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Studi Tedeschi

Filologia Germanica

Studi Nordici

Studi Nederlandesi



PAOLO LOFFREDO
INIZIATIVE EDITORIALI

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TRANSFORMATION AND SHAPE-CHANGING IN OLD NORSE LITERATURE AND IN FOLK 'MEMORATES'

by

Maria Cristina Lombardi
Napoli, University L'Orientale

The oldest shamanic ceremony described in a Scandinavian source occurs in *Historia Norwegie*, an important text from the second half of the 12th century representing the beginning of Norwegian literature, written in a learned Latin prose by an author who had studied abroad. It offers us geographical, historical as well as some ethnographic information, such as some accounts of Sami shamanistic rituals. The anonymous author took Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* and Honorio de Autun's *Imago Mundi* as models. But one of his main ambitions was that of showing the state of Christianity and paganism in Norway. After a prologue, a geographical description is given which shows structural borrowings from Orosius' *Historiae adversus paganos* (417 d.C.), and strong similarities with *Ágrip*, the first Old Norse historical source written in vernacular. In the IV chapter, entitled *De Finnis* «About the Finns», when defining the Norwegian borders he describes a vast wild territory which separates Christians (the Norwegians) from the heathens, a land inhabited only by the Finns, who eat wild animal flesh (half raw)¹. After enumerating all the animal species living there, he narrates the inhabitants' magical arts: how they worship some men who give predictions to folk through the medium of a spirit called *gand*. Then he tells this story:

Quadam uero uice dum christiani causa commercii apud Finnos ad mensam sedissent, illorum hospita subito inclinata expirauit. Vnde christianis multum dolentibus non mortuam, sed a gandis emulorum esse depredatam, ses illam

¹ After Christianity had come to Scandinavia eating raw flesh was forbidden because it was a pagan practise.

cito adepturos ipsi Finni nichil contristati respondent. Tunc quidam magus extenso panno, sub quo ad profanas ueneficas incantaciones prepararet, quoddam uasculum ad modum taratantarorum sursum erectis manibus extulit, cetinis atque ceruinis formulis cum loris et ondriolis nauicula eciam cum remis occupatum, quibus uehiculis per alta niuium et deuexa moncium uel profunda stagnorum *ille diabolicus gandus* uteretur. Cumque diutissime incantando tali apparatu ibi saltasset, huno tandem prostratus totus niger ut ethiops, spumans oratuta freneticus, preruptus uentrem uix aliquando cum maximo (fremore) emisit spiritum. Tum alterum in magica arte peritissimum consuluerunt, quid de utrisque actum sit. Qui simili modo, sed non eodem praecuta sudes, prosiliret implens officum – namque hospita sana surrexit – et defunctum magum tali euentu interisse eis intimaui: *Gandum uidelicet eius in cetinam effigiem immaginatum ostisco gando inpraecutassudes transformato*, dum per *quoddam stagnum* uelocissim e peosiliret, malo omine obuiasse, quia in stagni eiusdem profundo sudes latitantes exacti uentrem perforabant. Quod et in mago domi mortuo apparuit. Item dum Finni unacum christianis gregem squamigeram hamo carpere attemptassent, quos in casis fidelium paganiperspexerant, sacculis fere plenis unco suo de abyssu attractis scapham cum piscibus impleuerunt². «Once when Christians who had come to trade had sat down at the table with some Finns, their hostess fell forward all of a sudden and expired. While the Christians felt serious grief at this calamity, the Finns were not in the least saddened, but told them that the woman was not dead, *merely pillaged by the gands of her adversaries*, and that they could quickly restore her. Then a magician, spreading out a cloth under which he might prepare himself for intoning unholy sorcerer's spells, raised aloft in his outstretched hands a small vessel similar to a riddle, decorated with tiny figures of whales, harnessed reindeer, skis, and even a miniature boat with oars; using these means of transport the demonic spirit was able to travel across tall snowdrifts, mountain sides and deep lakes. After chanting incantations for a very long time and leaping about there with paraphernalia³, he finally threw himself to the ground, black all over like an ethiopian and foaming at the mouth as if he were mad; ripped across his stomach, with a mighty roar he eventually relinquished his life. Next they consulted another specialist in the magic arts as to what had happened in each case. The individual went through all his practices in similar fashion, though with a different outcome; *the hostess arose in sound health and then he revealed to them that the sorcerer had died in the following way; his gand, having taken on the likeness of a whale, was shooting rapidly through a lake when it had*

² *Historia Norwegie*, 2003, pp. 61- 62.

