1829): 413.

⁴⁸ Matthew J. Driscoll, "Nitida saga," in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano et al. (New York: Garland, 1993), 432.

⁴⁹ Sheryl McDonald, "Nítíða Saga: A Normalised Icelandic Text and Translation," *Leeds Studies in English* 40 (2010): 129, 131.

attacked. Þorsteinn determines it must be the “bikkjustakkrinn” [“bitch-skinned”]⁵⁰ sorcerer Ógautan, which not only implies the tradition of donning an animal skin in the process of shape-changing but also implies insult in the gender disparity once again. Throughout both the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur*, the fox cannot be disentangled from either the practice of magic or the shameful death it can incur.

Metaphors of Foxes

It is interesting to note that the blip in *Eiríks saga rauða* and Ógautan’s transformation are the only episodes in any sagas containing the physical presence of the fox. Beyond these moments, the fox appears to exist only in the abstract world of dreams. It is, however, notably present in yet another abstract world: the world of language. There is one particularly important verbal expression that illuminates much of the history of the Icelandic fox. In a moment of iconic bravado, Skarphéðinn of *Brennu-Njáls saga* steels himself up before his final battle, saying “Em ek ok ófúss þess at láta svæla mik inni sem melrakka í greni.” [“I am unwilling to allow myself to be burned inside like a fox in a hole.”]⁵¹ The base of this expression proliferates through the saga corpus. Although it varies in specifics (ranging from finding it “unpleasant,” “unmanly,” “shameful,” etc.; to be either burned, starved, taken, or suffocated; inside a hole, den, or trap; like either *refr* or *melrakki*), the metaphor “like a fox inside” is repeated in life-threatening situations throughout sagas of all genres. This includes *Laxdæla saga*, *Sturlunga saga*, *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, and *Niðrstigningar saga*, where the character who is trapped like a fox is none other than Satan himself.⁵² The popularity of *Njáls saga* is likely a large factor in the use of this expression in many other sagas, whether they were composed with it or it was added by later a scribe, assuming most anyone involved in the creation of a manuscript would have likely been familiar with it. Its common use implies that the tracking down of fox den systems, trapping, and killing of foxes within them must have been a relatively common practice in the period, despite not a single instance of it within any of the sagas. Between the hunting law of *Grágás* and

⁵⁰ Friesen, “Family Resemblances,” 269.

⁵¹ Einar Ól. Sveinsson ed., “Brennu-Njáls saga,” in *Íslensk fornrit XII* (Hið Íslensk fornritafélag, 1954): 326.

⁵² Finnur Jónsson ed., *AM 623, 4^o: Helgensagaer* (København: Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur, 1927), 4.

folktales from the seventeenth century onwards, this expression is the only evidence in the Old Norse corpus of this fox “hunting” in Iceland. Additionally, although the connection has not been made before and a thorough argument in its favor is outside the bounds of this paper, it also seems quite possible that this expression may play a part in the premise of *Skaufhalabálkur* as well, that of the foxes starving in their den.

While the Icelandic representations of the fox have generally been with either the trickster, the sorcerer, or a shameful death, there are instances within the sagas where these traditions appear to converge. In *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, likely composed in the beginning of the fourteenth century,⁵³ Sturlaugr convinces Frosti to masquerade as him in order to marry, seduce, and extract information from the princess Mjöll while he hides behind the tapestry to listen. In setting the trap for her, he says, “Nú er genginn refr or skorum” or “í skor” in the variant reading,⁵⁴ [Now the fox has gone out of/into the crack]. Although the exact meaning of this is unclear, it uses the same term (*skora*) as the expression in which the fox suffers a shameful death trapped underground, therefore also implying the expression was common enough knowledge to reference it without using the full metaphor. It first appears that Mjöll is the fox in this scenario, as she has been made vulnerable like a fox flushed from the safety of its den, but the specifics becomes less clear when Sturlaugr, seemingly at random, burns both Frosti and Mjöll alive in their marriage bed. Sturlaugr justifies this on Mjöll’s alleged knowledge of witchcraft, which she could use in retaliation against him for the deception. So perhaps Sturlaugr implies that he is the fox who has outsmarted his enemies, even killing his ally in order to do so. While the intersection of the fox metaphor, burning alive, and accusations of magic are likely coincidental, they blur the narrative lines between who is and who isn’t the fox—those trapped and burned (Mjöll and Frosti) or Sturlaugr himself, the one who achieves by trickery and deception what he cannot with valour.

The final example of convergence of the traditions of the fox in the sagas, as they have been demonstrated here, is *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*. Dated with near certainty to the second half of the thirteenth century,⁵⁵ is the oldest of the sagas

⁵³ Hermann Pálsson, “Sturlaugs saga Starfsama,” in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages Vol. 11* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1982): 496.

⁵⁴ C. C. Rafn, ed., “Sturlaugs saga Starfsama,” in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda eptir gömlum handritum Vol. 3* (København: C. C. Rafn, 1830): 636.

⁵⁵ Hermann Pálsson, “Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar,” in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages Vol. 6*, ed. Joseph Strayer (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1982): 310.

considered here. Early in the saga, Queen Ingigerðr has two very typical *fylgjur* dreams. In the first, she sees a lion and a polar bear leading wolves, relatively peacefully, toward them. In the second, the lion returns with a second polar bear as well as a fierce boar and this time, they appear to her more aggressive than the previous visit. No vixens are present, but it exactly fits into the model which is used in dream sequences of the two later sagas. The more important references, however, are near the end of the saga. The first occurs when Þórir tells the Princess Ingibjörg that he intended to starve her father in the castle. She replies:

önnur ráð eru mér heyriligri til at leggja, en þat faðir minn sé sveltr inni sem refr í skor, eða melrakki í greni, hefir mik svá dreymt, at hann muni skammt ófriðar missa ...⁵⁶

[I can think of better things than to let my father be starved alive like a fox in a crack or an arctic fox in a den. I have dreamt indications of more fighting shortly ...]

While it is likely simple coincidence that her father happens to be a villainous sorcerer able to predict attacks against him, his place as the referent in the metaphor is striking. Although it is never explained how exactly he is able to see the future, his daughter seems to do so in her dreams, harkening to the *fylgja* tradition harnessed by Queen Ingigerðr. Additionally, it is interesting to note that this is the only use of the expression which invokes both words for fox and two of the variations on places where the animal might be starved or burned alive.

All of these aspects become even more striking shortly after when King Hrólfr Gautreksson discovers the armed man who has set fire to the castle is in fact his wife and former maiden-king, Queen Ingigerðr. He tells her that “seint er þó at tryggja slíkar konurnar, sem þú ert, ok viltu nú brenna mik inni sem melrakka í greni” [it takes long to tame a woman such as you and now you want to burn me inside like a fox in a den].⁵⁷ In addition to utilizing the burning variation of the starving metaphor just used, this reintroduces the element of gender disparity—only now it is reversed. Instead of a man shamed for taking up a practice associated with women (magic), it is

⁵⁶ C. C. Rafn, ed., “Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar,” in *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda eptir gömlum handritum Vol. 3* (København: C. C. Rafn, 1830): 180.

⁵⁷ Rafn, “Hrólfs saga,” 183.

used in reference to a woman (re)taking up a practice associated with men (battle). Antagonistic wizards, maiden-kings, and *fylgjur* are all stock conventions of the *fornaldarsögur* genre and the expression of the fox in its den is rather common in itself. For these reasons its not all that unlikely that they could all converge in one saga, even if by utter accident. Tracing these from *Hrólf's saga Gautreksson* through the later sagas, however, illuminates certain patterns of association that cannot all be attributed solely to the the tradition of the *fylgja* nor to presence of the arctic fox in Iceland, implying there is some larger tradition surrounding the fox in Icelandic literature. *Króka-Refs saga* compounds many of these associations, exemplifying the clearest example of a saga character named for the fox and displaying qualities associated with it. It involves offensive accusations of homosexuality, an escape from a shameful death by burning in one's own home, the seizure of power through subversive means, and some of the metaphorical wordplay referenced in other sagas as well.

Although foxes are barely present in the sagas in physical forms, they are present within metaphorical borders. They exist in names and expressions, and they appear in dreams to offer insight into the past and the future, showing that animals are not so different from humankind; in fact, they represent each other. They are consistently associated with magic and the socially subversive and nearly always with the death. If not the experience of death, at least the threat of it. The animal *fylgjur* of dreams come bearing warnings and the metaphor of the fox is used as a call to action against a shameful end, whether it be escape, outwitting, or, like Skarphéðinn, at least death in the glory of battle. If the fox was first seen as a metaphor for the wisdom necessary to escape death in the early sagas, it somehow transformed into a more metaphysical threat of death: the harnessing of the supernatural in the form of magic. All of these can be ascribed to the mediatory qualities of that fox and to some extent its trickster identity. Foxes in the sagas seem to fit not only into the cracks between dream and reality, animal and human, above and below, even man and woman, but also between life and death.

