

An Invasion of Foreign Bodies

Legends of Washed Up Corpses in Iceland¹

Terry Gunnell

Arguably for many listeners at the Icelandic *kvöldvaka* or the Faroese *kvöldsetan* in the past, folk legends served as a kind of map. On one side, they reminded people of placenames and routes, and gave historical depth to these 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 Levi-Strauss 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 Eyðun Andreassen 1986, 56).

A number of legends of the more horrifying kind, however, underline 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 memorats, but as with all memorats, 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 Pentikäinen has noted (1989, 131), those who had drowned at sea were trapped between

worlds as „dead without status“, essentially both „innocent“ and „unsatisfied“, because they had committed no crime, and yet received no Christian burial. Like the *útburðir* examined by Pentikäinen (1989), they would never be at peace until they had been safely buried in a churchyard.² 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 (*að hlynnu nokkuð að þeim*), otherwise the dead person will come for the person who walked by them and haunt them both day and night“ (Jón Árnason 1954-1961, V, 458).³ 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 a churchyard, in the very least by informing the local authorities. Various 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 Árnason 1954-1961, I, 232), and the legend of „Árni Höskuldsson and the Ghost“ (Jón Árnason 1954-1961, V, 458) where people are physically attacked by the corporeal ghosts of the dead people they have ignored on a path or beach for one reason or another.⁴ Other more positive moral tales tell of material rewards gained by those who have aided such corpses (see for example Klintberg 1972, 196-197; trans. in Lindow 1978, 185; and Bruford and MacDonald 1994, 310-312).

Even worse 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 form of clothes or money. In such cases, in accordance with the general belief that any part of the dead that is removed from the body (be it a possession or a bone) is likely to disturb its eternal peace, the dead person almost always

² See also Bengt af Klintberg 1972, 196-197 („Drängen bar stranddöingen på ryggen“), on how people in Halland „talade om hur svårt det var med stranddöingar. De skreko: ‘Hjälp oss i kristen jord’. De kunde höra, hur vattnet rann av dem“ (196). Note the account that accompanies this legend, and also Lindow 1978, 186; Bergstrand 1964, 189-190; and Tang Kristensen, 1897, 97, for examples of how bringing bodies to a churchyard was seen as sufficient. See also Bödker 1958, 26-27 (translated in Simpson 1988, 98) for yet another example telling how a body needs help over a wall into a churchyard. As Jacqueline Simpson has informed me, the same idea is strongly reflected in the accounts told of a nineteenth-century priest named R. S. Hawker, who was known for the way he did his best to collect all the various mutilated remains (often mere „gobbets“ of flesh) of bodies washed up on the shores of his stormy Cornish parish, in order to give them burial in his churchyard. (Apparently such objects had previously been thrown into a pit on the shore, or left to float back out to sea: see Brendon 1975, 122; and Baring-Gould 1949, 115). Once again, the belief behind all of these activities is the same. As the priest wrote: „All I have read comes back upon the mind – the Rabbinical tenet that until the body interred the separated soul can find no rest“ (letter to Mrs. Watson, dated 16 Nov 1862, quoted in Brendon 1975, 131). As Bo Almqvist has noted (1999, 3) however, in Iceland there existed in some places a belief that the sea itself was consecrated and that those who drowned at sea were already „blessed“. Nonetheless, this naturally did little to ease the minds of those still missing their loved ones at home.

comes back, now in the more drastic shape of an „avenging ghost“, as in legends like that of „The Seaman’s Gold Buttons“ from Skåne.⁵

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 c. 10,000 records in the new *Sagnagrunnur* database of Icelandic legends currently under construction at 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 seem⁶) 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 Icelanders (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 Icelanders) 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 bosom of the community. These legends (which typically say little about the actual appearance of the body) naturally underline the human anguish of those waiting 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.⁷

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 Hairy Man of Skarði“, which like a majority of legends of such encounters, comes from the south coast of Iceland. The legend begins as follows:

⁵ See Klintberg 1972, 197, trans. in Simpson 1988, 94; see also Tang Kristensen 1897, V, 98-99 (legends 399-401); and 1934, V, 74-75 (legend 227); Lindow 1978, 186 and Bergstrand 1964, 189-190, and in Iceland, Helgi Guðmundsson and Arngrímur Bjarnason, 1933-1949, I, 29; and Jón Árnason 1954-1961 I, 509-510, along with the other examples mentioned in this article.

⁶ See Þorsteinn M. Jónsson 1964-65, IV, 11-12, where the remains of a Faroese seaman are found through the assistance of a dead Icelandic. This legend echoes the general feeling of the Icelanders that the Faroese were closer relations than people from other countries.

