

The coming of the Christmas Visitors...

Folk legends concerning the attacks on Icelandic farmhouses made by spirits at Christmas¹

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To my mind, one of the most interesting aspects in the field of folk legends is the way in which migratory legends adapt to their surroundings. The aim of the following article is to present a case study into the background of one such legend and one of the most common motifs in earlier Icelandic legends, namely an investigation into those accounts dealing with the man or woman who had to stay 'home alone' on Christmas night (or sometimes the night of New Year's Eve) when a group of 'hidden people' or elves broke into the farm to hold their annual Christmas celebrations, involving dance, the consumption of alcohol and other forms of lively entertainment. The motif seems to have ancient roots connected to the ancient beliefs of the first Icelandic settlers that the island was already populated by various forms of spirits, both positive and negative, which unofficially 'permitted' people to take up residence on their territory (see Strömbäck, 1970). It seems also that from the start people believed that at least once a year, at midwinter and sometimes around midsummer, these spirits would reassert their power over their territory by demanding offerings and/ or literally moving in with their tenants for a few days, just as the old Norwegian kings used to do in the Viking period (see for example Steinnes, 1955). Closely related to this belief is another one about how the dead commonly revisit their old dwelling places at these turning points in time. The modern-day Icelandic belief about visiting 'Christmas Lads' (*jólasveinar*, the Icelandic form of Santa Claus) stems from the same roots (see further Gunnell, 2001). But what exactly is the root of the *legends* concerning the Christmas visits?

The earliest extant example of this motif in Iceland is probably that found in the account of the so-called 'Fróðá wonders' in the thirteenth-century *Eyrbyggja saga* telling of how, one Christmas, the farm at Fróðá on Breiðafjörður is taken over by various ghosts of people who have died on both sea and land (*Eyrbyggja saga*, 1935,

¹ An Icelandic version of this article was earlier published in Gunnell, 2002.

pp.145-152; trans. in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, 1997, V, pp.195-203). Alongside this we have the legends in *Grettis saga* (written around 1400) about the mysterious death of a shepherd called Glámur; Glámur's subsequent fight with the hero Grettir at Þórhallssstaðir; and then, in turn, Grettir's conflict with the ogress of Bárðardalur, all of which take place at Christmas (*Grettis saga Ásmundssonar*, 1936, pp.108-119 and 211-212; trans. in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, 1997, II, pp.100-107 and 151-155).² These legends underline first and foremost the fact that in the oral legend tradition of the time, the unwelcome Christmas guests tended to be ghosts and 'trolls'³ rather than elves. What I would like to examine here is how these figures came to be transformed into *álfar* ('elves') or *huldufólk* ('hidden people')⁴ in the later Icelandic folk tales from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In Jón Árnason's pioneering central collection of Icelandic folk tales⁵ (and many other later collections containing legends from the nineteenth and early twentieth century) three particular types of legends tend to be classified together under the heading of 'the Christmas Dances of the Elves'. Before moving any further, it is necessary to separate the legends into clear type-groups. The

² See also the related accounts in *Grettis saga Ásmundssonar*, 1936, pp.62-71; and 135-136 (trans. in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, 1997, II, pp.77-81 and 83-85) which deal with other forms of 'Christmas visit'. These deal with a group of *berserkur* warriors and a polar bear which also threaten a house at Christmas and obviously belong to the same tradition. It is likely that the legend behind the Old English poem *Beowulf* (from about 700 AD) about the regular visits of the monster Grendel in order to kidnap and kill warriors from the hall of Heorot in Lejre in Denmark, and the resulting combats between the hero Beowulf and Grendel – and his mother – reflect the same Scandinavian belief and motif as those which appear in the account of Grettir and Glámur, even though the events in *Beowulf* do not seem to take place in the Christmas period: see *Beowulf*, 1973, II.99-188 (I-II), 662-836 (X-XII), and 1251-1650 (XIX-XXII); and Garmonsway and Simpson, 1968, pp.301-332.

³ *Grettis saga* describes the creature which attacks the farm at Bárðardalur at Christmas (ch. 64-65) as being 'tröllkona mikil' ('a great troll woman': p.212. It is also clear that Glámur could also have been described a 'tröll' (i.e. lit. 'an evil spirit') in the vocabulary use of the time.

⁴ In Icelandic folk tradition, these two expressions are almost synonymous. In the earliest Icelandic records, however, such spirits seem to be referred to as 'landvættir' or 'nátturuvættir' ('land or nature spirits'). The word 'álfar' seems to have been used for more godlike spirits (as in the Old Icelandic Eddic poems). The expression 'huldufólk' has close links to the later Norwegian expression 'huldre' for similar beings.

⁵ Jón Árnason, 1954-1961 (hereafter JÁ), 6 vols.

generalised common denominator connecting all of these accounts is the later belief that at Christmas (or New Year's Eve) the elves⁶ were on the move in and out of their world, and that they would meet to hold parties or dances either in their own homes, or (for some odd reason) on some human farm. Both the timing of these gatherings (at around midnight) and their dating are thus closely linked to liminal turning points in time, when one period is ending and another beginning.⁷ Nonetheless, the idea of particular *elf dances* taking place at Christmas or New Year does not seem to be so much related to any particular belief about elf behaviour as much the simple idea that the life of the elves in Iceland is seen as being a near mirror image of the life of human beings. Icelanders in the seventeenth and eighteenth century tended to hold their *vikivaki* dance gatherings on large farms during the Christmas period (see, for example, Gunnell, 1995, pp.144-160, and 2003, pp. 207-224), and people naturally believed that the same applied to the 'hidden people' at this time.

