

# Remembering Heathen Women in Medieval Icelandic Literature

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**ABSTRACT:** Several Icelandic texts from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries depict female characters from the pre-Christian past. In both poetry and prose, these heathen women are often portrayed as recalling the old, pre-Christian religion or the magical practices associated with it. Within this literature, different genres correlate with strata of cultural memory that are associated with different periods in Norse history and pre-history. This link between genre and era is largely independent of the actual dates of composition of the texts or the historicity of the events they describe. An analysis of illustrative examples from this corpus reveals how the evaluation and representation of heathen women depend on how deeply in the past they are situated by the narratives that describe them.

**RÉSUMÉ :** Plusieurs textes islandais des XIII<sup>e</sup> et XIV<sup>e</sup> siècles dépeignent des personnages féminins du passé préchrétien. Dans la poésie comme dans la prose, ces femmes païennes sont souvent dépeintes comme se rappelant l'ancienne religion préchrétienne ou les pratiques magiques qui lui sont associées. Dans cette littérature, les différents genres correspondent à des strates de la mémoire culturelle associées à différentes périodes de l'histoire et de la préhistoire nordiques. Ce lien entre genre et époque est largement indépendant des dates réelles de composition des textes ou de l'historicité des événements qu'ils décrivent. Une analyse d'exemples illustratifs de ce corpus révèle comment l'évaluation et la représentation des femmes païennes dépendent de la profondeur du passé dans lequel elles sont situées par les récits qui les décrivent.

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## Introduction



Medieval Icelandic literature includes a number of female characters who can be considered “remembering heathen women” in a dual sense. First, women are depicted in the act of recalling and transmitting memories of the heathen past or past heathenism. Second, the portrayals of these women in Icelandic texts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries indicate how these female mediators of memory were themselves remembered by a later Christian society. For this audience, the heathen knowledge that women are depicted as retaining would have been perceived as antiquated but also potentially transgressive. As I will argue, the perceived antiquity of the narrative affects how these women are represented: as the time of the events described approaches the medieval Christian present, the women depicted as remembering, transmitting, or deploying old, heathen knowledge are portrayed both more negatively and less frequently.<sup>1</sup>

At issue here is not when or whether a given event may have occurred in a historical sense, nor when a given work was first recorded or “originally” composed. Instead, what matters is when events are *represented* to have occurred. As Jan Assmann emphasizes:

Not the past as such, as it is investigated and reconstructed by archaeologists and historians, counts for the cultural memory, but only the past as it is remembered.  
(113)

Pernille Hermann argues that cultural memory is particularly concerned with managing “historical ruptures,” which she defines as crises or dramatic cultural changes that disrupt efforts to view the present as simply a continuation of the past. According to Hermann, the transmission of a continuous tradition differs from the construction of cultural memory in that the latter has an “ability to deal with ruptures by means of adaptation and selectivity” (2009, 302). This creative process enables people to continue to find meaning in past events “in spite of historical breaks or changed ideological circumstances” (302). For medieval Iceland in particular, Hermann identifies three such historical ruptures: emigration to Iceland in the decades before and after 900 CE; the conversion to Christianity around the turn of the first millennium; and the subjugation of Iceland to Norway in 1262–1264 (302).

In medieval Icelandic literature, different genres express cultural memory associated with different past eras. These genres also reflect different orientations toward the past events they depict. The deepest stratum of this constructed past is that inscribed in eddic poetry. As Brittany Schorn observes:

Eddic poets normally sought to channel the voices of the ancient past, and the effectiveness of their poems rested in part on how successfully they distanced themselves from their immediate audiences.  
(2016, 233)

With regard to prose texts, Margaret Clunies Ross demonstrates that the genres of *fornaldarsögur* [legendary sagas], *Íslendingasögur* [sagas of Icelanders], and *samtíðarsögur* [contemporary sagas] correspond, respectively, to “the prehistoric, legendary past”; the Age of Settlement; and the contemporary present or recent past (1998, 93). Thus, the domain of the *fornaldarsögur* overlaps with that of eddic poetry: both genres describe a mythical / legendary time preceding the first “rupture” of Iceland’s settlement. In contrast, the ostensibly more realistic mode of the *Íslendingasögur* reflects a past that, though still beyond living memory, is more securely rooted in Icelandic “history.” Within the *Íslendingasögur*, Clunies Ross further notes that “the far past before conversion [is represented as] different ... from the period after the Icelanders had accepted Christianity” (1998, 93); that is, this genre spans the second “rupture” and describes events before, during, and shortly after Iceland’s conversion. Finally, the *samtíðarsögur* are concerned with the present or near-past of their thirteenth-century compilers. As such, they express individual and communicative memory, not the cultural memory encoded in the other genres.

