The coming of the Christmas Visitors...
Folk legends concerning the attacks on Icelandic farmhouses made by spirits at Christmas

Terry Gunnell

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 iran 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 Strömberg, 1970). It seems also that from the start people believed that at least once a year, as midwinter and sometimes around midsummer, these spirits would revisit their power over their territory by demanding offerings and, or literally moving in with their treasuries for a few days, just as the old Norwegian lags used to do in the Viking period (see for example Steinnes, 1935). Closely related to this belief is another one about how the dead community revisit their old dwelling places at these turning points in time. The modern-day Icelandic belief about visiting 'Christmas Ladies' (holavæinar, 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 'Froði wonders' in the thirteenth-century Evyrægga saga telling of how, one Christmas, the farm at Froði on Breiðafirðar is taken over by various ghosts of people who have died on both sea and land (Evyrægga saga, 1935).

* An Icelandic version of this article was earlier published in Gunnell, 2002.
generative common denominator connecting all of these accounts is the belief that at Christmas or New Year's Eve the elves were on the move in and out of their castles and that visitors would be engaged in feasting and dancing, either in their homes or in castles. The belief stemmed from the old Norse tradition of "Yule," the winter solstice festival, and the Germanic tradition of "Weihnachten," the Christmas season.

In the Northern European folklore, the belief in the presence of elves and Christmas spirits was widespread. These legends often involved the visitation of these creatures to homes and castles, where they would engage in feasting, dancing, and mischief-making. The elves were seen as both beneficial and malevolent, depending on the context of their visit and the actions of the inhabitants. The stories were often passed down orally from generation to generation, with each iteration adding to the richness and complexity of the folklore.

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1 See also the related accounts in [Grimnismál, 1936; pp. 62-71; and 152-156 in [The Complete Sagas of Iceland, 1997, pp. 77-81 and 133-139, which deal with similar forms of "Christmas visit"]] (1997-2003; 'A Christmas visit' dealt with a group of fantastic 'elves' and a noble house which are transformed into castles at Christmas and obviously belong to the same tradition. It is likely that the legend behind the Old English poem off (often 'Old Abby') about the appearance of the 'Norsemen' in order to kidnap and kill women from the Hall of Housecarl in London and the resulting combat between the two forces (Beowulf and Grendel) and his mother - refers to the same Scandinavian battle and它的 place in the legend of the Great and Giant, and even though the events in Beowulf do not seem to take place in the Christmas period, see [Ranum, 1972-1974; 193-194 (XIII); and 193-194 (XIV); and 193-194 (XV); and 193-194 (XVI); and 193-194 (XVII); and 193-194 (XVIII); and 193-194 (XIX); and 193-194 (XX); and 193-194 (XXI); and 193-194 (XXII); and 193-194 (XXIII); and 193-194 (XXIV); and 193-194 (XXV); and 193-194 (XXVI); and 193-194 (XXVII); and 193-194 (XXVIII); and 193-194 (XXIX); and 193-194 (XXX); and 193-194 (XXXI); and 193-194 (XXXII); and 193-194 (XXXIII); and 193-194 (XXXIV); and 193-194 (XXXV); and 193-194 (XXXVI); and 193-194 (XXXVII); and 193-194 (XXXVIII); and 193-194 (XXXIX); and 193-194 (XL); and 193-194 (XLI); and 193-194 (XLII); and 193-194 (XLIII); and 193-194 (XLIV); and 193-194 (XLV); and 193-194 (XLVI); and 193-194 (XLVII); and 193-194 (XLVIII); and 193-194 (XLIX); and 193-194 (L); and 193-194 (LI); and 193-194 (LII); and 193-194 (LIII); and 193-194 (LIV); and 193-194 (LV); and 193-194 (LVI); and 193-194 (LVII); and 193-194 (LVIII); and 193-194 (LIX); and 193-194 (LX); and 193-194 (LXI); and 193-194 (LXII); and 193-194 (LXIII); and 193-194 (LXIV); and 193-194 (LXV); and 193-194 (LXVI); and 193-194 (LXVII); and 193-194 (LXVIII); and 193-194 (LXIX); and 193-194 (LX).]

