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Hunger Games: Supernatural Strategies Against Hunger in the Medieval North

1 Thrown Into the World

In the Parable of the Wedding Banquet (Mt 22:1–14) (Hultgren 2002: 332ff.; Barbaglio 1978; Buzzetti 1978; Smith 2003: 166–7; Maraschi 2014), Jesus compares the Kingdom of Heaven to a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son; evidently, the king is God, the son is Christ. The most important point for the purposes of this work is that the king wanted to make sure that all the guests showed up wearing adequate clothes (Zuck, Walvoord, Barbieri 1983: 71). They had not been asked to bring gifts but, implicitly, to put on their best garments. One of them, though, miserably dressed, was trying to keep himself unnoticed and to enjoy the delicious meal like everybody else. But the eye of the king was quick to spot the intruder, who was immediately questioned about his clothing: 'How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?', asked the king. The man was speechless. Then, he was thrown out of the room, 'into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth'.[1]

[1] Mt 22:12–13. Bible quotations are taken from NIV translation, © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.

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Abstract: However substantial the effect of the Medieval Warm Period may have been in northern Europe around 1000–1200, medieval Scandinavia was not exactly a place of plenty: the harshness of climatic conditions did still have a profound impact on food supplies, raising the need for alternative solutions. The sagas show that, in addition to practical responses, northern people could resort to "magic" and to their traditional pagan gods, but also to the powers of the new Christian faith to fight the ever-looming threat of hunger that had earlier shaped their idea of the afterlife and of the end of the world.

Key words: Magic, miracles, famine, medieval Scandinavia, Icelandic sagas.

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The allegorical message of this parable is immediate, at least on a superficial level: the Kingdom of Heaven is a sumptuous feast. Many will be invited, but just a few chosen. The former will enjoy an inexhaustible banquet with delicious, meat-based courses,[2] and will sit beside Christ; the latter will experience the fear and the pain of damnation, in the darkness outside the banqueting hall. This was what the biblical afterlife looked like, at least according to Matthew. As will be noted later, this idea of afterlife was no peculiarity of Christianity: the cultures which produced such images left fingerprints of a feeble – but clear – existential anguish about life in the world, as opposed to that in an imaginary afterlife (Power 1985: 159–61; Carlsen 2015: 214). Mainly, anguish towards hunger, the weather, crop yields, the livestock, food supplies, and so on. The darkness outside of Matthew's banqueting hall suggests that men perceived the world around them as potentially hostile, subject to laws they could not control. An existential feeling of powerlessness which we can associate with German philospher Martin Heidegger's notion of *geworfenheit*, the feeling of being *thrown into the world* (Dahlstrom 2013: 212), and a hostile and ruthless one at that.

This impression can be endorsed only if one accepts that myths are symbolical representations of reality (Raudvere 2002; Auerbach 1991; O'Donoghue 2010: 22), and that legendary/mythological/fantastic worlds are often caricatured versions of the real world. In the following sections, attention will be focused on survival strategies that medieval Scandinavians adopted from this side of the world, and not from the afterlife: specifically, on those which implied the use of "supernatural"[3] powers, whether of non-Christian or Christian origins (Malinowski 1984: 4). Arguably, the "supernatural" was exploited by saga authors to enrich the narrative and make it more appealing, to the detriment of their historicity (Spiegel 1990; Jochens 1993; Orning 2015: 65). This notwithstanding, there is probably a subtle but tight connection between real and fictional worlds, between life and depictions of the afterlife, and between literary scenes of "supernatural" powers and the mentalities/needs of saga authors (Clunies Ross 1994; Orning 2010: 4).

The present analysis of Icelandic sagas of different genres will be supported with parallels from the *Eddas*, and even from collections of medicinal remedies and of spells, with the intention of casting light on said "supernatural" survival strategies, on one of their main targets (hunger),

[2] Mt 22:4.
[3] A clearer definition of this term and alternative terminology will be proposed later.

and on the extraordinary continuity of attentions and solutions to such a problem from pre-Christian to Christian times in Scandinavia. One may well argue that many of the scenes we will be focusing on are not to be considered entirely trustworthy,[4] but this contribution is specifically aimed at showing that the study of the "supernatural" is yet another perspective from which to analyse those environmental threats which emerge from archaeological findings. This is only possible if we concede that written sources can offer information about people's mental attitudes (or *mentalité*), regardless of the reliability of the historical facts they narrate. From this standpoint, the role of the "supernatural" gains an actual literary dignity in historico-anthropological terms. Both sorcerers and holy men had very similar concerns, since they lived in the same places and roughly in the same socio-economic context.

