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Shapeshifting in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature²

Cambiante en la literatura nórdico-islandesa antigua

Abstract:

This article aims to cast a light upon the colorful yet largely unknown shape-changing motifs found in Old Norse-Icelandic literature as well as in related literary works conceived from Classical times until the middle of the 16th century. This essay analyzes the different sub-types of supernatural transformations and which kinds of texts they most commonly appear in and will posit as to their potential origins, genesis, and development within the context of Medieval Norse-Icelandic literature.

Keywords:

Norse; Shapeshifting; Magic.

Resumen:

El objetivo de este artículo es arrojar luz sobre las variadas y aún desconocidas figuras “cambiaformas” o “cambiantes” que se encuentran en la literatura nórdico-islandesa antigua, así como en obras literarias relacionadas, concebidas desde la Época Clásica hasta mediados del Siglo XVI. Este ensayo analiza los diferentes subtipos de transformaciones sobrenaturales y en qué tipo de textos aparecen comúnmente, así como plantea sus posibles orígenes, génesis y desarrollo en el contexto de la literatura medieval nórdico-islandesa.³

Palabras-clave:

Nórdico; Cambiante; Magia.

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1. Introduction

In the past couple of years, the study of magic and supernatural elements in Viking and Medieval Scandinavia seems to have blossomed. All the while numerous key-studies were published within academia, the image of the pagan Viking made new inroads in popular culture. During this period, modern medias such as History-Channel series *Vikings* (2013-), Bethesda's top-tier video-game *Skyrim* (2011) or Dreamworks' movie franchise *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010-) all reached mainstream recognition due in no small-part to their interpretation of Norse supernatural motifs. At the same time in academia, influential works on the subject such as Francois-Xavier Dillman's *Les magiciens dans l'Islande ancienne* (2006), Clive Tolley's *Shamanism in Norse myth and magic* (2009) or Stephen Mitchell's *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages* (2011) cast a new, highly analytical light on the subject of magic and the supernatural in the Viking Age. The present paper aims to follow step by focusing on a much more specific aspect of magic and sorcery in the Norse Middle Ages, namely the way shapeshifting is depicted in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. For the purpose of this article, Norse-Icelandic literature will be defined as referring to the literary corpus of Medieval Scandinavia. In addition, supplemental sources not originating from Scandinavia might be brought up as well in order to strengthen the understanding of specific Norse-Icelandic motifs. Finally, while the main focus of this paper will be put on narratives that revolve or feature individuals affected or engaging in shape-shifting, other peripheral motifs such as the relation between specific populations and various animals will also be brought to help further explain possible interpretations of shape-shifting motifs in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. It should be noted, however, that sentient animals like the magical ox Harri in *Laxdæla saga* and supernatural humanoids born of sorcery like Ögmundr in *Örvar-Odds saga* will not be discussed in the present article as it is believed that such figures fall outside its scope. This article will be constructed as to begin with an analysis of the different terms used in the corpus to describe shapeshifting before presenting the three main narrative sub-categories that feature such elements. However, before looking at actual shape-shifting narratives, one needs to focus one's attention on the vocabulary surrounding this motif and how it might affect the depiction and understanding of said motif.

2. The Language of Transmutation

Out of the numerous terms associated with shape-shifting in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, the most common one must be *hamr*, a rather obscure and multi-faceted concept that needs to be presented and explained before going further. On a practical level, the word *hamr* has been defined by Finnicist Clive Tolley as referring to the pelt of an animal or a bird (Tolley, 2009: I, 193). However, it differs from the word *serker* ("animal pelt") in that it is most common used to

describe much more than a simple animal skin. As shown by Icelandic scholar Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, there are numerous instances where the word *hamr* refers not strictly to such pelts but also to the shape, the appearance and form of someone who is able to change shape (Guðmundsdóttir, 2007: 280). Within the Norse-Icelandic corpus, the word is found both in narratives set in historical, legendary, mythical and even fictional times, ranging from 10th-century skaldic poetry to late-Medieval *rímur* poems. In these tales, the *hamr* is most-often described as a physical garment that can be worn and removed and which in and of itself can be a cause for transformation. A good example of the physicality of the *hamr* can be found in the prose introduction of the Eddic poem *Völundarkviða* in which human-looking women are in possession of swan-pelts (*álptarhamir*) and later leave the narrative's protagonists by flying in the air (*Völundarkviða*, 2014: 428).⁴ This narrative is, as will be demonstrated later on, only one of many in which saga characters assume the appearance of an animal or a monster by donning a supernatural pelt.