In this article, I consider a selection of “remembering heathen women” to assess how their representation evolves as the events depicted draw closer to the medieval present. The focus here is specifically on women for a number of reasons. First, depictions of heathen men are more complex and varied than portrayals of heathen women, and an analysis of “remembering heathen men” would require a more comprehensive treatment than is possible here. For example, some heathen men are depicted as “Noble Heathens” in an Icelandic version of Christian typology (Lönnroth 1969; Grønlie 2017, 119–33). Others, however, are portrayed very negatively, especially if they actively oppose Christianity. In addition, the sagas portray magical practices as “socially acceptable” for women in the heathen period (Price 175). When men engage in some of the same practices, however, these men are considered *argr* [effeminate] and elicit “horrified disgust” (175). A number of scholars have also noted the relative exclusion of women from power and influence after the conversion.<sup>2</sup> In Iceland, Christianity first took hold in what Siân Grønlie calls the “public and legal sphere, perceived as male and secular,” whereas the “domestic sphere [was] perceived as female and the focus of pagan cult” (2006, 298). The men who functioned as memory specialists before the conversion seem to have adjusted readily to the new situation. For example, Agnes Arnórsdóttir has shown that Icelandic lawspeakers played a leading role in committing the old laws to writing, and this group of men soon became experts in the new medium as well as the old (219). Another class of memory specialist,

the court skald, adroitly shifted from praising the victories of heathen chieftains to lauding the Christian accomplishments of kings (Fidjestøl; Clunies Ross 2005, 121). Meanwhile, women seem to have been left behind in the transition. Compared to men, women had far less access to the new literary culture centred in monastic institutions (Mundal 12–13; Sawyer and Sawyer 200). Gro Steinsland notes that women were also “excluded from all cult functions [because] the hierarchically organized professional priesthood of the Church consisted exclusively of men” (129). These factors help to explain the persistent association between women and heathenism throughout medieval Icelandic literature.

Icelandic literature contains many vivid portrayals of heathen women. Space precludes discussing them all, so the analysis here is limited to female characters who are involved with “remembering” in some capacity. First, eddic poetry and fornaldarsögur are examined to assess how female characters associated with the oldest level of cultural memory are represented. Next, a consideration of heathen women in the Íslendingasögur shows how their characterization shifts as the events described come closer in time to Iceland’s formal conversion to Christianity. Incidents connected to the conversion itself demonstrate how these texts respond when the heathen past threatens to intrude on a newly Christian present. Finally, the near-total absence of heathen women from the samtíðarsögur is interpreted in light of the shift from cultural to individual and communicative memory at the time that these texts were committed to writing.

## The Age of Myth and Legend

The *Codex Regius* text of the poetic *Edda* opens with the powerful voice of a woman:

Hjólóðs bið ek allar  
helgar kindir,  
meiri ok minni  
mǫgu Heimdalar;  
vildu at ek, Valfǫðr,  
vel fram telja  
forn spjöll fira,  
þau er fremst um man.  
(*Völuspá*<sup>3</sup> 1)

[I ask a hearing from all hallowed peoples, the greater and lesser of Heimdallr’s sons; you want me, Father of the Slain, fully to recount ancient tales of beings, which I remember from the beginning.<sup>4</sup>]

The speaker is a *vǫlva* [seeress], and her words serve to establish her status, her audience, and the setting. According to John McKinnell, *Völuspá* is likely to have

been composed by a heathen poet between c. 925–965 and c. 1065 (7–9). Although the poem does show signs of Christian influence (9–11), the presence of Óðinn, and the multiple references to heathen cosmology and mythology, clearly situate it in deep, mythic—in other words, heathen—time.

The emphasis on *memory* in the opening of *Vǫluspá* is striking. The *vǫlva* concludes her speech in the first stanza with “man” [[I] remember]. She begins the second stanza with the same formulation, “ek man jotna” [I remember giants], and repeats it in the fifth line, “nú man ek heima” [I remember nine worlds]. This first part of the poem is sometimes viewed as subordinate to the apocalyptic vision that follows: in this interpretation, the opening serves as a preamble in which the *vǫlva* “establishes her credentials” to predict the future by first speaking knowledgeable about the past (Schorn 2017, 99; see also Lönnroth 2002, 14; Jochens 347). However, the distinction between memory and prophecy is unduly limiting here. As John Lindow observes, for the medieval Christian audience, the whole of Norse mythology belonged to “a social world set long in the past, with its own past and future” (41). He further argues that descriptions of future events by mythological figures, including the *vǫlva*’s prophecy in *Vǫluspá*, in effect represent *memories* of those future events (50).

In the first stanza of *Vǫluspá*, the *vǫlva* addresses Valfǫðr (Óðinn), who has evidently requested her performance. Later in the poem, he rewards her richly with rings, necklaces, and other gifts (*Vǫluspá* 29).<sup>5</sup> Thus, the transmission of cultural memory in *Vǫluspá* is mediated by a female figure who passes on her ancient knowledge to a grateful, male querent. The seeress participates in a wider cultural tradition that viewed women situated in the distant, heathen past as sources of wisdom and counsel (Clark and Friðriksdóttir 342–44; Schjødt 2008, 415). Stephen Mitchell notes that this old, heathen knowledge includes the magical arts:

Non-Christian magic is typified by its relation to the supernatural or the old religion [and is connected to] the world of the past, with expressions such as Old Icelandic *fornspjöll* “old lore” and *fornfræði* “old learning.” (45–46)

Such *forn spjöll* is precisely what the seeress in *Vǫluspá* remembers and relates (1.7).

