

Ghosts, Ghouls and Grettir

The Portrayal of the Paranormal in Grettis Saga

Maximillian Jesiolowski

Háskóli Íslands

The *Íslendingasögur* have often been commended for their grounding in realism and objectivity.¹ This depiction led some scholars of the 19th and 20th centuries to describe the sagas as historical, and although modern scholarship does not regard them as completely accurate histories they are still praised for their realistic style. This realism has been attributed to the objectivity of the authors, the depiction of the landscape of Iceland and the realistic representations of characters' motives, goals and ambitions. However, the *Íslendingasögur* also contain various elements of paranormality, which, from our modern critical perspective, seem to contradict their realistic and objective style. Modern readers find it natural to interpret the paranormal elements as representatives of other worlds separate from the familiarity of the human world and has led to other problematic denominations such as otherworldly or supernatural. In this essay, I will examine the instances of the paranormal in Grettis saga to understand how it was perceived by its contemporary audience and how it indicates a complex interaction between saga author, folklore/traditional material and modernising European attitudes.

Paranormal, supernatural, or otherworldly?

Before analysing Grettis saga, the usage and meaning of the term “paranormal” should be discussed. When applied to the Icelandic sagas, the term relates to all beings and events that can be considered magical, unhuman or unknown. This can include but is not limited to sorcerers, witches, seeresses, trolls, ghosts and the undead. Although it may seem to modern audiences that these concepts are not real and are only included to enhance the folkish and fairy-tale style of the sagas, they are carefully integrated into the narratives and landscapes of the *íslendingasögur* and would have held important

¹ *Íslendingasögur* is a modern classification of Icelandic sagas, referring to sagas that depict the lives of Icelanders during or after Iceland's settlement in the 870's. They were written down in the 13th and 14th centuries.

cultural meaning to a medieval Icelandic audience. This audience would have been able to compare their own experiences with their contemporary paranormal experiences with those depicted in the saga as they were only removed from them by a few centuries and were therefore able to interact more significantly with these themes.

The use of the term “paranormal” merits discussion in its own right. Modern perceptions of the paranormal often attach it to the unnatural and separate it from the world of humanity, leading to synonyms such as “supernatural” and “otherworldly.” When these concepts are described in the context of the *Íslendingasögur*, they become inaccurate as they do not adequately reflect the medieval perspective, instead focusing on a modern perception of the ideas. The word “supernatural” implies that these elements are unnatural, where “otherworldly” categorises these elements as of an entirely different realm. They both imply a complete separation from the natural world of humanity. The term “paranormal,” however, implies a separation from the normal order but does not place these creatures and events outside the realm of humanity. This is crucial in order to understand the medieval Icelandic perception of the idea – these elements are intrinsically linked with the human world and the broader landscape of the sagas and therefore cannot be viewed as their own world. This is seen in the depiction of normal humans transforming into paranormal creatures or heavily affecting human society. Moreover, our application of all of the terms “supernatural” and “otherworldly” inevitably arise from the perspective of human minds – from this perspective, anything that is misunderstood or disliked can be so termed for humans to better understand unfamiliar concepts in their own minds. However, as much as humans attempt to do this, these creatures and events are all part of the saga landscape and are therefore a natural part of the setting in which the stories occur. This is why they must be referred to as “paranormal” – they are not “normal” for the human mind but are also not part of a world or natural order completely separate from that of humanity.

Grettis saga

Grettis saga is one of the most well-known *Íslendingasögur* and follows the general trends of the genre in its narrative structure, settings and characterisations. Like the other *Íslendingasögur*, it begins by providing background and genealogical context of the main character, recounting the activities of Önundur “Tree-Leg” and his family in Norway and their departure to Iceland from Haraldr Fine-Hair’s tyranny in Norway.² Grettir is born at Bjarg to Ásmundar “Grey locks”, with whom Grettir does not have a

² Bernard Scudder, *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, (London: Penguin Books, 2006) p. 5.

close relationship.³ Grettir's tricks and disobedience foreshadow his later status as a social outcast which heavily influences the events of his life. The saga focuses closely on the character of Grettir and his experiences as an outlaw while also highlighting the diminishing significance of the heroic pagan figure in a Christian society. This exploration of Grettir's individuality on the fringes of society contrasts with the tight and cohesive social units of medieval Iceland seen in other *Íslendingasögur*. As the paranormal elements to a large degree define Grettir's character and also play a vital role in the narrative of the saga they place us just outside the limits of society. This vantage point enables us to learn more about the reasons behind the portrayal of the paranormal elements which in turn can provide us with significant historic insights into both the society and the minds of the 14th century Icelandic audience.

