A Magic of Ice and Fire

Sorcery and Spirit Work in Iceland

Nicholas Breeze Wood

Above: the Sorcerer's Cottage at Bjarnarfjörður

In the northwest of Iceland, in a fishing village called Hólmavík, lies Strandagaldur - The Museum of Icelandic Sorcery and Witchcraft. This small private museum is dedicated to the folklore and history of sorcery and witchcraft in Iceland, a tradition which has a long history, since the island was first populated around 1200 years ago.

The Vikings were the first to bring their traditions to this tree covered island, followed by the Celts from Ireland and Britain, and Saami settlers from the north of Finland.

The trees are all gone now, cut down by the settlers - in a Northern Atlantic version of the clearing of the forests of Easter Island in the South Pacific - but the traditions of sorcery and witchcraft, and the worship of the old gods of Europe still continue - despite Iceland being a Christian country, and despite a heavy persecution of sorcery in the C17th.

Iceland is a wild, empty country. Even now it only has a population of some 330,000 people - almost all

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of whom live in Reykjavik the capital, situated in the South West of the country. The island has an land area just a little less than the land area of England, but compared to Iceland's emptiness, England has a population of 54 million.

Because of it's sparse population, combined with its often hostile weather conditions, life was hard for the people living there, and so they would often employ any method - both practical and supernatural - that they could, in order to help them survive.

Of course, the boundary between magic and primitive superstition is a very blurred one, and many of the old ways of sorcery were obviously nonsense, practiced by desperate illiterate people who were grabbing hold of what they could in very desperate times. But some of the magical arts practiced show considerable levels of sophistication, and at the end of the day any form of magic - when it is practised to help a people survive under adverse conditions - tends to have a degree of pragmatism about it; people don't waste too much time on things that are not going to bring results.

Forms of magic varied, from simple spells to help protect the home, to curses to do ill to a troublesome neighbour, and many more besides.

SEIÐUR, SCREED, SPIRIT STUFF

A general Icelandic term used today for anything to do with the spirits is *andleg mál*, [spirit stuff, or spirit work], and the work still continues to this day, especially in Northern Iceland (see the review of the book 'Bridges between Worlds' in this issue).

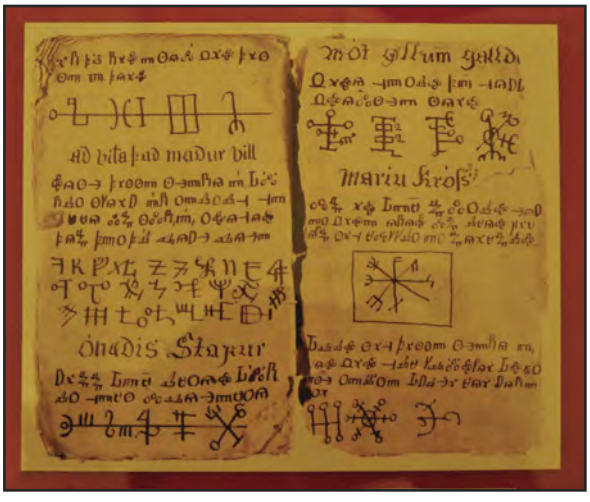
Those who practice nowadays are said to have *skyggnigáfa* [the gift] - an openness to the spirit world, which most people would not choose for themselves. Those with skyggnigáfa are normally have it from childhood, and are often said to spend their childhood playing with spirit animals, spirit people, or álfar [elves].

