

DEMONIC MAGIC IN THE ICELANDIC WIZARD LEGENDS

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The word 'wizard' in this paper refers to the Icelandic *galdramenn* as a separate class of magicians distinct from the pagan sorcerers of early medieval literature. The wizard legends represent a large body of Icelandic folk-tales and the magic practised in the legends reflects a wide range of beliefs, however, allowing for a few exceptions, some generalisations can be drawn. Many of the wizards are priests and the legends often have a strong Christian element. Terms referring to old or pagan knowledge are reserved almost exclusively for the evil magicians.

This paper will be primarily concerned with the migratory legends. These are legends which have been recorded in roughly the same form in several different countries. For the purpose of this paper we will assume that these legends originated elsewhere and were imported into Iceland. This assumption is consistent with the orthodox Christian beliefs from the early Middle Ages. The influence of these beliefs is especially strong in the legends concerning the wizard/priest Saemund the Learned.

Saemund Sigfusson is the earliest of the Icelandic wizards. According to the annals he was born in the year 1056. He was educated in France and returned to Iceland in 1076 or 1078. Once home he erected a large church on his patrimony at Oddi in the south of Iceland and played an active role in both the ecclesiastical and political life of the country. He was instrumental in passing both the law of tithes and the ecclesiastical law of 1125. Through his efforts he helped to raise his family to a position of power and prestige which it was to enjoy for several generations (Hermansson 1932, 5-8).

Saemund is credited with having written a Latin *History of the Kings of Norway*, which has since been lost. If this is the case, then he was the first history writer in Iceland. He was referred to as an authority by later medieval writers, and by the thirteenth century he was known as Saemund 'the learned', a term which implied knowledge of the literature and history of the ancient north and not of foreign learning (Hermansson 1932, 33-5). Saemund died on 22 May 1133 (Hermansson 1932, 9).

In the legends we find a very different character. Saemund is portrayed as a trickster who summons the Devil and bargains with his soul for small favours, then outwits him in order to avoid payment. He also acts as a mediator, using his wit and knowledge to rescue others from their contracts with the Devil. Throughout the legends, Saemund is presented as an ambiguous character, one who uses diabolical means to do good against the forces of evil.

In order to understand how these legends arose we must first understand the Christian conception of magic from the early Middle Ages. Philosophers and theologians throughout the early centuries of Christianity had increasingly regarded magic as essentially demonic, that is to say that it could only be performed through the aid of demons (Kieckhefer 1989, 8–10). In the twelfth century this theory was elaborated upon with the introduction of astral magic. Astral magic was a branch of astrology where it was believed that the astral power of the stars which influenced events on earth could be manipulated through the use of astrological symbols (Kieckhefer 1989, 131–2). The belief in astral magic had been imported into Europe from the Arab world. Initially the works of Arab writers had been available only in Spain and the south of Italy, but from the twelfth century onwards many of these works were translated into Latin and became available to scholars throughout Europe (Kieckhefer 1989, 117–19).

The men who had access to these writings were the physicians and clerics. At this time the word cleric was loosely applied to anyone who had been ordained to the lower orders of the Church. One of these orders was that of exorcist, and, as part of the ordination, the candidate would receive a book of exorcisms containing the language and rituals needed to command demons. This formed another component of demonic magic. The men most often accused of practising demonic magic were the clergy, monks and friars. In many cases these accusations may have been inspired by envy at an individual's unusual success, but others may well have attempted to copy that success by selling their souls to the Devil (Kieckhefer 1989, 153–6).

These are essentially the same elements that we find in the life of Saemund the Learned. He was a member of the clergy who was recognised as an expert in early (pagan) history. His education abroad would have included astrology, along with mathematics and theology. He would certainly have been aware of the contemporary attitudes towards magic. His rise to a position of prominence could easily have been interpreted by envious rivals as evidence of his having worked magic with the aid of the Devil.

