5 MISTS, MAGICIANS AND MURDEROUS CHILDREN: INTERNATIONAL MIGRATORY LEGENDS CONCERNING THE 'BLACK DEATH' IN ICELAND

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Folk legends, unlike wonder tales, tend to deal with particular people and places, and are, to some extent, presented as accounts of real events. It is nonetheless an established fact that legends come into being and thrive within the oral tradition. Like wonder tales, they move between people, travelling between farms, districts, countries, and even continents, changing constantly, adapting themselves to their environment.

Legends that might originally have had a historic basis thus mutate over time, and simultaneously often adopt the recognised characteristics and structures of other older, better-known migratory legends. Bearing this in mind, one can argue that many of Iceland's most famous legends are not actually Icelandic, but international: their roots originate predominantly in Iceland's neighbouring countries.

The argument that many Icelandic legends are international in form does not, of course, diminish the fact that their heroes are Icelandic people who might well have existed at some point. The places where the legends are said to have taken place usually still exist and, even though the shape of these legends might be similar to that of their foreign counterparts, comparison between the two often sheds light on certain details that are particularly Icelandic. Examinations of this kind are particularly useful for folkloristic research. The fact that similar kinds of legends are found in two neighbouring countries...
discussed later; and then in another account telling of how the 'Black Death' came... to a farm where a brother and his sister lived; they noticed that the people who died on the farm first of all started sneezing violently.

There are also other, more common motifs: the recurring image of the Plague as a fog (hoka), mist (mistur), or cloud (reykvim°d°a) which lay across the lowlands, killing people and livestock; the vague idea of links between the Plague and clothing or material (usually black), accounts of how people saved their lives by going to the mountains; the reiterated statement that the settlement in the Western Fjords remained untouched; the belief in the links between West-dwellers (of various kinds) and magic and 'sendinggar' (spirits sent to attack other people); and, last but not least, the legendary motif of the personification of the 'Black Death' as a couple, the female of the pair being by far the more dangerous.

The lastmentioned motif, known in both Northern and Southern Iceland (but, perhaps most commonly in Rangárvallasýsla in the south), undoubtedly has an origin in the Norwegian folk legend tradition. The best known example of this legend in Iceland is probably that of Torfi i Kolfa ('Torfi of Kolfi', from Rangárvallasýsla).

This legend concerning the arrival of the 'Black Death' runs as follows in translation:

One evening, a boy and girl came to Kolfi, and asked for a place to stay for the night. Torfi did not like the look of them, but because he never used to send anyone away into the night, he showed them to the guests' house, went out, shut the door, and then stood by the door, listening to their conversation. It became apparent that they were 'sendinggar' who had been despatched to wipe out all the people in Iceland. The previous evening, they had visited the two most powerful chieftains in the country for accommodation, and had been sent away. You go to the settlements in the east, the girl said to the boy: 'You go to the settlements in the east, where there are more people, because I trust myself more there.' Then they became silent, but Torfi hurriedly got ready to leave that night with all of his people and the livestock he had, and enough provisions... He then went to Bubba Ísland, and stays there for the duration of the plague. The legend then continues as follows...) At the time there seemed to be a continuous mist or fog laying across the settlement, but when it began to fade, Torfi sent two men to Kolfi to find out how things were in the settlement. They found no one alive. One of them touched some clothes or sniffed them, and fell down dead.
The last example to be given here concerning the distribution of this particular mori is a later legend from the east of Iceland, which deals with a farmer who lived in Norðfjörður. The legend, "Byggð á Norðfjarðarmúpa" ('The Settlement on Norðfjarðar Fjord Peak') has many similarities to "Torfi i Kjöfa":

A new thing happened one day, when an unknown couple came there and asked for a bed for the night, in the year 1402. The farmer said he could only put one of them up because of the poor conditions, but behind that lay the fact that the farmer found them so suspicious that he only wanted to put one of them up. He would have preferred to have got rid of both, but did not dare. When the couple heard the farmer’s answer, they showed little reaction. Each looked at the other with a cold grin, and one said, "Well then, we’ll only manage to kill half here." They later vanished. The farmer was shocked at the answer, and felt sure that there were unluckly omens on an impending disaster. They were followed by a black cloud which lay across the settlements and the lowland, and was followed by the awful Plague, later called the Black Death, which many tales tell of.

The farmer received good advice in time ... [and went up onto the high ridge between Norðfjarðar and Mosfjarður] ... Next morning it looked like there was a transparent, light grey sea lying across the district, reaching half way up the mountain slopes. The settlements looked like islands, and any animal that went down into the cloud turned black. It is said that this plague killed two thirds of the population, but only killed people from Norðfjarðar because the farmer at Nes only felt able to house one of the pair.

