

Chapter 5

THE STUPID BOY AND THE DEVIL: SÆMUNDUR FRÓÐI SIGFÚSSON, MAGIC, AND REDEMPTION

“Tornæmi Drengurinn og Kölski”¹ (The Stupid Boy and the Devil)

Sæmundur fróði once had a young boy working for him who was so stupid he could not learn anything at all, not even the basics of Christian doctrine. The boy was very bothered by this and often said he would rather like to be clever. One night a man came to him in a dream and offered him the chance to be very clever indeed if the boy would only promise to come and serve the man's household on Holy Cross Day the following spring. The boy gladly agreed and when he awoke, he felt himself to be as clever as any boy in Iceland. He impressed many with his abilities, even Sæmundur the priest, who knew a thing or two about being clever. As time passed, the boy became sullen and frightened. Finally, he confessed the whole story to Sæmundur. The priest told the boy he had surely been visited by the Devil himself, but not to worry ... Sæmundur would help him out of his troubles.

On the eve of Holy Cross day, Sæmundur told the boy to come with him to the church, where he put vestments on the boy, gave him the bread and wine of Holy Communion, and told him exactly what he must do. The boy, said Sæmundur, must face the nave and offer the Communion bread and wine to whoever should enter the church, and if they refused to partake of the bread and wine of Communion, then the boy must under no circumstances go with them. With that, Sæmundur left the church.

Not long after, the man from the boy's dream entered the church and said that it was time he came into his service. The boy said nothing, only offered the bread and wine of Communion. The man said he was not interested in what the boy was holding and demanded that he come as he had promised. The boy did not move, and eventually the man left angrily. After that, many of the boy's friends came one by one and tempted him to leave his spot. Some grew angry. Finally, Sæmundur himself entered the church and told him that he must come with him, but the boy did not move and only offered the bread and wine. Sæmundur grew angry and told him he had not come for Communion and that the boy was to come with him immediately. When the boy would not, Sæmundur turned and stormed out of the church. After that, all manner of devils and evil spirits seemed to storm the church and flew about making all sorts of awful disturbances until the boy thought the church itself would crumble to the ground. At last, the boy heard church bells ringing and all the visions ceased at once. At last, the real Sæmundur entered and said not a word, only

¹ JÁ 1:483–84. This story was collected from Markús Gíslason (1837–1890). Another version was recorded in Ólafur Davíðsson, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur*, 4 vols. (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Þjóðsaga, 1978–80), 2:303–5.

took Holy Communion from the boy, and told him there was nothing more to fear. The Devil would not trouble him anymore.

The boy thanked Sæmundur for his help and was devoted to him for the rest of his life. The boy, it is said, was able to keep his cleverness and became a famous man in Iceland.

This little story has a great deal to offer a discussion of Icelandic folk traditions and cultural memory.² Morphologically, it is related to a Finnish tale (E551) in which a woman inadvertently promises her unborn son to the Devil on his fifteenth birthday, but when the Devil comes to collect, the boy appeals to a priest for help. The story also has affinities with several important Indo-European tale types—The Priest and the Devil (ATU 810A*), The Man Promised to the Devil Becomes a Clergyman (ATU 811), The Sorcerer's Apprentice (ATU 325), The Youth Who Wanted to Learn What Fear Is (ATU 326), and especially The Smith and the Devil (ATU 330)—as well as motifs involving deals with the Devil—M211 and especially M216.1 (the Devil helping a man study for the priesthood in exchange for his soul). But there is also something deeply, uniquely Icelandic about the story: it features Sæmundur *fróði* Sigfússon, one of the most prominent Icelanders of both history and legend; and Holy Cross Day, the prescribed day the boy must go with the Devil, is a reference to May 3, the Icelandic Moving Day, when hired labourers could move from the service of one farm to another. Thus, it is significant that the boy, who is initially in Sæmundur's service will go into the service of the Devil on May 3.³

In addition to these points, the careful reader may be compelled to acknowledge certain curiosities about the story: First, as we shall see from the morphological analysis below, the presence of Sæmundur *fróði* seems to be rather superfluous. He plays a significant role in the long-developing figure of the Icelandic *galdramaður*, sorcerer, but this story is about cleverness and the Devil, not magic, and while it is true that Sæmundur *fróði* is said to know how to deal with the Devil, he does not deal with the Devil himself; he merely tells the boy what he must do. What, exactly, is Sæmundur's function in this story? Second, sacred space and ritual play prominent roles in the defeat of the Devil in this story. The boy must stand just so in the church, wear the vestments of a priest, and offer the sacrament of Holy Communion to anyone who enters. In most stories about defeating the Devil (in the above motifs and tale types), it is not ritual and space but clever (often petty) tricks that bewilder an overmatched devil figure. This devil is quite the contrary—not a fool, easily gulled, but quite a sinister figure who looks as if he really could steal the boy's soul (even though he fails in the end). Why is this story different? Third, and perhaps most importantly, this story seems to take special care to say that the boy keeps his cleverness and goes on to be a prominent figure in Iceland. While it is not uncommon in folk narratives in the tradition of The Smith and the Devil (ATU

² According to Jón Árnason's notes, the source for this story was Markús Gíslason of Mýrasýsla (1837–1890), who was a schoolboy at the time and went on to become a priest.

³ Simpson, *Legends of Icelandic Magicians*, chap. 5, n. 15. See also Árni Björnsson, *Saga daganna* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1994).

330) for characters to retain whatever it is the Devil has given them, there is something quite unsettling about this instance from a theological perspective. It is not obvious that anyone should keep what the Devil has given them, cleverness least of all, which can be either a good or bad quality depending upon how it is used. We need only look at the most fundamental of Christian narratives—the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden—to see how receiving cleverness from the Devil might become a serious problem. Why is the Devil’s cleverness a good thing here?

We will take these questions in reverse order.

On the one hand, the fact that the boy is able to keep his cleverness may be nicely accounted for by recognizing the story’s possible connection to international tale types and motifs. The Indo-European folklore landscape is peppered with examples of clever persons receiving something from the Devil in exchange for their souls and then outwitting him when the time comes. Connecting this story with the tale type *The Smith and the Devil* (ATU 330) is especially interesting because it associates this Icelandic story with possibly the oldest known tale type in the Indo-European world. Recent work done by Sara Garça da Silva and Jamshid J. Tehrani have applied a comparative phylogenetic analysis to explore the origins of several Indo-European folktales,⁴ and they have identified the origins of ATU 330 as plausibly going back 5,000–6,000 years to the Bronze Age.⁵ However, religious developments at various times in the various regions in which the basic story might be found will have influenced the story according to the beliefs and cultural pressures at play. Whatever this tale type may have been before the introduction of Christianity, it must have developed to accommodate the new religion, including its conception of good and evil.

From here we may turn to the Stith Thompson folk motif M216.1, in which we see evidence of those religious influences. This motif describes a story in which a man becomes a priest with the aid of the Devil, but during his studies discovers a way to save himself from the Devil. This *would seem* to fit nicely with the Icelandic story of the stupid boy and the Devil. Even though the story does not mention the boy becoming a priest, the tale specifically mentions his desire to learn Christian doctrine, and it is a ritual normally conducted by a priest, Holy Communion, that he enacts while dressed in a priest’s vestments. There is considerable value to this connection, but this interpretation only goes so far. The principal difficulty is that the picture of evil in “*The Stupid Boy and the Devil*” seems rather different from those farcical, ineffectual devils—such as the *vanapagan* (Old Boy or Stupid Devil) discussed by Ülo Valk and others—that tend to occur in similar international tales associated with ATU 330 and M216.1.⁶ The Devil

4 Sara Garça da Silva and Jamshid J. Tehrani, “Comparative Phylogenetic Analyses Uncover the Ancient Roots of Indo-European Folktales,” *Royal Society Open Science* 3 (2016): 1–11.

5 Da Silva and Tehrani, “Comparative Phylogenetic Analyses,” 9.

6 See Ülo Valk, *The Black Gentleman: Manifestations of the Devil in Estonian Folk Religion* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 2001), 12–13. Valk notes that the word *vanapagan* literally means “old heathen,” but that in Estonian folklore the word has come to refer either to the stupid devil or the primeval giants who have left marks of their existence upon the landscape in the form of boulders and hills (Valk, *Black Gentleman*, 12n2).

in “The Stupid Boy” is sinister, capable of elaborate deceptions and disguises, and the commander of a host of monsters and demons that come to terrorize the boy and almost destroy the church. We get the sense that in this case, the Devil really could take the boy’s soul, even though he is ultimately thwarted. “The Stupid Boy and the Devil” comes closer to the great cosmic war between God and the Devil discussed in the [previous chapter](#),⁷ which, as Heiko A. Oberman suggests, had such an impact on the Lutheran mentality.⁸ In the great cosmic war, the prize is authority over the Kingdom of God and the casualties are the souls that might be stolen by the Devil and lost to eternal damnation. Reading this tale as a skirmish in the great cosmic war sheds light on the second of the intriguing peculiarities of “The Stupid Boy and the Devil”: the importance of space and ritual.