The connection between demonic magic and a formal education is especially relevant to Saemund's reputation as a wizard. In the seventeenth century, Arni Magnússon recorded a legend which claimed that Saemund had studied at the Black School. The term of study there was three years, at the end of which all of the students would leave on the same day and the Devil would claim the last as tuition fee for the rest. Saemund was the last more than once, so he was there longer than most. Finally Bishop Jon Ogmundsson learned where Saemund was. He visited Saemund and offered to help him out if Saemund would return to Iceland and promise to keep a Christian life. Saemund agreed and when next he tried to leave Jon walked behind him with his coat thrown loosely over his shoulders. As they passed out of the door the Devil grabbed Jon's coat, but he and Saemund escaped.

The Devil then made a deal with Saemund that if Saemund could hide from him for three nights then he could go free. The first night Saemund hid in a riverbank and the Devil thought that he had drowned himself. The second night Saemund hid in the bottom of a boat floating at sea and the Devil thought that his body had been washed

out to sea. The third night Saemund covered himself with consecrated earth and the Devil thought that his body had been found and buried in a churchyard where the Devil could not reach him (Arnason 1954, i, 469–70).

Several variants of this legend were recorded in the nineteenth century. In one variant Saemund escaped by leaving his shadow behind. As Saemund was leaving the devil seized his shadow thinking that it was another student. From then on Saemund never cast a shadow (Arnason 1954, i, 475–6). This variant has been identified as a migratory legend, ML 3000: *Escape from the Black School*, by Reidar Th. Christiansen (Christiansen 1958, 18). The seventeenth-century variant with Bishop Jon losing his coat was probably influenced by the migratory legend with Saemund losing his shadow, in both variants the association with the Black School and the Devil make it clear that Saemund gained his knowledge from demonic sources.

The earliest recorded Icelandic variant of this legend occurs in the *Saga of Saint Jon* (xv–xvi), composed in the early thirteenth century by the monk, Gunnlaug Leifsson. In this account, Jon learned that Saemund was studying abroad and that he had forgotten everything from his past including his own Christian name. Jon visited Saemund and convinced him to return to Iceland, but Saemund's schoolmaster was unwilling to let him leave. Jon and Saemund fled and the next night the schoolmaster set out after them by following Saemund's star. Saemund hid by filling his shoes with water. The schoolmaster saw water around Saemund's star and assumed that he had been drowned. The next night the schoolmaster set out again, but Saemund filled his shoes with blood and the schoolmaster assumed that he had been killed. The third night the schoolmaster saw that Saemund was still alive, but was too far away to be brought back (Jonsson 1953, 21–5).

The schoolmaster in this account is not identified as the Devil, and the science which he practices is astrology, not demonology. The motif of Saemund losing his shadow, or of Jon losing his coat, is entirely absent. None of the motifs which characterise the migratory legend are found in this account, which suggests that the migratory legend entered the tradition and influenced the legend of Saemund's education at a later date. These are the same motifs which link the legend with the medieval beliefs in demonic magic. It is possible that Gunnlaug simply omitted the more fantastic elements from the legend in order to give it greater credibility, but we cannot presume that these elements had formerly been present.

There is some evidence to suggest that the migratory legend and the account of Saemund hiding from the Devil were both derived from the same original source. In the tale-type AT 329: *Hiding from the Devil* the hero must hide three times. A variant of this tale-type, AT 329A, is titled *Man gives (sells) his shadow to the Devil*. Unfortunately there is no summary of this tale-type given in the tale-type index (Aarne and Thompson 1961, 120–1). If these two variants were originally derived from a longer international tale-type containing both of the motifs of hiding and losing one's shadow, then this may also be the source of the legend of Saemund's education. We do not know, however, when this tale-type may have existed, or what relationship it may have had to the Black School legend.

The earliest recorded variant of the Saemund legend is found in William of Malmesbury's *History of the Kings of England*, written in the early twelfth century. This variant concerns a scholar named Gerbert, who later became Pope Sylvester II. William recounts how Gerbert learned astrology and the art of calling spirits from hell from a Saracen in Spain. The Saracen had a book containing the knowledge of his whole art, which he refused to show to Gerbert. With the aid of the Saracen's daughter Gerbert stole the book and fled. The Saracen pursued him by following the direction of the stars, but Gerbert hid by hanging under a wooden bridge, touching neither earth nor water (Stephenson 1989, 150–2).

