



University of
Nottingham

UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA



Volume 14: 2021-22

ISSN: 2041-6776

**Where the wild things are: Grounding the supernatural in
the world of *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka***

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English Dissertation (Spring Semester Only)

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Where the wild things are: Grounding the supernatural in the world of *Völsunga* saga and *Hrólfs saga kraka*

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While it is clear that the supernatural plays an almost genre-defining role in *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*, the significance of where and to whom supernatural things happen is arguably just as important as the specifics of what is happening. This dissertation emerges from the implications of that notion, as throughout both texts characters undergoing supernatural experiences are repeatedly associated with nature, specifically the forest and animals that live there. The concept of the supernatural itself is inseparable from accompanying ideas of nature and reality, seen in the Oxford English Dictionary definition of the term as something that exists beyond ‘what is natural or ordinary’.¹ The term ‘supernatural’ will be used as a blanket reference for many, often varied passages taken from both *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*, but the subtext of nature and transgression of its known boundaries carried in the word apply well to the dissertation. While ‘paranormal’ may have been a good alternative, it carries stronger connotations of binary opposition between ‘supernatural’ and ‘normal’ that are not always present in the sagas. On the contrary, this dissertation will argue that the supernatural is intrinsically linked to how the authors present the physical reality of saga worlds, especially when characters exist in natural environments.

While references will be drawn from throughout both texts, primary focus will be on the characters Sigmund and Sinfjotli, Bjorn, and Bodvar Bjarki during their encounters with the supernatural, studying how they are grounded in depictions of physicality and the natural world. The first chapter will be dedicated to exploring saga relationships to time and location, beginning with distance from historical context both in manuscript dating and historical and geographical settings. Discussions will then shift towards nature in supernatural narratives, such as how characters move into nature as a place of supernatural power. The second chapter will expand on this, emphasis placed on the specifics of shapeshifting and how it may be interpreted as movement across boundaries, simultaneously exploring spheres of human society, animality, and the supernatural. Having explored how the supernatural may be viewed in relation to the natural world, the third chapter will consider the movement of supernatural figures back into society in the form of the transgressive monster. Overall, this dissertation will pose that characters undergoing supernatural experiences in *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* are involved in a process of movement between social and natural spheres that serves to blur the boundaries between them.

Grounding the Supernatural in the World of *Fornaldarsögur*

Both *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* are categorised as *fornaldarsögur*, which bears interesting implications for the supernatural and physical reality of the texts. *Fornaldarsögur* were defined by Rafn in 1829, translating to mean ‘tale[s] of the Nordic countries in ancient times’, but ‘[i]n English they have also been referred to as “legendary sagas” and “mythical-heroic sagas”’.² While the terms define the genre in two seemingly different ways, they both highlight a key feature: grounding in a distant past. *Fornaldarsögur* frequently make use of historical material, *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* both drawing on the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries.³ These references become more complicated, however, when implications of the definitions are considered. Treating these texts as sagas of ‘ancient times’ would imply

¹ ‘supernatural, adj. and n.’, *OED Online* (March 2022) <www.oed.com/view/Entry/194422> [accessed 31 March 2022].

² Torfi H. Tulinius, ‘Sagas of Icelandic Prehistory (fornaldarsögur)’, in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 447.

³ *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, trans. by Jesse L. Byock (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p. vii; *The Saga of the Volsungs*, trans. by Jesse L. Byock (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 2.

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they reflect a past closer to the audience's grasp of history, while defining them instead as works of 'myth' or 'legend' blur this link to reality. Orton has noted that myths and legends, although sometimes 'considered to be true by the societies that preserved them', often take place in a 'remote past' that allows characters to operate outside the realm of 'everyday experience'.⁴ Supernatural elements are found frequently in the genre, to the point that they are a defining feature and clearly play an important role in their respective narratives. However, it may be debated whether saga audiences received these stories as works of pure fiction or if the timeframe used by authors encouraged acceptance as stories of a distant but ultimately realistic times. In saga analysis, it is therefore equally important to consider attitudes the authors had towards realism and history and how they may have reflected this in the supernatural elements of *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*.

Historical and Geographical Reality

Beyond the questionable reliability of stories involving supernatural motifs, the historical content of saga literature may be considered obscure due to strain between saga composition later in the medieval period and earlier narrative settings. The gap is especially pronounced in *fornaldarsögur* as they are typically found in later manuscript compositions. Although elements of the Volsung legend are attested in eighteen poems found in the Codex Regius (dated to around 1270), the earliest surviving manuscripts of both *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* are estimated to have been written around 1400.⁵ This is sharply contrasted by the distant past saga authors use to frame the narratives, *Hrólfs saga kraka* drawing on the sixth-century King Hrolf Kraki, for example, and *Völsunga saga* eluding to the fifth-century Attila the Hun.⁶ The authors of these works have consciously set the stories up to one thousand years before the time of writing, creating a clear sense of separation from the saga audience.