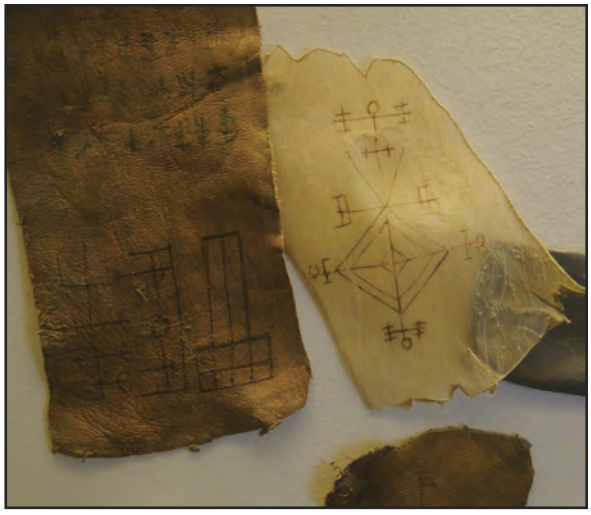
On a recent visit to Iceland, one woman I spoke to, told me in all seriousness how her own mother had been delivered by an álfar midwife, and how her grandmother had played with elves as a little girl, and called upon their help, not only to be a midwife, but as healers, when her children had become ill.

Spiritualism, which became popular in Europe and America in the C19th, didn't arrive in Iceland until 1905, and when it did, it mixed with the old pagan folk traditions already present, which had mixed with Christianity over the years. This is now the prevailing form of spirit work on the island, a mix of Christianised ancient pre-Christian traditions and a influences of Western spiritualism.

There is a long tradition of trance and spirit possession within andleg mál, practitioners go into

Below: the Sorcerer's Cottage





trance, and spirits - which they say are the spirits of the dead - speak through them. Those who go into trance are called miðill, and they sit upon a special chair, while everyone else gathers around them in a circle.

Whether there are traces of the ancient Viking art of seiður in the modern practice is hard to determine, but it would seem quite likely that there are some, the use of a special chair is one possible connection as in seiður a special 'high seat' was an important part of the ritual equipment.

In the practice of seiður - a tradition which has seen a revival in our own day - a shaman-like figure - most often a woman, who is called a völva - goes into trance. While in trance, the spirits speak through her, giving advice and prophecy to those gathered at the ceremony.

There is a considerable tradition of healing within the modern andleg mál tradition. Different healers have different ways of doing it, some will use a physical touch, some will employ light, some will call upon a special force which arises from the ground - or a particular mountain the healer has a connection with - and also, because they are present in Iceland, sacred hot springs are often used as part of any treatment.

The runes were an important element of traditional Icelandic magic, but nowadays they are less important, although still employed by some.

In the past they were combined with a system of *stafur* [sigils - magic signs] in a tradition called 'screed.' Screed are a series of magical diagrams or patterns, each drawn for a specific intent. Some of these were for protection, some for the gaining of wealth, some for cursing. They would be drawn on the body, or on paper or other material, or marked in wood or stone.

In effect they are a form of spell, and when executed in the correct way, with the right ceremony and using the correct words, they are said to be very powerful - even today. A very similar practice can be found in Tibet, where patterns are created, often using very specific forms of ink, such as human blood from a person of a certain age or sex.

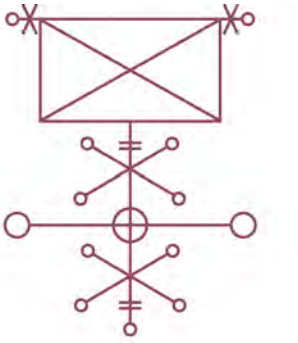
Top: a rune spell to control the weather, runes carved on a wooden stave pushed into the mouth of a dried cod head

Centre: a book of magic spells

Bottom: magical screed drawn on paper and animal skin

Here is an example of one Icelandic screed, used to lay a ghost, or banish a harmful spirit.

Draw the design on the scalp of a horse, using a mixture of seal's, fox's and human blood.



Recite this verse over the mark when you wish to use it:

'Þykkt blóð, þreytast rekkar.
Þjóð mörg vos öld bjóða,
grand heitt, gummar andast,
glatast auður, firrast snauðir.
Hætt grand hræðast dróttir
hríð mörg, vesöld kvíða,
angur vænt, ærnar skærur.
Illur sveimur nú er í heimi'

'Thick blood,
fighters grow weary.
The nation endures
centuries of hardship,
great destruction,
men die, wealth is lost,
the destitute are shunned.
Perilous ruin the people dread,
storm upon storm,
plagued by misery,
heavy remorse,
relentless warfare.
An evil stir haunts the world'

You probably need to be careful with that one however, it is also used to raise the dead.