However, while *hamr* as a substantive may thus refer to either a pelt, shape or appearance, several adjectives based on this word exist that contrast the meaning of their base-word. The most common of these are *hamrammr* (“one that is *hamr*-strong”) and *eigi-einhamr* (“one that doesn't have a single *hamr*”) and are, interestingly enough, only found in sagas set in decidedly historical times such as the *Íslendingasögur*, *Íslendingaþættir*, *Landnámabók* and in the *Sturlunga saga*. While these two terms are clearly related to the word *hamr* and the concepts of skin, shape and appearance, they are never used to refer to actual shape-shifters. Instead, as shown by Swedish historian of religion Dag Strömbäck in 1935, the concept of *hamrammr* in the literature is chiefly tied to characters' supernatural and magical powers (“[den här benämning] tillades trollkunniga eller med särskilda, övernaturliga gåvor utrustade personer” Strömbäck, 1935: 162). Clive Tolley, analyzing the related concepts of *hamslaus* (“devoid of *hamr*”) and *hamstolinn* (“deprived/ robbed of *hamr*”) has himself linked *hamr* with concepts of mental health, moods and varied psychological states (Tolley, 2009: I, 195).⁵ Finally, according to Nordan Nifl Heim, the *hamrammr/ eigi-einhamr* epithet is often used to refer to anti-social, and outcast individuals such as *berserkr* (Heim, 2005: 88).⁶ All in all, while the concept of *hamr* could appear as somewhat eclectic, beyond the strict definition of *hamr* as a pelt or skin, the lack, alteration or substitution thereof seems to denote psychological or even physical instability.⁷ One could thus advance that Medieval saga-writers and

⁴ The physicality of the concept of *hamr* is also evident in the related-term *hambleypa* (“*hamr*-leaper”) which has been interpreted as an umbrella-term for all types of supernatural transformation (Raudvere, 2002: 102-106) as well as linked to Sámi supernatural motifs (Heide, 2006: 89).

⁵ The concept of *hamrammr* individuals who seem to be affected by some type of aversive mental state such as Kveldúlfr Bjálfason (*Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, 1933: 4) is briefly hinted at by Guðmundsdóttir (2007: 282)

⁶ On the idea of the berserkr as a shape-changer, see Guðmundsdóttir, 2007: 280-282. and Davidson, 1986: 148-151.

⁷ A somewhat similar idea is expressed (if in much milder and imaged form) in the English-language-expression “to be comfortable in (one's) own skin.”

compilers might have made similar associations and understood, at least in some cases, the idea of skin-changing as being intrinsically linked to one's mental and magical state. However, while the complex concept of *hamr* is used in numerous narratives to describe physical transformations, it is far from being the only one used in such a context.

If *hamr*-type shape-shifting narratives seem to be stemming from the symbolism and/ or practice of covering oneself with, or changing one's pelt, a great many tales do not refer to the shape-shifter's change of skin. Instead, one can find instances where the shape-changer only alters its appearance (*líki*) without needing to change one's skin or clothe itself in a pelt. Another, even less-descriptive way to refer to supernatural transformation is *vera/ verða á*. The terms *vera/ verða á/ at* ("to be/ become") neither mentions nor hints at the existence of a physical medium of transformation such as a skin or pelt. Instead, *vera/ verða*-type transformations, just like their *líki*-type counterparts appear to be the result of spells or other supernatural abilities. A good example of such a narrative can be found in the 14th-century (*Norrøne Fornaldersoger*, 2006-2010: IV, 156) *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinssonar* in which the story's titular villain, king Hárekr, simply "becomes" a flying dragon during a battle ("Þá varð Hárekr at flugdreka" *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinssonar*, 1954: 277) without any indications that such a physical change was the result of any specific action. However, if at the outset there is a clear difference between these three main transformation-terms, they seem, for the most-part, to describe fairly-similar processes: namely a purely-physical transformation, may it be temporary, by the removal of a physical *hamr*-pelt or the casting of a counter-spell, or permanent. However, it is clear that, taking into consideration the numerous by-words stemming from it, the concept of *hamr* is likely the oldest of the group.⁸ Yet, Medieval Norse authors did not always make strict distinctions between them as exemplified by a passage in the Eddic *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* where *Fránmarr jarl hafði hamr í arnar líki* ("Fránmarr jarl had changed-hamr into an eagle's likeness" *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, 2014: 260).⁹ Finally, one must also mention narratives in which characters are not said to physically change at all but instead project their spirit or life-form into the shape of an animal. However, as the majority of such narratives focus on one single animal, namely the whale, this motif will thus not be dealt with immediately. Instead, now that the various terms and definitions related to Old Norse-Icelandic shape-shifting have been successfully presented and defined, it is now possible to analyze the main groups of supernatural transformation grouped by the type of narrative they most-commonly appear in, namely, mythic-heroical, far-northern and chivalric transformation motifs.

⁸ The German philologist Jan De Vries has found words and concepts related to *hamr* in numerous other European languages for instance (De Vries, 1962: 208).

⁹ All translations mine except otherwise noted.

3. Mythic-Heroical Transformation

Tales of supernatural transformations set in mythic and/ or heroical times arguably feature the oldest shape-shifting motifs found in Old Norse-Icelandic literature.¹⁰ From skaldic poems dated to the late-Viking age to 13th-century mythological compilations of the likes of Snorri Sturluson and Saxo Grammaticus, one can find both pagan gods, mythical heroes and giants engaging or being subjected to the practice. The chief shape-changer of Old Norse Myth is, unsurprisingly enough, Óðinn. As described by the 13th-century Icelandic writer-poet Snorri Sturluson, Óðinn was believed to master a vast array of magical powers, among which shape-shifting, which is described in some details in the mythic-heroical *Heimskringla*:

“Óðinn skipti hömum; lá þá búkrinn sem sofinn eða dauðr, en hann var þá fugl eða dýr, fiskr eða ormr, ok fór á einni svipstund á fjarlæg lönd, at sínum ørendum eða annarra manna [Óðinn changed shapes [hamr]; left then the body as if sleeping or dead, but he was then a bird, or an animal or a snake, and travelled, in one moment, to far-off lands, in his own errands or someone else’s]” *Heimskringla*, 1941-1951: I, 18).

