An Invasion of Foreign Bodies
Legends of Washed Up Corpses in Iceland
Terry Gunnell

Arguably for many listeners at the Icelandic kvöldvaka or the Faroese Ákvöldsvætan in the past, folk legends served as a kind of map. On one side, they reminded people of place names and routes, and gave historical depth to those surroundings, populating them with ghosts and other beings of various kinds. On the other, they served as a map of behaviour, underlining moral and social values and offering examples to follow or avoid. Simultaneously, they reminded people of the temporal and physical borders of their existence, questions of life and death, periods of liminality, insiders and outsiders, and continuously, the physical and spiritual division between the cultural and the wild, what Le-es Skuavis might refer to as the "cooked" and the "raw". If the map was followed, you had a good chance of living in safety. If you broke it, you stood an equally good chance of ending up in a folk legend yourself if not on a list of mortality statistics (see further Eyður Ásmundsson 1986, 56).

A number of legends of the more horrifying kind, however, stunned times at which these rules broke down, when the road-map dissolved into uncertainty as a result of moral confusion and/or a deeply influential experience that simply refused to be forgotten. The legends in question have a strong element of true life experience about them; in other words, they appear to have their roots (or their fuel) in memoratas, but as with all memoratas strongly reflect the moral and religious values of the time (see Honko 1989). In short, they describe encounters between local people and the bodies of foreigners that had been washed up on the shoreline, a phenomenon both well-known and dreaded by all those who lived beside the sea, and especially people living in those areas where shipwrecks tended to take place (in the Swedish skerries, the west coasts of England, Scotland and Ireland, and all the North Atlantic islands for example).

On the surface, matters here should be very simple. As Pentakilasen has noted (1989, 131), those who had drowned at sea were trapped between

world as "dead without status", essentially both "innocent" and "unmetis
fied", because they had committed no crime, and yet received no Christian burial. Like the aðaldar examined by Pentakilasen (1989), they would never be at peace until they had been safely buried in a churchyard. Hence, as one Icelandic legend underlines, the general rule was that "If a people find a corpse, they must not walk by it without doing something to help them (al kyna nokkrar að þeim), otherwise the dead person will come for the person who walked by them and haunt them both day and night" (Jón Arason 1954-1961, IV, 438). In general, the implication was that the person who finds the body was obliged to do something to make sure that the body was moved to the legends both in Iceland and elsewhere in Scandinavia and the British Isles served to underline this idea for their listeners, as with the Icelandic account of "The Woman Who Walked Again" (Jón Arason 1954-1961, I, 221), and the legend of "Arna Hóskuldsdóttur and the Ghost" (Jón Arason 1954-1961, V, 458) where people are physically attacked by the corporeal ghosts of the dead people they have ignored on a path or bench for one reason or another.

Ever wore a violation of moral norms was if someone did not just ignore the washed up corpse, but also went as far as stealing something from it in the belief that such a gesture might refer to as the "dead man's share" of the dead man's belongings. For example, in accordance with the general belief that no part of the dead is removed from the body (be it a possession or a bone) is likely to disturb its eternal peace, the dead person almost always

1 See also Besp of Klaeborg 1972, 196-197 ("Díningar har tresnámlegsins á ngrein"), on how people in Halland, Sweden on horseback suddenly fell through a hidden opening. See also Ólafur Ólafsson 1986, 228 ("De is a kusin's perf, 'The kusin's reef, but victim's on a dream'" (196)). Not the account that accompanies this legend, and also Lindqvist 1979, 113 ("Borgarfjordhreir, 1939, 141 and Ingó Kynnason, 1937, 51" for examples of how also Lindqvist 1979, 113 (Vötnsbrú, Westfjords, 1931, 194) and Þórar Magnússon, 1937, 51 ("for example, of how").
comes back, now in the more drastic phase of an 'avenging ghost', as is legends like that of 'The Seaman's Gold Button' from Skåne.¹

