Chapter 4

THE ELF CHURCH: MEMORIES OF CONTESTED SACRED SPACES

Tungustapi[1]

At a farm called Tunga, in Sælingsdalur, there was once a wealthy man with two sons, Arnór and Sveinn, both full of promise but as different from one another as two brothers can be. Arnór was outgoing, brave, and active, while Sveinn was quiet and timid. Arnór was often seen playing with his friends at Tungustapi, the tall, rocky hill near the farm where they lived, while Sveinn spent much of his time in church or walking alone around the same hill when no others were playing there. People would say, in fact, that Sveinn spent so much time there that he must have something to do with the elves who lived in the hill. Sveinn, for his part, warned his brother not to make too much of a ruckus on the hill lest some ill should come of it, but his brother never listened.

One New Year's Eve, Sveinn, as was his wont, disappeared from the farm and no one could find him. Arnór offered to go look for him and walked around the farm until he came to Tungustapi. As he approached the side of the hill that faced the farm, Arnór saw that the rock opened before his eyes and inside the hill stood rows of lamps brightly lit, and he heard music and singing. As he approached the doorway, he saw a great crowd gathered and next to an altar before them stood one dressed in beautiful vestments like a priest. As Arnór crept yet further into the mysterious church, he saw that his brother, Sveinn, was kneeling before the priest at the altar while the priest laid his hands on Sveinn's head. Around them stood others in sacred robes, so Arnór guessed that they were initiating Sveinn into the elf priesthood. Fearing for his brother, Arnór shouted to him that he must come out right away lest he lose his very life. Upon hearing his brother's call, Sveinn turned from the ritual and looked, for a moment, as if he might run toward his brother's call. The elf bishop grew angry, commanded that the door to their church be closed fast, and decreed to Sveinn that, because he had made as if to go to his brother, he was banished and cursed, and that the next time Sveinn saw the elf bishop as he was then, robed and standing at the altar, Sveinn would breathe his last. Then to the elf host he cried:

Ríðum og ríðum	*We ride, we ride*
það rökkvar í hlíðum;	*it grows dark on the slopes;*
ærum og færum	*let us drive the poor fellow mad and make him*
hinn arma af vegi	*lose his way*
svo að hann eigi	*so that he does not*

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[1] Adapted from JÁ 1:32–35. "Tungustapi" was collected from Jón Þorleifsson (1825–60).

sjái sól á degi,	*see the light of day,*
sól á næsta degi.	*the light of another day.*

Arnór ran terrified through the dark night toward his home, but the elf riders caught him and drove him back toward the hill, where their horses at last trampled him until he was all but dead. Having been set free after the elf priest's decree, Sveinn ran back to the farm as fast as he could for help (though without saying what exactly had happened), but no one could find his brother that night. Arnór's near-lifeless body was found the next day by a farmer on his way to the early church service. With his last breath, Arnór told the farmer what had happened and asked that he not be taken back to his home but be left where he lay.

Sveinn was never the same again. He became even more withdrawn and seemed to care nothing for the things of this world. Eventually, he recoiled so much from the world that he became a monk and went to live at the monastery at Helgafell. There, it is said, he became so learned that no one could compare with him, and he sang mass more beautifully than any other in Iceland.

His father, for whom Sveinn cared greatly, lived on at Sælingsdalstunga until he grew old and became quite ill. Perceiving his death was near, he wanted to see his son once more and sent for him. Sveinn came to his father at once, but as he left, he told the others at the monastery that it was likely he would never see them again. He arrived home the Saturday before Easter, and though his father was very near death he asked his son to sing the Easter mass. Reluctantly, Sveinn agreed but on the condition that the doors to the church be firmly closed through the entire service for, he said, his very life depended on it. The next morning the frail old man was taken to the church, where Sveinn, dressed in priestly robes, stood at the altar and beautifully sang the mass. At the end of the service, however, Sveinn turned from the altar and looked out at the congregation to pronounce the benediction. When he did, the doors burst open so that all turned to look out the open doorway only to see the hill, Tungustapi, standing open and facing the church. Inside stood the elf church with its brightly lit lamps leading in a row to the elfish altar. When those in the Christian church turned back toward their own altar, Sveinn had fallen down dead, his father also lay dead beside him. All in attendance knew what had happened, because the farmer who found Arnór's body had shared the story the boy had told him.

Father and son were buried on the same day, and the church at Sælingsdalstunga now stands elsewhere, out of sight of the elf church, whose altar is to the west and whose door is to the east.

The cultural memory embedded within this narrative embodies a series of uncomfortable tensions. The elves are mysterious and powerful, intriguing to anyone who might hear or read the story, yet in the same moment they seem ruthless and vengeful. Arnór may have been dismissive of his brother and perhaps disrespectful to the elves at Tungustapi, but it is difficult to say that he deserves the punishment he receives: left to die slowly on the slopes of Tungustapi through the long, cold New Year's night. The boys' father, too, seems to be an unfortunate casualty, for though he lives out his years, he does so with neither of his sons (their mother is never mentioned) and seems to be caught in the same tragic end as Sveinn. Arnór's brutal death can certainly be connected to the folk motif of the Furious Host (a.k.a., The Wild Hunt), E501, which is so pervasive in Indo-European folklore, but recognizing its international origins explains little about what function, in this story, the brutal death serves.[2] Sveinn's uncommon wisdom and his unnatural ability to sing mass more beautifully than anyone else suggest another peculiarity. His unique gifts work as an odd consolation for the whole affair, yet it is unclear whether the young man is being consoled for the loss of his brother or for the missed opportunity to become an elf priest.

The final words of the story may offer some clarity. It is possible that the story of the elf church at Tungustapi developed to explain why the local church was moved from one location to another. Another Icelandic folk narrative, "Dvergasteinn" (Dwarf Stone),[3] shares the motif of a church moving from one location to another, which has been shown to have historical corroboration. The tale states that in the twelfth century, a church was moved from the eastern to the western shore of Seyðisfjörður, in eastern Iceland, and archaeological excavations indeed find that a church once stood in both locations.[4] The 1862 edition of Jón Árnason's collection confirms this notion, as "Tungustapi" in that edition begins by saying that the medieval Icelandic saga *Eyrbyggja saga* states that a church was moved from one location to another but does not explain why.[5] The story of "Tungustapi" is meant to provide the lost explanation. Regardless of any historical origins of the church moving, it would appear from these details that some kind of contest between the two sacred spaces—the Christian church and the elf church—is fundamental to the story. On the one side stands the Christian church, which works as a representative of the farm, family, and Christianity, while on the other side, the rocky hill in which the elf church is hidden, which represents elfdom, the otherworld, and a kind of heterodox belief that the leaders of the Church in Iceland had spoken rather strongly against. The monastery at Helgafell acts as a refuge from the fray, but Sveinn cannot be safe there forever: he must return to Sælingsdalstunga to meet his doom. Built upon these spatial images resides a deep cultural memory of sacred and profane spaces passed down throughout the religious history of the country. The roots of Helgafell reach all the way back to the settlement of the country and, as the last chapter of *Eyrbyggja saga* attests, Sælingsdalur, where Tungustapi is found, is located in a region rich with the history of the original settlers. Throughout the long history of these important places, contests of sacred and profane spaces, not unlike the one observed in the folk story “Tungustapi,” are woven into the cultural memory of the land.

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[2] Stephen Grundy briefly discusses this connection in *Miscellaneous Studies towards the Cult of Óðinn* (New Haven: Troth, 2004), 43.

[3] JÁ 2:72.

[4] For more, see Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir, *The Awakening of Christianity in Iceland* (Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, 2004), 95.

[5] Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Æfintýri*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1862), 1:31. In the later edition, the comment has been moved to the footnotes, but the commentary is present, though in parentheses, in the manuscript of the collector, Reverend Jón Þorleifsson of Ólafsvellir (Lbs. 531 4to, 63r.). The account in *Eyrbyggja saga* refers to the church moving as it pertains to the burial place of Snorri *goði* Þorgrímsson (963–1031), who is said to have been buried at the church in Sælingsdalstunga and moved to the new location when the church was moved. See *Eyrbyggja saga: Brands þáttr ǫrva, Eiríks saga rauða, Grœnlendinga saga, Grœnlendinga þáttr*, ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson and Matthías þórðarson, Íslenzk Fornrit 4 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1935), 183–84.

If “Tungustapi” is a story of contested sacred spaces, then the Christian church must certainly be said to have “lost” that contest: three people are dead, and the Christian church must be moved to another location to escape the threat of the elf church. The deeper question most relevant to the present study is, *why does the Christian church lose?* At the very least, we must try to understand the purpose or function that such an apparent defeat might serve within the cultural memory of belief in the country. To pursue an answer to these questions, the present chapter must go back to the earliest examples of a cultural memory of space in Iceland, even to the origins of the country’s settlement, to examine how memories of contested sacred spaces have changed from the earliest narratives to the time in which the story of “Tungustapi” was current.

Early Memories of Contested Spaces

The first textual evidence of cultural memories of sacred space originate in the eleventh and twelfth centuries but reach back to the settlement period of Iceland during the settlement period (roughly 874–930), at which time it was the work of settlers to set apart spaces not only as inhabitable but also as sacred. Consequently, many of those memories of space in Iceland are of a contest not between respective religious belief systems but between one belief system and the wilderness of an untamed land. Accounts from *Landnámabók* (The Book of Settlements)[6] and the later *Eyrbyggja saga* offer accounts of settlers taking possession of land by carrying fire around its perimeter,[7] and stories of the construction of houses in Iceland and in Scandinavia more broadly, in which the house itself becomes a microcosm, and the *ǫndvegissúlurnar*, the high-seat pillars, serve to connect the space of the abode with the mythic cosmos.[8]

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[6] The dating of *Landnámabók* is difficult to fix. Its earliest extant version is from the second half of the thirteenth century but is perhaps a copy of an earlier version. For a discussion of the origins of *Landnámabók* see Jón Jóhannesson, *Gerðir Landnámabókar* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka bókmenntafélag, 1941); *Íslendingabók. Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, Íslenzk Fornrit 1 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1986); Barði Guðmundsson, “Uppruni Landnámabókar,” *Skírnir* 112 (1938): 5–22; Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, *Studier í Landnámabók. Kritiska Bidrag till den Isländska Fristatstidens Historia*, Bibliotheca Historica Lundensis 31 (Lund: Gleerup, 1974); Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Under the Cloak: A Pagan Ritual Turning Point in the Conversion of Iceland*, 2nd ed. (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1999).