The removal from audience experience may also be extended to the depiction of geography in both sagas. While the majority were authored in Iceland, *fornaldarsögur* are once again distinguished from other genres by settings in northern Europe.⁷ *Völsunga saga* is centred primarily in the Germanic landscape, making three references to the River Rhine, and Danish historians have frequently identified Hleidargard as 'Lejre on the central Danish island of Sjælland'.⁸ It could be argued that geographical distance in saga settings is a result of traditions framing Europe as an older homeland for Nordic people in Iceland, reflecting a historicised sense of the physical world. Ingemark has noted that specific locations linked to legends can become 'multitemporal' spaces, imbued with 'a past, sometimes even a supernatural past, and that past is still present there'.⁹ The geographical settings of the sagas may therefore achieve the same effect as the sense of historical distance, allowing

⁴ Peter Orton, 'Pagan Myth and Religion', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 311-2.

⁵ *The Saga of the Volsungs*, ed. and trans. by R.G. Finch (London: Nelson, 1965), pp. ix-x; Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, p. viii.

⁶ Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, p. vii; Byock, *Saga of the Volsungs*, p. 12.

⁷ Tulinus, 'Sagas of Icelandic Prehistory', p. 447.

⁸ Finch, *Saga of the Volsungs*, p. 96; Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, p. xviii.

⁹ Camilla Asplund Ingemark, *The Genre of Trolls: the Case of a Finland-Swedish Folk Belief Tradition* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2004), pp. 245-6; quoted in *Myth, Magic, and Memory in Early Scandinavian Narrative Culture: Studies in Honour of Stephen A. Mitchell*, ed. by Jürg Glauser and Pernille Herman (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), pp. 26-7.

narratives with potentially unrealistic content to be explored without encroaching on the everyday world of the audience.

However, no matter how distantly, both sagas clearly use grounded, realistic settings to tell stories involving elements of the supernatural. The Rhine, for example, is framed as the final location of Fafnir's cursed treasure.¹⁰ Furthermore, Byock has argued that in the supernatural passages of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, the author still 'uses an understated tone, relying on realistic-sounding description to create an almost believable story'.¹¹ Therefore, rather than relying on geographical and historical elements to distance audiences from the supernatural, it may be argued that realism is incorporated to draw on the contextual knowledge of the audience and pull them closer to the story. This is aptly summed up by Clunies Ross: 'realistic elements ... serve as the guarantee and focal point from which a fictional narrative can develop'.¹² Interestingly, Byock has inverted this to reflect back on historiography, arguing that saga realism sometimes reflects authors 'consciously trying to make history from the mythic and legendary material'.¹³ While this argument may be a little ambitious as *fornaldarsögur* are still inherently fictional narratives, it may be valuable to note that *Völsunga saga* present the Volsungs as descendants of Óðinn, while Sigurd is simultaneously, 'according to *Ragnars saga*..., an ancestor of the reigning Norwegian dynasty in the thirteenth century'.¹⁴ The genealogy of the Volsungs may therefore bridge myth and history across the sagas, working to both justify supernatural elements as part of a historical narrative and to aggrandise historical figures as the descendants of a higher mythical world.

The degree of separateness supernatural events carry in the two sagas seems entirely dependent on how the author presents elements of realism. Despite frequent references to historical content, the 'historical value of *fornaldarsögur* is practically non-existent' and even analysis 'as carriers of a tradition older than themselves' is limited.¹⁵ It may be more productive to view the sagas as products of the time they were written. This is particularly significant in the combination of historical and supernatural motifs. Tulinius argues that as European states expanded their influence in the twelfth century, sagas increasingly borrowed 'from heroic tradition, myth, folklore and continental romance' to reflect an increased '[i]nterest in the legendary past' of newly powerful countries.¹⁶ *Fornaldarsögur* are presented by Tulinius as 'a "matter of the north", akin to the three "matières" of Rome, France and Britain', constructing stories of ancient Nordic kings and heroes from pre-existing myth and legend such as Hrolf Kraki and the Volsung family.¹⁷ The best approach to these sagas may therefore be presented by Clunies Ross – allowing 'the two creative impulses, historical and fictional, to coexist ... in a variable relationship' without attempting to separate them into purely one or the other.¹⁸ *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* contain realistic and supernatural content existing simultaneously, and neither can be dismissed without detrimentally effecting an understanding of the text. Criticism that ignores

¹⁰ Finch, *Saga of the Volsungs*, p. 71.

¹¹ Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, p. ix.

¹² Margaret Clunies Ross, 'Realism and the Fantastic in the Old Icelandic Sagas', *Scandinavian Studies*, 74:4 (2002), 443-54 (p. 446).

¹³ Byock, *Saga of the Volsungs*, p. 4.

¹⁴ Tulinius, 'Sagas of Icelandic Prehistory', p. 454.

¹⁵ Tulinius, 'Sagas of Icelandic Prehistory', p. 459.

¹⁶ Tulinius, 'Sagas of Icelandic Prehistory', pp. 449-51.

¹⁷ Tulinius, 'Sagas of Icelandic Prehistory', p. 451.