In the Iceland of the past, however, it appears that things were simply not as clear cut as this. Indeed, legends regularly imply that in the case of foreign bodies, the rule of not stealing anything, and giving the corpse a Christian burial was far from enough to ensure peace of mind (and body). A brief examination of the 10,000 records in the new Sapungrunnar book database of Icelandic legends currently under construction in the University of Iceland reveals a number of interesting examples of legends concerning corpses that have been washed ashore, and a particularly intriguing division between those legends dealing with the bodies of icelanders (and Faroese, it would seem) and those which concern the bodies of people from other countries. The division in question underlines a particular characteristic of the way the icelanders viewed the world, and at the same time helps to explain the difficulties posed by foreign corpses.

The typical format of the Icelandic legends dealing with foreigners (apparently like those from the Faroes), is that those who have been drowned and washed up on shore go out of their way to contact their friends and relations (or even other Icelander) through the medium of dreams, informing them of where the body can be found, and thus ensuring that the body can be given a Christian burial before it is laid to rest among other family members in the bottom of the community. These legends (which typically only little about the actual appearance of the body) naturally underline the human aspect of these walking at home; the need for closure; and the desire to bring the lost family member back into the arms of his/her own. The same sort of idea is seen in legends elsewhere.²

In the case of foreign corpses, however, things are somewhat different. The 'otherness' of the foreigner (and the fear of it) is no better demonstrated than in the case of a legend known as 'The Haia Man of Skarð', which like a majority of legends of such encounters, comes from the south coast of Iceland. The legend begins as follows:

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It happened a long time ago that on one of the Medalland beaches, the body of a man was washed up on shore, a true of very strange appearance. He was wearing no clothes, but was covered with hair, and had claws on his fingers and toes. Some people say that two such men were washed up, both exactly the same. Even though everyone was a little frightened of these bodies, they were moved to a farm, and coffins made for them, as usually happens when such an event takes place. . . . The body was moved to Skarð for burial. However, when the funeral was about to take place, and people were about to sing the funeral hymns, they found themselves in difficulties, because every letter in their hymnals had turned back to front, and twisted into forms of bilabyness and vowels. People thought this very strange, and were supposed to be expected, and they were left to think of what to do. Little singing was done. Things went no better when the priest tried to say some words over the body. Even the blessing turned into curses as it left his lips, so he had to stop. Nonetheless, in spite of these wunders, the body still came to lie in consecrated soil, and had earth thrown on it by the priest as was planned.

Many guesses were made about who this washed up man might have been: that he might have been one of the Hound Fires, an evil spirit incorrigible, or an ape. Whatever it was, it was not long after this funeral that people started noticing ghostly activities taking place in the vicinity of the Skarð church. These got so bad that it was considered impossible to travel around there after dark. People saw the 'haary man'—as the recently buried body was called—pounding the church with planks from his coffin. Various other strange things also happened there . . . after the time of the funeral people say it has been very easy to get lost in this area. . . . (Einar Guðmundsson 1981, 16-17.)

Especially worth noting in this account is the emphasis on the foreign appearance; the elements of confusion in the church (they were lost about what to do—i.e. 'calf/paws'), echoed by the later comment that the being made it 'very easy to get lost in this area' ('mining villinger'); and the fact that even though the body was well treated, it still attacked the church in its uncertain manner, and caused regular problems for the local inhabitants. Furthermore, the way it is described and the satanic 'wonders' in the funeral service imply devilish (in the very least, heathen) connections, similar to those encountered by the helpless official Hans Wism, as described in his chilling account of the Þjóðtæknishfendi (Jón Arnórsson 1954-56, 1, 297-299).

Two accounts of another wandering ghost named 'Stigvelstrekki' (or 'Boon') (from Ænafljót) in the west of Iceland, have roots in a further encounter with a foreign body which caused deep troubles for a community (see Ólafur Davíðsson 1978, 1, 306-308; and Jón Thorstein 1971, 117-118).