³ Tools and other things for using drugs.

the misfortune to encounter a hostile gand, which had transformed itself into sharply pointed stakes; these stakes, hidden in the depths of the lake, penetrated the repulsed creature's belly and this was also manifested by the death of the magician in the house. Again, when the Finns, together with the Christians, had gone about catching fish with a hook such as these heathens had seen in Christian dwellings, they drew almost full traps out of the deeps with their wand, and so loaded the boats to capacity»⁴.

At the end of this passage we have seen an interesting connection between fishing and magic which witnesses Scandinavian people's use of magic for improving their economic resources.

Witchcraft was regarded as an art mastered by Sami people, a people racially different from Scandinavian Norsemen. In Norse traditions other ethnicities such as the Sami or the *Skraelingar* – in *Groenlendinga saga* and in *Eiríks saga rauða* – or *blámenn* «blackmen», are generally associated with secular evil (this has obviously to do with the fear of 'the other', of 'the stranger'). Instead of a clear separation between real and unreal, natural and supernatural, the above quoted passage in *Historia Norvegie* emphasizes the spatial aspect. The 'locus' of monstrous creatures and pagan magic experiences was not regarded as extra-geographical, but was placed in the North of Scandinavia at the borders between Norse people and the others: the Finns. In such a view, outside those borders, a magical 'terra incognita', characterized by wilderness and uncertainty, extended. Magical beings dwelled at the borders of the human world, where powerful animals lived on the earth and in the sea.

In sagas and other Old Norse sources, we find echoes of these Arctic inhabitants and landscape: wolves, bears and eagles – the most common totemic beasts frequently occurring in skaldic and Eddic poems – as well as whales and reindeer often appear in scenes where wizards, trollwives or other experts in magics (similar to shamans) are active.

Magicians can move from this to the other side of the borders, going out and coming back thanks to their magical power, also helped by auxiliary spirits in animal shapes. Marginal spaces were therefore their favourite territories⁵.

⁴ *Historia Norvegie*, 2003, p. 63.

⁵ BILDHAUER / MILLS 2003, p. 9.

OTHERNESS AND MAGIC IN OLD NORSE TEXTS

After the conversion to Christianity external influences came to Scandinavia from new continental literary trends, thus originating works where local tales mixed with imported motifs. The fantastic dimension often took its material from both exotic and Nordic traditions. Although considered paradoxical, the representation of magical beings has been strongly influenced by symbols and images of Christian religious texts, such as the Bible, or many hagiographical texts as well as Chivalric literature. Trolls and giants are redefined as enemies of the Church and of the New Doctrine, and partly reshaped as devils.

Several hybrid aspects show a strong contaminating tendency. For example in the *Saga of Bárðr*, *Bárðarsaga Snæfellsás*, an *Íslendinga saga* of the 14th century, in many respects similar to a *Fornaldarsaga*. In its IV chapter, a *Tröllakirkja* (Trolls' church) is mentioned:

[...] Þar gekk Bárðr á land ok hans menn ok er þeir kómu í gjáskúta einn stóran, þá blótuðu þeir til heilla sér. Þat heitir nu *Tröllakirkja*⁶.

«Bárðr went ashore there with his men, and after entering into a deep gorge, they offered propitiatory sacrifices. That place is now called the Church of the trolls».

In a later Norwegian song from Telemark about Brunkeberg Church, a ghost – a girl who had died on her wedding day – sings a psalm from *Landstadts Salmebok* which was in origin a healing chant. It is an example of re-using ancient popular chants even in Pietistic and Christian tradition.

Other types of hybrids are *huldras* (pagan forest spirits) and mermaids who may be mixed and confused with each others in folktales and 'memorates': some *huldras* may be seen in the sea and some mermaids may be met in forests (land and water magical beings are confused). Already in *Historia Norwegie*, the whale is placed in a *stagnum* 'a lake, a dam', putting a salt water creature into fresh water.

