The Troll Inside You: Paranormal Activity in the Medieval North

Ármann Jakobsson

Published by Punctum Books


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66790

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2331319
Despite these esteemed and noble men, it must be said that the witch Katla from *Eyrbyggja saga* is not the only unpopular occult practitioner found in the sagas. In *Laxdæla saga*, for example, Óláfr the Peacock and other shining representatives of civilization and of light also have to contend with an immigrant family from the Hebrides comprised of Kotkell, Gríma, and their two sons, Hallbjǫrn slífkisteinsauga and Stígandi. Few words are minced in their introduction in Ch. 35 of the saga: “Ǫll váru þau mjǫk fjǫlkunnig ok inir mestu seiðmenn” (they were all very sorcerous and the greatest shamans). Consequently, their region is “ekki vinsæl” (not popular), a prime example of Old Icelandic understatement. They find a protector though in the equally unpopular Hallsteinn goði who uses them as any unscrupulous magnate might use the scum of the earth, as thugs to make miserable the lives of those who stand in his way.

One of their victims is Ingunn, mother-in-law of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, whose son Þórðr refuses to suffer in silence and seeks out Kotkell and his wife, threatening them with lawsuits. Their answer is witching: “Síðan lét Kotkell gera seiðhjall mikinn; þau fœrðusk þar á upp ǫll; þau kváðu þar harðsnúin frœði; þat váru galdrar. Því næst laust á hríð mikilli” (Then Kotkell had a platform of sorcery erected where they all posted themselves. They recited ponderous lore there, which were charms. Then a storm broke out). This paranormal tempest descends upon the seafaring Þórðr and his companions at the worst possible
time, and in spite of Þórór’s fortitude in the face of the turbulent waves, they all drown.

The patronage of Hallsteinn momentarily saves his Hebridean henchmen from execution, but they are expelled from the county to seek abode with Þorleikr, Óláfr the Peacock’s brother. This arrogant and foolish magnate takes them in and another, new region now becomes tainted by their magic and unpopularity. Þorleikr soon falls into temptation in employing Kotkell and his rabble to wreak revenge on his own adversary Hríutr. They again conjure up a “seiðr” which is not described in explicit detail, although there are suggestions of noise emitted in the words “seiðlæti” (magic racket), which may sound to the innocents like something of a siren song (“fǫgur kveðandi,” fair chanting).

With their sorcery they manage to kill yet another impetuous youth, twelve-year-old Kári, the son of Hríutr, who becomes restless and must venture outside in spite of his father’s warnings. This time, however, no mercy is shown to the malefactors. The aged Hríutr, now grieving for his dead son, seeks out Óláfr the Peacock, renowned disciplinarian, ghostbuster, and man of action, and the latter characteristically wastes little time. The witches attempt to flee, but Kotkell and Gríma are soon caught and stoned to death, their grave thenceforth known as Skrattavarði (demons’ cairn). Hallbjörn is forcefully drowned, but not before he is able to curse Þorleikr. He also later appears after his death, following the natural progression from witch (troll) into undead (troll). Stígandi evades capture for a while but he, too, is later caught with the help of a female shepherd. He is then pelted to death, but not before he lays waste a beautiful grassy spot on the hillside with his evil eye.

The wickedness of these aliens is unmitigated. Even though they are not specifically referred to as trolls, indeed the word hardly appears in Laxdæla saga, the swift justice meted out to them by Óláfr clearly marks them as
otherworldly beings whose persecution requires no trial, and they are expectedly and promptly exterminated like common vermin. There is no doubt that their treatment is partly explained by their status as immigrants. Arriving from the Hebrides, Kotkell and his kin lack any family connections of note in Iceland. However, their cruel fate can only partially be explained by xenophobia. Óláfr himself claims descent from Irish kings, proud of being an “ambát-tarsonr” (son of a slave) when he woos and wins his wife Þorgerðr Egilsdóttir. But assuredly the audience of this saga is not encouraged to draw any parallel between his noble Irish blood and the Hebridean trailer trash he is now forced to cleanse Iceland of in order to fulfill his duty as a magnate. Óláfr’s foreign lineage serves as a mark of his distinction whereas they remain the lowest of the low, people with no genealogy worthy of mention.

The notorious fiend Glámr is similarly alien hailing from Sweden, which, though some have thought so, may not be all that revealing about general attitudes towards Swedes in medieval Iceland. It assuredly means though that he, too, is an individual without any lineage or possessions in Iceland, in short a person of little repute whose eventual demonic fate may be a natural consequence of his inherent outsider status, as the alien to Iceland inevitably becomes an alien of Iceland.