[7] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 8. Mircea Eliade notes that this practice might resonate with the Vedic practice of legally claiming land by a fire ritual, and other sagas speak of similar rituals. See Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, 1987), 30–31. See also Dag Strömbäck, “Att helga land. Studier i Landnáma och det äldsta rituella besittningstagandet,” in *Festskrift tillägnad Axel Hägerström* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1928), 198–220.

[8] Eliade uses the example of the Vedic ritual for claiming possession of land, in which “possession becomes legally valid through the erection of a fire altar,” a ritual that both becomes the organizing

Later, in places where pagan and Christian belief systems interacted, non-homogeneous space became a currency of religious beliefs. *Íslendingabók*, by Ari *fróði* (the wise) Þorgilsson (1067–1148), and *Landnámabók* offer well-known references to Christian monks in Iceland prior to the coming of Nordic settlers. *Íslendingabók* states that when the first travellers came to Iceland, Irish monks lived there:

> Þá váru hér menn kristnir, þeir es Norðmenn kalla Papa, en þeir fóru síðan á braut, af því at þeir vildu eigi vesa hér við heiðna menn, ok létu eftir bækr írskar ok bjǫllur ok bagla. Af því mátti skilja, at þeir váru menn írskir.[9]
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> There were Christians here then, whom the Norwegians called Papar, but they then left because they did not want to be here with pagan people, and they left behind Irish books, bells, and crosiers. Thus it can be surmised that they were Irish men.

Scholars are dubious of the historical validity of this account,[10] mainly because no archaeological evidence has been found to support Ari's claim,[11] but regardless of the historical validity of the account, the passage indicates something about how the settlement was perceived by Icelanders in Ari's time. Namely, the cultural memory of space here validates the country's contemporary dedication to Christianity: if Christian monks were there before pagans, the logic says, then the country "belonged" to Christ even before it belonged to (pagan) Norsemen. In contrast with this Christian-dominant cultural memory, accounts of *landvættir* (land "wights" or land spirits) in Iceland

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principle for the land and reproduces a microcosmic Creation for the settler. On the other hand, the same can be said of the construction of a house, where "the threshold divides the two sorts of space [sacred and profane]. … The central pillar in the dwellings of the primitive peoples … is likened to the cosmic axis." The house, then, becomes itself a symbolic microcosmic sacred space, set apart from the outside, profane world through with an individual must travel to reach the centre, the organizing principle of existence. Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 379. See also Terry Gunnell, "*Hof*, Halls, *Goðar* and Dwarves: An Examination of the Ritual Space in Pagan Icelandic Hall," *Cosmos* 17 (2001): 3–36.

[9] *Íslendingabók*, 5. A similar passage occurs in *Landnámabók*, 31–32.

[10] Jenny Jochens notes the need for caution as well, but she leans toward accepting the account. To this end she argues that "with one exception all medieval sources that treat conversion repeat these words, Ari's reputation for reliability and the fact that five Icelandic place-names incorporate the word *papi* (priest or monk) have encouraged its general acceptance." See "Late and Peaceful: Iceland's Conversion Through Arbitration in 1000," *Speculum* 74 (1999): 621–55 at 633. Jochens notes also that Ari's claim is "further corroborated by the contemporary Latin writer Dicuilus, an Irish monk at the Carolingian court, who wrote a book entitled *Liber de mensura orbis terrae* in 825." In *Um Haf Innan: Vestrænir menn og Ízlensk Menning á Miðöldum* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1997), however, Helgi Guðmundsson suggests that Ari's account here may be based on that of the Irish monk Dicuilus and is therefore unreliable. See also Gísli Sigurðsson, Review of *Um Haf Innan: Vestrænir menn og Ízlensk Menning á Miðöldum* by Helgi Guðmundsson, *Alvissmál* 9 (1999): 111, where Gísli criticizes Helgi's methodology and general theory.

[11] Between 1967 and 1981, Kristján Eldjárn carried out excavations at Papey, where the monks were said to have been, but he found no indication of their presence. See "Papey. Fornleifarannsóknir 1967–1981," *Árbók hins Íslenzka Fornleifafélags* (1988): 35–188.

date back to early memories of the settlement as well.[12] *Landnámabók* indicates that, according to law, settlers had to be careful not to scare away[13] the *landvættir* who inhabited the land when Norsemen first arrived.

Also in *Landnámabók*, a rather different kind of contested space is found in the story Ásólfur, a Christian settler who was so devout that he would not even eat the food of the pagan men.[14] Ásólfur is said to have lived in Ósar and kept to himself though he seemed to others to have an uncommon wealth of supplies and stores. His neighbours, who were of course pagan, began to wonder how he got his food and discovered that the stream by his house was brimming with salmon. Envious, they drove Ásólfur away and took over the stream, which subsequently failed to yield any salmon at all. When Ásólfur's good fortune continued at his subsequent homes, his neighbours chased him away a second and a third time (from Miðskála and then from Ásólfsskála). Finally, one of Ásólfur's kinsman, Jǫrundar, set him up with a house and food at Hólmi, where he lived out the rest of his life. After Ásólfur died, he was celebrated: "stendr þar nú kirkja, sem leiði hans er, ok er hann enn helgasti maðr kallaðr" (a church now stands there where he lies, and now he is called the holiest of men).[15] In a way similar to "Tungustapi" and "Dvergasteinn," this account offers an explanation of the specific location of a Christian church in a way that relies upon the notion of contested spaces. It is worth noting, however, that the sacredness of all of these spaces does not depend upon any inherent quality. There is nothing special about any of Ásólfur's settlements until he gets there, and after he leaves, the land returns to the ordinary. Ásólfur's holiness sets apart from ordinary space the rivers (and eventually the ground upon which the church was built).

Another well-known early cultural memory of sacred space occurs in the story of Auður *djúpúðga* (the deep-minded) Ketilsdóttir. Here, a certain sacred space is transferred from one system of belief to another. Although the religious connotations of that sacred object may have changed, its potency remains alive in the logic of beliefs of the people. When Auður comes to Iceland from the British Isles, where she became a dedicated Christian, "hon hafði bænahald sitt á Krosshólum; þar lét hon reisa krossa, því at hon var skírð ok vel trúuð" (she said her prayers at Cross Hills; there she raised crosses because she was baptized and a true believer [*trúuð*]).[16] After Auður dies, his pagan kinsmen retain a belief in the hills, though they transform it into something different:

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[12] For a recent discussion of this and other references to *landvættir*, see Nicholas Meylan, "La (re) conversion des 'Esprits de la Terre' dans l'Islande Médiévale," *Revue de l'Histoire des religions* 230 (2013): 333–54.

[13] *Landnámabók* (H268), 313.

[14] This story also appears in chapter 127 of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, 3 vols. Editiones Arnamagnæanæ (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1958), 1:276–78.

[15] *Landnámabók* (H 21), 64.

[16] *Landnámabók*, 139.

> Þar hǫfðu frændr hennar síðan átrúnað mikinn á hólana. Var [þar] þá gǫr hǫrg, er blót tóku til; trúðu þeir því, at þeir dæi í hólana.[17]
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> Her kinsmen later held a great belief in the hills. They made a pagan altar there where sacrifices took place; they believed therefore that they would go into the hills upon death.

A transformation of the sacred space from Christian to pagan takes place, apparently, with no difficulty. It is not clear whether the original Christian sacredness of the hills requires some kind of ritual repurposing although the raising of a pagan altar may be telling. Regardless, the original Christian character of the hills does not impede the space being taken over by pagan devotees: there were no supernatural repercussions against the pagans for doing so. This signals an apparent shift in the cultural memory of the space, so that its hierophanic nature remains constant even after Auður's kinsmen take it over. In fact, the hills possess their sacred potency for Auður's kinsmen because they were sacred to Auður, not in spite of that fact. The same is not true in the opposite direction, since Auður will not allow herself to be buried on pagan land. In accordance with her wishes, she is buried by the sea between the high and low tide marks, rather than in unconsecrated ground. For both the pagan ancestors and for Auður, the sacredness of their respective kin carries over, but for Auður, the pagan space cannot be tolerated after death. The land between the high and low water mark is no more hallowed than any dry land in Iceland, but because her burial plot is owned by the sea (and because it receives a daily "baptism" when the tide comes in), she finds it acceptable.

Beyond *Landnámabók* and *Íslendingabók*, the Icelandic cultural memory of contested sacred space continued to develop in the thirteenth-century Icelandic saga *Eyrbyggja saga*. In addition to the account mentioned above about claiming a settlement by fire, memories of sacred space appear in the description of the settlement of Þórólfur Móstrarskegg on Snæfellsnes.[18] When Þórólfur's ship first approaches Breiðafjörður (which Þórólfur himself is said to have named), he casts overboard the *ǫndvegissúlurnar*, the high-seat pillars—which he had taken with him from his temple in Norway—and resolved to settle wherever they landed. When they come to shore, he finds the place where the pillars landed and establishes a temple (*hof*) at Hofsstaðir, the structure of which Terry Gunnell, among others, has suggested reflects the pagan cosmos.[19] But equally important is the way the structure relates to itself and the world around it. The *hof* is separated into at least two spaces that differ qualitatively. The *ǫndvegissúlurnar* function as the threshold between the two spaces, and all the space beyond them is considered sacred: "líking sem nú er sǫnghús í kirkjum, ok stóð þar stalli á miðju gólfinu sem altari" (just as the choir is in churches now, and there stood a [pagan] altar in the middle of the floor like the [Christian] altar).[20] Into the high-seat pillars are driven the *reginnaglar*, the sacred nails, which consecrate the threshold.[21]

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[17] *Landnámabók* (H 81), 137–38.