¹⁸ Clunies Ross, 'Realism and the Fantastic', p. 444.

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realistic elements would overlook authorial intentions to create an image of distant historicity, while overemphasis on realism could equally neglect 'the symbolic value of the fantastic'.¹⁹ Therefore, the realistic features of *fornaldarsögur* may be viewed as complimentary to the supernatural moments, allowing them to be more familiar and grounded in a realistic world.

Importance of Nature and Boundaries

Scholars such as Ármann and Mayburd have proposed alternative approaches to the study of the supernatural by drawing the focus away from the external experience of a supernatural event, towards the internalised psychological understandings of characters. Ármann, for example, has suggested that the supernatural is understood as 'a psychological rather than geographical entity', 'inextricably intertwined' with 'human consciousness'.²⁰ The narratives of *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* are undeniably coloured by the perspectives of characters: for example, by contrasting Bodvar's bravery and Hott's fear in the face of a 'huge, monstrous beast', the author of *Hrólfs saga kraka* places more emphasis on the experience of characters undergoing a supernatural experience than the supernatural figure itself.²¹ However, it would be reductive to suggest they are not still tangible events grounded in the representation of the saga world. It may be useful to incorporate the concept proposed by Honko: that the supernatural is 'essentially empirical, in that they are encountered through the senses and their perceived manifestation is triggered by certain factors in the individual's environment'.²² In this way the supernatural may still be understood internally, but also incorporates the undeniable influence of the tangible world it exists in.

If the importance of historical and geographical grounding in *fornaldarsögur* discussed in the previous section is accepted, then similar value may be found in assessing the patterns of association drawn between the presentation of supernatural events and the specific physical spaces they take place in. As highlighted by Clunies Ross, the mythical world 'partakes of the same basic metaphysical reality as that of the humans', adding to this the repeated references to place within *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* which reinforce more literal grounding in geographical location.²³ In the case of the two sagas, the use of natural space, specifically movements within and between the domestic and natural spheres, seems to be the most prominent example of how the authors ground the supernatural in place.

The forests and woodland depicted by the saga authors serve an important role as a reflection of 'the physicality of the world in which the stories were set, transmitted, and recorded'.²⁴ Timber served as an essential resource in medieval Nordic communities (such as in building) and may have been given further emphasis in the context of saga composition in Iceland, which is notably less wooded than other parts of the Nordic world within their

¹⁹ Ármann Jakobsson, "I See Dead People": The Externalization of Paranormal Experience in Medieval Iceland', in *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150-1400*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Miriam Mayburd (Boston: Medieval Institute Publications, 2020), pp. 10-1.

²⁰ Ármann, 'I See Dead People', p. 10.

²¹ Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, pp. 50-1.

²² Miriam Mayburd, 'The Paranormal', in *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 267.

²³ Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society*, 2 vols (Odense: Odense University Press, 1998), p. 24; quoted in Hans Jacob Orning, 'The Magical Reality of the Late Middle Ages: Exploring the world of the *fornaldarsögur*', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 35:1 (2010), 3-20 (p. 12).

²⁴ Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough, 'Trees, Woodlands, and Forests in Old Norse-Icelandic Culture', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 120:3 (2021), 281-301 (p. 292).

cultural memory.²⁵ It has also been estimated that Iceland was deforested from a previous coverage of between twenty-five and fifty percent, although Abram notes that these would not have necessarily been lush forests.²⁶ In either sense, there is potential Icelandic awareness of a past either in Iceland or abroad with more forests, and a present with less, which becomes significant in the context of distant historical and geographical *fornaldarsögur* settings. The forests depicted in *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* may therefore serve to reinforce the imagery of settings less familiar to the audience and lay groundwork for the magical events taking place.

However, beyond the contextual knowledge of the audience, forests and woodlands also have important roles as backdrops to supernatural episodes. There are several examples in both sagas: Sigmund and Sinfjotli roam the forest when under the influence of wolf skins, and after his bear transformation Bjorn retreats to a cave.²⁷ It is interesting to note that both examples involve shapeshifting narratives, combining geographical and bodily changes in a way that potentially presents the forest as a space of alterity that characters adapt to or incorporate into themselves. This notion will be discussed in more detail in the second chapter. To add to this, in both passages the characters are forced out of the community to exist in the forest periphery, simultaneously spatially and socially exiled. This suggests the role of natural spaces in the sagas was as a place to function outside of society, representative both of a 'dangerous shadow place on the other side of the boundary of order' and to those who have already subverted lines of social normality, a place of safety where these transitions make take place without disrupting natural order.²⁸ Equally, movement across forest boundaries becomes symbolic of transitional supernatural experiences. The forest boundary exists in a 'relationship of respect and fear', with both sagas placing emphasis on forest boundaries as a place of conflict even without the involvement of explicitly supernatural elements, such as the ambush led by Adils' berserkers in *Hrólfs saga kraka*.²⁹

Dichotomies of Nature and the Supernatural

Exploration of nature and boundaries in *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* also raises an important overarching question: should a dichotomy be drawn between what is understood as the supernatural and the normal? So far, this dissertation has exclusively used the term 'supernatural', which implies something that contrasts or 'transcends nature'.³⁰ However, the sense of supernatural as something separate to nature may not be appropriate to our topics of discussion, especially regarding medieval understandings of the world. In Isidore's *Etymologies*, for example, portents are described as 'not created contrary to nature, but contrary to what is known nature', united in the idea that the whole world is the will of God.³¹ It may therefore be argued that medieval ideas about nature incorporated magical and miraculous events into the fabric of daily life, and the boundary between the natural and

²⁵ Barraclough, 'Trees, Woodlands, and Forests', pp. 282, 287.