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3 A woman who appears as a farmer and rules over the land. She works well and is given a position of responsibility (as the housekeeper or wife of the farmer).

4 Every year when people go to the Midnight Mass (at Christmas or New Year's Eve), this woman chooses to stay at home to take care of the farm.

5 If someone (a man) stays with her on the farm at that time, he either disappears (is turned into something dead the next day).

6 One year, however, another farmer husband decides to follow the woman.

7 From this point onwards, when using the word "elves," I am referring to both the koboldvæl and the other. See also note 9.

8 See Vail, 1946; 1960, on the concept of "Yule magic in our lives and environment, and in connection with belief in tradition (see especially pp. 170-184)."
5. Without being seen, the farmhand follows the unknown woman (in one example she places a magic bracelet on him and rides him see JA, 1, pp. 105-109 'Hildur afláfrøttur') 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 survey 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.

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 Melusina who becomes the mistress of an

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* There are ten legends of this type in Jon Amorsson's collection. The legends were recorded in the counties of E. Skálholtas fill (example): Rangávallasúla (1), Gullbrungaúla (3), Borgafjarðar (1, later Mýli), Strándaúla (1), Skagafjarðar (1), E. Húsavíkasúla (3), W. Húsavíkasúla (12). Translations of ten examples are Hildur and Una, 1854, pp. 89-96. It is interesting that the legend seems to have been lost in the Western and Eastern parts of Iceland. The only examples from the western and eastern parts are taken place in South Iceland see 1854, pp. 101-111.

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Icelandic Christmas (see Lundata saga, see Lundata saga, 1934, 23-28; trans. in The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, 1997, V. 10-11). The two other 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 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 emphasis. I am of the same mind as the previous student of mine, Végaður Guðmundsson, who in a course paper argued that these two legends need to be reserected separately.

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 other do. 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 Elf 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 farmhouse 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.
The woman girl starts by finishing off the household chores 
4. She next sits on in bed, and reads (usually the Bible).
5. Some storytellers (casually elves or 'hidden people') enter her scriptural or dance or 'steal' the husbands of other women. To this degree, it is probably best to classify this legend along with the numerous other Scandinavian legends which warn about the dangers of public dances and vanity. Putting the legend in the context of an all-ages party allows the storytellers (male or female) of saying the indirect warning that is clearly meant to apply to people of everyday life. The legend is thus turned into an entertaining exercise rather than a tedious sermon.

The third legend type, which I mean to concentrate on here, deals instead with a male who looks after the farmstead at this liminal time (we can call it 'The Man with No Name and the Christmas Spirit') and is totally different to the other two legends in several ways. First, and foremost, as the classification tree I have given implies, the hero is (almost always) unknown, and an outsider (thereby effectually connected with the traffic elves themselves). He is generally unannounced, and without any prompting, orders to take care of the house overnight for the owner.

One can say that the following example of the legend (colonialist K. Klaftausaa, 'Christmas Night in Kuliswarentem') is typical for this version of the legend as it was known in the nineteenth century:

It happened one time at Hainniis in Laxdalur, at the time when men used to take place on Christmas night that the man who was left home on Christmas night disappeared. This happened for two years running, and in the third year, there was no one who wanted to stay at home alone, with the exception of one man who offered to do this. When the people

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The Christmas Visitors

1. Evil spirits (usually referred to as ‘hidden people’ or chens) 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 mind) the next morning. No one dares to be home at this time.

3. An unknown man (often a farmer 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 is covered in some hole in the ground.

5. His dog (if he has one) lies on the floor.

6. The spirits arrive noisily (the noise being always emphasized). 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 woman who complains about the smell of human flesh in the house.