2 If the Afterlife Looks Like a Banquet

In Old Norse mythological tradition, according to Snorri, dead warriors were escorted by the Valkyries into Valhǫll, the hall of the All-Father Óðinn, and were served food and drink for eternity in a place of plenty (*Gylfaginning*: 30). Ale was surely popular at such latitudes, but the Einherjar could also enjoy another, more desirable drink. Not water, of course, but sweet, inexhaustible mead: 'There is a goat called Heidrun standing on top of Val-hall feeding on the foliage from the branches of that tree whose name is well known, it is called Lerad', Snorri continues, 'and from the goat's udder flows mead with which it fills a vat each day. This is so big that all the Einheriar can drink their fill from it' (Faulkes 1987: 33).

There was no chance the Einherjar could feel hungry, by the way. The valkyries would zealously serve them as much meat of a supernatural pig (or boar[5]) as they could eat until *Ragnarøkr*: it was 'cooked each day and whole again by evening' (ibid.: 32). The equation of the idealized afterlife

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[4] About the scholarly debate on the possible use of sagas as historical sources, see, among others: Sigurður Nordal 1953 and 1957; Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1958; Andersson 1964; Jónas Kristjánsson 1986; Byock 1984 and 2001; Mitchell 1991.

[5] Actually, the very etymology of the name Sæhrímnir would suggest the idea of a marine animal ("sooty black sea beast"), possibly a seal. In spite of this, and following Snorri's indication, scholars generally tend to assume Sæhrímnir was a pig (Campanini 2016: 28–29).

existence with a drinking/dining hall is anything but an isolated occurrence in northern literature: even in texts like *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (70–71) or *Njáls saga* (193), the Otherworld that was visualized in the dreams of the protagonists could often consist of halls where they (or their friends) were drinking, seated by the fire.[6]

On the other hand, similar edenic features concerning food can be spotted in Celtic mythology and its many Otherworlds (Ralls 2000: 29), which were based on the same utopian ideas: the endless supply of food and drink, no cycle of seasons, no famine, no need to work the fields (Montanari 2006: 13). They all were lands of eternal youth and abundance, just like the utopian Land of Cockayne would be in the later Middle Ages (Goodwin and Taylor 2009: 34–37). The paradise which the Norwegian Eiríkr encounters, according to the legendary *Eiríks saga víðfǫrla*, also was a

> ... fagrt land grausin huít sem purpuri vid sætum ilm ok myklum bloma ok flutv hunangs lækir um alla uegu landzins. Þetta land uar langt ok slett. Sol skin var þar sua at alldri var þar myrkt ok alldri bar skugga a. lognn uar þar i lofte en lítill vindr a iordu til þess at þa kende hinn sæta ilm helldr en adr. [... 'beautiful country with grass as white as costly cloth, with a sweet scent and many flowers; around all that land flow streams of honey. This land was wide and even. There was sunshine, so it was never dark nor did any shadows fall there. The air was calm, but along the ground there was a gentle breeze so that the sweet scent was even more noticeable than before'.] (*Eiríks saga víðfǫrla A*: 1, 218–223; tr. Carlsen 2015: 214)

Eiríkr would later come to a hall where delicious white bread and wine were served within a lavish setting, suggesting that his Otherworld was deeply influenced by medieval learned narratives focused on the Christian Earthly Paradise (Power 1985: 159–161). This, however, did not make it any less relatable to the audience.

Moreover, this same mental representation worked also in reverse: the idea of the end of the world could sometimes coincide with the coming of an apocalyptic winter. The Old Norse *fimbulvetr* (*Gylfaginning*: 49) was an age of decay during which crops would not grow. According to the *Eddas*, after six winters with no summer in between, the wolf Skǫll (or maybe Fenrir) would eventually swallow the sun: in other words, the end takes the shape of a terrifying beast that literally *eats* that which is

[6] Christian Carlsen has recently suggested that a peculiar emphasis on images concerning the hall and physical comfort (as we can see, for example, in tales of visions in *Sólarljóð* or *Gísla saga*) seems to characterize the Germanic cultural *milieu.* See Carlsen. 2015: 202–203; Turville-Petre 1972.

the source of sustenance of all living beings. Not surprisingly, the *vǫlva* speaking in *Vǫluspá* (*Völuspá*: 17, st. 60) identified the rebirth of the world with the image of fertile lands which would not require labour. Similarly, in Celtic mythology, the conception of apocalypse is characterized by the inevitable end of food supplies and by an anomalous summer that would bring no fruits (*Cath Maige Tuired*: 73).

So, how to deal with situations of emergency on earth, however? How to fight hunger and secure food supplies? The answer was, in some cases, the "supernatural":[7] in the "supernatural" medieval Scandinavians projected their ideas of a utopia and their dreads; in the "supernatural" they found the solutions to their daily, short-term or long-term problems. But what kind of "supernatural"?