In spite of their general shared features, it is clear that these three legends are really quite different in several important ways that need to be borne in mind. First and foremost, as I will show, each legend serves a different function. One can also discern a different origin in each case. The first legend can be referred to simply as 'The Elf Queen Legend'. As can be seen below, it is closely connected to the Scandinavian migratory legends known as 'Following the Witch' (ML [Migratory Legend] 3045: see Christiansen, 1958, pp.46-48). The general structure of the legend runs as follows:

1. An unknown woman appears on a farm and asks for work. She works well and is given a position of responsibility (as the housekeeper or wife of the farmer).
2. Every year when people go to the Midnight Mass (at Christmas or New Year), this woman chooses to stay at home to take care of the farm.
3. (Extra motif:) If anyone (a man) stays with her on the farm at that time, he either disappears or is found dead next day.
4. One year, however, another daring farmhand decides to follow the woman.

⁶ From this point onwards when using the word 'elves', I am referring to both the *huldufólk* and the *álfar*. See further note 4 above.

⁷ See Van Gennep, 1960, on the concept of 'liminal' time in our lives and environment, and in connection with belief and tradition (see especially pp.178-184).

5. Without being seen, the farmhand follows the unknown woman (in one example she places a magic bridle on him and rides him: see JÁ I, pp.105-109: 'Hildur álfadrottning') when she goes to the other world (over or under the sea; into the earth or into a rock).
6. The farmhand sees her welcomed as a returning, but enchanted Elf Queen and watches as she takes part in an elf dance.
7. The farmhand takes a souvenir as evidence and follows the woman home (still unseen).
8. Next day, he informs the farmer about the activities of the farmer's wife and she disappears back to the world of the elves, usually grateful for being released from her enchantment.⁸

The general framework motifs in this legend (which I have not seen in this form outside Iceland) about someone looking after the farm and the elves holding a dance are clearly minor elements of the story, suggesting that in fact the legend is wrongly classified with the other types. The central element here, as in the Icelandic 'following the witch legends' is the mystery surrounding unknown female workers who come outside the local community, and especially those women who come from outside and are given positions of responsibility (similar to those women who arrive as the wives of priests or suddenly gain employment as housekeepers or 'foremen' on a farm). In some senses the legend is reminiscent of the account concerning the silent but aloof Irish princess Melkorka who becomes the mistress of an

⁸ There are ten legends of this type in Jón Árnason's collection. The legends were recorded in the counties of E. Skaftafellssýsla (1 example); Rangárvallasýsla (1); Gullbringusýsla (1); Borgarfjörður (1, near Mývatn); Strandasýsla (1); Skagafjörður (1); E. Húnavatnssýsla (1); W. Húnavatnssýsla (1); and N. Múlasýsla (2). Translations of two examples (on Hildur and Una, the 'elf women') are available in Simpson, 1972, pp.43-52; and Jón Árnason, 1864, pp.80-95. It is interesting that the legend seems to have been little known in the Western and Eastern fjords: the only example from Strandasýsla in the western fjord area takes place in South Iceland: see JÁ I, pp.101-111 (on Una, Úlfhildur, Hildur and Snotra the 'elf women'), and JÁ III, pp.162-168 (on Snotra, Bóthildur and others). The legend, which strays into the territory of the wonder tale, does not seem to have been very popular in the twentieth century. To the best of my knowledge, apart from one example (told by Herdís Jónasdóttir in *All the World's Reward*, 1999, pp.271-272), it is only found in Jón Árnason's collection.

Icelandic chieftain in *Laxdæla saga* (see *Laxdæla saga*, 1934, 23-28; trans. in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, 1997, V, 10-13).⁹

The other two legend types, more directly related to the so-called 'elf dance gathering', have even more in common to the degree that they both deal with a human being who has to stay 'home alone' on Christmas night (or New Year's Eve) while everyone else goes off to a Midnight Mass. The individual has to somehow survive the onslaught of the invading nature spirits (usually described in legend from the nineteenth century as 'hidden people' or elves who hold a party that goes on all night until the sun comes up). Both legends indicate that previous watchmen have all either vanished or been found dead. Apart from these shared central features, however, the two legends are actually quite different in terms of structure and emphases. I am of the same mind as a previous student of mine, Valgerður Guðmundsdóttir, who in a course paper argued that these two legends need to be researched separately.¹⁰

The first legend type tells of a woman or girl (often the daughter of the farmer) who has to watch over the farm as the others leave. Unlike the central figure in the 'Elf Queen Legends', this figure stays put for the duration of the night's activities. The legend (which we can call for convenience 'The Girl and the Dance of the Elves') tends to run as follows:

1. A woman/ girl has to stay at home on Christmas night while the people of the farmstead go away to a Christmas Mass (14 out of 17 legends).
2. Those women who have previously looked after the farm have died or gone out of their minds.

⁹ In this connection, one notes particularly the legend 'Huldukonan mállausa' ('The Elfwoman Who Could Not Speak') (JÁ III, pp.164-165) which takes place in southern Iceland and was recorded by Guðmundur Gísli Sigurðsson, the priest at Staður in Steingrímsfjörður, who last lived in Gilsfjörður, in Dalasýsla. As its title suggests, the legend underlines that the outsider elf woman does not speak (like Melkorka).

¹⁰ The Icelandic folklorist Guðrún Bjartmarsdóttir has suggested that the two legends are in fact masculine and feminine versions of the same migratory legend which work to underline male and female images and the different social roles of the two sexes: see Guðrún Bjartmarsdóttir, 1982, pp.324-326; and Ólína Þorvarðardóttir, 1995, pp.15-16, which echoes the same ideas. Even though I agree with these two scholars about the message the two legends present about the different roles of the sexes, it still seems clear to me that these legends have different backgrounds and different functions, and need to be discussed separately.