8. The spirits dance and drink until...

9. The hoko announces that sunshine is at hand (and sometimes calls on God or Jesus).

10. The spirits run off in panic (sometimes into a lake or pond)!

11. The hero keeps the clothes, food and other belongings that are left behind.

12. The spirits never return.

Sagen af Stenb-hioe og allmen” (Sigfus Sigfusson, 1982, III, pp.149-153) from Saeglfujakar which takes place in the north.


See JA I, pp.112-114 (from Amundsdottir, JA I, pp.177-178, JA I, p.177 (from Huldarsson, Amundsdottir, JA I, pp.177-178), JA I, pp.506-507 (from Bredstaðsfjöll) and takes place in ‘Olafsfjördur’ where the hero has a job without.”


See Viðmennaband og sveiðkur” (JA I, pp.112-114, involving a lake) from Amundsdottir and Ólafur Thórhallsson, 1978, pp.119-120, both from Raunavallavænslu.

The most common features of this legend run as follows:

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this article are by the author.

2. The legends are as follows: all but three take place on Christmas Night. ‘Vinnuband og svettull’ (JA I, pp.112-119) from Amundsdottir. All others are from Ólafur Davidson.

3. In Ólafur Davidson, 1978, pp.93-97, he is in a chaur.

4. See JA I, pp.112-114 (from Amundsdottir, JA I, pp.177-178, JA I, p.177 (from Huldarsson, Amundsdottir, JA I, pp.177-178), JA I, pp.506-507 (from Bredstaðsfjöll) and takes place in ‘Olafsfjördur’ where the hero has a job without.”


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12. See Viðmennaband og sveiðkur” (JA I, pp.112-114, involving a lake) from Amundsdottir and Ólafur Thórhallsson, 1978, pp.119-120, both from Raunavallavænslu.
The oldest form of this legend is unquestionably closely linked to the aforementioned accounts of Grettir and Gljáurm from Vasamundur and the Grettis saga (with the exception of Bardarbónd) and is not to be considered as a separate entity. The earliest written account of this story is found in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla: Grettir, the son of Grettir the Strong, is mentioned in the Prose Edda in the sixteenth century. The account is found in the manuscript collection Arni Magnússon in the eighteenth century. The earliest known version of this particular legend, which is commonly linked to the town of Skagafjörður in Skagafjörður, and has the following structure:

1. An evil spirit (usually said to be a ghost or troll rather than an elf) and a female ghost underlying a kind of battle between the two) commonly attacks shepherds and their belongings. One night, the host of the shepherd is seen on Christmas Night.
2. The next morning, the shepherd is found dead with no sign of a struggle. The spirits are supposed to have killed the man before he could be found.
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.

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4. The man prepares himself for the arrival of the ghost Gljáurm. He lays down on the bed opposite the farmer's bed and then, with the aid of the ghost Gljáurm, he is allowed to enter the room.

5. The man sees a very strong bed frame in front of the bed and he becomes frightened by this. Gljáurm, however, says that this is not to be feared. He then teases the man about his fear and tells him to be brave.

6. The man prepares himself for the arrival of Gljáurm, who tells him to be brave and to keep calm. Gljáurm then teases the man about his fear and tells him to be brave.

The man then prepares himself for the arrival of the ghost Gljáurm, and he is told to be brave and to keep calm. Gljáurm then tells the man to be brave and to keep calm.
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The relative age of the legends of the more recent type seems clear; they stem essentially from a time that has already gone by when most of the legends came to be recorded in the fourteenth century. As the Icelandic ethnologists Jonas Jonasson and Ann Björnsson have pointed out, Christmas Midnight Masses like those mentioned in the legends were banned in Iceland by royal edict in 1344. They nonetheless seem to have continued in some places until about 1770 (Ann Björnsson, 1996, pp. 339-341, and Jonas Jonasson, 1965, pp. 230-238, and 211).

