

Aparbjón

VOLUME 2

Aparbjón Journal for Scandinavian Studies

University of Aberdeen, UK

2021

Copyright © 2021 Paula Budó i Rosa, Amy Jefford Franks, Peggy Gilbert, Melissa Ridley Elmes, Gwendolyne Knight, Giulia Mancini, Roberto Luigi Pagani, Keith Ruitter, Dain Swenson, Elizabeth J. West, Caroline Wilhelmsson.



The authors published in this issue retain copyright of their submitted work and have granted Apardjón right of first publication of the work. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. For more information, please visit creativecommons.org.

First published in 2021

ISSN 2634-0577 (Online)

ISSN 2634-0569 (Print)

Published in Aberdeen, United Kingdom

Apardjón Journal for Scandinavian Studies

Centre for Scandinavian Studies

University of Aberdeen

Email: apardjon@abdn.ac.uk

Editors: Hannah Booth, Heidi Synnøve Djuve, Deniz Cem Gülen, Ingrid Hegland, Jennifer Hemphill, Simon Nygaard, Alessandro Palumbo, Solveig Marie Wang, Jessie Yusek.

Cover image: © 2021 Karine Djuve Riisdal

Creative and type: Heidi Synnøve Djuve and Jennifer Hemphill

Special font design: Blake Middleton

Back cover illustration: The Aberdeen Bestiary (MS 24), Folio 8r – Tigris/the tiger (University of Aberdeen)

The present volume of this periodical was financially supported by the University of Aberdeen Development Trust Experience Fund.

BOOK REVIEW

Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150-1400, 2019.
ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Miriam Mayburd
(Berlin: De Gruyter)

Gwendolyne Knight

The anthology *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150-1400*, edited by Ármann Jakobsson and Miriam Mayburd, sits at a crossroads of several trends in scholarship. Necessary reassessment of previous scholarship is, in and of itself, not new; in this volume, however, it is intensified by the recent cultural moment calling on medieval scholars to critically assess the methodological and theoretical origins of our respective disciplines. ‘The paranormal’ has in recent years been a fruitful site of such reassessments and theoretical experiments,¹ and in this volume the editors present ‘paranormal experience’ as a lens to challenge our views of disciplinary boundaries, scholarly language, and human experience. Nevertheless, the introduction occasionally becomes bogged down by the weight of its own rhetoric — it presupposes a general understanding of the paranormal which is never fully or clearly articulated in the text, thus working against the stated aim of ‘emphatically seek[ing] to dismantle the silos of disciplinary overspecialization’ (p. 3).

If we are to understand the paranormal as something which upsets and challenges our view of and interaction with what we consider ‘normal’, then can mythological stories, which take place almost entirely within their own bounded environment and react at best allegorically with the ‘normal’ world, truly be considered paranormal? I have no good answer to this question, nor am I particularly well aided in attempting to answer it by the introduction, or indeed many of the contributions to this anthology. It is worth considering

what impact the lack of precise definitions has on the reader, particularly in a volume with the express intention of dismantling silos and building bridges between disciplines. As much as the editors want ‘the paranormal’ to act as a challenging and destabilising concept, the force of deconstruction is somewhat muted without a clear grasp of the initial construct (whether that be a working definition of ‘normal’ or ‘paranormal’).²

The anthology is comprised of twenty-three chapters, divided into three sections: ‘Experiencing the Paranormal’, ‘Figures of the Paranormal’, and ‘Literature and the Paranormal’. In this review, I present the major trends that run through each of the sections, highlighting particular merits as well as those articles which best encapsulate the goals of that specific section.

‘Experiencing the Paranormal’

The nine articles in this first section bear witness to the range of human experiences that touch and are touched by ‘the paranormal’. Ármann Jakobsson and Mayburd state that this grouping ‘concerns the framing of the paranormal encounter in the cognitive space of its reader-audience’ (p. 5). Ármann Jakobsson himself leads the volume with “‘I See Dead People’: The Externalization of Paranormal Experience in Medieval Iceland’ (pp. 9–20), wherein he advocates for refocusing the scholarly gaze onto the internal experience of the paranormal, i.e., the realm of human consciousness. Many of the other chapters in the section, however, focus less on the projection of an individual’s existential crisis, and more on the role of the paranormal in mediating community, as well as individual understanding of and responses to overwhelming experiences or concepts — be these natural (Mayburd; Remein), cosmological (Ásdís Egilsdóttir; Maraschi; Lawing), or less straightforwardly categorically psychosocial (Poilvez; Bienko Eriksen, Heiniger and Ármann Jakobsson).

Easily the most representative of the section’s core theme is Marion Poilvez’s ‘A Troll Did It?: Trauma as a Paranormal State in the *Íslendingasögur*’ (pp. 71–88). Poilvez observes that paranormal events in the *Íslendingasögur* and trauma share a challenge to precise definition, yet both are (or in the case of trauma, was initially) characterised by disruption. ‘Trolls are defined by what they do,’ she writes, ‘what they disturb, without letting themselves be caught in a rational category, and trauma functions in the same way’ (p. 80). That monstrous metaphors may express personal trauma is clear, but Poilvez points out that cultures can — and do — build and transmit collective traumas, whereby the paranormal has the potential to become a communal way to both express and relate to trauma. Thus, in cases

where a reading of the paranormal in this way is appropriate, it has the potential to express *both* a deeply personal experience or crisis, but also a community's collective interpretation and understanding of trauma.