[18] Helgafell is among the first plots of ground set apart as in some way sacred, but it certainly was not the only one. Other natural spaces set apart by ritual, proclamation, or consensus include those under *álög* (a spell) or *bannhelgi* (taboo). Árni Óla has catalogued many of these sites in Iceland: see *Álög og Bannhelgi* for more examples of this kind.

[19] See Gunnell, "*Hof*," 3–36. See also Frands Herschend, *Livet i Hallen: Tre fallstudier i den yngre järnålderns aristokrati*, Occasional Papers in Archaeology 14 (Uppsala: Institutionen för akeologi och antik historia, Uppsala universitet, 1997), 49–55; Frands Herschend, "Ordering Landscapes," in *Settlement and Landscape*, ed. Charlotte Fabech and Jytte Ringtved, Jysk Arkeologisk Selskab (Århus: Jutland Archaeological Society, 1999), 334; Charlotte Fabech's "Centrality in Sites and Landscapes," in *Settlements and Landscape: Proceedings of a Conference in Århus, Denmark, May 4–7, 1998* (Århus: Jysk Arkeologisk Selsk), 458. These suggest that the farm serves as a central

Regardless of whether post-conversion accounts of pre-conversion sacred spaces were accurate representations of history, two points may be extracted from these texts. First, while post-conversion writers viewed pre-Christian sacred spaces through the lens of Christianity, the semantic fields for pre- and post-Christian spaces remained distinct in the texts they composed. The *hof* (temple), as it is described in *Eyrbyggja saga*, though similar, is not a *kirkja* (church), with which it is compared, and the *stalli* (pagan altar), though similarly situated, is not an *altari* (Christian altar), with which it is compared. The author distinguishes the pre-Christian belief system by preserving a lexical field sufficiently removed from mainstream contemporary religious culture, and he feels comfortable enough with the separate fields to use the one as a comparison of the other. One belief system (the Christian) predominates in the minds of the author and the anticipated audience so much that it can be used a descriptive point of reference. In other words, the cultural memory of the thirteenth century had sufficiently distinguished pagan sacred space from Christian sacred space that the author of *Eyrbyggja saga* felt no need to comment further on what constituted orthodox (Christian) sacred space and what constituted heterodox (pagan) space. Second, there is no sense of pejoration evident in these descriptions, as was the case with the Dead Bridegroom tale type discussed in chapter 1 of this book. The difference between the respective sacred spaces seems to have been clear enough already, so that Þórólfur's temple (as described in *Eyrbyggja saga*) remains free of any negative or demonizing connotation. (This would change as memories of sacred spaces proceed through history.)

Þórólfur also identifies two other sites as sacred: Helgafell (the Holy Mountain) stood at the heart of the entire area and commanded a long view of the landscape and fjord. Similar to Auður's kinsmen, Þórólfur and his companions believed they would go into Helgafell after they died. He also established a *þing* (assembly) at the headlands

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point of the cosmos, much in keeping with Eliade's view. To my mind, there remains the question of the extent to which these comparisons represent a *symbolic* cosmos versus a *mythical* one. *Symbolic* differs from *mythical* in that the former merely represents a place in which a mythic experience can take place, where the latter is a place reserved for the mythic experience. On the more general scale of methodology, the current study will speak indirectly to questions such as these, aiming to point out the general distinction between concepts such as these in the *logic of belief* for a mythic structure.

[20] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 8.

[21] Gunnell notes six passages in *Landnámabók* in which these are used. See "*Hof*," 15; see also *Landnámabók*, 42–45, 124–25, 232, 302, 312, 317, and 371.

where the pillars came to shore. The latter site was deemed so sacred by Þórólfur that no bloodshed could occur on it and no one could relieve themselves there. Instead, anyone who attended the assembly on that plot of land had to walk out to the "dritsker," the "shit" skerry.[22] During one assembly meeting, a visiting group flouted the edict not to relieve themselves on the sacred land, and a bloody battled ensued. After that time, the land was deemed "eigi helgari en aðra" (no more sacred than any other),[23] and the assembly was then moved to a different location.

The four sites described in this episode of *Eyrbyggja saga*—the *hof*, Helgafell, the original *þing* site in a field near the *hof* (at Hofsstaðir), and the second *þing* site—share some noticeable connections to the story of "Tungustapi." It is to a Christian monastery at Helgafell—that same pagan "holy mountain" at the heart of the landscape in *Eyrbyggja saga*—that Sveinn retreats in order to escape the curse of the elfin bishop, and the *þing* site in particular holds a special relevance to the folktale "Tungustapi." This episode also describes one of the first times a sacred space is moved in Iceland, though here a pagan assembly site, due to an offence perpetrated at the original site, not unlike the moving of the church in "Tungustapi." Arnór offended the elves in "Tungustapi" while the visiting group offend the "sacredness" of the *þing* site in *Eyrbyggja saga*. Interestingly, the verb used for relieving one's self in the *Eyrbyggja saga*'s account is *álfrek ganga*, a euphemism for defecation which literally means "the driving away of the elves." Connections between the two stories need not be overdone, yet it is at least worth noting that the same mechanisms of contested spaces—the moving of sacred space and the motivations behind those moves—are evident in both medieval and post-medieval sources.

Foundations of Sacred Spaces

Scholars are diligent in pointing out that these descriptions of pre-Christian pagan sacred spaces are not reliable because the medieval (Christian) writers who composed these texts were doing so long after conversion. Certainly, this point cannot be ignored. Whatever the pagan origins of these sacred spaces may have been, descriptions of both Christian and pagan sacred spaces—written as they were by Christians writers—build upon a Judeo-Christian belief system that has always placed a priority on sacred space.[24] In the Pentateuch, God's instructions on building the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle highlight the point. God says to Moses that the Israelites "shall make me a sanctuary, and I will dwell in the midst of them."[25] God's instructions on the construction of the Ark and the Tabernacle[26] are remarkably specific, describing types of materials, dimensions, the colours of the veils, and procedures for sanctification. The Tabernacle became the heart of the Israelite religious experience—a physical space into which only the most purified of priests may enter,[27] a place in which dwelt the spirit of God[28] and through which God communicated his commands and delivered forgiveness of wrongdoings.[29] But the physical space of the Tabernacle was symbolically disrupted in the minds of the Christian faithful. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke say that the heavy veil dividing the holy inner sanctum of the Tabernacle was torn into two pieces.[30] The divide between human and divine was thus broken, and the body of Christ, rather than the sanctified space, became the medium through which communion with God might be attained. Through the sacrament of the Eucharist (the ingestion of Christ's body and blood), God now dwelt not in the Tabernacle but within the bodies of all who partook. The physical body, just as Christ's, becomes the temple of God.[31] In medieval Europe, Christ's physical posture upon the cross subsequently becomes a template for designing sacred spaces, which often took as their floor plan the shape of the cross.[32] The body of Christ took the place of the Tabernacle by way of the Eucharist and in the reproduction of his crucifixion in the design of many medieval churches, while the bodies of the most holy saints held sanctifying power in the form of holy relics. Thus, in perhaps a mystical but yet a very real way, then, the agent of the cultural memory (the believing person) becomes also the object of the cultural memory (the sacred space). This internal situation is then confirmed by an external duplication of it—i.e., the church in the shape of a cross, the holy relics, and the ritual ingestion of the Eucharist. There, the actual, external spaces function both as actual, hierophanic spaces and as representations of the internal sacred space of the human person, whose body, upon initiation into the religion, is elevated to the status of a sacred space as the temple of God.

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[22] These details are described in chap. 4 of *Eyrbyggja saga*, 7–10.

[23] Kevin J. Wanner explores the importance of this passage in "Purity and Danger in Earliest Iceland: Excrement, Blood, Sacred Space, and Society in *Eyrbyggja Saga*," *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 5 (2009): 213–50. I will return to this scholarly discussion directly.

[24] This changes somewhat with the Reformation, as I will discuss below (108–13).

[25] Translated from the Vulgate, Exodus 25:8: *facientque mihi sanctuarium et habitabo in medio eorum*.

This Judeo-Christian view of sacred space contributes something to the vocabulary used by the medieval writers, even when they describe pagan sacred spaces, but differences between the memories of sacred space in pagan and Christian Iceland prove relevant. Kevin J. Wanner, who has recently worked on the sacred space in medieval Icelandic sources, applies Mary Douglas's theory of social organization to Icelandic texts in order to understand something about the uses of sacred space in early Iceland.[33] Wanner's assessment is thought-provoking, but one question lingers in the final stages of his analysis, specifically regarding the changing status of a sacred space that has been (or that might be) defiled in some way. Wanner draws a connection between the prohibitions against bloodshed on sacred ground in *Eyrbyggja saga* and similar prohibitions in Christian law codes of the thirteenth-century Nordic world.[34] He begins by referring to a well-known scene in *Eyrbyggja saga*, chapter 10 (mentioned above, 97), in which the sacred land has been defiled by the bloodshed from a battle that was, not insignificantly, fought over the sacredness of the land itself. After the battle, the text declares the once-sacred land to be "eigi helgari en aðra" (not more holy than any other).[35] In Christian law codes, says Wanner, "blood spilled in violence is accorded the same status and is thought to have the same effect on hallowed ground … as in *Eyrbyggja saga*."[36] According to Wanner, then, the Nordic Christian perception of defiled sacred space matches the pagan perception of defiled sacred space: the space simply no longer qualifies as sacred; it is merely "eigi helgari en aðra."