Heimskringla, which was likely written down in the early 13th-century (*Heimskringla*, 1941-1951: I, XXIX) is not the only source describing Óðinn’s shape-shifting capacities. In the *Skáldskaparmál* section of his *Prose Edda*, Snorri Sturluson goes further and tell the tale of the theft of *Óðroerir*, the mead of poetry. There, Óðinn is said to turn into a snake and then an eagle in order to steal the magical mead from the giant Suttungr (*Skáldskaparmál*, 1998: 4-5). A second god strongly associated with shape-changing in the literature is Loki. In the *Prose Edda*, Loki is described as turning into a (female, no least) horse (*Gylfaginning*, 2005: 35), a seal (*Skáldskaparmál*, 1998: 19), a salmon (*Gylfaginning*, 2005: 48) and, by borrowing Frigg’s falcon-cloak (*valshamr*), a falcon (*Gylfaginning*, 2005: 2, 24).¹¹ Loki is also described as being able to turn into a fly in the *Sörla þáttr* chapter of the early 14th-century (*Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, 1958-2001: III, V) *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* (*Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*, 1860-1868: I, 276).¹²

If Óðinn and Loki are the most prolific shape-changing gods in the literature, the god Heimdallr is also said to assume the shape of a seal in *Skáldskaparmál* in order to battle Loki (*Skáldskaparmál*, 1998: 19). The goddess Frigg, Óðinn’s consort

¹⁰ On the subject of the age of the Eddic poems and their narratives, see Gunnell, 2005: 93-59.

¹¹ A similar account regarding Freyja’s cloak is also found in the Eddic poem *Drymskviða* (*Drymskviða*, 2014: 422, st. 3)

¹² It should also be noted that Narfi, Loki’s son is said to have been unwillingly turned into a wolf by the Æsir followings his father’s betrayal (*Gylfaginning*, 2005: 49).

is also said to be able to shift into a crow's *hamr* ("krákuham" *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 1965: 3). However, while gods are the main protagonist and focus of Old Norse-Icelandic mythological prose and poetic texts, these documents nevertheless feature other mythical characters, some of which are also said to engage in shape-shifting. As mentioned earlier, Óðinn is said to have turned into a snake and then a bird in order to steal the mead of poetry from the giant Suttungr. In the *Skáldskaparmál* retelling of the story, Suttungr does not idly let the god get away for his theft, and turns himself into a bird before reaching for the skies to follow Óðinn all the way into Ásgarðr (*Skáldskaparmál*, 1998: 4-5). Other giants are also described as being able to turn into birds such as Þjazi in the 10th-century (*Haustlong*, 1967-1973: I A, 16) skaldic poem *Haustlong*, in which he is said to have ravished the peaceful goddess Iðunn in the *hamr* of an eagle ("gemplisham" *Haustlong*, 1967-1973: I A, 16, st. 2) or Hræsvelgr, who creates all the winds in the world while in the *hamr* of an eagle ("jötunn í arnar ham" *Vafþrúðnismál*, 2014: 362, st. 37). One also need to mention the women from *Völundarkviða* taken up earlier who turn into swans with the help of their *hamr*. Finally, Norse-Icelandic mythic-heroical material also feature a few mere mortals that can seemingly change shape in a manner similar to their supernatural counterparts described above. The heroes Sinfjötli and Sigmundr, who belong to the *Völsung* family and are said to be descended from Óðinn are said to have turned into wolves after donning magical *hamir* (*The Saga of the Volsungs*, 1965: 11-12; *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, 2014: 255, st. 41). Another wolf-transformation is also attributed to the unnamed mother of their enemy King Siggeir (*The Saga of the Volsungs*, 1965: 7).¹³

A significant portion of these rather diverse mythic-heroical supernatural transformations mentioned so far revolve around the concept of *hamr* which, as explained at the beginning of this article, is a rather versatile concept. In some cases, this *hamr* is clearly some sort of a physical pelt as in *Þrymskviða*, where we hear of a *fiadrhamr* (feather-*hamr*) ("Muntu mér, Frøyja, fiadrhams líá" *Þrymskviða*, 2014: 422, st. 3) or *Völsunga saga* where the *úlfbamir* ("wolf-pelts") are items which are found and used by the saga heroes Sinfjötli and Sigmundr (*The Saga of the Volsungs*, 1965: 11-12). In most cases, however, the heroic-mythological texts don't seem to interpret the *hamr* as something physical as exemplified by the tale of Þjazi in *Skáldskaparmál* ("þá kemr þar Þjazi jötunn í arnarham [then came there Þjazi the giant in an eagle-*hamr*" *Skáldskaparmál*, 1998: 2) thus possibly showing that the idea of supernatural metamorphosis was seen from the earliest time as a multifaceted process which could occur both through the help of a physical medium and with the help of sorcery or maybe innate magical abilities. In addition, one can note that almost all cases of mythic-heroical transformations are presented as rather functional actions or reactions and are often intricately woven in the narrative they are featured in. In *Völsunga saga*, for example, Sinfjötli and Sigmundr's

