



Societas Magica Newsletter

Issue 23

Spring 2010

Clerical Magic in Icelandic Folklore

Iceland, which converted to Christianity only around the turn of the millennium, lay far from the center of Latin Christian culture. Nevertheless, stories from Iceland connect various church figures with necromancy, Latin magic, and the devil. For Icelanders, it was not Arabic learning, but their own heathen past which stirred anxiety. By examining tales in which clerics demonstrate unholy supernatural power, I hope to demonstrate how continental ideas about magic blended with local ones in reflecting the conditions of Icelandic society.¹ I will begin with a recapitulation of the tale of Gerbert told by William of Malmesbury, since this forms a touchstone for the Icelandic material.

William of Malmesbury's Tale of Gerbert

The twelfth-century historian William of Malmesbury (d. c. 1143) recounts the tale of Gerbert, the notorious Pope Sylvester II (d. 1003).² According to the tale, Gerbert studied in Spain where “the Christians have Toledo for their capital and the Saracens Hispalis commonly called Seville; there they devote themselves to divination and witchcraft, as their national custom is.”³ From the Saracens, Gerbert learns a variety of arts:

There he surpassed Ptolemy in knowledge of the astrolabe, Al-handreus in that of the relative positions of the stars, and Julius Firmicus in judicial astronomy. There he learnt to interpret the song and flight of birds, to summon ghostly forms from the nether regions, everything, in short, whether harmful or healthful, that has been discovered by human curiosity; for of the permitted arts, arithmetic, music, astronomy, and geometry, I need say nothing—by the way he absorbed them he made them look beneath the

Thomas B. de Mayo
J. Sargeant Reynolds Community
College

Clerical Magic cont'd

level of his intelligence, and re-established in Gaul through his untiring efforts. He was the first to seize the abacus from the Saracens, and he handed down the rules which calculators for all their efforts hardly understand.⁴

The association of Arabic knowledge, astrology, and magic is here clear, as is the use of spirits. Such knowledge takes on a dual character, desirable in part, and execrable beyond certain bounds, which seem embodied in the division of Spain's principal cities into Saracen and Christian capitols.

Gerbert's studies among the Saracens clearly proceeds beyond the bounds of acceptable. He takes one particular master, whom he hires to teach him and to provide books. This master, however, keeps back one book "to which he had committed all his art and which Gerbert could by no means get out of him."⁵ Gerbert seduces the master's daughter, and with her help, he steals the book and makes his escape. When the Saracen uses astrology to track him, Gerbert avoids detection by hiding suspended under a bridge so that he touches "neither earth nor water."⁶ To complete his getaway, Gerbert summons the devil to whom he "covenanted to pay him perpetual homage if he would protect him from the Saracen ... and convey him overseas."⁷

We can see the lineaments of the necromancer in William's tale: he possesses forbidden knowledge, contained in secret books, is capable of making (and foiling)

divinations, and of commanding spirits. Moreover, even for William, Gerbert represents the prototype of a branch of learning which (for good or ill) is already well-advanced throughout Europe.

Saemundur the Learned

William's tale of Gerbert forms the earliest bridge between Latin necromancy and Iceland. The thirteenth-century *Jón's Saga Helga* about the early Icelandic bishop Jón contains the earliest recorded version of the story of Saemundur "the Learned" (d. 1133), a priest-magician of mostly benevolent character. This account so closely resembles William's that the two presumably have a common source.⁸ Saemundur's great learning and his foreign studies provide a figure to which necromantic material could also be attached in an Icelandic context. *Jóns Saga*⁹ recounts that the Icelander Saemundur studied in Europe "with a certain understanding magister, there acquiring such unknown wisdom that he had abandoned everything that he had learnt in his youth, even his baptismal name."¹⁰ Instead, he went by Kol (Coal).