Post-Medieval Folklore

Chronologically speaking, there is a gap in traceable references to foxes in Icelandic culture in the transition from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern. The datings of *Skaufhalabálkur*'s two extant manuscripts (c. 1530-c. 1730)⁵⁸ essentially bookend this gap. There is one unusual reference to Icelandic foxes, however, in the form of a 1585 map illustrated by the Flemish inventor of the atlas, Abraham Ortelius. Allegedly the information for the map was sent from Bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson to Danish historian Anders Sørensen Vedel, who then sent along his own version of the map (now lost) and the original notes to Ortelius, who used them to produce what is considered the first detailed and relatively accurate European map of Iceland.⁵⁹ In southeastern Iceland, several foxes are lined up vertically, suspending themselves down a cliff by their tails and beneath them is a Latin description of their activities: “*astuta vulpecularum venatio, in nidis volucrum investigandis atque diripiendis*” [a cunning method of hunting by little foxes for finding and plundering birds’ nests].⁶⁰ This depiction of the fox is novel in its form but conventional in the character that it describes. Although it could be a European assumption of the habits of foxes in Iceland based on their own cultural traditions of the clever red fox, it does accurately depict the primary food sources of the Icelandic arctic fox specifically. Although the practice is clearly anthropomorphized as both red and arctic foxes hunt alone, it does demonstrate the folk belief of the fox as being capable of human intelligence and ingenuity.

Despite a much shorter distance in time, higher literacy rates, and greater availability of book production materials, post-Medieval Icelandic folklore remains as mysterious to modern scholarship, if not more, than Medieval culture. The first National Librarian of Iceland Jón Árnason collected and published the first collections of folktales in the Icelandic language,⁶¹ in two volumes from 1862-4.⁶² He relied

⁵⁸ Jón Þorkelsson, “Skaufalabálkur,” in *Kvæðasafn eftir íslensk menn frá miðöldum og síðari öldum* (Reykjavík: Íslenska bókmentafélagi, 1922): 154.

⁵⁹ Marcel P.R. van den Broecke, *Ortelius Atlas Maps: An Illustrated Guide*, (Houten: Hes & de Graaf, 1996): 161.

⁶⁰ Einar Ól Sveinsson, *The Folk-Stories of Iceland* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2003). 84.

⁶¹ In 1860, just two years prior, Konrad Maurer had published *Isländische Volkssagen der gegenwart*, a collection of Icelandic folktales in German.

⁶² Terry Gunnell, “Daisies Rise to Become Oaks: The Politics of Early Folktale Collection in Northern Europe,” *Folklore* 121 no. 1 (2010): 23-24.

primarily on priests, students, and acquaintances around the countryside to write up and send the folktales to him that he would then edit and add to the collection, allegedly privileging oral narratives with connections to the sagas and the settlement age.⁶³ In Guðbrandur Vigfússon's introduction to the first volume of the collection, he admits that the ages of the tales cannot be known exactly, but, he optimistically claims that "the oral accounts were born and created in and alongside the nation, they are the poetic creation of the nation and her spiritual offspring century after century and show better than most other things the nation's way of thought and traditions."⁶⁴ While the nationalistic ideology behind this is crystal clear, by claiming that the folktales developed alongside the sagas and are even present in them implies that at least some of them could be equally as old. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson notes the "motifs that are easily found in stories from the late Middle Ages when such stories were told for entertainment without any note of fear."⁶⁵ Regardless of their ages, however, there is certainly a continuity of the motifs representing the fox from the sagas of the thirteenth century to the folktales of the nineteenth.

While the association with magic is both expected and found amongst the folktales containing foxes, the topic of the trickster figure must first be considered more thoroughly than before. Lewis Hyde identifies another key aspect of the archetype in his definition of it:

The trickster myth derives creative intelligence from appetite. It begins with a being whose main concern is getting fed and it ends with the same being grown mentally swift, adept at creating and unmasking deceit, proficient at hiding his tracks and at seeing through devices used by others to hide theirs.⁶⁶

In this context, the foxes of Ortelius's map, the drive of Króka-Refr to protect his mother's food source, the premise of *Skaufhalabálkur*, and many of the following folktales all fit perfectly into the trickster tradition. Much of the study of the trickster

⁶³ Ibid., 25.

⁶⁴ Translation quoted from Gunnell, "Daisies Rise," 25. Originally in Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1862).

⁶⁵ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Folk Stories*, 115.

⁶⁶ Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Myth, Mischief, and Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010), 18.

figure has centered on North American and West African culture, even by prominent European scholars the like of structuralist Lévi-Strauss. Michael P. Carroll uses Freudian theory to deconstruct Lévi-Strauss's assumptions that coyotes and ravens are the typical tricksters in Native American folklore because the trickster is characterized by the opposition of life and death and therefore "carrion-eaters," arguing that it has more to do with their status as solitary hunters.⁶⁷ Although they are concerned with North American culture, one foundational aspect of structuralism is that the same structures can be found in conceptual oppositions throughout all humanity and therefore, the trickster figure must be defined by the same opposition in European culture as North American. The fox is so closely associated with the trickster in Europe in general and Iceland specifically that the Icelandic word for trickster is actually "bragðarefur" [trick-fox]. Associations with satisfying hunger, the life-death binary, and solitary behavior have all been demonstrated in the motifs traced in the sagas and can also be seen in the later Icelandic folktales containing foxes. There is one main difference that is clearly noticeable between the references to foxes in the sagas as opposed to the folktales: the folktales actually contain stories about physical foxes rather than purely metaphorical ones. The folktales describe what appears to be (by the nineteenth century, at least) a fairly common practice of fox-hunting in Iceland whereas the sagas insinuate such an activity through the frequency of the metaphor invoked without ever actually describing or documenting it.

The folktales related to foxes typically fall into one of two categories, the few tales demonstrating the general craftiness of the fox and the vast majority its connection to magic, the supernatural, and the infernal. One folktale from the collection of Sigfús Sigfússon, titled "Klókur refur" [Clever fox], is a perfect example of the first category as described above, but also hints at the traditions of foxes in the sagas. It begins, "Margar sagnir eru um viturleika og klókindi refsins og undarlegar athafnir ýmsar"⁶⁸ [Many accounts are about the wisdom and cleverness of the fox and its various strange activities]. It goes on to describe a fox that plays dead to attract the attention of a raven and when it swoops down to prey on the fox, the fox grabs the raven instead. This exemplifies both the hunger drive and the medial position between

⁶⁷ Michael P Carroll, "Lévi-Strauss, Freud, and the Trickster: A New Perspective Upon an Old Problem," *American Ethnologist* 8 (1981): 302.

⁶⁸ Sigfús Sigfússon, *Íslenskar þjóðsögur og sagnir Vol. 4*, ed. Óskar Halldórsson et al. (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Þjóðsaga, 1982): 215-217.

life and death of the trickster figure. In addition, it uses *tæfa* (a variant of *tófa*) and *lágfóta* [low-foot], two less common feminine nouns to describe the fox in question.

In a tale whose title uses the same adjective to describe them as was seen in the sagas, “Slægð refa”⁶⁹ [slyness of foxes] tells the story of an arctic fox who also plays dead in order to hitch a ride with a farmer from an island where it is trapped back to the mainland. A third tale tells of how a “grenjaskytta”⁷⁰ [den-shooter] is camped out waiting to shoot foxes when he sees two, one with a lamb in its mouth, and they run separate ways, the one drawing his attention and getting shot while the other escapes with the food. Upon finding the den, the hunter realizes that the one fox sacrificed himself to allow the other fox to feed the cubs in the den. This tale not only exemplifies the same tricky resourcefulness as the others but also hints at a heroism not typically associated with foxes, save for Króka-Refr as already shown and *Skaufhalabálkur* below.

As can be expected based on the evidence in the sagas, the majority of the folktales containing foxes explicitly associate them with sorcery. One tale, “Guðbjartur sauðamaður og tófan”⁷¹ [Guðbjartur, shepherd, and vixen], is a perfect example. The priest Guðbjartur is well-known to be versed in magic and a shepherd complains to him about a fox biting the sheep. The priest says that if he sees the fox to tell it the priest wants to meet it and when he does, the fox comes to the priest’s home and he tells it has done wrong and should leave, and it is never seen again. There are two tales, quite similar to each other, which reverse the dynamic of the fox as a counterpart or companion to the sorcerer. They each begin with a fox terrorizing the sheep in certain valleys and a man is called in to kill the fox. In one, the man takes a young boy with him and tells him to sleep, but the boy only pretends to.⁷² The boy sees an eagle circling around the fox, which dies. When he jumps up, he sees the man returning with the dead fox and assumes that the man must have caught it using magic. In the other, the man is a known sorcerer called “Grái” [gray]⁷³ and he takes another man with him. He goes to sleep and asks the other man not to wake him. The

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁷⁰ Ingólfur Jónsson, *Þjóðlegar sagnir og ævintýri Vol. 2* (Hafnarfjörður: Skuggsjá, 1974): 141-142.

⁷¹ Jón Árnason, *Íslenskar þjóðsögur og ævintýri Vol. 3*, ed. Árni Böðvarsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson. (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Þjóðsaga, 1955): 527-528.

⁷² Sigfús Sigfússon, *Íslenskar þjóðsögur og sagnir Vol. 5*, ed. Óskar Halldórsson et al. (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Þjóðsaga, 1984): 377.