Notwithstanding new fabulous details imported from the continent, the Northern Arctic nature continues to appear in Old Norse texts. Witches and magicians taking on whale shapes occur in episodes where fishing and magics are linked to each other in every category of Scandinavian sagas

⁶ GUÐNI Jónsson 1968, p. 304.

(*Sagas of Icelanders*, i.e. *Eiríkssagarauda*, *King's sagas*, and *Fornaldarsögur*) as well as in other popular tales. By the way, the motif of a fishing god in a world where fishing was so crucial for living does not surprise too much: of course I refer to Þórr trying to fish the Miðgarðsormr, which lies in the ocean and wraps the earth⁷.

I will draw some examples from two sagas: *Barðarsaga Snæfellsás*, where two wizards are related to a whale, and *Friðþjófssaga* one of the most famous *Fornaldarsögur*. These sagas show many folkloristic aspects, typical of later folk literature like folk ballads. They represent a kind of transitional phase between mythical account and folktale where we can find ancient characters, names and language features, besides more popular, often ridiculous and humorous aspects, partly shared by *Barðarsaga*.

Barðarsaga is very much concerned with magic⁸. It starts telling about Barðr's father, Dumbr, who had a double origin: from his father's side he descended from the race of giants, *rísar*. On his mother's side he came instead from the lineage of the trolls. After having some contrasts with the *þursar* (another kind of giants) he went to Norway where a giant, Dofri (who lived at Dofrafjöll), adopted him. Barðr is therefore presented as a descendant from both sides from beings skilled in magic.

Barðarsaga mentions several giants' races. It is difficult to distinguish among them in Scandinavian sources: *þursar*, *jötnar*, *rísar*, and *trollar*. *Rísar* are characterized by huge and beautiful bodies, *þursar* by stupidity, *trollar* by ugliness, cruelty and above all they are skilled in black magic⁹.

I quote from the text edited by Guðni Jonsson, *Barðarsaga Snæfellsás*, in *Íslendingasögur*, III, Ch. VIII, where a troll-woman called Hetta is described as evil and cruel towards men and animals¹⁰.

⁷ The monster's positive role has been indicated in recent years by scholars who have pointed out its function of holding the earth together (ie. LARRINGTON 2006, p. 543). This positive view seems to hint at the peculiar role of whales as a fundamental economic resource.

⁸ The most recent scholarly editions of *Barðarsaga* are that by JÓN Skaptason and Philip PULSIANO, *Barðar saga*, Garland, New York/London, 1984, and the Íslenzk Fornrit edition by ÞÓRHALLUR Vilmundarson and BJARNI Vilhjálmsson, *Barðarsaga Snæfellsás*, XIII, Reykjavík, 1991. In this article I usually quote from the 2nd edition (1968) of GUÐNI JÓNSSON, *Barðarsaga Snæfellsás*, *Íslendingasögur*, III: *Íslendingasagnaútgafan*, Reykjavík, 1946, pp. 295-355.

⁹ SCHULZ 2004, pp. 164-166.

¹⁰ GUÐNI JÓNSSON 1968, p. 315.

Hetta er nefnd tröllkona. Hon átti byggð í Ennisfjalli ok var in mesta *hambleypa* ok ill ok viðskiptis bæði við menn ok fénað¹¹.

«Hetta is called a troll-woman. She lived in Enninsfjallr and was the most skillfull shape-changer and she was evil and cruel towards men and animals¹²».

The saga stresses her ability as a *hamleypa* «shape-changer», a feminine term, used also for men, together with *hamrammr* «one who has power on his/her own shape»: they are compounds referring to the skill of changing shape, mostly consisting of taking on an animal shape and generally attributed to wizards in Old Norse sources.

In Ch. III, two other wizards appear:

Var ok á skipi sá maðr, er Svalr hét, ok Þúfa, kona hans. Þau váru trylld mjök bæði óhæg ok at öllu illa fallin [...]¹³

«There was a man on the ship, whose name was Svalr, and Þúfa, his wife. They were both very skilled in magic, and absolutely devoted to evil[...]».