Sæmundur instructs the boy to do exactly as he says: he must be standing in front of the altar, facing the nave, wearing the vestments, and holding the Sacraments; he must offer the Sacraments to anyone who enters and must not take even one step toward anyone—even Sæmundur himself—if they will not first accept the bread and wine of Communion. His success depends entirely upon both maintaining an appropriate relationship to the sacred space and adhering to the ritual of Holy Communion. These two elements, space and ritual, seem to indicate something about the severity of the threat the boy faces. Much like the uses of space and ritual discussed in the [previous chapter](#), here we see the two working together to combat evil: it is through space and ritual that the boy will save his soul, or lose it. The consequences of losing this battle also involve the sacred space of the church. While the boy is resisting the visions of monsters and demons, it seems to him that “kirkjan hristast og skjálfa og hélt að hún mundi þá og þegar sökkva eða fara um koll” (the church began to shake and shiver, and he thought it would sink into the ground or come crashing down right then and there).⁹ That the church might sink into the ground is another motif common in both local Icelandic and international narratives. Internationally, the story draws from the Stith-Thompson motif F941.2 (Church sinks underground).¹⁰ In Iceland, F941.2 features in other narratives as well, most notably in a story discussed in the [previous chapter](#), about Loftur Þorsteinsson, *Galdra-Loftur* (the most sinister and tragic of all Icelandic *galdramenn*)¹¹. According to the narrative about him, Loftur

7 108–11.

8 Oberman, *Luther*, 104.

9 JÁ 1:484.

10 For a recent discussion of this motif, see Sandis Laime, “The Place Valence Approach in Folk Narrative Research: The ‘Church Sinks Underground’ Motif in Latvian Folklore,” in *Storied and Supernatural Places: Studies in Spatial and Social Dimensions of Folklore and Sagas*, ed. Ülo Valk and Daniel Sävborg, *Studia Fennica Folkloristica* 23 (Helsinki: The Finnish Literature Society, 2018), 80–92.

11 Historical sources indicate that Loftur Þorsteinsson was born in the early 1700s and that he went on to become a student at the Hólar Cathedral School (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Folk-Stories of Iceland*, 207). Hannes Þorsteinsson has done the most thorough examination of the legacy of *Galdra-Loftur* stories in his discussion of the 1915 play by Jóhann Sigurjónsson in the January 9

tries to raise from the dead the evil bishop-magician, Gottskálk *grimmi* (the cruel) Nikulásson,¹² for the purpose of stealing his magical book. Like the eponymous stupid boy, Loftur relies upon rituals—the Lord’s Prayer, the singing of Hymns, and the act of confession—to achieve his purpose, although this time he reverses the rituals to pray to the Devil, glorify evil, and confess all the good he has done in his life. These parodies of Christian ritual are common to the international motifs G243 (Witch’s Sabbath) and 243.2 (Parody of Church Ceremony at Witch’s Sabbath).¹³ In the Loftur story, these motifs function in concert with the desecration of sacred space to signal the seriousness of the proceedings. Loftur ultimately fails in his endeavour and dies a horrible death because of it. Evil though he clearly is, even Loftur seems to come to a moral line he is not willing to cross. After he has failed to get the grimoire from Gottskálk, Loftur says, “Rankaði ég fyrst við mér þegar svo langt var komið að hefði ég farið einu særingarstefi lengra þá mundi kirkjan hafa sokkið, og það var það sem hann ætlaðist til” (I came to my senses when, if I had chanted one incantation more than the church would have sunken into the ground, and that was what he [the Devil] intended all along).¹⁴ This story again depicts a high-stakes conflict that, if lost, could result in the loss of both the combatant’s eternal soul and the presence of sacred space in the community.

Nor are the spatial and ritual elements of “The Stupid Boy and the Devil” recent additions to Icelandic cultural memory. The fourteenth-century family saga *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* includes a strikingly similar contest between a priest named Jósteinn and an evil king Raknar, who was buried alive with five hundred men. During the assault, Raknar tries to entice the priest to come with him, but the priest remains fixed in his position:

Mörg fádæmi sýndust honum, bæði troll ok óvættir, fjandr ok fjölkunnigar þjóðir. Sumir blíðkuðu hann, en sumir ógnuðu honum, at hann skyldi þá heldr burtu ganga en ádr. Þar þóttist hann sjá frændr sína ok vini, jafnvel Ólaf konung með hirð sinni, ok bað hann með sér fara. Sá hann ok, at Gestr ok hans félagar þjuggust ok ætluðu í burt ok kölluðu, at Jósteinn prestur skyldi fylgja þeim ok flýta sér í burt ... Ekki gaf prestur um þetta, ok hvat

and January 13, 1915 iterations of *Ísafold*, a pdf copy of which can be found at <https://timarit.is/page/3951352#page/n1/mode/2up> and <https://timarit.is/page/3951358#page/n1/mode/2up>. The fascination with *Galdra*-Loftur is due in no small part to the efforts of Skúli Gíslason, who edited and added a literary quality to existing oral accounts of Loftur. It is Skúli’s work that we have in Jón Árnason’s collection, and it is indeed a majestic retelling of Loftur’s story. Of Skúli’s effort, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson says, “it is as if a folk-legend is on the way to becoming something more sophisticated; one might perhaps call it a myth” (*Folk-Stories of Iceland*, 212). Einar Ólafur Sveinsson’s discussion of *Galdra*-Loftur stories (*Folk-Stories of Iceland*, 207–13) is drawn largely from Hannes’s study.

12 Again, a historical figure, bishop of Hólar 1497–1520, Gottskálk Nikulásson was rumoured to be especially cruel and to have magical ability.

13 See Heinrich Institoris, *Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. and ed. Christopher S. Mackay, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 79 A–B and 96D.

14 JÁ 1:574.

undrum sem hann sá, eða hversu ólmliga þessir fjandr létu, þá kómu þeir þó aldri nær presti sakir vatns þess, er hann stökki.¹⁵

Many marvels appeared to him—both trolls and evil beings/creatures [*óvættir*], fiends and people of the black arts.¹⁶ Some entreated him, while others threatened him, urging him to go away instead. He thought that he saw his family and friends there, and even Ólafur the king [whom Jólsteinn serves] with his bodyguard,¹⁷ and asked him to come with him. He also saw that Gestur and his companions were making ready and intended to leave and called out that the priest Jólsteinn should follow them and hasten away ... The priest did not give in to that, and no matter what wonders he saw or how dreadfully these fiends acted, they could never come near the priest on account of the [holy] water that he sprinkled.

The sprinkling of holy water connects the contest between the priest and Raknar with ritual aspersion and baptism, while the spatial element has gone from a church to a burial mound. Though the later narrative replaces Raknar with the Devil and the burial mound with a church, the sinister quality of this evil foe remains evident in the post-Reformation story of the stupid boy. Ritual and sacred space furthermore serve an important cultural function as a response to evil. The ritual element—aspersion with holy water in *Bárðar saga*, Holy Communion in “The Stupid Boy”—is fundamental to the fight against evil. Simply put, Christian ritual keeps us safe.

The role of space is less clear. The group that went with Jólsteinn has struggled to open a burial mound in which Raknar was put to rest, but after the party toils each day to dig, the mound mysteriously fills itself each evening. Only by standing his ground through the night, relying on his ritual and remaining unmoved, can Jólsteinn overcome the magic that thwarts their efforts. While there is no threat in *Bárðar saga* of the burial mound sinking into the ground like the church (F941.2), that may be because, as a burial mound, it is already *in* the ground. In fact, Sandis Laime has shown that, in Latvia, F941.2 (Church Sinks Underground) became associated with places in the landscape featuring hillforts and stone gravesites that were assumed to have an ancient, pre-Christian origin.¹⁸ Something similar may be happening with F941.2 in Iceland, where nineteenth-century narratives such as “The Stupid Boy and the Devil” and the Loftur narrative transform the sacred landscape of the context to match F941.2. In the

15 *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, 295–355; *Íslendingasögur*, 3 (Reykjavík: Hrappseyjarprent h.f., 1946), 349–50.