¹³ Numerous other *hamr*-related term especially revolving around the lexical field of wolves also do exist, despite most-often not referring to actual shape-changing (see Guðmundsdóttir, 2007: 280)

transformations are presented as obstacles to overcome while in *Sörla þáttr*, the issue of how to obtain Freyja's necklace is resolved by Loki's shape-changing. In addition, such transformations are only rarely associated with martial or physical-conflictual situations such as battles or brawls with one the tales of Loki and Heimdallr fighting in the shape of seals or those depicting opposition between the gods and the giants (Óðinn versus Suttungr, the kidnaping of Iðunn by Þjazi) qualifying for such a category. Finally, it must be noted that only a handful of the narratives discussed so far depict non-consensual transformations or metamorphosis being cast upon someone as opposed to being self-imposed. These two later ideas of the transformation as a curse or as an occurrence associated with conflicts and battle will, however, be dealt with later on as they happen to be much more common in other sub-categories of narratives. Still, when it comes to mythic-heroical metamorphoses, they most-often are depicted as a mostly beneficiary and utilitarian ability or supernatural power. Such magical powers, best exemplified by Óðinn's and Loki's have been compared and to an extent, linked with historical records of shamanistic practices members of the Sámi people of Northern Fenno-Scandinavia (an area henceforth referred to as "the far-north") have been known to engage in (Stömbäck, 1935: 161; Laidoner, 2009). It is indeed correct to point out that the Sámis, together with other inhabitants of the far-north are featured in a significant number of narratives involving supernatural events and animal transformation in particular. These narratives can thus be said to form the second group of supernatural transformations motifs in Old -Norse-Icelandic literature which shall be dealt with shortly.

4. Far-Northern Metamorphoses

One of the most detailed, and famous, account of pagan sorcery in Medieval Norse-Icelandic must be that of the Sámi magician described in the late-12th/ early 13th-century (*A History of Norway*, 2001: XVI) *Historia Norvegiae*. In this Latin historical and geographical treatise of the Norwegian kingdom, one passage in particular, told as an anecdote, reveal that two Sámi magicians once performed a magic ritual in order to retrieve the soul of a Norwegian woman they believed had been hexed by the *gandus* (magical energy) of a maleficent sorcerer. In order to save the woman, one the of the Sámi magician lies on the ground, under a cloth to perform a spell in which he sends his own *gandus* in the shape of a whale (*A History of Norway*, 2001: 6-7). It has been theorized by modern scholars such as Clive Tolley that this account, or another similar instance of Sámi magic might have inspired the depiction of Óðinn's shape-shifting powers in *Heimskringla* (Tolley, 1996). One major difference between mythological transformations and their counterparts set in Sámi, Finnic or far-northern areas, however, is the type of creatures shape-shifters are turning into. If a significant part of the mythic-heroical tales of shape-shifting concern bird and wolf transformations, their Sámi, Finnic and far-northern counterparts tend to instead mostly feature whale, bear and deer-transformations.

As exemplified by the *Historia Norvegiæ* account, tales of whale-transformations can often be linked either to the far-northern corner of Fenno-Scandinavia or to their inhabitants. Within the Norse-Icelandic corpus, there are a total of 10 accounts (including that found in *Historia Norvegiæ*) of whale-transformations. Some of those seem to follow the model displayed in *Heimskringla/ Historia Norvegiæ* in which the magician projects his spirit in the form of an animal while others see the warlock physically turning into a *cetacean*. Of these 10 accounts, six can be linked to either Sámi-Finnic perpetrator or to their homelands. In *Ketils saga Hængs*, a *Fornaldarsaga* from the early 13th-century (Torfi H. Tulinius, 2005: 452), the hero Ketill meets no less than two individuals in the Sámi district of Finnmörk (one Sámi and one troll) who turn into whales. In *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinssonar*, another Sámi turns into a whale to fight the saga hero (*Hálfðanar saga Eysteinssonar*, 1954: 276). In addition to these four accounts, three more (*Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, 1954: 65; *Sigurðar saga þogla*, 1963: 171 and *Göngu-Hrólf's saga*, 1954: 238) take place in either *Austrvegr* (the eastern Baltic) or *Garðaríki* (Russia), areas occupied by Finnic peoples from the beginning of the Iron Age. The last three accounts, found in *Heimskringla* (*Heimskringla*, 1941-1951: I, 271) *Kormáks saga* (*Kormáks saga*, 1939: 265) and *Hjalmpérs saga ok Ölvis* (*Hjalmpérs saga ok Ölvis*, 1954: 231) feature, respectively, a shapeshifter of unknown origin, an Icelander and an Arab. Yet, these accounts are very similar to those far-northern ones mentioned above. In *Kormáks saga* for example, the sorceress Þorveig turns into a whale but retain a single human feature, namely her eyes. This same exact detail also happens to be found in *Ketils saga Hængs* where this time it is a Sámi magician who retains his distinctly human eyes while in a whale form. Finally, while it is true that most whale shape-changers are not said to be Sámi, it has been argued that this very concept was, in origin Sámi. Clive Tolley, for example, advanced that the whale shape-shifter mentioned in *Heimskringla*, while never actually described in details, could be understood to have been seen as Sámi (Tolley, 2009: 197).¹⁴ To further the connection between Northern Fenno-Scandinavia and supernatural whale magic, one could also mention a passage of the 11th-century (Adam of Bremen, 1959: XXVII-XXXII) *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen* written by the German cleric Adam of Bremen. In this passage where Adam describes the inhabitants of Northern-Norway, he mentions that some are able to summon gigantic sea-animals (that could be understood as being whales) by means of magic:

“All indeed, who live in Norway are thoroughly Christian, except those, it is said, who are removed beyond the Arctic tract along the ocean. These people, it is said, are to this day so superior in the magic arts or incantations that they profess to know what every one is doing the world over. Then they also draw great sea monsters to shore with a powerful mumbling of words and do so much else of which one reads in the

¹⁴ If the link between Norse-Icelandic transformation motifs and Sámi ones will be discussed further down in this article, other cross-cultural comparisons such as Celtic-Norse ones have also been made as of late (see for example With Pedersen, 2015).

Scriptures about magicians. All this is easy for them through practice”
 (Adam of Bremen, 1959: 212).

Even not taking into consideration these numerous narratives associating the far-north, whales and sorcery, there exist numerous sources that underline the importance of whale hunting in this area in pre-modern times. The 9th-century (Orosius, 2007: 21) *Old English Orosius* is for example known to include a description of Northern-Norway based on the meeting of the local chieftain Ohthere and the English king Alfred. It is notable that large swaths of this otherwise rather short text are dedicated to the description of whale hunting by locals, Sámis and Norwegians alike (Orosius, 2007: 44-47). Similarly, the early 14th (Shafer, 2010: 229) saga *Gríms saga löðinkinna*, which stars none else than Ketill *hængr*'s son, Grímr, starts with a description of a fierce fight between Grímr and nondescript enemies for the securing of the carcass of a beached whale (*Gríms saga löðinkinna*, 1954: 190-191). Could it thus be that, in the light of the importance of whale-hunting in the far-north, myths and tales of “were-whalery” might have organically developed in the area, then were passed on further south through oral culture before being written down? Such an hypothesis of a link between practices of animal hunt and supernatural tales surrounding said animal could then also be used to explain other narratives of supernatural far-northern transformations, such as that of the bear.

In pre-modern literature, one can find quite a few texts in which bears, either brown (*birnir*) or white (*hvíta-birnir*) are said to be found across Scandinavia, with a significant amount of them locating these beasts specifically in the far-north.¹⁵ In addition to these rather succinct mention of bear-hunting practices, one can find a couple more accounts in which hunting, killing and finally taking care of the carcass of the bear is described in much more complex, almost ritualized ways. The most-detailed of these narratives are beyond the shadow of a doubt, those found in *Grettis saga Ásmundsonar* (*Grettis saga Ásmundsonar*, 1939: 74), *Finnboga Finnboga saga ramma* (*Finnboga saga ramma*, 1959: 275-281), *Örvar-Odds saga* (*Örvar-Odds saga*, 1954: 221-222), and *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonnar in mesta* (*Ólafs saga Tryggvasonnar en mesta*, 1958-2001: I, 41-45). In *Finnboga saga*, the Icelander Finnbogji, while visiting *Hálogaland*, hunts a bear in the most peculiar ways: He walks towards the bear's cave backwards, then, upon meeting the bear, starts talking to it as if it were human, before casting his weapons aside and killing the bear bare-handed. After returning to the village, the bear is then paraded before being flayed. In *Örvar-Odds saga* and the passage in *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonnar in mesta* we find individuals killing bears before rising the animals

¹⁵ In total, there are twelve tales of bear hunt set in Fenno-Scandinavia in pre-Modern literature. Of these twelve tales, three are set in either southern Norway or Sweden (*Landnámabók* 1968: I, 116: S 80; Nansen, 1911: 208-209 and Olaus Magnus, 1996: I, 212), three in Norse Greenland (Ivar Bardsen, 1873: 44; *Króka-Refs saga*, 1959: 133-135 and *Víga-Glums saga*, 1956: 13-14) while six, half all of these narratives that is, take place in Northern Fenno-Scandinavia (Orosius, 2007: 44-47; Querini, 1908: 906; Krantz, 1546: 590; Ziegler, 1878: 12; Münster, 1575: 1718 and *Ólafs saga Helga*, 1849: 79). This last account is also found in *Heimskringla*, 1941-1951: II, 285; and *Ólafs saga hins helga*, 1860-1868: II, 356-357).