⁷ See Almqvist 1999, 3. For examples, see Jón Árnason 1954-1961, I, 224; Einar Guðmundsson 1981, I, 43-44; Jóh. Örn Jónsson 1956, 269-270; Þorsteinn M. Jónsson 1964-1965, IV, 12 and 191; Oddur Björnsson and Jónas Jónasson 1977, 31, 44, and 157-158; and Helgi Guðmundsson and Arngrímur

It happened a long time ago that on one of the Meðalland beaches, the body of a man was found washed up on shore, a man 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 Skarði 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 blasphemy and curses. People thought this very strange, as can be expected, and they were lost about 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 wonders, 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-Turks, an evil spirit incarnate, or an ape. Whatever it was, it was not long after this funeral that people started noting ghostly activities taking place in the vicinity of the Skarði church. These got so bad that it was considered impossible to travel around there after dark. People saw the „hairy 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 are the emphasis on the foreign appearance; the elements of confusion in the church („they were lost about what to do“: i.e. „ráðþrota“), echoed by the later comment that the being made it „very easy to get lost in this area“ („mjög villulegt“); and the fact that even though the body was well treated, it still attacked the church in no 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 hapless official Hans Wium, as described in his chilling account of the Hjaltaastaðir fiend (Jón Árnason 1954-1961, I, 297-299).

Two accounts of another wandering ghost named „Stígvélabrokkur“ (or „Boots“) from Árnafjörður, 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, I, 306-308; and Jón Thorensen 1971, 117-118).

However, since the foot in one of the boots was „clenched“ (i.e. „krepptur“, suggesting a deliberate attempt to hang on to the boot), the shepherd had to give up. In the earlier version (that of Ólafur Davíðsson), he then hid the first boot, and the body was properly buried. The later account, however, attempts an explanation for why „Stígvélabrokkur“ should have remained at large in the area: it states that the shepherd compounded his crime in not small degree by despatching both the body and the boot back out to sea.

Of particular interest, however, is the way in which „Stígvélabrokkur“ 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 misty 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 Palmenfelt [1993, 143-167] refers to as the *identificant* position), it is clear that we are expected to be on the side of the shepherd (who dies in neither account): indeed, any Icelander 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 innocently draw attention to their boots (see the accounts of the „Engineer from Aberdeen“ below, and also the legend of „Flóða-Labbi“ in Jón Árnason 1954-1961 I, 509-510: see note 14 below). That the common people of Scotland and Ireland would also have sympathised with this view is well demonstrated in the popular account of a wandering piper 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 Kristensen 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 imprinted themselves upon both the retina and the mind. This is particularly clearly in two more recent accounts of such encounters, that of the „German“ found by two men near Selvógur in the south of Iceland,⁸ and that of the „Engineer from Aberdeen“, encountered by an official in Seyðisfjörður in east Iceland.

* Interestingly enough, the storyteller herself, Þjóðbjörg Jóhannsdóttir, makes no mention of the nationality of the body. On the tape, this is implied by the person encouraging her to speak. It might be noted that the storyteller apparently heard the story from Vilhjálmur Þórðarson, who had heard it from his father.

The first account, taken from the sound archives of the Arnamagean Institute (SÁM 89/ 1827 EF; which may be related to another account from the western fjords⁹), tells of two brothers named Stefán and Jón who (in the eyes of anyone with knowledge of the Nordic folk tradition) were probably asking for trouble by taking a walk along an empty beach to go and play cards with another local farmer at Christmas time.¹⁰ On the way, they came across „a body which was badly 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 (by which time the body had been washed away again).¹¹ After this, the two men began to be troubled by „a being“, which, whenever they were in these parts, tried to force them down towards the sea. One brother moved away, but the other, after an earlier solo 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 „road-map“ of the area, trying to bring the brothers into the „wild“. Interestingly enough, however, while the guilt of the brothers shines out from between the lines, it is also clear that the storyteller has respect for them, not only in terms of their strength but also their potential. The implication is that she understands 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“ („Vélstjórinn frá Aberdeen“: Sigurður Nordal 1972, II, 15-19; originally in Sigurður Nordal and Þórbergur Þórðarson 1962, I, 157-162) is of particular interest for this discussion because it is essentially a memorat written by a learned official (Axel Tulinius) about an event that took place in Seyðisfjörður in July 1894, when a body was caught up in a line by some fishermen, just outside the town.¹² Once again, the chilling account places a great deal of emphasis on the horrific appearance of the corpse which was brought in for autopsy:

⁹ See Helgi Guðmundsson and Arngrímur Bjarnason (1933-1949, I, 29), which also tells of two brothers, now named Sigurður and Jón, who were haunted and whose descendants were forced from their land after the brothers had come across a body on the beach which they had given a shallow grave on the spot. The account tries to explain the events by suggesting they took a cardigan with silver buttons off the body. No mention is made of the nationality of the body, but the implication is that it was foreign.