When the cloud had disappeared, and the Plague gone down, the farmer moved his people back to Nes, and lived there into his old age.11

As was mentioned above, the same kinds of legend are well known in the Swedish and Norwegian traditions concerning the Black Death. There, the Plague is often personified as a pair of young children (especially in the north), or a troll-like female figure (ML 7080).10 Here, if there is a pair, the two are differentiated with different implements, one (most often a female) being more dangerous than the other. The following example, from Östergötland in Sweden is relatively typical:

I have heard that before that awful disease came to our parts, there were a pair of poor children who wandered around the settlements, and they asked people the question: ‘Shall we sweep or shall we rake?’ - ‘Yes, it is best that you sweep, for then it will be cleaner.’ You see, people took it as a joke, but they weren’t so easy later, for then the Black Death came, and he really swept away the people, so much so that the parishes was nearly emptied of inhabitants.23

It is interesting to note that this form of Plague personification does not appear to have existed in the Danish folktales tradition.11 Another noteworthy feature is the way this migratory legend has adapted itself to the Icelandic circumstances. Instead of carrying different tools, the pair take different roles. According to the Torfi legends, the female figure travels ‘along the coast’ while the male takes the ‘settlements in the highlands’ or goes ‘up into the mountains, at least halfway up the slopes’ (the wording here echoes the common statement that the cloud did not reach any higher than that). The alteration reflects the Icelandic folk belief that people who went to the mountains had more chance of survival. Similar ideas do not seem to have existed in Sweden and Norway where storytellers stress that ‘the Black Death did not rage in the coastal districts alone, as other epidemics have often done, but found its way into the most remote and secluded mountain districts.12

Another difference between the Norwegian/Swedish tradition and that which existed in Iceland is that in Icelandic legends the Plague often appears in two different forms (often simultaneously): in addition to being personified as a couple, it regularly takes the form of steam, mist, "móða" (a form of dust cloud) or smoke. In 'Svartidáði' from Fljót [see above], it is described as "two little puffs of cloud" which "came closer and grew in size and in the end turned into a man and woman." The legend "Porsteinn á Brú" ("Porstein at Brú") from Vopnafjarðar tells of a farmer from Brú who visits a merchant in Vopnafjarður to buy some clothes. The merchant "brought a roll of material ('klæðistraga') and unrolled it on the table, and out of the roll of material came some black steam. When Porstein saw the steam he reacted quickly, got on his horse, and galloped off ... [He came up onto Tungheitið] ... and when he looked down from the heath he could see this black 'móða' lying across half the district."

The description is repeated in 'Sagan af Gunnlaugi og Sölvegvi' ('The Tale of Gunnlaugur and Sölvegvi'), from East Iceland11 where it is stated that it "looked like a valley mist covering the whole valley, reaching half way up the slopes." Porstein said he reckoned that this was what caused the disease. Títar and Sigga in the next scene of the same name from Fljót also see 'a strange fog lying across all of Olafsfjörður ...' This fog stayed for a long time .... When the fog started thinning ... all the people along the fjord were found to be dead.10 In the same way, Grandar Helga in Eyjafjarður, in 'Grandar-Helga', sees 'fog over the entire settlement' when she is up in the
mountains trying to escape from the Plague.22 'God hjálpi þer broði minn', mentioned above, states that the Black Death began in Babylon where men were digging up some ancient ruins, and 'black particles were seen flying in the air: this was called the Black Death.'24 It seems that in the minds of the Icelanders the name 'Black Death' referred predominantly to the appearance of the dark mist rather than that of the dead bodies.

The ideas expressed in the legends about the connection between the Plague, clothes and smoke seem to be relatively old. Fjörunnall (written in about 1640) states concerning the years 1494–5: 'This Plague was said to have come from some black clothes material (úr bláu klæði)', which had arrived from abroad in Hvalfjarðar. And when it first rose from the material, it looked like a bird, and from this rose like smoke into the air.'25 It is worth noting that neither of these motifs appear in earlier annals concerning the Plague. On the other hand, something similar is found in more recent Danish folk legends where the 'smoke' motif is relatively common, although in Denmark it tends to remain in the sky. People say that 'The Plague came driving in' (from Navstrup),26 that 'it came driving in like a big black cloud' (from Ulvborg and Rødding)27 and that 'the Black Death passed in front of the windows like a shadow' (from Vemderup).28 In Denmark, one also finds the Plague taking the image of flying clothes: a legend from Sjellerup states that 'when the Plague came, they said that it flew like a blue pinafure through the air.'29 Since there is no historical background for this kind of strange cloud in Denmark, it seems more probable that the motif has an origin in the learned explanations given for the Plague in the Middle Ages, such as that in the famous essay written by Bengt Knutsson, a bishop in Sweden and Denmark in the mid-fifteenth century. The bishop repeats the ideas of others that the air was contaminated with poisonous fumes, and tells of 'foul and unclean winds from the south.'30