²⁶ Christopher Abram, *Evergreen Ash: Ecology and Catastrophe in Old Norse Myth and Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019), p. 104; quoted in Barraclough, 'Trees, Woodlands, and Forests', p. 289.

²⁷ Finch, *Saga of the Volsungs*, p. 11; Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, p. 37.

²⁸ Timothy Bourns, 'Becoming-Animal in the Icelandic Sagas', *Neophilologus*, 105:4 (2021), 633-53 (pp. 645, 648).

²⁹ Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, pp. xxvi, 24.

³⁰ 'supernatural', *OED Online*.

³¹ *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. by Stephen A. Barney, W.J. Lewis, J.A. Beach and Oliver Berghof (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 243.

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supernatural was not as defined. It would perhaps be more productive to draw this line between ideas of the known and unknown of nature interacting in the world.

The word 'paranormal' has been adopted by some scholars as an alternative, and when defined by the Oxford English Dictionary supports this notion of existence 'outside the scope of the known laws of nature', but once again carries contrast between normal and paranormal phenomena.³² This would be an entirely appropriate word in mythical saga worlds made of binary oppositions, such as in the simple narrative structure proposed by Orning: a human 'centre gradually expanded at the expense of a[n increasingly negative] magical periphery'.³³ However, as Orning notes, closer examination shows the 'borderline between centre and periphery could be blurred and subject to change'.³⁴ Supernatural-paranormal episodes are evenly dispersed through *Hrólfs saga kraka*, and while *Völsunga saga* may be interpreted to follow the pattern (divided into a more mythical first-half and pseudohistorical second-half), the later chapters are not absent of magic such as that performed by the 'sorceress' Grimhild.³⁵ Similarly, supernatural experiences often involve movement between domestic and wild spaces, suggesting that the natural world may serve less as 'a bridge from one [sphere] to the other but as a very tangible space where such boundaries are confused and do not apply'.³⁶

The events depicted in the sagas may therefore be regarded as far more fluid than simple binary opposites to their absence in the normal world. Supernatural characters are rarely limited to existing in one sphere of influence or the other, figures such as Sigmund and Sinfjotli moving back and forth between living in the forest and the hall as the narrative progresses. Furthermore, at a broader scale, supernatural elements are not restricted to the *foraldarsögur*. Similar episodes may also be found contained in more 'realistic' saga genres such as *Íslendingasögur*, *Eyrbyggja saga* providing a notable example in depictions of the undead Thorgunna and the hauntings at Froda.³⁷ The presence of the supernatural even in these seemingly more 'realistic' settings and texts suggests they had far more wide-reaching influence on sagas as tools for narrative progression. Therefore, the supernatural may be understood as situated within layers of observable reality. As summarised by Ármann, 'however unreal they are perceived to be, the tendency to see paranormal entities as part of the world's fauna is still marked'.³⁸

Animality and Hybrid Identity in Supernatural Figures

On the note of Ármann's argument, and as signposted throughout the previous chapter, it will be valuable to shift focus towards animals and supernatural creatures inhabiting natural spaces in the sagas.

Shapeshifting and the Adoption of Animal Characteristics

Both *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* contain multiple depictions of shapeshifting, highly significant when considering the overlaps between nature, the supernatural and

³² 'paranormal, adj. and n.', *OED Online* (March 2022) <www.oed.com/view/Entry/137554> [accessed 31 March 2022].

³³ Orning, 'Magical Reality of the Late Middle Ages', p. 5.

³⁴ Orning, 'Magical Reality of the Late Middle Ages', p. 12.

³⁵ Finch, *Saga of the Volsungs*, pp. 9, 44.

³⁶ Mayburd, 'The Paranormal', p. 269.

³⁷ *Gisli Sursson's Saga and The Saga of the People of Eyri*, ed. by Vésteinn Ólason, trans. by Martin S. Regal and Judy Quinn (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 170-5.