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¹ See Kleisberg 1972, 197, from Skágará 1986, 94; see also Tony Konings 1993, V, 86 (legends 599-613) and 1994, V, 74-75 (legend 5723) from Víðey 1976, 109 and Birgisdóttir 1996, 130-131, and in Skógar (Guðmundsson and Ásmundsson; 1931-1949, 1: 79, and Jón Árnórs 1954- 1956, 1: 106-107) along with the other examples mentioned in this article.

² See Freysteinn M. Freysteinn (1940), Dv. 11-12, where the remains of a foreign seaman found through the assistance of a dead icelander. This legend echoes the general feeling of the Icelanders that the Easterns were less religious than people from other countries.

³ See Árnumars 1999, 5, for examples see Jón Árnórs 1954-1960, 1, LD 18-19; Guðmundsson 1981, 1, 41-44, 68; Gísli Jónsson 1938, 290-297; Sveinbjörn Jónsson 1938-1965, Dv. 82 and 191; Oskar Bjornsson and Jón Jónsson 1977, 31-44, and 157-158; and Hafli Guðmundsson and Ásmundur.
However, since the foot in one of the boots was "cliched" (i.e. "kreppet"), suggesting a deliberate attempt to hang on to the boot, the shepherd had to give up. In the earlier version (that of Olafur Davísson), he then hid the first boot, and the body was properly buried. The later account, however, attempts an explanation for why "Stigélabrockurr" should have remained at large in the area: it states that the shepherd compounded his crime in not small degree by despaching both the body and the boot back out to sea.

Of particular interest, however, is the way in which "Stigélabrockurr" haunts the shepherd in the first version, trying to force both him and his sheep away from home and high up onto the mountainside; in short into the mist and physically dangerous, uncharted "wild" where the spirit would presumably have more power and be able to revenge himself on his enemy.

Also worth considering is the fact that even though the central figure of the account breaks moral norms by attempting to steal in the earlier account, the body does actually receive Christian burial. Furthermore, if we consider the viewpoint of the reader in this legend (what Palmeford [1993, 143-167] refers to as the "identifiable" position), it is clear that we are expected to be on the side of the shepherd (who dies in neither account); indeed, any explander of the time (and not least a shepherd) would have been faced with a very difficult problem in deciding whether to take good boots or allow them to be buried with the body. Such feelings are well displayed by a comment in the later account that "since only the upper classes had such footwear in those days, the boy thought them very attractive." The same idea is shown in two other accounts of washed-up corpses which incidentally draw attention to their boots (see the accounts of the "Engineer from Aberdeen" below, and also the legend of "Flóða-Láth to in Jón Árnason 1954-61 1, 899-101; see note 14 below). That the common people of Scotland and Ireland would also have sympathy with this view is well demonstrated in the popular account of a wandering pirate who stole the boots off a frozen body that he found (see, for example, Bruford and MacDonald 1994, 244-250; and O'Sullivan 1968, 247-248; see also Tang Kristen 1897, 98-99; and 1934, 227).

Guilt haunts, but so do other things in the cases of these "foreign bodies", and not least their physical state which is commonly emphasised in the legends; understandably echoing the way in which they impressed themselves upon both the reina and the mind. This is particularly clearly in two more recent accounts of such encounters, that of the "German" found by two men near Selby in the south of England, and that of the "Engineer from Aberdeen", encountered by an official in Seyðisfjörður in east Iceland.

The first account, taken from the sound archives of the Arnamagnean Insti- tute (SAM 801827 EF; which may be related to another account from the western British Isles of two brothers named Stefán and Jón who (in the eyes of anyone with knowledge of the Nordic folk tradition) were probably "killing a boot" for trouble by taking a walk along an empty beach to go and play cards with a "another local farmer at Christmas time." On the way, they came across a "body which was boddy rotten; they could hardly tell what it was really", but apparently did not stop. What was worse is that, allegedly, one of the brothers (Stefán) gave it a kick, saying, "What on earth's that doing on land!" Furthermore, they made no mention of the presence of the body to the local farmer until after they had finished playing cards all night (though the body had been washed away again). After this, the two men began to be worried by "a being", which, whenever they were in these parts, tried to force them down to the sea. One brother moved away but the other, after an earlier who encounter with the spirit, was eventually found dead close to the point at which the body had been found after going out alone one night. Once again, it would seem that the spirit was disturbing the clear "roadmap" of the area, trying to bring the brothers into the "wild". Interestingly enough, however, while the guilt of the brothers shins out from between the lines, it is also clear that the storyteller has respect for them, too, only in terms of their strength but also their potential. The implication is that she under- stands Stefán's violent reaction to the body, which is one of general irritation at a disturbance, something very different to what he might have felt had it been the body of a lost local man.