This raises the question of why the smoke motif should have such an important role in Iceland, when the main Plague tradition seems to have come from northern Norway (Sweden is, of course, a less probable source). It is unlikely that the Plague reached Iceland in the fourteenth century, since trade contacts with Norway at that time were almost non-existent, owing in part to the effects of the Black Death. However, as both Alver31 and Tillhagen32 have stressed, the Scandinavian 'Black Death' legends in their present form do not only refer to the Black Death, but to all of the plague outbreaks that continued to harass the Scandinavians at almost ten-year intervals until the seventeenth century.33 The 'Black Death' seems to have become primarily a reference to some devastating disaster that took place in the distant past. In all probability the same applied in Iceland.

One also notes how often Icelandic storytellers refer to later annals as a means of supporting memory. The legend, 'Halla flyt noður' ('Halla Moves North'), from Mývats34 states directly that 'It is stated in the ancient annals that the Black Death wiped out almost all the people living in the districts of Northern Iceland.'35 'Byggð á Norðfjarðarsýnum' (mentioned earlier) gives an exact date: '1402'.36 However, the commonly repeated Icelandic wording in describing the Plague as 'a moða or frog (rather than a cloud) which flies across the lowlands, where 'any animal that went down into the cloud turned black' (quoted earlier), sounds more relevant for Iceland in the light of the events of the late-eightheenth century when the population was almost wiped out by epidemics, climatic conditions, and the effects of the devastating Laki eruptions of 1783–84 (referred to as the 'Móðahárdindi'), which led to the deaths of over sixty per cent of the livestock, and about nine thousand people. The following contemporary description from Ketilstavarannall of the ash cloud (moða) that covered the country at that time strikes a powerful chord when compared with the 'Black Death' legends:

These eruptions led to a great amount of sand and ash falling all over the country, with so much ash, such great dust clouds and darkness that people could hardly see their neighbour's farms for most of the summer, and the sun seemed to be blood red . . . the result was that everything growing on the earth started to wither . . . 37

In short, these legends in their present form seem to say more about the conditions and attitudes of eighteenth-century Iceland than the fifteenth century, even though various features may have an echo in the annals and learned works from earlier centuries. This leads one to consider those Plague legends which deal with the Western Fjords (and Westmann Islands), and with certain powerful magicians who do not appear in legends concerning other parts of the country. Skarðsvarannall and Varrsfjarðarvarannall kven ætli, both well known to the Icelandic people, state that for the most part the Western Fjords were untouched by the Black Death. The same idea is repeated in at least three legends: 'Svartisdóttir' (from Ranaváravallsýsla);38 'Svartisdóttir' (from Staðarholt,39 and possibly also Hrafnarfjörður); and 'Halla flyt noður' (from Mývats).40 One of the roles of the folklore tradition is
to explain such exceptions, and in the eighteenth century, the most natural explanation for the unusual survival of the Western Fjords was magic (the area having seen most of the Icelandic witch-burnings in the seventeenth century). The legend 'Svartárdýkk' from Rangárvalsálag (see above) tells how 'twelve magicians in the west worked together and summoned up a "sending" against the Black Death, which took the form of a great ox which had been "bleded as far down as the knees and 'dagged its skin behind it.' It 'met the man and woman' at Gilsfjörður and "crushed them" to death. A similar image relating to 'sendingar' or shape-changing is encountered in 'Svartárdýkk' from Stuðlaðaá, where the 'Black Death' is said to have reached the Húsavíkarfjörður river - in the form of a grey bull and intended to go west. It started wading into the river, but when it tried to land in the west, it met a red bull and had to turn back. It tried to cross the river at another point, but the same thing happened. The Black Death never made it west over the Húsavíkarfjörður river.

The legend 'Hallr flýt neður' states simply, 'the Black Death never came to the Western Fjords.' This has been said to be the result of the magic wrought by the people of the Western Fjords. Clearly related ideas to do with 'sendingar' and magicians (both defensive and offensive) also occur in two other legends from South Iceland, where, perhaps owing to misinformation or uncertain recollection, the magicians are given associations with the Western Islands which otherwise have no connection with magic of this kind: see "Galdheimstirnar í Vestmannaeyjum" ("The Magicians of the Westman Islands"), and "Klofa-Torfi flyr Svartárdýkk" (quoted earlier).

