The Troll Inside You: Paranormal Activity in the Medieval North
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Doubt and uncertainty are central to the late fourteenth-century *Bergbúa þáttir*, a brief and little-known medieval prose narrative, which tells of a man called Þórðr who lives in the Westfjords of Iceland, and who is introduced as a prosperous man in the prime of his life (“á góðum aldri”). The narrative concerns a single episode from his life, taking place during the winter when Þórðr travels to church with one of his servants in tow. The journey is a long one, and while the two are on the road a snowstorm breaks out. Þórðr acknowledges that they are lost, and since he does not want to journey into the dark in this weather they seek shelter immediately under a steep cliff where they unexpectedly find a cave previously unknown to them. Þórðr prudently and conspicuously uses his staff to mark a cross at the mouth of the cave, and they rest close to the entrance, not wanting to venture further inside.

Given these details it is perhaps not all together surprising when, during the first third of the night, the men hear something (“nökkut”) moving inside the cave. This terrifies the unnamed servant, who attempts to flee, but Þórðr stops him by instructing him to sit still and tells him to pray, remarking that if men run out into the night their eyes may deceive them, a statement not clarified further. The two make the sign of the cross together and pray to God for mercy when they hear awe-inspiring noises coming from within the cave. Looking into the darkness they see two large lights almost like two full moons and suspect that these eyes must belong to a creature of some enormi-
ty. They next hear a mighty voice reciting with a great din a poem of twelve stanzas, more or less in the skaldic metre although the last line of each stanza, eerily and uncharacteristically, is repeated. This happens three times during the night and while the poem is recited (taking up more than half of the narrative), they see the big moving lights but otherwise see nothing.

After the third recitation of the poem, the eldritch presence seems to retreat deeper into the cave and soon Þórðr and his servant see the light of the day and hurry out from the cave. When Þórðr exits, he places his foot on the cross he had previously made at the entrance to the cave. The pair go and find the church they were heading towards but discover that they are too late for the service. On the way home, they reach the place where they thought that they had spent the night but find no cave there and feel this to be extraordinary. The two return home and Þórðr remembers the poem, but the servant does not recall a single word. The next year Þórðr moves his farm closer to the church, but the servant dies. Þórðr himself has a long life and does not experience any queer things, and the narrator wraps up this story by informing us that this event was an extraordinary thing.

The timing and the setting of this encounter both seem to be highly significant. In fact the tale does not take place at any certain time in history although the casual mention of Þórðr’s journey to a church service indicates that Iceland has been Christian for some time when the events take place. This is unusual; the Christianization of Iceland around the turn of the first millennium may be one of the main reasons why the late tenth and early eleventh centuries attracted overwhelming attention from twelfth- and thirteenth-century historiographers, who on the other hand seem to have largely neglected the events and history of the late eleventh and the twelfth centuries, if the surviving saga literature provides any indication. The apparent obsession with this particular period in his-
tory might indicate that Christianization was regarded as a significant break from the past in the history of Iceland, more decisive, for example, than the death of the Icelandic commonwealth in the late thirteenth century. The preoccupation with the shift from pagan religions to Christianity is significant, as paranormal activity tends to be closely identified with the pagan past in the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century historiography of Iceland.

The focus in this study is on narratives which take place in Iceland, where there is greater intimacy between the events they describe and their implied audience. In spite of much scholarly debate over the last two centuries, there is still no consensus opinion concerning the precise origins of the Sagas of Icelanders as a literary genre. For the last few decades, there has been general scholarly agreement that in their present written form, the sagas are texts from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries although their manuscript preservation does not preclude the idea that some might be even younger. It still seems somewhat unsatisfactory, however, to regard the final compositions as strictly works of art by individual creative authors and dismissing the traditions behind them altogether. A saga in its finished form may be a late medieval work of art, and yet large chunks of its material are probably traditional. Nevertheless the sagas are much too far removed from the pre-Christian past to be regarded as undiluted or credible sources from or about that era. Identifying a motif in a Christian text as genuinely pre-Christian will never be easy when the sources are so overwhelmingly late and perhaps irreversibly diluted. The chronological aspect of the paranormal will be returned to later in this study (see “Time the Devourer” below).

The only temporal marker in the tale described above, the mention that Þórðr is on his way to attend “tíðir” (canonical hours) during the “hátiðir” (holidays, meaning Christmas, Easter or possibly Pentecost), is also crucial in that, importantly, during the whole encounter his mind
must be clearly focused on the spiritual life. The sign of
the cross he makes at the mouth of the cave is a clear state-
ment of this fact. In the constant struggle between good
and evil, Þórðr has confirmed his place within the Christ-
ian camp and is thus perhaps better suited for the ordeal
that awaits him than is his hapless servant. It cannot be
entirely overlooked, however, that at the same time Þórðr
also gives the seemingly un-Christian creature in the cave
its due in memorising its poem, perhaps concurrently en-
suring his own survival.

The weather and the landscape serve a vital function in
many a paranormal encounter, and *Bergbúa þáttir* provides
a good example of this. The encounter comes about on the
very account of the sudden onset of snow where, in the far
North, the weather and the cave-dweller may well serve as
a Scylla and Charybdis to the vulnerable human traveler.
Furthermore, its setting is within stone, in the cave which
serves as an entrance to the otherworld and which ap-
pears and then disappears according to an unknown set of
rules. That stones, carved by nature into various shapes
that may sometimes resemble anthropomorphic beings
to the human eye, can acquire a mystical quality, possi-
bly precisely on account of their quiet immobility, is well
known to us even in this civilized age of human conquest.
Caves are also traditional settings for liminal encounters
in medieval Iceland, perhaps naturally so given the island’s
abundantly rocky landscape where the human so often en-
counters and is so often dwarfed by stone.

The mysterious cave, their lithic refuge, is imposed
on Þórðr and his servant by harsh necessity and the two
are clearly reluctant to venture further into its unknown
depths than necessary. For someone who denies the ex-
istence of the paranormal, such reluctance makes little
sense, since other humans are the only dangerous animals
inhabiting Iceland that could take up residence in a cave
like this. Rationalist modern people are not likely to regard
stones as intentionally dangerous in themselves, but it is
abundantly clear from the narrative that they, and the narrator as well, have been trained to expect the worst from any cave encountered in the wild. In Iceland, perhaps excepting for their own kind, land and sea are the fiercest natural predators of humans, and their uncompromising nature naturally contributes to the claustrophobic and paranoid atmosphere pervading the small portion of the land defined as normal, human, and civilised.