Svalr ok Þúfa hurfu frá skipinu þegar ina fyrstu nótt, ok spurðist eigi til þeira nökkura stund, en reyndar váru þau í fjallinu ok trylldust þar bæði. Ok er á leið, gerðust margar óspektir af þeim, ok treystust menn ekki at gera sakir trölldóms þeira¹⁴.

«Svalr and Þúfa left the ship on the first night and nobody heard about them for a while; they flew onto the mountain and there they both did many spells. They also did a lot of damage and people did not dare do anything because of their magic.»

[...] Þat var einn tíma, at hvalr kom á reka Barðar, ok hafði Svalr þá vanda sinn ok fór til um nótt at skera hvalinn. Ok sem hann í mölinni, ok heitir hafði skorir hvalinn um stund, kom Bárðr þar [...]¹⁵.

«[...] once a whale beached near Barðr's settlement, and, as he was used to, during the night Svalr went to remove the meat from the whale. After he had cut meat from the animal for a while, Bárðr arrived there [...]».

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² This one as all the following translations from *Barðarsaga* and *Friðþjófssaga* are mine, if not diversely specified.

¹³ GUÐNI Jónsson 1968, p. 302.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

Trylldist Svalr þá, svá at Bárði varð aflsfátt, en þó kom svá um síðir, at Bárði braut hrygg í Sval ok kasaði hann þar Svalsmöl [...]¹⁶.

«Svalr cast spell against Barðr in order to take away all his strength, but at the end Bárðr managed to break Svalr's back and covered him with stones in the place now called Svalsmöl [...].»

Aðra nótt eftir fann hann Þúfa a hvalnum ok drap hana með sama móti¹⁷.

«The following night he [Barðr] found Þúfa on the whale and he killed her in the same way».

Here a voyage to Island is described, where a pair of wizards, Svalr and Þúfa, are present. They create a lot of problems. Then the saga tells that a beached whale was found there and that Svalr and Barðr fight for the privilege to remove the meat from the animal. At the end Barðr manages to break Svalr's back. The following night he kills Þúfa in the same way.

I want to draw attention to Barðr's way of killing the two wizards. Breaking magicians' and witches' backs seems to be an effective method of eliminating them in many Old Norse texts regardless of the genre to which they belong.

BACK-BREAKING

In Old Norse poetry and prose we encounter many examples of 'back breaking' as the best way to free oneself from a magical creature. It occurs first in *Þórsdrápa* (a mythological skaldic poem by Eilif Guðrunarson, X century) quoted in *Snorra Edda*, where the god Þórr kills two giantesses this way¹⁸.

The following chapter (IX) of *Barðarsaga* presents a witch, named Kolla and connected to a river, the river Torfa. She is killed soon after in the same way (by 'back-breaking') according to the prose passage at the begin-

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Hufstjóri braut hváru/ hreggs váfreida<r> tveggja/blárellið hellis/ *hundforman kjöl *sprundi.* (SNORRI, *Skáldskaparmál*, 1998, p. 29).

«The females were trodden down by log swords. The driver (Þórr) of the hull of the storm's hoverchariot broke each of the cave-women's age-old laughter-ship (breast)- keel (a kenning- poetical metaphorical periphrasis- indicating backbones)». SNORRI, *Edda* 1997, p. 85.

ning of the chapter, and to the stanza recited by Þórir which follows soon after. After realizing that she was a powerful witch and after a long struggle, Þórir eventually managed to break her back and kill her.

Fann Þórir brátt at hon var it mesta tröll. Var þeira atgangr bæði harður ok langr, en þó lauk með því, at *hann braut í henni brygginn* ok gekk svá af henni dauðri[...]¹⁹.

«Þórir realized that she was a powerful troll. Their fight was both hard and long, but at the end *he broke her back* and killed her [...]».

The prose passage is followed by a stanza which reads in its second helmingr:

Hugðak heimsku flagði
hryggspenning dag þenna.
Missti tröll it trausta
tír, en ek beygða svíra²⁰.

«To this stupid witch today I' ve broken the back. / The troll has lost her usual reputation/ and I have twisted her neck».