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[26] Jonathan Z. Smith's discussion of the Jewish Tabernacle bears the most relevance to the current discussion. See especially "To Put into Place," in *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 47–73, where Smith adeptly articulates the mapping of the Tabernacle and the relation of Israelites and priest to it.

[27] Leviticus 16:3–6.

[28] Exodus 25:8.

[29] Leviticus 16:15–16.

[30] Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45.

[31] 1 Corinthians 6:19; 3:16–17.

[32] See Dawn Marie Hayes, *Body and Sacred Place in Medieval Europe, 1100–1389*, Studies in Medieval History and Culture 18 (New York: Routledge, 2003), especially 95–98.

This point may be worth further consideration in light of the manner in which sacred Christian space (either a church or a churchyard) is redeemed as a fully functional sacred space after having been defiled in some way. Two important Christian law codes of the time—the *Frostaþing* and *Christenret* of Archbishop Jon of Nidaros—describe the rechristening of defiled sacred spaces. The *Frostaþing* says that when hostilities disturb the peace of a church, "En fe þess er uigh uakte skal fara til kirkiu vigslu fyr en i konungs garð falle eða biskups" (The goods of the one who stirred up the fight shall go to consecrating the church before it goes to the treasury of the king or bishop);[37] and the *Christenret* says that when blood is shed in a church or churchyard, "þa ma æigi syngia i þairri kyrkiu. hvart sem honn hevir verit vigð eða uvigð. *fyr en byskup hevir ræinsat með vigðu vatne*" (then no one may conduct services in the church, whether it has been consecrated or not consecrated, *until the bishop has purified it with holy water*).[38] No similar stipulation exists for the defiled pagan sacred space in *Eyrbyggja saga*. The difference, though perhaps subtle, is an important one.[39] For Þórólfur's sacred land to lose its sacredness indicates that something has abandoned it. It would seem that the bloodshed in the battle has scared away the spirits that indwelled within the sacred space, in keeping with the notion of *álfrek ganga*, or "driving away the elves"[40] through the contamination of a sacred space. Without these supernatural beings, who appear to leave forever, the formerly sacred space is indeed mere space like any other (that is, "eigi helgari en aðra"). In contrast, the defiled Christian sacred space falls under something more like a taint or stain of which it must be cleaned. Even the verb used in the *Christenret* passage indicates as much: the space must be *ræinsat*, purified or cleansed—"rinsed," as the word would become in English. The sacred space endured and was cleansed of its taint rather than the sacredness being driven out of it. The distinction is subtle but significant when considering the longer view of religious development in Iceland, which incorporates, as will soon be demonstrated, contests between Catholic and Protestant spaces into the notion of defiled sacred space.

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[33] Wanner, "Purity and Danger." See Wanner's literature review for more detail on earlier efforts to understand Helgafell. See also Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Routledge, 2003 [1970]).

[34] Wanner refers to *Gulaþing*, *Frostaþing*, and *kristenréttr*. See Wanner, "Purity and Danger," 241–42. For original quotations from Frostaþing, see Keyser and Munch, *Norges gamle love indtil 1387*, vol. 1 (Oslo: Gröndahl, 1846), 134; and for "Erkebiskop Jons Cristenret," see Keyser and Munch, *Norges gamle love*, 2:343.

[35] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 17.

[36] Wanner, "Purity and Danger," 242.

[37] Keyser and Munch, *Norges gamle love*, 1:134.

[38] Keyser and Munch, *Norges gamle love*, 2:347; my italics. Also quoted in Wanner, "Purity and Danger," 242.

[39] This detail, while important to my discussion, detracts little from Wanner's overall argument.

Complex though this legacy of sacred space may have been, its importance was not lost on the medieval Icelandic Christian world. Sverrir Jakobsson draws attention to "the complex ways in which time and space had a social meaning in thirteenth-century Iceland—and how the Church had succeeded in imposing a religious interpretation on these underlying frameworks of the world-view."[41] Throughout medieval Christendom, the medieval church promoted ideas about sacredness and sacred space, but it also allowed for those specific ideas to develop in variant forms according to region and custom. In Iceland, for example, space is made holy through the blessing of springs and pools of water (like those blessed by Bishop Guðmundur Arason),[42] the establishing of holy sees at Skalhólt and Hólar, the raising of local churches and monasteries throughout the island during Christianization, the distribution of holy relics at various places in the country, and the protection and asylum afforded by churches and churchyards. All this was challenged during the struggles over the Reformation in Iceland, as can be discerned, first, by the Danish bailiff Didrich von Minden's hostile takeover of monasteries, and, second, Daði Guðmundsson's disregard for the sanctuary of a church when he finally captures Jón Arason and his sons on the eve of Reformation in Iceland.

Contested Spaces and the Reformation

The study of contested spaces thus far has identified three types of contests in the medieval sources:

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[40] Wanner, "Purity and Danger," 216 and 217. I agree with Wanner that *álf-* in this word ought to be considered something more like *landvættir* (land spirits), rather than elves as we think of them today. See "Purity and Danger," 216.

[41] Sverrir Jakobsson, "Heaven is a Place on Earth: Church and Sacred Space in Thirteenth Century Iceland," *Scandinavian Studies* 82 (2010): 1–20 at 2.

[42] For a thorough discussion of the cult of Guðmundr Arason, see Joanna A. Skórzewska, *Constructing a Cult: The Life and Veneration of Guðmundr Arason (1161–1237) in the Icelandic Written Sources* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

1. Contests between Christian and pagan spaces, manifested primarily in accounts of the settlement of Iceland;
2. contests within (Christian) accounts of pagan spaces that have been defiled and from which the sacredness has gone;
3. contests between Christian sacred spaces and defiled sacred spaces that must be cleansed, as indicated in the discussion of Christian legal codes.

These early accounts of sacred, profane, and defiled spaces, whether pagan or Christian, create a context for cultural memories of contested spaces in Iceland as the systems of belief develop in the country over time. It is especially important here to note the value of the settlement period—and accounts of it in *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*—to the Icelandic cultural memory. As Kevin P. Smith puts it, “the settlement of Iceland has provided Icelanders with an important ideological charter for eight centuries. *Íslendingabók* formalized the identity of the Icelanders as a distinct people with a unique, known history … By the thirteenth century, when the earliest extant version of *Landnámabók* was written, the tales of Iceland’s settlement retained this function.”[43] These conclusions may easily be applied to cultural memories of contested spaces in Iceland. Memories of these important landscapes were thus sustained throughout the Reformation period in Iceland and became vital parts of the folk narratives collected in the nineteenth century. While some references to sacred space at times contributed not much more than narrative context, a significant portion also used space as a means of preserving or comprehending some aspect of social conditions. For example, alongside religious history, post-Reformation folklore often became a mechanism by which positive and negative cultural memories of the Catholic *ecclesia* were formulated. Helgafell continued to play a prominent role in that cultural memory, as may be seen in the tale entitled “Helgafellsklaustur” (The Cloister at Helgafell),[44] which offers an incriminating explanation of how the mountain pass dubbed Munkaskarð (Monks’ pass) received its name. When, during the Reformation, the monastery at Helgafell was dissolved, the expelled monks “litið aftur úr skarði þessu heim til staðarins og klaustursins og bannfært hvorttveggja með sungnum[45] sálmum” (looked back from this mountain pass to the land and the monastery and excommunicated both with the singing of psalms).[46] The tale should certainly call to mind the violence perpetrated against Catholics in Iceland at the hands of the Danish bailiff, Didrich von Minden, leading up to the Reformation in Iceland, but the means by which they excommunicated the lands and the monastery,[47] by the singing of psalms, will be relevant in the subsequent discussion of a certain sorcerer, *Galdra*-Loftur, who uses a twisted version of singing to defile a Christian sacred space.

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[43] Kevin P. Smith, “*Landnám*: The Settlement of Iceland in Archaeological and Historical Perspective,” *World Archaeology* 26 (1995): 339.

[44] JÁ 2:75–76.

[45] The monks “bannsyngja.” That is, they perform excommunication by song. Consider also a similar place called Sönghóll near Kirkjubær.

[46] JÁ 2:76.

[47] For more on this topic, see Cormack, “Catholic Saints.”

Concerning sacred and profane space in the narrative of "Helgafellsklaustur," several points are of interest. For one, the monks carry out their excommunication from the mountain pass, as far from the monastery as they can get while still being able to see it;[48] they conduct a ritual to effect the transformation of the space; they also excommunicate both the cloister (*klaustursins*) and the surrounding land (*staðarins*), making the action applicable not only to the once-sacred space but also to whom- or whatever might inhabit it. In short, the curse affects humans, livestock, and wild animals alike. In other words, not just the cloister but the constituents, too, are subject to the monks' excommunication. Most significantly, the excommunication, a gesture typically reserved for a person or peoples (in a few cases), reverts what was once sacred space into something outside of Christendom. The land still cannot be called "eigi helgari en aðra," but neither is it merely defiled, as when violence or bloodshed has occurred. Excommunication permanently fixes the space outside of Christendom. While we are not yet at the point where an evil ritual transforms sacred space into a force for evil (as will soon be the case with a certain evil Icelandic magician named Loftur), we do observe a ritual transformation of space. This space has become corrupted, profaned with sinfulness; it is therefore condemned, as are the people who live there.

