Caietele Echinox, vol. 21, 2011: *Fantômes, Revenants, Poltergeists, Mânes*

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Revenants in Medieval Icelandic Literature

ABSTRACT
In this article I discuss the meaning of revenants in medieval Icelandic literature with particular reference to the numerous examples of haunting in *Eyrbyggja saga*. Using an approach informed by Greimassian semiotics and psychoanalysis, I identify an unease about the inherited power that is played out in the saga narrative.

KEYWORDS
Icelandic Sagas; Revenants; Psychoanalysis; History; Semiotics.

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In his impressive study of ghosts in the Middle Ages, *Fantômes et revenants au Moyen Âge* from 1986, Claude Lecouteux makes extensive use of the medieval Icelandic sagas. Despite Iceland's marginal position in medieval culture – or perhaps because of it – the numerous accounts portraying revenants in the sagas are representative of a deeper layer of beliefs, originating in pre-Christian times, and common, at least to the peoples of Northern Europe. The dead could return to life, not as spectres or spirits, but as the same physical beings they were before their death. However, they did not come back quite as their former selves, but as much more hostile and dangerous creatures than before their death. More importantly, the belief in revenants is very persistent and therefore reveals a coherent attitude towards the dead that the Church is progressively replacing with its own representation of the Afterlife throughout the Middle Ages.[1]

In this paper, I would like to focus on Iceland and consider why revenants do not appear in every type of medieval Icelandic literature, but mainly in two genres: the settlement stories, collected in the different versions of *Landnámabók* (Book of Settlements) and especially in the so-called *Íslendingasögur*, named in English 'family sagas', 'sagas of Icelanders' and, more recently, 'sagas about early Icelanders'.[2] In the wider group of sagas, comprising among others stories of Nordic kings, Christian saints, knights from Continental Europe and contemporary Icelanders, these two types of narratives are characterized by the fact that they deal with the origins of the society to which their writers and original public belong.[3] Indeed, most of these texts were composed in the thirteenth century, though some may have existed already in the preceding century. However, they all take place in a determined time-span, ranging from the discovery and settlement of Iceland in the late ninth century to its Conversion to Christianity in the early eleventh. For at least three reasons, this is a crucial time in thirteenth-century Icelanders representation of the past. The first is that the settlement of the hitherto uninhabited country three to four centuries earlier explained to a considerable extent the way power and wealth were still shared in the country, at least around the year 1200. The second is that these stories told where the Icelanders originally came from, i.e. primarily from Norway. The third reason is that the Conversion brought the inhabitants of this isolated country in the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean into the fold of Christian peoples. One could therefore say without any hesitation that these particular texts are – more than any other in the vast corpus of medieval Icelandic literature – preoccupied with the identity of the Icelanders. They seem also to be particularly interested in revenants.

In the introduction to his book on ghosts in the Middle Ages, Jean-Claude Schmitt, while recognizing the value of research such as Claude Lecouteux's, says it is also important to understand the social conditions contemporary to the telling or transcribing of these tales.[4] This is what I would like to attempt in this study of revenants in the *Íslendingasögur* or sagas about early Icelanders. It is my opinion that the fact that the living dead are more frequent in these sagas than others is closely related to historical developments in Iceland during the thirteenth century, a time of great transformation in Icelandic society which entailed at least a challenge to identities if not their redefinition.

These sagas are around thirty in number and not all equally interesting from my perspective. In the interest of brevity, I will focus on the one which has the greatest number of revenants and only in my concluding remarks broaden my perspective to the genre as a whole to reflect on its historicity. Its title is *Eyrbyggja saga*, which has been translated as *The Saga of the People of Eyri*. I will begin by focussing on a particular passage before considering structural features which have eluded scholars but which seem to me deeply relevant for understanding the role of revenants in this literature.

Prosecuting ghosts

The passage in question is in chapters 50 to 55 of the saga.[5] The same summer that Icelanders decide to convert to Christianity at Thingvellir, i.e. in the year AD 1000, a boat arrives to the peninsula of Snæfellsnes on the west coast of Iceland, with aboard a woman named Thorgunna. She owns some beautiful objects which fuel the desire of Thurid, wife to Thorodd, farmer at Fródá on the north coast of Snæfellsnes. She manages to convince Thorgunna to spend the winter in their home, believing that in time she will be able to persuade her to part with some of her treasures. Thorgunna insists on working for her keep.

Near the end of summer, the whole household is out drying hay, when a dark cloud floats in from the sea and releases a shower of blood over the people of Fródá. In the evening Thorgunna falls ill and calls Thorodd, the farmer, to her bedside. She tells him that she does not believe she will survive this illness, and he can dispose of her belongings after her death, with the exception of her exceptionally beautiful bed-clothes. She insists that they be burned and also asks Thorodd to arrange for her remains to be buried at Skálholt, site of the future bishopric of Iceland. She wants a proper Christian funeral, and this is impossible, since no priests have arrived in the area yet.

Thorodd promises to fulfil her dying wishes and Thorgunna passes away. Thorodd is about to burn the bed-clothes when his wife Thurid arrives and cajoles him into leaving the prettiest parts of them for her. Thorodd sends his men to bring the body to Skálholt. On their way, they spend a night at a farm where they receive nothing to eat. In the middle of the night they are woken up by sounds from the pantry. Thorgunna is standing there naked and preparing a meal for them. The next morning the men continue their trip and Thorgunna is buried at Skálholt.

When they come back to Fródá, the wonders start there. The first one is the appearance, during the evening, of an *urðarmáni* (moon of destiny) on the wall of the main hall of the farm. Then the shepherd starts to behave strangely and dies shortly afterwards. He will not remain in his grave and one night he assaults another member of the household who dies and also comes back. Four other persons die in this way. Now a strange sound is heard from the pile of dried fish, as if someone or something is eating it, but no explanation can be found for this. Thorodd decides he needs to more dried fish and takes five men with him on a boat to a place where he has some stored. While they are away, a seal's head appears in the fire-place. A servant tries to make it go away by hitting it on the head but it only rises higher and stares at Thorgunna's bed-clothes. It is not until Thurid's son, the young Kjartan, comes and bludgeons it with a heavy hammer that it disappears.