It is also worth bearing in mind that migratory legends of this type did not only exist in Iceland but also in neighboring countries like Norway, Sweden, Denmark, the Faeroe Islands and Scotland. Comparison with these legends helps a great deal with explaining the odd form of the fourteenth-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 6051A ("The Christmas Party of the Fairies," which is closely related) (Christiansen, 1938, pp. 144-148). Christiansen describes the legend in its Norwegian form as follows (slanted features in the Norwegian and Icelandic forms have been bracketed here):

To a certain form (A)\textsuperscript{(1)}, on Christmas Eve (A2), a chamber came, asking for a wise lodging (A2). The owner of the house (B1) answered that they could not take it as no one had ever invited to the house (B2), having prepared food and milk (B3) for the farmers (B4), who used to occupy the house (B5). The milkfarmer, however, argued that his visitors were hungry (C1) and that he would take C2 and ask the company of the bear or the dog (C3) and his god C4 to come in and be a guest behind the fireplace (D1) and see the visitors arrive (D2), commencing upon the small of human beings (D3) and less for an old man (D4) who preceded at the table. During the meantime he offered them pelts (D5) or drank his health (D6) saying that this was a gift to the leader (D7). After a while a man is holding jointly in D8, being his gift as the leader (E3), in saying that they were this gift (E3). The enraged bear chased the men, nor to E4, to the man lashed at them with a spit which, thus making a impossible for him to come off the blows (E4). Finally the visitors feel in

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\textsuperscript{(1)} Christiansen names 49 examples from eastern Norway, 24 from Telemark, 16 from southern Norway, 39 from western Norway, 4 from Trondelag, and only 2 from northern Norway.

\textsuperscript{(2)} The numbers reflect motifs and features which do not necessarily always appear and tend to vary in form. For example, C4 (the gift) is sometimes not used.
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The soil of Norway, where the Christmas spirit prevails, is one of the most beautiful and picturesque in all Europe. The people are simple and kind-hearted, and their customs and traditions are as old as the hills.

The Christmas tradition in Norway is very strong, and the people take great care to keep it alive. The Christmas tree is a central feature of the celebration, and it is decorated with lights, candles, and ornaments. The tree is usually placed in the center of the room, and the family gathers around it to sing carols and exchange presents.

Christmas Eve is a very special day, and the family usually goes to church in the evening to listen to the Christmas Mass. The Christmas Day is a time for family gatherings, and the people enjoy eating traditional Norwegian dishes such as lutefisk, a type of fish that is smoked and then boiled in lye.

In the evening, the children are given presents, and the adults enjoy drinking mulled wine and eating gingerbread cookies. The Christmas spirit is everywhere, and the people are happy and contented.

Christmas in Norway is a time for reflection and gratitude, and the people take the time to appreciate the beauty of the season. It is a time for coming together and sharing the warmth of the Christmas spirit.
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belief in these spirits was still strong in the early twentieth century can still be seen in the far corners, painted over doors of certain old farms preserved as folk museums like those in Bogstad and Foss in Sogn and Jønudal in Western Norway. These crosses, which were annually painted over the doors of the main farm, the stable and the storerooms, were meant to protect the buildings against the power of this powerful supernatural force. It is interesting that the MI. 6015 AT 1663 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 Braghman, 1966, pp. 23; MacDonald, 1966, p. 62; Almqvist, 1991, pp. 275-278, and Gregor, 1883, p. 297). It should come as no surprise, however, to find that, as 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 Bruton, 1982, pp. 80-84). The variant recorded in the Faeroe islands, interestingly enough takes place on Twelfth Night (in Scandinavia known as the "thirteenth"), which was the 'elf night' in Faeroe belief. Even though the hero is female (but makes no sign of reading the Bible) the Faeroe 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 chromatically when the hero calls: "Jesus have mercy on me!" The storyteller adds that when the people of the farm returned the next day, the old woman (the hero of the legend) undertakes that "they left when they heard her name Jesus" (Hammarsheim, 1949, pp. 337-338, a legend from Tjóllnes on the island of Kalsoy; see also a related legend from Mikenes on p. 286, and Jakobsen, 1899-1901, pp. 207-208).