Stories have also grown up around two other cloisters near Kirkjubær in the southeast of Iceland and cast Catholicism in quite a negative moral light. The cloister at Kirkjubær housed nuns while another at nearby Þykkvabær, just over a mile away, was home to a community of monks, which proximity makes for some interesting anecdotes about monk-nun relations. Many of the tales about Kirkjubær and Þykkvabær contribute typical anti-Catholic incriminations that describe immoral behaviour of monks and nuns together. Among these narratives we find the popular international tale[49] in which the abbess of Kirkjubær Cloister finds a monk and a nun in bed together and prepares to chastise them appropriately, when the nun notices something clinging to the abbess's coif: the underpants of the abbot from Þykkvabær. "Allar erum vér syndugar, systur" (We are all sinners, sister),[50] says the abbess. Stories like this one, while common in international collections, contribute a jocular post-Reformation perspective of Catholicism and perhaps ought not be considered as much more than propaganda or possibly an expression of rivalry. They also, however, correspond to the feeling in post-Reformation ecclesiastical culture that Catholic Iceland maintained only a thin veil of moral standards.

Other tales assume a more expressly Icelandic identity. For instance, the large freestanding rocky outcrop called Systrastapi at Kirkjubær Cloister is the subject of an extended story about one or possibly two nuns (sisters) who were burned for illicit behaviour. One, named Katrín, was accused of making pacts with the Devil, defiling the Eucharist, and sleeping with a number of laymen, while the other (unnamed) had either insulted the pope or not thought enough of him.[51] The sisters were reported to have been burned at Systrastapi, where there can be seen two tufts of grass, one that remains evergreen and another that never turns green and produces only thorns.[52] Yet another story about Kirkjubær reaches as far back as the settlement period in Iceland. Ketill *fíflski* (the foolish), one of the few Christians among the first settlers in Iceland, is said to have settled at Kirkjubær, and it was said then that only Christians could inhabit the land. After Ketill's death, a pagan, Hildir, tried to move to the area, but the moment he crossed the *tungarðr*, the border or fence around the area, he dropped dead and was buried at a place called Hildishaug.[53]

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[48] Special thanks to Margaret Cormack for pointing out this detail.

[49] As Einar Ólafur Sveinsson notes, in *Folk-Stories of Iceland*, 280, this common story occurs most visibly in the *Decameron*.

[50] JÁ 2:78.

Galdra-Loftur and the Battle for Sacred Space[54]

After the Reformation had taken hold, contests over sacred spaces at times took a dark and serious turn in certain corners of Icelandic folklore, as is evident in the classic folktale "Galdra-Loftur" (Loftur the Magician). Not much is recorded about the historical Loftur Þorsteinsson, except that he was born shortly after 1700 and matriculated at the Hólar Cathedral School.[55] The folk motifs associated with *Galdra*-Loftur are rooted in the stories of Sæmundur *fróði* (the wise) Sigfússon, who will be discussed in full detail in the next chapter, but *Galdra*-Loftur seems to have captivated the Icelandic imagination even more than Sæmundur in the modern era. The fascination with *Galdra*-Loftur is due in no small part to the efforts of Skúli Gíslason,[56] who edited and added a literary quality to existing accounts of Loftur. It is Skúli's work that Jón Árnason preserved in his collection, and it is indeed a majestic recreation 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."[57] While Skúli gives the text its aesthetic appeal and complexity, the legends of *Galdra*-Loftur were among the most popular tales in Iceland even before Skúli's rewriting. Two other extant texts include stories of *Galdra*-Loftur: Jón Espólín's *Árbækur* (1821–1830)[58] and Gísli Konráðsson's *Söguþættir*,[59] also from the early to mid-nineteenth century. Jón Espólín's account focuses on the corrupt nature of the boy Loftur, while Gísli and Skúli include many of the same anecdotes about his bad nature but focus primarily on *Galdra*-Loftur's attempt to acquire a magical book of great power. Jón Espólín's work, being the earliest, contributed evenly to the two later variants. Both Gísli and Skúli include the fundamental components of the Loftur legacy: (1) Loftur is a young magical prodigy, (2) he uses magic to cause trouble and play tricks on people, (3) he tries to gain more power by obtaining a magical book, and (4) he fails to do so and as a result loses his soul.

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[51] JÁ 2:77.

[52] In fact, it is safe to say that not one corner of the Icelandic landscape is homogeneous. Rocks, shorelines, hills, rivers, fields, glaciers, volcanoes, and whatever else are all likely candidates to be set apart as sacred or enchanted. Some of these spaces may be classified as *álagablettir*, "enchanted spots," and some have legacies that reach far back into the Icelandic cultural memory. Many *álagablettir* have been catalogued and described in Árni Óla's *Álög og Bannhelgi*, and recent work by Terry Gunnell has considered them in light of comparable migratory legends from Norway, Ireland, and the Northern Islands of the United Kingdom. Tungustapi would be better classified as an *álfakletta* (elf-crag), as described by Valdimar Tr. Hafstein, "The Elves' Point of View: Cultural Identity in Contemporary Icelandic Elf-Traditions," *Fabula* 41 (2000): 87–104. See Terry Gunnell, "Kraftur, staðarins: Íslenskar sagnir um álagabletti í samanburði við erlendar sagnir," in *Rannsóknir í félagsvísindum XIII. Erindi flutt á ráðstefnu í október 2012*, ed. Sveinn Eggertsson and Ása G. Ásgeirsdóttir (Reykjavík: Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2012); Terry Gunnell, "The Power in the Place: Icelandic Álagabettir Legends in a Comparative Context," 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: Finnish Literature Society/SKS, 2018), 27–41. See also Jón Árnason's treatment of *álagablettir* in JÁ 1:457–67.

[53] The editor of these tales must have taken this account at least in part from a version of *Landnámabók*. The place names, at least, must have had a resilient and wide distribution. See Árni Óla's *Álög og Bannhelgi*, 179–80 and Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Landnám í Skaftafellsþingi* (Reykjavík: Skaftfellingafélagið, 1948), 97.

[54] Note Einar's lengthy discussion of *Galdra*-Loftur and its sources (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Folk-Stories of Iceland*, 206–13).

[55] Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Folk-Stories of Iceland*, 207.

In terms of a folkloristic analysis, Skúli's work presents certain problems, most importantly because his version of the Loftur story offers a clear example of a learned nineteenth-century individual bringing his own aesthetic and literary intent to an otherwise orally transmitted narrative. An assessment of the cultural memory or of oral tradition based on Skúli's work must therefore proceed with caution. Despite these challenges, this examination will focus on Skúli's work for three reasons. First, as was remarked in the introduction to this book, regardless of whether the Loftur story is literary or a collected folktale, it is a wonderful story, certainly worthy of discussion. The popularity of the Loftur narrative both before and after Skúli's version should be enough to show that, even where Skúli might have deviated from oral tradition, the Loftur stories were not the singular invention of one individual but part of a broad body of storytelling about this figure. Second, Skúli's version fits seamlessly into the greater and older iterations of folk motifs associated with the Icelandic *galdramenn*, as we will discover in the next chapter. Third, Skúli's expansion of other accounts of Loftur does not reform but merely enhance what is present there. The two main innovations that Skúli brings to the narratives are an impressive aesthetic sensibility and the tragic depiction of Loftur's demise. The first takes away nothing from the cultural memory evident in the title, and the second, in those instances in which it seems to deviate from tradition, is easily compartmentalized. The story, in other words, contributes to an understanding of nineteenth-century Icelandic cultural memory, even if we acknowledge its literary rather than its oral quality. For these reasons, Skúli's version works well in a study of *galdramaður* tales, and in fact, we would be remiss to exclude it.

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[56] See below (120, note 11) for more on the *Galdra*-Loftur narratives. See also Hannes Þorsteinsson, *Galdra-Loftur: söguleg rannsókn* (Reykjavík: Ísafoldarprentsmiðja, 1914), also printed in *Ísafold* 42 (January 1915): 2–4.

[57] Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Folk-Stories of Iceland*, 212.

[58] Jón Espólín, *Íslands Árbækur í sögu-formi*, vol. 9 (Copenhagen: Hið Islendska Bókmentafélag, 1830), 40–41.

[59] Gísli Konráðsson, *Söguþættir* (Reykjavík: Einar Gunnarsson, 1915).

Like other Icelandic sorcerers, *Galdra*-Loftur has a mischievous streak, but from the very start his nature appears more corrupt and selfish than other *galdramenn*. At a young age Loftur takes to studying magic, conducting not just forbidden magic but malicious magical pranks on schoolmates, teachers, and friends, even to the point of killing a maidservant in his house after having got her pregnant. The tale states that Loftur, having learned everything there was to learn from the *Gráskinna* manual (which by that time had supposedly long been present at Hólar),[60] he decides to summon from the grave the evil magician Bishop Gottskálk[61] in order to take his magic book, *Rauðskinna*. Loftur employs a brave schoolmate to help him, but when he explains to the boy his reasons for wanting the book, he reveals an unexpected concern for the well-being of his soul. Skúli's version dramatizes this element of the story, having Loftur say:

> þeir sem eru búnir að læra galdur viðlíka og ég geta ekki haft hann nema til ills og verða þeir allir að fyrirfarast hvenær sem þeir deyja, en kunni maður nóg mikið þá hefur djöfullinn ekki lengur vald yfir manninum, heldur verður hann að þjóna honum án þess að fá nokkuð í staðinn eins og hann þjónaði Sæmundi fróða, og hver sem veit svo mikið er sjálfráður að því að brúka kunnáttu sína svo vel sem hann vill.[62]
>
> Those who are as learned in magic as I cannot use it except for ill, and they all become forfeit when they die, but if a man knows enough then the Devil no longer has power over him; rather the Devil must serve him without getting anything in return, just as he served Sæmundur the wise, and whoever knows that much is free and can use his skill in whatever way he wants.

Loftur further warns the boy to be diligent in his help because his temporal and eternal well-being ("stundleg og eilíf velferð") depends upon their success.[63] Without *Rauðskinna*, Loftur will never possess the ability to control the Devil and will thus be doomed to continue along his evil path and will be rewarded accordingly in the afterlife. Unlike the traditional Christian doctrine that the repentant soul must leave behind the sins and evils of their transgression, for Loftur (and other Icelandic magicians), it is the forbidden knowledge and magical abilities that enables them to experience redemption. Raising the evil Bishop Gottskálk and going deeper into the forbidden knowledge promises—counter to Christian doctrine—to free him from eternal damnation. That he does not succeed makes Loftur's story a tragic tale rather than a redemptive one.