⁷³ Jón Árnason, *Vol. 3*, 552.

man suddenly sees a gray goose on a stone and the fox creeping up to it, but the goose turns and defecates onto the fox's head, startling it and killing it instantly. Both of these stories associate the fox with magic as that is the only way it can be overcome, but they also both harken specifically to the traditions of *fylgjur* and *hamrammr* [shape-shifting]. By a human man, metaphorically a fox, to use magic in order to outsmart a literal fox there is an interesting inversion of the trickster archetype, blurring the lines between whether the man associated with the beast or the beast itself is the actual trickster. In one very short tale, titled “Öllu snúið öfugt þó” [Everything is in reverse], a man actually reports to his priest that everything is terrible because a cursed woman is out in the countryside biting sheep while a blessed vixen is at home taking care of children instead.⁷⁴

Several folktales not only describe supernatural or magical activity associated with the fox but insinuate that it is also infernal. In one folktale, iconic poet and priest Hallgrímur Pétursson himself is said to be able to drop foxes dead instantly by singing the first verse of the Passion Psalms.⁷⁵ Additionally, some of the most noteworthy examples of foxes in Icelandic folklore, and especially their supernatural associations, are a series of demonic beasts that are spawned from foxes. The earliest examples are two tales, placed together in the second volume of Jón Árnason's collection. The first, “Skoffin og Skuggabaldur” identifies the *skoffín* as the offspring of a female cat and a male fox and the *skuggabaldur* as the offspring of a male cat and female fox.⁷⁶ The origins of the *skoffín*'s name are unclear, but the *skuggabaldur* takes its name from *skuggi* [shadow] and *Baldr*, “the shining god” from Old Norse mythology. The tale says that when one *skuggabaldur* is killed, it told its killer to tell a specific cat that it had died and when the man says so in the presence of the cat, it kills him. In the next tale, which also includes the “*urðarköttur*”⁷⁷ [wild cat], describes the *skoffín* as hatching from a rooster's egg while the *urðarköttur* lives three years below a cemetery; both have lethal gazes and can only be killed by silver bullets after the barrel of the gun has been crossed three times. It adds one anecdote in which a *skoffín* stations itself outside a church, killing all who exit until the deacon holds a mirror out

⁷⁴ Þorsteinn M. Jónsson, *Gríma hin nýja Vol. 5* (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Þjóðsaga, 1965): 332.

⁷⁵ Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri Vol. 1*, ed. Árni Böðvarsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson. (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Þjóðsaga, 1954): 449-451.

⁷⁶ Jón Árnason, *Vol. 1*, 610.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 610-611.

the door and the *skoffín* kills itself in its reflection. A fourth beast, the “finngálkn,”⁷⁸ is also described as the offspring of a cat and a fox as well as sharing many other attributes with the other beasts.

As many of these characteristics are also shared with the European traditions of the basilisk and werewolf, it is clear that some continental influence is present in the development of the folktales but some of their characteristics can be traced back to the older representations of the Icelandic fox. Most accounts of these beasts include their ability to sink into the ground, which Ógautan does in his fox form in *Þórsteins saga Víkingssonar*. While many other magic-user and shape-shifters have this ability in the sagas, it may also be a reference to the fox’s association with the earth and its ability to “disappear” into it when slipping into a den. Additionally, each of these beasts is the product of an unnatural sexual act between two animals associated with the infernal. The prospect of a male rooster hatching an egg, a biologically female activity, also echoes the access of magic by male characters in the sagas.

While there are more folktales that do so, these have demonstrated the consistent transmission of motifs surrounding the Icelandic fox from Medieval literature well into the modern folklore. With tricksters, sorcerers, transformations, and even demonic beasts, the Icelandic fox may have become more extreme in later years but it was still the same in essence. It may have taken hundreds of years of Icelandic literature before they showed their faces, but the foxes and what they represented were there all along.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Skaufhalabálkur

Origins

Knowing that amongst the mountains of post-Medieval Icelandic paper manuscripts containing uncounted, unstudied, and unedited poems, there are at least a few that could be categorized as very late variations of beast epics featuring narratives of anthropomorphized animals. How many more there could be, however, remains to be discovered. That said, *Skaufhalabálkur*, is the only such dated to the Medieval period, which makes it noteworthy for its singularity. While it is the clear exception to the absence of literature dealing directly with foxes in the Old Icelandic canon, its rarity as a beast epic within the canon also fits directly into the pattern of the rarity of foxes throughout. The only edition of the poem was published by Jón Þorkelsson in 1922.⁷⁹ Although *Skaufhalabálkur* has occasionally been mentioned in articles related to late Medieval Icelandic poetry since Jón Þorkelsson's edition, Frederik Amory's 1975 article is the only one to date published on the text specifically. The poem was originally attributed to Einar fóstri, poet to Jerusalem-pilgrim Björn Einarsson of Vatnsfjörður in the late fourteenth century but has since been attributed to Svartur of Hofstaðir, poet to Ólöf, wife of Björn Þorleifsson of Skarð in the late fifteenth century. As of 2002, Shaun Hughes still lists it as attributed to Einar fóstri.⁸⁰ Amory attributes several mix-ups of Björn of Vatnsfjörður for his grandson Björn of Skarð, in which Ólöf is occasionally listed as the wife of Björn of Vatnsfjörður in genealogical accounts and some of Björn of Vatnsfjörður's travels are accidentally attributed to his grandson by Síra Jón Egilsson.⁸¹ After establishing its authorship, Amory concerns himself with the sources of its content, which he identifies as the conventions of the Icelandic saga and the European beast epic.

In order to address possible continental influences on the composition of *Skaufhalabálkur*, an overview of the transformation of the European animal fable into the beast epic tradition must first be addressed. The tradition can be traced back to antiquity with the fables of Aesop, which were adapted by the early Christian church

⁷⁹ Jón Þorkelsson, "Skaufalabálkur," in *Kvæðasafn eftir íslensk menn frá miðöldum og síðari öldum* (Reykjavík: Íslenska bókmentafélagi, 1922): 154.

⁸⁰ Shaun Hughes, "Late Secular Poetry," in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005): 217.

⁸¹ Amory, "Skaufalabálkur," 295.

as exempla and therefore made their way into Western Europe via Latin translations and adaptations, most notably *Ysengrimus* by the Flemish monk Nivardus.⁸² In one fable, a wolf accuses a fox of disrespecting a sick lion for his absence at the lion's bedside but the fox appears claiming he was looking for a cure to aid the lion; and, as is conventional to the fable, all the animals are unnamed.⁸³ Some scholars have argued that the fable had made its transition into the beast epic when the animals were given human names,⁸⁴ such as Reynard and Isengrim, both first attested in *Ysengrimus*.

Reynard, the anthropomorphic fox who has come to characterize the tradition, is the anchor of a cycle of narratives spanning multiple countries, languages, and hundreds of years. The earliest, most comprehensive, and best-known text is *Le Roman de Renart*, a cycle of French poems consisting of sixteen "branches" composed between 1175 and 1205.⁸⁵ The branches later designated II and V were the first to be composed and although it was composed later, the branch designated as branch I came to be so as it was placed first in most of the subsequent compilations.⁸⁶ It correlates to the fable by Aesop, only with a Medieval update including a courtly setting and appropriate names. In it, Noble the lion, king of the beasts, calls all the animals of the kingdom to his court but Reynard wisely stays away, knowing he has done wrong by the animals who will be present and wishing to avoid them.⁸⁷ Each of the branches, turned into chapters, tells a different story of how each of the various animal characters have been wronged by Reynard and the stories become increasingly complex. While the pitting of the fox against the wolf as the main antagonist dates back to *Ysengrimus* and this story arc has made its way into all subsequent versions, the second-oldest branch⁸⁸ to be written introduces Courtoys the dog, complaining that Reynard has stolen a sausage from him.⁸⁹ Although both incarnations of foxes as *fylgjur* in the sagas are accompanied by wolves, the actual Icelandic landscape is

⁸² N. F. Blake, "Introduction," in *The History of Reynard the Fox*, trans. William Caxton, ed. N. F. Blake (London, New York, & Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970): xi.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁸⁴ Gaston Paris, "Le Roman de Renart," in *Mélange de Littérature française du Moyen Age*, ed. Mario Roques (Paris: H. Champion, 1912): 357.

⁸⁵ Blake, "Introduction," xviii.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ William Caxton, trans., *The History of Reynard the Fox*, ed. N. F. Blake. (London, New York, & Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970): 6.

⁸⁸ Blake, "Introduction," xviii.

⁸⁹ Caxton, *The History of Reynard*, 7.

devoid of them. Therefore it is no wonder that even if the Reynard cycle were somehow an influence on *Skaufhalabálkur* that the poem, featuring a distinctly Icelandic beast in its distinctly Icelandic setting, would not contain such an antagonist. The dog would be the clear choice as a replacement. The poem actually goes a step further, however, while still keeping with both the trickster archetype and the Icelandic tradition: the true enemy of the fox is neither the dog that chases it nor the man that kills it, but hunger itself.

Although it contains references to classical literature that would certainly not be caught by children, the poem identifies itself at the end as a nursery rhyme. It is in *fornyrðislag*, a meter known primarily from the Poetic Edda but also used throughout folk poetry well into the modern period. The poem is linguistically simple without kennings and very few *heiti*, although it does contain several poetic compound synonyms for foxes that do not exist in any other texts. They are likely original creations of the poet. The narrative of the poem follows an old arctic fox from his den, where he is goaded by his wife to go find food for their hungry children, to his attack on a sheep and back, after which he relates his journey. Stanzas 1-3 introduce the fox parents, who will be called Skaufhali and Grenlægja according to their most frequent appellations, in their den and 4-14 details the conversation between them. Skaufhali is reluctant to go out for the sake of his old age and decrepit body, but after counting up the scant bones they have available in the den, Grenlægja convinces him to go. Stanzas 15-17 recount his finding the sheep and taking it down. Stanza 18 skips forward in time to his return home, badly injured and sheepless. In stanzas 19-28, Skaufhali recounts to Grenlægja how, after he bagged his prey, a human man set his black dog upon the fox, who chased him into a cave. The dog could not get in, but the hunter was able to slip his staff in, breaking the fox's ribs and he is able to slink home only after they leave with his sheep. Stanzas 29-35 recall Skaufhali's younger days, stealing goods and killing sheep around the countryside, while 36-37 lament his frailty and imminent death. Stanzas 38-39 are his last flash of hope in a prediction: that one of his offspring will be even worse a menace to mankind than he was. In stanza 40 he accepts his death and in 41 it claims him. The final stanza identifies the author, Einar fóstri in the older manuscript and Svartur of Hofstaðir in the younger.