Halldor Hermansson has suggested that Saemund first brought some variant of this legend to Iceland. Saemund was then made the hero of the tale and in that way gained his reputation as a wizard (Hermansson 1932, 54). We can not know what other variants may have existed, but this account seems to be completely independent of the migratory legend. The Saracen is not identified as the Devil, although there is a reference to demonic magic. William of Malmesbury generally shows a high level of credulity towards his sources, and it seems unlikely that he would have omitted elements confirming Gerbert's association with the Devil.

William tells us that the next day Gerbert came to a sea coast. He then summoned the Devil and offered to sell him his soul if the Devil would transport him to the opposite coast (Stephenson 1989, 152). William offers this bargain as an explanation for Gerbert's later successes in life. A similar tale was recorded in the nineteenth century concerning Saemund the Learned. After leaving the Black School Saemund went to Norway. There were two other Icelanders there and the king offered the parish at Oddi to whomever could get there first. Saemund went to the seashore and summoned the Devil, offering to sell him his soul if the Devil could carry him all the way to Iceland without getting his coat-tails wet. The Devil then changed himself into a seal and swam to Iceland with Saemund on his back while Saemund read from a psalter. Just before they reached land Saemund closed the book and hit the Devil over the head with it. The Devil sank down and Saemund swam to shore with his coat-tails wet (Arnason, 1954, i, 478).

Iceland did not come under the king of Norway until the middle of the thirteenth century and this variant cannot be any older than that. The fact that this legend is set just after Saemund's escape from the Black School suggests that the two legends may once both have been part of a longer account following the same outline as the legend concerning Gerbert. This is further evidence that William of Malmesbury and Gunnlaug, who wrote Jon's saga, were both working with legends derived from the same source. The act of summoning the Devil in both of these legends, along with references to astrology and education, shows that this early source had been shaped by beliefs in demonic magic.

In a similar legend, Saemund had promised to take his daughter, Margret, to the happiest place in the world on New Year's Eve. They went to the sea shore and Saemund summoned the Devil in the form of a grey horse. As they climbed on to the Devil's back Saemund warns Margret not to pray during the journey. The Devil started to run across the water. Three times he attempted to sink under the water and

drown Saemund and Margret, but each time Saemund brings him under control by hitting him on the head with a book of prayers (Arnason 1954, i, 485).

This legend is a variant of the migratory legend ML 3025: *Carried by the Devil* (Christiansen 1958, 35). In Scottish and Norwegian variants of this legend the Devil always appears as a horse or as a man driving a horse. Some variants of this legend resemble ML 5005: *Journey with a troll*. In these variants the passenger says a short prayer during the journey and is immediately thrown to the ground. This motif may be derived from an episode in the *Arabian Nights*. On the fifteenth night a merchant tells how he once offered a prayer to Allah while in a magic boat and was thrown overboard (Mardrus and Mathers 1964, 91–2). In some variants of ML 3025 this motif is expanded into a short dialogue in which the Devil tries to trick the passenger into saying the name of God so that the Devil would vanish and leave the passenger to drown or fall to his death.

In *Journey with a troll* and some variants of *Carried by the Devil* the troll or Devil is encountered by Chance. Only in the variants concerning wizards is the Devil summoned, and it is only in these variants that the short dialogue occurs. Both of these motifs are consistent with medieval beliefs in demonic magic. A fifteenth-century demonologist's handbook, *The Munich Manuscript*, describes how a magician can summon the Devil in the form of a horse to carry the magician wherever he wants to go. The manuscript goes on to warn the magician not to make the sign of the cross while riding on horseback as the blessing will banish the demon (Kieckhefer 1989, 6 and 197).