Anthropologists have shown that premodern civilizations resorted to "ultranatural" forces to protect themselves and to cope with a variety of threats of daily life (Shanafelt 2004: 322), from sickness to large-scale calamities: among them, "magic" (practices which replaced natural causality with human causality) and miracle-working (Malinowski 1984: 28–29). The source of and the mechanism behind their powers were different: magic was based on the manipulation and coercion of non-natural powers, whereas miracles (in James Frazer's words) implied that the priest entreated them and invoked the help of God (Frazer 1922: 51–54; de Vries 1962; Styers 2004: 104–09; Torfi Tulinius 2008: 10; Kieckhefer 2000: 14). But, in fact, if we consider their respective social purposes, the difference between the two branches of "ultranatural" was unimportant, so much so that Robert Shanafelt has recently proposed to group them under the term "marvel". Whatever the type of "ultranatural" force one chose to resort to, its main purpose could be the same: facing the challanges of that no-longer-friendly nature (Hanska 2002: 32–33), which was the exact opposite of Valhǫll, of the Garden of Eden, of Matthew's Wedding Banquet, of the Otherworld (Ovitt, 1987: 78).

From the perspective of their social function, many pre-Christian "magic" practices were not simply discarded and forgotten in medieval times, but rather Christianized, as Aron Gurevich has shown (Gurevich 1988: 80–82; Hanska 2002: 42). Actually, the distance separating the hemispheres of "magic" and "religion" has never been as irrelevant as it was in the Middle Ages, especially in the Anglo-Saxon and the Scandinavian world, as their aims often coincided. This is not surprising, as past civili-

[7] A risky definition in itself, as it introduces potential 'issues of class': supernatural and natural forces, magic, miracles, etc. were not considered equally prestigious by the 'literate elite' who dominated the written sources (Jolly 2002: 3).

zations were generally "powerless before the forces of nature (or supernature) – subject to poor crops, disease, wild beasts, the uncertainties of generation and heredity, etc." (Thee 1984: 315; Bailey 2008: 7–8).

This does not mean that, from the standpoint of the Christian authorities, miracles and "magic" belonged to the same realm: the former were manifestations of divine power, performed by God Himself or by the saints; the latter were manifestations of the devil, illusions (Jolly 2002: 6). But, as a matter of fact, Frazer's evolutionary interpretation of the magic-religion-science paradigm does not take into account the fact that "religion" and "magic" would be considered two sides of the same coin for many centuries. Not even one of the more convincing distinctions (i.e., the supplicative dimension of miracles against the coercive nature of charms) is enough to prove such idea right, as hagiographical tales occasionally feature saints almost compelling God to perform miracles, whereas many medieval medicinal remedies consisted of charms and prayers in equal measure (ibid.: 9). On the other hand, scholarship concerning magic (here, in particular, magic in the Scandinavian world) has long analyzed this category from an etic – not emic – perspective, underestimating the role of the authors of our extant sources (who were Christians; Meylan 2014: 13–17), and ultimately failing to develop the same kind of historical and anthropological awareness that we find – for instance – in Catharina Raudvere's studies. Our approach, here, is based on a different assumption, which further stresses the connection between "magic" and "religion": in some cases, both sorcerers and Christian holy men needed to solve similar problems just because, regardless of their own system of beliefs, they were actually part of the same social, economic and environmental cosmos.

3 Same Landscape, Different Beliefs, Same Needs

At the time of the Settlement, Iceland was perceived as a land of plenty due to a favourable climatic context (Amorosi 1992; Barlow and Jenkins 1998; Durrenberger 1991). In *Egils saga*, it is told that when Skalla-Grímr and his companions took into possession lands in the Borgarfjörður region in western Iceland, they found an abundance of fauna and of food resources for both men and the livestock (*Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*: Ch. 29). Pollen analysis indicates that the island was largely covered by birch woods, and that the mild temperatures allowed the cultivation of

barley (Hennig 2015: 38–39). In this sense, despite being a narrative text, *Egils saga* is an important resource, and so are other Icelandic sagas.

As the number of settlers increased, and especially starting from the twelfth century, good and desirable lands became progressively more scarce (see, for instance, *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*: Ch. 9), the pressure on the productive system intensified, and social tensions arose with greater frequency. A more rainy summer than usual could lead to bad grass and hay harvests, undermining a productive system which was still mainly based on cattle breeding (Astrid E. J. Ogilvie and Gisli Pálsson 2003): this is what happened to the tenants of Blund-Ketill, who were in desperate need of hay for their livestock. Hænsna-Þórir refused to sell them hay for the winter, though, contrary to what a new law promulgated by King Magnus VI of Norway (1263–1280) would have required, and he was eventually beheaded (*Hænsna-Þóris saga*: Ch. 4–5). In *Njáls saga* we find the description of a similar situation of emergency at the beginning of the eleventh century: the lack of food and hay led to feuds, robberies of cheese and butter, and various episodes of violence (*Brennu-Njáls saga*: Ch. 47). Snorri himself allegorized this feeling of "existential" anxiety (Raudvere 2012; Auerbach 1991) in the pages of *Gylfaginning*, where Hunger (*Hungr*) is the name of the dish of the ruler of the Underworld Hel, and Famine (*Sultr*) is her knife (*Gylfaginning*: 27): starving is an emanation of the netherworld, a typical feature of Hell.