Jón convinces Saemundur to flee his master, who like Gerbert's Saracen, pursues him using "astronomia."¹¹ Clever Saemundur outwits his master, first by putting water in his shoes and his shoes on his head. The master thinks that "Jon, the foreigner, has drowned my foster-son Kol, for there is water round his star."¹² The next night the Saracen again sets out in pursuit. Saemundur fills his shoes with blood, so that his master thinks he has been murdered. Eventually, the Saracen realizes

that Saemundur has escaped, but he lets them go, noting that "men will win long-lasting benefits from his [Jón's ?] good luck."¹³

We already begin to see important transformations to the tale that proceed from its particularly Icelandic context. Although Saemundur's master remains an astrologer, most of those elements which reflect anxiety over Islam have disappeared. Instead, Saemundur's master shows distinctly heathen characteristics: he adopts his student as a foster-son, which reflects Icelandic kin-systems. His resignation, even approval, in the face of someone's luck, also reflects a particularly Norse attitude towards destiny and personal power.

Saemundur's story continued to change down through the centuries. By the time Jón Árnasson recorded and compiled many Icelandic folktales in the nineteenth century, Saemundur's magical training had become wholly fantastic. Now Saemundur was said to have studied at a demonic "Black

Conference Cancellation

Esotericism, Religion and Politics

Because of recent budget constraints at the host institution, the planned June 2010 conference that was to be held at Michigan State University, and was to have been jointly sponsored by the Association for the Study of Esotericism, the Societas Magica, and the Journal for Radicalism, has been cancelled. The ASE conference cycle will be suspended until 2012. However, there was a great deal of interest in the conference, and many proposals were submitted. Thus, the next volume in the Studies in Esotericism series, to be titled *Esotericism, Religion, and Politics*, will proceed as usual.

Clerical Magic cont'd

School.” Lessons appeared on the wall, and the Devil took as payment the soul of the last student of each class to leave. Saemundur, of course, is this last student.¹⁴

In some versions of these tales, Jón remains a significant figure who helps Saemundur make his escape. Eventually, however, Jón drops out of the legend-cycle, and only Saemundur remains as a significant character. In these tales, Saemundur escapes the Devil, sometimes by hiding suspended under a bridge like Gerbert, but more often by tricking the Devil into grabbing his cloak or his shadow in his place.¹⁵ We can see that Icelanders remained concerned that learning might be tainted with magic, but the source of that magic has become fully demonized.

Magic in these later tales is often clearly associated with pre-Christian religion. In one tale, Saemundur and a rival go to the king of Norway to seek a church appointment in Oddi, Iceland. The king promises the benefice to whoever can arrive there first. Saemundur summons the devil and promises him his soul, if the devil can convey him to Iceland without getting him wet. The devil obligingly takes the form of a seal and carries Saemundur on his back. When they come in sight of shore, however, Saemundur strikes the Devil on the head with his Psalter, causing the Devil to sink. Saemundur gets wet, but he also gets to Iceland, gains the church, and keeps his soul.¹⁶ The motif of travel in an animal form has deep roots in Icelandic religious-magical practices. In much Old Norse literature, heathen magicians

can project their spirit in an animal form and travel great distances.¹⁷

Loftur the Magician

Our final set of tales concern the post-Reformation figure of Loftur (born c. 1700).¹⁸ A far more sinister character than Saemundur, Loftur combines the figure of the clerical magician with a typically Icelandic concern for the revenant dead.

Loftur studied at the clerical school of Hólar, where he supposedly had access to a magical manual known as the *Greyskin*.¹⁹ Magical texts do seem to have circulated in Icelandic schools. Legal records from the seventeenth-century record the punishment for magic of students at Skálholt.²⁰ We have several surviving Icelandic magical books, which contain elaborate compound runes, and in some cases Solomonic and Necromantic material as well.²¹

The most important tales about Loftur concerns his desire for the *Redskin*, a magical book supposedly “written in runes, like other books of spells” by the notorious Bishop Gottskálk (d. ca. 1522), who “gathered together all the black spells, which had never been used since heathen times.”²² When Gottskálk died, he had the book buried with him in his tomb so no one could read it.²³ Without the *Redskin*, Loftur is damned. As he explains to a fellow student:

Those who have learned as much magic as I have can only use it for evil, and must all be lost whenever they die. But if a man knows enough, then the Devil will have no power over him,

but must serve without pay as he served Saemundur the Wise, and whoever knows as much as that is also his own master, free to use his arts for whatever purpose he wishes. It is not possible to attain this degree of knowledge nowadays, since the Black School closed down, and Gottskálk the Cruel had his book Red Skin buried with him. That is why I want to raise him up and force him by spells to let me have Red Skin.”²⁴

Loftur and his companion enter the church at night, where Loftur summons the spirits of the dead Bishops. Gottskálk appears, bearing the *Redskin*. They engage in a duel of magic, which Loftur loses when his companion rings the church bell too soon. Despairing, Loftur leaves the school and later dies.²⁵

These tales combine Latin, Icelandic and Lutheran features into a composite picture of the nature and dangers of clerical magicians. The magical use of the dead is a particularly Icelandic motif. In Old Norse literature the dead (especially the heathen dead) often guarded treasure in their tombs. As with Gottskálk they are prone to physical manifestations, sometimes engaging heroes in violent combat.²⁶ Loftur’s magic strongly resembles Latin necromancy. In the magical duel he inverts and perverts Christian ritual:

He turned the penitential psalms of David to the Devil’s name, and made a

cont'd on page 5

SESSIONS SPONSORED BY THE SOCIETAS MAGICA AT THE FORTY-FIFTH INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS ON MEDIEVAL STUDIES MAY 13–16, 2010

1. Session 412, Saturday 10:00 AM, Schneider 1325

POLITICS, CONDEMNATION, AND SORCERY IN THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

(Co-sponsored by the 14th Century Society)
Presider: Claire Fanger

Trials for Sorcery in Early Fourteenth-Century Avignon

Robert Ticknor, Tulane Univ.

Acknowledging the Annals: A New Perspective on Witchcraft in the Alice Kyteler Trial

Vanessa R. Taylor, Catholic Univ. of America

Maleficae et Maledictae Feminae: Fourteenth-Century Sources for Key Features of the Learned Interpretation of Witchcraft in Italy at the End of the Middle Ages

Fabrizio Conti, Central European Univ.

2. Session 469, Saturday 1:30 PM, Schneider 1355

LOVE MAGIC

Presider: Amelia Carr

Love and Body Parts: A Study on the Use of Cadavers in Love Magic in the PGM, the Picatrix, and the Munich Handbook

David Porreca, Univ. of Waterloo

Love Potion #9: Examining Tristan and Isolde for Popular Notions of “Love” and “Magic” in the Medieval British Isles

Jennifer Pluck, Univ. of North Carolina–Charlotte

Love Magic in Late Medieval English Confession and Preaching Manuals

Catherine Rider, Univ. of Exeter

What Do We Mean by “Love Magic”?

Frank Klaassen, Univ. of Saskatchewan

3. Session 519, Saturday 3:30 PM, Schneider 1350

MAGIC IN ITS MANUSCRIPT CONTEXT

(Co-sponsored by the Research Group on Manuscript Evidence)

Presider: Mildred Budny

A Household Approach to Magic: Charms in Cambridge, Trinity College MS 1081

Laura Mitchell, Univ. of Toronto

Use of Mysterious Symbols in the Liber florum Old Compilation, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS liturg. 160

Claire Fanger, Rice Univ.

Fashionable Magic: Characters and Ciphers in Conrad Buitzruss’s Compendium (Munich, Clm 671)

Elizabeth I. Wade-Sirabian, Univ. of Wisconsin–Oshkosh

4. Session 549, Sunday 8:30 AM, Schneider 1220

CIPHERS, CODES, AND MYSTERIOUS SYMBOLS I:

MANUSCRIPT EVIDENCE

(Co-sponsored by the Research Group on Manuscript Evidence)

Presider: Richard Kieckhefer, Northwestern Univ.