3. The woman/ girl starts by finishing off the household chores.
4. She next sits on or in bed, and reads (usually the *Bible*).
5. Some strangers (usually elves or 'hidden people') enter.
6. Two children come to the woman/ girl and she gives them gifts (often candles).
7. A man comes to her and wants to sleep with her. She politely refuses.
8. Sometimes she is invited to take part in a dance in the house, but again politely refuses.
9. Finally, an elf woman comes to the woman/ girl (the mother of the children and wife of the aforementioned man) and praises her for her good behaviour. She rewards the woman/ girl with clothes, material or jewellery.
10. The strangers depart (sometimes when on hearing that daylight is coming).
11. When the household returns they are surprised to see that the woman/ girl is still alive and are amazed at her new, magnificent possessions.
12. In seven of the legends, the mother of the girl or the farmer's wife wants to look after the farm next time around, but she does not know how to behave correctly (morally) and is harshly punished.

At least fourteen examples of this legend have been recorded, most of them from Þingeyjarsýsla (five examples), and from north Múlasýsla (four to five examples), both in northern Iceland.¹¹ It is clear that the legend is closely related to other legends telling of a girl who is seduced by an elf (indeed, in some cases, this legend continues in that form¹²). However, the central purpose here is to show how the girl refuses to be tempted by the sinful attractions of dance, alcohol, and/or sex which would lead to her moral downfall and destruction

¹¹ The fourteen legends I know of were recorded in the following areas: Árnessýsla (1 example); Rangárvallasýsla (1); Skaftafellssýsla (1); Reykjavík (1: although the legend takes place in N. Múlassýsla); Breiðafjörður (1); Strandasýsla (2); S. Þingeyjarsýsla (5); N. Múlasýsla (2); S. Múlasýsla (2): see JÁ I, pp.114-116 (trans. in Simpson, 1988, pp.186-187; and Boucher, 1977, pp.38-42); pp.118-119 (trans. in Simpson, 1972, pp.55-56); JÁ III, pp. 170-175; 177-184 and 198; Sigfús Sigfússon, 1982, III, p.156; Þorsteinn M. Jónsson, 1965, V, pp.138-140; and Torfhildur Þorsteinsdóttir Hólm, 1962, pp.15-18.

¹² In two examples, the girl watching the house 'fails', and goes off with a young elf man.

1. Evil spirits (usually referred to as 'hidden people' or elves) annually take over a farm on Christmas night (sometimes the night of New Year's Eve) while the household goes off to the Midnight Mass.
2. The person who has to look after the house meanwhile disappears or is found dead (or out of his wits) next morning. No one dares to be home at this time.
3. An unknown man (often a farmhand or shepherd) comes (and sometimes asks for accommodation) and says he is not afraid of the spirits.
4. The people at home flee and the man prepares himself, hides behind a panel or in a covered hole in the ground.¹⁸
5. His dog (if he has one) lies on the floor.¹⁹
6. The spirits arrive noisily (the noise being always emphasised). If the man has a dog with him, the dog is now killed violently and messily.
7. Sometimes the group is led by an old man who complains about the smell of human flesh in the house.²⁰
8. The spirits dance and drink until ...
9. The hero announces that sunrise is at hand (and sometimes calls on God or Jesus).
10. The spirits run off in panic (sometimes into a lake or pool²¹). Occasionally they have to drag the old man out.
11. The hero keeps the clothes, food and other belongings that are left behind.
12. The spirits never return.

'Sagan af Stapa-Jóni og álfunum' (Sigfús Sigfússon, 1982, III, pp.149-153) from Skagafjörður which takes place in a chapel.

¹⁸ The hero is always 'between the panel and the wall' except in JÁ III, pp.179-180; JÁ I, pp.506-507; and JÁ III, p.179. In Ólafur Davíðsson, 1978, I, pp.93-97, he is in a chest.

¹⁹ See JÁ I, pp.112-114 (from Árnessýsla); JÁ I, pp.117-118; JÁ, III, p.175 (from Rangárvallasýsla); JÁ III, pp.175-176 (from Rangárvallasýsla); and JÁ I, pp.506-507 (from Breiðafjörður but takes place in 'Ölves'), where the man has a lamb with him.

²⁰ See JÁ I, pp.112-114; JÁ I, pp.117-118; JÁ I, pp.506-507; JÁ III, p.179; JÁ III, pp.179-180; JÁ III, pp.185-186; Ólafur Davíðsson, 1978, I, pp.93-97; and Sigfús Sigfússon, 1982, III, pp.149-153.

²¹ See 'Vinnumaðurinn og sæfólkið' (JÁ I, pp.112-114, involving a lake) from Árnessýsla; and 'Jólanótt á Reyðarvatni' (JÁ III, p.175; involving a lake) and 'Sakamaðurinn og huldufólkið' (JÁ III, pp.175-176, involving a pond), both from Rangárvallasýsla.

The oldest form of this legend is unquestionably closely linked to the aforementioned accounts of Grettir and Glámur from Vatnsdalur and Grettir's fight with the ogress of Barðárdalur (and thus at the same time the conflict between Beowulf and Grendel).²² This can be seen best in the legend 'Sagan af Grími Skeljungsbana' ('The Tale of Grímr, the killer of Skeljungur') from Skagafjörður in northern Iceland, which was collected by the manuscript collector Árni Magnússon in the eighteenth century. There are at least four versions of this particular legend, which is commonly linked to the farm of Silfrunarstaðir in Skagafjörður, and has the following structure:²³

1. An evil spirit (usually said to be a ghost or troll rather than an elf, and often female, thus underlining a kind of battle between the sexes) commonly attacks shepherds and/ or farms on Christmas Night.
2. The man who is looking after the sheep or the farm at the time disappears or is found dead next morning. No one dares to take on the role of shepherd or be at home at this time.
3. An unknown man (often a worker or shepherd) comes and asks for work, and states that he is not afraid of ghosts or trolls.