Amory notes that stanzas 4-14 parody the important role of the saga wives convincing their craven husbands to perform actions that occasionally result in tragedy; he also argues that 19-40 parody the *ævikviða*, or long-form death poems, of

fornaldarsaga heroes such as *Hervarar saga*'s Hjálmar and the eponymous Örvar-Oddr.⁹⁰ He claims the poem is anti-heroic. In these senses along with the latter's potential as an Icelandic beast epic variant, *Skaufhalabálkur* and *Króka-Refs saga* are both trickster characters parodying saga conventions. They share other features as well, including the proliferation of motifs that have been established as associated with the fox. The common reference to magic is missing in both, but they exemplify many others. Although it is not because they are barricaded in, the very premise of *Skaufhalabálkur* is foxes starving in their den. With the myriad occurrences of the "sem melrakki í greni" [like a fox in a den] metaphor throughout the sagas that the poem here demonstrably parodies, its origins likely lie in the same concept.

The narrative opens with the dens they have lived in and refers to the vixen as the "grenlægja" [lair-dweller] on multiple occasions. Although it is a different crack in which Skaufhali is injured, it too fits into the motif: a fox in a den, facing death at the hands of the man who has trapped him inside. Another motif repeated here is the fox's association with its tail, and particularly so as a phallic metaphor. The terms "*dratt[h]ali*" [drag-tail], "*rebb[h]ali*" [fox-tail], and obviously "*skauf[h]ali*" [sheaf-tail] are each used several times as synonyms for foxes but presumably only ever in reference to the male foxes. The poem also displays the character which came to be associated with foxes in the later folklore and into the consciousness of rural Icelanders to this day: not only does the Skaufhali use his trickery and resourcefulness to the detriment of the humans nearby, but he even *revels* in it. Lastly, more specifically, and most notably, the entire poem hinges not only on foxes in the earth but also multiple threats of death, both starvation and killing by human and animal enemies. Unfortunately, unlike his human counterparts who invoke the threat of his shameful death, the protagonist of this narrative is not able to use his quick wits or resourcefulness to spare his own life.

Vésteinn Ólason identifies Skaufhali as a "hero" depicted with "humor and compassion,"⁹¹ and while Amory also cites the heroic portrayal of the character, he implies that the poem's parodic elements make it rather "anti-heroic" in character.⁹² Interestingly, *Króka-Refr*, in addition to being the only other vulpine main character,

⁹⁰ Amory, "Skaufalabálkur," 300-1.

⁹¹ Vésteinn Ólason, "Old Icelandic Poetry," in *A History of Icelandic Literature*, ed. Daisy L. Neijmann (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, In cooperation with The American-Scandinavian Foundation, 2006): 59.

⁹² Amory, "Skaufalabálkur," 301.

is the only reference to the fox that is displayed as heroic or anti-heroic. In either case, we see an inversion of association with the fox as cowardly or shameful. While saga characters like Skarphéðinn and Hrólfr can be considered heroic, in their invocations of the metaphor of the fox in its den, the referent cannot be considered heroic. Instead the fox is the foil to the heroes who refuse to allow themselves the shame of being treated like the fox. The farmer Refr in *Gísla saga* does aid the heroic protagonist but cannot necessarily be considered heroic, especially as the only descriptor given to him, “*slægastr*” [slyest] has negative connotations. All other instances of the fox in the sagas, including Þórgrímr, Gautan, Ógautan, Slægrefr, and Refsteinn are all explicitly antagonistic. Even Króka-Refr, the only heroic fox figure in the sagas, is stripped of his metaphorical association with the fox by being given a new, human name when he is recognized as a hero by royal authority. This makes the sympathetic Skaufhali all the more distinctive.

It remains to be examined how exactly this animal which has been consistently associated with deception, shame, emasculation, magic, and death throughout the Old Icelandic corpus, could suddenly be portrayed as heroic or even anti-heroic. The fable of the sick lion had been translated into Icelandic by the fifteenth century⁹³ and therefore the foundations of the beast epic were available to Icelandic literary society, if not any beast poems themselves. Hughes claims that “the fifteenth century was very much ‘the English century’ in Icelandic history, particularly because of the burgeoning trade contacts connected with the fishing industry” and the English bishop of Hólar, John Craxton, from 1426-1435.⁹⁴ Although the translation of the Dutch Reynard cycle into English did not happen until the late fifteenth century, the names of the animal characters are seen in the thirteenth-century poem *The Fox and The Wolf* and the fourteenth-century *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Chaucer’s *The Legend of Good Women*.⁹⁵ So as the names and stories from Reynard were increasing in popularity in England from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and economic and cultural exchange between England and Iceland increasing in the fifteenth century, particularly in northwestern Iceland where Svartur lived most of his life, it seems entirely plausible that more than just the early fables were transmitted to Iceland.

⁹³ P. A. Jorgensen, “Ten Icelandic Exempla and their Middle English Source,” in *Biblioteca Arnemagnæana XXX, Opuscula IV* (1970): 205-7.

⁹⁴ Hughes, “Late Secular Poetry,” 215.

⁹⁵ Blake, “Introduction,” xxi.

Transmission

The transmission history of *Skaufhalabálkur* is relatively simple. As mentioned, it survives in only two manuscripts, AM 603 4to and Rask 87 8vo. AM 603 comes from Hólar in Hörðudalur and Jón Þorkelsson dates it to circa 1530 or before.⁹⁶ It is a parchment manuscript with 56 leaves and many parts of it missing. A note by Jón Ólafsson in an early eighteenth century manuscript AM 477 fol. mentions that by his time, there were already many poems and sections missing from the manuscript. The majority of the other texts contained are *rímur* but it also contains *Geiplur*, *Heimsósómi*, and *Deilur karls og kerlingar*. *Skaufhalabálkur*, titled *Skaufalabálkur* without the ‘h,’ is the sixteenth text of twenty and only takes up two pages, 81-82. This version of the text does not include stanzas 6 and 7 and it ends at stanza 37, leaving 38-42 off. As the manuscript is dated to less than a century from the text in question, it is unlikely far removed from the original text. Rask 87 is a paper manuscript in much better condition. It takes up nine pages across leaves 112-116. Jón Þorkelsson notes that the hand is that of Einar Hálfðanarson of Kirkjubæjarklaustur (d. 1752),⁹⁷ although it is evident that many hands are represented in the manuscript as nearly every text has been copied in a different hand. It is an eclectic manuscript in its content as well as its scribes, containing various genres of writing in addition to *kvæði*. This version of *Skaufhalabálkur*, here titled *Refsbálkur*, contains all 42 stanzas. The transmission history of the poem between its two manuscript incarnations is unknown.

Amory makes mention to “*tóukvæði*, or fox songs of the seventeenth century,”⁹⁸ insinuating that they may be inspired by the *ævikviða* aspect of *Skaufhalabálkur*. Several poems identified as “*tóukvæði*” can be found in manuscripts starting in the early eighteenth and through the nineteenth century⁹⁹ and it is likely that there are more from within this time period. While there exists the slight possibility of more being left unidentified in manuscripts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as Amory mentioned, it is unlikely as they have mostly been well-catalogued.

⁹⁶ Jón Þorkelsson, “*Skaufalabálkur*,” 154.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Amory, “*Skaufalabálkur*,” 309.

⁹⁹ Landsbókasafn Íslands—Háskolabókasafn. <https://handrit.is/en/search/results/zpknCQ>.

Although some manuscripts of the seventeenth century do contain poems such as *Tófu kvæði* and *Kvæði af Tófu og Suffaralín*, these appear to be poems about women named Tófa or Tóa rather than about actual foxes. Although this study has established a connection between characters named for the animal and the animal itself, it is unlikely that poems of this kind have been directly influenced by the beast epic tradition in the same sense that *Króka-Refs saga* possibly was, nor by the style or content of *Skaufhalabálkur*. Additionally, Jón Samsonarson has documented the issue of a man named Klemus Bjarnason being sentenced to death by burning for the use of a “*tóuvers*” [fox charm] over the sheep in his region in order to prevent them from being bitten by foxes.¹⁰⁰ While the association of foxes with magic and wizardry has also been established here, a direct connection between *Skaufhalabálkur* and any documented fox-related verses of the seventeenth century seems unlikely. Beginning in the eighteenth century, however, there begin to be more poems that have been identified as *tóukvæði*. Handrit.is lists three manuscripts, Rask 94 (eighteenth-century), ÍB 209 8vo, and Lbs 4662 8vo (both nineteenth-century), as containing poems identified as *tóukvæði*. Although not specifically identified as *tóukvæði*, another nineteenth-century manuscript DFS 67 contains a poem beginning: “Refur skauzt ofan fyrir bakka / með eitt nýtt ...”¹⁰¹ [A fox shoots down a hill / with one new ...].