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[60] Simpson notes that both Skálholt and Hólar were in possession of certain manuals of magic, both named *Gráskinna* (*Legends of Icelandic Magicians*, chap. 5, n. 1).

[61] This is Gottskálk *grimmi* (the cruel) Nikulásson, bishop of Hólar from 1497 to 1520. See below, 139.

[62] JÁ 1:573.

[63] Other Icelandic magicians experience a similar dependence upon magic to save their soul, though Loftur fails to attain mastery. See 131–38 below for more on this point.

Skúli's version of the *Galdra*-Loftur tale also develops several important ideas concerning contests of spatial opposition. For instance, Loftur uses twisted rituals to profane sacred space for his own purposes. At the appropriate time, he and his helper go into the sanctuary, obviously itself a sacred space (in comparable stories, the conjuring might take place in a graveyard). As Loftur goes behind the pulpit and begins conjuring, he wilfully transforms this sacred space into a defiled one, not by the incidental shedding of blood or disregard for its sacrality, as was evident in earlier sources, but by an active and intentional abuse aided by sacred objects and rituals for the purpose of turning them to evil. Loftur populates the sanctuary with the raised corpses of bishops (except for those who were buried after a certain time, for it was later customary for bishops to be buried with a Bible on their chest, something that Loftur's conjurations could not overcome). Three of them wear crowns: doubtless one is Jón Ögmundsson (1106–1121), who plays a prominent role in the tales of Sæmundur *fróði*; another must be Guðmundr Arason (1161–1237), mentioned above; and a third is Jón Arason (1484–1550), the last Catholic Bishop in Iceland, who was brutally executed at the hands of Reformers.[64] These crowned figures create a kind of arena in which the struggle between Loftur and Gottskálk will take place. The tale states, "stóðu þá þrír hinir kórónuðu biskupar lengst frá með upplyftum höndum og snéru andlitum móti Lofti, en hinir horfðu undan og á þá" (the three crowned bishops stood farthest from Loftur with hands uplifted and they twisted their faces toward Loftur, but [the others] looked away from him and at the three bishops).[65]

Loftur defiles the sacred space by employing malefic, blasphemous magic, but it is a magic that draws its power from the sacredness of the Christian belief system. The tale says that during Loftur's struggled to raise Bishop Gottskálk, "snéri hann þá iðrunarsálmum Davíðs upp á djöfulinn og gjörði játningu fyrir allt sem hann hefði vel gjört" (he then twisted the penitential psalms of David up to the Devil and made confession for all the good that he had done).[66] After Gottskálk taunts Loftur, he once more distorts Christian sacred prayers: "Snéri hann þá blessunarorðunum og faðirvori upp á djöfulinn" (He then twisted the benediction and Lord's Prayer to the Devil).[67] This sort of malefic magic here denotes the direct distortion of a sacred object, prayer, or space for the express purpose of malevolence. A malefic magical act of this kind does

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64 Simpson makes note of these figures in her translation of this tale (*Legends of Icelandic Magicians*, chap. 6, n. 2).

65 JÁ 1:573. After the duel Loftur states that the bishops would not have allowed Gottskálk to linger after the sunrise, indicating that they have some jurisdiction over the events of the duel.

66 JÁ 1:573.

67 JÁ 1:574.

not, it must be understood, desacralize its subject; it rather draws its malevolent power from the inversion or distortion of the sacred subject. For instance, Loftur's recitation of the Lord's Prayer to the Devil achieves the desired effect *because* of the distortion, not in spite of it.

This sort of blasphemy is commonly involved in the raising or manipulation the dead, which allows some comparison with older traditions. While certainly present in medieval Norse mythology, necromancy begins to take on a remarkably different form than in post-medieval sources. The cult of Óðinn, most obviously, is often associated with necromancy, specifically for the sake of acquiring some arcane knowledge. After the Vanir kill and behead Mímir, Óðinn enchants Mímir's head so that it can still impart wisdom to the Æsir.[68] This motif is used in similar fashion in a later folktale about a certain Þorleifur who takes the head of a recently drowned man (some say it is the head of a child), feeding it bread and wine and keeping it in a chest or crag, all for the purpose of acquiring knowledge from it.[69] Another tale tells of a magician who uses the dead to acquire knowledge: "Útisetur á Krossgötum" (Sitting Out at the Crossroads), in which the magician must lie down at a crossroads and cover himself completely with an animal hide so that nothing of himself is showing.[70] Then he must stare at the edge of an axe and conjure the dead from the four churchyards, and if he has any relations in the graveyards, they will come to him and tell him whatever he wishes to know.[71] The act evokes images of the conversion to Christianity in 999/1000, when law speaker Þorgeirr Þorkelsson retired under his cloak for an entire day in order to seek guidance on whether the country ought to accept Christianity, and indeed Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson has linked Þorgeirr's actions on that day to similar kinds of sorcery elsewhere in the Norse belief system.[72]

Tales like "Galdra-Loftur," which involve necromancy and other manipulation of the dead, often incorporate malefic incantations. "Skollabrækur" (The Devil's Underpants)[73] gives careful instructions for how to make a pair of breeches whose pockets never lack a coin, no matter how often you reach for one. In order for them to work, however, the wearer must first steal a coin from an extremely poor woman during a church service, sometime between the reading of the Epistles and the reading of the Gospel.[74] Likewise, Jón Árnason points to other examples of malefic magic in his explanation of methods for raising the dead. The sorcerer, he explains, must enact the ritual at midnight on a prescribed night—some think a night between Friday and Sunday, others say between the 18th and 19th or the 28th and 29th of the month—and he must write the Our Father backwards on a piece of parchment in his own blood, then, selecting the grave, he must chant the reversed Our Father along with other secret sayings.[75] Necromancy for the sake of acquiring knowledge also plays a role in stories about magicians who raise the dead to attain a magic book. Both Eiríkur of Vogsós[76] and *Galdra*-Loftur raise long-dead magicians in order to steal their magic books. In both tales the motif of raising the dead functions as a guide for those who seek to understand how, in the (Icelandic) Christian world, the magicians must approach power, good and evil, and the prospect of death. The motif likewise illuminates the consequences of both righteousness and unrighteousness in a Christian sense. The distinctions between good and evil, righteousness and unrighteousness, prove to be more complicated than one might originally suspect, and understanding that complexity brings us closer to understanding the mythic structure ingrained in the later folktales.

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[68] See Snorri Sturluson, *Ynglinga saga*, ed. Bjarni Aálbjarnarson, Íslensk Fornrit 26 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritfélag, 1941), chaps. 4 and 7.

[69] JÁ 1:507–8. Jacqueline Simpson makes passing reference to this in *Icelandic Folk Tales & Legends*.

[70] JÁ 1:422–24. As Jacqueline Simpson notes, the motifs in this tale bear a strong resemblance to those in the tale "Krossgötur" ("Crossroads"; JÁ 1:118), in which an individual can sit out at a crossroads in order to procure treasures from the elves (*Icelandic Folk Tales & Legends*, 72 and 190). That the motif transcends the mythic structure to signify both elves and deceased family members as knowledge keepers indicates the importance of the motif in the later belief system.

[71] Simpson notes that this sort of necromancy was common in Iceland and Norway since medieval times and that Christian law forbade a man from engaging in such acts (see *Icelandic Folk Tales & Legends*, 192).

[72] Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Under the Cloak*, 103–23.

[73] JÁ 1:415.

The Loftur story merges these notions of blasphemy and necromancy with the defilement of sacred space. We can no longer call this space "sacred" after the blasphemy and necromancy enacted upon it by Loftur, yet neither is it merely "profane" in the sense of being outside the Church or even outside Christendom; it is rather "profane*d* space," which has become so by a maleficent ritual meant to distort the sacredness of an otherwise christened, holy place. In the Loftur stories, Loftur clearly draws his power from both the sacredness of the space itself and the maleficent ritual acts of profanation he acts upon the space. Much more than simply having lost its sacred element (as was the case with tainted space in Old Norse depictions of pre-Christian Iceland), *profaned space* must be defined as a space that was once sacred but has been made evil by some act of profanation, often twisted by blasphemous or sacrilegious ritual. In this sense, profaned space is only possible in a cultural memory that acknowledges the stark polarity between good and evil, such as is found in what may be called the Christian, and especially in Lutheran, "cosmic war," in which forces of good and evil vie against one another. It is also a phenomenon that occurs within a single religion, rather than between two separate religions, as was the case in contests between pagan and Christian spaces.

The Cosmic War and the End of Loftur Þorsteinsson

The fact that Loftur is seeking a kind of redemption, though he fails, affords considerable context to the means by which he struggles to that end: Loftur's malefic conjurations serve to create not merely an ambiguated space but rather one that has been *profaned*, into which he enters for the purpose of raising the dead. The arena is thus set for his redemption, and the three crowned figures serve as his guardians, ready to instruct him on the return (Bishop Jón has already given him a warning, in fact).[77] Loftur might have succeeded, too, but for his pride. He goes into such a frenzy of conjurations that the schoolboy, who has been charged with ringing the church bell at the appropriate time, misinterprets Loftur's reaching for *Rauðskinna* as the signal and rings the bell, sending all the bishops back into their graves. After the fact, Loftur tells his schoolmate that he became so obsessed with the prospect of taking the book by conjuration that he forgot all else. Had he chanted any more verses, he would have sunk the cathedral into the ground. He stumbled, says Loftur, because he saw the faces of the bishops, who seem to serve as officiators over the duel between Loftur and Gottskálk. Had the bishops not caused Loftur to stumble at the last moment, the price for his total failure would have been the destruction of the church in which the duel took place. As it stands, the bishops prevent such a calamity, and it is only Loftur who must sink tragically to his own demise.[78]

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[74] JÁ 1:415.