Encoding, Decoding, and the Milieu of Virgilius Maro Grammaticus

Jen Reid, Univ. van Amsterdam

Angelic Alphabets: What Do They Mean?

Marla Segol, Skidmore College

Outdated Cipher-Systems in Magic Texts

Benedek Láng, Budapesti Muszaki és Gazdaságtudományi Egyetem

5. Session 588, Sunday 10:30 AM, Schneider 1220

CIPHERS, CODES AND MYSTERIOUS SYMBOLS II:

OBJECTS OF POWER

Presider: Richard Kieckhefer, Northwestern Univ.

Symbolic Power in Traditional Ethiopia

Sean M. Winslow, Centre for Medieval Studies,

Univ. of Toronto

Runic Books, Clerical Magicians, and the Dead in Icelandic Folklore

Thomas B. de Mayo, J. Sargeant Reynolds

Community College

The Hooked X, a Grail Code, and a New Translation of the Kensington Runestone

James L. Frankki, Sam Houston State Univ.

confession of all the good he had ever done as if were a sin. ... He recited the Lord's prayer to the Devil, and gave the blessing in the Devil's name, till the whole church shook and rocked as if in an earthquake.²⁷

Gottskálk's book-burial demonstrates how thoroughly magic was seen as a pagan survival, made dangerous by its eruption into Christian society. As Simpson notes, the book-burial turns its possessor into a type of ancestral figure. Thus, Gottskálk is both pagan (in his knowledge) and Christian (as a Bishop). His power comes from unnaturally retaining knowledge of the older era into the new. Indeed, there is a triple-layering of the past, for Gottskálk was a Catholic bishop in a now-Lutheran country, and Loftur therefore has greater power over him than over the later Bishops who "were all buried with the Bible on their breasts."²⁸

Conclusion

The stories of Loftur and Saemundur reveal the complexities of Icelandic clerical magic. The Arabic-inspired necromancy that vexed the authorities of Latin Europe traveled to Iceland via the same channels as Christianity itself. There it blended with local ideas about spirit projection, the dead, and the power of runes. In the popular imagination it became more fantastic as well as more revealing of Iceland's own cultural concerns. Remote from fears about Arabic learning, medieval and early modern Icelanders instead saw learned magic as a dangerous reminder of the practices they had already abandoned.

Footnotes

¹ An earlier version of this paper was originally given at the J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College 3rd Annual Faculty Research Symposium in Richmond, VA (April, 2009). Thanks to Benedek Láng for assistance with the legend of the Black School. See also his *Unlocked Books: Manuscripts of Learned Magic in the Medieval Libraries of Central Europe* (Penn State University Press, 2008), 1-3.

² William mis-identifies Gerbert as John XV.

³ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum: The History of the English Kings*, eds. and trans. Mynors, Thomson, Winterbottom (Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1998), ii.167, translated on 1:281.

"Et sicut Christiani Toletum, ita ipsi [Saraceni] Hispalim, quam Sibilium uulgariter uocant, caput regni habent, diuinationibus et incantationibus more gentis familiari studentes." See also 2:151 n.1.

⁴ Ibi uicit scientia Ptholomeum in astrolabio, Alhandreum in astrorum interstitio, Iulium Firmicum in fato. Ibi quid cantus et uolatus auium portendat didicit, ibi excire tenues ex inferno figuras, ibi postremo quicquid vel noxium vel salubre curiositas humana deprehendit; nam de licitis artibus, arithmetica musica et astronomia et geometria, nichil attinet dicere, quas ita ebibit ut inferiores ingenio suo ostenderet, et magna industria reuocaret in Galliam omnino ibi iam pridem obsoletas.

Abacum certe primus a Saracenis rapiens, regulas dedit quae a sudantibus abacistis uix intelliguntur. ii.167, 1:280-281.