Relying on the sagas as sources for the understanding of environmental challenges is a risky operation, of course: many were written with specific literary aims, such as entertainment or the need to construct a noble ancestry dating back to the time of the Settlement and earlier. The depiction of Iceland they offer is to be counterbalanced with that of foreign observers, such as Adam of Bremen, Saxo Grammaticus, or the author of *Konungs skuggsjá*, who all described the island in negative terms; but also with that featured in *Biskupa sögur*, where similarly environmental scarcity and difficult climatic conditions often emerge (Hennig 2015: 41–42). Within this context, the myth of the inexhaustible Sæhrímnir gains particular significance: archaeological findings suggest that, due to progressive changes in landscape after the Settlement, pigs lost their sources of nourishment (woodlands consisting of birch and dwarf willows) within about two hundred years, and pork had become a rare foodstuff when the sagas were being written down (Hennig 2015: 39; Smith 1995; Vera 2000: 185; McGovern 2007: 30).

Among the major concerns saga characters had, one was the weather, understandably. Gaining control over what seemed uncontrollable was

among the main aims of those who could resort to ultranatural forces (Dillmann 2006), especially since weather was a decisive element in the matter of food production. As the god Njǫrðr ruled the course of the wind (*Gylfaginning*: 23), sorceresses such as Þorgríma galdrakinn ("witchface") of *Eyrbyggja saga* (Ch. 40), or Dalla of *Finnboga saga* (Ch. 34) – to name two – could raise storms at their will, while in *Vatnsdœla saga* the sorcerer Bárðr stirfinn (Ch. 47) had the power to ward off storms by means of "magical" spells. The very existence of specific terms such as *galdrahríð* ("magic storm") and *gerningaveðr* or *gerningahríð* ("storm raised by witchcraft") is proof of the dignity of this practice, in the mind of saga authors (Mitchell 2011: 65–66). These tended to depict their heathen past in an ambiguous manner, and "were forced to disassociate themselves" (Hansen and Olsen 2014: 51) from them; still, they often wanted to "present this past as glorious" (ibidem).

Christian saints were similarly concerned with the weather, and farming was their priority: four years after his death, bishop Þorlákr appeared in the dreams of a northern priest named Þorvaldr, and told him when exactly the weather would improve after the harsh winter of 1197 (*Þorláks saga A*: Ch 20).[8] The saint was thus perpetuating ancient "talents" (Mitchell 2011: 66) dating back to Óðinn himself, in view of a "continuity of needs" (ibidem) that clearly had little to do with faith, but a lot to do with everyday life and real, tangible problems.

Moreover, Þorlákr's miracle may well be considered as a Christianized version of a passive divinatory practice, which recalls a very well-known description of a *seiðr* ("spell", "sorcery") featured in *Eiríks saga rauða* (written in the first half of the thirteenth century; *Eiríks saga rauða*: Ch. 4). The *seiðr* is seemingly performed in Greenland at the beginning of the eleventh century, at the time of a great famine. A prophetess named Þorbjǫrg is invited to a farm in order to predict when the famine would come to an end, and she performs a semi-public ritual (Meylan 2014: 39–42) which is described in minute detail, so much so that some scholars have questioned its plausibility (Mitchell 2011: 94). Whatever position we may want to take in such a debate, though, the scene is extremely interesting for at least two reasons, even if it may be impossible to prove whether this practice is fictitious or not:

1) it serves the narratological purpose of showing that situations of emergency such as famines may have required a compromise between non-Christian and Christian practices for the benefit of the community,

[8] The weather would improve after the *translatio* of Þorlákr's relics.

since Þorbjǫrg requires the help of the Christian Icelandic woman Guðríðr Þorbjarnardóttir in the chant of the "warding songs" to perform the *seiðr*;
2) it sheds light on the belief in the sympathetic powers of animal/human organs (in this case, probably a literary remnant of a much older and widespread knowledge).

Indeed, the seeress was invited by the chieftain Þorkell, who set up the seats and tables and served her dinner. Needless to say, this was no ordinary banquet: a woman with supernatural powers necessarily preferred foods which were somehow connected with a "supernatural" dimension. In fact, her meal consisted of a porridge of kid's milk and of the cooked hearts of all the living creatures they found in the area.

