There is no work of greater importance for the reception of the medieval folk traditions of the North than the influential collection of Icelandic folktales, Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri, compiled by Jón Árnason (1819–1888), Iceland’s counterpart to the Brothers Grimm. Much like other folktale collections of that age, Jón Árnason’s collection formed a central part of the romantic nationalist project of Iceland’s intellectual elite taking place in the middle of the nineteenth century. However, it is even more noteworthy for the fact that the taxonomy of the paranormal expressed in this and other folktale collections compiled during the nineteenth century has served as a framework for twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholarly thought concerning medieval and post-medieval paranormal activity in the North.

Jón’s influential tome first appeared in Leipzig in 1862, was dedicated to no lesser an authority than Jakob Grimm (“hinum ágæta fræðimanna öldúngi ... höfundi alðýðlegrar sagnafræði”), and was accompanied by an introduction written not by the collector himself but rather by the Icelandic scholar Guðbrandur Vigfús son, standing in for Jón who was far away in Iceland at the time. The classifications employed in this volume were not entirely Jón Árnason’s own either but were rather conceived of by German scholar Konrad Maurer who had recently published his own smaller collection, Isländische Volkssagen der Gegenwart (1860). They were indeed only slightly modified by Jón himself in his own work in close consultation with Maurer.

Categories
The first three categories in the published collection are theological tales (goðfræðissögur, mostly tales of elves and trolls), ghost stories (draugasögur), and stories of witchcraft and magic (galdrasögur), and these categories have continued to dominate scholarly thought about such phenomena even to the present day. This classification or taxonomy is essentially a pragmatic one. Under the circumstances of publishing a book, it is of course necessary that the material be placed in some kind of order and for that a system is needed. However, such systems may sometimes acquire lives of their own, and inevitably the idea eventually began to materialise that otherworldly beings could, or perhaps even must be categorised discretely according to a sensible taxonomy such as that used to categorise the flora and fauna of the natural world; thus a folktale must either be a troll story, a ghost story, or a witchcraft story, but never all three at once.

This system of thought is partly inspired by the study of the natural world undertaken during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and folklore taxonomists like Maurer and Jón Árnason were indeed following in the footsteps of their scientific counterparts, prominently the great Carl von Linné (Linnaeus) of Uppsala (1707–1778). The Princeps botanicorum and the Pliny of the North, hailed as a genius by such diverse figures as Rousseau, Goethe, and Strindberg, Linné constructed and expressed in his Systema Naturae a system of binomial nomenclature applicable to all living things wherein each and every animal or plant belongs to precisely one species and one genus, a functional subsystem of the hierarchal biological classification system that also includes discrete categories of families, orders, classes, phyla, kingdoms, and domains.²⁵

Pioneering scholars of folklore, including Maurer and his disciples in Iceland, subscribed to the same scientific paradigm as Linné and his “apostles,” evident in that they too believed that classification was one of the central tasks of scholarship. Thus they invented a similar system for
their own field, partly for pragmatic reasons but also trusting in the taxonomy’s objective existence outside of the tables of contents accompanying their works.26 The inevitable conclusion was that every paranormal being must also belong to a particular “species,” and thus folklorists and their general audience became accustomed to regarding a ghost, a troll, and a sorcerer as three discrete categories of the paranormal, as attested in Jón Árnason’s categorisation of tröllasögur, draugasögur, and galdrasögur.27

The taxonomy applied first by Maurer and then by Jón Árnason has provided a natural starting point for research of the Icelandic paranormal ever since 1862. Nevertheless, in the Icelandic texts of the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries, a ghost, a troll, and a sorcerer turn out, on closer inspection, to be not as clearly demarcated as this taxonomy suggests; indeed, as already observed, they may all be described using the term troll. Thus the study of the medieval troll must include ghosts and sorcerers as these figures feature even more commonly under the heading troll than those mountain-dwelling ogres who later usurped the term during the nineteenth century, after four centuries of slow but gradual semantic constriction.28

Of course post-medieval scholars did not instigate the semantic constriction of the term, but through the application of categories within the folktale collections they produced during this time, the constricted sense of the word troll became the scholarly analytic tool also used to discuss older texts. As a result the medieval vocabulary was subsequently eyed through the lens of nineteenth-century terminology and its later use. Thus modern scholars will sometimes ignore the older sense of the word troll, and when encountering the term might consequently neglect to examine carefully whether it might convey the older and wider significance of the word or the more recently constricted one. For example, when the Lutheran bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson (c. 1541–1627) published his monumental book of hymns in 1589, wanting to eradicate “Þeir
onytsamligu Kvedlingar / Trölla og Fornmanna Rymur” (the useless ditties, rhymes of trolls and the ancients), he is probably not speaking of poetry about hairy and brutish ogres in the wilderness but rather of any poem with a heathen or paranormal theme.

One has to assume that scholars and scientists of the nineteenth century were well aware of the fact that there is a difference between a living organism that bears a physical existence and a paranormal being that does not. It also seems likely that they would have realised that it is not self evident that the methods used to taxonomise living organism should be used also to taxonomise non-existent creatures. And yet it seems that this distinction preyed rarely on their minds and pragmatism, rather than reason, appears to have often been a strict taskmaster. A scholar must always analyse data, and indeed categorisation was often the main tool of late nineteenth-century folklorists, attested also for example in the typology invented by Aarne and Thompson and by the later Thompson motif-index.

Typology has scholarly repercussions that go beyond the actual act of categorisation: when a taxonomy has been created for the paranormal beings of the nineteenth century, it might seem logical to some to apply it also to those of previous centuries as well. Indeed, Guðbrandur Vigfússon began his introduction to the original printed version of Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri with references to ghosts in the medieval Eyrbyggja saga and Grettis saga, and dreams and premonitions in Njáls saga, and thus surreptitiously invented a tradition that stressed a kind of continuity between the Middle Ages and the nineteenth century.

Notions of a continuity of Northern folk traditions have managed to survive every attack to this day, and are revived in every generation, with subtle changes, without having ever really gone out of fashion. Even though arguments can be made for such a continuity in certain cases, it may be jeopardous to make general assumptions from only limited or specific instances. Each case must instead be judged
on its own merit. Another fallacy would be to assume that we always know what medieval concepts and terminology signify because we know what the same words were used to indicate during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, without ever examining their actual usage in the medieval sources. A closer look at some of these words is merited, and will reveal that the hazards of assuming continuity on these grounds from present to past are all too real.