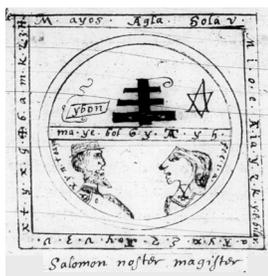
⁵ "Vnus erat codex totius artis conscius quem nullo modo elicere poterat." ii.167, translated on 1:281.

⁶ "... pendulum et pontem amplectens ut nec aquam nec terram tangeret." ii.167, translated on 1:283.

⁷ "Ibi per incantationes diabolo accersito,

The Societas Magica invites proposals for essays to run in future issues of the newsletter.

We are looking for short essays (1500-2500 words) announcing new developments deriving from research in the study and teaching of magic and its related topics. We would be especially interested to see lead articles on modern magic, or periods other than medieval. We are also looking for smaller pieces for our notes and queries column. News about dissertations in progress or completed, manuscript discoveries, or other such items are all welcomed.



Please contact Kathryn Laity: laityk@mail.strose.edu

www.societasmagica.org

Clerical Magic cont'd

petuum paciscitur hominum si se ab illo qui denuo insequerentur defensatum ultra pelagus eueheret." ii.167, translated on 1:283.

⁸ See John Mearns, "The Man Who Did Not Write the *Edda*: Sæmundr fróði and the Birth of Icelandic Literature," 12th Internationale Saga Konferenz. (Bonn, 2003).

⁹ *Jón's Saga Helga* exists in several versions. See *Jón's Saga Hólabyskups Ens Helga*, ed. by Peter Foote (Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel Forlag, 2003), esp. 72-74 of the L. Recension. The translation, from Jacqueline Simpson, *The Northmen Talk: A Choice of Tales from Iceland*. (London, Phoenix House, 1965), 71-73, apparently derives from this text.

¹⁰ "Enn hinn heilagi Ion gat hann vpp spurðan at hann var meðr nockurum agaetum meistara, nemandi þar okunniga fraeði sua at hann tyndi allre þeire er han hafði aa aesku allðri numit. Ok Iamual skinar nafni sinu." Foote, 73. *Jon's Saga Helga*, trans. Simpson, *Northmen Talk*, 71

¹¹ Foote, 74.
¹² "Ill tíðinndi þuiat Ion hinn vtlendzski <hefir dreckt> Koll fostra minum. Þuiat vatn er vm stiornu hans." Foote, 74. *Jon's Saga Helga*, trans. Simpson, *Northmen*, 72

¹³ "... ok langaeligar nytiar munu menn hafa hans hamingiu." Foote, 75. *Jon's Saga Helga*, Trans Simpson, *Northmen*, 73

¹⁴ Alan Boucher, ed and trans. *Icelandic Folktales*, (Reprint; Almenna bókafélagið/Edda Publishing: Reykjavík, 2007), 122. Boucher provides no bibliography beyond indicating that his tales come from Árnason. Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og Aevintr*, new edition, ed. Árni Böðvarsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (Reykjavík, 1954-61), 6 vols. I:475-6 "Svartiskóli."

¹⁵ Árnason 1:469-70. Jacqueline Simpson, Trans. *Legends of Icelandic Magicians* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, Ltd., for the Folklore Society, 1975), 19-20, 92-3, n.1. In most tales Jón has dropped out entirely, leaving only Saemundur as a central character.

¹⁶ Boucher, *Icelandic Folktales*, 122-3. Presumably from Árnason. Perhaps, I. 478-9, "Saemundur Fróði Faer Oddann."

¹⁷ In *Ólafs Saga Tryggvasonar*, for example, a hostile wizard travels from

Norway to Iceland in the form of a whale, but the protective spirits of the land prevent him from coming ashore. Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*, trans. Lee M. Hollander (Austin: U Texas Press, 1964), 173-4.

¹⁸ See Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *The Folk-Stories of Iceland*, Revised by Einar G. Pétursson, Translated by Benedikt Benedikz, Edited by Anthony Faulkes (London: The Viking Society for Northern Research, 2003), 204-213.