on poles, a practice that one could link to the pagan Finnish tradition of binding bear-skulls unto trees (Pentikäinen, 2007: 93). Such narratives of ritualized animal-killing are uniquely associated with bears in Old Norse-Icelandic literature and often localized in the far-north or connected to individuals hailing from this area such as in *Grettis saga*, *Finnboga saga* and *Örvar-Odds saga*, tales that all take place in Northern-Norway. This motif of a ritual bear hunt can also be shown to be directly related to bear-transformations in the case of *Hrólfs Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans*: In this Icelandic saga most-likely stemming from the 14th-century (Haggerty, 2014: 9-10) we are faced with a Sámi witch who turns her son in a law Björn, a Norwegian prince from Uppland, into a bear by hitting him with a glove made of bear-skin before sending a hunting party after him (*Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans*, 1954: 44-51). Just like in *Finnboga saga*, the remains of the bear are then taken to the village where his flesh is served to his pregnant wife, who soon after, because of ingesting the meat, gives birth to three deformed children: Elg-Fróði who is half-moose, Þórir who is endowed with dog feet and the seemingly-normal Boðvar who is later revealed to possess bear shape-shifting abilities. This rather colorful and unique tale which brings together concepts of shape-shifting, culinary taboo (something that will be dealt with shortly), bear hunt and far-northern areas has the peculiarity to be likely linked (Tolley, 2007: 17; Pentikäinen, 2007: 52) with an indigenous Sámi folk tale recorded in Swedish Lapland in the 18th-century in which a Sámi woman becomes the lover of a bear who is later killed by a hunting party sent from the woman's settlement (Fjellström, 1981: 13-15). Even if establishing clear connections between Sámi-Finnic ideas about bears' sacredness and likeness with humans and Medieval Norse-Icelandic tales of bear shape-shifting largely falls outside the scope of this article,¹⁶ there is no denying that, at least in the eyes of saga compilers and writers, there existed a clear link between supernatural aspects of the bear and the far-north.¹⁷ Besides the accounts of bear-interaction mentioned earlier-on, many of which were tied to the area, there exist four narratives in which individuals straight-up transform into bears, two of which are linked with Northern Fenno-Scandinavia. Besides the tale found in *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans*, the second far-northern bear transformation concerns the grandsons of the Icelandic settler Ketill *hængr*,¹⁸ Dufþakr and Stórolfr who respectively turn into an ox and a bear before fighting each other (*Landnámabók*, 1968: II, 355-356: S 350/ H 309).¹⁹ The third case of bear-

¹⁶ Ivar Hansen and Bjørnar Olsen pointed to numerous similarities in Sámi and Norse pagan religions, using as one example shape-shifting motifs, in their 2004 monograph on pre-Modern Sámi history *Samenes History fram til 1750* (Hansen and Olsen, 2004: 351-353).

¹⁷ Ellis-Davidson has brought up a few other examples of Sámi shape-shifting narratives that might be likened to their Norse-Icelandic counterparts (Davidson, 1986).

¹⁸ This one Ketill *hængr* is not the Ketill of *Ketils saga hængs* but instead is said to have been his direct descendant (*Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, 1939: 57).

¹⁹ *Landnámabók* exists in several manuscripts and the edition used in this thesis makes use of several of these. The letter and number following the page number correspond to the manuscript and the chapter in the said manuscript (S, *Sturlubók*; H, *Hauksbók*)

transformation, in *Svarfdæla saga*, is very similar to this later one, where the Icelander Klaufi turns into a polar bear (*Svarfdæla saga*, 1956: 181-182). The last case of bear-transformation in Old Norse-Icelandic literature is more of an outlier as it is featured in a more fictional *riddarasaga*, (a genre that will be dealt with more in details in the following section) namely *Tiódels saga* where the eponymous French nobleman is said to assume the *hamr* of various beasts, including that of a bear (*Tiódels saga*, 2009: 16-17). As far as the impetus for bear-transformation is concerned, it seems that in some cases, bear-transformation is caused by an item coming from the bear itself, but interestingly enough, not a bear-*hamr*. If neither the tales of Tiódel, Klaufi or Dufþakr feature any bear-item (nor much details regarding their protagonists' transformations either), *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappá hans* feature first a bear-skin glove used by the sorceress to turn the prince into a bear and secondly implies that it is the consumption of bear-flesh by the prince's widow that turns their yet-unborn children into half-human creatures. A similar idea is expressed in the tale of Oddr Arngeirsson in *Landnámabók* where it is said that eating polar-bear meat made Oddr *hamrammr* and granted him the gift of being able to transport himself extremely quickly between far-away places (*Landnámabók*, 1968: II, 286-286: S 258/ H 222). It should also be noted that, in general, the consumption of bear-meat is often synonymous with supernatural and/ or transgressive behaviors in Old Norse-Icelandic literature.²⁰ In *Ketils saga hængs* for example, Ketill meets a giant in Finnmark who is said to keep bear-meat for himself in a food-pit (*Ketils saga hængs*, 1954: 155-156). Such ideas seems to not have been limited to Scandinavia either, as the 8th-century (Aethicus Ister, 2011: LXI) German *Cosmographia* of Aethicus Ister describes Turkic people as "unclean" because of their consumption of bear-meat (Aethicus Ister, 2011: 33). One possible explanation for the existence of such negative association between the consumption of bear-meat might be linked with the Finnish concept of *väki*, which roughly translates to the concept of supernatural life force. In Finnish belief, *väki* could be stored in, among other things, animal fur and body-parts, and it has been theorized by folklorist Thomas Dubois that "principles similar to *väki* appear to underlie at least some of the magic uses of objects described in Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon magic as well" (DuBois, 1999: 105). All in all, such a theory would fit very well with the numerous associations between bear-interaction, bear transformation and the largely Sámi-Finnic areas of the far-north that have been presented so far.