²² See note 2 above.

²³ The legends are the following: 'Sagan af Grími Skeljungsbana' (JÁ I, pp.237-238) from Skagafjörður, which was collected by Árni Magnússon in the eighteenth century; 'Þáttur af Grími Skeljungsbana' (JÁ I, pp.238-247: trans. in Jón Árnason, 1864, pp.181-202) from Skagafjörður, which was recorded by the poet Bólu-Hjálmar; 'Silfrunarstaða-Skeljungur' (JÁ III, pp.318-320) from Reykjavík; and 'Silfrunarstaða-Grímur' (JÁ III, pp.320-322) from Eyjafjörður. See also 'Náttrollin í Kerlingarhól' (Oddur Björnsson, 1908, p.135) from N. Þingeyjarsýsla; 'Frá Brandi sterka' (Oddur Björnsson, 1908, p.137) from S. Þingeyjarsýsla (which takes place on Þorláksmessa, the day before Christmas Eve); and 'Tröllkonan í Skandalsfjalli' (JÁ I, p.490) from Breiðafjörður, where the hero is called Árum Kári. The last-mentioned legends have a similar form to the legends on Grímur. In all of these legends, the hero just deals with just one spirit at a time. They end with a wrestling match of some kind. See also JÁ I, pp.187-192 for two other interesting variants also set in Silfrunarstaðir ('Sagan af Katli á Silfrunarstöðum' and 'Smalinn á Silfrunarstöðum'; the latter translated in Jón Árnason, 1864, pp.140-147), in which there is no fight, but the hero still visits the pilfering female troll behind a waterfall, where an amicable arrangement is now made to solve the problem. Here the storytellers seem to have deliberately chosen the message of peace over war.

4. The man prepares himself. In this regard, it is worth noting how the saga hero Grettir prepares himself for the arrival of the ghost Glámur:
[he] lay down on the bench opposite the farmer's bed closet ... There was a very strong bed frame in front of the seat and he braced himself against that ... (*Grettis saga Ásmundssonar*, 1936, p.119; trans. in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, 1997, II, pp.105-106).

As regards Grettir's preparation for the ogress of Bárðardalur, it is stated that

He took the tables and spare timber and and wedged them across the room to make a wall so high that none of them could get across it ... The way in was via the side wall of the farm below the gable, and then by the platform; Gestr lay down there, but did not get undressed (*Grettis saga Ásmundssonar*, 1936, p.211; trans. in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* 1997, II, p.152).

There are clear parallels in the way heroes in the later legends regularly prepare themselves in a similar way to Grettir (and Beowulf) behind or below wood.

5. Sometimes (if the legend is in two halves) the shepherd is killed in a very violent fashion (Glámur and Skeljungur).
6. The spirit comes to the house and tries to drag the hero out (from the 'cultural' area into his/her own 'wild' area).
7. A wrestling match takes place (notably no weapons are involved) both inside the house and outside it.
8. The spirit (often wounded) rushes off, sometimes into water (a lake or waterfall).
9. The hero chases the spirit and kills him/ her.

As in the case of the legends of 'The Girl and the Dance of the Elves', it is clear that most stories of this kind originate in the northern part of the country.²⁴

²⁴ There were strong cultural connections between northern and southern Iceland owing to workers from the north taking regular trips to fishing stations in the south to work or buy fish. The same kinds of legends are commonly found in Þingeyjarsýsla (Skagafjörður and Vatnsdalur) and Eyjafjarðarsýsla in the north, and in Rangárvallasýsla, Árnessýsla, and Gullbringusýsla in the south. The legends 'Nítján útilegumenn' (JÁ II, pp.233-234; from Reykjavík), and 'Átján bjarnadyr á Langanesi' (JÁ I, p.608; from Vatnsdalur) are

From this quick review of the forms of the legend, it is clear (as I noted earlier) that people in earlier centuries believed that trolls, ghosts and other forms of evil spirit posed a danger at Christmas (probably in pre-Christian times, the period in question would have been at the winter solstice, which in Icelandic is called *sólvörð* or 'sun-turning'). It is also clear that from an early point of time (and especially in northern Iceland, in Skagajörður and Vatnsdalur) tales were told about solo outsider heroes (such as Grettir and Grímur) who fought off intruding spirits. (It reminds us in some ways of the god Þór's role against the giants.) However, when we compare the 'older' and 'younger' versions of the legend of the 'Man with No Name and the Christmas Spirits', it is interesting to note the changes that have taken place within the oral tradition:²⁵ how the earlier solo evil spirit has been changed into 'evil spirits'; how the hero has changed from being a shepherd out in the wild into a watchman in the internal home environment; how the hero now often has a dog with him, which is killed as part of the story; and last but not least how the trolls/ ghosts have now become 'hidden people' or elves. The last motif sits particularly uncomfortably in these legends, and not least because the evil spirits are sometimes said to disappear into lakes or ponds after they leave, something very rarely associated with Icelandic elves to the best of my knowledge.²⁶ Similar problems occur with regard to the way the visitors employ gratuitous violence, and are obviously frightened of daylight and the name of god: once again, none of these characteristics are usually associated with the Icelandic elves who regularly appear by day, and according to other legends even have their own churches and priests. Nor is it clear exactly why the elves have to take over a human farm to hold their dance. One wonders why they can not use their own living rooms or halls for this purpose?

probably connected to these legends in form. See also JÁ I, p.145 (from Árnessýsla?); and JÁ I, pp.148-151 ('Gellivör' from N. Múlasýsla) which both tell of men who are kidnapped at Christmas by trolls, or whose disappearance is caused by trolls.