A more thorough investigation of these manuscripts, however beyond the scope of this research, would reveal whether these texts are simply ballads about women named Tóa, magical charms associated with foxes, or poems of the beast epic tradition. There is another notable manuscript in National Library of Sweden, Papp. 8vo nr 9, which contains a poem called “*tóubrag[ur]*.”¹⁰² It begins with a *mansöngur* in the *rímur* style and then relates a narrative about a tricky fox and a lion. As this is very clearly in the beast epic tradition, there is a possibility that it was influenced directly by *Skaufhalabálkur* (likely in its later manuscript witness) and that while some of the other unstudied *tóukvæði* could be more fox charms or poems about women named Tófa, they could just as easily be beast epics as well. Considering the presence of the fox in the folktales of this period it only seems natural that they would

¹⁰⁰ Jón Marínó Samsonarson, “Tóuvers Klemusar Bjarnasonar,” *Gripla* 6 (Reykjavík Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 1984): 64.

¹⁰¹ Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, “DFS 67,” *Biblioteca Arnemagnæana XLII, Opuscula XI* (2003): 210.

¹⁰² Vilhelm Gödel, *Katalog öfver Kongl. bibliotekets fornisländska och fornorska handskrifter*. (Stockholm: Kungliga Biblioteket, 1897-1900): 369.

make appearances in folk poetry as well, at least beyond the names of human characters. When European folklorists like George Stephens began to express interest in Icelandic folklore, a “Boðsbréf til Íslendinga um fornrita-skýrslur og fornsögur” [Invitation to Icelanders regarding ancient writing and stories] was sent to priests and chieftains around the country in 1846.¹⁰³ They asked specifically for Icelanders to provide them with, among other texts, poems about animals including “grýlukvæði” and “tóukvæði,”¹⁰⁴ *grýla* being most often associated with troll-maidens and ogresses but also a rare, old word for fox.¹⁰⁵ So the concept of a body of poetry or at least a concept of a genre called *tóukvæði* is not simply a product of contemporary academic categorization but one that was consciously articulated by the mid-nineteenth century.

What exactly each poem contains and whether or how it may have been influenced by *Skaufhalabálkur* will remain a mystery until a specific study of these scattered manuscripts can be undertaken. Jónas Hallgrímsson, poet and founder of *Fjölnir*, the Icelandic nationalist journal of the nineteenth century, wrote a poem in *fornyrðislag* titled “Grenið,” published in 1847.¹⁰⁶ In it, a marksman comes to the door of a vixen’s den, who apologizes for the state of her home before the man tells her that he has been asked by farmers to kill her. She implies innocence, saying she stays inside with her little ones while it is her partner who cleverly robs the estates of the farmers for food to feed their family. Whether this poem is a conscious inversion of *Skaufhalabálkur* or not, it includes nearly every motif that can be found in *Skaufhalabálkur* and many from the sagas: the den, the hunter, the human intellect of the foxes, their use of this cleverness to outsmart humankind in search of sustenance, and the devious pleasure in doing so. Although the fox never escaped the negative stigma associated with it from its first mentions in the sagas, by becoming a character in a poem by the father of Icelandic nationalism himself, it must have somehow become a part of the national identity, even if a dark one. Whether it was by accident or intention that these poems mirror each other, the fact remains that the cultural traditions of the arctic fox in Iceland, while built on their European origins of the red fox, adapted into something distinctly Icelandic.

¹⁰³ Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, “(Ó)Traustar heimildir: Um söfnun og útgáfu þjóðkvæða.” *Skáldskaparmál* 4 (1997): 211.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Richard Cleasby and Guðbrand Vigfusson, “Grýla,” *An Icelandic-English dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957).

¹⁰⁶ Jónas Hallgrímsson, *Ljóðmæli eftir Jónas Hallgrímsson*, ed. B. Pjetursson and K. Gíslason, (Kobenhavn: S. N., 1847): 246-248.

Conclusions

Foxes first sparked my curiosity because I knew they were present during the settlement of Iceland but I had not seen any in the sagas. Once I went hunting for them, I found them in unlikely places and in unlikely forms but they were indeed present. By tracing these references from their earliest incarnations in the Christian laws of the thirteenth century to the nationalist poetry of the nineteenth, I have established a cultural framework for the Icelandic fox. I had originally set out to discover two things: 1. Why are foxes not present in the sagas? and 2. Why is there still a stigma against them in contemporary Icelandic society? As I began to investigate, I found that no one has ever researched the fox in Icelandic culture and that I would have to conduct a survey of the primary sources available before those questions could be answered. While I can only venture an educated guess about the first question and provide some evidence for the second, I made many unexpected discoveries about the fox along the way.

When considered together, these sources have revealed two essential motifs associated with the Icelandic fox. The first is a fairly predictable inheritance from its European cousin: the conformity with the trickster archetype. The second and less likely is its frequent association with the supernatural, magic, and the kind of men who use it. Not every reference to the fox in Icelandic literature contains both motifs, but nearly every single one references one or the other. The discovery that was wholly unexpected within the scope of this research was the association of the fox with gender amongst both the trickster and the sorcerer motifs.

While Old Norse literature was written exclusively by men and centers around them heavily, the whole corpus could arguably be seen as preoccupied with masculinity. Courage was a masculine trait and therefore to be accused of cowardice was to be accused of effeminacy, even without mention of gender. Because the practice of *seiðr* by men was associated with *ergi*, this preoccupation with masculinity or lack thereof was a natural discovery once the connection had been established between foxes and sorcerers. Of course these men, harnessing a female power against the grain of society, are always characterized as villains, if not also cowards. Interestingly, however, this same preoccupation is present in representations of foxes that are completely or even consciously devoid of magic. Not only that, but they are present even in those who are portrayed as heroes. It is subtle but certainly present in

Skaufhalabálkur as he, like Þorður melrakki, drags his tail (a phallic reference) about finding food for his family and must be incited by his wife to do so. In *Króka-Refs saga*, this preoccupation is so unsubtle that it is comical. He is called a coward by his mother, a softy by his first murder victim, and a faggot and a sodomite by his rivals in Greenland. Meanwhile his story is consciously devoid of magic in lieu of his ingenious wooden inventions, so it is likely by the nature of his name alone that such consistent insults are hurled at him. This demonstrates how deeply rooted the association of the fox was with not only magic and the men that used it, but the even darker associations of effeminacy and even homosexuality.

The other concept that appeared in every single reference to the fox is the association with death. The fox could be killed, but not eaten. It could appear in a dream to foreshadow death and the man it represented in the dream could be accused of something that was punishable by death. Characters named after it or invoking its name could often escape from death or, at least, escape a shameful one. It has spawned monsters that, when looked at directly, can cause instant death. Through the hunting of the fox in its den, which is only hinted at in the sagas but fully described in the folktales, the Icelandic fox is distinctly associated with the surface of the earth. This is one of its liminal qualities, it exists not quite above the earth and not quite below it. It mediates between the natural and the supernatural and between male and female. Its most important mediatory quality is between life and death: survival.

In terms of an answer to my initial question of why foxes are physically absent from Old Icelandic literature, the best I can offer is superstition. Because the representations of it are inflected with Christian concerns from *Grágás* and *Niðrstigningar saga* to the *skoffín* outside the church, it seems likely that people were reluctant to write about it for the same reasons they were likely reluctant to eat it: a fear of its qualities. As to why this stigma has persisted long into the contemporary period, it is likely due to the characterization they have taken on through the folklore. Although an arctic fox can no longer cause much harm to a modern Icelandic farmer (at least not to the detriment of a whole family or even village as in times past), *Skaufhalabálkur* illustrates an important factor. The fox is not seen as a pest because of its actions as much as its perceived character. It is portrayed as an animal that not only causes harm to human society but actually takes *delight* in it. Perhaps that is the problem. Human beings see themselves in everything, but especially in foxes. In this context, the *skuggabaldur* makes analogical sense. Its name implies it is some kind of

god amongst the shadows, unable to look upon its own reflection. These traditions are even carried well into twenty-first century literature by the poet Sján. In his novel *Skugga-Baldur*, a hunter dons the skin of the fox he has been chasing throughout the book and becomes the fox himself.¹⁰⁷

What I find most interesting is equal parts beautiful and ironic. The arctic fox, alternately feared, mocked, reviled, and killed throughout Icelandic history, is the essential Icelander. Stranded on a cold North Atlantic island without their typical food sources, they have adapted. This is essentially as true for the Icelandic people as the foxes. They have managed not only to survive but to even thrive. Associated with the man who unabashedly uses women's power in a man's world and the trickster who will outwit anyone in order to fight starvation, the Icelandic fox is a symbol for the power in the subversive. The fox means survival by any means necessary. In spite of—or perhaps even because of—the history of tension between Icelandic people and Icelandic foxes, they are one and the same: Icelanders.

¹⁰⁷ Sján, *The Blue Fox*, trans. Victoria Cribb (London: Telegram, 2008): 114.

Translation

Preface

Translating Old Icelandic poetry is a delicate business. Between breaking down kennings and losing alliteration, rhyme, or syllable stresses, the English results typically lack much of their original depth. They also often remain confusing to the reader or they are far from beautiful. With no kennings or end rhymes, I decided to take advantage of the relative simplicity of *Skaufhalabálkur* by preserving its alliterative quality. Although I did not concern myself with syllable stresses, I've translated each half line with at least one alliterative syllable in an attempt to give the English version a similar auditory quality to the original Icelandic. Although I have had to sacrifice literalness at some points for the sake of sound, I did so rather infrequently. For those more concerned with the exact translation, I have included a literal if less elegant translation as an appendix. The poem has many poetic synonyms for foxes and rather than simply use "fox" in every instance, I have left their compound meanings intact. Save for a few synonyms for man and dog that are easily understood in context, it is safe to assume that any unusual word is simply another for a fox. So let the hunt begin.