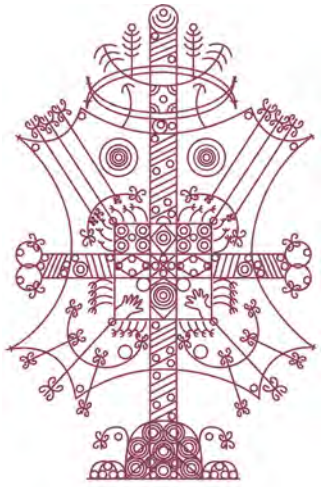
Here is another, a protection spell called 'The Greater Shield of Terror:'

Draw this design on black paper using bile taken from a raven as your ink. Once you have drawn it, place it in the nest of a brooding raven and leave it there until the raven has hatched its eggs, then take back the paper.

It will be of great use to you for protection, as even if a hundred men were your enemies, and attacked you, wanting you dead, this will save you. Hold it up before you when you face your enemies, and it will appear to them as a host of black dragons, which you are setting loose on them.

And one more, called 'The Mirror,' designed to reveal things from the past and the future, anywhere in the world:

Draw the design on calfskin which has never been out under the bare sky. For ink, use water from within a raven's eye, and blood from the heart of a man, and a woman, who have loved each other with all their hearts, but never consummated their love.



For a pen, use a feather from a water rail bird, and once the ink is dry scatter myrrh all over the design.

Then go to a spring, over which no bird has flown that day, and where the temperature of the water remains constant, winter and summer, and strike the water with the calfskin, making sure to face the design you have drawn downward.

Let the design lie still in the water, while you yourself circle the spring four times, counter-clockwise.

When you have completed circling, take the design from the water and gaze into it and through it, and you will be able to see throughout the world, backwards and forwards through time, and anywhere in the world's four quarters.

The calf skin with the design must be kept in an amnion [the membrane which covers an embryo in the womb], and only brought out when you are going to use it.

FALL AND RISE OF SORCERY

Iceland became a Christian country in the year 999. There was growing internal dispute in the country between the Christians and the pagans, and so, at the Alþingi [Althing], the open air parliament, held in the gap between the tectonic plates of North America and Eurasia, Thorgeir Thorkelsson - a pagan magician and lögsöguaður [law speaker] - decreed that from that time on, Iceland would be a Christian country, but all people would be free to practice any spirituality they chose in private.

The peace between the pagans and the Christians continued fairly well for several centuries, but in the middle of the C17th, a rising puritanical Christian backlash arose - much like the witch trials which swept mainland Europe at this time - and people were prosecuted for sorcery, and burned or drowned. So many were killed at this time that it is known as Brennuöld [the age of fire]

As in the European witch-frenzy, often there was little evidence, and

Below: Law Rock at the Alþingi. On the flat rock in the centre left foreground, each June until 1798, the Lögsöguaður recited aloud all the laws of the land in force

Bottom: the 'drowning pool' at the Alþingi, where those found guilty of witchcraft were tied in sacks, weighed down with rocks and thrown in

neighbour turned on neighbour, denouncing someone if a cow became barren, or some other misfortune occurred.

The Icelandic witch-frenzy ended in 1700, when the last case of sorcery was tried, but in the almost 50 years of 'the age of fire' great damage was done and many innocent lives taken. It should be noted that unlike Europe, many of the accused and executed in Iceland were men.

However, Iceland is now, once again the home of an active pagan community, and as well as those who practice andleg mál, pagan rituals are practised by many modern Icelanders as part of their everyday life. This can be seen in the protests against road building which Iceland is known for, because it will disturb the álfar and the other Huldufólk [hidden folk].