Meanwhile, Thorodd's boat has capsized and all six men drown. Kjartan and his mother invite the neighbours to a funeral feast, to which Thorodd and his men also come. The members of the household are not dismayed, the author ascribing this to their only being recently converted to Christianity. However, after the funeral the dead men do not go away and the six who had died earlier also join the group. Every night, twelve 'living dead' sit around the fire in the main hall to the severe discomfort of the survivors.

Now there is a third apparition: a black and furry tail protrudes from the pile of dried fish. The people of the household try to pull it out but it will not budge until it slithers back into the heap at so much speed that it burns the people's hands. All the flesh of the fish has been eaten away and only the skin is left. There is a new series of six deaths. Then Kjartan decides to go seek the advice of his uncle Snorri who is a chieftain (*goði*). Snorri sends him back to Fródá with his son, Thord, and a priest that has just arrived. The priest is to say mass, confess the household members and purify it with water, whereas Thord and Kjartan are to burn Thorgunna's bed-clothes and prosecute the ghosts in a trial to be held outside the main entrance of the farm (*dyradómr*). All of this is done, and the ghosts are obliged to leave the premises, ending the strange happenings at Fródá.

Despite the complexity of this part of *Eyrbyggja saga*, it is quite well constructed. After the description of Thorgunna's arrival and death at Fródá, the narrative is structured around the promises made to her. The first one is fulfilled with the transport of her body to Skálholt and her apparition on the way there. The second one is broken which seems to be the reason for the subsequent events at Fródá. There is a pronounced ternary structure in this latter account: three strange apparitions and three sets of six people die. One of the many intriguing aspects of the passage is that it contains an unusually high amount of elements which are unique in medieval Icelandic literature.[6]

In his study of the Fróðá episode, Kjartan G. Ottósson examines each of its elements and discusses its likely origin. His general conclusion is that some are deeply rooted in folklore and even pagan beliefs, while others might be memories of real events, albeit transformed through oral transmission. He also detects considerable Christian influence, both when it comes to individual elements, as well as in what seems to have been the saga-author's attitude to the events he is portraying and the meaning he ascribes to them.[7] Ottósson thus considers the episode as partly traditional and partly authored to fit contemporary needs and beliefs, an attitude which is difficult to contest, even though in the following I will try to add a few more weights on the scales of contemporary authoring.

There seems to be a consensus among scholars that a significant part of the episode's contents are to be ascribed to traditional beliefs.[8] However, a new note was struck recently when John D. Martin published a stimulating article in which he endeavours to read the Fróðá episode from the perspective of continental medieval thinking on phenomena such as ghosts. He builds on Schmitt's study of medieval concepts of ghosts and revenants, on the one hand Saint Augustine's dismissal of ghosts and revenants as images without any corporeal substance, on the other Gregory the Great who allows for the return of the dead in certain circumstances.[9] Martin argues that these ideas would have been well known in Iceland by the time *Eyrbyggja saga* was written and says about the ghosts at Fróðá that "these visitors from beyond the grave conform to distinctly high medieval Christian ideas about the dead that were current on the continent throughout much of the period from 1000 to 1500".[10]

Both Schmitt's and Martin's reading are an encouragement to those who wish to view *Eyrbyggja saga*, its construction and its meaning, in the context of Icelandic culture and society in the period in which it was written, i.e. the thirteenth century, instead of the period in which the events it describes are supposed to take place, the late tenth and early eleventh century.

There is some evidence that the Fróðá episode can be read as such an ideological construct. I will take as a point of departure one of Kjartan G. Ottósson's observations in his book on the episode. It concerns the way the revenants are forced to leave by prosecuting them in a "dyradómr", i.e. a trial held outside the main entrance to the farm. *Eyrbyggja saga* is the only saga of the corpus which mentions this form of trial, and also the only one where law is used to counter a supernatural phenomenon. Indeed, Ottósson knows only of one record of another occurrence of legal action against ghosts in the European Middle Ages.[11] In 1913, Alfred Jacoby suggested a parallel between the account in *Eyrbyggja saga* and a fifteenth-century record from a German monastery where the abbot prosecuted successfully a demon who had been harassing the nuns.[12] Jacoby therefore placed the Fróðá episode in the context of the Christian practice of exorcism, but Ottósson rejected this on the grounds that there is evidence from pagan times of dead men being prosecuted, though in these examples they had not returned from the dead. He also claimed a significant difference between the German example where the procedure involves members of the clergy and a cleric, and the Icelandic one which involves laymen.[13] His arguments seem rather weak, since exorcism was practiced both on clerics and laymen in the Middle Ages and such rituals would have been known in Iceland by the time *Eyrbyggja* was written. It is therefore just as likely that the author of the saga had them in mind rather than vague memories of pagan practices.

Ottósson also has trouble explaining why the supernatural events at Fródá needed to be ended by such a complex series of measures. Indeed, the bed-clothes are burned, a priest has the inhabitants confess, sings mass and sprinkles holy water over the dwellings, and Snorri's son and nephew prosecute the ghosts. Ottósson's approach is to postulate a progressive evolution of the narrative through oral transmission. The burning of the bed-clothes is obviously an intrinsic part of the narrative, since it takes on the folk-tale form of a spell or a curse cast upon an object. However, as has already been said, Ottósson believes the prosecution of the ghosts has roots in pagan practices. He also thinks that the actions of the priest might be a late addition to the narrative due to Christian influence. Nothing in the text itself indicates however that the Fródá episode contains several layers. Indeed, the different aspects of the method used to rid the farm of the ghosts and other supernatural events are wholly integrated, since they are presented as instructions given by Snorri, which are carried out by his son, his nephew and the priest.

