Rationalism in the Lava Field

The medieval causal models employed to make sense of the paranormal can indeed be located within a single person who in turn may be considered a Christian rationalist, a believer in demonic phenomena or even a ruthless pragmatist that makes use of the paranormal as it suits his grander purposes. Such a man is the noble Icelander from the conversion period who has already been mentioned above, albeit perfunctorily, Snorri Þorgrímsson (963–1031), usually referred to as Snorri goði and a contemporary of King Óláf Tryggvason. Snorri’s relationship with the paranormal is interestingly but unsettlingly diverse and yet perhaps typical for his own time. It is perhaps no less typical than how our own century has dealt with our ancestor’s belief in trolls, a topic that is difficult to ignore when discussing definitions of the paranormal.

As previously mentioned, the Christianization of Iceland around the turn of the millennium was regarded as a seminal event in the sagas from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. From the thirteenth century onwards, the narrative tradition concerning the Christianization-parliament of the year 1000 includes a particular riposte issued by Snorri, one of the leading magnates on the Christian side of the conflict. The legend has it that in the middle of the parliamentary debate at Þingvellir a man comes running in and announces a volcanic eruption at Ólfus, likely to overrun the estate of Þóroddr goði, another recent convert among the magnates. Reasoning the coincidence of the eruption, the pagans at parliament remark that it is not
surprising that that the gods have grown angry given some of the remarks made during the debate. To this, Snorri goði retorts: “Um hvat reiddusk guðin þá er hér brann hraunit er nú stóndu vér á?” (What then angered the gods when the lava burned that we are standing on now?).

Snorri manages to silence the heathens with this powerful comeback, so powerful that it is still reported in the textbooks used by Icelandic schoolchildren today. The cultural significance of his one-liner has been considerable during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as it evidently was also during the fourteenth century. However, the joke was never explicitly interpreted in the medieval sources, the author’s of which, as a rule, are content to narrate without providing overt, critical commentary. The only thing certain about Snorri’s apparently rhetorical question is that it is far less innocent than it might seem, but all else is left open to interpretation, including to what extent Snorri understands the origins of lava and of igneous rock.

Later interpreters though were not slow to recognise in Snorri a kindred spirit, a kind of medieval Icelandic Richard Dawkins even, the rational man who undermines superstition with clever mockery. During the twentieth century, scholars and pundits such as the Rev. Gunnar Benediktsson (1892–1981) regarded Snorri’s remark as a prime example of “Icelandic thought,” characterised by stoicism and earthbound rationalism, and geologist Þorleifur Einarsson (1931–1999) referred to it as “the first geological commentary.” The Snorri that appears in this anecdote held strong appeal for nineteenth- and twentieth-century rationalists, their own epistemological reasoning firmly grounded in the scientific thought of the technological revolution. The wise man who calmly asks what could have angered the gods when the lava on Þingvellir originated is eagerly interpreted as a man of (scientific) reason and logic, with reason even occasionally defined as a particularly Icelandic attribute.
The contradiction, however, between scientific thought and the fact that Snorri was in fact speaking as a member of one religious camp on the precipice of war with another faction, siding with the Christian God against the ancient pagan gods, did not seem too worrying for the “rationalist” interpretation of Snorri’s geological gag. This same contradiction was indeed also present in the life of most of Iceland’s intellectual elite during the twentieth century, most of whom were professed Christians who nevertheless believed in science and whose rationalism was wedded to their nationalistic ideals. During the twentieth century a belief in a God who had only created lava indirectly seemed most natural and rational and thus Snorri’s faith was easily moulded to fit such a model. His Christianity could be regarded as genuinely devout but it must nevertheless be reasonable from the point of view of modern science, much like that of the faithful Icelandic scholars of the twentieth century. These scholars were nominally Christian but did not care much for the paranormal and tended to believe in the sagas, albeit somewhat selectively, as factual historical sources, applauding their realism and rationality while dismissing and ignoring the abundance of paranormal elements described within them. Accepting Christ but disliking much of the paraphernalia of religion, in particular Catholic miracles and saints, many twentieth-century scholars of Old Norse history and writing believed that they were men of enlightenment and reason with a deeper understanding of the laws of nature than their ancestors, with Snorri the medieval rationalist standing out as a notable exception.140

This particular disassociation was noted by the scholar Jón Helgason (1899–1986) who, when discussing Egils saga, noted that that, “Þegar fram liðu stundir þótti ekki lengur tilhlýðilegt að trúa á seið, en um leið og menn gáfust upp á því var meginstöðinni kippt undan skilningi á flani Egils til útlanda. [...] Það er hæpið að trúa því að ef galdur er tekinn úr galdrasögú, verði afgangurinn sönn saga” (In the
fullness of time a belief in magic became unbecoming but when that was abandoned the foundation for understanding Egill’s wanderings abroad was gone ... It seems strange to believe that if magic is taken out of a magical tale what will remain is a true story).\textsuperscript{141} This acerbic comment is well known and yet it remains a common trope to refer primarily to the sagas as “realistic narratives,” if not necessarily true in every detail. The emphasis on their supposed realism, defined very much in relation to modern perceptions of what is or what only can be real, has subsequently often lead scholars to ignore the paranormal elements frequently described in the sagas.\textsuperscript{142} Thus the paranormal becomes an elephant in the room, obvious to all and yet generally ignored.

Returning to Snorri, if he had truly embraced Christianity in the year 1000, he had far from dispensed entirely with the paranormal, adopting instead somewhat of a new framework of causality, with God, the father and son, positioned as the creator of all things and the saviour of mankind. Indeed the natural phenomena to which Þingvellir owes its existence would within this framework be identified as miraculous, a part of the larger miracle of nature that forms a part of the fundamental miraculousness of creation itself.\textsuperscript{143}

What Snorri actually means with his retort nevertheless remains opaque. Though he seems to be poking fun at how the heathens use the phenomena of volcanic eruptions selectively to argue their own case, the notion of the wrath of the gods is unlikely to have been wholly alien or objectionable to him, given that he not only grew up in pre-Christian Iceland but had even served as a goði, a religious office of vague contours in pre-Christian Icelandic society.

Indeed one must wonder what accepting the supremacy of Christ actually meant to a person born into and raised in the pagan world. As shown above, in Oddr’s Óláfs saga, the victory of Christ does not cause the utter disappearance or erasure of the other gods. Instead they continue to
wander the earth opposing him, much like magicians and trolls, superseded but not entirely displaced by Christ.144 Thus interpretations of Snorri’s remark other than considering it to be a breezy dismissal of the credulous belief in the anger of the gods may be possible. One possibility may be that those present at the Christianization-parliament generally accepted the pre-settlement age of the lava at Þingvellir, its very age making it unlikely that the anger of the gods spurred by human activity is necessarily the only causal explanation for the appearance of lava. The local movement for Christianity being new, Snorri may also be pointing out that, as the lava predates the coming of Christianity to Iceland, the anger of the gods who made it must have been caused by something other than Christ or the adoption of this new faith.

One must also not overlook the practical function of the riposte is to not offer an answer to the question posed but simply to kick the ball into the other court again and to get the heathens entangled in complicated and unconvincing arguments about only tenuously related events. For Snorri’s purposes, silencing his opponents, or drawing them into an unrelated argument is enough to ensure his own victory. He may not have been an Enlightenment rationalist, but the Snorri described in this anecdote was indubitably a clever pragmatist and a skilled debater.