The account of the "Engineer from Aberdeen" ("Véljótróðn frá Aber- deen"), Sigurður Nordal 1972, 11, 15-19; originally in Sigurður Nordal and Pórborgur Pólmundsson 1962, 1, 157-162) is of particular interest for this discussion because it is essentially a memoir written by a learned official (Axel Ólínuus) about an event that took place in Reyðsfjörður in July 1894, when a body was caught up in a line by some fishermen, just outside the town. Once again, the chilling account places a great deal of emphasis on the horrific appearance of the corpse which was brought in for autopsy:

1 Interestingly enough, the...heralded Huldjöft Jóhannsdóttir, makes no mention of the nationality of the body. On the tape, one is inspired by the persons encouraging his to speak. It might also have been noted that when asked about the nationality of the body, the shepherds did not know. The confusion may be given the wrong impression that the corpse is foreign.

2 The storyteller is not sure whether it was Christmas or Twelfth Night, but he also confirmed the event actually happened, hence (on the tape) occurs that the story was not told as a folk tale as local history.
The body was in such a condition that both of the hands had fallen off, the bare bones being all that was left of the upper part of the arm. All of the hair and flesh had been scraped off the head, so that all that was left was the bare skull. In the back, the muscles had been drawn away from the neck. Other wise, the rest of the body was relatively unaltered. This was because his clothes were still on him, and they seemed to have been soaked through with oil or grease. They were general Arab men's clothes, but on his feet he had worn brown boots (halbuniyya). Both his clothes and especially his boots suggested to me that he had been an engineer. On the lower buttons was the word "Abu" and, in one of his trouser pockets we found a single pence. His whole appearance was horrific, and there was such a stench from him that we thoroughly refused to have anything to do with him (Siganur Naqvi 1972, 16-17).

Worth noting here once again are both the boots and the buttons (which so often appear in these legends both from Iceland and abroad). Nonetheless, once again, the body is generally well treated. It is given a Christian burial and those who minister the man (on the boat) are brought to justice. Nonetheless, the engineer still does not go away. On the night of the funeral, its corporeal form returns to attack both the local chemist and the narrator, who stresses that:

his appearance was exactly the same as that of the body. The skull was naked and shining, the eye sockets hollow and empty. The teeth alone between the jaw, and the bright white bone hung down at his sides. I felt I could see that he was angry with me, and thought badly of me... (Siganur Naqvi 1972, 15).

The man tries speaking to the "ghost," but gets no answer. Instead, he threw his bare bones over my arms and said, half asked as I was. The being is then ejected from the room, but comes back the following two nights. Once again, the "dead without status" (except for foreigner) return to haunt people in spite of having been buried. As a means of explanation, it might be noted first of all, that, as mentioned, it is psychologically quite obvious why these figures should remain in the minds of those who found them. Interestingly enough, one Icelandic legend (Jon Arnason 1954-1956, V, 456-457) stresses that "ghosts don't look like they did in life, or as they did, but exactly as when they were found." It went on to tell how of a priest (another outsider) whose body had been found in a "mouse-eaten." The narrative appeared in that fashion to those who had found him. Another legend (containing a ghost called Lákví), tells of a man who found a body that was "worm-eaten with its intestines hanging out," and was so shocked that he fainted. He was then chased across the shore by this being, with its intestines flapping and its bones raging. It continued to haunt him in this form, in spite of receiving a burial (Jon Arnason 1954-1956, I, 458). In short, the apparition that serves as a complicating action (see Tangherius 1990, 55, and Nicolaussen 1961, 72) not only represents a territorial invasion and a threat to the individual, but also an unrequited aversion of the senses, the persistent later memories being explained by dominant folk belief (see further Holten 1989). These accounts are thus fine examples of desire and desire associated with the common environmental and social factors affecting both the active and passive traditions bearers (Tangherius 1990, 58).