*Edition**Skaufhalabálkur**The Ballad of Sheaf-Tail*

1.

Hefir í grenjum¹⁰⁸
gamall skaufali
leingi búið
hjá langhölu.
Átt hafa þau sér
alls upp talda
átján sonu
og eina dóttur.

An old sheaf-tail
had long shared
many lairs alongside
his long-tailed wife.
All counted up,
they had created
eighteen sons
and one sister.

2.

Því voru níttján
niðjar skaufala,
hunds jafningja,
heldr en tuttugu,
þar sannaðist fyrða
formæli,
að opt verðr örgum
eins vant á tög.

This meant nineteen
minions of the sheaf-tail,
opponent to the dog.
One short of twenty,
they all proved
the old proverb
that of ten cowards,
one cannot be found.

3.

Þá voru burtu
börn skaufala
flest öll farin
úr föðurgarði,
þó voru eptir
þeim til fylgdar

The sheaf-tail's offspring
had mostly gone off
far away
from their father's house.
Only few were left
in the fox's lair,

¹⁰⁸ The Icelandic text of my translation is from Jón Þorkelsson's critical edition of *Skaufhalabálkur* from 1922. It is a "best text" edition that is based mostly on AM 603 4to with additions and emendations from Rask 87 where necessary.

þrír yrmlingar
og þeirra dóttir.

some three sons
and their sister.

4.

Mælti gortanni
við grenlægju:
Hvað skulum vinna
vær til þarfa?
Við erum orðin
veiklenduð mjög,
hryggsnauð harla
og halar rotnaðir.

The gore-tooth
greeted his fellow
den-dweller,
“What can be done?
We are left
very weak-legged,
terribly thin-spined
and even tail-rotten.”

5.

Svarar grenlægja
gömul á móti:
Nú eru á burtu
börn okkar roskin,
en þau ung,
sem eptir sitja,
og enn ekki
á legg komin.

The old lair-layer
let out her response,
“Long gone
are our grown ones
but the youngest
have yet to go
and they are unready
to be set afoot.

6.

Lítill er missir
í mínum ungum,
atvinnu brestr
okkur bæði,
hafðir þú áður
hærri útvegur,
nægtir voru þá
og nógar vistir.

Not much was missing
from my minors
when you had
what it took to hunt.
We were flowing over
with food then
but now we fall
short in our fare.

7.

Sannast má það,
að sýnist þú gamall
og stíðfættr
að strjúka heiman
og matvæla
mér að afla,
niðjum okkar
til nauðpurftar.

It is possible
you are past your prime,
too stiff-footed
to set off from here
and steal food
to feed me
and provide
for our progeny.

8.

Þú munt heiman
halda verða
og afla bráða
til bús okkars,
væri það skárri
í venju að leggja,
sem virðum má
vestu gegna.

You must go forth
from home
and fetch something
for our subsistence,
preferably
making a practice
of that mischief
which hurts men most.”

9.

Mælti þanninn
móðir drattala:
Matr er eigi meiri
mér í höndum:
halrófu bein
og hryggr úr lambi,
bógleggir þrír
og banakringla.

Then declared the mother
of the drag-tails,
“All we have to eat
on hand is this:
one sit-bone
and one lamb-spine,
three sinews,
and a single atlas.

10.

Svo er nú liðið,
segir lágfóta,
loðbakr minn,

It is late in the year,”
says the low-foot.
“My dear fluffy-back,

langt á tíma,
von er upp héðan
veðra harðra,
en að höndum kominn
haustþustr mikill.

fall is now here
and we can predict
pitiless weather;
there are already
strong autumn winds.

11.

Betra er nú
bráða að leita,
en þá fyrðar
fé sitt geyma,
liggja með brúnum
lömb hvervetna,
en á fjalli
feitir sauðir.

Now is a better time
to try for prey
than when the men
whisk the sheep away,
for now the lambs
lay all around
and up on the mountain
is the fat mutton.”

12.

Sá er nú tími,
segir rebbali,
sem seggir munu
að sauðum ganga;
víst er alstaðar
von upp héðan,
mun á fjöllum nú
mannferð mikil.

“Now is the time,”
tells the fox-tail,
“That men will seek
their stock;
all from here
up to the hills
will of course
be crawling with men.”

13.

Vissa eg eigi
víst, segir tófa,
að þú huglaust
hjarta bærir.
Þú vilt, bölvaðr,
til bana svelta
afkvæmi þitt
og okkur bæði.

“I did not surely know,”
says the vixen,
“That you carry
a coward’s heart.
Damn it, you want
death by starvation
for your own babies
and both of us.”

14.

Þú skalt ráða,
segir rebbali;
við mun eg leita
vista að afla;
þó hafa nornir
þess um mig spáð,
að mér gömlum
glæpast mundi.

“You shall decide,”
declares the fox-tail,
“That I should go
in search of goods
even though my future
the fates have foretold:
that in my seniority
I will somehow slip up.”

15.

Fór heiman þá
fljótt dratthali
og ætlar sér þá
afla að fanga,
fann skjótlega
fímtán sauði,
og einn af þeim
allvel feitan.

Then the drag-tail
departed from home
planning to secure
some provisions.
He swiftly found
fifteen sheep
and one was pleasantly
quite plump.

16.

Það var geldingr
gambrlega stór,
grákollótt,
gamall að aldri
vendir skolli
víst að honum
og með tönnum
tók í lagða.

It was a rather
massive old ram,
grown ancient
and gray-headed;
the skulker winds
his way surely
and with teeth,
takes it by the wool.

17.

Svo lauk skiptum
skolla og sauðar,
að grákollur
gekk frá lífi;
bjóst drattali
burtu heim þaðan,
hafði sauð feingið
sér til vista.

So the skulker
and the sheep's situation
ended with the gray one
giving up life;
the drag-tail prepares
to part for home
having gotten the sheep
for his goods.

18.

Nú skal segja
nokkuð fleira
frá ferðum hans
fyrst að sinni;
heim kom síðla
sauðbítur gamall,
svangr og sofinn
svo til grenja.

Some more
should be said
about that jarring
journey of his;
the old sheep-biter
crawls back belated,
into his hole,
hungry and sleepy.

19.

Kallar kámleitr
á konu sína,
heldr hvasseygðr
hunds jafningi:
Má eg segja þér
frá mínum ferðum
heldr hraklega,
sem mér hugr sagði.

The muck-faced
mutt-enemy
calls out to his
keen-eyed consort,
“Let me recount
my remarkably
terrible trip:
I told you so.

20.

Það var morgin
þá eg heiman fór,
hafða eg feingið mér

It was morning
when I meandered off
and snatched myself

feitar bráðir,
 bundið bagga
 og á bak mér lagðan,
 hugðumst heim flytja
 hann til bygða.

some fat prey.
 I bound the bag
 and laid it on my back,
 intent to bring it
 back to the burrow.

21.

Pá var mér litið
 í lág eina,
 hvar að háfættr maðr
 hljóp kallandi,
 fór með honum
 ferlíki mikið
 kolsvart að lit,
 kenda eg hunza.

Then in a glen
 I glimpsed where
 a long-legged man
 leapt, yelling,
 and beside him
 a monstrous beast
 coal-black in hue.
 A hound, I knew.

22.

Rétti hann trýni,
 en rekr upp sjónir,
 og kendi þegar,
 hvar eg keifaða;
 mér kom heldr í hug,
 hvað hann mundi vilja,
 vatt eg af mér
 vænni byrði.

He turned his nose up,
 narrowed his sight,
 and knew completely
 where I crept;
 thinking just what
 he would want,
 I bolted briskly,
 leaving the bag.

23.

Hann tók skeiði
 skjótt eptir mér,
 skundar hvatlega
 og skrefaði stórum;
 hljóp eg frálega
 heldur undan,
 leitaða eg við
 lífi að forða.

He took off sprinting
 swiftly after me,
 galloping greatly
 with gaping strides.
 I hurtled fast
 far from him,
 seeking to save
 my own skin.

24.

Fóru við leingi
 um fjallshlíð eina
 upp og ofan,
 svo undrum gegndi;
 hitta eg hamraskarð
 og holu eina,
 hlaut eg í hana
 hræddr að smjúga.

We ran and ran
 around, up, and over
 the mountain
 in marvellous ways.
 I found a gorge
 and a gap in it;
 I was so scared
 I had to slip inside.

25.

Var gren þetta
 grjóti um hvorfið,
 mátti hundr þar
 hvergi inn komast;
 gó hann grimmliga
 þó gat hann ekki,
 garpr ginmikill,
 gripið mig tönnum.

That crevice
 was craggy all around,
 and the hound could
 nowhere come in;
 the big-mouthed one
 barked loudly
 but he could not
 catch me in his chops.

26.

Þar húkta eg,
 þó mér ilt þætti,
 heldr hundeygðr,
 og hræddumst dauða;
 hljóp inn háfætti
 fyrir holu munna,
 hafði staf stóran,
 og stakk inn til mín.

I cowered there
 and considered myself
 to be dog-eyed
 and death-scared.
 Then the high-foot
 hopped toward the hole,
 he had a large stick
 and stuck it in.

27.

Mér kom á síðu
mikill stafs endi,
mátta eg hvergi
hlaupa undan;
þá brotnuðu
þrjú fyrir skapti
um þvert þunglega
þrjú rifin í mér.

I was trapped
in that tight space
and the staff's end
struck me in the side;
the villain's weapon
went roughly
through, thrashing
three of my ribs.

28.