It seems preferable to look at the episode as an integrated whole in light of the context of its time of writing, sometime between 1230 and 1270.[14] What strikes me as the most salient feature of the method used to put an end to the supernatural events is the distribution of the roles. The son and nephew of the chieftain use legal ritual, whereas the priest uses church ritual. Thus the representatives of each social group have their own area of action. This strikes a familiar note to anyone who has studied the conflicts between Icelandic chieftains and the clergy in the first decades of the thirteenth century, since the strain on their relationship had so much to do with different interpretations of their sphere of action within society. This problem was of course not particular to Iceland, since it reflected a general trend within western Christendom in the period, when the Church was striving to increase its hold on society against the resistance of lay rulers.[15]

Privilegium fori

One of the most dramatic chapters in the history of the struggle between clergy and laity in Iceland took place in the first decade of the thirteenth century, when a violent conflict broke out in northern Iceland between the high clergy and the chieftains. On the clerical side, the main protagonist was the newly elected bishop of Hólar, Gudmund Arason (1160-1237). Leading the chieftains was the head of a family of chieftains from Skagafjord, Kolbeinn Tumason (d. 1208). There were two objects of discord. One concerned the resources belonging to the see of Hólar, which the chieftains felt they should control, since they did not trust Gudmund's ability to manage them. The other involved the respective roles of the Church and chieftains in legal matters.[16] The particular issue which sparked the conflict was the *privilegium fori*, i.e. sole ecclesiastical jurisdiction over members of the clergy. It meant a serious limitation to the power of the chieftains, who until then had been able to bring lawsuits against clerics and extract fines from them. Kolbeinn wanted to prosecute a priest in his area but Gudmund opposed this, threatening Kolbeinn with excommunication. Progressively the situation degenerated and at one point the bishop's men began infringing even more on the chieftains' area of competence by extracting fines from laymen.[17] The chieftains would not tolerate this and attacked Hólar driving the bishop and his entourage away from the episcopal see. For Gudmund this was the beginning of a long exile, and he never really gained control of his see again.

The question arises whether the way the supernatural events at Fródá are brought to an end is a commentary on the power struggle between clergy and laity in Iceland. As has already been mentioned, the saga as a whole can be seen as showing the power of lay chieftains in a globally positive light. It is worth looking at its beginning from this point of view. Chapter 4 tells how Snorri's ancestor, Thorolf Mostrarskegg, settled the peninsula of Thorsnes, built a temple and became a *hofgoði* (temple priest). All the inhabitants of the region were to pay a tribute to the temple and follow the *hofgoði* in any endeavour, "in the same way as *þingmenn* follow their chieftains" in the thirteenth century.[18] This would mean that the chieftain or *goði*, as an important lay institution of the Christian period, had its roots in the pagan past, when political and religious leadership were in the hands of the same social group. The historical value of this account has been disputed.[19] It does seem likely though, given the fact that the word *goði* is related to *goð* (e. "god"), that the power of the chieftains had historical roots in their role in pagan practices.

Of relevance to the argument proposed here, however, is that this account comforts the idea that the saga expresses the way the lay chieftains of the thirteenth century grounded their social identity in history. Another text is of interest in this context, the so-called "Úlfljótslög" or "laws of Úlfljótr". It purports to give a picture of Icelandic law at the time of the establishment of the Alþingi in 930. However, it is found in the Hauksbók version of *Landnámabók* which is from the first years of the fourteenth century, as well as in other late manuscripts. Since it is not in the Sturlubók version, many scholars believe it to derive from the lost Styrmisbók, attributed to the cleric Styrmir Kárason (d. 1245), who was associated with the Sturlung family. This places the origin of "Úlfljótslög" in the early thirteenth century. Other scholars believe them to be authentic and thus even older. The majority opinion, however, is that it is a learned attempt from around 1200 to reconstruct pagan law, but reflecting contemporary concerns.[20] Though not directly related to the chapter of *Eyrbyggja saga* which describes the role of the pagan priest, the passage concerning the "Úlfljótslög" also tells of the chieftains of pagan times. In addition to what the saga says about the toll paid to the temple, this passage says that the pagan chieftains were chosen "because of their wisdom and sense of justice" and that it was their role to "nominate juries at meetings" and to "direct lawsuits" ("stýra sakferli").[21]

Whatever the historical authenticity of the "Úlfljótslög", they certainly express the chieftains' own opinion of their role in legal matters, a role they were prepared to defend even at the cost of excommunication. It is therefore interesting that *Eyrbyggja saga* underlines the legal prerogatives of the chieftains in opposition to the clergy when describing the way the wonders of Fródá are ended. It is tempting to see both texts as expressing an ideology of the Icelandic chieftainship in the first decades of the thirteenth century. The chieftains define themselves as holding an exclusivity on prosecution in society and base this monopoly on some kind of moral superiority („vit ok réttlæti“), as in the "Úlfljótslög" passage. In the Fródá episode, they are also given power over supernatural creatures, a power which seems to be part of their genealogical inheritance as can be seen in the way the apparitions fear Kjartan, Snorri's nephew, more than anybody else in the household (147 [173]).

This reference to the supernatural may seem on the surface quite archaic but it can also be seen to relate with what was going on in medieval society in general in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries when, in the words of Peter Brown, there was "a redrawing of the boundaries between the sacred and the profane" and, as Richard W. Southern has shown, the lay aristocracy was being deprived of its claim to a supernatural foundation to their power by a Church which was becoming increasingly assertive of its monopoly of the sacred.[22] In the Fródá episode, the power of the chieftains to use the law transcends the world of the living by applying also to that of the dead. This gives it a metaphysical dimension that underlines the identity of this particular social class as superior to commoners and in opposition to the clergy.[23]

The shape of the saga

We will now focus on a different aspect of the saga, the relationship between its multi-stranded narrative structure and the portrayal of its main character, the chieftain Snorri. One could indeed say that the saga is paradoxical in its construction, since on the one hand it tells the story of one character, of how his ancestors founded the society in which he evolves and of his subsequent rise to power in his region. On the other, the saga has an exceptionally meandering structure, going from one plot-line to another, often developing what seem to be parallel stories in which the main character has only a secondary role. It is useful to give an overview of the main ideas developed in earlier work on t he structure of *Eyrbyggja saga* before proposing a different approach.