Young Grettir defeats the mound-dweller

Grettir's first encounter with the paranormal is as a young boy at Vindheimr in Norway after his first outlawry from Iceland. A "mound-dweller" called Kárr had been haunting and frightening the local farmers to ensure that his still living son Þorfinn could claim the entire area for himself.⁴ Grettir notices the glow of Kárr treasure hoard and decides to investigate, leading to a fight with the mound-dweller in which Grettir is victorious.⁵ Even this short encounter gives us insight into the paranormal elements in this saga. The mound-dweller is clearly a physical being, seen in Grettir's fight with it - "something grabbed him tight", "the two of them grappled violently."⁶ There is no indication that this paranormal creature is different from a human, other than the fact that it is dead - "there's a mound...where Kárr the Old... was buried."⁷ There are also clear remnants of humanity within the mound-dweller, as he is frightening all the local farmers and ensuring that more power goes to his son Þorfinn. We can also see remnants of his humanity in his traits of greed and desire for wealth that fuel his hoarding of treasure that he keeps in his mound.⁸ Therefore, although the mound-dweller exists on the fringes of human society in solitude, he clearly retains elements of his former humanity that affect his actions. With Grettir's dispatchment of the mound-dweller, he cuts off its head and places it "up against the mound-dweller's buttocks."⁹ This is clearly a ritualistic method to avoid further trouble from the mound-dweller

³ Scudder, p. 24.

⁴ Scudder, p. 39.

⁵ Scudder, p. 38.

⁶ Scudder, p. 39.

⁷ Scudder, p. 38.

⁸ Scudder, p. 38-39.

⁹ Scudder, p. 39.

and to ensure that it stays dead. Clearly this ritual has cultural significance to the 14th century Icelander and even from this short encounter we can see that they view the mound-dweller as an overall negative figure.

Encountering the ghost of Glámr

The most striking occurrence of paranormality in the saga occurs at Þorhallstaðir with the characters Glámr and Grettir. Þorhallr's farm is being "badly haunted" by "an evil being" and hires the Swede Glámr as a shepherd.¹⁰ During the Christmas period, Glámr ventures outside in the dark in a storm and is later found dead "black as hell and bloated", at which Þorhallr concludes "an evil being" had killed him.¹¹ However, Glámr does not "rest in peace" and starts to cause havoc by frightening people, "straddling rooves" and roaming around the valley by day and night.¹² The residents of the valley term Glámr as a ghost, a ghoul and an evil being.¹³ In fact, Andrew Lang classified Glámr as a vampire in 1897.¹⁴ It seems as though there is no firm identifier for Glámr and it is not important to the author how he is classified, but rather that he is simply paranormal. Grettir then visits the area where the hauntings pique his interest, and he stays with Þorhallr to witness Glámr's actions, and they fight each other through the night. After a hugely taxing encounter, Grettir is victorious. However, before being defeated, Glámr unnerves Grettir by glaring up at the moon¹⁵ and curses him to outlawry, misfortune and loneliness, and that "his eyes will always be before [Grettir's] sight."¹⁶ Following this, Grettir recovers himself and cuts off Glámr's head and places it between his buttocks.¹⁷ This encounter shows similarities with the previous one. Grettir's placement of the head on the buttocks is obviously the same as how Grettir dispatched the mound-dweller. This clearly reinforces that this is a ritualistic act to ensure the "second death" of the paranormal being. Ármann Jakobsson writes that the power behind the gaze of the undead was behind this ritual, as it faced the eyes away from humans.¹⁸

¹⁰ Scudder, p. 75.