However, while the supernatural figure of the bear, together with that of the whale seems strongly associated with the far-north, one should not forget to mention one more type of animal transformation associated with the area, namely that of *Cervidae*-family metamorphoses. *Cervidae*s (deers) are mentioned on several occasions in Old Norse-Icelandic literature in connection with the far-north; notable

²⁰ It should be noted, however, that Medieval Scandinavian legal texts do not forbid the consumption of bear-meat, but rather permit it in some situations (see for example *Frostapingslög*, 1846-1895: I, 144; and *Bjarköyret*, 1846-1895: I, 317)

example include the early 13th-century (Ugulen, 2002: 8) *Konungasaga Óláfs saga ins Helga inni Sérstaka* in which the North-Norwegian chieftain Þórir *hundr* is said to be wearing an armor made of reindeer skin that was made indestructible by Sámi magicians (*Ólaf's saga hins helga*, 1860-1868: 325). In the aforementioned *Ketils saga hængs*, Ketill is also said to encounter (and later defeat) a Sámi king in Finnmörk that presented himself to him by riding a reindeer-cart (*Ketils saga hængs*, 1954: 161). As has been shown with cases of *cetacean* and bear-transformations, beyond tales of mere interactions with *cervidaes*, there also exist instances of supernatural transformations related to these animals. In total, one can find only two narratives, within the corpus, both of which being linked to the far-north: first there is that of the North-Norwegian chieftain Þórir *hjotr* (“þórir deer”) in Oddr monk’s saga of Ólafr Tryggvason who is said, upon his death, to release a deer-shape described as looking like an inflated bag (“belgr” *Ólaf's saga Odds*, 2006: 258), an image that one could possibly link to that of the *hamr* discussed at the beginning of this article. The second account of *cervidae*-transformation concerns the already-mentioned tale of the half-moose Elg-Fróði, in *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappá hans* (*Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappá hans*, 1954: 51). Besides presenting a unique half-moose-half-man creature, this tale is remarkable for being the sole mention of a moose (*elg*) in the entirety of Medieval Norse-Icelandic literature,²¹ thus strengthening the association between the animal and this otherwise rather minor shape-shanking motif.

All in all, lands located in or around Northern Fenno-Scandinavia appear to have been seen as areas in which age link between humans and specific animals was close enough to sometimes reach the point of physical transformation. Such a singular image might be but one extension of a more general belief that Northern Fenno-Scandinavia was a land of wonder, inhabited by numerous monsters as expressed by, for example, the late 12th/ early 13th-century (Saxo Grammaticus, 2015: I, XXXIII-XXXV) Danish scholar Saxo Grammaticus:

“To the north [Norway] faces an undefined and nameless territory, lacking civilization, and swarming with strange, unhuman races; a vast stretch of sea however separates this from the opposite shores of Norway and, since navigation there is hazardous, very few have set foot on it and enjoyed a safe return” (Saxo Grammaticus, 2015: I, 17).

Such a vision of the far-north, seemingly stemming from the earliest period of Old Norse-Icelandic literature, might, in some cases such as for the motifs of whale and bear-transformation, originate from local beliefs and practices. However, as with the various cases of dragon-transformations for example, many most likely derive from a foreign corpus of texts, namely narratives of chivalric literature that

²¹ This word *elg* can nevertheless be found as a kenning for “ship” in two 12th century skaldic poems: one penned by Einarr Skúlason (“elg búum flóðs” *Lausavísa Einarr Skúlasonar*, 1967-1973: A 1, 483, st. 4) and the other by Rognvaldr Jarl Kali Kolsson (“elg branda” *Lausavísa Rognvaldr Jarls*, 1967-1973: A 1, 505, st. 2).

became popular in Scandinavia in the 13th-century, thus developing yet another pool of supernatural-transformation motifs that shall be dealt with forthwith.

5. Chivalric Skin-Changing

While the majority of narrative texts written in Scandinavia in the Middle-Ages deal with indigenous Norse ideas, concept and tales such as the lives of early Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*) or the political history of Norway (*Konungasögur*), Norse-Icelandic literature also integrated and further developed foreign literary works, thus creating the genre known as *Riddarasögur*. *Riddarasögur*, or sagas of knights, did not, as opposed to, for example, the *Íslendingasögur*, organically develop in Scandinavia through local and popular oral culture. Instead, the *Riddarasögur* were deliberately introduced and promoted into the Norse-Icelandic literary corpus via the Norwegian King Hákon Hákonarson, in the 1220s (Glauser, 2005: 375). The core of the genre is composed of translated foreign (most often French, but also German and English) romances starring legendary or semi-historic knightly figures facing monsters, rescuing princesses and acquiring riches and power in the process. If some sagas are essentially but translations of continental texts (such as those texts retelling Arthurian legends), others are greatly expanded/ adapted while some likely were entirely composed in Norway and Iceland as pastiche or homage (*Ála flekkis saga*). *Riddarasögur* are similar to *Fornaldarsögur* in the sense that both are set in fantastical times and/ or lands where supernatural events are likelier to take place than in the saga-writer's own environment. As such, both genres mutually influenced each other: One can find Norse elements in sagas set in Medieval France or ancient Greece while continental motifs "contaminated" narratives otherwise set in semi-historical Scandinavian settings. Such an exchange of motifs can clearly be seen in tales of supernatural transformations: Tales of whale-transformations, which are otherwise completely absent from Medieval continental literature appear in a few *Riddarasögur* such as the aforementioned *Hjálmpés saga ok Ölvis* where an Arabic character turns into a whale in the entirely-fictional kingdom of Mannheimar (*Hjálmpés saga ok Ölvis*, 1954: 231-232). However, as these native Scandinavian motifs, may they be originating from mythic-heroical or far-northern material, have been discussed above, the focus will be thus turned to supernatural-transformations motifs that seem to have arisen from the development of foreign-influenced fantastical sagas as well as the way some of these older motifs were treated in such texts.