Theodore M. Andersson was unable to fit it into the structural modes he brought to light for most of the *Íslendingasögur*.[24] Using a different approach, Carol Clover argued for a continental aesthetic, citing *Eyrbyggja* as an example of a multi-stranded narrative, comparable to the complex prose cycles written in French in the thirteenth century.[25] A third view of the composition of the saga was developed by Lee M. Hollander, who made a case for a relationship between the construction of *Eyrbyggja* and the way skaldic poetry was composed. Hollander focussed especially on the intricate interlacing of the sentences in the skaldic stanza, woven into the framework provided by the constraint of metrical rules and metaphorical speech. He saw it as a model for the meandering narrative of the saga, wandering from one plot to another and with no obvious central character.[26]

Vésteinn Ólason recognized the importance of the account of the Conversion in chapter 49 as a structuring feature of the saga.[27] However, he also argued that its main organizing principle is the figure of Snorri, whom he believed to be the central character. Quoting Einar Ólafur Sveinsson's, he calls *Eyrbyggja* 'a story which describes increasing organization, increasing order, at the same time as it tells of the growing power of Snorri'. Indeed, the saga begins by telling of several generations of Snorri's forefathers, what brings them to settle in Iceland, and their establishment as *hofgoðar* on the northern coast of Snæfellsnes. There is a decisive break in the saga when we are told extensively about how Snorri prevails in a conflict with his uncle over control of the family estate. After this, a series of more or less interwoven and interconnected plots are developed in which Snorri is sometimes the main character and sometimes a more minor player. However, his ascendancy over the area increases as time passes, and the final chapters revolve around him.

Despite the multitude of separate but interwoven plots in the saga, there is a guiding force within the narrative and it is that of society ordering itself around and under the influence of the chieftain Snorri. Ólason relates this view of Icelandic society in the tenth and eleventh centuries to the social reality of the thirteenth, when overlords were acquiring control over larger and larger areas of the country.[28]

I agree that the saga deals with chieftainship and the struggle for power within a community and that this theme is one of the unifying principles binding the different elements together. A remark of the narrator about Snorri in chapter 15 makes this clear:

> He maintained a temple and was therefore known as Snorri the Godi. He became a prominent chieftain, but his power also occasioned envy since there were many who believed that their lineage gave them no lesser claim to leadership than his, and rather more in terms of their strength and their proven valour [88].

In terms of Greimassian narratology,[29] this can be seen as the establishment of a narrative contract between the author and audience of the saga. It will tell us how Snorri fares in his task of maintaining himself or growing as a great chieftain despite the opposition he is sure to meet given the circumstances described in this passage: he has rivals who are just as nobly born as he is but are more powerful, and whose strength and readiness to achieve their ends through battle have been proven.

We have a distribution of what Greimas calls actantial roles, where Snorri is the subject. The object of his quest is to safeguard or increase his status as a great chieftain. His opponents are the other chieftains of the area, among them Arnkell, Björn of Breidavik. His helpers are his own innate qualities, i.e. his determination and his capacity for planning strategies and deceiving his opponents that already have come to light in the preceding chapter of the saga, when he tricks his step-father into selling him his father's land for a small price. The sender is not mentioned explicitly in the saga, nor is the receiver. However, as the only male member of his lineage of his generation, one could say that Snorri is 'programmed' to become a chieftain by his ancestors who founded the family's power in the area, as the saga tells us in detail in its first chapters.

This is an implicit and very important theme in the saga, as will become clear in the course of this paper. Moreover, Snorri is himself the ancestor of many of the most powerful chieftain families in the thirteenth century, most prominently the Sturlungs, who wielded Snorri's chieftainship in the Dalir region. One could therefore say that the senders are Snorri's ancestors, and the receivers i.e. the beneficiaries of his quest for the object, many Icelandic chieftains of the Sturlung age, who are his descendants and are mentioned in the final chapter of the saga.

The fact that both past and future generations occupy the positions of sender and receiver, i.e. what Greimas calls the axis of communication, need not surprise. So much of the saga literature is genealogical in its nature, and establishes a relationship between the generations that are the object of the narrative and those of the present. What is interesting about *Eyrbyggja* is that this relationship involves three periods or generations: the settlers, the people living around the Conversion and those of the age of saga-writing. The settlers were the founders of the society in which both of the other generations live, although the second of these generations is the main object of the saga narratives.

One can therefore propose as a hypothesis that the third of these generations, to which the author and first auditors / readers of *Eyrbyggja* belong, is projecting one of its own concerns on the world of their ancestors living just before and after the Conversion. This concern is the necessity for a chieftain to hold his own in a society where there is enormous competition between people of equally prestigious ancestry.

This has interesting ramifications for understanding the purpose of the saga as a narrative. One is that it not only establishes a heritage but also tells of how individuals or groups deal with this inheritance. This is a theme which resonates with the situation of the chieftain class in the first half of the thirteenth century in Iceland, a period of increasing strife within the chieftain class. The sources tell of quite a few chieftains of that period who were equally well born (to paraphrase *Eyrbyggja*), whose capacity to use force was more or less proven and who were in intense competition for power. What was it that motivated them to engage in this struggle? There must have been some kind of pressure that was inherent in the fact that their position in society was bestowed upon them at birth. Therefore, they had to defend it against other chieftains. In the following, I will argue that this pressure can be perceived not only in the theme of *Eyrbyggja* but also in the way it is structured.

