The Troll Inside You: Paranormal Activity in the Medieval North
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Preface: Jitterbug

The present book may well spring from seeds planted in a postgraduate course offered at the University of Iceland on the subject of folktales, instructed by Davíð Erlingsson, some twenty years ago. The class consisted of the standard five or six students attending any postgraduate course at the university, all eager to learn more about trolls and other paranormal beings. There was though a collective tinge of disappointment building as the teacher seemed unable to get around to covering the advertised subject, rather relentlessly providing us with photocopies of various tables of contents and indices from nineteenth-century folktale collections and sometimes even of articles from the dominant Icelandic newspaper, Morgunblaðið, or foreign presses like The Guardian Weekly. When the week in which trolls were supposed to be discussed was upon us Davíð arrived with a photocopy from one of his favourite journals of a Nazi propaganda poster from World War II in which American culture was personified as a composite monster called “Jitterbug” that was set to destroy European culture.¹

As the reader may well imagine, the students found Davíð’s method of teaching them to think about Icelandic folktales baffling at first but the results have proven to be lasting: from that day onwards it was harder to take for granted the matter of classifying and categorising folktales, and at least one of this unorthodox instructor’s students never forgot the lesson provided by the image of the
“Jitterbug” in lieu of more traditional imaginings of trolls. Thus it is that these now primitive photocopies have exer-cercised a profound effect on the present project: both in drawing attention to the actions through which categories and definitions arise, and in providing liberation from the preconceived notion that a troll is, like a dog or a cat, a well-defined and discrete zoological category.

This study is concerned with medieval Iceland, traditionally believed to have been settled during the ninth cen-tury and formally Christianised around the year 1000. The texts under analysis, the sagas, are late medieval sources, mostly from the fourteenth century although many of them contain storylines and themes that rely upon older narrative traditions. The culture of medieval Iceland, dominantly Norwegian but also influenced by Celtic traditions, was indeed Christian at this point but much involved with a pagan past and the transition from one belief sys-tem to another.

Although this study is primarily concerned with written sources produced within one society during a couple of centuries, its focus is general rather than specific and is thus possibly of some interest to any scholar seeking an engagement with paranormal encounters from any time and place. While Iceland has never been a great power, culturally, politically or otherwise, it had during the Mid-dle Ages a literary culture which is remarkable in its scope for having developed within such a small society, the pres-ervation of which is no less astounding. Thus documents from Iceland form a significant, and perhaps to some ex-tent disproportionate, share of the preserved European documents from the Middle Ages. Furthermore, they are of a varied nature, many of them dramatical historical narratives which illuminate the human condition in
general. Sagas are frequently compared to modern novels and their art is parallel to that of later fiction, and yet they were probably conceptualised as history, a narrative form that was flexible in medieval Iceland. It is also the case that all study of a single individual, group, or culture may have implications for humanity in general, and this study is fashioned as a case study of general interest. I have thus tried to make it accessible not only to experts in Old Norse but also to whomever is interested in how paranormal encounters can be framed and indeed were framed in the culture of fourteenth-century Iceland.

It is a strange endeavour to attempt to write something intelligent in a language one does not possess. For practical reasons I tried to suppress my feelings of inadequacy while writing and even became accustomed to regard this book as a long poem, by which I mean that this is a book of ideas rather than an exhaustive catalogue of examples and matching interpretations. Instead of delineating every single paranormal encounter found in medieval Icelandic saga writing, the aim is to offer a path that might eventually lead to a better understanding of the subject, so it is to be hoped that readers will not miss their favourite scenes or characters too much but feel fortified enough to continue on their own neverending quest of textual interpretation. Readers who feel certain scholarly issues are ignored or not discussed thoroughly enough may also be advised to turn to the endnotes (“Textual Hauntings”) for further enlightenment.

This is a study of a particular culture and particular late medieval narratives. Nevertheless the focus will not be on particularities but the general, in the belief that it is through the general application that the particular becomes interesting, even though the general is never inter-
esting enough to particular humans unless it manifests itself in the particular.