It is easy to track literary models and, consequently, important symbolical implications: hearts of animals appear to be linked with supernatural powers in at least two[9] passages of the *Poetic Edda.* One is the well-known story that we find in *Fáfnismál*, where the hero Sigurðr slays the dragon Fáfnir and roasts its heart: after tasting it, he could understand the speech of birds and learned from those around him that Regin was planning to kill him (*Fáfnismál*: 238, ss. 31–32). In the legendary *Vǫlsunga saga*, Sigurðr would also give his wife Guðrún some of Fáfnir's heart to eat, which would make her wiser (and grimmer; *Völsunga saga*: Ch. 26). The second one can be found in *Vǫluspá hin skamma*, where we see the god Loki eating the half-roasted heart of an evil woman (defined as her *hugstein*, "soul-stone" or "thought-stone"[10]): by doing so, he absorbs her wickedness and gives birth to all sorts of monsters (*Hyndluljóð*: 403, st. 40).

Though this specific aspect would deserve an in-depth analysis, here we will just highlight one main detail: whether the heart could be simply "prepared" or "cooked" (*búin*, in *Eiríks saga*), half-roasted (*brenna* and *hálfsviðinn*, in *Vǫluspá hin skamma*), or fully-roasted (*steikja*, in *Fáfnismál*), it could give the eater supernatural abilities, mostly concerning knowledge and wisdom. On the other hand, not only the motif of the

[9] The tragic banquet described in *Atlakviða*, during which Guðrún serves Atli the roasted hearts of his sons, does not seem to include any "magic"-related connotation (Montanari 2015: 78).

[10] Margaret Clunies Ross interpreted this stone as a reference to a vulva (1994: 184). Zoe Borovsky (2002) favours a different, less sexually-oriented and more culinary-oriented approach: in her view, the half-cooked heart that Loki eats makes him 'soft and cool' (p. 12, fn. 5), and capable of giving birth, whereas the fully-roasted heart of the dragon Fáfnir makes Sigurðr *óblauðast[r]*, "least soft". See also Clover 1993.

"eaten heart" was widely popular in ancient and medieval literature (Montanari 2015: 77–92), but the very notion of absorbing a man's or an animal's powers by eating parts of his/her/its body was one of the most widespread beliefs among ancient cultures, which James Frazer catalogued under the label "sympathetic magic" (Frazer 1922: 11–48). Historical and literary evidence is scattered in sources such as Pliny's *Historia naturalis*, Celtic literature, Carolingian medical treatises, Anglo-Saxon leechbooks, Icelandic sagas, medieval *exempla* (Jolly 2002: 32–42; Pearson 2002: 46; Pals 2006: 35–36; Meyer 1897: 109; Filotas 2005: 260ff; Thorndike 1929: 72; Abrahams 1889). Actually, in the same *Vǫlsunga saga* we see Guttormr, son of King Gjúki, becoming fierce and brutish after eating a stew of snake and wolf flesh (*Völsunga saga*: Ch. 32), by virtue of the animals' characteristics (see also *Ynglinga saga*: 64, and *Drauma-Jóns saga*: 47).

Arguably, when Þorbjǫrg eats the hearts of all the animals living nearby, she engages in a tight relationship with nature: as the heart *contains ingredients* such as the knowledge of the surrounding environment and its governing forces, partaking of the hearts of its inhabitants lets the eater foresee future events impacting that same environment. Aside from the ritual itself, it is also worth noting that, according to Snorri, s*eiðr* was first known by the Vanir, the gods of fertility, who then taught it to the Æsir: this means that especially the divinatory aspects of s*eiðr* were strongly associated with future wealth and prosperity, first and foremost with reference to fields and livestock (Raudvere 2002: 114).

Even when no direct references to the weather were made in the sagas, we still notice an undisguised feeling of anxiety towards the potential loss of crops. Snorri tells of the miracle worked by Óláfr II Haraldsson, king of Norway from 1015 to 1028, whose men carelessly trampled and flattened to the ground the cornfields of a farmer named Þorgeirr flekkr (*Óláfs saga helga*: II, Ch. 203). To him, who was complaining about the devastation of his land, Óláfr replied quite confidently that most likely (Snorri uses the verb *vænta*) God would remedy his losses within a week. In this interesting passage, a typical trait of traditional Jewish-Christian miracle-working ('They will eat and have some left over',[11] the Lord said) is integrated with an unusual cockiness that looks closer to sorcery than to piety: Óláfr does not pray or beg, he simply knows a miracle would soon make it 'the best crop' (*Óláfs saga helga*: II, Ch. 203). The connection between the Christian faith and fecundity actually recurs

[11] 2 Kings 4:43.

under many different guises. For instance, the fields where saints were buried could often become particularly fertile as we see in *Knýtlinga saga*, where it is told that the clearings surrounding the grave of king Knútr (d. 1035) would be *fagrgrœnn* ("beautifully green") ever since his interment (*Knýtlinga saga*: Ch. 92).