²⁵ It would not be surprising if the shape of the 'Grímur' legends was maintained in part by people regularly hearing *Grettis saga* read aloud as part of the evening reading sessions (*kvöldvökur*) that were so common on Icelandic farms. Indeed motifs drawn from the literary sagas are relatively common in the oral legends of Iceland for this very reason (see for example Gunnell 1998).

²⁶ This might be a remnant of a motif that was connected to other earlier supernatural beings like the troll woman of Bárðardalur and Grendel's mother, both of whom live behind or below water.

The relative age of the legends of the more recent type seems clear: they stem essentially from a time that had already gone by when most of the legends came to be recorded in the nineteenth century. As the Icelandic ethnologists Jónas Jónasson and Árni Björnsson have pointed out, Christmas Midnight Masses like those mentioned in the legends were banned in Iceland by royal edict in 1744. They nonetheless seem to have continued in some places until about 1770 (Árni Björnsson, 1996, pp.330-331; and Jónas Jónasson, 1961, pp.205-208, and 211).

It is also worth bearing in mind that migratory legends of this type did not only exist in Iceland but also in neighbouring countries (in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, the Faroe Islands and Shetland). Comparison with these legends helps a great deal with explaining the odd form of the nineteenth-century Icelandic legends.

In other countries, this particular legend has been classified by the Norwegian folklorist Reidar Christiansen as ML 6015 ('The Christmas Visitors') and ML 6015A ('The Christmas Party of the Fairies', which is closely related) (Christiansen, 1958, pp.144-158).²⁷ Christiansen describes the legend in its Norwegian form as follows (shared features in the Norwegian and Icelandic forms have been italicised here):

To a certain farm (A1)²⁸, on Christmas Eve (A2), a wayfarer came, asking for a night's lodging (A3). The owner of the house (B1) answered that they could not take in anyone since they themselves had to vacate the house (B2), having prepared food and drink (B3) for the fairies (trolls) who used to occupy the house (B4). The wayfarer, however, in spite of the owner's warning (C1) said that he would stay (C2) and did so, having the company of the bear or a dog (C3) and his gun (C4). He then hid in a corner behind the fireplace (D1) and saw the visitors arrive (D2), commenting upon the smell of human beings (D3), and led by an old man (D4) who presided at the table. During the meal they offered him gifts (D5) or drank to his health (D6) saying that this was a gift to the leader (D7). After a while, the man in hiding joined in (E1), firing his gun at the leader (E2), or saying that this was his gift (E3). The enraged bear chased the visitors away (E4), or the man lashed at them with a split stick, thus making it impossible for them to 'count off' the blows (E5). Finally the visitors fled in

²⁷ Christiansen names 49 examples from eastern Norway; 24 from Telemark; 26 from southern Norway; 89 from western Norway; 4 from Trøndelag; and only 2 from northern Norway.

²⁸ The numbers reflect motifs and features which do not necessarily always appear and tend to vary in form. For example, C4 (the gun) is sometimes not used.

confusion (F1) exclaiming (F2), and *carrying the dead leader away* (F3) . *Next morning the owner returned with his family* (G1), *gave thanks to the one who had stayed* (G2), *and in the future he never again needed to vacate his house* (G3). On the next Christmas Eve, someone shouted from the hill, asking the farmer if he still had the big white cat (H1), and he said that he had - - with some even fiercer kittens - - the visitors never dared return.

The same legend (in a more restricted form, just dealing with the man and the polar bear) has also been classified as AT 1161 ('The Bear Trainer and his Bear'; or 'Kjetta på Dovre' as it is called in Norwegian) by Aarne and Thompson in their international list of *Types of the Folk Tale* (see Aarne and Thompson, 1973, p.366; and also Hodne 1984, p.219).

The ML 6015 legend (in which the man *either* has a bear *or* a dog) was obviously best known in the mountains and fjords of western Norway. In the restricted AT 1161 form (just dealing with the man and the bear), however, it seems to have followed the pilgrim route from Trøndelag (St Ólav's Cathedral in Trondheim/ Nidaros) in Norway through Sweden and Demark to Germany and Czechoslovakia.²⁹ The most well-known versions of the legend in Norway are those which are published in Asbjørnsen and Moe's collections of folk tales, first of all in the story collection 'Rensdyrsjagt ved Rondane' ('Deer Hunting in Rondane'), where the legend is wrongly connected to the famous hunter Per Gynt (who is said to come from the farm *Kvam* in Gudbrandsdal) because of the misleading account of the young storyteller Engelbret Hougen;³⁰ and then in the legend 'Kjetta på Dovre' ('The Cat of Dovre') which runs as follows:

There was once a young man up in Finmark who had had caught a big polar bear; he was going to take it to the king of Denmark. It then happened that he came to Dovrefeld on Christmas night, and there he

²⁹ Hodne (1984, pp.219-222) names 64 Norwegian examples of 'Kjetta på Dovre'. The legend was clearly best known in Norway, although examples were also collected in Finland (42 examples: see also Jauhainen 1998, p.242, for the Finnish form G 1801-1900); Estonia (19); Lithuania (26); Sweden (42); Denmark (20); Germany (15); Czechoslovakia (6); Slovenia (10); and Russia (1): see Aarne and Thompson 1973, p.366. It is necessary to bear in mind that more collecting has taken place in some countries like Finland and Estonia, and that this will effect the numbers.

³⁰ Asbjørnsen and Moe, 1995, pp.260-279, see especially pp.275-276; trans. in Booss, 1984, pp.33-34. On Hougen's account and the error, see, for example, Liestøl, 1948, p.148.

went into a farm building, where a man named Halvor lived. He asked if he could borrow a house for himself and his polar bear.