[75] JÁ 1:304–5.

[76] Numerous stories circulated about Eiríkur of Vogsós. Many are collected in JÁ 1:543–65.

It must be remembered that the body of Christ and Heaven represent only one side of the Christian worldview. The Devil and Hell complete the landscape. From the Christian—especially from the Lutheran—perspective, the world is the site of an epic battle, one in which the Good triumphs but that nevertheless is played out in the human arena, where casualties are counted in the currency of human souls. A similar contest was evident in medieval Iceland, though it was not a war between Heaven and Hell but between Christian and pagan. Sîan Grønlie notes that such contests point to an Augustinian view of conversion.[79] Sverrir Jakobsson points out that this contest between Christian and pagan forces is nowhere better on display than in the well-known episode from *Þiðranda þáttr*, where Þiðrandi, "a well-behaved and noble youth,"[80] is killed by nine pagan *fylgjur*. Sverrir thus points out that "At the center of this struggle [between Christianity and paganism] is an unfortunate youth, an unwilling observer of this cosmic struggle."[81] In the post-Reformation variation on this contest, Christianity battles not against paganism but against the Devil himself, and the "youth" at the centre of this struggle, as represented in post-Reformation tale "*Galdra*-Loftur" is neither "well-behaved" nor "noble." Instead, the well-behaved and noble youth of the Christian-pagan struggle in *Þiðranda þáttr* has been transformed into the complicit, ignoble, and sinister youth of the "*Galdra*-Loftur" tale, but the (eternal) well-being of the youth at the centre of the struggle remains the casualty of the battle.

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[77] If we recall that Loftur has already once referenced Sæmundur *fróði* and the Black School, then we can conclude that, in terms of the narrative at least, both the storyteller and the characters in the tale understand that Jón Ögmundsson has served this function once before for Sæmundur *froði*.

[78] The difference between Sveinn in "Tungustapi," and Loftur may not be immediately apparent. In the case of "Tungustapi," the hero of the tale actually completes the rite of redemption (recall that his love for his family facilitates the redemption stage for him), and only at the *reckoning* stage is he held accountable for his actions. Loftur fails to complete the rite and thereby suffers a different fate from that of Sveinn.

[79] Sîan Grønlie, "'Reading and Understanding': The Miracles in *Þorvalds þáttr ens víðfǫrla*," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 112 (2013): 475–94 at 482.

[80] Sverrir Jakobsson, "Conversion and Cultural Memory," 23.

[81] Sverrir Jakobsson, "Conversion and Cultural Memory," 23.

It seems, then, that even more so than its Catholic predecessor in the country, the post-Reformation Icelandic cultural memory was keenly aware of this epic struggle against evil. Martin Luther would have whole-heartedly affirmed the recognition of this epic battle. For Luther, the Devil was an ever-present enemy. Heiko A. Oberman, biographer of Luther has said,

> Luther's world of thought is wholly distorted and apologetically misconstrued if his conception of the Devil is dismissed as a medieval phenomenon and only his faith in Christ retained as relevant or as the only decisive factor. Christ and the Devil were equally real to him: one was the perpetual intercessor for Christianity, the other a menace to mankind till the end … Christ and Satan wage a cosmic war for mastery over church and world.[82]

The writings of Bishop Jón Vídalín (1666–1720), which were so important to post-Reformation thought, will attest that Icelandic Lutheranism took this cosmic war quite seriously.[83] Sigurdur Arni Thordarson argues that Vídalín depicts the Fall of humankind in spatial terms: "As a created being the human is placed within a circle that may not be broken. Attempts to transcend the limits will result in a fall. This fall is interpreted spatially. The sin consists in trying to place oneself higher in the hierarchy of values, than one is allowed."[84] Icelandic folklore seems to have taken the spatial nature of the Fall equally seriously, though not in ways that might be expected.

After Loftur's failure to secure the magic book, the concepts of transcending and transforming spaces remains crucial. Loftur falls into a deep depression, unable to bear darkness or to be alone for very long. He seeks the help of an elderly cleric, who pities Loftur and tries to save him from his fate by allowing him to participate in his vocational care of others. Loftur finally grows so weak that he cannot accompany the cleric, and, once, thinking Loftur will be safe enough if he remains inside, the cleric leaves him alone. Before he leaves, however, the cleric fortifies the threshold of the house: "fyrir bæjardyrum féll hann á kné og baðst fyrir og gjörði krossmark fyrir þeim" (he dropped to his knees before the door of the house, prayed before it, and made the sign of the cross on it).[85] Here, truly sinister evil is signalled by a spatial and ritual response to the threat. The prayers and blessings of the cleric represent an attempt to establish a protective barrier around Loftur, but the efforts cannot save the young man. After the cleric leaves, Loftur mysteriously recovers from his illness and elects to leave the safety of his protective space. He is never seen alive again.[86]

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[82] Heiko Augustinus Oberman, *Luther: A Man between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 104.

[83] See Thordarson, *Limits and Life*, 87–95, for more on the Icelandic view of this war.

[84] Thordarson, *Limitation*, 153–54; see also *Limits and Life*, 97.

[85] JÁ 1:575.

"*Galdra*-Loftur," "Tungustapi," and the Inward Turn

Sveinn's struggles and suffering in the tale "Tungustapi" somehow mirror the struggles and suffering of *Galdra*-Loftur. Both desire a secret, forbidden knowledge or initiation; both try, and fail, to attain it; both withdraw from the world, ultimately into the care of members of the Christian church; both die as a result of their trials; and both tales also have a strong dependence, though not in the same way, upon the notion of contested sacred spaces. The manner in which they articulate that dependence illuminates a final step in the development of cultural memories of space in Iceland.

The transition from Catholicism to Lutheranism in Iceland provoked a dramatic shift in the locus of sacred space. Sigurdur Arni Thordarson points out that in post-Reformation Iceland, "homes rather than the churches became the loci of religious formation," particularly in the sense of the daily education of Icelandic families:[87] It was common for pastors in post-Reformation Iceland to attend to the needs of specific households as caregivers, educators, and even as defenders and arbitrators of the way of life at the farmsteads under their care.[88] This localizing[89] of sacred space to the home or farmstead accompanied an increasing internalization of the sacred that took place after the Reformation. Whereas Catholicism endorsed (or at least tolerated, in the less traditional cases) a variety of physical locales to which constituents might go to enter sacred space, the teaching of the post-Reformation church continued the trend of localization, going from church to farmstead or home and then turned inward to the body, heart, and soul of the believer. It was inside the individual heart that the temple of God resided.

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86 The Jón Árnason version of the tale states that he went out in a boat with a local fisherman, and a large grey hand dragged down both boat and men. Ólafur Davíðsson's version suggests suicide as the cause of death (Ólafur Davíðsson, *Þjóðsögur*, 2:129–32). Simpson suggests that the latter is more reasonable (*Legends of Icelandic Magicians*, chap. 6, n. 2).

87 Thordarson, *Limits and Life*, 52.

88 The church edifice also offered a form of protection against the dangers of the land (Thordarson, *Limits and Life*, 54). See also William H. Swatos, jr., "The Relevance of Religion: Iceland and Secularization Theory," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 23 (1984): 34, as cited in Thordarson, *Limits and Life*, 53. Further evidence of this phenomenon can be found in *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, 16 vols. (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka bókmentafélag, 1857), 1:291; and *Grágás: Lagasafn Íslenska Þjóðveldisins*, ed. Gunnar Karlsson, Kristján Sveinsson, and Mörður Árnason (Reykjavík: Mál og Menning, 1992), 43. Sverrir Jakobsson discusses these examples of church sanctuary and instances in Icelandic literature when it was challenged. See Sverrir Jakobsson, "Heaven Is a Place on Earth," *Scandinavian Studies* 82 (2010): 15–16.

89 Despite the pastors' increased presence within homes, it would be wrong to assume that the edifice of the local church was of no consequence. Pastors conducted the major rites in the church, like baptisms and marriages, and the church became an important place for social interaction as well as the first stop before leaving on a long voyage. See Thordarson, *Limits and Life*, 53.

This movement, sometimes called the "indwelling of God," became of special important to Reformation doctrine in Iceland. Bishop Jón Vídalín offers a good example of the subject in his *hvítasunnuhátíð* (Pentecost) sermon.[90] He begins by making use of Zechariah 6:12, which presents the image of two worlds: one is the visible world, which we see with physical eyes and in which we live, and the other is the world above, in Heaven, from which Christ will come at the end times. In Þorlákur Skúlason's (bishop of Hólar from 1628–1656) version of the Icelandic Bible, which Jón Vídalín would have read, the passage reads, "Siaðu, þar er eirn mann sem heiter Zemah, þvi under hønum skal þat vaxa og hann skall byggia mustere Drottins" (Behold there is a Man whose name is the Zemah [the Branch]; he shall grow out from where he is, and he shall build a temple to the Lord).[91] On this passage, Jón Vídalín elaborates in a sermon for Pentecost, 1718–1720: "Það er Guðs kirkja í mannanna hjörtum, í hverjum Kristur býr fyrir trúna, og hann er þar sjálfur kennimaður í sínu hásæti, og ráð friðarins á milli beggja" (This [temple] is God's Church *in the hearts of men*, in which Christ dwells through faith; for He is Himself the Priest there on his throne, and the Counsel of peace between them both).[92]

The opposition of the two worlds would appear to fall in line with the typical duality of physical and spiritual existence, and indeed Jón proceeds along these lines throughout his sermon. He concludes, however, by explaining that the duality will not hold. Of the earthly world, he says, "Þessi er sú önnur veröld er eg í upphafi talaði um, hver eð uppbyrjast hér í náðinni en fullkomnast síðar í dýrðinni þá Guð verður allt í öllu …" (This is the other world of which I spoke at the start, begun here by grace and which will be perfected in glory when God becomes all in all …).[93] In other words, the world in which we live and which we see with our physical eyes is *in process*. We do not transcend from the physical to the spiritual world as a Neo-Platonist might, sloughing off our regrettably physical condition to attain a higher, spiritual one; we rather observe and participate in the transformation of the world around us as it becomes the promised New Heaven and New Earth (Rev. 21:1). The root of this transformation, and our participation in it, comes from the indwelling of God. Says Jón Vídalín: "hann sem býr í himninum, hverjum að þjóna þúsund og tíusinnum hundrað þúsund heilagra engla, hann hefur búið sér vist *í þeirra hjarta hér á jörðunni* sem hann elska og hans orð varðveita" (he who lives in Heaven, upon whom wait a thousand and ten times a hundred thousand holy angels, has made a place in *the hearts of those here on earth* who love him and keep his word).[94] The focus of sacredness is, at least theologically, turned away from external, localized spaces such as churches, blessed springs, and pilgrimage sites, and toward the internal heart in which Christ dwells. In a certain way, the change diversifies the sacred landscape to include every individual constituent of a church community.