*Vǫluspá* both relies on and contributes to medieval Icelanders’ cultural memory of an ancient time when, as Assmann says, “the distinction between myth and history vanishes” (113). The fact that versions of the poem appear, not only in the *Codex Regius*, but also in *Hauksbók* and in Snorri Sturluson’s prose *Edda*, demonstrates that this poem was in circulation in medieval Iceland.<sup>6</sup> As Lönnroth points out, “the audience had to know its way around the Old Norse mythological cosmos and its cast of characters” to make sense of the text (2002, 11). *Vǫluspá*

therefore draws from a pool of cultural memory shared by its creator, transcribers, and audiences.

That same pool of memory was evidently available to the composer of *Grógaldr*. The earliest surviving texts of this poem are in paper manuscripts of the poetic *Edda* dating to c. 1700 (Ólason, 188–90). *Grógaldr* is generally agreed to have been composed no earlier than the beginning of the thirteenth century (202), and this “neo-eddic” poem is likely to have been composed by a Christian poet making deliberate use of a traditional form (Schorn 2017, 142–47). Despite its relatively late date, however, *Grógaldr*’s eddic meter and list of magical spells clearly situate the poem *for the audience* in the remote heathen past. Like *Völuspá*, it depicts a powerful woman transmitting arcane knowledge to a male recipient. The sorceress Gróa is summoned from the grave by her son, who asks her to grant him magical protection. Her last word to her son—and the poem’s last word to the audience—is an injunction to *remember* what she has said:

Móður orð  
 berr þú, moðgr, heðan  
 ok lát þér í brjósti búa,  
 því nóga heill  
 skaltu of aldr hafa,  
 meðan þú mín orð of mant.  
 (*Grógaldr* 16)

[[Your] mother’s words, son, carry from here, and let them abide in your breast;  
 for you shall have enough luck all your life, as long as you remember my words.]

That *Völuspá* and *Grógaldr* are likely to have been composed centuries apart is irrelevant from the perspective of cultural memory: both represent the same primordial era, a time associated with heathen myth and magic, and both depict women as mediators of ancient knowledge that is sought by male figures.

In the poetic *Edda*, women’s transmission of memory may also be associated with a magically-charged alcoholic drink. As Judy Quinn points out, consuming such a drink is a “metaphorical description of drawing knowledge into the self” (2010, 186). Words and drink are offered together; indeed, the drink “can only be offered by the speaker of the information that needs to be remembered” (186). Two eddic poems provide unambiguous examples of this complex.<sup>7</sup> In *Sigrdrífumál*, the hero Sigurðr awakens the valkyrie Sigrdrífa. In the prose following the third stanza, she “gaf honum minnisveig” [gave him memory-drink]. Schjødt (2008, 294) identifies this memory-drink with the “bjór ... / magni blandinn / ok megintíri” [beer ... compounded with power and great glory] that Sigrdrífa gives the hero shortly afterwards (*Sigrdrífumál* 6.1, 3–4). In the stanzas that follow, she instructs him in runic and gnomic wisdom. The implication is that the function

of the “memory-drink” is to help him retain these teachings. In *Hyndluljóð*, the goddess Freyja asks the giantess Hyndla to give *minnisöl* [memory-ale] to Freyja’s lover Óttarr (45.1). Hyndla has just recounted Óttarr’s lineage, which he needs to claim his paternal inheritance. The purpose of the “memory-ale” is to help him retain this critical information. Hyndla is reluctant to provide the drink, but Freyja appears to prevail: the closing stanza says that “Óttarr skal drekka / dýrar veigar” [shall drink [the] precious liquids] (50.5–6).<sup>8</sup> In *Hyndluljóð*, two female figures together mediate Óttarr’s acquisition of knowledge: by compelling Hyndla to give him the memory-ale, Freyja ensures that Óttarr will assimilate what Hyndla has told him.

The liquor usually called the “mead of poetry” can be interpreted as a third example of a memory-drink. The eddic poem *Hávamál* describes how Óðinn receives the mead from the giantess Gunnlōð: “Gunnlōð mér um gaf / ... / drykk ins dýra mjaðar” [Gunnlōð gave me ... a drink of the precious mead] (105.1, 3). The god refers back to this drink in virtually the same language later in the poem: “ek drykk of gat / ins dýra mjaðar” [I got a drink of the precious mead] (140.4–5). These words are immediately followed by Óðinn’s statement that “þá nam ek frævask / ok fróða vera” [then I began to flourish and to become wise] (141.1–2). The poem then continues with Óðinn’s extended boast about his runic knowledge and spellcraft. Thus, the process of gaining wisdom that begins with Óðinn’s self-sacrifice on the world-tree (138) is not complete until he drinks the mead that Gunnlōð has provided. As Svava Jakobsdóttir observes, the idea that Óðinn manipulates Gunnlōð through seduction or trickery is based solely on Snorri’s account in the prose *Edda*; the notion finds no direct support in eddic poetry (30–33). Admittedly, Gunnlōð does not speak to Óðinn in *Hávamál*. The stanzas are, however, clearly meant to allude to a more complete myth that would have been known to the audience. This would not necessarily have been the version of the story provided by Snorri in his artistic reworking; as Pernille Hermann notes, Snorri “re-created and transformed memories into something else” (2009, 297). It is conceivable that, at the time that these stanzas were composed, cultural memory retained a version of the myth in which Gunnlōð acts as Óðinn’s teacher. Such a scenario would be consistent with Brittany Schorn’s conclusion that “an oral milieu was ... crucial” for the transmission of traditional knowledge in Norse wisdom poetry (2017, 148).