Of people can be found in Sauer, 1992, pp. 278-279 "Est, som vante taket av ilske.

3. The legend from northern Scotland related by Gregor, the trolls have been replaced by a witch, but another understanding the earlier form of the legend with an angle among related to water.

2. Noticeable 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 "Borgt" which appears in another Norwegian legend about Per Goult. See also Asbrook and Wiesner, 1905, 1, pp. 275-277, and of course also Brochs play Per Goult. See also Broggie, 1971, pp. 337-374, and Gregor, in which the hero, John Sivertsen, about a fairy gathering in a house on a deserted un isolated island. This also contains various motifs from MI. 6015.

2. Like those in the Norwegian that not Islandic legends, they had to tend to totally abandon their house for that night of the year.
The Christmas Visitors

As noted above, a dog often appears in place of a horse in Norwegian legends. If the heroine in these legends had lived with a story of a man-enduring and suffering in the vicinity of a home, he is very unlikely that they would have believed it. For a legend to survive, it is necessary for people for people to believe that it could not have taken place andiar omnibus out and out that wintime (on the Norwegian people). It is also likely that such a legend would be the exception, and not the rule. However, the stories and songs in the home, which serve to illustrate the legend, are often remembered by the storytellers from generation to generation. The tradition of storytelling from one generation to the next is an important part of the cultural heritage of the Norwegian people.
and the marhavelir or mermaids. 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 Fairies imagined them. On the other hand, the vixens as trolls and ghosts, and certainly not as frightened of daylight that was bound to cause certain problems for lossears. Another problem about the adaption was that in Iceland a new reason had to be found to explain why the fairies was totally abandoned at Christmas time owing to fears of ghosts or trolls does not seem to have gone down well in the Icelandic circumstances (although these are for example the story of 'Gellir' in A I, pp 145-151). In Catholic times, however, houses were often closed at this time for another reason, since people often Iceland would have re-invested a longish trip. This connection, 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 Fact that the Icelandic legends of the 'Christmas Visitors' because 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 absence of the legend in twentieth-century collections of Icelandic legends.

Finally, it is well noting these motifs from the older version of the legend which survives into the more recent versions of the legend in Iceland, in spite of the pervasive influence of the Norwegian folk fiddling behind wood of some kind, half in and half out of the house (as occurs in the earlier accounts of Grettir, Bjornull, and Grimur Skalhundar), or in a hole in the ground (somewhat like Signar's Fehinunum does when preparing to kill the serpent Fáfnir in the Eddic poems Fafnismál). One also notes the way some of the invaders go on living in—let's have connections with—lakes or pools (as occurs with Puck) and the origins of Heimdall's sword even though it is implied that the beings in more recent accounts are elves or hidden people. Also interesting is the fact that the latter shows little physical resistance compared to the activities of his forebears. He has become what modern Icelanders term 'a set man'; he no longer fights the beast. He does not even shout at the invaders like some of his Norwegian forebears 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 are coming into being, live and migrate between countries, regularly running and adapting themselves (often with difficulty) to the prevailing circumstances and dominant beliefs. As noted earlier, the motif of '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 'Elves who Fehinunum' which might point to a belief in a comparable tradition occurring at home amongst the elves; and also to the satisfactions 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 come to be connected in Iceland to the international legends of the 'Man Who Has 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 existing 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 south of the country, a god that has early roots in the Icelandic beliefs in nature spirits from the early Middle Ages.

See the introduction to Fafnismál in Edsalsg, 1962, p.62. For gods Signar refers us to a vadjorn og er sigur Signar bar ("Signar hurst a deep ditch in the path and sent him into that").
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