16 Sara M. Anderson translates *fjölunnigar þjóðir* here as “fairy folk,” which has much to be said in its favour. I avoid connotations with “fairy” here because the etymology of the word *fjölunnigar*, and the context of this quotation, does not quite seem to support the deep connotation of the “fairy.” See Anderson’s translation of the saga in *The Complete Sagas of the Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinnsson, 6 vols. (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 2:237–66 at 263.

17 I prefer “retinue” here over Anderson’s preference for “court,” which to me connotes something different. My translation and Anderson’s are otherwise largely the same. See Anderson, “Bard’s Saga,” 263.

18 Laime, “The Place Valence Approach,” 84–86.

nineteenth-century stories, what was once the underground burial mound of *Bárðar saga* is no longer the site of the conflict but rather the place into which the church sinks if the conflict goes terribly wrong.

Finally, even though the *Bárðar saga* episode predates the Lutheran mentality described by Oberman, the medieval text does contain a sense of the cosmic war fought by Christianity. To see it, however, it must be noted that the episode from *Bárðar saga* takes place at the heart of a conversion narrative that occupies the second half of the saga. Gestur, who ultimately leads the party against Raknar, converts to Christianity because of his own experience struggling against the evil king, and while the latter is not said to be the Devil, he is clearly an agent of evil.

Returning to the question of why the stupid boy gets to keep his cleverness, we find that an understanding of space and ritual illuminates something of the religious and cultural pressures upon ATU 330, M216.1, and other international influences in medieval and post-medieval Northern Europe. In contrast to the Devil figures in ATU 330, M216.1, and other narratives about defeating him—in which the devils are defeated by cleverness—here “The Stupid Boy and the Devil” and the medieval narrative *Bárðar saga* both use space and ritual to act out the skirmish between good and evil as a part of the cosmic war between God and the Devil. The once-stupid boy may have been able to keep his cleverness in the end because he earned the right to do so: Had he lost, he would have forfeited his soul; since he won, his spoils of war are the cleverness offered by the Devil to begin with.¹⁹

A more difficult question to answer is what, exactly, Sæmundur *fróði* Sigfússon is doing in this story at all. Based on the above discussion of ATU 330 and M216.1, Sæmundur appears to be an unnecessary complication. M216.1 states that the Devil helps a man become a priest, but when the man becomes a priest, he has learned enough to save himself from the Devil—a kind of ironic rite of passage for the man-become-priest. It is true that the Finnish variant also includes a priest, but he seems to have no particular identity. In fact, of the unnamed priest in the Finnish variant of this story, E551, Elli-Kaija Kōngäs and Pierre Maranda say, “It is obvious that it does not matter structurally who fools the Devil and by what means.”²⁰ That might be true about the Finnish variant, but it is certainly not true for the Icelandic variant. Not only is the priest named, but he is one of the most famous literary, historical, and legendary figures that Iceland has ever known.

To understand Sæmundur’s presence in the tale, we must trace the history of both Sæmundur *fróði* Sigfússon and stories about him.

19 Similar uses of space occur in the previously discussed tale of *Galdra-Loftur*, though to a worse end. Skúli’s version of the tale nonetheless reflects many of the important trends concerning spatial and ritual opposition to the evil forces that oppose Christianity noted here. See above for more on this point (105–8).

20 Elli-Kaija Kōngäs and Pierre Maranda, “Structural Models in Folklore,” *Midwest Folklore* 12 (1962): 133–92 at 171, www.jstor.org/stable/4317987.

The Folk Legacy of Sæmundur fróði

By the time “The Stupid Boy and the Devil” was recorded in the mid-nineteenth century, stories of Sæmundur fróði as a *galdramaður*—in fact, the prototypical *galdramaður*—were well established. Before becoming a prominent fixture in Icelandic folklore, Sæmundur fróði was first a historical personage who lived from 1056 to 1133 and was well respected as a historian and otherwise learned man. Sæmundur fróði²¹ has always been close to the centre of Icelandic cultural and literary history (even when he perhaps ought not to have been).²² He was apparently so respected a historian during his time that Ari Þorgilsson submitted his *Íslendingabók* to Sæmundur for review, and Ari and other writers cite Sæmundur as an authority for historical information.²³ Attributions of literary achievement to Sæmundur have little potency now, but during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when many of the *galdramaður* tales about him would have been circulating for centuries, the cultural memory of Sæmundur’s prowess as a writer and poet were alive and well.²⁴ He was, for example, presumed to have written the *Poetic Edda*, and even today we may see this work referred to as the *Sæmundar Edda*.²⁵ Even Jón Árnason believed that Sæmundur was the poet responsible for the moving thirteenth-century poem “Sólarljóð” (The Lay of the Sun).²⁶ Sæmundur’s cultural status in both medieval and post-medieval Iceland afforded him the sympathy of the audiences of post-medieval folktales, so that from the start he would have been rather impervious to whatever criticisms came his way as a result of some of his more questionable dealings with magic as recorded in some narratives. The later folk tradition certainly maintains the sentiment, if not the wording, displayed first in *Jóns saga Helga* (early thirteenth century), which introduces Sæmundur as “þann mann er verit hefir einnhverr mestr Guðs kristni til nytsemðar á Íslandi” (that man who has been one of the most useful to God’s kingdom in Iceland).²⁷

21 Both Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson and Terry Gunnell have contributed extensive studies of the origins and development of folktales about Sæmundur fróði (Gunnell, “Return of Sæmundur”; Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, “Sæmundur fróði”), to which I will refer regularly in this chapter. Halldór Hermannsson’s 1932 study of Sæmundur and his cultural and literary context remains an invaluable source on the subject: *Sæmund Sigfússon and the Oddaverjar*, *Islandica XXII* (Ithaca: Cornell University Library, 1932), especially 33–36, for a discussion of Sæmundur’s career as a historian.

22 As is well known, Sæmundur was wrongly given credit for the composition of several important medieval texts.

23 For Ari’s appeals to Sæmundur’s authority, see *Íslendingabók: Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, *Íslenzk Fornrit 1* (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1968), 3 and 16–17. Note also Siân Grønlie’s comments in “The Book of the Icelanders,” in *Íslendingabók, Kristni saga: The Book of the Icelanders, The Story of Conversion*, trans. Siân Grønlie (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2006), nn. 2 and 88.

24 Halldór Hermannsson, *Sæmund Sigfússon*, 36–37.

25 Halldór Hermannsson, *Sæmund Sigfússon*, 36–37.

26 JÁ 1:475.

27 *Sæmundar þáttr*, in *Biskupa Sögur 1*, ed. Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson, and Peter Foote, *Íslenzk Fornrit 15* (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 2003), 339.

Regarding his connection to “The Stupid Boy and the Devil,” it is interesting to note that medieval sources depict Sæmundur getting himself into a bind similar to that of the boy in “The Stupid Boy and the Devil.” The medieval Icelandic text *Jóns saga Helga* (which was probably a translation of a lost Latin original) gives an account of Bishop Jón Ögmundarson (1052–1121)—the first bishop of the episcopal see at Hólar in the north of Iceland—going to retrieve Sæmundur from somewhere in Europe.²⁸ The earliest version of *Jóns saga Helga* says only that Sæmundur had gone abroad and not been heard from in a long time, but Jón discovers his location and brings him back home. A later version (late thirteenth-/early fourteenth-century) goes into much more detail, stating that Sæmundur has been studying with an astrologer who teaches “mysterious” arts. It is likely that the medieval story of Bishop Jón and Sæmundur *fróði* was moulded after a similar twelfth-century account of Gerbert of Aurillac (who later became Pope Sylvester II), found in William of Malmesbury’s *Gesta regum Anglorum*,²⁹ which predates the earliest versions of Jón’s vernacular *vita* (ca. 1300).³⁰ Even though the moral quality of Sæmundur’s mysterious learning is ambiguous in *Jóns saga Helga*, in this original story about Gerbert there is no mistaking the morality. While with the Saracens, Gerbert learned many things, including how “to summon ghostly forms from the nether regions, everything, in short, whether harmful or healthful, that has been discovered by human curiosity.”³¹ When Gerbert absconds with a book that belongs to his Saracen master, he summons the Devil to help him escape. The text is also clear that Gerbert meets a horrible end because of his dealings with the Devil and forbidden arts.³² An important contrast between William of Malmesbury’s narrative about Gerbert and the medieval Icelandic variation is, as Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson suggests, that the medieval saga writer appears to see no moral conflict between learning these mysterious arts and the Christian church service Sæmundur begins immediately upon his return to Iceland,³³ but it should at least be clear that Jón is concerned about Sæmundur, wants him to leave his mysterious teacher and come home to Iceland, and that Sæmundur agrees.