¹⁰ The storyteller is not sure whether it was Christmas or Twelfth Night, but she is convinced the event actually happened, stressing (as often occurs) that the story was not told as a folk tale but 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 arms. All of the hair and flesh had been scraped off the head, so that all that was left was the bare skull. In the same way, all of the muscles had been eaten away from the neck. Otherwise, the rest of the body was relatively undamaged. This was because his clothes were still on him, and they seemed to have been soaked through with oil or grease. They were general seaman's clothes, but on his feet he had pointed boots (*fjaðrastíg véll*). Both his clothes and especially his boots suggested to me that he had been an engineer. On the trouser buttons was the word Aberdeen, and in one of his trouser pockets we found a single penny. His whole appearance was horrible, and there was such a stench from him that we thoroughly disliked having to come anywhere close to him (Sigurður Nordal 1972, I, 16-17).

Worth noting here once again are the mention of 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 murdered 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 shone between the jaws, and the bright white bones hung down at his sides. I felt I could see that he was angry with me, and thought badly of me... (Sigurður Nordal 1972, I, 18).

The man tries speaking to the „ghost“, but gets no answer. Instead „he threw his bare bones over my arms and around me, half naked 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 as foreigners) return to haunt people in spite of having been buried.¹³ 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 (Jón Árnason 1954-1961 V, 456-457) stresses that „ghosts don't look like they did in life, or as they died, but exactly as when they were found“. It goes on to tell how of a priest (another outsider) whose body had been found in a „mouse-eaten“ state regularly appeared in that fashion to those who had found him. Another legend (con-

cerning a ghost called Láki¹⁴), 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 ringing“. It continued to haunt him in this form, in spite of receiving a burial (Jón Árnason 1954-1961, I, 458). In short, the apparition that serves as a complicating action (see Tangherlini 1990, 55; and Nicolaisen 1987, 72) not only represents a territorial invasion, but also an unrequested invasion of the senses, the persistent later memories then being explained by dominant folk belief (see further Honko 1989). These accounts are thus fine examples of „fears and desires associated with the common environmental and social factors affecting both the active and passive tradition bearers“ (Tangherlini 1990, 58).

The bodies, however, also represent other kinds of invasions. First of all, for people like the Icelanders of 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 usable commodities on a body of this kind created an extremely difficult moral question: that of self survival in the present, or assumed „survival“ after death. Such dilemmas were also unrequested. Secondly, we have to remember the simple „alien“ quality of the corpses which, unlike 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 (be they „Hound-Turks“ or unscrupulous Danish merchants), they were as alien as a „little green man“ 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.¹⁵ The fact that they refuse to rest in the local churchyard¹⁶ however, underlines yet other aspects of their difference. First of all, as any Icelander 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“ community 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

¹⁴ Even though the ghost is called „Láki“, or „þorlákur“ by those who later encounter it, everything points to this being a pet name given to what was essentially an outsider.

¹⁵ See the account of the „Engineer from Aberdeen“ above, where the narrator describes how he attempted to speak to the ghost; see also Jón Árnason 1954-1961, I, 509-510 („Flóða-Labbi“) where the local priest initially unsuccessfully tries to exorcise the ghost which is clad in „tails and boots and decorative uniform“ in ten languages. In another legend from the south of Iceland, the famous magician Eiríkur frá Vogsósum is more successful when he sends some Swedish ghosts off to

(mental and physical). The fact that the „unsatisfied“ ghosts proceeded to cause problems was not so much a matter of them gaining revenge for being mistreated, 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 locals astray in more ways than one.

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Innihaldsyvirlit

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Formæli | 7 |
| Tabula gratulatoria | 9 |

FÓLKSLIGT ALMENNI

| | |
|---|----|
| <i>Ólavur Christiansen</i> Comments on Conceptualisations and Social Science Research Methodologies | 18 |
| <i>Karsten Biering</i> Visuel kulturel dokumentation. Eller levende billeder af dagliglivet – i forskning, formidling og undervisning | 25 |
| <i>Ulf Palménfelt</i> Dagens ros – ett litet stycke folklig offentlighet | 33 |

KVÆÐI OG SAGNIR

| | |
|---|----|
| <i>Bo Almqvist</i> Huldukonan í barnsneyð. Kring ML 5070, <i>Midwife to the Fairies</i> , í færøisk tradition | 44 |
| <i>Brynjulf Alver Reidmund Kvideland</i> Olea Crøger og pinonerinnsatsen hennar som innsamlar av balladar <i>Terry Gunnell</i> An Invasion of Foreign Bodies. Legends of Washed Up Corpses in Iceland | 60 |
| <i>Sólfinn Hansen</i> Margretu kvæði í søgn og søgu | 80 |
| <i>Svavar Sigmundarson</i> Pórnaldarpula | 87 |

MENTAN OG SØGA

| | |
|--|-----|
| Trúgý og trúarviðurskifti <i>Arne Bugge Amundsen</i> Hvem eier ritualene? Et essay om 1780-årenes liturgidebatt | 100 |
| <i>Nils-Arvid Bringéus</i> Boktryckare Høpffners bildbibel och kistebrev | 108 |
| <i>Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson</i> „Hér hvíldi ég mig líka...“ | 116 |

Síðir og skikkir

Carsten Bragdon