What women give, they can also take, and the drinks they serve can erase memory as well as enhance it. In *Völsunga saga*, Queen Grímhildr, mother of the Gjúkings, twice prepares and deploys such a forgetfulness-drink. First, she gives Sigurðr a drink that causes him to forget his previous commitment to Brynhildr; the result is that he then agrees to marry Grímhildr’s daughter Guðrún. Grímhildr later gives a second forgetfulness-drink to Guðrún after Sigurðr is killed; Grímhildr’s purpose this time is to reconcile Guðrún to her brothers despite their role in her husband’s death.<sup>9</sup> In both cases, the queen advances the interests of

her family by inducing a highly specific form of amnesia. Though these episodes do not involve the same kind of *forn fræði* associated with memory-drinks, they do demonstrate one woman's precise and effective control over human memory.

The events of *Völsunga saga* are still in the realm of myth and legend, but this fornaldarsaga focuses primarily on (supposedly) historical human beings rather than on goddesses and giantesses. We are thus moving closer in time to the "historical rupture" of Iceland's settlement, and Grímhildr manipulates social, rather than numinous, memories. This shift from the godly to the mortal realm is not as momentous as a modern reader might suppose. In a comprehensive semantic analysis, Brittany Schorn demonstrates that the difference between god and man in Norse myth is one of degree rather than kind:

The gods were . . . conceived of as essentially similar to human beings, inhabiting more or less the same space and governed by the same basic conditions of life. Even when belief in their divinity became absolutely disallowed, the rationalization of the gods as fully human allowed them to be preserved in literature as human archetypes.  
(2017, 37)

As Schorn points out, this attitude toward the gods is profoundly different from the Christian view: the God of the Bible "is fundamentally distinct from [humanity] by virtue of His divine nature" (59). Stories and poems that depict the heathen gods as relatively human-like may have survived in part because this concept posed less of a challenge to the divine perfection of the Christian God.

## Settlement and Conversion

As the events described approach more closely in time to the medieval present, the focus continues to narrow from the cosmic to the local. The Íslendingasögur are rich with examples of women who possess arcane knowledge, but this knowledge is now deployed in situations that relate to everyday concerns and relationships. The discussion below focuses specifically on women in these sagas who are described as remembering or teaching heathen magic, or who use it to affect another's memory.

In the early days of Iceland's settlement, the second "historical rupture" of the conversion to Christianity still lies several generations in the future. In sagas set in this early period, *fornfræði*—old, and therefore heathen, knowledge—is not necessarily treated as evil in itself. Instead, a given text's view of a woman who knows, uses, or teaches magic is determined primarily by her role in the story. The narrative possibilities available to the compilers of these sagas would have been determined by cultural memory, which, as Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning observe, establishes the "repertoires of forms" for a literary tradition (273).

Evidently, positive conceptions of heathen, magic-working women were still part of the saga-writer's repertoire in the thirteenth century. An example is Geirríðr, who teaches magic to her neighbour's son Gunnlaugr. The events are described in both *Landnámabók* and *Eyrbyggja saga*. In the former, Gunnlaugr visits Geirríðr "at nema fróðleik" [to obtain knowledge] (S79); in the latter, he "nam kunnáttu at Geirríði Þórólfsdóttir, því at hon var margkunnig" [obtained instruction from Geirríðr Þórólfsdóttir, because she was very knowledgeable] (28). In both narratives, the context makes clear that the "knowledge" that Geirríðr teaches is magical lore. The old woman is presented in a favourable light, especially in contrast to her neighbour and rival Katla, who is ultimately stoned to death for harmful sorcery (*Eyrbyggja saga* 54). Yet, there are hints that the knowledge that Geirríðr possesses and teaches is already starting to become suspect: she is charged at the local assembly with harming her protégé through witchcraft. Geirríðr is fully acquitted, however, and her accusers are dishonoured (29–30). The differing fates of Geirríðr and Katla are unrelated to the essential nature of the knowledge they possess: both are skilled in heathen magic, and *Eyrbyggja saga* implies that Geirríðr's skill is the greater. Rather, the two women are presented as occupying different social roles. As Joyce Tally Lionarons points out, Geirríðr's relationship with Gunnlaugr is the socially acceptable one of mentor to student, whereas Katla's interest in the young man is primarily, and transgressively, sexual (307). Geirríðr is also the sister of the powerful chieftain Arnkell goði, whereas the sources identify no family connections for Katla beyond her childless son Oddr. The most fundamental difference between these two witches is evidently not *what* they know, but *who* they know, and what those relationships imply about their integration into the social fabric. As Gísli Pálsson observes, the whole episode is concerned with "the micro-politics of the community" (163). Within that community, Geirríðr's transmission of heathen knowledge is evidently sanctioned.