THE MUSEUM OF SORCERY

The museum is in the area of Iceland which is reputed to have been the most active, magically, the last place where the old ways died out, and which saw some of the largest humbers of burnings and drownings in 'the age of fire.'

The first burning in the area was in 1652, when a man called Jón Rögnvaldsson was charged with creating a zombie, which he was said to have used in order to cause harm to his enemies. The museum has a somewhat tongue-in-cheek display of a zombie climbing through the floor as a reminder of this.

Other displays in the museum are perhaps a little less sensational, but they do include an invisible man - together with the screed for making oneself invisible, the somewhat world-famous nábrók [necropants], various antique books of screed and other magical formula, and other items.

The necropants, nábrók, have to be the strangest exhibit in the museum, the flayed skin of a man from the waist down - including his genitals - which is part of a spell designed to increase one's riches.

The making of a nábrók is quite exacting. First you have to ask, and get, permission from a living man

Above: the nábrók [necropants]
Above right: the museum in Hólmavík
Right: a screed drawn on the inside of the skin from a fox's head
Below: a zombie pushes up through the floor of the museum

to use his skin in this manner, after he has died, then when he has been buried you have to dig up his corpse and flay it, in one piece, from the waist down.

Next you have to steal a coin from a poor widow and place it in the dead man's scrotum, along with the special screed for the nábrók, which is written on a piece of paper.

The skin is then put on, and worn by the person seeking to gain riches, and once worn, the coin and the screed in the scrotum will draw more money into the scrotum, so that it will never be empty, as long as the original coin is not removed.

Before death, the owner of the skin has to convince someone else to take on the nábrók, and the present owner must step out of them and the new owner immediately step in, and in this way the magic of the nábrók will keep drawing in coins.

The nábrók at the museum are actually a replica, as are some of the other items on display, but the tradition is real enough.

Another interesting exhibit in the museum is a tilberi [carrier] or snakkur [spindle]. These were supposed to have been created by female sorcerers in order to steal milk from a farmer. Similar supernatural beings occur right across the old Norse world, in Norway a being called a trollnøste [troll cat] was created to carry out the same task.

To create a tilberi, a woman has to steal a human rib, taken from a recently buried body early on the morning of Whitsunday (the seventh Sunday after Easter), and a piece of copper, which should come from a church clock.

After she has the rib and the piece of copper,, she has to twist grey sheep's fleece around them which has to be stolen specifically for the purpose - some traditions specify that the wool must be plucked from between the shoulders of a sheep belonging to a widow.

Once the rib and copper are wrapped in the wool, the bundle is placed between the woman's breasts, and for the next three Sundays, she has to go to church and take communion. When she has drunk the communion from the chalice, she holds it in her mouth and discretely spits it onto the bundle.

Over the course of the three weekly communions, each time she spits the sanctified wine on the bundle, the tilberi will become a little more alive.

After the third time she spits the wine, she has to place the rib bundle under her skirt and let it suckle on a growing wart-like nipple, which forms on the inside of her thigh. The tilberi is now ready, and it's mistress can send it out to suck milk from the cows and ewes belonging to other people. Once it has done this, the tilberi will return to its mistress, and call out; "Full belly, Mummy," and vomit the stolen milk into a container.

To suck the milk from the animal's udder, the tilberi jumps on the back of the animal and then it grows longer, so that it can reach down to the teats.

Inflammatory hardening of a cow's udder was traditionally blamed on to tilberi, and as late as the C19th animals would be protected by the sign of the cross under their udders. Butter made from milk stolen by tilberi is said to form into disgusting clumps, or dissolve if a magical sign, called a smjörhnútur [butterknot] is drawn in it.

If the mistress of a tilberi has a child themselves, and the tilberi manages to reach her own milk-filled breast, the woman is at risk of being sucked to death.