¹¹ Scudder, p. 75.

¹² Scudder, p. 75.

¹³ Scudder, p. 79, 82.

¹⁴ Andrew Lang, *The Book of Dreams and Ghosts* (London, New York and Bombay: Longmans, Green & Co., 1897), p. 245.

¹⁵ Scudder, p. 85.

¹⁶ Scudder, p. 85.

¹⁷ Scudder, p. 85.

¹⁸ Ármann Jakobsson, "Vampires and Watchmen: Categorizing the Medieval Icelandic Dead", *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 110, no. 3 (July 2011), p. 296.

Another major similarity is the remnants of humanity seen in the figure of Glámr. Despite his classification as both a ghost and a ghoul, we know that Glámr is a physical being. Unlike the mound-dweller, however, Glámr retains the ability to talk. It is possible that this is a stylistic choice by the author to distinguish Glámr from other paranormal beings, but it is more likely that Glámr is simply a different creature to the mound-dweller. As we will see, there is a large amount of diversity in paranormal beings. This is not the only difference between Glámr and other paranormal beings. Glámr displays the ability to wreak havoc during both day and night,¹⁹ but the mound-dweller appears to favour the night and the darkness.²⁰ Glámr's death occurs during the night, and the residents of the valley only feel safe to venture outside to find him "when it was fully daylight."²¹ As we will see with other creatures in the saga, paranormality displays a clear preference for night over day. This creates a clear division from humanity without separating the paranormal from the natural saga landscape. Additionally, the mound-dweller puts up much less of a fight than Glámr and appears to be less mischievous. The mound-dweller also seems to be confined to the mound itself – there is no instance of him leaving it and only appears to Grettir once Grettir has entered it. It is unsurprising that Glámr is a more powerful paranormal being, as he is a more important character to Grettir's story. This shows that the paranormal was seen as diverse and impactful on human lives. Furthermore, the flexibility of the terminology regarding Glámr suggests that there were no clear divisions between paranormal figures – they can be ghosts, ghouls, spirits, trolls or witches. Finally, we clearly witness the origins of the mound-dweller – he died and was buried and simply arose to support his son. The origins of Glámr's paranormality, however, are more mysterious. He ventures outside at night during a storm and is discovered the next morning at a "huge trampled area" at the scene of "a mighty skirmish" where "rocks and soil had been torn up in many place."²² Þorhallr also discovers footprints "as large as if a barrel had been slammed down into the snow."²³ The only explanation offered for this scene is that it was the work of an "evil being."²⁴ This indicates that 14th century Icelanders viewed the paranormal as mysterious and unknown – it was not entirely explainable and distinguishes the paranormal from the normal without classifying it as unnatural or otherworldly.

¹⁹ Scudder, p. 78.

²⁰ Scudder, p. 39.

²¹ Scudder, p. 77.

²² Scudder, p. 78.

²³ Scudder, p. 78.

²⁴ Scudder, p. 78.

How is Grettir seen by others?

The encounter with Glámr affects the rest of Grettir's life. Although he was already an outlaw, Glámr's curse instils a fear of darkness on Grettir and makes him see "all kinds of phantoms."²⁵ In fact, the author writes that this encounter inspired the saying "they see things with Glamr's eyes."²⁶ Moreover, Glámr's curse seems to transfer the evil nature of Glámr's spirit to Grettir – throughout the rest of his life, Grettir is accused of performing evil deeds such as burning a house full of people in Norway and is visited by an evil spirit to bring him bad luck.²⁷ During this incident in Norway, we witness how Grettir is perceived by other people. He is said to look like a troll and is taken to be an "evil creature", leading to him being attacked and assaulted.²⁸ Later in the saga, Þorir from Gard attempts to fight Grettir with a band of eighty men and witnesses Grettir's fighting abilities, but attributes it to his skill in magical arts and says, "we are dealing with a troll, not a man."²⁹ Grettir's strength is associated with paranormal abilities and beings, so clearly the paranormal is viewed as powerful and magical. Grettir has even been likened to the modern figure of the monster fighter.³⁰ The very fact that he fights a monster means he becomes intrinsically connected with the world of monsters and becomes placed within their sphere on the fringes of society.³¹ Paranormality is also transferable and attainable – once Grettir has been forced to interact with monsters, he becomes tainted by paranormality. Grettir can never again be normal, and is therefore a paranormal figure.³²