Another wise woman in the pre-conversion era, Þórdís *spákona* [prophetess], is portrayed more ambivalently. In *Vatnsdæla saga*, the compiler's sympathies evidently lie with the Vatnsdaler clan, and Þórdís assists one of their allies, a man named Þorkell. In this context, the saga portrays Þórdís in a highly positive light: "hun var forvitra ok framsýn ok var tekin til þess at gera um stórmál" [she was very wise and foresighted and on account of this was engaged to act in major legal cases] (120). In one such lawsuit, Þórdís gives Þorkell precise and detailed instructions about how to magically prevent his opponent Guðmundr from appearing in court against him. Afterwards, Þorkell reverses the spell, again at Þórdís's direction. The charm specifically targets Guðmundr's memory: once the spell is lifted, "tók Guðmundr minnit ok þótti kynligt, at þat hafði frá honum horfit" [Guðmundr got [his] memory back and thought it strange that it had been lost to him] (121). Though she works through a male agent here, it is Þórdís's arcane knowledge that, like Grímhildr's in the *Völsung* legends, makes possible the manipulation of human memory. In contrast, *Kormáks saga* describes the same

Þórdís somewhat negatively. This saga appears to reflect the viewpoint of the eponymous hero: even though Þórdís has helped him on other occasions, Kormákr complains about her magic when she assists his opponent in a duel (290). Even in *Kormáks saga*, however, Þórdís is depicted as an important and capable figure who is involved in the life of her community. Whether Þórdís is viewed positively or negatively in a saga depends on whose side she is on: her knowledge of heathen magic becomes problematic only when she is regarded as an adversary.

As the dates of events described in the *Íslendingasögur* approach the date of the conversion, however, an increasing sense of disquiet with women's role as keepers of old, heathen knowledge becomes evident. In *Eiríks saga rauða*, an incident around the time of the conversion illustrates this tension between the old ways and the new religion. A woman named Þorbjörg is known as *lítill-völva* [little seeress] and is also called a *spákona* [prophetess] (206). She visits a farmstead in Greenland in the middle of a famine and is asked to predict when conditions will improve. To summon the spirits who help her know the future, Þorbjörg needs someone to sing the old chants known as *Varðlokur* (208).<sup>10</sup> Guðríðr, a young woman staying at the farm, admits to knowing the songs but is reluctant to perform them:

Hvárki em ek fjölkunnig né vísindakona, en þó kenndi Halldís, fóstura mín, mér á Íslandi þat kvæði, er hon kallaði Varðlokur. ... Þetta er þat eitt atferli, er ek ætla í engum atbeina at vera, því at ek em kristin kona.  
(207-8)

[I am neither skilled in magic nor a wise woman, but even so, Halldís, my foster-mother, taught me in Iceland the chants that she called *Varðlokur*. ... This is one proceeding in which I intend to be of no help, because I am a Christian woman.]

A generation previously, Guðríðr's foster-mother apparently taught her the old songs in the old way. As a new convert, however, Guðríðr is deeply uncomfortable with this knowledge. She vigorously denies any expertise in pre-Christian magic, asserts her fidelity to her new faith, and is persuaded to sing the heathen songs only at the sharp insistence of her host. There is nonetheless a certain ambiguity in how events play out. The depiction of the heathen *völva* is generally positive: she is treated with deference by the community she visits, she accurately foretells a bright future for Guðríðr and her descendants, and her auspicious prediction that the local famine will soon lift proves true. Nonetheless, the uneasiness voiced by Guðríðr perhaps reflects a similar unease felt by the saga's audience. The Greenlandic setting may have served to create additional psychological distance between the saga-audience and the heathen ritual. As Helga Kress puts it, the rite "has moved from the sphere of acceptance from an Icelandic viewpoint out to the margins" (1990, 291).

*Fóstbræðra saga* reflects a similar ambivalence. The action is set shortly after Iceland's conversion, when "kristni var ung ok vangor" [Christianity was new and imperfect] (161). The saga describes two sorceresses, each named Gríma. The first performs a weather-spell to help her slave leave Iceland. Like Guðríðr in *Eiríks saga*, Gríma was taught the old ways in her youth, before the arrival of Christianity: to work her weather-charm, Gríma "minnisk á þau in fornu kvæði, er hon hafði í barnæsku sinni numit" [recalled to mind the old chants, which she had learned in her childhood] (169). The saga reflects some sympathy for this Gríma, and it gives her the excuse that her knowledge is a holdover from her childhood at a time when people still did not clearly understand the new religion. The second Gríma, like the prophetess in *Eiríks saga*, is located out in Greenland. Compared to her namesake, this Gríma is more heathen in her behaviour but also better informed about Christianity. She possesses a chair carved with an image of Þórr and his hammer, and the saga implies that she still honours the old gods. When challenged on this point, however, she disingenuously replies that she only keeps the chair to remind her that idols can be burned and broken. She then praises the Christian God, "er skapat hefir himin ok jorð ok alla hluti sýniliga ok ósýniliga" [who has made Heaven and earth and all things visible and invisible] (247). As Síân Grønlie points out, Gríma's pious words are ironic: the sorceress lauds God's creation of "invisible" things at the very moment that her own heathen magic has made the saga's protagonist, Þormóðr, invisible to his enemies (2006, 104). At the same time, however, her cynical words serve to remind the saga's audience of God's omnipotence. In a further twist, Þormóðr, who owes his life to Gríma's spell, later becomes a devoted, Christian follower of King (later Saint) Óláfr Haraldsson. Despite the impressive magical skills displayed by the two Grímas, the old religion is evidently on the way out in *Fóstbræðra saga*.