The bodiless, however, also represent other kinds of invaders. First of all, for people like the Icelanders at the time (who were by necessity regularly making use of everything else that they found washed up on shores), being faced with the boots and other unused commodities on a body of this kind treated as an extremely difficult moral question: that of self survival in the present, or assumed "survival" after death. Such döggmsgar were also urgently consulted. Secondly, we have to remember the simple "allure" quality of the corpse which, wake those locals who had called out for help in dreams, are not actually coming home. For the people of the time, who were already wary of foreigners (as they "Hound-Turks" or uncircumcised Danes (or foreigners), they were in as a little "green men" might be for us. As several legends underline, these beings did not even speak the local language, thus preventing any sort of "name magic" for a nation that believed strongly in the power of words. The fact that they refuse to rest in the local churchyard, however, underlines yet another aspect of their difference. First of all, as any Iceland would have understood, they would have presumably wanted to rest elsewhere. They were not part of the local "family" which the graveyard represented for the community. In short, they might be back in the Christian community but when it came down to it, the "family" was still in Iceland was even more important, and these bodies simply did not belong there.

In short, one can perceive these legends as being essentially an expression of feelings about what people considered a foreign invasion of Icelandic territory. The main point is that the body is not used for anything positive but this being a use-name given to this was meant to. It is true that all of these fantastic stories are intended to speak to the general and not in fact (1954-1956, I, 458-459) (Helle Løkken), where the local priest actually managed to cure the ghost which was said to "exchange and born and decorative strength" in the language. In another legend (also the south of Iceland) the local magician Förkur hid it (Engelhard) in more successful when he wore some Swedish glove to it.
(mental and physical) The fact that the „unroutine“ ghosts proceeded to cause problems was not so much a matter of them gaining revenge for being mis treated, more an oral expression of the way in which their presence had, in numerous ways, dismantled and disturbed the peaceful and stable map that kept the community together, leading the local atray in more ways than one.

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Mulan Maternsdóttir, Jóns Crans og Aðalindur Johannesson

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Innhaldsyvirlit

Formelt ................................................................. 7
Tabell gratahistoria .................................................. 9

FOLKSLIGT ALMENNI
Olavur Christensen
Comments on Conceptualizations and Social Science
Research Methodologies ............................................. 18

Kurzem Biering
Visuel kulturer-dokumentasjon. Eller levende bølger av låtlighet
- i forskning, formidling og uddannelse .......................... 25

Ulf Palmfelt Dagens ros – ett lite stykke folklig opptattighet .... 33

KVÆDI OG SAGNER
Bo Aamquist
Huldrokona i barnmann, Kring ML 5070, Midwif to the Faires
i fiktisk tradisjon .......................................................... 44

Brynjulf Alver Reimund Kvedeland
Ole Crager og pinocchetekens herrar som innsamler av balladar
60

Terry Gunnell
An Invasion of Foreign Bodies. Legends of Washed Up Corpses
in Iceland ................................................................. 70

Sólfiv Hansen
Margreth kvædi i sagen og søga ..................................... 80

Svarar Sigurdardóttir
Pórnaldabjúlía .............................................................. 87

MENTAN OG SÓGA
Trygge og trøstevæsker
Arne Bugge Aamodt
Hvem er dit titulan? Et essay om 1780-årenes litteratudbatt .... 100

Nils-Arvid Bongsø
Boktrykker Håpnters bokdatabel og kistebrø
108

Jon Hjelmfjell Alþakinsson
„Hér hvíldi ég að líka...“ .............................................. 116

Sólar og skikkar
Carna Brevnes