The same way of killing trollwives compares in another famous *fornaldarsaga*, *Friðþjófs saga*. *Friðþjófs saga* is considered an important source for pagan rituals and black magic. Friðþjófr is a typical viking hero of adventure tales, travelling across the seas, endowed with magical objects. From his father, a rich but not aristocratic Norwegian chieftain, he has inherited Elliði, a magical ship which can understand human speech and for him is a marvellous helper in seabattles and seastorms. The Norwegian kings, Helgi and Hálfðan, two brothers who both succeeded their father Beli on the throne of Norway, refuse to give Friðþjófr the permission to marry their sister Ingibjörg because of his lower social status. The saga portrays the conflict between the kings and Friðþjófr and ends with his victory. Given its remoteness from the pagan period (it was composed in the early 14th century) *Friðþjófs saga* cannot be regarded as an authentic source for the details about Helgi's heathen practices, described in Ch. IX. Neverthe-

¹⁹ GUÐNI Jónsson 1968, pp. 317-318.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

less some scholars (Hjalmar Falk²¹, Ludvig Larsson²², Gustaf Wenz²³) do not exclude that the text may preserve ancient remnants of pagan rituals or at least it may reflect some actual moments of the *seiðr*. *Seiðr* is an Old Norse term for a kind of magic practice attributed to both gods and men. Its earliest reference goes back to Kormákr's *Sigurðardrápa* – a scaldic poem of the 10th century – and to the Eddaic lays *Lokasenna* and *Völuspá*. Among the functions of the *seiðr*, besides the divinatory category (see also the episode about Þurið in *Landnámabók*²⁴) we have also that of effecting a physical change by means of magic, spells, etc.

That some form of trance might be involved in the *seiðr* is indicated in *Völuspá* where the *seiðkona* is defined *leikinn* «entranced»²⁵. In his article, Clive Tolley argues that the Old Norse *seiðr* would correspond to Lappish shamanism, at least in so far as the summoning of guardian spirits (*varðalockur*) is concerned. Sami are frequently described in Old Scandinavian texts (i.e., in *Egilssaga*) because they were tributaries of Norwegian and Swedish monarchs (they had to pay them taxes in the form of furs), and they are presented as powerful magicians, who could take on shapes of animals. In *Norges Gamle love I*, 389, 403, it is said that the law forbids anyone *att tru á Finn eða fordæði* «to believe in a Lapp or in a sorcerer»²⁶.

However let's return to *Friðþjófs saga*. In its IX Chapter, after hearing about Friðþjófr's and Ingibjörg's love, the two kings Helgi and Hálfðan destroy Friðþjófr's properties and try to kill him and all his companions, by using magical arts.

Síðan brendu þeir upp allan böeinn at Framnesi en ræntu fé öllu. Síðan sendu þeir eptir *seiðkonum* tveim, Heiði ok Hamglámu, ok gáfu þeim fé til, at þær sendi veðr svá stórt at Friðþjófi ok monnum hans, at þeir týndiz allir í hafi. *Þær efldu seiðinn ok færduz á hjallinn með góldrum ok geringum*²⁷.

«They burned the entire Framnes making raids on all the goods. Then they

²¹ FALK 1890, pp. 60-102.

²² LARSSON 1893.

²³ WENZ 1914.

²⁴ JAKOB Benediktsson 1968, p. 115.

²⁵ NECKEL / KUHN 1962, p. 6.

²⁶ *Norges Gamle Love I* 1848, p. 389.

²⁷ *Saga di Friðþjófr l'audace*, (the Italian translation is based on Ludvig Larsson's edition, *Friðþjófs saga hins frækna*, 1901, hrsg. von LARSSON Ludvig, Niemeyer, Halle, 1901) by Maria Cristina Lombardi, Edizioni dell'Orso, Alessandria, 2015, p. 42.

sent for two witches, *Heiðr* and *Hamgláma*, offering them money and urging them to raise a terrible storm against *Friðbjófr* and his companions, a storm so violent as to make them all die in the sea. *The two witches prepared the magical ritual and went on the incantation stone and uttered spells and performed their witchcraft arts*».