Dead fathers

Of interest here is that the genealogical urge is related to the way society organised itself by basing the transmission of power and wealth through inheritance. The importance of dead fathers in *Eyrbyggja* is therefore remarkable. They are indeed a very salient theme, as becomes clear when one searches for what Greimas calls isotopies, i.e. multiple occurrences of the same semantic element in a narrative. Snorri is the fourth in a line founded by the settler Thorolf Mostrarskegg. Snorri's grandfather and father died prematurely. Snorri's father died when Snorri was yet unborn. He carries the mark of these fathers, however, since his social position derives from them.

Of other characters whose fathers die or are dead, it is interesting to note that these fathers are in some way problematic. The most obvious one is Thorolf Lame-foot, father to Arnkell, a chieftain also and Snorri's main competitor in the saga. He can be characterised as a hostile father, engaging in a plot with Snorri against his own son. He is even worse when he dies, and this is the other major story of revenants that is to be found in the saga. After Thorolf's death, which follows an argument between his son and himself, he comes back as a revenant, haunting the valley and killing among others his own wife (93 [134]). His son Arnkell manages to control him, but after he is killed by Snorri, Thorolf Lame-foot comes back and his body has to be burned to put an end to his haunting. Even then, a cow licks ashes from his body and is subsequently seen with a mysterious grey bull. The cow later bears a calf which will become a murderous raging bull before the saga ends (171 [193]).

Thorarinn, an important character in quite a long segment of the saga, also has a dead father. This father is mentioned when

Thorarinn is introduced. His name is Thorolf, like Arnkell’s father and like Thorolf Mostrarskegg, the founder of Snorri’s lineage. Thorarinn is such a peaceful man that his enemies say that he is as much a woman as a man. When provoked he nevertheless shows his manly character, and kills his aggressors. His father is dead and does not seem to have left him any social status he can rely on to protect himself.

A fourth occurrence of the theme of the dead father thematises paternity in a different way. Kjartan is the son of Thurid, half-sister to Snorri. Though officially the son of Thorodd, Kjartan is widely believed to be the son of Björn Ásbrandsson of Breidavik (77, 107-9, 155 [144, 178, 196]). Indeed, the saga makes it quite clear that in Kjartan we have a case of falsely attributed paternity. Nevertheless, the dead father is present.

In all of these four cases the fathers are dead. In two of them, the fathers will not stay in the world of the dead: Thorolf Lame-foot and Thorodd. This is not true of the two others: Thorolf Mostrarskegg, Snorri’s great-grandfather lives on in Helgafell where he welcomes his sonThorsteinn in a memorable scene (19 [83]), and we learn nothing of what became of Thorolf, the father of Thorarinn. He must be dead and does not participate in the story. It is remarkable that of the four, three have the same name, Thorolf.

What does this mean and does it have anything to do with the meandering structure of the saga? To answer this question, it is useful to resort to Greimas calls the elementary structure of meaning and which he represents as the ‘semiotic square’ (See Fig. 1).

Meaning is structured through opposition (S1 vs. S2). Narrative achieves meaning by going through a number of logical transformations. Before going from S1 to S2, there must be a phase when meaning separates itself from S1 and becomes Not S1 before it can become S2. The same is true of the transformation from S2 to S1. It must transit by Not S2. To take the example of the opposing pair of Good and Evil, a good man must go through a stage when he is not good before becoming evil. This intermediary stage could be some kind of temptation he falls into which leads to his becoming evil. In order to be transformed back into good, he must renounce his evil ways. This is the elementary structure of a traditional story of Fall and Redemption, but also that of every story, if we follow Greimassian narrative theory.

Let us now turn to *Eyrbyggja*. If we allow ourselves to combine all of Snorri’s paternal line into one, one could say that Snorri’s dead father(s) is (are) characterised positively, and that he (they) stay(s) in his (their) place, i.e. the world of the dead. However, he (they) is (are) ever present in a sense, because Snorri’s social situation derives ultimately from Thorolf’s status as first settler and *hofgoði*. This is for example symbolised by the way Snorri ascends Helgafell to devise successful plans (72 [118]).

Thorarinn’s father also stays dead, however there is nothing left of him, neither family ties nor power, to support his son in the struggle he must engage in. Thorarinn must rely on his maternal line, through his uncle Arnkell, and his brother-in-law, Vermund, who is married to his sister. One could say that this ‘absence’ of the father is symbolised by what is said of his *kvenna skap* or womanly temperament.

Arnkell’s father, Thorolf Lame-foot is the most virulent revenant of the saga. The noteworthy characteristics are his hostility towards his son, and the fact that he will not stay within the boundaries of the world of the dead. Indeed, he manifests himself at several times as an evil and disruptive power within the world of the living.

Finally, there is the problem of Kjartan’s falsely attributed paternity. The saga represents this ambiguity very clearly. On the one hand, there is no doubt that Björn is the young man’s father; on the other, Kjartan himself will not let it be known that he is not the son of his ‘official’ father, as can be seen in the episode when Snorri is praising his nephew for valour in battle and alludes to his real father (155 [178]). Kjartan will not talk about it, but the sword Björn sends to Kjartan at the end of the saga confirms symbolically that he is indeed the son of the hero from Breidavík (179-80 [196]).

The four sons of dead fathers can be arranged in a semiotic square (See Fig. 2). Snorri is Kjartan’s maternal uncle, as Arnkell is maternal uncle to Thorarinn. Whether this is relevant or not remains to be seen. However, the saga narrative seems to follow the movement of the semiotic square along the unbroken lines in the diagram. After Snorri is introduced, we are told how he acquires his father’s farm and his ancestors’ power in the area.

This phase is what Greimas would call the acquisition of a competence. It is followed by the episode involving Thorarinn which will eventually pit Snorri against Arnkell, since the latter is obliged to organise his nephew’s defence. After Arnkell has been killed, there is the long and complicated issue between Snorri and Björn of Breidavik. It involves Björn’s continuing affair with Snorri’s sister, which is the reason for Kjartan’s dubious paternity, but their feud also gets entwined into skirmishes between Snorri’s close neighbours. Then we are told about Kjartan’s supposed father’s death and haunting, which brings the narrative back to Snorri. At the end of the saga, Snorri is the Christian chieftain, who has prevailed. He is also a certain type of chieftain. He has had a difficult time affirming his authority, while Arnkell has no problems. One could say that the saga tells of a developmental process, since in the end Snorri is successful. His descendants are in power while Arnkell dies without progeny.