'Oh God!' said the man of the farm, 'We can't lend a house to anyone now, because every Christmas night such a large group of trolls comes that we have to move out. We haven't even got a roof to put over our own heads.'

'Oh, you can still lend me a house,' said the man; 'my bear can lie by the stove here, and I can lie down in the back room.'

Yes, he went on asking for so long that in the end he got permission. So then, the people on the farm moved out, and the tale was fully laid for the trolls, with rice porridge and *lutefisk* [fish boiled in lye] and sausages, and everything else that was good, just like a grand banquet. And then the trolls arrived. Some were big and some were small, some had long tails, some had none, and some had big, big noses, and they ate and they drank, and tasted everything.

But then one of the little trolls caught sight of the polar bear that was sleeping by the stove, and he took a sausage, put it on a fork and grilled it in the fire, and then went over and stuck it on the nose of the polar bear, who burnt himself. 'Pussy! Want a sausage?' he screamed. Then the polar bear got up and growled and chased them all out, the whole group of them, big and small.

The following year, Halvor was in the forest in the afternoon of Christmas Eve, getting wood for the Christmas feast, because he expected the trolls to come back.

He was working hard when he heard a voice shout out in the forest: 'Halvor! Halvor!'

'Yes,' said Halvor.

'Have you still got that big cat with you?'

'Yes. She's lying at home by the stove,' said Halvor, 'and now she's had kids, she's had three kittens, and they're all bigger and more irritable than she is herself.'

'We're never coming back to you again then!' yelled the troll in the woods; and since that time not a single troll has come round to Halvor's for porridge at Christmas time (translated from Asbjørnsen and Moe 1914, II, 240-241; collected in Gudbrandsdal in Norway).³¹

The oldest version of ML 6015/ AT 1161, however, is not found in Norway but in the German poem 'Das Schretel und der Wasserbär'

³¹ For other versions, see, for example Sande, 1992, II, pp.49-52 (a good example from Kvamsøy, Sogn in Norway); Christiansen, 1964, pp.123-124 (an example from western Norway about another farm by the name of Kvame); Klintberg, 1972, p.130 and p.308, and Kvideland and Sehmsdorf, 1991, pp.237-238 (examples from Västergötland, Sweden); Liungman, 1952, III, pp.506-509 (also from Sweden); and Kristensen, 1982-1901, I, pp.434-437 (legends 1400-1403, from Denmark). Certain translations are available in Kvideland and Sehmsdorf, 1991, pp.237-238; and Lindow, 1978, pp.90-91.

which Heinrich von Freiberg composed between 1290 and 1295. This too tells of a man who takes a polar bear from the King of Norway to the King of Denmark.³² Heinrich von Freiberg's account is obviously similar to the ML 6015/ AT 1161 legends which were recorded in the nineteenth century, except to the degree that it (like the Beowulf-/ Grettir-/ and Grímur Skeljungabani legends) only tells of one spirit causing trouble at a time. Furthermore, as with Beowulf's encounter with Grendel and his mother, there is no mention of the action taking place at Christmas. The argument made by the Norwegian folklorist Knut Liestøl (1933), which most folklorists have since accepted for the main part, is that this version of the legend is in turn closely linked to a medieval account of another Icelander, Auðun vestfirski ('Auðun of the Western Fords'), who, in the eleventh century, is also said to have travelled with a polar bear from Greenland to Norway, and from there to King Sveinn Estríðsson of Denmark. The oldest manuscript version of this account (*Auðunar þáttir vestfirzka*), however, was written in the *Morkinskinna* manuscript in the latter half of the thirteenth century (see *Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka*, 1943). It is also important to underline that the *þáttir* makes no mention of any invasion of farms at Christmas by trolls or ghosts.

Liestøl's argument, however, is that oral legends of the real trip made by Auðun, which might lie behind the written medieval legend, became connected at an early point to the old Scandinavian beliefs concerning the movement of supernatural beings and their encroachments onto farms made at the time of the winter solstice. In this connection, it is interesting to note that many of the ML 6015/ AT 1161 legends from Western Norway are placed in the context of the movement and arrival of the so-called 'julereid' or 'oskoreia', a group of malevolent, violent and noisy spirits that were believed to ride down from the mountains on horseback at Christmas. These spirits usually take the form of ghosts or trolls, led by the legendary figures of Guðrún Gjúkadóttir (or Guro Rysserøver, as she is called in Norway) and Sigurður Fáfnisbani (Sigurd svein). These spirits were believed to invade farms at this time especially for the purpose of stealing food from the Christmas table, Christmas ale, and even any people that happen to be in their way.³³ Evidence of the fact that the

³² On the background, distribution and age of the legend see further Christiansen, 1922 and 1946; Liestøl, 1933 and 1948; Shier, 1935, pp.164-180; Bø, Grambo et al, 1981, pp.292-293; Bø, Grambo et al, 1982, p. 386; and Lindow, 1978, p.130.

³³ On the phenomenon of the *oskoreia*, see especially Celander, 1943; and Eike, 1980. A good example of an *oskoreia* legend involving the kidnapping

belief in these spirits was still strong in the early twentieth century can still be seen in the tar crosses painted over doors of certain old farms preserved on folk museums like those in Sogndal and Førde in Sogn and Fjordane in Western Norway. These crosses, which were annually painted over the doors of the main farm, the stable and the storehouses, were meant to protect the buildings against the invasion of this powerful supernatural force.