'Figures of the Paranormal'

This section 'has a stronger focus on paranormal figures and how they feature in the narratives' (p. 5). Although there are only six articles in this section, and despite the specificity of their subject matter, they cover a lot of ground with stimulating and thought-provoking arguments. This particular section raises the question most prominently of what qualifies a figure as 'paranormal'; some of the authors address it, while others focus on the intersection of certain figures and the circumstances of their appearance or disruption. At a narrative level, Andrew McGillivray and Kent Pettit explore the particular connections between different interpretations of 'paranormal' characters (*æsir* in McGillivray's 'Encounters with Hliðskjálf in Old Norse Mythology' (pp. 175-192); reanimated corpses in Pettit's 'The New Faith vs. The Undead: Christmas Showdowns' (pp. 227-244)) and specific places or moments in time. Sandra Ballif Straubhaar follows a similar tack in "'Ok flýgr þat jafnan": Icelandic Figurations of Böðvarr bjarki's Monster' (pp. 193-202) by comparing three iterations of a 'monster's' attack on the feasting location of a Danish king.

The other three papers in this section examine more closely how we define and categorise particular paranormal figures. Arngrímur Víðalín's essay, 'Demons, Muslims, Wrestling Champions: The Semantic History of *Blámenn* from the Twelfth through the Twentieth Century' (pp. 203-226), is a measured and thoughtful analysis of the paranormal elements of the *blámaðr* figure or character. It is, however, also an example of where the grey area between paranormal monstrosity and racial or ethnic Othering could benefit from a more integrated analysis of both elements.³ As Arngrímur Víðalín observes, *blámaðr* is a complex term which has received a great deal of scholarly attention; nevertheless, this attention has tended to focus on *blámaðr* as a racial descriptor at the expense of the paranormal uses which the term has also had. This chapter is a welcome contribution to that corpus, yet a more critical stance towards the relationship between the categories of 'alterity' and 'monster', and the degree of their overlap in medieval Icelandic literature, would have been desirable.

Precisely this question of monstrosity, and its perceived physicality and essentialism, is taken up by Rebecca Merkelbach in her chapter, '*Dólgr í byggðinni*: Meeting the Social Monster in the Sagas of Icelanders' (pp. 263-277). In an analysis that ties in well with Poilvez's

chapter above, Merkelbach highlights social disruption and community impact as significant factors that condition how a given society or community will judge a potentially monstrous figure. From this analysis emerge two critical observations: first, that the spectrum of what constitutes monstrosity is socially driven, and second, that public opinion is a powerful element in the story-world of the *Íslendingasögur*, which confirms but also potentially confers monstrous status.

Zuzana Stankovitsová takes on the public opinion of scholarship in her chapter, 'Following up on Female *fylgjur*: A Re-Examination of the Concept of Female *fylgjur* in Old Icelandic Literature' (pp. 245-262). Previous scholarship has represented female *fylgjur* as a discrete taxonomic category but, Stankovitsová argues, this category is a phenomenon based in scholarship rather than sources. Indeed, after having discounted the clear references to *fylgjur* who appear as animals, Stankovitsová identifies only two sources which feature female beings called *fylgjur*. Overall, she argues convincingly for the lack of a discrete category of 'female *fylgjur*' in the Middle Ages, emphasising that the sources point towards a fluid and adaptable concept of *fylgjur* — a conclusion which speaks well to the overall thesis of the volume.

'Literature and the Paranormal'

The final section of this anthology 'takes a broader view to consider the literary functions of the paranormal' to reflect their diversity across different genres (p. 5) The eight chapters focus mainly on different genres within saga literature, and their approaches to the range of literary functions that may be borne by 'the paranormal' are indeed diverse. Of particular importance for this theme, as well as for the volume overall, are Þórdís Edda Jóhannesdóttir's chapter, 'A Normal Relationship?: Jarl Hákon and Þorgerðr Hølgabrúðr in Icelandic Literary Context' (pp. 295-310), and Martina Ceolin's chapter, 'Paranormal Tendencies in the Sagas: A Discussion about Genre' (pp. 347-366). Ceolin, in particular, is one of the few contributors who includes a working definition of 'the paranormal'. Her chapter contains a thoughtful critique of genre distinctions in saga literature, and demonstrates how the paranormal, which often has been a prominent (and notably pejorative) feature of genre distinctions, can in fact contribute to a more dynamic and descriptive approach to genre than what currently exists. Þórdís Edda Jóhannesdóttir uses the relationship between Jarl Hákon and Þorgerðr Hølgabrúðr as a departure point to consider whether what is considered as paranormal by modern audiences would be considered the same way by a medieval one. She thus highlights

the importance of the historical social contexts, and past frames of reference, for an analysis of the paranormal.