It is interesting in this respect how meaning travels within the text in the form of the dead fathers (see figure 2). The dead fathers of Snorri remain dead and they are a source of strength for him. In this sense they are present and their presence is benevolent. Thorarinn’s father is absent, and he is in a position of weakness. His father’s absence makes him neither malevolent nor benevolent, whereas Thorolf Lame-foot’s presence is pure malevolence. Though his son manages to keep it in check while he is alive, it becomes ever more virulent as time passes and quite uncanny in the Glæsir episode.

The haunting at Fródá leads to Thorodd’s death. He is a dead father who remains present in the world of the dead until he is made to leave. His presence is transformed into absence and later the fact that he is not Kjartan’s father is confirmed by both Snorri and Björn himself. At the end of the process, Snorri’s authority over the region has increased (See Fig. 3).

The main opposition is therefore between two types of dead fathers, those who stay dead and those who will not remain in their graves.

Icelandic Hamlet

It is in this context of an opposition between two figures of the father that it is interesting to look at the first episode in which Snorri is involved in the saga, i.e. when he tricks Börk into giving him back his inheritance. This is a crucial episode, since in it Snorri acquires competence. The reader is now informed that Snorri has a plan, one he will not necessarily divulge but that has to do with his striving to be the equal of his forebears. It also tells the reader that Snorri will prefer manoeuvrings and ruses to the use of brute force.

It is all the more interesting that this crucial episode should be linked to a situation analogous in many ways to that of Hamlet. Indeed, Snorri and Shakespeare's prince of Denmark share a similar predicament. Both are sons and heirs to dead fathers who were rulers. In both cases their paternal uncle has taken over their father's political position and married his widow. Both *Eyrbyggja saga* and *The Tragedy of Hamlet* portray the ghosts of dead fathers. In the play it is the hero's father, in the saga his main opponent's.

This opens up a way for explaining why the complex task of acquiring power in a stateless society also involves ghostly episodes. It has to do with the duality of the father in Freudian theory: both the figure of the law, a model imposed on the son, and the fearsome tyrant, he who threatens to castrate the son if he does not submit to the law by repressing his desire for the mother. Unlike the ghost of Hamlet's father, who urges him to take revenge, the ghosts in *Eyrbyggja*, especially Thorolf Lame-foot, represent the sadistic and castrating father, whereas the memory of the other Thorolf, Thorolf Mostrarskegg, Snorri's great-grandfather, is the model he has to imitate.

An element of significance here is the way the author of *Eyrbyggja* narrates the scene where Börk gives his wife a blow for attempting to murder the slayer of her brother Gísli Súrsson. Indeed, the same episode is told in *Gísla saga*, but there Snorri is absent from the scene, whereas in *Eyrbyggja* he pushes his step-father to the ground and takes his mother under his protection.[30] Another difference between the two sagas lies in the fact that whereas Thordis divorces her husband immediately in *Gísla saga*, she doesn't do this until her son has managed to trick Börk into selling him the ancestral farm at Helgafell. These differences between the two sagas carry meaning. *Gísla saga*'s account of the episode highlights the major theme of that saga, i.e. the senseless logic which brings people to turn on their own kinsmen or friends in order to take revenge. The way the author of *Eyrbyggja saga* tells the story introduces quite a different theme: intergenerational strife for wealth, power and women.

Moreover, this theme is developed in a way that offers itself to an approach informed by psychoanalysis. Börk is Snorri's uncle but also his mother's husband. Like Claudius in *Hamlet*, he is in the ambiguous position of being in the father's place and therefore concentrating upon himself the (suppressed) hatred of the son, but also being a usurper which the son must remove in order to take his own rightful place (and can therefore legitimately hate). Hamlet does not manage to do this and Freud explains this by attributing Hamlet's indecision to his identification with Claudius. The uncle has done what the nephew secretly dreamed of doing himself.[31]

Snorri is more successful than Hamlet, since he not only obtains his rightful inheritance, but also gains control over his mother, who spends the rest of her life with him. However, the persistence of the ambiguity in his relationship with the paternal inheritance is projected into other parts of the saga, especially in its more fantastic parts, i.e. the

Lame-foot episodes and the account of the haunting at Fródá. It is signified one last time in the final chapter when the three members of the oedipal triangle, Snorri, his mother Thordis and his uncle Börk are dug out of their graves before the eyes of Gudny Bödvarsdóttir, the maternal ancestor of the Sturlung line (183-4 [198]).

This exploration of *Eyrbyggja* and its revenants therefore suggests that the apparently loose structure of the saga has a hidden logic which allows one to read it as a social myth of the authority of the chieftain class, an authority which is undermined by an ambiguous relationship with its paternal inheritance. It does not present the ancestors as a model for the present but tells of a character that has to deal with the pressure of living up to the social status of his ancestors. By projecting problematic aspects of paternity onto figures of dead fathers, it deals in a covert way with the pressure to become a great chieftain.

Conclusion: spectral fathers and the past in the present

Eyrbyggja saga is arguably one of the most interesting of the sagas about early Icelanders. One reason for this is that it carries some of the characteristics of these narratives to their ultimate conclusion, among others their preoccupation with survivals from the past in the present, be it ancient customs or beliefs, objects, poems or reminders of the past in the landscape. Some of these remnants are concrete but others only exist in language and memory. One could say that they are a bit like the dead fathers in the saga: like the revenants, some are physically present, though they belong to the world of the dead, whereas others are physically absent, even though they are present in the minds or social customs and structures, as active legacies from earlier times. One could say that though physically absent, they are spectrally present. The way physical and spectral presence and absence are articulated in the saga can also be satisfactorily formalised in Greimas's elementary structure of meaning. Indeed, there is a near perfect permutation of these two categories in the way the saga evolves (See Fig. 4).