## Christian Iceland

For events set a generation or two after the conversion, the "repertoires of forms" no longer include the possibility of positive depictions of heathen knowledge. *Grettis saga* provides an instructive example. An old woman named Þuríðr is the foster-mother of Grettir's arch-enemy Þorbjörn, and after Þorbjörn's efforts to capture or kill Grettir have failed, Þuríðr brings about his downfall through sorcery. Þuríðr's magical art is represented as dark and dangerous knowledge that, the saga suggests uneasily, should have been forgotten by now:

Þuríðr ... var mjök gømul ok til lítils fær, at því er mōnnum þótti. Hon hafði verit fjōlkunnig mjōk ok margkunnig mjōk, þá er hon var ung ok menn vāru heiðnir; nú þótti sem hon myndi ǫllu týnt hafa. En þó at kristni væri á landinu, þá vāru þó margir gneistar heiðinnar eptir.  
(245)

[Þuríðr ... was very old and could do little, or so it seemed to people. She had been very skilled in magic and greatly knowledgeable about it, when she was young and people were heathen; now it seemed as if she must have lost all that. But, though Christianity had been established in the country, even so there were many heathen embers left.]

As Helga Kress points out, the saga even suggests that, in what can be viewed as a metaphysical battle for Grettir's life, "baráttan stendur milli Krists og kerlingar" [the struggle is between Christ and the old woman] (1996, 196). Þorbjörn is sharply criticized for resorting to witchcraft. The saga says that he has committed a *níðingsverk*, an utterly contemptible act, for accepting his foster-mother's magical aid against Grettir (*Grettis saga* 265). In a Christian world, the old knowledge—fornspjöll, fornfroði—that is remembered and passed on by women is now reviled.

A few narratives bring the old heathen world and the new Christian one into explicit conflict. The usual context is the conversion itself, and the champions of Christianity in these texts are invariably male. Ruth Mazo Karras remarks on this "curious silence" (110). She notes that royal wives and similar figures are effective proponents of Christianity in conversion narratives for most of Europe, yet "there are no women" in thirteenth-century accounts of conversion in Scandinavia (110).<sup>11</sup> Of course, women may indeed have played a historical role in the Christianization of the Nordic world, but what is significant here is that they were not *remembered* as having done so. In the same thirteenth-century accounts that are silent about female proponents of the new faith, women are vividly portrayed as active defenders of the old ways. In *Kristni saga*, for example, a woman named Friðgerðr conducts a heathen ritual while the missionary Þorvaldr is preaching nearby, and the encounter is represented as a kind of shouting match between the representatives of the two religions (9–10). The same saga preserves a version of a poem by Steinunn—a female, heathen skald—that praises Thor's destruction of a missionary's ship and mocks the impotence of the Christian god (24).<sup>12</sup> That both of these incidents are preserved in skaldic verse suggests that the stereotype of female resistance to Christianity may have some basis in reality, but it is also significant that these particular stanzas were selected for preservation and transmission and so reinforced the association of women with heathenism in Icelanders' cultural memory. Though men are also depicted as staunch heathens in sagas that describe the conversion, this portrayal is counterbalanced by numerous descriptions of other men who actively advance the Christian cause. The sagas' representations of women are distinctly one-sided in comparison.

For the present purpose, the most telling example of a conversion narrative that opposes female heathenism to male Christianity is *Sörla þátr*. Like *Hyndluljóð*, this tale gives the goddess Freyja a role in the mediation of memory, but the implicit judgement of the text on her actions is very different. Joseph Harris

identifies *Sörla þáttr* as one of a group of fornaldarsögur that, rather than simply using a past setting as “an excuse to tell about the ancient heroes,” have a more ideological function. These *þættir*, he argues, represent “a symbolic burying of the heathen past by the Christian king” (165). *Sörla þáttr* is preserved only in *Flateyjarbók* in the context of that manuscript’s near-hagiographic treatment of Óláfr Tryggvason, the king credited by Icelanders with bringing Christianity to their country. Indeed, Elizabeth Ashman Rowe suggests that the only point of including heathen deities in the story at all is to magnify the accomplishments of Óláfr and his follower as champions of Christianity (38, 63). Freyja’s role in the *þáttr* is to instigate an “eternal battle” between the sworn brothers Heðinn and Hogni. In her campaign to estrange the sworn brothers from each other, Freyja gives Heðinn a drink that obliterates his memory of his relationship with Hogni:

Svá var Heðinn fanginn í illsku ok óminni af öli því, er hann hafði drukkit, at honum sýndist ekki annat ráð en þetta, ok ekki mundi hann til, at þeir Högni væri fóstbræðr. (376)

[Heðinn was so seized by wickedness and forgetfulness from the ale that he had drunk that no other course seemed right to him [than what she suggested], and he did not remember that he and Högni were sworn brothers.]

Heðinn recovers his memory later, but only after he has committed a series of unforgivable offences against Högni. Battle inevitably ensues. Only after 143 years of endless combat is the spell finally broken by one of Óláfr’s Christian followers.