Víða er eg þó
vorðinn mjög sárr
stráks af stingjum
og stafs enda.
Hér kom þó að lyktum
að hann heim leitaði,
og hafði bagga minn
burt gjörvallan.

My body was badly
broken all over
from the hunter's
heavy hand.
When all was done,
he departed
and stole away
the sack of sheep.

29.

Svo hafa aldri,
síz eg leitaða við,
mér svo tekizt
mínar ferðir;
það er hugboð mitt,
að héðan mun eg eiga
skjótt skaplega
skamt ólifað.

Save for this hunt,
never have I had
a trek turn out
so truly awful;
I have a hunch
that from here on
I have but little
time left to live.

30.

Hef eg margan heldr
harðfeitan
sauð snarlega

I have had
many hard-fattened
sheep skillfully

sviptan lifi,
 tínt kiðlinga,
 en týnt lambgymbrum,
 gripið geldinga
 og gamalrollur.

swept from life.
 I have looted kids,
 left lambs lost,
 gripped geldings
 and grabbed ewes.

31.

Hef eg með ströndu
 strokið jafnlega,
 og heima jafnan
 um hauga snuðrað,
 bitið hef eg álar,
 belt klippingum,
 rifið af þönum
 rétt húð hverja.

I have sprinted along
 the sandy beaches
 and back home.
 I have snooped around,
 bitten belts,
 and untied bands.
 I have plucked feathers
 from every fowl.

32.

Hef eg optlega
 óþarfr verið
 bænda fólki
 og bygð þessi,
 skoðað jafnlega
 skreið í hjöllum,
 riklinga rár
 og rafabelti.

At least I have usually
 been unuseful
 to the farmers
 and their friends.
 I have drooled over
 drying stock in sheds,
 flounder on crossbars,
 and cuts of fat fish.

33.

Hefi eg hent mér
 hákalls lykkjur,
 og höggið mér
 hvinna snepla;
 eiga mér allir,
 ef eg einskis dyl,
 ýtar optlega
 ilt að launa.

I have circled prey,
 snapping like a shark,
 and scratched up
 scraps to steal.
 I hide nothing
 and no man owes me
 for I would have only
 wickedness as reward.

34.

Forðast víska eg
 vélar gjörvallar,
 þótt fyrðar þær
 fyrir mig setti;
 þurfti eingi
 þess að leita,
 því að eg víska
 vélar gjörvallar.

I foresaw every single
 fox-snare set
 by those trying
 to trap me;
 I did not even have
 to look hard
 because I already
 knew all their tricks.

35.

Fanst sá eingi
 fyrr né síðar
 hundr háfætt
 né hestr í bygðum,
 að mig á hlaupi
 hefði uppi;
 var eg frárra dýr
 en flestöll önnur.

No high-foot hound
 nor horse in stable
 has been found
 before or after
 who could catch
 me in a caper.
 I was the quickest
 of all the creatures.

36.

Nú tekr elli
 at mér sækja,
 má eg alls ekki
 á mig treysta:
 farinn fráleikr,
 fitskór troðnir,
 tenn sljófgaðar
 og toppr úr enni.

Now that age comes
 to claim me,
 I cannot at all
 lean on myself.
 My pads are trodden,
 my teeth blunted.
 Gone is my hustle
 and my head of hair.

37.

Mun eg til rekkju
 reika verða,
 mér tekr verkr

Now I will
 wander to my bed
 as the pain stabs

að vaxa í síðu;
svo hef eg ætlað,
sá mun dagr koma
mér yfir höfuð
minn enn síðasti.

stiffly in my side.
Just as I expected,
the end of my days
now hangs
over my head.

38.

Það hlægir mig:
þó mun hér koma
úr ætt minni
annar verri,
hann mun mann gera
margan sauðlausan
og aldri upp gefa
ilt að vinna.

It cheers me
that of my children
there will soon be
one worse than me,
one who causes men
many missing sheep
and will never quit
the work of mischief.

39.

Hann mun óþarfr
ýtum verða,
bændum og búum
um bygðir allar,
stela og ræna
stórum fé manna,
morðvargr meiri
en man eg í sveitum

He will be a plague
to the people,
the farmers and creatures
of the countryside,
pillage and loot
livestock from men,
a murder-wolf unlike any
in these mountains.

40.

Mun eg nú linna
og láta af þessu,
vill hel sækja
hvern um síðir,
fer mér svo
sem flestum öðrum,
að dauði drepr
drótt og kindur.

Now I will lay back
and let myself go.
Death finds everyone
eventually and so
it happens to me
like most others,
that death bags both
human beings and beasts.”

41.

Bjóst þá skolli
 í ból sitt fara,
 beit hann helstingi
 hart til bana.
 Þar mun hann verða
 þjófr afgangall
 líf að láta. –
 Lokið er kvæði.

The skulker lay there
 in his lair awaiting
 the hell-sting that
 struck him in the heart.
 It was there the life
 of that ancient thief
 ended poorly,
 like this poem now.

42.

Hefr bálk þennan
 og barngælur
 sett og samið
 Svartur á Hofstöðum
 mér til gamans,
 en meinþurðar
 meingi ófróðu.
 Mun eg nú þagna.

This narrative
 and nursery rhyme
 was composed and set
 by Svartur of Hofstaðir
 for our pleasure
 and perhaps not
 for silly people.
 Now, silence.

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Appendix

Alternate Translation

Skaufhalabálkur

1.

Hefir í grenjum
gamall skaufali
leingi búið
hjá langhölu
Átt hafa þau sér
alls upp talda
átján sonu
og eina dóttur.

2.

Því voru níttján
niðjar skaufala,
hunds jafningja,
heldr en tuttugu,
þar sannaðist fyrða
formæli,
að opt verðr örgum
eins vant á tög.

3.

Þá voru burtu
börn skaufala
flest öll farin
úr föðurgarði,
þó voru eptir
þeim til fylgdar

Poem of a Sheaf-Tail

An old sheaf-tail
had long lived
in dens with a
long-tail.
All counted up,
they had themselves
eighteen sons
and one daughter.

Thus there were nineteen
offspring of the sheaf-tail,
a dog's equal,
holding but twenty,
there proved to men
the old saying
that those who are cowards
lack one to make ten.

Then the children
of the sheaf-tail
were mostly all gone
from their father's house,
though there were left
to follow them

þrír yrmlingar
og þeirra dóttir.

three young ones
and their daughter.

4.

Mælti gortanni
við grenlægju:
Hvað skulum vinna
vær til þarfa?
Við erum orðin
veiklenduð mjög,
hryggsnauð harla
og halar rotnaðir.

The gore-tooth spoke
with the lair-layer:
What work shall
be necessary?
We have become
very weak-loined
and greatly thin-spined
with tails rotten.

5.

Svarar grenlægja
gömul á móti:
Nú eru á burtu
börn okkar roskin,
en þau ung,
sem eptir sitja,
og enn ekki
á legg komin.

Answered the lair-layer
old in response:
Now our grown
children are away
but those who remain
here are young
and not yet
on their feet.

6.

Lítill er missir
í mínum ungum,
atvinnu brestr
okkur bæði,
hafðir þú áður
hærri útvegur,
nægtir voru þá
og nógar vistir.

Little is missing
in my young ones,
work falls short
for us both.
You had higher
means before,
it was abundant then
with enough provisions.

7.

Sannast má það,
að sýnist þú gamall
og stirðfættr
að strjúka heiman
og matvæla
mér að afla,
niðjum okkar
til nauðpurftar.

True may it be
that you seem too old
and stiff-footed
to leave home
and steal food
to provide me and
the decedents of ours
what they need.

8.

Þú munt heiman
halda verða
og afla bráða
til bús okkars,
væri það skárra
í venju að leggja,
sem virðum má
vestu gegna.

You must go
from home
and provide immediately
to our house.
It would be better
to make a habit
of that which for men will
make the worst.

9.

Mælti þanninn
móðir drattala:
Matr er eigi meiri
mér í höndum:
halrófu bein
og hryggr úr lambi,
bógleggir þrír
og banakringla.

Spoke thence
the mother of draw-tails:
There is no more food
in my hand than
one tailbone
and a lamb-spine,
three forelegs,
and one neckbone.

10.

Svo er nú liðið,
segir lágfóta,
loðbakr minn,

My shaggy-back,
says the low-foot,
it now grows

langt á tíma,
von er upp héðan
veðra harðra,
en að höndum kominn
haustþustr mikill.

late in the year.
We can hence expect
hard weather
and strong autumn
winds already.

11.

Betra er nú
bráða að leita,
en þá fyrðar
fé sitt geyma,
liggja með brúnum
lömb hvervetna,
en á fjalli
feitir sauðir.

It is better now
to quickly seek
than when the men
store the sheep away,
lambs lay by the brinks
all around,
and on the mountain
are fat sheep.

12.

Sá er nú tími,
segir rebbali,
sem seggir munu
að sauðum ganga;
víst er alstaðar
von upp héðan,
mun á fjöllum nú
mannferð mikil.

Now is the time,
says the fox-tail,
when men will
go to the sheep;
surely everywhere
from here up
the mountain there will
now be many men.

13.

Vissa eg eigi
víst, segir tófa,
að þú huglaust
hjarta bærir.
Þú vilt, bölvaðr,
til bana svelta
afkvæmi þitt

I knew not
for sure, says the vixen,
that þou bear
cowardice in heart.
You want, blast it,
to starve to death
your offspring

og okkur bæði.

and the both of us.

14.

Þú skalt ráða,
segir rebbali;
við mun eg leita
vista að afla;
þó hafa nornir
þess um mig spáð,
að mér gömlum
glæpast mundi.