The second major occurrence of paranormality in the saga comes at Barðardalr. The saga author rather nonchalantly describes the farm of Þorstein and Steinvor as "haunted by trolls."³³ Grettir comes to the farm because of his skill at "putting an end to hauntings and ghosts."³⁴ This time, Grettir fights with a troll woman, who is described as huge and stronger than Grettir.³⁵ After a destructive and exhausting fight, the people

²⁵ Scudder, p. 86.

²⁶ Scudder, p. 86.

²⁷ Scudder, p. 91, 93.

²⁸ Scudder, p. 91.

²⁹ Scudder, p. 130.

³⁰ Ármann Jakobsson, "The Fearless Vampire Killers: A Note about the Icelandic *Draugr* and Demonic Contamination in *Grettis saga*, in *Nine Saga Studies: The Critical Interpretation of the Icelandic Sagas*, Ármann Jakobsson, 125-138, (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2013), 132.

³¹ Bruce McClelland, *Slayers and Their Vampires: A Cultural History of Killing the Dead*, (USA: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 184.

³² Jakobsson, p. 133.

³³ Scudder, p. 148.

³⁴ Scudder, p. 148.

³⁵ Scudder, p. 150.

of Barðardalr claimed that the trollwoman “turned to stone at daybreak.”³⁶ Here the tendency of paranormal figures to prefer the night and the darkness is repeated— in this case the trollwoman is completely defeated by the daylight. This again reinforces the preference for the term paranormality – people viewed these elements as separate from humanity as night from day, and therefore they are not perceived as unnatural or otherworldly. Grettir then explores a nearby river and finds a cave which contains and a monstrous and terrible giant.³⁷ He easily dispatches the giant and finds a treasure hoard.³⁸ This is a similarity with the mound-dweller, who also showed a desire to hoard treasure. Again, this shows that there are elements of humanity in paranormal beings. After the encounter, Grettir composes a poem about it, calling the giant “the trollwoman’s ugly lover.”³⁹ This appears to be another aspect of paranormality in this saga – it seems to be conflated with ugliness. Glámr’s introduction frightens Þorhallr, and he is described as “very strange-looking.”⁴⁰ Although the mound-dweller and trolls are not described as ugly, they are social outcasts, and it is safe to assume that they were unwashed, unkempt and are disliked by everyone – they are “socially ugly.” Again, this reinforces the separation of paranormal figures from regular society – they are all outcasts, have no place in society’s processes and live in caves, mounds and hills, in the wilderness. Mayburd defines this as a limbo – neither part of society nor part of anything else.⁴¹ Finally, this encounter is praised by the residents of the local area. The author writes that “no visitations or haunting ever occurred in the valley afterwards” and that “Grettir was considered to have rid the place of a great evil.”⁴² We see again that the paranormality was regarded as evil, but now we also see that it is regarded as conquerable – it is possible to defeat the paranormal and it is possible to cleanse an entire area from it. This shows that it was perceived as evil but conquerable by humanity.

Grettir’s final major encounter with paranormality occurs near the end of his life, when he is living on the island of Drangey in exile from society. Þorbjörn Hook’s foster-mother, Þuríðr, is introduced as “very old” but retains elements of secret arts and magic from her youth.⁴³ Þorbjörn asks her to help him defeat Grettir. She curses Grettir to be “deprived of all favour, all endowments and fortune, all defence and wisdom.”⁴⁴ Grettir

³⁶ Scudder, p. 151.

³⁷ Scudder, p. 152.

³⁸ Scudder, p. 153.

³⁹ Scudder, p. 153.