4 Super-foods

Food seems to have been assigned several supernatural properties in our texts, many of them actually concerning the notion of inexhaustibility. And, again, as much as this supernatural fare is necessarily the product of legendary worlds, legendary worlds themselves are utopian or dystopian projections of the real world. This is to say that "magical" and "supernatural" foods are the expressions of ideas, anxieties, dreams, but such ideas and anxieties are themselves real, factual. The *vínlaukr* ("wine-leek") that is immediately mentioned at the beginning of *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* (Ch. 1) and that was given by Heimir to Áslaug, the daughter of Sigurðr and Brynhildr, could apparently support life by itself, without other food. Such a kind of super-vegetable, which provided a complete diet, did embody a very ancient concept: that of an ultimate super-food which would chase away the fear of hunger forever, like the manna which supported the Israelites during their journey through the desert.[12] Besides, the fact that Áslaug's supernatural food was a wine-leek is quite interesting in itself, as both wine and leek (*laukr* could also mean "onion" or "garlic") had been traditionally assigned important nutritional and medicinal properties by physicians in medieval times (Wallis 2010: *passim*). The very word *laukar* appears with stubborn insistence in a number of runic inscriptions, bracteates, and rings, even though its practical meaning is still subject of debate among scholars (Page 1998: 107).[13]

But Old Norse mythological traditions feature at least one other example of a food that could seemingly provide all of the essential nutrients to sustain life for a long time. As mentioned above, *Ragnarøkr*, the end

[12] Ex 16.

[13] Actually, the term *vínlaukr* (*vinlök*) is still used in modern Norwegian with reference to *allium atropurpureum*, a purple-flowered onion which is edible, but that is usually grown for ornamental purposes (Waggoner 2009: 98, fn. 3) and does not seem to have particular medicinal properties.

of the world, would be announced by *fimbulvetr*, the great winter. The wolf Fenrir would eventually be set free and would swallow the sun and devour Óðinn; yet two humans, Líf and Leifþrasir, would be able to survive by hiding in Hoddmímir's wood, where they would live on the morning dew ('Dews of morning they shall have | as their food'; Faulkes 1987: 57) and finally repopulate the world. What exactly this *morgindǫgg* was, and how it could feature all the basic nutrients, we may never find out; but we surely know it was not a novelty in mythological lore, as the idea of a supernatural food source which did not require work, which was inexhaustible and freely accessible despite the apocalyptic setting of the tale, was not exclusive to the Old Norse tradition. Interestingly, when dew reappears in hagiographical tales, it is deprived of supernatural properties, but it seems to be indirectly essential for cattle breeding: it is told that, in an abnormally dry summer during which no grass could grow in the fields, the Icelandic bishop Jón of Hólar (d. 1121) recited a *Gloria in excelsis* and made it rain so much that the grass crops would be covered by dew during all of the following nights and thus would be saved from complete failure (*Ioans saga*: 560–61).

5 Grinding Inexhaustible Food

Riddarasögur, in turn, often include the description of "marvelous" objects that supply inexhaustible amounts of food and drink: one of the more peculiar is perhaps a "magic" tablecloth providing as much to eat as one needed, as we read in *Valdimars saga* (*Valdimars saga*: I, Ch. 1) and in *Viktors saga ok Blávus.* Curiously, in *Viktors saga* the object has no role in the story, and will not be mentioned again after it is given to the hero; this suggests that we are probably dealing with a rhetorical motif whose presence is even more telling just because it does not recur anymore in the text. In fact, as we would expect from a modern fantasy romance, the world described by chivalric sagas (whether it was meant to look real, semi-fictional or entirely imaginary) hid a great quantity of treasures, including references to what is probably to be considered the most famous and hackneyed one: the Holy Grail. Indeed, regardless of the shape of the object (a vessel, a cup, a dish, etc.), its symbolic and cultural significance should not be overlooked, and it is strictly connected with its "magical" properties. Whatever it was, the Holy Grail provided worldly, not spiritual powers in Arthurian romances: happiness, in the

forms of abundance of food and drink and eternal youth (Wilson 1988: 175). This is, essentially, the same function fulfilled by the cauldron Eldhrímnir, in which the inexhaustible pig Sæhrímnir was cooked.

Branches of this utopian concept can be tracked everywhere. An intriguing example is included in *Grottasọngr* (Mackenzie 1985: 246–53), an Old Norse poem which is part of the *Poetic Edda* (mss. R and T), but which is not featured in the *Codex Regius*. Snorri drew upon the poem (*Grottasọngr*: 1–2) and included the story behind the kenning for "gold" in *Skáldskaparmál* (51–58; Lindow 2001: 33; Krappe 1924). Here, the legendary Danish King Fróði Friðleifsson purchases two giant women as slaves to work a legendary mill called Grotti (*Grottasọngr*: 35), in order to grind out for him whatever was asked of it, such as treasures, peace, harmony, and "wealth" (*fjölð*).