Shape-shifting is here connected to a whale representing all the evil forces joined against *Friðbjófr* and in some way recalling the image of the *Miðgarðr*'s serpent around the earth:

Þá fór *Friðbjófr* í tré upp ok sagði félagum sínum, er hann kom ofan: «Ek leit mjök undarlíga sýn. *Stór hveli lagðiz í hringum skipit*, ok er mér grunr, at vér munum komnir nærri landi einhverju, ok mun hann vilja banna oss landit. Hygg ek *Helga* konung ekki búa við oss vingjarnlíga, ok mun hann sent hafa oss enga vinsending. *Konur sé ek II á baki hvalnum, ok munu þær valda þessum úfriðarstormi með sínum versta seið ok goldrum*. Nú skulu vér til reyna, hvárt meira má hamingja vár eða trollskaþr þeirra. Ok skulu þit stýra at sem beinast, en ek skal með lurkum lemja þessa úvætti»²⁸.

«Then *Friðbjófr* climbed the mast and, when he was at the top, he shouted to his companions: «I see something very strange: *a large whale is wrapped around the ship*. I know that we have come close to a land and that the beast wants to prevent us from reaching it. I think *Helgi* is not preparing a nice reception for us and that he is not sending a sign of friendship. *Now I see two women on the whale's back, I'm sure they rouse this storm against us with the worst spells and magic charms*. Now we will know if our luck is stronger than their witchcraft. So go ahead straight at them, and I will strike these two monsters with a pole.»

In the next stanza, 'back-breaking' is used in order to neutralize the two magical beings:

Sé ek *trollkonur*
tvær á baru;
þær hefir *Helgi*
hingat sendar.
Þeim skal sníða
sundr í miðju
hrygg Elliði,
*áðr af hafi skríðr*²⁹.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

«I see trollwives, two on a wave; Helgi has sent them here. Elliði will break their backbones in the middle, before she stops».

The following prose reads:

Síðan skaut hann forkinum at annarri hambleypunni, en barð Elliða kom á brygg annarri ok brotnaði bryggjinn í báðum. En hvalrinn tók kaf ok lagðiz á brott ok sá hann ekki síðan³⁰.

«Then he threw the harpoon against one of the witches that were changing shape while the pointed bow of Elliði reached the back of the other so that both their backs were broken; but the whale dived rapidly sinking into the deep and since then they did not see it anymore».

The saga states clearly that the two witches are sent by king Helgi:

Mjök tekr sjór at svella,
svá er nú drepit skýjum;
því ráða galdrar gamlir,
er gjálfr ór stað færiz³¹.

«High the sea foams, clouds darken fearfully; since the ancient incantations let the sea rise and fall».

[...]
Helgi veldr, at hrannir
hrímfaðaðar vaxa³².

«Helgi makes the waves grow up with a frosty mane».

A kind of shamanic ceremony where Helgi evokes the two shapeshifters (connected to the whale) may be inferred here. The two trollwives could be regarded as *gandir*, spirit-helpers of Helgi who might have performed some *seiðr* practice to summon them. The whale which is trying to strip Elliði – according to what Friðþjófr reports looking from the mast at his ship – is the form the two trollwives have taken on, in order to fight against the magical ship, Elliði, which represents the good helper³³.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 48.

³³ See the category of folk- and fairytales in PROPP 1966, Cap. III.

Helgi's connection with magic is also stressed later in the text. The religious ceremony – portrayed when Friðþjófr enters the god Baldr's temple where the two kings and their wives are performing a pagan ritual by warming up some small idols – is unique in saga narratives as it gives some descriptive details of a ritual otherwise unknown³⁴.

In both texts *Barðarsaga* and *Friðþjófs saga*, we have observed shapeshifting skills (manifested or only hinted at). In *Barðarsaga* we can assume this ability in the two wizards, Svalr and Þúfa: the episode where they are killed by Barðr is dominated by a constant close relationship between them and the whale. Moreover the name *Svalr* itself rhyming with *hvalr* «whale», hints at this identification.

The 'back-breaking' is another topic which can be associated with whaling since backs were considered the most deceiving parts of these animals.

We already find it in the Bible, where Leviathan – in later Medieval texts identified with the whale – is a personification of evil and in another important source having a rich and manifold tradition, the Greek *Physiologus* (whose translations spread over all Medieval Europe). Such translations constituted a set of narratives that influenced a great number of authors and texts³⁵. The Old Icelandic *Physiologus* has been studied as a source for many monsters in Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse homilies, poems and sagas. Of course, this is a derivative, later text, but it makes additions and changes so as to reflect a specific geographical, historical and cultural context.