Though it is true, as Jón Hnefill observes, that the medieval saga writer does not offer direct moral judgment of Sæmundur’s motives, there is strong indication of an internal

28 *Sæmundar þáttr*, 339–43. See commentary in Peter Foote’s introduction to *Jóns saga Helga*, in *Biskupa sögur 1*, cclxvii–cclxxi. See also Ásdís Egilsdóttir, “From Orality to Literacy: Remembering the Past and the Present in *Jóns saga Helga*,” in *Reykholt som makt- og lærdoms-senter i den Islandske og Nordiske kontekst*, ed. Else Mundal (Reykholt: Snorrastofa, Menningar og Miðaldasetur, 2006), 215–16, for a discussion of the manuscript traditions for *Jóns saga Helga*.

29 See William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum*, ed. and trans. R. A. B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson, and M. Winterbottom, 2 vols., Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998–99), 1:279–95.

30 For information on *Jóns Saga Helga*, see *Jóns Saga Hólabyskups ens Helga*, ed. Peter Foote, Editiones Arnarnæmæ, Series A, vol. 14 (Copenhagen: Reitzel, 2003).

31 William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum*, 1:280–81.

32 William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum*, 1:294–95. Also referenced in Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson’s “Sæmundur fróði,” 123.

33 Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, “Sæmundur fróði,” 124.

struggle within the *Sæmundur* of *Jóns saga Helga*. There are two significant indicators of this struggle. First, when Jón finds the wayward *Sæmundur*, it is said that the latter is so deep in his studies of dubious lore that “hann týndi allri þeirri er hann hafði á æskualdri numit ok jafnvel skírnarnafni sínu” (he had lost everything he had learned in his childhood, even his baptismal name).³⁴ Jón Hnefill reads this passage as reflecting the possibility that the historical *Sæmundur* left to study at such an early age that he forgot much of what he knew of Iceland as a child. There may be a historical element to this passage, but the detail about the loss of his baptismal name (*skírnarnafni*) is also suggestive beyond any historical connection: The loss of a baptismal name indicates something about the spiritual standing of an individual. If the baptismal name has been forgotten, then the spiritual function of baptism may also be lost. In other words, *Sæmundur*’s journey to acquire mysterious knowledge has taken him so far outside Christendom that he has forgotten not just his name but also his Christian identity. This loss of identity is also suggestive of a dramatized rite of passage, in which neophytes are sometimes characterized as forgetting or losing their own name during the liminal stage. As Edward Berry describes this function, “the liminal phase can be characterized as one of confusion, testing, and education, although ‘confusion’ is too trivial a word for the fundamental dislocation of self sometimes experienced ... this disorientation occurs in such activities as dying symbolically; losing one’s name, language, and customary diet; disguising oneself, or mutilating or painting one’s body.”³⁵ This “confusion” and “education” fit well with *Sæmundur*’s experience here, for he has lost his identity, become confused, so to speak, for the purpose of acquiring a rather unique education. There may even be cause to view his psychological state as “disguised” or “mutilated,” for in place of his baptismal name *Sæmundur* is using the name *Kollur*, which could mean “head,”³⁶ as Jón Hnefill translates it, though it may also be read as an abbreviated version of *kölski* (devil).³⁷

The nature of Jón’s rhetorical rebuttal of *Sæmundur*’s dubious name points to a second reason to perceive an internal struggle in *Sæmundur*: Jón does not merely correct him but rather answers “af gipt heilags anda” (with the gift of the Holy Spirit),³⁸ which suggests a kind of spiritual rebuke or even exorcism of *Sæmundur*. When *Sæmundur* acquiesces to Jón’s entreaties, he says, “Vera má at sönun sé saga þín. Ok ef svá er, þá mun finnask í túninu í Odda hóll nökkurr, sá er ek lék mér jafnan við” (It may be that what you say is true, and if it is, then a certain hill will be found in the field at Oddi where I used to play).³⁹ Again, there is something about this scene that reminds us of a liminal phase for *Sæmundur*. As Turner puts it, “during the liminal period, neophytes are alternately

34 *Sæmundar þáttur*, 339.

35 Edward Berry, *Shakespeare’s Comic Rites* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 4.

36 Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, “*Sæmundur fróði*,” 119.

37 See *Sæmundar þáttur*, 339n7 and references there.

38 *Sæmundar þáttur*, 339–40.

39 *Sæmundar þáttur*, 339.

forced and encouraged to think about their society, their cosmos, and the powers that generate and sustain them. *Liminality may be partly described as a stage of reflection.*⁴⁰ This is just the sort of reflection affecting Sæmundur here. He feels a call to return to his childhood environment and retrieves the memory of himself within his native space at his home at Oddi. Spatial consideration of this story thus produces a similar binary to those observed in previous chapters: just as Auður's Christian lands (and her church) opposed the land that Gullbrá co-opted, and just as the Christian church opposed the elf church in Tungustapi, here too the hill at Oddi opposes a school of "mysterious arts" where Sæmundur has forgotten who he is and where he comes from. The internal struggle, then, is both spiritual (as he recalls his baptismal name) and spatial (as he recalls his childhood home). When his Icelandic, Christian origins win out, the internal struggle is resolved and he is Kollur (devil) no longer. What follows in the medieval text, *Jóns saga Helga*, is an outward reflection of the inward struggle which Sæmundur has already won: he must escape from his master and return to his home at Oddi, Iceland.

The connections between "The Stupid Boy and the Devil" and these early stories about Sæmundur *fróði* may not be obvious, but they are present even in the medieval version of Sæmundur's quest for "mysterious" knowledge. In both, we see a young man who seeks knowledge in a way that presents an internal struggle. For the boy, it is a deal with the Devil; for Sæmundur, it is the loss of his Christian identity and the remembrance of his childhood home. Likewise, both the stupid boy and Sæmundur are unable to resolve their struggles on their own. The stupid boy receives help from Sæmundur, while Sæmundur receives help from Bishop Jón Ögmundarson. Finally, in both *Jóns saga Helga* and "The Stupid Boy and the Devil," the principal characters retain what they have learned even after their ordeals. The long development of folk stories about Sæmundur *fróði* bears out the connection even further. In post-medieval folklore, Sæmundur stories have become associated with the well-known legend ML 3000, the Black School, in which the teacher at the school is the Devil himself.⁴¹ The final stage of Sæmundur's story in *Jóns saga Helga*—his life after he returns to his home at Oddi, Iceland—likewise bears an important connection to "The Stupid Boy and the Devil." In order to understand these connections, however, we must consider the development of Sæmundur stories from the medieval to the post-medieval period.

40 Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage," in *Betwixt & Between: Patterns of Masculine and Feminine Initiation*, ed. Louise Carus Mahdi, Steven Foster, and Meredith Little (La Salle: Open Court, 1987), 14.

41 Other stories represent the magicians' acquisition of forbidden knowledge in various ways. Instead of going to the Black School to learn magic, the priest Eiríkur of Vogsóðs (1638–1716) learns his dark arts from a magic book. The story of the *galdrabók* is traceable in Iceland at least as far back as Árni Magnússon's Sæmundur stories (ca. 1700), though there it is more or less an anecdote about a magical expedition gone wrong (JÁ 1:473–74). The folk figures (here they are Sæmundur, his friend Jón, and Jón's mistress) get word of a magic book buried in the graveyard at Oddi and try to raise the magician holding it in order to steal it. After raising all the ghosts in the cemetery, Jón's mistress, who had snuck in to see the show, becomes scared and screams, prompting Jón to ring the bell early and Sæmundur to lose the book.