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[90] Jón Þorkelsson Vídalín, *Vídalínspostilla: Hússpostilla eður Einfaldar predikanir yfir öll Hátíða og Sunnudagaguðspjöll árið um Kring*, ed. Gunnar Kristjánsson and Mörður Árnason (Reykjavík: Mál og Menning, 1995), 485–94.

[91] *Biblía það er öll heilög ritning (Spámannabækurnar)* (Hólar: n.p., 1644), 240, http://baekur.is/bok/000036976/2/240/Biblia_thad_er_oll_heilog/?iabr=on#page/Blaðs%C3%ADða+%5B240%5D++(240+/+388)/mode/2up.

[92] Jón Þorkelsson Vídalín, *Vídalínspostilla*, 486; my italics.

[93] Jón Þorkelsson Vídalín, *Vídalínspostilla*, 494.

Both "Tungustapi" and "Galdra-Loftur" embody this internalization by the manner in which they approach their deaths.[95] They turn inward, abandoning the outward world and reflecting upon the conditions of their own souls, rather than outward. I have argued elsewhere that this internalization is due to a fundamentally Christian type of cultural memory called "cognitive prospective memory," in which the approach to death is marked by a strong internal sense of culpability and concern for one's prospects for eternal life. Cognitive prospective memory must, I argue, be set in contrast with "heritable prospective memory," which is a type of cultural memory inherent in pagan belief systems. Thus, whatever heterodoxy may be present in these tales about Loftur and Sveinn, they are fundamentally Christian in their approach to death. By contrast, *Þiðranda þáttr* stands as a transitional narrative between these two prospective memories of death. While Þiðrandi tragically loses his life during the global struggle between Christianity and paganism, *Galdra*-Loftur loses his soul (but not yet his life) in the personal struggle between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. The audience must watch him slowly wither away into his damnation until he is taken by the Devil himself. The important contribution that these stories make to a discussion of prospective cultural memories is that their internalization takes on a deeply post-Reformation identity: their internalized view of death and the afterlife is echoed by an externally manifested contest of spaces.

Final Thoughts: Church Moving and the Elf Church at Tungustapi

The contest of sacred spaces in the folktale "Tungustapi" must be understood within a larger context of cultural memory that reaches back to the beginnings of Iceland. Even in the earliest written sources in Iceland, and perhaps even earlier in oral traditions, Christian sacred space competed with pagan sacred spaces. Whatever the actual history might have been, it is clear that the cultural memory hidden within those early written sources perceived pagan sacred spaces through a Christian lens (as is evident in our discussion of *Eyrbyggja saga*), which was in turn buttressed by the profound importance of sacred spaces evident in Judeo-Christianity. As is evident in thirteenth-century legal texts, a different type of space develops in the course of the medieval period: a sacred space that is Christian but has been tainted or defiled. This is a space that begins as sacred space, such as a church, and is stained in some way by an evil act, though an evil act not directed at or *intended* to alter sacred space. The defilement of sacred space here is but a consequence and can be restored through proper ritual.

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[94] Jón Þorkelsson Vídalín, *Vídalínspostilla*, 494; my italics.

[95] See Bryan, "Prospective Memory of Death and the Afterlife."

The moving story of "*Galdra*-Loftur" affords us another type of contested space, which must be added to the three already mentioned. Even though this fourth space is witness to a contest between good and evil, it remains within the purview of Christianity because this contest participates in the cosmic war as articulated by Christian doctrine. In other words, it is a cultural memory of sacred spaces defined by Christian ideas and therefore must be considered to have a Christian identity. The four types of contested space that have developed throughout the religious history of Iceland are, then, as follows:

1. Contests between Christian and pagan spaces;
2. contests within (Christian) accounts of pagan spaces that have been defiled and from which sacredness has been lost;
3. contests between Christian sacred spaces and defiled sacred spaces that must be cleansed;
4. contests between orthodox and heterodox Christian spaces, in which Christian sacredness is turned in upon itself to create a profaned space.

The contest of sacred spaces in "Tungustapi" confounds this typology because it sits squarely in the gaps between these four types. Like the pagan temple described in *Eyrbyggja saga*, the elf church is understood through a Christian lens. It is familiar—a mirror image of the Christian church, a mythical inversion of the Christian church opposite it. The elf church sits inside the hill in the west and its doors face east, whereas the Christian church stands in the east and faces west. When the elves choose to keep them closed, the doors ("kirkjudyr," church doors, in the text) of the elf church appear as a part of nature, a solid rock barrier; but at certain times, such as the turn of the New Year, they serve rather as a threshold between the ordinary world and the elfish sacred space within. In contrast, the Christian church's doors, which ought to serve as a threshold between the ordinary space outside and the sacred Christian space within, become a barrier when Sveinn requires them to be bound shut on the Easter that he is to perform mass. Likewise, the elf priest is sometimes referred to as "álfabiskupinn" (the elf bishop) in the tale, marking him as an elfish antithesis to the Christian bishop. But there is something less wholesome about the elf church. It cannot wholly escape that new type of defiled Christian space, which is tainted or profaned.

The elf church holds a mystical power that cannot be attained in the present world, yet anyone who seeks initiation into the elfish priesthood must pay a high price. Had Sveinn completed his initiation, he would have been required to sacrifice his love and benevolence for his family. For Icelanders, who are so very family conscious, this would have been a horrible price to pay. When Arnór shouts at Sveinn during the initiation ceremony, the story says, "Hrekkur Sveinn þá við, stendur upp og lítur utar eftir; vill hann þá hlaupa móti bróður sínum" (Sveinn then started up, and looked out; he wished to run toward his brother).[96] As a result he is cursed. Specifically, says the elf priest, “En fyrir það að þú stóðst upp *í því skyni* að ganga til bróður þíns …” (But therefore [you will be cursed because] you stood up *for the purpose* of going to your brother).[97]

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[96] JÁ 1:33.

All of these details enable “Tungustapi” to evade any classification of contested sacred spaces. The contest between the two spaces may be (1) a contest between Christian church and a space indwelled by “pagan” supernatural creatures or (2) a mythical space defiled by an irreverent guest (Sveinn’s brother, Arnór), as in *Eyrbyggja saga*, but these designations do not explain why the elf church looks like a Christian church and the elf bishop look like a Christian bishop. The Christian church in contest with the elf church might also be called (3) a Christian space that has been inadvertently defiled by some act of violence (the deaths of Arnór and Sveinn), which might explain why it must be moved, but it does not explain what the elf church is or why it has won the contest. Finally, the twisted versions of Christian ritual, blasphemous elf bishops, and a mockery of a Christian church all look, perhaps, most like the *profaned* space that we find in “*Galdra*-Loftur,” yet there is no evidence of any act of profanation such as *Galdra*-Loftur’s recital of the Lord’s Prayer to the Devil or repenting of all the good he has ever done. The contest of sacred space in “Tungustapi” thus does not conform to any of these four categories, yet so much may be the very function and purpose of the story within the cultural memory of sacred space in Iceland. The contest between the elf church and the Christian church was never meant to produce a “winner” and a “loser” as was posited earlier in this chapter. Instead, it was meant to demonstrate the costs and rewards of mediating between the two competing spaces.

Only Sveinn has the ability to mediate between the two spaces, and he does so for a long time before his brother dies. Even prior to the fateful New Year’s Eve, Sveinn was known to walk alone not only around the elf church at Tungustapi but also around the Christian church,[98] while afterwards he retains the beauty and mystery of the elfish world and turns it to the benefit of the Christian world. There is nothing twisted or profaned (as in “*Galdra*-Loftur”) about the Christian mass he sings or the Christian wisdom for which Sveinn is known, but his ability to mediate between the two spaces comes at an even greater cost than he would have paid had he been initiated into the elf priesthood. It would be easy—and perhaps true enough—to say that this mediation is between heterodox belief in supernatural creatures and orthodox belief of the Church, but some deeper, more fundamental truth may also be at play in the story of “Tungustapi”: beauty and wisdom—the deep sort of beauty and wisdom for which Sveinn was especially known—require some kind of transgression, a passage into a forbidden space which must needs be condemned by the world above, yet more so, that kind of beauty and wisdom comes not from merely transgressing the barrier between Christendom and the forbidden realm of the elves, but rather from going into the forbidden world … *and returning home*.

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[97] JÁ 1:33; my italics.

[98] JÁ 1:32.

In the next chapter, we will discover that these types of costly and beautiful transgressions into an otherworld, and their subsequent boons of wisdom, beauty, and—in the case of the Icelandic *galdramenn*—magical prowess, have deep roots in the cultural memory of religious beliefs in Iceland and beyond.