³⁸ Ármann, 'I See Dead People', p. 11.

physicality. Shapeshifting is depicted in various ways, including the exchange of human forms such as Signy's 'exchange of appearance' to conceive Sinfjotli with her brother, but animal transformations are prominent in both sagas: Sigmund and Sinfjotli being trapped in wolf forms, and Bjorn and Bodvar shapeshifting into bears.³⁹ These figures in particular emphasise the importance of movement across boundaries in supernatural experiences, allowing for the mutual collapse of lines between animal/natural and human/cultural. However, Bourns has argued that '[r]ather than inhabiting a stable and singular location in the liminal space between animal and human, these characters usually oscillate between the two categories'.⁴⁰ Bjorn's bear transformation is notably cyclical, living as a 'beast by day' and as 'a man at night', and Sigmund and Sinfjotli are not transformed permanently as '[t]hey could shed the skins once every ten days'.⁴¹ Recent anthropological and cultural-historical scholarship has suggested that in the medieval era, 'boundaries between the self and its environment were less strictly defined and may indeed have been non-existent'.⁴² The experience of movement between human and animal forms may therefore be more reflective of what Mayburd describes as the 'experience of self as dissolving into environmental otherness', in this case the literal loss of human identity into animality as characters adapt to the forest.⁴³ The supernatural of shapeshifting in *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* may therefore lie in the process of transformation itself. If the end points of human or animal coordinate with the environment they find themselves in, then it is instead the transition into and out of these states that transgresses the known order of nature, presenting characters in a hybrid existence between the two states.

Duerr defines werewolves as people 'able to dissolve "within themselves" the boundary between civilisation and wilderness', an idea embodied in how *Völsunga saga* depicts the experience of Sigmund and Sinfjotli.⁴⁴ While identity blurring into the environment has been explored at a general level, Duerr's approach raises the particularly interesting notion of an internal change accompanying the bodily metamorphosis. Furs and animal skins are included in the depictions of magic in both sagas, Hvit striking Bjorn with 'wolfskin gloves' and Sigmund and Sinfjotli becoming trapped inside 'wolfskins'.⁴⁵ These processes are deeply grounded in an understanding of transformation as literally taking on the shape of an animal, noted by Aðalheiður in reflections on the term *hamr* 'mean[ing] both a pelt/skin and a shape'.⁴⁶ However, this may be expanded into a figurative sense of adopting animal characteristics as well. The sagas have examples of people consuming animal parts, Bera eating 'bear meat' and both Sigurd and Hott drinking blood from a dragon's heart.⁴⁷ However, while still bodily experiences, these episodes do not result in a total shapeshifting transformation. Instead, the characters seem to adopt animal characteristics of varying physicality, ranging between the hybridity of Bera's children Elk-Frodi and Thorir Hound's

³⁹ Finch, *Saga of the Volsungs*, pp. 9-11.

⁴⁰ Bourns, 'Becoming-Animal in the Icelandic Sagas', p. 634.

⁴¹ Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, p. 37; Finch, *Saga of the Volsungs*, p. 11.

⁴² Miriam Mayburd, 'It Was a Dark and Stormy Night: Haunted Saga Homesteads, Climate Fluctuations, and the Vulnerable Self', in *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150-1400*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Miriam Mayburd (Boston: Medieval Institute Publications, 2020), p. 23.

⁴³ Mayburd, 'It Was a Dark and Stormy Night', p. 30.

⁴⁴ Hans Peter Duerr, *Dreamtime: Concerning the Boundary between Wilderness and Civilisation*, trans. by Felicitas Goodman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), p. 87; quoted in Bourns, 'Becoming-Animal in the Icelandic Sagas', p. 645.

⁴⁵ Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, p. 37; Finch, *Saga of the Volsungs*, p. 11.

⁴⁶ Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, 'The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 106:3 (2007), 277-303 (pp. 279-80).

⁴⁷ Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, pp. 38-9, 51; Finch, *Saga of the Volsungs*, p. 19.

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Foot with human torsos and elk/dog legs, Sigurd's incorporeal ability to 'understand the language of birds', and the purely psychological change of Hott becoming braver.⁴⁸ It may therefore be argued that, while still grounded in a physical reality of wearing or ingesting part of an animal, these transformations reflect the adoption of animality in general, including abstract ideas attributed to certain animals (the bravery of dragons, for example). This is a closer fit to Price's understanding of *hamr*, arguing that they 'represented the body's physical form—not just in terms of superficial appearance but as the shell which held all other aspects inside'.⁴⁹

Symbolism of Wolves and Bears

On this note, it is interesting to highlight that Knight has presented *hamr* shapeshifting as more symbolically charged than other forms by relating figures to one specific animal, usually with strong thematic connections, rather than the ability to transform into multiple creatures.⁵⁰ It may therefore be valuable to consider the similarities and differences in the shapeshifting passages of *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* in the context of the specific animal represented. Aðalheiður has highlighted wolves and bears as the two most prominent forms of shapeshifting in Nordic narratives, with werewolf motifs found in fourteen Icelandic texts (including *Völsunga saga*) and man-bears present in eight Icelandic texts (including *Hrólfs saga kraka*).⁵¹ This is particularly interesting as wolves and bears often convey contrasting themes in Old Norse traditions. While wolves carried 'strongly negative associations' as beasts of battle and symbols of outlawry (the term *vargr* used interchangeably to mean wolf or outlaw), bears have been argued by Bourns to symbolise strength and be 'associated with great warriors'.⁵² It is important to note that ideas of animal morality have little to no basis in animal behaviour and are instead purely rooted in human observation. Perceived moral attributes therefore reflect far more on how saga authors present the characters undergoing transformation and the contextual understanding of the audience.