Ministration and the Post-Medieval Sæmundur Stories

After the medieval period, the narrative about Sæmundur and his escape from the astrologer drops out of written sources for more than three hundred years. The fact that it resurfaces again in 1701, when renowned Icelandic scholar Árni Magnússon began collecting accounts of Sæmundur *fróði*, is a testament to the vitality of the story in oral tradition in Iceland.⁴² Later still, around 1850, Jón Árnason collected even more stories about Sæmundur *fróði* as a magician, adding further stories about more than thirty magicians, eleven of whom held some position in the Church.⁴³ Terry Gunnell argues that the story recorded in *Jóns saga Helga*, which was clearly literary in style,⁴⁴ must have entered (or re-entered) oral tradition and there became fully shaped over the next few hundred years.⁴⁵ Of the connection between the medieval account of Jón and Sæmundur and the post-medieval stories about Sæmundur, Terry Gunnell suggests that the

late thirteenth-/early fourteenth-century account has little to do with the later, more well-known legends concerning Sæmundur's return [to Iceland] which are found in Jón Árnason's *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri*, apart from the central ideas that Sæmundur Sigfússon studied in a Northern European school under the guidance of a powerful Master who taught him "mysterious" arts (including "astronomian"); that Sæmundur's master did not intend him to leave, and thus needed to be tricked; and that Sæmundur (originally with Jón Ögmundarson) returned home to Iceland (by sea) to be awarded the position of the priest at Oddi in southern Iceland.⁴⁶

Gunnell's point here is perhaps nowhere clearer than in the stories of what happens after Sæmundur returns to Iceland from the Black School. The medieval *Jóns saga Helga* offers a concise but complete description of the ministries of both Jón and Sæmundur upon returning to Iceland, saying that they both served their community humbly and well and relied upon good Christian doctrine to support and protect the Church, and gave wise counsel to whoever needed it.⁴⁷ This description in the medieval tale of Sæmundur's and Jón's service to their churches is a key factor in the perception of both men. It is a testament to their fulfilment of their vocations as priests, and it shows that their various trials and travels contributed something not just to their own personal edification but also to their local Icelandic communities. It is also, from a literary and narratological perspective, a key feature in the completion of the dramatized (possibly latent) rite of passage mentioned above, since the neophyte has now completed the

⁴² Recorded by Bishop Björn Þorleifsson and now found in AM 254 8vo. Terry Gunnell notes that Bishop Björn was from Oddi (where Sæmundur was priest for most of his career) and would likely have picked up stories about Sæmundur that were still alive in oral tradition during the seventeenth century. See Gunnell, "Return of Sæmundur," 90.

⁴³ Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, "Sæmundr *fróði*," 118. See also JÁ 1:468–599 and 3:490–622.

⁴⁴ Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, "Sæmundr *fróði*," 121.

⁴⁵ Gunnell, "Return of Sæmundur," 109.

⁴⁶ Gunnell, "Return of Sæmundur," 88.

⁴⁷ *Jóns saga Helga*, 190.

reincorporation stage of the rite and has returned to his home space to serve his community as a transformed, fully initiated member of the society.

In stark contrast to this description from the medieval narrative, the post-medieval stories about Sæmundur's life after his return describe his contests with a (typically) weak, ineffectual devil. As Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson concludes,

In the folk tales from about 1700 and 1850, there are no particular accounts concerning Sæmundur's priesthood or his work in the service of the church. These legends commonly mention that he was the priest at Oddi, but that is not seen as being of any real importance. Most accounts of Sæmundur concern his confrontations with the devil.⁴⁸

Should Sæmundur's and Jón's ministries in Iceland be absent from the post-medieval tales, as Jón Hnefill's conclusions here suggest, it would signal a notable departure from the perception of Sæmundur in the medieval narrative.

I would argue, however, that an assessment of these post-medieval stories about Sæmundur show more nuance than Jón Hnefill allows. It is true, as he attests, that many of the post-medieval stories about Sæmundur's life after his return to Oddi depict his confrontations with the Devil. These narratives tend to be fairly typical international motifs⁴⁹ that follow the view of a devil that is more or less a pathetic figure.⁵⁰ Regarding Sæmundur's service to his church and community, however, the important aspect of these stories is not just that he defeats an ineffectual devil, but that in many of these stories he does so specifically in service to people of his church and community. For instance, the story "Kölski smíðar brú á Rangá" (The Devil Builds a Bridge over the River Rangá)⁵¹ follows a common international motif, G303.9.1.1 (The Devil Builds a Bridge), but to grasp the full meaning of the tale we must read beyond the motif. According to this short tale, Sæmundur has the Devil build the bridge, "því oftsinnis var örðugt yfir ána að komast, *einkum þeim er til Odda skyldu tíðir sækja*" (because it was often difficult to cross the river, *especially for those who wished to go to Oddi to attend church*).⁵² The means by which Sæmundur serves his congregants has become entangled with international folk motifs, but he is still tending to the needs his congregation.⁵³ Likewise, in "Púkinn og

⁴⁸ Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, "Sæmundr fróði," 130.

⁴⁹ Gunnell asserts that "The story of Sæmundur has evidently moved out of an international hagiographic tradition and shifted into an international folkloristic tradition. What is especially interesting, however, is the way in which the Icelandic legends deviate from their close relations in neighbouring countries" ("Return of Sæmundur," 89). That the tales were drawn back into the folk tradition suggests they had some usefulness to the folk belief, and that Icelanders developed the tales in their own unique way suggests that the usefulness was in some way shaped by the Icelandic mythic consciousness. All of this supports the approach to pagans as discussed in the Introduction.

⁵⁰ Jón Hnefill, "Sæmundur fróði," 130.

⁵¹ JÁ 1:472.

⁵² JÁ 1:472; my italics.

⁵³ The theme of a magician-priest using knowledge of magic to provide a service is developed more fully in the folk figures of Eiríkur of Vogsó and Hálfán of Fell. "Eiríkur frelsar konur frá

fjósamaðurinn” (The Demon and the Cowherd),⁵⁴ Sæmundur enlists the aid of a demon (*púkinn*) to teach a moral lesson to a cowherd with a vulgar tongue.⁵⁵ Sæmundur’s actions here may not qualify as teaching good Christian doctrine (*kenningar helgar*)⁵⁶ as he is described doing in *Jóns saga Helga*, but the Sæmundur of later tales is teaching a moral lesson nonetheless. And when Sæmundur makes the Devil lick up cow dung in the story “Kölski moka Oddafjósið” (Kölski Mucks Out the Cowshed at Oddi)⁵⁷ it is because the Devil has blocked the door with the dung and Sæmundur needs to get to his church service on time. Further, we may look at several tales in which Sæmundur defeats the Devil for the purpose of saving someone who has foolishly agreed to exchange their soul for something. For example, in “Vatnsburður Kölska” (The Devil Carries Water),⁵⁸ Sæmundur tricks the Devil to help a housemaid in Oddi who has rashly made a deal with him; in “Fjósamaðurinn í Odda”⁵⁹ (The Cowherd at Oddi), Sæmundur saves a foolish cowhand from eternal damnation by lending him a piece of clothing, which the Devil will recognize and thus abandon the man’s soul.⁶⁰ It is of course in this last category that we can place “The Stupid Boy and the Devil,”⁶¹ in which a boy would have lost his soul in exchange for the gift of cleverness, had Sæmundur not instructed him on how to escape. Finally, we find moments where Sæmundur’s love and concern for those under his care is impossible to ignore. One folktale states: “Sæmundur hafði tekið meybarn til fósturs

óvættum” (Eiríkur Frees Women from Ogres) includes three tales, and here I refer her to the second (JÁ 1:556–59). Eiríkur helps a young, promising man find his lost wife, who has been abducted by ogres. Likewise, in “Málmeyjarkonan” (The Woman of Málmey; Já 1:501), Hálfván of Fell attempts a similar rescue but with a less happy end. Both Eiríkur and Hálfván serve a similar guardianship function to that of Sæmundur here.

54 Já 1:481.

55 Eiríkur of Vogsó’s also has a proclivity for instruction. In “Hestastuldurinn” (The Horse Theft; Já 1:548–49), two young boys take two of the priest Eiríkur’s horses without permission, something that Eiríkur strictly forbids. As they try to escape, the boys realize that they are stuck to the saddles and the horses are riding fast back to Vogsó’s and Eiríkur. One boy decides to cut himself out of the seat of his pants and thereby escape the wrath of the magician, but the other boy panics and is caught. In the end Eiríkur scolds the boy who panicked, but says of the boy who cut himself out of his trousers that he would make a worthy pupil because of his resourcefulness. See also “Handbókin” (The Handbook; Já 1:545–46), which is an Icelandic example of the common tale of a young boy who opens a sorcerer’s magic book without permission (a variant of ATU 325*, The Sorcerer’s Apprentice) and must deal with the consequences. Eiríkur finds out, he praises the boy for his ability (rather than chastising him for his disobedience), and takes him on as a pupil. In another tale, “Sakamaðurinn” (The Convict; Já 1:559), the same boy aids Eiríkur in overcoming a *sending* that has been sent to kill the magician.

56 *Jóns saga Helga*, 190.