It is interesting that the ML 6015/ AT 1161 legend is not known in Ireland, and that, to the best of my knowledge, only one version has been found on the mainland of Scotland (see Baughman, 1966, p.27; MacDonald, 1996, p.62; Almqvist, 1991, pp.275-278, and Gregor, 1883, p.293³⁴). It should come as no surprise, however, that it appears in the North Atlantic islands. In Shetland, it occurs in the legend of the 'Trow of Windhouse' which was collected on the island of Yell in Shetland, a legend which also takes place at Christmas but in which the hero has no dog (see Bruford, 1982, pp.80-84).³⁵ The variant recorded in the Faroe Islands, interestingly enough takes place on Twelfth Night (in Scandinavian known as the 'thirteenth'), which was the 'elf night' in Faroese belief. Even though the hero is female (but makes no sign of reading the Bible) the Faroese version of the legend is very similar to the accounts found in Iceland: the hero hides beneath a table, and the evil spirits (here trolls) dance and all disappear chaotically when the hero calls: 'Jesus have mercy on me!' The storyteller adds that when the people of the farm returned the next day,³⁶ the old woman (the hero of the legend) underlines that: 'tey hvurvu, tá tey hoyrdu hana nevna Jesus' ('they left when they heard her name Jesus')(Hammershaimb, 1891, pp.357-358: a legend from Tröllanes on the island of Kalsoy; see also a related legend from Mikines on p.356; and Jakobsen, 1898-1901, pp.207-208).

of people can be found in Sande, 1992, pp.278-279: 'Ein, som varte teken av jolareidi.'

³⁴ In the legend from northern Scotland related by Gregor, the trolls have been replaced by a waterhorse, once again underlining the earlier form of the legend with its single antagonist related to water.

³⁵ Noticable in this legend is the fact that the evil spirit once again appears alone, and is closely reminiscent of the formless troll known as the 'Bøygen' which appears in another Norwegian legend about Per Gynt: see also Asbjørnsen and Moe, 1995, I, pp.272-273; and of course also Ibsen's play *Per Gynt*. See also Briggs, 1971, pp.372-374 for another legend from Shetland ('Thom and Willie'), about a fairy gathering in a house on a deserted and isolated island. This also contains various motifs from ML 6015.

³⁶ Like those in the Norwegian (but not Icelandic) legends, they had had to totally abandon their house for that night of the year.

So what can be read out of all of this? First of all, it is clear that these particular legends have a centre in western Norway, and that both the legends and the folk belief are essentially Scandinavian (they have little to do with the later legend tradition of England, Scotland and Ireland). It is also clear that the belief that people are in danger from various evil spirits which were on the move around the time of the winter solstice or Christmas is ancient and deep-rooted. As noted above, there are examples of this belief in *Eyrbyggja* and *Grettis saga* and this seems to have become connected at a early point with legends about the traveller with the polar bear first recorded in the German poem from the thirteenth century. The oldest version of the legend of the lone hero (in *Beowulf*; in *Grettis saga*; in the German poem; in the Icelandic legends about Grímur Skeljungsbani from the eighteenth century; and perhaps even the rare legends from northern Scotland and Shetland) all underline that fact that initially the evil spirit (a ghost or troll) was an individual, and commonly connected with water like the Grendel family. These legends, like the account given in *Beowulf*, also underline that the hero defeats his enemy by physical strength rather than with weapons or religion, and that he chases the enemy away before his antagonist (who is commonly female) eventually dies.

It is also clear to my mind that the more recent examples of the Icelandic legend have come under influence from Norwegian legends (or at least legends which have an origin there) and that the Norwegian legends in question must have been known in Iceland. Certainly the form of the Norwegian legends help to explain the presence of the dog that appears in some Icelandic legends (indeed he is sometimes half-forgotten, as for example, in *JÁ III*, pp.175-176),³⁷ and the participation of the 'old man' who leads the invaders, and who

³⁷ As noted above, a dog often appears in place of a polar bear in Norwegian legends. If the Icelanders in later times had heard such a story of a man travelling and sleeping in the vicinity of a live polar bear, it is very unlikely that they would have believed it. For a legend to survive, it is necessary for people to believe that it *could* have taken place, and Icelanders (unlike people from Western Norway or Germany where tame dancing bears were known in the Middle Ages) knew from experience that it was especially difficult to tame a polar bear. Admittedly they knew the account told in *Auðunar þátt vestfirska*, but that took place in 'ancient' times when men were believed to have been bigger (as is emphasised by those Icelandic legends telling of discoveries of large early bones) and carried out wondrous acts. However, the mention of a 'lamb' in the house which serves no obvious role in the legend of 'Jólanótt' (*JÁ I*, pp.506-507) may reflect a vague memory of the existence of a white animal in certain legends from the past.

is sometimes carried out by his men at the end of the legend, exactly as occurs in the Norwegian legends. Such a direct influence would also help to explain the emphasis on the hiding place of the hero and the way he calls out at the end (although the Norwegian heroes often call out something different). Here, too, we at last get some explanation for why the group has to invade someone else's farmstead for a dance (in Norway, this was initially in order to steal Christmas food and Christmas ale which were both less profuse in Iceland³⁸); and for why one of the Icelandic legends takes place at a farm called Hvammur³⁹ (Norwegian variants commonly take place at a farm called Kvam, Kvame or Kvamme⁴⁰); and then finally for why later Icelandic storytellers talk of spirits in the plural rather than a single spirit.