You shall decide,
says the fox,
that I will seek
provisions to provide
though the norns have
propheesied about me
that in my old age I will
make a mistake.

15.

Fór heiman þá
fljótt dratthali
og ætlar sér þá
afla að fanga,
fann skjótlega
fímtán sauði,
og einn af þeim
allvel feitan.

The drag-tail went
quickly from home then
and as he intended
to provide provisions,
he swiftly found
fifteen sheep,
one of them
fairly fat.

16.

Það var geldingr
gambrlega stór,
grákollótr,
gamall að aldri;
vendir skolli
víst að honum
og með tönnum
tók í lagða.

It was a castrated ram,
braggingly large,
gray-headed,
old in age;
the skulker winds
surely at him,
and with teeth,
took him in the wool.

17.

Svo lauk skiptum
skolla og sauðar,
að grákollur
gekk frá lífi;
bjóst drattali
burtu heim þaðan,
hafði sauð feingið
sér til vista.

The affairs of the skulker
and the sheep ended
with the gray one
going from life;
the fox prepared
to go from there to his home,
having the sheep gotten
for his own provisions.

18.

Nú skal segja
nokkuð fleira
frá ferðum hans
fyrst að sinni;
heim kom síðla
sauðbítur gamall,
svangur og sofinn
svo til grenja.

Now I shall tell
some more
from the trip of his
at first;
the old sheep-biter
comes home late,
hungry and sleepy,
to the den.

19.

Kallar kámleitr
á konu sína,
heldr hvasseygðr
hunds jafningi:
Má eg segja þér
frá mínum ferðum
heldr hraklega,
sem mér hugr sagði.

The grime-face calls
to his rather
sharp-eyed wife,
the hound's equal:
May I tell you
about my rather
wretched journey
as I had thought.

20.

Það var morgin
þá eg heiman fór,
hafða eg feingið mér

It was morning
when I went from home
and I caught myself

feitar bráðir,
bundið bagga
og á bak mér lagðan,
hugðumst heim flytja
hann til bygða.

some fat prey,
bound the pack,
and layed it on my back
intending to come home
to the stead.

21.

Þá var mér litið
í lág eina,
hvar að háfættr maðr
hljóp kallandi,
fór með honum
ferlíki mikið
kolsvart að lit,
kenda eg hunza.

Then I caught a glimpse
into a hollow
where a long-legged man
leapt calling,
and with him
a monstrous beast,
coal-black in hue.
I knew the hound.

22.

Rétti hann trýni,
en rekr upp sjónir,
og kendi þegar,
hvar eg keifaða;
mér kom heldr í hug,
hvað hann mundi vilja,
vatt eg af mér
vænni byrði.

He turned his nose,
drove up his sights,
and knew he immediately
where I waddled;
it came to my mind
what he would want,
I wrang from myself
the heavy burden.

23.

Hann tók skeiði
skjótt eptir mér,
skundar hvatlega
og skrefaði stórum;
hljóp eg frálega
heldur undan,
leitaða eg við
lífi að forða.

He took off sprinting
quickly after me,
speeding rapidly
and striding greatly;
I ran fast
from him
seeking to
save my own life.

24.

Fóru við leingi
um fjallshlíð eina
upp og ofan,
svo undrum gegndi;
hitta eg hamraskarð
og holu eina,
hlaut eg í hana
hræddr að smjúga.

We went long
about the mountain slope
up and over,
so wondrously matched;
I found a ravine
and some hole;
afraid, I had to
slip into it.

25.

Var gren þetta
grjóti um hvorfið,
mátti hundr þar
hvergi inn komast;
gó hann grimmliga
þó gat hann ekki,
garpr ginmikill,
gripið mig tönnum.

That den was
rocky all around
and the hound could
nowhere get in;
he barked fiercely
though could he not,
the great mouthed champion,
grip me in his teeth.

26.

Þar húkta eg,
þó mér ilt þætti,
heldr hundeygðr,
og hræddumst dauða;
hljóp inn háfætti
fyrir holu munna,
hafði staf stóran,
og stakk inn til mín.

I crouched there
and it seemed bad to me
to be dog-eyed
and fearing death;
the high-foot ran
to the entrance,
he had a large staff
and he stuck it into me.

27.

Mér kom á síðu
mikill stafs endi,

It came to my side,
the big staff's end,

mátta eg hvergi
hlaupa undan;
þá brotnuðu
þrjóts fyrir skapti
um þvert þunglega
þrjú rifin í mér.

and I had nowhere
to run away;
then the shaft's
end broke
greatly through
three of my ribs.

28.

Víða er eg þó
vorðinn mjög sárr
stráks af stingjum
og stafs enda.
Hér kom þó að lyktum
að hann heim leitaði,
og hafði bagga minn
burt gjörvallan.

I have become wounded
in many places
from the lad's stinging
and the staff's end.
At the end, though,
he went home
and took the bag of mine
away, all of it.

29.

Svo hafa aldri,
síz eg leitaða við,
mér svo tekizt
mínar ferðir;
það er hugboð mitt,
að héðan mun eg eiga
skjótt skaplega
skamt ólifað.

Save this last attempt,
never have my journeys
ever gone
so poorly;
I have a hunch
that from now I have
but a short time
left unlived.

30.

Hef eg margan heldr
harðfeitan
sauð snarlega
sviptan lifi,
tínt kiðlinga,
en týnt lambgymbrum,
gripið geldinga
og gamalrollur.

I have swept many
hard-fattened
sheep deftly
from life,
picked off kids,
gripped geldings,
and made lambless
and old ewes disappear.

31.

Hef eg með ströndu
strokið jafnlega,
og heima jafnan
um hauga snuðrað,
bitið hef eg álar,
belt klippingum,
rifið af þönum
rétt húð hverja.

I have often sprinted
along the beach
and often home,
snooped around mounds,
I have bitten straps,
untied wool,
and plucked feathers
right off every skin.

32.

Hef eg optlega
óþarfr verið
bænda fólki
og bygð þessi,
skoðað jafnlega
skreið í hjöllum,
riklinga rár
og rafabelti.

I have often
been unuseful
to the farm people
and this area,
often eyed
drying stockfish in sheds,
fish on a crossbar,
and the fattest cuts.

33.

Hefi eg hent mér
hákalls lykkjur,
og höggið mér
hvinna snepla;
eiga mér allir,
ef eg einskis dyl,
ýtar optlega
ilt að launa.

I have thrown myself
like a shark
and chopped for myself,
pilfering scraps;
if I conceal nothing
from men,
they owe me only
for my evil deeds.

34.

Forðast vissa eg
vélar gjörvallar,
þótt fyrðar þær

I knew how to avoid
all kinds of traps
which those men thought

fyrir mig setti;
þurfti eingi
þess að leita,
því að eg vissað
vélar gjörvallar.

to set for me;
I did not have
to seek this out
because I know
all their tricks.

35.

Fanst sá eingi
fyrir né síðar
hundr háfætr
né hestr í bygðum,
að mig á hlaupi
hefði uppi;
var eg frárra dýr
en flestöll önnur.

No one was to be found,
before nor later,
not hounds of the high-feet
nor horse in the stables,
to have caught up
to me on a run;
I was a faster animal
than most all the others.

36.

Nú tekr elli
at mér sækja,
má eg alls ekki
á mig treysta:
farinn fráleikr,
fitskór troðnir,
tenn sljófgaðar
og toppr úr enni.

Now old ages comes
to fetch me,
I can not at all
trust myself:
my teeth are blunted
and pads trodden;
gone is my swiftness
and the top of my head.

37.

Mun eg til rekkju
reika verða,
mér tekr verkr
að vaxa í síðu;
svo hef eg ætlað,
sá mun dagr koma
mér yfir höfuð
minn enn síðasti.

I will have
to wander to bed,
it causes the pain
to grow in my side;
as I expected,
my last day
will come to me
over my head.

38.

Það hlægir mig:
þó mun hér koma
úr ætt minni
annar verri,
hann mun mann gera
margan sauðlausan
og aldri upp gefa
ilt að vinna.

It cheers me
that from my lineage
will come here
another even worse;
he will cause man
a lack of his sheep
and never give up
mischief as work.

39.

Hann mun óþarfr
ýtum verða,
bændum og búum
um byggðir allar,
stela og ræna
stórum fé manna,
morðvargr meiri
en man eg í sveitum.

He will become
dispensable to men,
farmers and dwellers
in all inhabited areas,
steal and plunder
livestock from men,
more a murder-wolf
than any known here.

40.

Mun eg nú linna
og láta af þessu,
vill hel sækja
hvern um síðir,
fer mér svo
sem flestum öðrum,
að dauði drepr
drótt og kindur.

Now I will cease
and let off this,
Hel will seek
everyone eventually,
it happens to me
as most others,
that death kills
men and sheep.

41.

Bjóst þá skolli
í ból sitt fara,
beit hann helstingi

The skulker expecting
to go in his lair,
the Hel-sting bit him

hart til bana.

Þar mun hann verða

þjófr afgangall

líf að láta. –

Lokið er kvæði.

to death in the heart.

There he had to,

that very old thief,

give up life.

End of the poem.

42.

Hefr bálk þennan

og barngælur

sett og samið

Svartur á Hofstöðum

mér til gamans,

en meinþurðar

meingi ófróðu.

Mun eg nú þagna.

This verse

and nursery rhyme

was set and composed

by Svartur of Hofstaðir

for my enjoyment,

though unnecessary

to unwise men.

Now I become silent.