57 Já 1:473 and 481.

58 Já 1:470.

59 Já 1:473.

60 Já 2:473.

61 Já 2:483–84.

af fátækum manni; honum þótti ósköp vænt um hana og unni henni svo mikið at hann mátti ekki af henni sjá né við hana skilja” (Sæmundur had taken in the daughter of a poor man as his foster daughter; she was extremely dear to him, and he loved her so much that he never took his eyes off her nor wanted to be separated from her).⁶² Even though the purpose of this story “Sæmundur á banasænginni” (Sæmundur on His Deathbed) is not necessarily to highlight Sæmundur’s service to his community, this description of his affection for his foster daughter shows the selfless love one would expect from someone who possesses great compassion and concern even for those who are less fortunate.

Sæmundur’s Death and Accountability

The end of Sæmundur *fróði*’s life goes more or less unaccounted for in the medieval text *Jóns saga Helga*. With the exception of a statement indicating that he (and Jón) lived a long and prosperous life, there is no indication of how Sæmundur dies or the condition of his soul in his final moments (though we might assume the best). This absence, once again, is a notable departure from the source text for the Sæmundur story, the story of Gerbert/Silvester in William of Malmesbury’s *Gesta regum Anglorum*. This is the second important departure from William of Malmesbury. We may remember that the medieval Icelandic narrative also does not include any direct moral assessment or condemnation of Sæmundur, while William of Malmesbury’s text certainly does make moral judgment of Gerbert, Sæmundur’s counterpart. The absence of moral judgment and the absence of an account of Sæmundur’s death may not be unconnected, since Gerbert’s death scene is clearly invested in his moral judgment and accountability. According to William of Malmesbury, when Gerbert of Aurillac (Pope Sylvester II) fell mortally ill, his final moments went as follows:

Calling, therefore, the cardinals together, he lamented his crimes for a long space of time. They, being struck with sudden fear were unable to make any reply, whereupon he began to rave, and losing his reason through excess of pain, commanded himself to be maimed, and cast forth piecemeal, saying “Let him have the service of my limbs, who before sought their homage; for my mind never consented to that abominable oath.”⁶³

The passage does not specify what exactly follows, but it can be assumed that he died immediately following his rant. There are several key elements of this passage to bear in mind. First, Gerbert makes a confession but receives no absolution because the cardinals present are “struck with sudden fear.” Second, the antecedent of “him” who wants Gerbert’s limbs is clearly the Devil with whom he made a deal long ago. Third, the meaning behind the phrase “my mind never consented to that abominable oath” is puzzling, but at least the narrator, William of Malmesbury, is convinced of his guilt. In an earlier allusion to Gerbert’s death, William states, “The singular choice of his death confirms me in the belief of his league with the devil; else, when dying ... why should he,

⁶² JÁ 1:485.

⁶³ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum*, 181.

gladiator-like, maim his own person, unless conscious of some unusual crime?"⁶⁴ William of Malmesbury views this final torment of Gerbert's life as an indication of his oath to the Devil. Gerbert's mind may not have consented, but it is certainly broken, which leads to his demands that his body be mutilated in the most gruesome way possible.

It is telling, then, that the medieval story of Sæmundur, *Jóns saga Helga*, offers neither moral judgment of Sæmundur's pursuit of mysterious arts nor a final death scene, which may have provided an indication of the condition of Sæmundur's eternal soul, as William of Malmesbury's source text does for Gerbert. It is as though the medieval Icelandic writer wanted to keep things simple. Rather, as I suggested earlier, *Jóns saga* shifts Sæmundur's pursuit of mysterious arts away from a matter of culpability to a matter of internal struggle, and then takes time to illustrate Sæmundur's uncommonly good service to his community and church after his ordeal. The presence of an internal struggle instead of a moral judgment in *Jóns saga* affords the medieval narrative the freedom to show Sæmundur's service to his church and the community at Oddi in such a way that need not be complicated by any question of his motives.

It is further telling that post-medieval tales of Sæmundur include both an account of Sæmundur's service (though distorted into accounts of defeating the Devil) to his church and community at Oddi and an account of his death. Correspondingly, the prospect of moral accountability upon Sæmundur's deathbed also more closely resembles the deathbed of Gerbert than anything we see in *Jóns saga Helga*, though it has a conclusion quite different from what we see in William of Malmesbury's work. One story of Sæmundur collected about 1850 describes the final moments of his life:⁶⁵ Sæmundur has a premonition of his death and asks his beloved foster daughter to sit at the foot of his bed through the night. She recognizes that he is anxious about whether he will go to Heaven or Hell when he dies, and Sæmundur tells her to watch for signs of what might occur. Later in the night, she sees a host of demons first try to tempt him into doing some evil, which Sæmundur resists, and then the demons begin to threaten him. This too fails, and a swarm of midges then attack Sæmundur and sting him mercilessly until a ray of light escapes his mouth, which his foster daughter perceives to be his soul flying off to Heaven.

Even though any direct transmission between the account of Gerbert's death in William of Malmesbury's work and this post-medieval tale seems quite unlikely, a comparison of the two texts remains useful because it gives us a sense of the development of this story over the centuries in Iceland. Both Sæmundur and Gerbert are concerned about the state of their eternal soul upon their deathbed, and both suffer torments during their final moments. While Gerbert ultimately confesses of all his wrongdoings, Sæmundur does not, and yet it is Gerbert who ends up in Hell while Sæmundur goes to Heaven. The fact that Gerbert confesses but does not receive forgiveness seems to have a ritualized implication as well. The cardinals, we may recall, are so stunned by

⁶⁴ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum*, 175.

⁶⁵ JÁ 1:485–86.

what Gerbert has said that they cannot speak. They would have had the responsibility of performing the last rites, but no one seems able to perform the ritual.

It seems that through the long development of the *Sæmundur* stories, the communities that sustained these narratives through oral transmission from the medieval to the post-medieval period grew unsatisfied with the absence of some sort of deathbed moral accountability. The point is driven home by the fact that other magician-priests have similar deathbed experiences.⁶⁶ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson seems to take these tales lightly, suggesting that these magicians “are a little worried about their eventual salvation, and piously coloured stories exist on this theme.”⁶⁷ I suggest rather that the crisis of faith and the prospects for the afterlife would have resonated with an audience who, as discussed earlier, viewed the last moments of life as a testament to the prospects of the soul after death, so much the more so if the dying person is connected with both malefic magic, on the one hand, and Christian ministrations on the other. In life, the magicians call upon magical prowess to fight against supernatural forces.

In death, however, that assistance is lost to them, and they suffer—as Gísli Súrsson famously does at the end of his life—from an impotency in the struggle for their souls. In one of his violent dreams Gísli sees two loons fighting, covered in blood, and apparently symbolizing the two dream-women who struggle of Gísli’s soul in *Gísla saga*. The two birds that fight one another in a bloody mess must somehow be connected to Gísli’s *fylgja* (attendant spirit), whose presence often serves as an omen for an impending death. Nothing in Gísli’s poetry indicates which bird wins, or indeed which bird is the good and which the bad, ambiguities which further contribute to the uncertainty of Gísli’s fate after death. As in the *Sæmundur* stories, *Gísla saga* relates a profound anxiety that results from Gísli’s impotence throughout the struggle, but the difference between *Gísla saga* and the later tales is that it gives little indication of what Gísli has done to warrant the struggle for his eternal well-being (it is surely not because he is an outlaw), but we understand precisely why the magicians’ welfare hangs in the balance in the post-medieval tales: *Sæmundur* and the others are being made to answer for their acquisition and usage of black magic. They stand as representatives of both darkness and light, of sinfulness and good intentions, of living an inevitably sinful life and hoping for redemption nevertheless. At the point of death, the tally is taken; the *galdramaður*

66 See, for instance, “Eirfukur prestur grafinn” (The Reverend Eirfukur Buried), “*Sæmundur á banasænginni*,” and especially “*Dauði Hálfðanar prests*” (The Death of the Reverend Hálfðan), in which Hálfðan asks his foster daughter to watch over him on his deathbed. She must observe whether the three candles at the head of the magician’s bed remain lit through the night. Hálfðan has also placed a ram with a golden fleece under his bed. If the candles remain lit and the ram disappears, then Hálfðan will go to Heaven. Like *Sæmundur*, Hálfðan is now powerless in the struggle over his prospects in the afterlife, and once again, we see no hint of Heaven’s forces there to protect him. Nevertheless, one candle burns through the night and the ram ascends from under the bed and through a hole in the roof. The ram is no doubt a part of folklore descended from the animal *fylgjur* of earlier legends and lore. When it ascends through the light, Hálfðan’s watcher assumes that he has made his way to Heaven.