⁴⁰ Scudder, p. 76.

⁴¹ Miriam Mayburd, “The Hills Have Eyes: Post-Mortem Mountain Dwelling in the (Super)Natural Landscape of the Íslendingasögur”, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 10 (2014): p. 144.

⁴² Mayburd, p. 154.

⁴³ Mayburd, p. 173.

⁴⁴ Mayburd, p. 175.

brands her a “witch” and seems aware that she has magical powers.⁴⁵ The crone then further displays her magical skill when she performs a magical ritual on a piece of wood, carving runes into it, smearing it with blood and speaking magical words to it.⁴⁶ From this, we again see the fluid and ill-defined nature of paranormality, as magical arts can also be defined as paranormal. However, unique to this encounter is that paranormal powers can originate from seemingly normal individuals – unlike Glámr’s shocking appearance or the ugliness and size of trolls and giants, there is no reason to suspect that Þuríðr is a paranormal being. The cause of this is that Þuríðr is depicted as a remnant of pagan times when magic and paranormality were more widespread and normal.⁴⁷ Here, the author is perceiving paranormality and paganism in a symbiotic relationship.

Christianity vs the Paranormal

Throughout the saga, the depictions of the paranormal display influences from Christianity. Poole wrote that “undoubtedly, it embodies a strongly Christian ideology”, as it depicts the paranormal elements as evil and related to heathenism.⁴⁸ Several paranormal events occur on or close to Christmas – Glámr’s death, the death of the shepherd at night, and Grettir’s encounter with the trollwoman.⁴⁹ Örnólfur Thorsson writes that this is no coincidence – the symbolism of these events occurring during a significant Christian period shows that the author associated the defeat of paranormal beings with Christianity.⁵⁰ These beings can be viewed as manifestations of heathendom and paganism and represent the triumph of Christianity over these concepts. Christianity is implied as a barrier against evil when Grettir is in Norway in the care of King Olaf. The boy that speaks to Grettir in the aisle of the church questions that Grettir – an “evil-doer,” “criminal” and “evil man” – should be allowed to come in peace to a Christian country.⁵¹ Here, the boy is implying that Christianity is morally above evil deeds, and therefore paganism. However, the dichotomy between the paranormal paganism and Christianity is best seen through the old crone. When she is introduced, she is said to have known much magic when people were heathen, and although her powers were lesser in old age and Christianity had been introduced there

⁴⁵ Mayburd, p. 175.

⁴⁶ Mayburd, p. 176.

⁴⁷ Scudder, p. 173.

⁴⁸ Russell Poole, “Myth, Psychology and Society in Grettis Saga”, *Álvissmál* 11 (2004): p. 7.

⁴⁹ Poole, p. 80.

⁵⁰ Örnólfur Thorsson, “Introduction”, in *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, trans. Bernard Scudder, London: Penguin Books, 2005, xxxi.

⁵¹ Scudder, p. 93.

still remained remnants of paganism.⁵² Here, a link between magic and paganism is heavily implied. The introduction of Christianity reduced the practise of paganism and therefore dulled the power of magic as well. This shows that the author – and likely the audience too – viewed Christianity as a powerful force that could counter paranormality.

Conclusion

There are several major encounters with different paranormal beings, events and places in Grettis saga. Throughout the saga, we see encounters with trolls, undead and magicians in different areas of both Iceland and Norway. For all this diversity, however, these encounters tell us similar things. The author's perception of paranormality is one of separation from society – the evil beings are doomed to live in solitude in Iceland's wilderness. Paranormality is clearly not only perceived as unhuman and unnatural, however, and should be considered an integral part of the Iceland's saga landscape that plays a narrative and thematic role, much like its weather or geography. Paranormality is also seen as a broad and undefined concept, juxtaposing with the orderly nature of Christianity. Its portrayal shows that the saga authors were still enamoured with the folkloristic aspects of their country's history. However, by separating paranormality's from civilisation also shows that the saga authors had an awareness of the social and religious trends of Europe and were attempting to connect themselves with the wider world.

⁵² Scudder, 173.