Another similar tale is found in literature from the early Middle Ages. In the Life of St Peter it is told that Simon Magus once summoned invisible demons to carry him up into Heaven. St Peter said a prayer and Simon fell to his death. This tale is included in the *Legenda Aurea* compiled by Jacobus de Voragine in the thirteenth century (Palmer and More 1966, 40). Earlier variants of this account do not mention demons, but merely state that Simon rose up and St Peter's prayers brought him back down (Kieckhefer 1989, 34). The *Legenda Aurea* remained popular until the sixteenth century and this tale would have been well known. A close variant was recorded in the sixteenth century concerning the sorcerer John Faust (Palmer and More 1966, 101).

The legend of Simon Magus is not likely to be a variant of the migratory legend *Carried by the Devil*. In the Simon Magus legend the Devil does not appear as a horse. The magician's intention is to impress an audience, not to seek transportation to a specific location. Finally, the demons are banished not by accident, but deliberately through the prayers of a third person who remains on the ground. Similarly, the legend of Saemund's return to Iceland from the Black School differs from the migratory legend. The Devil appears as a seal, not as a horse, and the dialogue, or any similar motif, is absent. Saemund banishes the Devil intentionally at the end of the journey in order to cheat him of their bargain.

The legend of Saemund's return from the Black School was probably derived from the same source as the account in Jon's saga or the story of Gerbert. This source was not derived from the migratory legend which may have been introduced into Iceland

at a later date. All of these legends, including the legend of Simon Magus, reflect similar beliefs, especially the belief that magic was performed through the aid of demons.

The motif of hitting the Devil over the head with a book does not occur elsewhere in Icelandic folklore, nor is it found in the Motif Index of Folk Literature (Thompson 1932), however it does appear in one source from early Icelandic literature. In the *Saga of Olaf Tryggvason* (Ix) by the monk Odd Snorrason, there is an account where three trolls describe their attempts to destroy King Olaf. The third troll tells how he disguised himself as a woman in order to enter the king's bed-chamber, but at the last moment the king woke up and hit the troll over the head with a book (Jonsson 1957, 143–4).

Throughout his saga King Olaf is portrayed as an evangelical Christian and the enemy of pagans and sorcerers. The pagan gods appear as incarnations of the Devil and Odd would certainly have equated the trolls with some form of demon. It is not possible to draw substantial conclusions from the use of a single motif, but a comparison with King Olaf may give us some clues to Saemund's character in the legends. Like King Olaf, Saemund's relationship with the Devil is antagonistic, and like the king Saemund uses Christian tools and symbols, such as the prayer-book, as weapons against the Devil. Like the medieval demonologists, Saemund does not merely banish or exorcise the Devil, he commands him, and unlike King Olaf he is willing to use the Devil's own methods against him. This creates an essentially Christian character, but one which is far more ambiguous than the missionary king.

At various points in the *Saga of Olaf Tryggvason* Odd quotes from Saemund's lost *History of the Kings of Norway*, often without naming his source (Turville-Petre 1953, 83). It is possible that the motif of hitting the Devil over the head with a book was originally taken from Saemund's history and was later applied to Saemund himself. The motif may then have been assimilated into the migratory legend from the earlier legend of Saemund's return to Iceland through analogy due to the similarities between the legends.

A third migratory legend occurring in the Icelandic wizard legends is not told about Saemund the Learned. ML 3020: *Inexperienced use of the Black Book* concerns the seventeenth-century clergyman, Eirik Magnusson. On one occasion the Reverend Magnusson had left his book of magic at home and he sent his apprentice back to fetch it. Eirik warned him not to open the book, but on the return trip, out of curiosity, the boy looked inside. Immediately he was surrounded by imps demanding work. The apprentice commanded them to weave ropes of sand, an impossible task, to keep them occupied until Eirik could be brought to exorcise them (Arnason 1954, i, 545–6).

While the magic in this legend is not explicitly demonic, it is consistent with beliefs in demonic magic. In the thirteenth century an astrologer, Michael Scot, listed among other books of demonic magic the *Book of Consecrations from Certain Experiments*. When this book was opened Scot claimed that the spirits to whom it had been consecrated would be heard demanding work (Thorndike 1965, 120). Variants of this legend have been recorded in Iceland in which imps appear when

a box is opened rather than a book (Arnason 1954, iii, 513–14). In Christiansen's summary of the Norwegian variants of the migratory legend the Devil is made to appear (Christiansen 1958, 28). The imps, 'pukar', in the Icelandic variants are often portrayed as demonic, but they could not be confused with a manifestation of the Devil.