Snorri's dead fathers are physically absent, but their spectral presence is quite strong, in his social status and also his drive to maintain and increase it. Thorarinn's father is both physically and spectrally absent. He is not there and he has left no social legacy to his son apparent in the saga. Arnkell's dead father is physically very present as a revenant. However, he has turned against his son and is therefore spectrally absent as a father. Finally, Kjartan's official father is physically present after his death, as he is one of the revenants of Fródá. However, he is spectrally both present and absent as he is officially father to Kjartan who inherits his farm. But in reality he is the son of Björn and this paternity is affirmed at the end of the saga. Thus Björn replaces Thorodd as Kjartan's father. Interestingly, Björn has both characteristics of Snorri's fathers. He is physically absent in his mysterious land across the sea he can't leave, but he is spectrally present in Kjartan's innate heroism which he has transmitted to him and which is symbolised by the sword he sends him. It is interesting that the ambiguity of Thorodd's spectral presence has been replaced by that of Björn's physical presence: he is alive but physically absent, though spectrally present (See Fig. 5).

If the saga is some sort of social myth, it is one about the status of chieftains within society. On the one hand, their particular role in contrast to that of the clergy, on the other their relationship with each other and their forebears who are responsible for them being part of the chieftain class. They are symbolised by the dead fathers of the saga. A good dead father remains dead but gives strength and assurance to his son, comforting him in his social position. The bad dead father, symbolized by the cruel and aggressive Thorolf Lame-foot and the passive and weak Thorodd, brings misfortune upon his son and society as a whole.

In the late thirteenth century, Icelandic society went through a period of civil war, with members of the main chieftain families pitted against each other in a violent struggle. At the same time, their power was being encroached upon by the Church as well as by the Norwegian king, who ultimately gained control over the country in 1262. The chieftain class was under attack and there was probably a feeling of intense unease about its identity, despite its firm grounding in more than three centuries of Icelandic history. It is likely that this unease was projected onto the very same past, changing it into a sort of mirror where the unconscious fears and doubts of and about the chieftain class were projected.

Even though *Eyrbyggja saga* is exemplary in this, a fair number of the revenants found in other sagas about early Icelanders suggest a similar reading. In *Grettis saga*, it has been shown that the portrayal of the famous revenant Glámr, though not a dead father, distinctly suggests he represents the hero’s father, Ásmund. Indeed, many aspects of the outlaw’s story can be seen to be deeply rooted in an Oedipal conflict.[32] The same can be said of *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, where there is no revenant, but where it is strongly suggested that the father’s hero dies in such a way that he might be planning to come back and haunt his son. Indeed, one can say that the spectre of the angry father haunts the whole story of Egill Skalla-Grímsson, materialising in the figures of angry kings and even storms.[33] Other occurrences of revenants in the sagas, also suggest a similar approach, bringing us to the conclusion that the genre of the *Íslendingasögur* or sagas about early Icelanders, came into existence at a time when their creators were especially haunted by their past.

Notes

[1] Claude Lecouteux, *Fantômes et revenants au Moyen Âge*, Paris, Imago 1996 (1st ed. 1986).

[2] I prefer the third and last of these English terms for the genre. It is more accurate than the first and more elegant than the second. It was coined by Theodore M. Andersson. *The Growth of the Icelandic Saga 1180-1280*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2006.

[3] For a recent and complete overview of the different genres of Old Norse-Icelandic literature see Rory McTurk, *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Culture and Society*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2005.

[4] Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Les revenants. Les vivants et les morts dans la société médiévale*, Paris, Gallimard, 1994, pp. 15-16. [English translation from 1998: *Ghosts in the Middle Ages. The Living and the Dead in Medieval Society*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p. 3.]

[5] I will refer to Einar Ó. Sveinsson (ed.), *Eyrbyggja saga. Brands þáttr Örva. Eiríks saga Rauða, Grœnlendinga saga, Grœnlendinga þáttr*. Reykjavik, Íslensk fornrit 4, 1935. For a recent and trustworthy English translation see *Gisli Sursson‘s Saga and the Saga of the People of Eyri,* trans. M. Regal and J. Quinn. London, Penguin 2003. Page numbers of the Icelandic text will be between parentheses and of the translation between brackets.

[6] To mention just a few, the *urðarmáni*”, the *dyradómr* and the fact that bed-clothes are at the root of the haunting do not appear in

any other text of the corpus. See Kjartan G. Ottósson, *Fróðárundur í Eyrbyggju*, Reykjavík, Studia Islandica, 1983, pp. 9 and 42.

[7] See his conclusion, pp. 114-117.

[8] See Vésteinn Ólason, ‘The un/ grateful dead – from Baldr to Bægifótr’, *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society*, Odense, University Press of Southern Denmark, Viking Collection 14, 2003, p. 167. Lecouteux also studies the episode from his perspective in *Fantômes et revenants…*, pp. 106-111.

[9] Schmitt 1994, pp. 39-42.

[10] John D. Martin, ‘Law and the (un)dead: medieval models for understanding the hauntings in *Eyrbyggja saga*’, *Saga-Book* 29 (2005), p. 81.

[11] Ottósson 1982, p. 109.

[12] Alfred Jacoby, “Zum Prozessverfahren gegen die bösen Geister”, *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde* XXIII (1913), Berlin, pp. 184-187. Ottósson 1983, p. 123.

[13] Ottósson, 1983, p. 108-110.

[14] *Eyrbyggja saga. The vellum tradition,* ed. Forrest Scott. Copenhagen, Editiones Arnamagnæanæ, Reitzels, 2003, pp. 19*-27*.

[15] For an account of this long and complex story, see for example Richard W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, London, Penguin, p. 34-41.