Sigmund and Sinfjotli are presented the most negatively of the shapeshifters in the texts. *Völsunga saga* describes the wolf skins to have been '*óskopum*', translated by Finch as 'curses', which carries strongly negative connotations towards the magical objects themselves or the wolves they represent.⁵³ Additionally, Aðalheiður has argued that Sigmund and Sinfjotli 'become more cruel after the transformation', aligning themselves with evil werewolves found throughout Old Norse tradition.⁵⁴ This violence is certainly supported by the text, the pair killing eighteen people as wolves and Sigmund abruptly biting Sinfjotli's throat.⁵⁵ However, rather than attributing this change purely to the werewolf transformation, shapeshifting into wolves may instead symbolise change Sigmund and Sinfjotli had already undergone by moving into the forest space. Knight has suggested that wolf transformation

⁴⁸ Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, pp. 40, 51; Finch, *Saga of the Volsungs*, p. 19.

⁴⁹ Neil Price, *The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* (Uppsala: Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, 2002), pp. 59-60; quoted in Bourns, 'Becoming-Animal in the Icelandic Sagas', p. 644.

⁵⁰ Gwendolyne Knight, 'Categorizing the Werewolf; or, the Peopleness of Shapeshifters', in *Margins, Monsters, Deviants: Alterities in Old Norse Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rebecca Merkelbach and Gwendolyne Knight (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020), pp. 36-7.

⁵¹ Aðalheiður, 'Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature', pp. 277-8.

⁵² Aðalheiður, 'Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature', p. 282; Bourns, 'Becoming-Animal in the Icelandic Sagas', p. 649.

⁵³ Finch, *Saga of the Volsungs*, pp. 11-2.

⁵⁴ Aðalheiður, 'Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature', p. 301.

⁵⁵ Finch, *Saga of the Volsungs*, p. 11.

'makes symbolically visible the marauding that Sigmundr and Sinfjotli had already been pursuing before they found the pelts'.⁵⁶ Wolves as outlaws and negative figures may therefore be considered central to the symbolism of shapeshifting in *Völsunga saga*: Sigmund and Sinfjotli were already lupine in their existence outside of society in physical location (forest) and legal status (outlawry), and this was solidified by their transformation into literal wolves. The forest may therefore be considered intrinsically linked to ideas of alternate identity and personal transformation in this saga.

In contrast, *Hrólfs saga kraka* presents Bjorn in a more positive role. Unlike Sigmund and Sinfjotli, Bjorn does not seem to have psychological change accompany his shapeshifting. Bjorn is described as 'large and strong' both before and after his bear transformation, and Bera's ability to recognise Bjorn's eyes has been compared to ideas of eyes symbolising 'a portal to the inner essence which remains human, despite the animal exterior'.⁵⁷ It could be argued that Bjorn spends less time in the forest environment than the werewolves (as well as spending shorter periods as an animal in day-night cyclical transformation) and is therefore not as fully absorbed into the alterity of the space.⁵⁸ However, animal symbolism may still be present in Bjorn's broader characterisation, reflecting positive bear symbolism on a heroic figure rather than negative wolf symbolism on outlaw figures. *Hrólfs saga kraka* reasserts this through Bodvar Bjarki, another heroic character with a shapeshifting episode and bear associations. 'Bodvar Bjarki' is frequently interpreted to mean 'little bear'.⁵⁹ Bodvar's shapeshifting is not literal bodily change such as that depicted by Bjorn, the 'great bear' instead seemingly projected into battle while the human form remains 'sitting idle' in the hall, but this still reflects the essential process of leaving one form to inhabit the shape or characteristics of another.⁶⁰ It may even be argued that projection reflects the process of internal change more closely than bodily transformation as it blurs the 'distinction between the psychological and the physical condition'.⁶¹ However, Bodvar is described with animalistic qualities, such as his arms being 'as strong as a bear's', even before his transformation.⁶² Once again, shapeshifting is reflective of, not the cause of, character behaviour.

Representations of Supernatural Behaviour

These notable contrasts in the way *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* depict shapeshifters, both in animality and perceived morality, raises the question of where these figures exist in the relationship between society and nature. Hume has argued that Bodvar Bjarki depicts someone whose supernaturality is 'simply part of his special equipment as a hero'.⁶³ Despite already being described as strong and brave, Bodvar explains that he can 'offer the king far less support than before you woke me'.⁶⁴ This shows an element of Bodvar embracing animal ferocity as a warrior in support of the community, somewhat blurring ideas of shapeshifting transformations in the movement away from domestic spaces (as seen by Sigmund and Sinfjotli's forest outlawry in *Völsunga saga*). However, it may still be argued

⁵⁶ Knight, 'Categorizing the Werewolf', p. 39.

⁵⁷ Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, pp. 36-7; Bourns, 'Becoming-Animal in the Icelandic Sagas', p. 649.