67 Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Folk-Stories of Iceland*, 202.

is accountable for the life he has led. This, from the Christian perspective, is the human condition. The *galdramaður's* death thus serves as a dramatized template for any who face death and the afterlife.

Similar employment of the *fylgja* motif occurs in post-Reformation Icelandic folktales. In the deathbed tale “Eiríkur Prestur Grafinn” (The Reverend Eiríkur Buried),⁶⁸ the motif of two fighting birds (E756.3, Black and White Birds Fight Over a Man’s Soul) reappears, though, this time, the lines are more clearly defined because one is a black bird and the other white (like the *fylgjur* of *Piðranda þátr*). Eiríkur, one of the subsequent guardian magician-priests to follow Sæmundur, has predicted that the two birds will fight over the right to perch on the roof of the church. If the white bird wins, then things will go well for Eiríkur and he can be buried in the churchyard, but if the black wins, he must be thrown under a cairn (perhaps echoing some remembrance of pagan burial though here it possesses an obviously negative connotation). All this should indicate that these magician-priests are more than just “a little worried about their eventual salvation,” as Einar Ólafur suggests.

Jacqueline Simpson says of accounts of magicians on their deathbed that they “dramatize an ambivalent attitude toward magic, which is seen as intrinsically evil, but pardonable if used for good ends.”⁶⁹ Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson agrees with this assessment, pointing out that over the long development of these Sæmundur stories, Sæmundur is never said to have been charged with using magic.⁷⁰ Simpson and Jón Hnefill make compelling arguments regarding views of magic, yet something about these deathbed stories remains unsatisfying. Sæmundur’s deathbed scene is not just a matter of ambivalent attitudes toward magic but also a matter of spiritual condition. It is a matter of the cosmic war in which his soul will be won or lost depending on the outcome of this battle at the end of his life. In the Sæmundur story, just as in “The Stupid Boy and the Devil,” demons first try to tempt and then threaten Sæmundur into doing evil. Also like the stupid boy, Sæmundur is victorious. Only, for Sæmundur, this is the final battle, so to speak, the battle that signals to his friends and family whether his soul is won or lost. For this reason, we must wonder how the development of an Icelandic understanding of death and dying might have influenced these stories as well.

Arnved Nedkvitne has conducted a comprehensive study of material and literary evidence for ritual practices in medieval (Christian) Norse society. His work indicates the importance of purification rituals intended to free the individual of their moral shortcomings in preparation for the afterlife. He argues that “the basic and absolutely necessary religious rituals for laymen were felt to be baptism, ... more or less frequent attendance at divine service during one’s lifetime, and last rites at the end of life.”⁷¹ All

⁶⁸ JÁ 1:565.

⁶⁹ Simpson, *Legends of Icelandic Magicians*, 30n16.

⁷⁰ Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, “Sæmundur fróði,” 129.

⁷¹ Arnved Nedkvitne, *Lay Belief in Norse Society, 1000–1350* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2009), 158.

of these rituals, most importantly the last rites, required the presence of an ordained member of the clergy, though a deacon could administer shrift (sacrament of penance) if no priests were available.⁷²

This concern with the condition of the soul and the direction it will travel in the afterlife are confirmed in later medieval Icelandic literature. Úlfar Bragason mounts a convincing argument that in *Íslendinga saga*, the centrepiece of the larger compilation *Sturlunga saga*, saga writer Sturla Þórðarson uses his description of death scenes to mark approval (or disapproval) of the life led by the deceased.⁷³ Based upon Úlfar's examination, a character might experience a tranquil death which they predict, prepare for, and await peacefully, as do Guðmundur Arason and Þórður Sturluson (*Íslendinga saga*, chapter 120). The preparations serve to indicate the piety of the characters at their time of death.⁷⁴ Particularly violent death scenes characterize the dying individual as heroic, as in Sighvatur Sturlason's case (*Íslendinga saga*, chapter 138).⁷⁵ Finally, the death of Sighvatur's brother, Snorri Sturluson, who faced death largely unprepared (both for the attack that killed him and for the afterlife), might indicate a life of cowardice.⁷⁶

Margaret Cormack's study of death and dying in Icelandic saints' lives further confirms much of this assessment, but literary topoi allow for further clarification of Icelandic perceptions of the end of life. Cormack acknowledges that many of these topoi originate from European saints' lives and other literary sources, but she also surmises that while the Church leadership and scribes would have recognized international hagiographic borrowings, the laity in Iceland are not likely to have been aware of them.⁷⁷ These literary descriptions of deaths indicate a notable concern for the status of the individual's spiritual condition at the time of death. Either immediately before or after death, some (often supernatural) signal indicates whether the deceased or dying will make their way directly to Heaven. Specifically, Cormack notes that medieval accounts of confession or pious gestures can indicate optimism about the ultimate destination of the deceased.⁷⁸ In turn, posthumous miracles (rays of light illuminating the body, for example) not dissimilar to those indicating sainthood might also suggest the good fortune of the recently deceased⁷⁹ and that consequently they can be buried in consecrated ground.⁸⁰ Finally, it was not uncommon, Cormack observes, that those who

72 Nedkvitne, *Lay Belief*, 105.

73 Úlfar Bragason, "The Art of Dying: Three Death Scenes in *Íslendinga saga*," *Sacandinavian Studies* 63 (1991): 454. I cover this in "Prospective Memory of Death and the Afterlife," 550. See Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Knopf, 1981).

74 Nedkvitne, *Lay Belief*, 457.

75 Nedkvitne, *Lay Belief*, 458.

76 Nedkvitne, *Lay Belief*, 459.

77 Cormack, "Saints and Sinners," 196.

78 Cormack, "Saints and Sinners," 189.

79 Cormack, "Saints and Sinners," 190–95.

80 Cormack, "Saints and Sinners," 196.

receive posthumous indications of salvation also suffered from a questionable status in the eyes of the Church at the time of their death.⁸¹

It seems that variants of confession, piety, and certain literary topoi lived on in post-Reformation stories about Sæmundur *fróði*. In these tales, Sæmundur, too, has foreknowledge of his death, and he gives a trusted relative or disciple the responsibility of watching over him as he dies. Sæmundur *fróði* isolates himself from the world as much as he can and instructs the watcher to look for certain signs of his fate after death. As he is dying, the watcher observes demons first try to coax Sæmundur into succumbing to his evil past and then to scare him into it. Whatever magic ability he had in life to combat such evil creatures has left him here, for he endures the attacks much more than he combats them. Next, a host of midges enter the room and begin to devour the Christian magician. At last, a ray of light, presumably his soul, escapes from his mouth, the midges vanish, and the watcher reckons the magician to have gone to Heaven. The struggle that Sæmundur must endure takes a similar structure to that of Gísli's struggle. Just as Gísli is promised by his good dream-woman that he will go to a fair place after death, Sæmundur was told earlier in his life (upon being saved from the Black School of magic by Bishop Jón) that his soul would be free from eternal damnation. But when the time of death has come, the souls of both Gísli and Sæmundur seem to be quite up for grabs. Furthermore, in neither case does there seem to be any indication that any "good" power is there to combat the evil that has come to afflict the dying man; Gísli's good dream-woman is nowhere to be found, and until the very end, Sæmundur has not only lost his ability to fight evil but he is also completely separated from any form of good help; even the watcher does nothing.

These observations lead us to a larger, perhaps more interesting question for the present examination of Icelandic folklore, which is why these stories about defeating the Devil—some of them silly, others perhaps more serious—find a home in the context of Icelandic religious and cultural history. One possibility is that religious development in the country from medieval to post-medieval times may have brought about an unexpected deterioration of the diversity of spiritual guardianship in the country. In medieval Iceland the local priest might have been a possible spiritual guardian—provided he was local enough (and Icelandic enough) to win the trust of the average Icelander—but saints, supernatural sacred spaces, and icons also took up the responsibility of guardianship, facilitating both good fortune and the reversal of bad fortune. The conversion from Catholicism to Lutheranism had a significant impact on all three of these. Margaret Cormack has done the pioneering work on saints' lives and the veneration of saints in Iceland. As she shows, hagiographic elements had to some degree or another long been a part of Icelandic literature, both prose and poetry. Saints' lives were translated into Icelandic from Latin,⁸² and Old Norse poetry took saints as

⁸¹ Cormack, "Saints and Sinners," 196.