The story had a specific moral meaning, namely that of blaming Fróði's lack of mercy for the giantesses, who were forced to work incessantly at the mill and eventually betrayed him. But apart from this, it is fair to assume that, with the word *fjölð*, the poet may have referred to food as well, given the frequent parallel between fertility gods and milling (ibid.: 24). On the other hand, the association between corn and gold emerges already in the tenth century in the verses of the Norwegian skald Eyvindr skáldaspillir (ibid.: 25; Davidson 1983: 205–06), as well as in earlier runic inscriptions.[14] To further support this idea, it may be useful to note that in a later Scandinavian folktale which derives from this tradition (*Grottasọngr*: 17), a similar wonder-mill is given by the devil to a poor man (*Norske folke-eventyr*, n. 50, 249–253). To begin the tale, the man asked his brother for some ham (other versions have lamb or bacon), and the latter told him he would do so only if he would go to Hell. The poor man accepted the exchange, and the devil rewarded him with a mill that had the power to grind anything. In this story, the mill is straightforwardly associated with hunger, and appears to be the definitive solution to this problem: not a novelty within agricultural societies, as Tolley observes (*Grottasọngr*: 18–24). "Magic" and wonders arise from need, and by need they are shaped.

[14] The Tjurkö bracteate (found in Blekinge, Sweden, in 1817 and dating to the second half of the fifth century), has an inscription in elder fuþark which arguably makes reference to the "corn from the south", a kenning for "gold" (corn imported from southern regions of Europe). See Spurkland 2005: 28–29.

6 Rituals: Stories or History?

In conclusion, a few brief observations need to be made about the issue of textual representations of ritual activities. Given the rhetorical purposes of our sources, it is not always easy to assess whether certain rituals can be considered descriptions of actions that were likely to have taken place, or if they were simply embedded in a narrative pattern and did not represent an actual practice. As for what concerns weather magic, Astrid E. J. Ogilvie and Gisli Pálsson have correctly remarked that

> while medieval Icelandic texts were rooted in Western discourse, they must somehow mirror the culture, needs, and circumstances of those who produced them. [...] Some accounts seem likely to be accurate in many ways as they resonate with what is known from historical and archaeological evidence. Other accounts, however, including descriptions of the manufacture of storms by magic, were deliberate fiction, rhetorical devices reflecting the constraints of storytelling by the time the sagas were written. (Astrid E. J. Ogilvie and Gisli Pálsson 2003: 268–69)

In other words, even depictions of practices which were likely to be fictional or served the purpose of making the story engaging, had to be relatable to the audience. Relatability was necessary in order to captivate listeners and readers: if not the practices themselves, the reason why people resorted to said practices had to be relatable. This was true in the case of miracles as well, of course, which responded to actual collective needs (Maraschi 2011: 20): the natural landscape influenced the cultural landscape, and "weather magic was just as 'natural' or down-to-earth as weather events and weather forecasts" (Astrid E. J. Ogilvie and Gisli Pálsson 2003: 269). This would explain the important role of weather magic in Icelandic narratives, and of related scenes such as that describing Þorbjǫrg's divinatory practice in *Eiríks saga rauða*: they are all testimonies to the threats of living in a world which was constantly at the mercy of the elements, as was typical of our past.

The plausibility of the scene featured in chapter 4 of *Eiríks saga* is not to be taken for granted, but similar rituals may have indeed been performed in the pre-Christian North: on the one side, evidence of analogous practices in medieval Europe cannot be questioned (Kleinhenz 2004: 670; Durrant and Bailey 2012: 122; North 1990; Graf 2011; Dutton 2004: 169–188); on the other side, Monica-Maria Stapelberg has recently remarked that "sympathetic magic is found worldwide amongst all societies at some or other stage in their history" (Stapelberg 2014: 3; Maraschi 2017: 210–11), and is particularly evident in episodes concerning the eating of

human or animal parts with the intention of absorbing their supposed virtues. Evidence of this belief in the pre-Christian North comes from other literary scenes which I have addressed earlier: this does not mean that sympathetic eating was still practiced in Christian times, but that its principles were still known and were associated with the heathen past.