⁵⁸ Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, p. 37.

⁵⁹ T.A. Shippey and Andreas Haarder, eds., *Beowulf: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 525.

⁶⁰ Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, p. 74; Roderick Dale, *The Myths and Realities of the Viking Berserkr* (London: Routledge, 2022), p. 49.

⁶¹ Aðalheiður, 'Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature', p. 282.

⁶² Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, p. 75.

⁶³ Kathryn Hume, 'From Saga to Romance: The Use of Monsters in Old Norse Literature', *Studies in Philology*, 77:1 (1980), 1-25 (p. 14).

⁶⁴ Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, p. 75.

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that characters cannot fully exist in the community while occupying an animalistic supernatural identity. *Hrólfs saga kraka* draws a distinct separation between Bodvar's human form in the 'king's chambers' and his bear form outside on the battlefield, physically separating his identities into two separate spaces, while Sigmund, Sinfjotli, and Bjorn are all pushed out of their homes to live in the forest during or immediately following animal transformation.⁶⁵ Furthermore, Bjorn instructs Bera to bring Elk-Frodi, Thorir, and Bodvar back to the cave space he inhabited as bear if she is 'not able to raise them at home, because of their strange and uncontrollable natures' bound up in hybrid animal existence.⁶⁶ Therefore, while marginal supernatural attributes may have been needed or even desired by the social sphere at times, they were still potentially dangerous and could not be fully incorporated.⁶⁷ Shapeshifters may therefore be interpreted to reflect a human-animal hybridity that, even if it exists in domestic spaces at times, has become inherently linked to the alternate and potentially marginal world of natural spaces.

Liminality and Transgression of the Social Sphere

The figures discussed so far have mostly been depicted leaving society to undergo supernatural experiences in the forest. This has been argued to reflect an inherently transitional nature of supernatural identity as people blur the boundaries of natural and human spaces within themselves. However, what occurs when this is transitional experience is flipped and supernatural transgresses back into the social sphere? To contrast earlier discussions, it may be valuable to study how supernatural encounters are represented outside of natural spaces and whether they inhabit an aspect of otherness because of this.

Transgression and Monstrosity

Clunies Ross has highlighted that shifts between realism and the fantastic in saga literature often occur during 'the intrusion of the world of the supernatural into the everyday'.⁶⁸ Examples of supernatural figures attacking or transgressing into social spaces may be found throughout *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*, such as the hall-attacking monster of *Hrólfs saga kraka* and Odin arriving at the feast in *Völsunga saga*.⁶⁹ In these passages the hall may be interpreted to symbolise the community, though Byock has suggested they may also be read as signs of royal strength or power that the supernatural puts at risk.⁷⁰ In either sense, however, the attacking figure serves to threaten the safety and normality represented by the hall – the monster in *Hrólfs saga kraka* 'causing much damage' for the last two winters, for example.⁷¹ Violence in these passages also raises the idea that by entering the social sphere, supernatural 'intruders appear especially vicious'.⁷² Mayburd has argued that, rather than finding power in the periphery, 'the closer to home the paranormal occurs, the greater its perceived magnitude and terror'.⁷³ It could therefore be argued that the supernatural is more accepted when it occurs in natural spaces, as it has been separated from the community and relegated alongside other marginal figures (such as outlaws),

⁶⁵ Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, pp. 74-5; Finch, *Saga of the Volsungs*, p. 10.

⁶⁶ Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, p. 38.

⁶⁷ Hume, 'From Saga to Romance', p. 14; Orning, 'Magical Reality of the Late Middle Ages', p. 12.

⁶⁸ Clunies Ross, 'Realism and the Fantastic', p. 453.

⁶⁹ Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, p. 50; Finch, *Saga of the Volsungs*, p. 4.

⁷⁰ Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, p. xxv.

⁷¹ Finch, *Saga of the Volsungs*, p. 13; Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, p. 50.

⁷² Anna Katharina Heiniger, 'On the Threshold: The Liminality of Doorways', in *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150-1400*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Miriam Mayburd (Boston: Medieval Institute Publications, 2020), p. 116.

⁷³ Mayburd, 'It Was a Dark and Stormy Night', p. 21.

whereas it becomes far more conspicuous and dangerous when posing a threat to the structure of society.