⁸² Margaret Cormack, *The Saints in Iceland: Their Veneration from the Conversion to 1400* (Brussels: Society of Bollandistes, 1994), 32–34.

its subject as early as the eleventh century, when poets began to venerate St. Ólafur.⁸³ Cormack notes that “readings from saint’s legends on their feast days were probably the primary, if not the sole, source of information about them.”⁸⁴ The establishment of feast days was in turn influenced by popular opinion. As Cormack points out, “the saints in whom interest is attested appear to have attained popularity before, rather than after, their feasts were adopted.”⁸⁵ We may deduce from Cormack’s observations that legends of the saints’ lives were perpetuated by both the Church and the laypeople, entering oral tradition from the pulpit and living on in orality to reinforce church practices. In other words, if the initial and most common means of transmission of information about saints’ legends was from the pulpit, orally, then the saints’ narratives had a mode of distribution to the literate and illiterate alike. It seems reasonable to think that the popularity of those saints should flourish within the oral tradition, particularly in an environment like Iceland, where we have reason to believe that oral transmission was a vital part of the cultural milieu.⁸⁶ If the stories about saints intermingled with folk stories about other, fantastic guardians, then the cultural memory of the two may also have been intermingled.

In addition to feast days and oral transmission of legends, the veneration of saints involved employing holy relics, taking oaths on saints, pilgrimages, and of course, by prayers, offerings, and fasts. In some cases, such as on feast days, a direct replacement of pagan tradition occurred in a relatively orthodox manner;⁸⁷ at other times oath taking and holy relics seem to have been used in less acceptable ways. In Iceland, holy men employed relics in various capacities, though most were used for healing people or animals, or blessing pools of water, springs, or rivers.⁸⁸ While written narratives offer examples of people doubting the authenticity of relics, though these appear to have been hagiographic opportunities either to reveal the ultimate reality of a miracle, for instance by disproving the skeptic, or to justify the miracle by erudition.⁸⁹ Vows and relics were used together to acquire supernatural aid in both difficult tasks, such as raising the dead, and more menial ones, such as finding lost items. Oaths taken for the benefit of persons

83 Cormack, *Saints in Iceland*, 41.

84 Cormack, *Saints in Iceland*, 32.

85 Cormack, *Saints in Iceland*, 23.

86 For more on the orality and literacy of hagiography, see Evelyn Birge Vitz, “From the Oral to the Written in Medieval and Renaissance Saints’ Lives,” in *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. Renate Blumenfel-Kosinski and Timea Klara Szell (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 97–114. In specific relation to Icelandic hagiographical texts, see also Ásdís Egilsdóttir, “From Orality to Literacy,” 215–28, especially 216–17.

87 Similarly, Cormack points to a story from *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar af Oddr Snorrason munk*, in which Martin appears to Ólafur and promises him the gift of eloquent speech if Ólafur will give toasts to him in place of the pagan toasts of old.

88 Cormack, *Saints in Iceland*, 64.

89 Cormack, *Saints in Iceland*, 65.

could be small-scale, for the sake of individuals, or on a larger scale, for groups.⁹⁰ Of the twenty-nine petitions to saints that Cormack collects from Old Norse narrative texts and annals,⁹¹ five call for good fortune (two going into battle, one in a struggle with a walrus, one before a journey, and one just after a birth) and six are petitions for the reversal of bad fortune, while eleven are petitions made in dire situations (e.g., ships in a storm or during an enemy attack). Others simply note that vows were made.

After the Reformation, the validity of these guardian figures were called into question. The Communion of Saints no longer implied the ability to offer petitions to saints who had gone on to be with God in Heaven, or to venerated Catholic saints for personal, intimate, local, supernatural assistance. What resulted was a loss of supernatural guardianship at the local level. In Iceland, the timing could not have been worse. By the eighteenth century, Icelandic society was suffering possibly its worst years since the settlement. Famine and disease had taken a large percentage of the population, and economic, political, and cultural cohesion were as low as they would ever be.⁹² The causes and effects of this social climate were multiple, but it was within this cultural environment that some of the most significant Icelandic folk narratives come into being. It may not be surprising to discover that many of the tales that began to circulate during this time contribute to a uniquely formulated image of a distinctly Icelandic guardian figure—one who is local, familiar, intimate, and capable of combatting supernatural as well as natural threats. Folk narratives about Sæmundur *fróði* fill that gap on an imaginative, folkloric level if not in real life, as do other magician-priests found in the post-Reformation tales.⁹³

Final Thoughts: The Legacy of Sæmundur *fróði* and “The Stupid Boy and the Devil”

We thus have an answer to the last of the three questions we started with: why does Sæmundur *fróði* appear in the tale “Tornæmi drengurinn og kölski”? The answer is that they are, in a way, the same story ... or, at least, they are stories of a similar type. Just as the ritual of Holy Communion saves the boy in “The Stupid Boy and the Devil,” the complete, fully developed arc of Sæmundur’s narratives articulate a similar saving ritual: A young man pursues knowledge that is forbidden, mysterious, or in some other way taboo. When the cost of this knowledge becomes too great, the young man must

⁹⁰ Cormack, *Saints in Iceland*, 63.

⁹¹ Cormack, *Saints in Iceland*, 65–68.

⁹² See [chapter 2](#) above, for a more complete discussion of these events. See also Karlsson’s *Iceland’s 1100 Years*, 142–48, for a brief overview.

⁹³ Other magician-priests in the Icelandic folk record function similarly. Most notably Reverend Eiríkur of Vogsós (1638–1716), Hálfán of Fell, and Snorri Björnsson of Húsafell (d. 1757), although the latter was a complicated figure (see Benedikts, “Introduction,” 13), as well as other unnamed magicians who come to the aid of those in need, such as the magician who lays the deacon’s ghost to rest in “Djárninn á Myrká.”

find a way to overcome the one who gave him his knowledge. These trials include temptation, fear, and the prospect of evil servitude to the Devil. Both Sæmundur and the stupid boy avoid that evil service (Sæmundur because he does not do *black* magic and the stupid boy because he escapes going into the service of the Devil in the first place). And both Sæmundur and the stupid boy are able to retain the forbidden knowledge they have acquired and, most importantly, they are able to use it after their ordeal is complete: Sæmundur serves his community and the stupid boy becomes a follower of Sæmundur for all the days of his life and becomes an *ágætismaður* (a great man).

There is something performative, even ritualistic about all this. In his description of the liminal phase in Shilluk rites of passage, Victor Turner writes: “The arcane knowledge or ‘*gnosis*’ obtained in the liminal period is felt to change the inmost nature of the neophyte, impressing him, as a seal impresses wax, with the characteristics of his new state. It is not a mere acquisition of knowledge, but a change in being.”⁹⁴ Oddi, Iceland is far from the Shilluk home of southern Sudan, yet the stupid boy and the young Sæmundur seem to experience a similar transformation. Unlike the rituals described by Turner, however, the Sæmundur stories must accommodate a Christian sense of culpability, moral judgment, and accountability for having acquired knowledge that is not just taboo but sinful. Post-medieval stories of Sæmundur’s death address this unequivocally, and even though the story of “The Stupid Boy and the Devil” does not contain a deathbed scene for the stupid boy, it does describe something rather similar to Sæmundur’s ordeal. Just as Sæmundur is first tempted on his deathbed to do evil acts and then terrorized by midges and demons, the stupid boy is likewise tempted to do evil and then terrorized at the end of his ordeal: first, his friends and family (even an image of Sæmundur) come to coax him away from the church, but when temptation does not work, the boy begins to see “alls konar ófreskjur og skrímli og jafnvel djöflar” (all kinds of monsters⁹⁵ and beasts and even devils).⁹⁶ Both stories are also, in their own way, stories of redemption; both are the Christianized version of “happily ever after,” in which not only is the protagonist saved from peril but he is also made better, smarter, wiser because of and through his peril; and further, not only is the protagonist redeemed, but the forbidden knowledge is somehow redeemed as well, so that our protagonist can use what he has learned to contribute something to his community. This redemption, of both personhood and knowledge, cuts to the heart of both stories: both Sæmundur and the stupid boy, in the end, remember who they are and where they come from.

⁹⁴ Turner, “Betwixt and Between,” 11.

⁹⁵ Simpson translates this word, *ófreskjur*, as “supernatural visions” (*Icelandic Magicians*, 29). However, “monsters” is more appropriate because the term *ófreskja* refers to a physical creature who is clearly troublesome, not just supernatural but evil.

⁹⁶ JÁ 1:484.