The Norwegian legends, however, have clearly adapted themselves to their new environments and local beliefs. The time setting for example, has been adapted to the general folk beliefs of each country. Even though the oldest versions take place at Christmas (which was and is seen as being one of the most powerful evenings in mainland Scandinavian belief), the variant in the Faroes takes place on Twelfth Night. In Iceland, the legend is sometimes moved to New Year's Eve (the most powerful night in Icelandic folk belief in more recent times).⁴¹ It was also highly unusual in Icelandic folk belief in the nineteenth century for trolls (with the exception of the so-called 'Christmas Lads'⁴²) or ghosts to go wandering around in large groups. The concept of the *oskoreia* was unknown there. In Iceland, the only spirits that were believed to live in groups were the 'hidden people' or elves, and perhaps also the sea people (that is to say the 'seal people'

³⁸ Such a tradition seems to have also existed in Iceland at certain times of the year, at least on New Year's Eve: see for example JÁ III, p.169, which tells how on New Year's Eve, some people had had 'lights burning in every corner to lighten it up, and even placed food and wine on the table for them, and the story says that this food had generally disappeared by the following morning' (taken from *Allrahanda*). See also Ólafur Davíðsson, 1978, I, pp.93-97 (from Gísli Konráðsson's collection *Gráskinna*); and JÁ I, p.119, on light in houses on New Year's Eve (based on information from Ólafur Sveinsson, of Purkey).

³⁹ See 'Jólanótt í Kasthvammi', in JÁ III, pp.169-170.

⁴⁰ See Liestøl, 1933, p.30; and Christiansen, 1958, pp.145-156.

⁴¹ The change (and the confusion) is probably related to the (c. eleven-day) change in time systems that occurred when people in northern Europe took up the Gregorian calendar in the mid-eighteenth century.

⁴² See further above. It is nonetheless questionable whether the Christmas Lads should be regarded as trolls rather than a form of mischievous elf. Furthermore, even they tend to travel separately.

and the *marbendlar* or mermen). The Icelandic elves were seen as being the same size as human beings, and could thus comfortably get inside a farmhouse in a group, something that certainly did not apply to trolls as the Icelanders imagined them. On the other hand, the 'hidden people' and sea people were not regarded as gratuitously violent as trolls and ghosts, and certainly not as frightened of daylight and the name of God, and this aspect of the adaption was something that was bound to cause certain problems for listeners. Another problem about the adaption was that in Iceland a new reason had to be found to explain why the farm was totally abandoned at Christmas. The idea that people should need to move out (into the stable or next farm) owing to fears of ghosts or trolls does not seem to have gone down well in the Icelandic circumstances (although there are examples of this: see for example the story of 'Gellivör' in JÁ I, pp.148-151). In Catholic times, however, houses were often temporarily empty at this time for another reason, since people often went off to the Christmas Midnight Mass which in some places in Iceland would have necessitated a longish trip. This connection between the Midnight Mass and the ML 6015/ AT 1161 legends, however, rarely appears in the same type of legend in the other Scandinavian countries (the Christmas Mass there being more commonly associated with another legend known as the 'Midnight Mass of the Dead': ML 4015: see Christiansen, 1958, pp.61-64). The fact that the Icelandic legends of the 'Christmas Visitors' became connected with this old tradition of the Midnight Mass was nonetheless likely to have a drastic effect on the length of time for which they could survive. As noted above, the tradition of the Midnight Mass was already beginning to fade from living memory in the nineteenth century. This probably helped lead to the apparent near absence of the legend in twentieth-century collections of Icelandic legends.

Finally, it is worth noting those motifs from the older version of the legend which survived into the more recent versions of the legend in Iceland, in spite of the pervasive influence of the Norwegian folk legend tradition. First of all, we still see the emphasis on the hero hiding behind wood of some kind, half in and half out of the house (as occurs in the earlier accounts of Grettir, Beowulf, and Grímur Skeljungsbani); or in a hole in the ground (somewhat like Sigurður Fáfnisbani does when preparing to kill the serpent Fáfnir in the Eddic

poem *Fáfnismál*⁴³). One also notes the way some of the invaders go on living in – or having connections with – lakes or pools (as occurs with Grendel and the ogress of Bárðardalur) even though it is implied that the beings in more recent accounts are elves or hidden people. Also interesting is the fact that the later hero shows little physical heroism compared to the activities of his forerunners. He has become what modern Icelanders term ‘a soft man’: he no longer fights the beast. He does not even shoot at the intruders like some of his Norwegian forerunners do. It is quite enough for him to name God or point to the coming daylight.

The above case study demonstrates clearly how legends both in Iceland and Scandinavia come into being, live and migrate between countries, regularly mutating and adapting themselves (often with difficulty) to the prevailing circumstances and dominant beliefs. As noted earlier, the motif of *elf dances* in Iceland seem to have come about in direct connection with the common Icelandic tradition of wild communal dance evenings that existed prior to the nineteenth century. This applies especially to the ‘Elf Queen Legends’ which might point to a belief in a comparable tradition occurring at home amongst the elves; and also to the warnings about the dangers that such gatherings posed for young women (as can be seen in the legends about ‘The Girl and the Dance of the Elves’). However, even though these motifs came to be connected in Iceland to the international legends of ‘The Man With No Name and the Christmas Spirits’ (to the degree that the evil spirits make their invasion for a dance on Christmas Night) it is clear that the latter two legends have different origins and are of a different age. It is also obvious that the invading force was initially not a group of elves or ‘hidden people’ but rather a troll (and/ or some ghosts). Furthermore, it seems apparent that the more common nineteenth-century form of the legend originated for the most part in Western Norway. Exactly when that form of the legend came to Iceland is less certain, but everything points to the fact that the move must have taken place prior to the Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century, and that in Iceland, the new Norwegian version of the legend effectively blended with the old local type especially known in the north of the country, a legend that has early roots in the Icelandic beliefs in nature spirits from the early Middle Ages..

⁴³ See the introduction to *Fáfnismál* in *Eddadigte*, 1962, p.62: ‘Þar gөрði Sigurör gröf mikla á veginom, og gekk Sigurör þar í’ (‘Sigurör made a deep ditch in the path and went into that’).

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