The supposed traditional method of getting rid of a tilberi, if its services are no longer required, is to

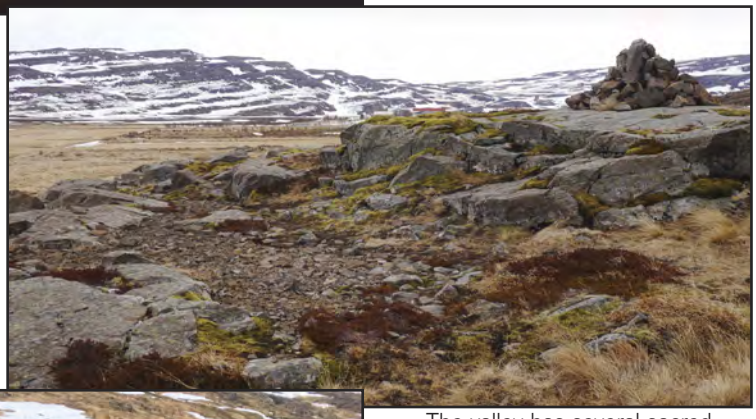
Above: a tilberi and the thigh of its 'mother' showing the nipple on which the tilberi feeds

Left inset: a butterknot

Below: a view of the inside of the museum showing the nábrók and a display about invisibility spells

Above: a ritual stone bowl discovered at Bjarnarfjörður

Right: the lonely landscape of Bjarnarfjörður



send it to a series of three mountain pastures, with orders to collect all the sheep and lamb droppings from each one of the three. The tilberi will then work itself to death, and only the original human rib and piece of copper will be left lying in the pasture.

THE SORCERER'S COTTAGE

A few miles to the north of the museum in Hólmavík is a long, remote, and rather desolate valley called Bjarnarfjörður.

The valley has several sacred sites within it and a small side valley, called Goðdalur [Valley of Goði], once contained a pagan temple. A sacred stone bowl - now displayed in the museum at Hólmavík - was found on the site, and after forensic tests, was found to still hold traces of blood - presumably from sacrifice.

There is also a burial mound in this remote side valley, containing the remains of a Viking called Snorri Goði, who died around 1030. It is said that the valley and the burial mound are haunted and best not disturbed.

A little way further down the down the Bjarnarfjörður valley, towards the sea, there is an ancient hot pool called Gvendarlaug. This is one of the oldest in Iceland, and it was said to have been blessed by the early Christian Bishop Gudmund, around the C1200. However, it was well established by then.

Close to this pool, a stone's throw away from a former local school, which is now Hotel Laugarholl, can be found the Sorcerer's Cottage, an annex of the Sorcery museum in Hólmavík.

The cottage is a faithfully made reconstruction of a typical Icelandic house of the C17th, dug into the hillside, with walls made from driftwood - the only timber available once the abundant forests had been cut down - and covered over with turf for insulation. This is the type of house typical in Iceland - and such dwellings, which can still be seen here and there by the side of the road in some parts of the island, were inhabited well into the C20th in rural places.

Walking through the primitive, rooms of the cottage shows the visitor why magic was so important to the population of Iceland, as life there - even with volcanically heated running water issuing directly from the hill a few metres away - was very tough.

Iceland is a place of magic and mystery, its land is very natural and powerful, and the spirits of nature are immensely strong there. It is however rapidly becoming a major tourist destination, as the world wakes up to its beauty, and in the summer its own population are outnumbered some seven to one by inbound foreign tourists.

Whether the island remains true to its nature, or is turned into a sort of Disney theme park, we will have wait to see, but I feel confident that the bleakness and the isolation of many of its wild places mean that the álfar will still have homes for a long time to come. And after the last tourist has left, once the West's culture finally collapses, a knowledge of sorcery will once again be probably be a requirement in order to live within the islands rugged beauty.

Above: the ancient hot pool close to the Sorcerer's Cottage at Bjarnarfjörður

Right: the inside of the Sorcerer's Cottage

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Museum Website:
www.galdrasyning.is