Goði as Exorcist

From Kristni saga to Brennu-njáls saga, Snorri goði is easily recognised for his wit and irony as well as his ability to emerge victorious from a verbal exchange by sometimes invoking and sometimes questioning the paranormal. From a modern viewpoint, however, Snorri appears to be somewhat inconsistent in his attitudes towards the paranormal and thus not well suited to the role cast for him by many twentieth-century scholars. In Eyrbyggja saga, Snorri again appears within a narrative centred on the paranormal, this time called in as a chief-tain who takes full part in fighting the occult forces that haunt the farmstead Fróðá and threaten his region on the Snæfellsnes Peninsula shortly after Christianity has been officially adopted in Iceland.

In this narrative, Snorri does not seem to take the “Fróðá wonders” lightly at all; this time there is no debate that needs to be won and no ironical comments are reported. On the contrary, Snorri contributes his sage advice to an exorcism performed at Fróðá to turn out the demons. Snorri advises both the burning of the bed linens of the late Þórgunna, who was perhaps the cause of all the wonders at Fróðá, and the conducting of a paranormal trial strongly resembling an actual parliament, a sort of exorcism-by-law, the judgement of which the surprisingly law abiding ogres eventually respect. Snorri also provides a priest to perform an exorcism by holy water after all of the demons have apparently left.¹⁵⁸ Thus Snorri’s eclectic range of remedies spans the oddly secular to the orthodox, perhaps regarded as complementary rather than rival modes of de-
fense against the dark arts. Here the hegemonic faith and
the superstitious stand together in the fight against dark
forces, as they so often do, as both the traditional rules of
the commonwealth and the new religion work in concert
to expel the undead.

Medieval authors may have believed that Snorri goði
understood the geological origins of lava but he also seems
to believe in ghosts firmly enough to know of the various
rituals used to expel them. It is also worth noting that to
Christians a belief in the wrath of heathen gods may ren-
der one worthy of scorn but that does not mean that Chris-
tians did not have their own occult forces to contend with,
employing their own tools such as holy water and chant-
ing of the kind which King Óláfr used against the trolls of
Hálogalând. Similar methods are employed in the exorcism
at Fróðá. In both instances, magic is very real and powerful
even if Christianity proves more powerful still and eventu-
ally triumphs.

In light of this synthesis of the pagan and Christian it
is perhaps interesting to note that Snorri is often referred
to with reference to his status as a goði, often glossed sim-
ply as “chieftain” or “magnate.” The word may also suggest
that before Christianity, Icelandic magnates, or at least
those serving as goðar, served some kind of important re-
ligious function. As implied in several saga narratives, the
regional magnates are clearly expected to cleanse their
regions of such evil spirits, so presumably that was one of
the things expected of a goði, and thus of Snorri, whom
we then have to regard as more of a professional exorcist
than an amateur enthusiast. Considering this role, Snorri’s
ironic comment about volcanic fire during the conversion-
parliament may not be as modern or rationalistic as its
interpretation by contemporary scientists suggests, and
a professional exorcist may indeed prove to be a poor ex-
ample of an exponent of rational scientific thought around
the turn of the first millennium.
The audience of *Eyrbyggja saga* may learn what brought an end to the wonders of Fróðá but from the saga they never learn their exact cause or their certain nature. The events are hardly miraculous, and the defensive presence of the exorcist rather suggests they are magical and demonic, as one would expect of hauntings of the undead. And yet these ghosts are strangely passive and neutral, perhaps more wondrous than evil. What Snorri actually thinks of them is never revealed either but only are his remedies explained. Neither does Snorri attempt to speculate about the causes of the alleged zombies at Þingvellir in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, nor, indeed, about the origins of the lava at that hallowed place in *Kristni saga*. Snorri only poses questions, wisely keeping his own counsel, and so too do the sagas’ authors. But how could such wonders ever really be defined? Are they miracles or magic or are they wonders precisely because they ultimately defy any clear explanation?

As demonstrated above, the troll is frequently found in darkness, its shadowed appearance fraught with ambiguity. It speaks, has its own point of view, and is intimately alien. However, as the undead are by no means the least significant trolls, the troll might also be intimately human, like us, and yet utterly alien. All these apparent contradictions make difficult demands on any attempt to explain them clearly and when it comes to causal explanations, we enter — or perhaps cannot escape — the same nebulous arena. Illustrious historical figures like Snorri goði often appear in many different sources, reacting in different ways when encountering the paranormal. Sometimes seemingly reasoning like a modern rationalist, Snorri also introduces ghosts to a debate where they had not been present before, and to him exorcism is a serious endeavour. Twentieth-century scholars may have desperately wanted Snorri to think like a modern rational man, but the utter rationalism of medieval saga heroes remains in fact a fairly
irrational scholarly myth, one that would likely be unrecognisable to the sagas’ medieval audience.