Proving the relatability of narrative sources is no easy task. It has been shown that, in the sagas, food and livestock were important targets of charms and miracles, not surprisingly. For instance, water consecrated by the bishops Þorlákr and Guðmundr the Good was sprinkled over cattle to protect them from sickness, weather or wild beasts. The same was done with cornfields and hayfields (*Þorláks saga A*: Ch. 8, 20, and 83; GA: Ch. 29 and 35). The question of whether these were mere narrative *topoi* or if instead they had a connection with the real world, is answered by resorting to non-literary works. Actually, the need to secure food supplies and to protect animals emerges in totally different sources such as the sixteenth-century Icelandic collection of spells known as *Galdrabók* (Mitchell 2015: 64ff.). Here, among others, we find a magical remedy against theft or pestilence of livestock which suggested to clip or cut certain symbols known as helms of awe (*ægishjálmar*) onto one's livestock if it was sick or in danger of getting stolen, one on the left shoulder and one on the right (*Galdrabók*: n. 7, 61). The power of the *ægishjálmr* was symbolized by a cross-like configuration and was probably aimed at covering and "shielding" the animal (ibid.: fn. 5).[15] Its working mechanism, then, was not much different from that of holy water: in fact, both were embodiments of "supernatural" powers, different in nature, but addressing the same issues.

Similar remedies are found in a number of other texts of this and of other kinds, from leechbooks to handbooks of magic. For example, in the early fifteenth-century Danish medical treatise AM 187 8°, which features medical indications associated with the School of Salerno and to Henrik Harpestræng (Mitchell 2015: 61), we find a remedy 'to prevent the theft of cattle', recommending to inscribe a Latin prayer to the Lord on the door post where the animals go out (*Det arnamagnæanske håndskrift nr. 187 i oktav*: 97).[16] Solutions combining "supernatural" powers

[15] Among the magical objects Sigurðr gets after slaying the serpent Fáfnir, one is the ægishjálmr, a covering that surrounds the wearer with the power to terrify his enemies.

[16] "Item Om thu wilt, at thiufæ tachæ æy thit fæ oc æy ransmæn oc æy ulwæ tachæ th*æt,* tha scrifh th*æt*tæ ofæn dyrnæ træt, thær the gangæ wt: *Domine,* qui creasti equos, porcos, boues, uaccas *et* oues in adiutorium *hominum,* crescant *opera* tua, et defende animalia tua de dentibus lupor*um et* de minibus inimico*rum. cristus* illa [†] ducat, *cristus* illa [†] reducat *et* p*er* intercessionem *sancti* eustachij defende illa de lupis *et* latronibus, am*en*".

from – theoretically – different belief systems show that any modern distinction between the notions of "magic", "religion" and "science" is bound to fail and distort the correct interpretation of sources. On the contrary, a common characteristic of leechbooks and handbooks of magic from the late-medieval North was to present a mixture of references to "magical" gibberish, pre-Christian rituals, folk medicine, and prayer. Interestingly, in the same Danish treatise, a remedy to heal sick oxen is entirely based on the principles of sympathetic magic, as it prescribes a potion made with tortoise shell well ground into powder, which the oxen were to drink (ibid.: 94).[17] In this case, the protective quality of the tortoise shell would grant the animals protection against disease, replicating inside their bodies the same function of a shield it fulfilled when it covered the turtle's body.

Such brief examples have the sole aim of supporting a clear impression which has emerged after analyzing the aforementioned literary sources. As a whole, these seem to unveil a stable, unchanging mental attitude of medieval Scandinavians towards food supplies, agriculture, and the weather: anxiety, concern, the need to exert control. Solutions and strategies, however different in theory, were actually quite similar as for what concerned their typology and purposes. The heterogeneity of the texts, Stephen A. Mitchell has shown (Mitchell 2011), does not set a limit on possible comparisons. Actually, two main observations can be made at this point: 1) sagas of different genres (and thus with different rhetorical purposes) show a remarkably similar attention to food-related issues, the weather, etc. on the level of the "legendary/fantastic world"; 2) books of magic and leechbooks, in turn, give historical evidence to said attention, showing that all of the facets of the magic-religion-science triad were combined and exploited for the sake of addressing such issues in the "real world". This should not necessarily lead to the conclusion that a comparison between these typologies of texts implies no difficulties: however, food and its related "anxieties" do emphasize continuity rather than disconnection.

Then, we may safely assume that what Godfrid Storms said about Anglo-Saxon magic is true in the case of Scandinavia as well: "the difference between religion and magic is none too clear in theory and often non-existent in practice" (Storms 1948: 178). Ásdís Egilsdóttir has recently stated that "The miracles may have reflected peoples' fantasies

[17] "Item Ad boues languentes. [O]m oxæ worthæ siukæ, Tac testudinem oc bræn, oc gijf oxen *thæt* puluer at drickæ."

about a better life. The Icelandic miracles show a desire for health, enough food and security" (Ásdís Egilsdóttir 2006). The intention of this paper was to suggest that the same can be said about charms and incantations. The two hemispheres of "magic" and "religion" could often overlap in a number of ways: undoubtedly, their basic, material purposes used to coincide, and consequently their contents could sometimes reciprocally intermingle. In this sense, a distinction between "magic" and "religion" (and "science") is almost unnecessary. After all, they were utopian products of the same dystopian projections: no matter if one was a sorcerer or a holy man, everybody must take part in the *Hunger Games*.

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