¹⁹ Several stories tell of his early, often murderous, magical misdeeds. Simpson, *Legends of Icelandic Magicians*, 73-79, 103. n1.

²⁰ Magnús Rafnsson, *Angurgapi: The Witch-hunts in Iceland* (Hólmavík, Strandir: Stradagaldur, 2003). See also Jón Árnason I:473-4, "Gadrabókin í Skálholtskirkjugarði".

²¹ See, for example, Magnús Rafnsson, ed. and trans. *Tvae galraskraeður: lbs 2413 8vo, Lenileturskraeðan Lbs 764 8vo: Two Icelandic Books of Magic* (Hólmavík, Strandir: Strandagaldur, 2008), or Matthías Viðar Saemundsson, ed. *Galdrar á Íslandi*. (Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1992).

²² "Gottskálk biskop grimmi var hinn mesti galdramaður á sinni tíð: tók hann upp aftur svartagaldur er ekki hafði tíðkapt síðan í heiðni og skrásetti galdrabók þá er kallaðist Raðskinna. Var hún skrifuð með gullnu letri og að öllu hin skratlegasta; rituð var hún með rúnastöfum eins og allur galdur." Árnason, I:499. Simpson, *Legends of Icelandic Magicians*, 73.

²³ Gottskálk was a historical personage, but his activities as a wizard are probably fictitious. The book *Redskin* may be a remembrance of a red-bound tax register particularly hated by his subjects. By the time of our tale, however, he and his book have become the subject of sinister legend clerical and magical, secular and supernatural power have become conflated. Simpson, *Legends of Icelandic Magicians*, 103-4, n1.

²⁴ "Vil ég nú," maelti Loftur, "segja þér gjörla af áformi mínu; þeir sem eru búnir að lara galdur viðlíka og ég geta ekki haft hann nema til ills og verða þeir allir að fyrirfarast hvenaer sem þeir deyja, en kunnir maður nógur mikið þá hefur djöfullinn ekki lengur vald yfir mannum, heldur verður hann að þjóna

honum án þess að fá nokkuð í staðinn eins og hann þjónaði Saemundi fróða, og hver sem veit svo mikið er sjálfáður að því að brúka kunnáttu sína svo vel sem hann vill. Þessari kunnáttu er nú á dögum ekki auðið að ná sðan Svartiskóli lagðist af og Gottskálk biskup grimmi lét grafa Rauðskinnu með sér; vil ég því vekja hann upp og saera hann til að láta Rauskinnu af hendi við mig .. " Jón Árnason, I:573. Jacqueline Simpson, *Legends of Icelandic Magician*, 75.

²⁵ Jón Árnason I:572-5. Simpson, *Legends of Icelandic Magicians*, 75-79.

²⁶ See especially, *Grettir's Saga*. In late Icelandic folklore, magicians could command the spirits of the newly dead, and employ them as "sendings" against their foes.

²⁷ "Tók þá Loftur að saera fyrst að marki og snéri máli sínu að Gosskálki einum; snéri hann þá iðrunarsálmum Davíðs upp á djöfulinn og görði játningu fyrir allt sem hann hefði vel gjört. ... Loftur umhverfðist þá og hamaðist og var sem aldrei hefði hann saert fyrr. Snéri hann þá blessunarorþunum og faðirvori upp á djöfulinn; kirkjan hrikti oll og lék á reiðiskjálfi." Jón Árnason I:573-4. Simpson, *Legends of Icelandic Magicians*, 75.

²⁸ "En hina seinni biskupa get ég ekki vakið upp því þeir eru allir grafnir með ritningunga á brjóstinu." Jón Árnason I:573. Simpson, *Legends of Icelandic Magicians*, 75.

20% Discount

Members of the Societas Magica are entitled to a 20% discount on all books in the Magic in History series put out by Pennsylvania State University Press. Mention that you are a Societas Magica member when ordering books by phone (800-326-9180) or fax (877-778-2665). These telephone numbers work from the US and Canada.