[16] Orri Vésteinsson. *The Christianization of Iceland. Priests, Power and Social Change.* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 174-178.

[17] For this particular issue see Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, ‘Um afskipti erkibiskupa af íslenzkum málefnum á 12. og 13. öld’ *Saga* 20 (1982), pp. 31-32.

[18] *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 9: “Til hofsins skyldu allir menn tolla gjalda ok vera skyldir hofgoðanum til allra ferða, sem nú eru þingmenn höfðingjum.”

[19] For an argument against its value as a historical source, see Olaf Olsen, *Hørg, hov og kirke. Historiske og arkæologiske vikingestudier. Aarbøger for nordisk oldkyndighed og historie* Copenhagen, 1965. See chapter 1, “De norrøne kilder”, especially pp. 34-49. For a defense of its historicity, see Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Blót í norrænum sið. Rýnt í forn trúarbrögð með þjóðfræðilegri aðferð*, Reykjavík, Háskólaútgáfan, 1997, pp. 163-187. The most recent statement is in Gunnar Karlsson, *Goðamenning. Staða og áhrif goðorðsmanna í þjóðveldi Íslendinga*. Reykjavík, Heimskringla, 2004, pp. 372; 383-389. He does not see any reason to disagree with Olaf Olsen, however he mentions many more examples from the sagas of the same persons owning temples and being chieftains.

[20] See *Íslendingabók. Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson. Reykjavík, Íslensk fornrit 1, 1968, pp. 313-315. See also the discussion of the passage in the introduction, xcvi-ci. As well as Olaf Olsen, *Hörg, hov og kirke*, p. 49: “Jeg opfatter dem som et lærd forsøg på at rekonstruere hedensk lovgivning, skrevet omkring 1200 på grundlag af upålidende tradition og ved tilbageslutning af endnu rådende forhold.” Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson argues for the authenticity of much of the elements contained in the “Úlfljótslög, see *Blót í norrænum sið*, pp. 163-187

[21] *Íslendingabók. Landnámabók*, 315.

[22] Peter Brown, ‘Society and the Supernatural: A Medieval Change’, *Daedalus* 104:2 (1975), p. 134. Southern, *Western Society and the Church*, pp. 36-38.

[23] See John D. Martin, ‘Law and the (Un)dead’, p. 81. Interestingly, very many of the stories of revenants analysed by Schmitt are centered around the dealings of clergy and lay aristocracy, see for example his chapter on “la Mesnie Hellequin” in Schmitt, *Les revenants…*, pp. 115-145.

[24] Theodore M. Andersson, *The Icelandic*

Family Saga. An Analytic Reading. Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1967, pp. 153-162.

[25] Carol J. Clover, *The Medieval Saga*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1982, pp. 77-79.

[26] Lee M. Hollander, 'The Structure of Eyrbyggja saga', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 58 (1959), pp. 222-227.

[27] Vésteinn Ólason, 'Nokkrar athugasemdir um Eyrbyggja sögu", *Skírnir* 145 (1971), pp. 5-25.

[28] Vésteinn Ólason, 'Nokkrar athugasemdir…', 21.

[29] For a useful presentation of this method of investigating the deeper meaning of narratives see A.J. Greimas, *On Meaning. Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, Theory and History of Literature 38, 1987.

[30] *Gisli Sursson's saga*, pp. 68-69.

[31] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, London, Pelican Freud Library, 1976 (1953), vol. 4, p. 367.

[32] Torfi H. Tulinius, 'Thykir mer godh sonareign i thér: pères, revenants et fantastique dans trois sagas islandaises'. *Revue des langues romanes* 101/2 (1997), pp. 145-162.

[33] Torfi H. Tulinius, *Skáldið í skriftinni. Snorri Sturluson og Egils saga*. Reykjavík, Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2004.

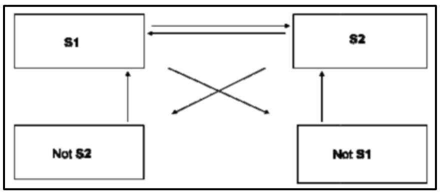
S1
S2
Not S2
Not S1

Figure 1. The semiotic square

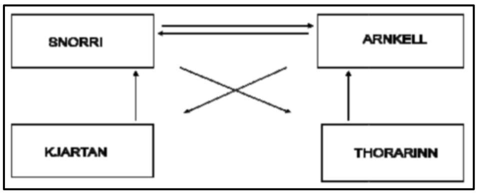
SNORRI
ARNKELL
KJARTAN
THORARINN

Figure 2. Two chieftains and their nephews

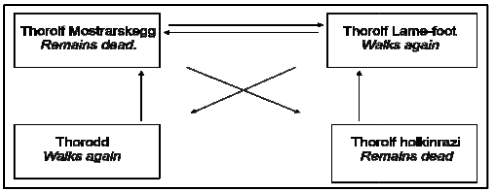
Thorolf Mostrarskegg
Remains dead.
Thorolf Lame-foot
Walks again
Thorodd
Walks again
Thorolf holkinrazi
Remains dead

Figure 3. Behaviour of dead fathers

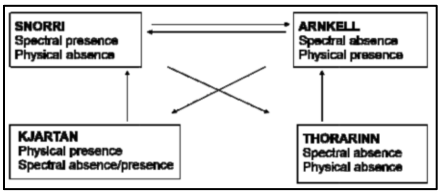
SNORRI
Spectral presence
Physical absence
ARNKELL
Spectral absence
Physical presence
KJARTAN
Physical presence
Spectral absence/presence
THORARINN
Spectral absence
Physical absence

Figure 4. Spectrality of fathers

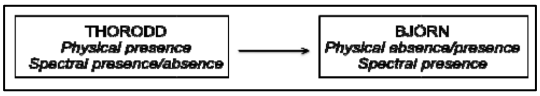
THORODD
Physical presence
Spectral presence/absence
BJÖRN
Physical absence/presence
Spectral presence

Figure 5. Kjartan's fathers