Like Grímhildr in the *Völsung* legends, Freyja employs the device of a forgetfulness-drink to accomplish her aims in *Sörla þáttr*, but here there are no mitigating factors to explain or excuse its use. In contrast to Grímhildr’s goals of protecting and strengthening her family, Freyja’s only motivation is greed to recover her necklace from Óðinn, whose own motivation appears to be a desire to incite suffering and strife solely for their own sakes. The wholly negative portrayal of Freyja’s manipulation of memory in *Sörla þáttr* is the last stage in the decline in status of the “old knowledge” remembered by women, and it is embedded in a context that deliberately brings two temporal levels into direct confrontation. Though the story begins in the old heathen age, it carries the reader forward to the triumphant dawn of the new Christian era, when the superior power of the Christian God can be unambiguously demonstrated by having His favourites overcome the evil workings of the heathen gods.

## The Medieval Present

Iceland underwent its third historical “rupture” in 1262–1264, when the island became subject to the Norwegian crown. Not coincidentally, this was also the great age of saga-writing. Strengthening a sense of their own past was one way that Icelanders responded to their pending and actual loss of political independence. As Pernille Hermann observes, the production of sagas and genealogies that recorded Iceland’s national and pre-national past acted to “confirm cultural stability and permanence” at this time of social disruption (2010, 75). Jürg Glauser further argues that the retrospective project of compiling the *Íslendingasögur* was in itself a response to the contemporary crisis (211–12).

Coming to terms with the heathenism of their ancestors was part of this effort to construct a past that affirmed Icelanders’ identity. By this time, Christianity was fully entrenched, and witchcraft and heathenism alike were banned by law. The medieval Icelandic legal code *Grágás* is preserved in manuscripts from the middle of the thirteenth century.<sup>13</sup> This law-code explicitly prohibits the worship of heathen deities. Immediately afterwards in the same section, lesser outlawry is specified as the penalty for practicing magic. *Grágás* explains that someone “ferr ... með fiolkyngi. ef hann queðr þat eða kennir. eða lætr queða. at ser eða at fe sinv” [performs ... magic if he speaks it or teaches it or has it spoken over himself or his livestock] (22). The law thus forbids some of the precise activities—reciting spells and teaching them to others—that are ascribed to heathen women in the *Íslendingasögur*. *Grágás* goes on to prescribe full outlawry for *fordæls skap*, black magic that causes illness or death (23). It follows that the earlier prohibition on *fiolkyngi* applies to magic in general, regardless of its intention or effects. That the laws against heathenism and magic are grouped together in *Grágás* suggests that the two concepts remain connected in cultural memory.

Consistent with these legal prohibitions, there is a near-total absence of heathens or witches in the *samtíðasögur*, which reflect contemporary concerns rather than the cultural memory of an ancestral past. Gísli Pálsson analyzes mentions of magic and witchcraft in different saga genres.<sup>14</sup> For the *Íslendingasögur*, he finds 116 references to magical practices (164). For the contemporary *Sturlung* sagas, on the other hand, he finds only two. Sturla Þórðarson’s *Íslendinga saga* contains the only appearance of an unambiguously heathen woman in a contemporary saga.<sup>15</sup> Over the span of a few weeks, a young woman named Jóriðr dreams three times that Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, heroine of the *Völsung* legends, appears to her. In the dream-world, Guðrún is an imposing figure: “Mikill var hestrinn ok svá konan” [great was the horse, and so too the woman] (519). Jóriðr is alarmed by this apparition and asks, “Hví fara heiðnir menn hér?” [why are heathen people coming here?] (521). Guðrún reassures her, tells her the outcome of a recent battle, and foretells the future. Guðrún has

something of the aspect of a *völva* here, but her parting words affirm Christian values:

Nú hefir þetta þrisvar borit fyrir þik, enda verður þrisvar allt forðum. Þat er ok eigi síðr, at góð er guðs þrenning.  
(521)

[Now this has been shown to you three times, and indeed all good things come in threes. It is also no less the case that God's Trinity is good.]

The saga thus uses three devices to insulate the Christian present from this frightening incursion of a heathen woman: Guðrún is a mythical figure from ages long past, she is encountered only in dream, and her words endorse a Christian worldview. She nonetheless remains a powerful figure in cultural memory, and her appearance in the narrative enhances the significance and drama of Jóriðr's dreams.

## Conclusion

In mythological poems set in the distant and mythical past, women and goddesses are represented as powerful keepers and mediators of numinous wisdom. The prophetesses who speak in *Völuspá* and *Grógaldr* transmit arcane knowledge that is eagerly sought by male querents. In *Sigrdrífumál*, *Hyndluljóð*, and perhaps *Hávamál*, supernatural women not only recite knowledge to male beneficiaries, they also provide magical drinks to ensure that the information they speak of will be remembered. The *fornaldarsögur* and the heroic poems of the *Edda* start to approach more closely to the medieval present in terms of setting and scope, and magical drinks now interfere with memory rather than enhancing it. All these poems and tales about the legendary past are represented as occurring before the "historical rupture" of emigration to Iceland.