It may be noted that both sagas contain monstrous, non-human creatures in the form of Fafnir and the unnamed hall-attacking monster. Specifically, Hume has identified *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* as the only two sagas to depict 'towns victimised by dragons'.⁷⁴ *Hrólfs saga kraka* never explicitly uses the term 'dragon' in its description (only ever 'troll' or 'beast'), but the passage mirrors *Völsunga saga* with its heart giving Hott strength and bravery once eaten, much like Sigurd gains the ability to speak with birds, so the two figures seem have similar narrative purposes.⁷⁵ However, the descriptions of the two dragons are very different. On the one hand, Fafnir reflects a seemingly older image of Nordic dragons as wingless and serpentine, which Straubhaar has argued to be 'more primal in its form than a high medieval European winged dragon'.⁷⁶ Fafnir has strong associations with nature in the saga, living in the 'moors' where Sigurd must seek him out, meaning he appears to closely follow narrative structure previously discussed in which supernatural figures move towards and become absorbed in the nature around them.⁷⁷ It may even be argued that Fafnir aligns with the notion of parallel internal and bodily shapeshifting discussed in the second chapter, as his dragon transformation is preceded by his murder of his father to satisfy his greed for gold.⁷⁸ The dragon of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, on the other hand, may be compared to later medieval images of dragons as winged and flying.⁷⁹ Unlike the animalistic Fafnir, it is also specifically defined as a supernatural entity: 'It is not an animal, rather it is the greatest of trolls'.⁸⁰ It may be argued that this contrast is required by the narrative structure of attacking the hall: if supernatural intrusion into society is considered more dangerous, the characters representing this may require a stronger distance from realism and more obvious monstrosity. Hume has argued that while 'uncanny folk cannot ... be safely distinguished from realism', monsters such as dragons are more obviously fictional, and the winged dragon of *Hrólfs saga kraka* may therefore have been adopted from broader European traditions drawn on by *foraldarsögur* to create a more obvious work of literary fiction.⁸¹ However, Straubhaar has noted that in an earlier analogous story from Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*, the hall-attacking threat is posed by 'a plain old bear whose monstrosity is exhibited only in its size', showing that animality can still be used to the same effect in this narrative structure.⁸² To add to this, Sigurd and Bodvar have similar narrative movement as supernaturally-associated figures coming into the community from an external space, but either use their animalistic qualities in the service of the community (in the case of Bodvar) or gain their supernatural from slaying these monsters (in the case of Sigurd).

It may therefore be argued that the supernatural in these sagas exist in a transitional relationship to the social and natural worlds. While the supernatural can occur in the hall in various forms, from the hall-attacking monster to heroes such as Sigurd and Bodvar, neither are fully accepted in this space (as was discussed in the second chapter). Dragons as

⁷⁴ Hume, 'From Saga to Romance', p. 5.

⁷⁵ Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, pp. 50-1; Finch, *Saga of the Volsungs*, p. 19.

⁷⁶ Finch, *Saga of the Volsungs*, pp. 30-1; Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, "'Ok flýgr þat jafnan": Icelandic Figurations of Böðvarr bjarki's Monster', in *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150-1400*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Miriam Mayburd (Boston: Medieval Institute Publications, 2020), p. 195.

⁷⁷ Finch, *Saga of the Volsungs*, p. 30.

⁷⁸ Finch, *Saga of the Volsungs*, p. 26.

⁷⁹ Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, pp. 50-1.

⁸⁰ Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, p. 50; Straubhaar, 'Ok flýgr þat jafnan', p. 195.

⁸¹ Hume, 'From Saga to Romance', pp. 2-3; Tulinus, 'Sagas of Icelandic Prehistory', p. 449

⁸² Straubhaar, 'Ok flýgr þat jafnan', p. 195.

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represented in *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* may simply be reflections of another supernatural motif – like bears and wolves – used in this case to reflect a more dangerous or threatening aspect to the supernatural. Following this, nature once again offers a space in which supernatural identity can exist in a more grounded way, with transgression between the natural and social space highlighting the clearest examples of supernatural alterity in the texts.

Conclusion

In the passages taken from both *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*, the supernatural is consistently grounded in depictions of physicality and space. The saga authors employ multiple techniques, including historical and geographical setting, the use of motif and animal symbolism, and processes of movement between the natural and social spheres, all of which establish a balancing act between more distant supernatural experiences and the sense of realism and familiarity they are depicted with. As seen throughout this dissertation, the clearest examples of relationships between the supernatural and realistic worlds are narratives involving the movement of figures between the natural/animal and social/human spheres. This can be seen depicted both literally in geographical movement or physical transformation and metaphorically through the adoption of animalistic characteristics during or after the accompanying physical movement. Characters involved frequently move outwards from society into the natural periphery, which Mayburd has noted often ‘resulted in reading paranormal as marginal and marginal as paranormal’.⁸³ However, the boundaries between these two notions are often more blurred than a simple adoption of supernatural otherness. The depiction of the supernatural ‘encodes cultural ambiguity and uncertainty’, blurring the boundaries between what is understood to be normal in the respective natural and social spaces.⁸⁴ Rather than reflecting liminality in the sense of something that exists entirely in-between, the supernatural of *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* is most often depicted in a hybrid existence between two spaces (human and animal, realism and fiction, nature and society).⁸⁵ It is the movement of characters between the two spheres that serves to ground the supernatural in ideas of physicality and space, with characters either absorbing the alterity presented by natural spaces and their associations in saga literature or returning to threaten or contrast the established social order of the society they have been rejected from.

⁸³ Mayburd, ‘The Paranormal’, p. 266.

⁸⁴ Clunies Ross, ‘Realism and the Fantastic’, p. 453.

⁸⁵ Heiniger, ‘On the Threshold’, p. 11

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