The two trollwives/whales' double nature in *Friðþjófs saga*, being both land and sea creatures – as trolls they are linked to rocks and mountains, as whales to the sea³⁶ – is already present in the original *Physiologus*, since both in *Physiologus* and in its offsprings (the bestiaries) observation is inseparable from mythology. In fact, according to some traditions, the whale was able to disguise itself as an island. Its back was covered with rocks, trees and bushes. It seemed an oasis for the sailors but when they landed and then lay there, it would suddenly dive to the bottom of the sea. Pre-

³⁴ *Friðþjófs saga*, p. 70.

³⁵ i.e. *Navigatio of St Brendan* and the *The Life of Columba* are among those texts which were influenced by these translations. See ROTSAERT 1996, pp. 40-50.

³⁶ i.e. the troll-wife in *Þórsdrápa* is called by the kenning (SNORRI 1997 pp. 74, 82) «the Nanna of the rock» which, being Nanna Baldr's wife and therefore a goddess, means «the goddess of the rock».

cisely as the two trollwives do in the above quoted passage of *Friðþjófssa-ga*³⁷.

Thus the reason why Old Norse texts concentrate so much on the importance of breaking magical beings' backs might be connected to the whale's deceiving back. Surfaced whales' long broad backs, when seen from a distance, could appear to be islands and therefore breaking them might be the equivalent of breaking a spell and revealing the evil's plan. Striking the whale's most deceiving part was essential for destroying it.

With the advent of Christianity, the whale became an embodiment of sin, but it had represented and still represents also a real and concrete danger for Nordic people, vikings and seafarers in general. The Bodleian manuscript 764 of the bestiary tells about the «island-whale» or «whale-island» creature: ships were the first adversaries of these monsters in the reality³⁸, and Elliði, Friðþjófr's magical ship, fights against the two monsters, giving an excellent example of a personified duel between good and evil.

However whales have an ambiguous function in Nordic literary sources also due to their economical importance as vital resources for Scandinavian inhabitants. Linguistic formations occurring in skaldic poetry, such as the kennings *brannvala braut* «the whale's path» and *brannblakks hóll* «the whale's hall» (for 'the sea')³⁹ as well as *hvals buðar húð* «the whale's house skinn» (for 'ice')⁴⁰ are evidence of their great significance for Scandinavian culture and society.

The Norwegians and the Icelanders developed a subsistence strategy relying upon the products of both sea and land which focused (as, for example, Anglo-Saxon narratives, such as the *Voyage of Ottar* and *Aelfric's Colloquy* demonstrate) on the whale as a resource rather than considering it just a monster. The two mentioned texts are pragmatic in their descriptions and, as P. H. Sawyer illustrates in *Othere and Viking Trade*⁴¹, when elephant tusks became very scarce, after the 5th century, whalebone and walrus tusks were used in their place. The sources of them were the Arctic

³⁷ See *Saga di Friðþjófr l'audace* 2015, pp. 11-12.

³⁸ *The Bodleian manuscript 764*, p. 204.

³⁹ MEISSNER 1921, p. 95.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁴¹ SAWYER 1982, pp. 43-55.

zones of Norway and, after its discovery, of Greenland⁴². The famous precious Franks casket – preserved partly at the British museum and partly at the Bargello Museum in Florence – is made of whalebone as its runic inscription testifies. Walrus ivory appears to have been something Ottar and his companions hunted for themselves. In *Friðþjófs saga*, Friðþjófr's incitement to his magical ship Elliði may hide an allusion to this goal of whale-hunting:

Heill Elliði!
Hlauptu á báru!
Brijóttu í trollkonum
tennr ok enni,
kinnr ok kjálka
í konu vándri,
fót eða báða
í flagði þessu⁴³!

«Heill Elliði!/ Spring on the wave! / *Break the trollwives/teeth and cheeks/foreheads and jaws* /to one of the monsters/ only one foot/ or both/to the evil witch».