One tale-teller claimed that the Eirik Magnusson had studied at the Black School, but that it had little influence on his magic (Arnason 1954, iii, 499). The Devil does not appear in any of the legends concerning him. Two other wizards were said to have studied at the Black School along with Saemund the Learned, Kalf Arnason and Halfdan Einarson (Arnason, i, 475). Only a few legends survive concerning Kalf Arnason. The Devil does not play a prominent role in the legends concerning Halfdan, who lived in the sixteenth century. He is more often portrayed in contact with ghosts and trolls, the traditional figures of Icelandic folklore. This is consistent with the majority of Icelandic wizard legends.

While the belief in demonic magic does not appear to have persisted, it has influenced the legends concerning the later Icelandic wizards. Many of these wizards remain priests. They continue to play a role as mediators between the natural and the supernatural, protecting others and exorcising evil spirits. Books of magic remain a recurrent feature in the legends, as does the belief that magical knowledge can be acquired through a formal education. All of these features were consistent with Icelandic culture. The term 'fjolkunnigr', or much-knowing, was applied to magicians from pre-Christian times. In a largely literate society knowledge became easily associated with the written word, and often the most educated individual in a community was the clergyman.

The association between magic and the Devil does reappear in some of the later legends. This is especially true of the legend of Loft Thorsteinsson, an evil wizard from the eighteenth century. Although the Devil does not appear as a character in the legend, except as a grey hand which emerges from a lake and pulls Loft to his death, we are explicitly told that through his use of magic Loft has come under the Devil's power. This is probably an influence from the Icelandic witchcraft trials of the seventeenth century. Loft himself claims that if a wizard can learn enough, like Saemund the Learned, then he can command the Devil without losing his soul (Arnason, i, 573). This assertion was not consistent with orthodox Christian belief.

An anecdote which may reflect the orthodox belief concerns Saemund the Learned and Halfdan. Halfdan once followed Saemund from the Althing, the Icelandic parliament. When he caught up with Saemund Halfdan said, 'You have an evil familiar, brother, a raven out of Niflheim, and now I mark you with this mark'. He then struck Saemund on the cheek and eye and rode off. Saemund could never see well out of that eye again (Arnason, i, 503). Niflheim was the Norse land of the dead. The reference to the raven suggests a connection with Odin, the one-eyed god of magic, who had two ravens as servants. The pagan gods were often equated with the Devil in early Icelandic literature, and Halfdan's statement would seem to reflect Saemund's continued association with the Devil.

The practice of demon magic has persisted in the legends concerning Saemund the

Learned until their recording in the nineteenth century. It is not fair to regard these legends as mere survivals of earlier beliefs. That they continued to be told is evidence that the attitudes reflected in them remained relevant and that they continued to entertain their audience.

From the evidence in the *Saga of Saint Jon*, we know that Saemund had begun to acquire a reputation as a wizard as early as the thirteenth century. At this time orthodox Christian belief was that magic was performed through the aid of demons, and this belief has shaped Saemund's legend. The belief in demon magic is more explicit in the migratory legends *Escape from the Black School* and *Carried by the Devil*. These legends may have been influenced by the same source as the account in Jon's saga or the story of Gerbert, but they appear to have entered the Icelandic wizard legends at a later date.

While Saemund may have served as a model for the later wizards, other beliefs and traditions have influenced the development of the wizard legends. Only those features of medieval demonology which were consistent with Icelandic culture were retained. The witchcraft trials of the seventeenth century brought new attitudes concerning the role of the Devil in the practice of magic. These attitudes may have had some influence on Saemund's character, but they have not changed his basic role in the legends. He is a wizard who has learned enough of the Devil's own magic to command and outwit him on his own terms.

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