On the basis of the above examination, there is good reason to question the value of these Icelandic legends as sources on the Black Death. It may well be that the legends are their original form came from Norway in the fifteenth century after the main fourteenth-century disaster had become distant enough in time to allow the development of folklore explanations of the kind discussed here. Some of these (such as those involving the saving children) may conceivably have arisen under indirect influence from sermons relating to the Passover described in Exodus, 12. First and foremost, however, the extant Icelandic legends appear to give a better reflection of other, much more recent disasters that had left a deeper mark on the national consciousness of the later Icelanders. This, of course, does not diminish the value of these accounts. They remain a valuable testimony to the activity of the oral tradition over time. While they may not be trustworthy sources concerning the fifteenth century, they contain a great deal of information about the historical understanding of the nineteenth-century storytellers and the cultural links that clearly continued to exist between Iceland and Norway following the disasters of the Middle Ages.

NOTES


2. Considering the difference in dating, it is somewhat questionable whether the Icelandic epidemic should be grouped with the rest. The folk tradition, however, has few academic quandaries of this kind. The Black Death in Europe, see P. Ziegler, The Black Death, Hammondsorth 1970; R. S. Gottfried, The Black Death: Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe, New York and London 1980; and especially R. Haynes (ed. and trans.), The Black Death, Manchester 1994. On the Black Death in Scandinavia in particular, see O. J. Benedictson, Plague in the Late Medieval Nordic Countries: Epidemiological Studies, Oslo 1992. On the Plague in Iceland, see forkell Jóhanneson, Óláfr miki 1402-1404, Skrán Or (1928), 73-95; Björn Jónasson, Óláfr miki 1402-1404, in Sigurður Líndal (ed.), Sæga Íslands í Reykjavík 1990, 7-12; Gunnar Karlsson and Helgi Skul Kjartansson, Óláfr miki á Islandi, Sæga XXIV (1994), 11-73; and the various articles contained in Ísgrimír (1992).


6. J. A., iv, 131. Note: Owing to limitations of space, it has unfortunately been necessary to drop the original texts, and keep to translations. The sources of original texts, however, are indicated for those who wish to trace them. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are by the present author. On this legend type, see also the Danish examples in E. T. Kristensen (ed.), Danske sager som de har blyd i folklorevåden, IV, Aarhus 1896, iv, 538-9, and J. M. Thielk, Dansmetrics folkesagn, ed. P. Skan, København 1968, iv, 132.


8. The stales here and elsewhere in this article are my own.


14. Bragi Halldórsson et al. (eds), Íslendingar þáttr ok þvíðarla, Íslendingasögur og þætrir, Reykjavík 1987, 2235-3.

MIGR., MAGICIANS AND MURDEROUS CHILDREN 57
NORTHERN LIGHTS
Following Folklore in North-Western Europe

Aisti in adhnó do Bho Almqvist
Essays in honour of Bo Almqvist

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Bo Almqvist in conversation with a former Blasket Islander, Seainín Mhíchíl Ó Súilleabháin, at Dúin Chaorain, county Kerry, 1986.
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CONTENTS

List of Illustrations ix
Foreword xi
Acknowledgements xv
Abbreviations xvii
Tabula gratulatoria xviii

1 'Bertwixt the Stirrup and the Ground': Some Remarks on an English Epitaph and a Scandinavian Folk Legend 1
BENG AF KLENTBERG

2 Quotation Proverbs in Ireland 9
FRANNULA CARSON WILLIAMS

3 Caith Maige Tuired – A Parable of the Battle of Clontarf 22
MICHAEL CHESNUTT

4 Dreams in Old Norse and Old Irish Literature 34
HELDA ELLIS DAVIDSON

5 Mists, Magicians and Murderous Children: International Migratory Legends Concerning the 'Black Death' in Iceland 47
TERRY GONNEL

6 The Blood Brothers' Tale 60
HERMANN PALSSON

7 Óldiche Riomnagacb Renvlagach – A Tale with a Sting 72
BARBARA HILLERS

8 The Wedding Dance and the Bridal House in Faeroese Folk Tradition 87
JOAN PAULI JOHENSEN

9 The Varnokkur of Gudrjófur Porbjarnardóttir 97
JON HNEFILL ADALSTEINSSON

10 'Halt Illu Frin Bofa' – Til Tolkening af Kvinneby-Amuletten fra Oland 111
JOANNA LOUR-JENSEN