A passage in Ottar's voyage shows the superiority of Norwegian whaling compared to the English one. The word used by the Anglo-Saxon translator for whale is *hwæl*, a general term. Old English seems to have only *hwæl* for «cetus» and *bron* for «ballena» (which appears in the runic inscription of the Frank Casket: *bronæs*). Christine Fell underlines this higher competence of Scandinavians' by comparing the number of Old English and Old Norse terms for 'whale'⁴⁴, stressing the Old Norse wider range of terms, 26 in *Snorra Edda* and 18 in *Konungs Skuggsjá* (some of which are poetic synonyms), versus the two above quoted English words. Some examples: *hrosshvalr*, *rostungr*, *rosmhvalr*, *náhvah*⁴⁵.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ FELL 1982, pp. 56-58.

⁴⁵ Of course, besides borrowing some words such as *hrosshwæl* (walrus) already present in Old English texts (although as Fell points out that the Anglo-Saxons seemed not familiar with these animals), the modern English translators of these two works have created nominal compounds corresponding to the Old Norse ones (such as *narwhale*, by introducing new loanwords).

This abundance of linguistic materials mirrors a crucial economic importance of the whale, as it is shown also by Icelandic and Norwegian coastal rights, including scavenging, hunting, and fishing rights. Church law, as recorded in Iceland's *Grágás*, the Old Icelandic law, permitted wild bounties to be captured even when other work was prohibited. They were so essential to survival that they were collected even on Sundays and holy days.

In the French legend of Within, for example, written by the 10th century monk, Letaldus, a whale was killed by a monk, named Within, while he was inside the whale. The whale carcass drifted and was stranded on the English shore near Rochester. Local people rushed to butcher it. But they were afraid since they had been taught, according to other whale stories, that whales were demonic or possessed⁴⁶. For Scandinavian people instead whales were not only symbols, they were also viewed as resources by scavengers on the shore.

Thus the image of whale in early medieval times was influenced by two opposite views: one, positive, based on economics, and one, negative and symbolic, influenced by magic and reinforced by the new religion.

Encounters with natural beings – magical animal, *huldras*, *skogsrå* (female forest spirits) – are recorded also in later ballads, folktales and in oral narrative traditions such as ‘memorates’, collected all over Scandinavia. It is certainly due to the new religion that totemic animals, such as wolves, bears – or whales in Arctic regions, already dangerous for ships and men at sea – became symbols of evil. Other beasts may also appear in a monstrous shape. In places far from the sea some ‘memorates’ and folktales tell about marvellous enormous fish (which remind us of whales) living in lakes, rivers and dams.

An interesting tradition of magical water beings arose about Swedish lakes and springs. Among *Halländska Folkminnen, lokalsägner och övertro från Fagered*⁴⁷, some ‘memorates’, collected by Johan Kalén, tell about a magical giant pike, *gäddan*. In one of them, *Gäddan i Björsjö* «The pike in Björsjö lake», the fish is called *odjuret* «the monster»⁴⁸, and at the beginning of the story the text says that the pike is so big that it is difficult to believe

⁴⁶ SZABO 2008, pp. 52-54.

⁴⁷ KAHLÉN 1927, p. 81.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

that it is a real pike, but *utan istället något trolltyg*⁴⁹ «but rather some magic being». This tale like other similar legends (i.e. *Gäddan i Hällesjö*)⁵⁰ is connected with fishing and fresh water (lakes, rivers, etc.). It may be compared with those folktales telling about hunting and presenting magical bears, wolves or deers and human beings with special abilities (people understanding the speech of animals, witches, geomancers, future tellers, etc.) who know how to deal with them.

They represent a continuity between Scandinavian Old Norse world and later nordic traditions.

To conclude, magic was quite often present in Old Norse texts, with positive connotations: it was a question of predicting future events, revealing a precious secret knowledge, as in the case of Sigdrífa or Grípir in *Edda* or the little Völva in *Eiríks saga rauða*. Magic was also strictly connected with economic resources: its divinatory functions are often shown by magicians and *völvur* to predict how the crop would be or if fishing or hunting would be lucky.

With the spreading of Christianity, old sacrifices and rituals were condemned and heathen deities appeared in *fornaldarsögur* as monsters, sinister wizards, cruel trolls and witches. Sagas show this complex passage from heathen time to the new religion. But magic rituals would continue to be performed under different forms for centuries.

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⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

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