In contrast, the *Íslendingasögur* lie on the near side of that rupture and portray Iceland's past in apparently realistic terms. In narratives about the early days of Iceland's settlement, women's occult knowledge can still be viewed as respected and respectable: *Eyrbyggja saga* expresses no disapproval of Geirríðr's instruction of a young man in magic, and *Vatnsdæla saga* depicts Þórdís spákona as an esteemed figure in her community. As the second rupture of the conversion approaches, however, the heathen knowledge that women preserve and transmit becomes suspect. Women like Friðgerðr and Steinunn, who actively resist Christianity in the conversion narratives, are depicted as enemies of the true faith. In *Eiríks saga rauða*, Guðríðr as a recent convert is careful to distance herself from the heathen past. In *Fóstbræðra saga*, the magic of the two Grímas is still potent but is overshadowed by the ascendance of Christianity. Once the new faith

has fully taken root, women who remember the old ways, like Þuríðr in *Grettis saga*, are degraded to evil witches, and the same fate befalls the goddess Freyja in *Sörla þáttr*.

By the time of the recent events recorded in the *samtíðarsögur*, heathen women and witches have virtually disappeared from the written accounts. Such women now exist only in cultural memory. Ironically, however, the very preservation and transmission of eddic poetry and Icelandic sagas acted to keep the memory of *fornfræði*—the old learning—alive. It seems that, as long as this material was sequestered in the distant past at a safe psychological distance from the audience, stories of generous women passing on their knowledge to specially favoured men could be remembered and enjoyed. As is literally the case in *Grógaldr* and *Íslendinga saga*, however, the voices of heathen women are—or at least ought to be—the voices of the dead.

#### NOTES

1. A preliminary version of this paper, “Remembering Heathen Women: Female Keepers of Memory in Medieval Icelandic Literature,” was presented by the author at the 2018 Leeds International Medieval Congress. The author acknowledges financial support from Allegheny College to attend the conference and also thanks the anonymous reviewers of this essay for comments leading to significant improvements.
2. In addition to the works cited in the discussion above, see also Glauser 208–9; Kress 1990; 1996, 194–202.
3. Citations of *Völuspá* in this paper refer to the *Codex Regius* text of the poem.
4. All translations in this work are mine.
5. Judy Quinn observes that the usual emendation of *fe* to *fecc* in the *Codex Regius* text is unnecessary. Restoring it serves to emphasize how generously Óðinn rewards the *völva*: instead of giving her rings and necklaces in exchange for receiving *spjöll spaklig* [gentle speech] and a *spá ganda* [prophecy-wand] from the seeress, he gives her all of these and *fé* [wealth] as well (2002, 272).
6. The *Codex Regius* and Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda* are both ascribed to the thirteenth century; *Hauksbók* dates to the fourteenth century (Clunies Ross 2016, 22, 26, 30).
7. An additional instance of a memory-enhancing drink appears in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, where, under compulsion from the hero, a (male) dwarf uses a *minnisveig* [memory-drink] as part of a counter-spell that restores the memory of a woman whom the dwarf has previously bewitched into a zombie-like state (230). Hans-Peter Naumann notes that this late *fornaldarsaga* contains “material of oriental origin” and other “borrowings” from foreign literary traditions (254). The only characteristic this tale shares with the other texts discussed here is the memory-drink itself, which is presented as just another tool in the dwarf’s bag of magical tricks. As Schjødtd says: “every myth does not need to have the whole repertoire” of elements that constitute it (2008, 438), but in this case the memory-drink appears to have wandered far afield from the “semantic centre” (Schjødtd 2016, 138) established by the eddic poems.

8. I am not persuaded by Quinn's argument that Hyndla refuses to provide the memory-ale and that Freyja therefore provides an alternative "concoction" (2010, 188)—if Freyja already has access to such a drink, why does she press Hyndla so hard for the memory-ale?
9. The eddic poem *Guðrúnarkviða II* also describes the drink of forgetfulness that Grímhildr gives to Guðrún.
10. For discussion of this obscure term and its variant form *Varðlokkur*, see Gunnell 683.
11. A possible exception is Eiríkr the Red's wife Þjóðhildr, who builds a church in Greenland. She is, however, following the lead of a man, her son Leifr. In typical fashion for conversion narratives, she refuses to live with her heathen husband after she converts. Less typically, though, her action neither inspires him to embrace Christianity nor provokes him to make a martyr of her: it merely "honum var ... mjök móti skapi" [was very much against his inclination] (*Eiríks saga rauða* 212).
12. For discussion of the variant texts of this poem and their mediating prose contexts, see Grønlie 2004, 46–66; 2006, 293–94; Sheffield 80–85.
13. The two principal manuscripts of *Grágás* are dated to c. 1260 (*Codex Regius*) and c. 1280 (*Staðarhólsbók*), respectively (Dennis, Foote, and Perkins 13). The discussion of *Grágás* above is based on the *Codex Regius* text.
14. Specifically, Pálsson tallies occurrences of "fjölkyngi, seiður, galdur, margkunnindi," and their respective "related concepts" (164).
15. Sturla completed *Íslendinga saga* within two decades after Iceland's subjection to Norway. This work forms a substantial part of the *Sturlunga saga* compilation of samtíðarsögur and describes events that occurred between 1183 and c. 1264, i.e., during Sturla's and his parents' lifetimes (Hallberg 617).

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