The Troll Inside You: Paranormal Activity in the Medieval North

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Published by Punctum Books


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Zombies in the Crack

With respect to the prevalent myth of Snorri goði as a man of reason and even a medieval post-Enlightenment thinker, another famous verbal sally attributed to him might raise certain problems. In Brennu-Njáls saga, Snorri becomes secretly embroiled in the battle of the alþingi in 1012, on the side of Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson, Gizurr the White, and other magnates determined to gain compensation for the arsonous attack at Bergþórshváll. Snorri attempts to keep the group’s primary opponent Flosi and his men from the stronghold at Almannagjá, where they could easily defend themselves from attack. When Flosi and his men arrive in flight, Snorri stands in the way and asks Flosi who is chasing after him. Flosi angrily replies: “Ekki spyrð þú þessa af því, at þú vitir þat eigi. En hvárt veldr þú því, er vér megum eigi sækjia til vígis í Almannagjá?” (You do not ask this because you do not know it already, but is it you who is denying us the keep of Almannagjá?). To which Snorri replies: “Eigi veld ek því ... en hitt er satt, at ek veit, hverir valda, ok mun ek segja þér, ef þú vilt, at þeir valda því Þorvaldr kroppinskéggi ok Kolr” (I am not the cause of this ... but it is true that I know who is the cause of it and I will tell if you want that this is caused by Þorvaldr Croppedbeard and Kolr). The narrator of the saga then identifies these two gentlemen: “Þeir váru þá báðir dauðir ok hǫfðu verit hin mestu illmenni í liði Flosa” (They were then both dead and had been the most evil men on Flosi’s side).

As is often the case in the Sagas of the Icelanders, this “explanation” of the rejoinder fails to explain much to a
modern audience. Why does Snorri attribute actions in the battle that are so clearly his to dead men? As Matthías Þórðarson has noted, the identity of the two apparently undead retainers seems to have become blurred in the transmission from the original riposte to the surviving written saga texts. These two men are thus in all probability not two recently dead criminals from Flosi’s gang, but were originally two notorious historical figures mentioned in Ari’s Íslendingabók: Þórðr kroppinskeggi, whose grandson was called Þorvaldr and seems to have inherited both his grandfather’s cut of beard and his nefarious nature, and his slain slave Kolr. While Þorvaldr the grandson was guilty of fratricide, his grandfather Þórir had murdered a slave in Bláskógar, in the land that later became the hallowed ground of parliament, and this infamous deed had consequences of great magnitude since it lead to the land becoming available for the general public. The slaying of Kolr thus eventually became a murderous precondition for the sacred role of Þingvellir as the central parliament of Iceland.

In this heated exchange Snorri thus seems to be effectively evoking two renowned ghosts of Þingvellir to explain why Flosi and his men are kept from the sanctuary of the keep. As Matthías Þórðarson has also remarked, it is far from certain why Snorri replies in such a fashion, but he suggests that Snorri’s intention is to disassociate himself from direct involvement in the conflict by attributing Flosi’s inability to enter this space to the local bogeymen. It is also possible to focus on the potential irony of the answer, and Matthías indeed argues that Snorri would have also wanted Flosi to understand that he and his men are indeed the real cause. Thus Snorri may also be teasing Flosi and goading him to enter upon a learned debate about paranormal activity, which is bound to be fruitless since presumably neither Flosi nor anyone else present can fully explain the nature of ghosts any more than they can explain the origins of lava. In each instance, Snorri is
thus taking full advantage of the nervous uncertainty that ordinary humans experience when faced with the unexplained and possibly unexplainable.

The Snorri that emerges from the exchange of words documented in Brennu-Njáls saga is not Snorri the great sceptic and rationalist who refers to the laws of nature as we too understand them to silence his opponents, but Snorri the ghostmonger, certainly rational enough in his own way but not shying away from using otherworldly explanations to make his point. While it could be argued that Snorri’s words are coldly ironic and that in no way do they reveal his own belief in ghosts — his very use of irony might even be said to demonstrate his own irreverence for the superstitious fears of others — it is nevertheless evident that he finds ghosts useful on occasion to explain his actions and the nature of the world around him. If we can speak of Snorri’s particular brand of rationalism, it is one saturated in cynicism.

In fact, it is impossible to know whether the “real” Snorri goði actually believed in ghosts or not or even if it was assumed to be the case in thirteenth-century historical traditions. However, in some way he clearly occasionally used them in causal explanations to win arguments. And, in fact, this joke serves much the same function as did his quip about the lava at Þingvellir: it misdirects and silences his opponents. For this same purpose, Snorri uses ghosts just as well as geology, and by no means does he consequently take the side of science and rationality against the occult and the unexplained.

In evoking undead villains like Þorvaldr and Kolr, Snorri acknowledges a — if not his own — belief in magic. Such legendary trolls as the aforementioned Ögmundr Eyþjófsbani, sorcerer, zombie, and malignant spirit, are magical to the core, with Ögmundr in particular having undergone a magic ritual that “trolls” him and renders him undead. In the theory of miracles, magic is their antithesis, and during the Middle Ages there seems to have been a strong link
between magic and all paranormal activity not associated with Christ and his saints. Can magic then explain the zombies at Þingvellir, if not the lava? They are certainly not miraculous.

What angered the gods when the lava at Þingvellir emerged? Why are there zombies in the crack of this hallowed place a decade later? The thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelandic authors to whom the sagas are anonymously attributed seem, like Snorri, keen to leave such questions unanswered, having imagined their ancestors sitting firmly on the fence of causality when explaining the paranormal.