Christopher Crocker's 'Even a Henchman can Dream: Dreaming at the Margins in *Brennu-Njáls saga*' (pp. 279-294) and Ingibjörg Eyþórsdóttir's 'Darraðarljóð and Its Context within *Njáls saga*: Sorcery, Vision, *Leizla*?' (pp. 327-346) explore paranormal settings of dreams and visions within and adjacent to *Njáls saga*. Crocker's chapter, the first in the section, sets the stage well for many of the chapters that follow through a consideration of dreams as narrative events which rely on and exploit 'familiar traditions' (p. 290). Ingibjörg Eyþórsdóttir explores the complex relationships between the poem 'Darraðarljóð' and *Njáls saga*, with which it is connected in all manuscript witnesses of the latter. Mythology and an analysis of different kinds of vision literature are particularly important in her chapter. The literary context for space and place and their relationship to the paranormal sit at the centre of Gunnvör S. Karlsdóttir's chapter, 'Priest Ketill's Journey to Rome' (pp. 311-326) — focusing on travel through narrative space — and Shaun F.D. Hughes' chapter, 'Reading the Landscape in *Grettis saga*: Þórhallur, the *meinvættur*, and Glámur' (pp. 367-394) — examining how deeply place-bound the paranormal can potentially be.

The relationship between masculinity and the paranormal is interrogated in the final two contributions to this section: Yoav Tirosh's chapter, 'Trolling Guðmundr: Paranormal Defamation in *Ljósvetninga saga*' (pp. 395-420), and especially in Védís Ragnheiðardóttir's 'Meir af viel en karlmennsku': Monstrous Masculinity in *Viktors saga ok Blávus*' (pp. 421-432). The sexual defamation of Guðmundr *inn ríki*, Tirosh argues, is influenced by the correspondence of Old Norse gender with the paranormal. Paranormal attributes contribute to and enhance the humiliations heaped on Guðmundr by the narrative — and ultimately, Tirosh argues (through impressive, yet occasionally distracting, pop culture reference points), this edge of eeriness and uncanniness invites the audience to question their own human experience. Rounding out the volume, Védís Ragnheiðardóttir could be said to approach the correspondence of monstrosity and masculinity from an alternative perspective: by not following the conventions of masculine-appropriate behaviour, and engaging incorrectly with the paranormal, the protagonists' performance of masculinity turns monstrous. In both cases, the paranormal may provide a strategy for subverting or threatening the normal, but ultimately hegemonic masculinity is strengthened.

Conclusion

In the article ‘The Paranormal’, Mayburd argues that the concept represented by the term ‘the paranormal’ at once rehabilitates and expands on ‘the supernatural’, such that it ‘[seeks] to recover it from the denigration its synonym ‘supernatural’ has received’, and in its expanded definition can include the ‘unexplainable’, which is uncanny and unsettling but not, necessarily, supernatural.⁴ Such a working definition might have been helpful at the outset of this volume; without a firm departure point in the paranormal (or, indeed, in the normal), what is meant to be disruptive and challenging to the reader runs the risk of edging closer to confusing. Nevertheless, *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150-1400* is a thought-provoking collection with some important contributions to the field of medieval Icelandic literature, and particularly for the burgeoning cross-disciplinary research on the role of ‘the paranormal’ in medieval literature and society.

Notes

¹ E.g. Ármann Jakobsson. 2013. 'The Taxonomy of the Non-existent: Some Medieval Icelandic Concepts of the Paranormal', *Fabula* 54:3-4, 199-213; Daniel Sävborg. 2016. 'Are the Trolls supernatural?: some Remarks on the Terminology for Strange Beings in Old Norse Literature', *Annali. Sezione Germanica N.S.* 26:1-2, 119-130; Ármann Jakobsson. 2017. *The Troll Inside You: Paranormal Activity in the Medieval North* (punctum books); Daniel Sävborg and Karen Bek-Pedersen (eds.). 2018. *Supernatural Encounters in Old Norse Literature and Tradition* (Turnhout: Brepols); Rebecca Merkelbach and Gwendolyne Knight (eds.). 2020. *Margins, Monsters, Deviants: Alterities in Old Norse Literature and Culture* (Turnhout: Brepols).

² Mayburd addresses some of these concerns in her chapter on 'The Paranormal' in *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*; indeed, it is tempting to suggest that the reader begin with this chapter and Ármann Jakobsson's 'The Taxonomy of the Non-Existent' for a more complete presentation of the editors' departure points in the present volume. See: Miriam Mayburd, 'The Paranormal' in Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson (eds.). 2017. *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas* (London: Routledge), 265-278 (esp. p. 265 and pp. 269-71) and Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Taxonomy'.

³ See the introduction to Sarah Ahmed. 2000. *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality* (London: Routledge), esp. pp. 1-3, as well as Geraldine Heng. 2018. *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), esp. pp. 35-41.

⁴ Mayburd, 'The Paranormal', p. 265.