Riddarasögur and *Fornaldarsögur* inspired by foreign chivalric romances are quite often riddled with a large array of supernatural motifs. This aspect of Medieval Norse chivalric literature is by no means a late development, as it can be traced all the way from what is allegedly the first manuscript of *Riddarasögur*: the 13th-century Norwegian *AM 666b 4°* better known as *Strengleikar* (*Strengleikar*, 1979: XXVII). This manuscript, which is generally believed to be based on a collection of French

lais composed by Marie de France includes the singular *Bisclavret ljóð* in which the story's titular hero, a *vargulfr* (literally "were-wolf"), suffers from lycanthropy ("hann byr i vargs ham" *Strengleikar*, 1979: 86) and needs to have access to his human clothes in order to return to his original human shape ("Mannzham" *Strengleikar*, 1979: 86). This shape-shifting passage, which clearly cannot have any Scandinavian origin is believed to have been influential in the way supernatural transformation is depicted in Old Norse-Icelandic literature as a whole and especially in the aforementioned *Völsunga saga* (Tulinius, 2005: 455; Guðmundsdóttir, 2007: 293-294). In this saga, as mentioned earlier, Sinfjötli and Sigmundur indeed turn into wolves (albeit not needing human clothing to turn human again) and Signý, Sigmundur's sister is also said to change her very-human *hamr* with that of a sorceress in order to secretly commit incest with her brother (*The Saga of the Volsungs*, 1965: 9). *Bisclavret ljóð* could be said to represent a bridge between European chivalric literature and the Norse Middle-Ages in yet another way: at the end of the text, a new narrator (possibly the manuscript's scribe) comments on the poem's lycanthropic theme by asserting that he himself once was witness to a Norwegian landowner transforming into a wolf ("En sa er þessa bok norrœnaðe hann sa i bærnsko sinni æinn Rikan bonda er hamskiftisk stundum var hann maðr stundum i vargs ham" *Strengleikar*, 1979: 98). In the light of these two shape-shifting accounts, it becomes clear that Medieval saga writers had the means of interpreting both foreign supernatural motifs and indigenous Scandinavian ones alike. Yet, even in cases of types of animal-transformation that are found both in indigenous tales and foreign-influenced romances, one can pinpoint significant variation in the way these motifs are handled.

A good point of departure would be motifs of wolf-transformation. In later *Riddarasögur* and *Fornaldarsögur*, one find both tales of supernatural transformations that clearly imitate older indigenous Norse tales as well as new, innovative narrative elements that feature variations on this theme. A good example of late *Riddarasaga* pastiche is the 14th-century (Kalinke and Mitchel, 1985: 60) *Jóns saga Leikara*. This rather obscure saga, set in Flanders (*Flæmingjaland*) sees Sigurðr, the son of the king, turned into a wolf by his unnamed stepmother who touches him with a wolf-skin glove²² just like how Björn was turned into a bear in the aforementioned *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappá hans*. This motif of the transformation as a curse, first seen in mythological and heroic tales truly blossomed in the late Scandinavian Middle-Ages. Unique and colorful narratives such as that of the early 14th-century (Kalinke and Mitchel, 1985: 34) *Dínus saga drambláta* where African nobles mutually transform each others into ox-horned monsters and crows (*Dínus saga drambláta*, 1960: 45-49). A sub-category of this motif could be said to be of particular interest: that of the troll-*hamr* curse. Found among others in the aforementioned *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, the motif calls for an evil witch/ step-mother figure to curse a beautiful princess to

²² *Jóns saga leikara* has never been publicly edited. As such, I rely on information personally obtained from Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir when discussing this specific saga.

live in the shape of a troll in a far-away land, most often the far-north or areas near Russia. The 14th century (Kalinke and Mitchel, 1985: 97) *Sigrarðs saga frækna* is a perfect example of this motif. Here, the Norse heroes Stígandi and Knútr save two such princesses who have been exiled in Garðaríki (Russia) by the means of a magic powder that separates the troll-*hamr* from the beautiful women (*Sigrarðs saga frækna*, 1965: 98).

Another sub-type of supernatural transformations that does not revolve around a hero's curse is that of the benevolent supernatural helper, an extensive motif that can take numerous aspects depending on the narrative. In many cases, the supernatural helper is said to be a dwarf (*dvergr*) who is imbued with great magical powers including that of supernatural transformation. This is best-exemplified in the 14th-century (Kalinke and Mitchel, 1985: 99) *Sigrarðs saga ok Valbrands* where, in the fictional country of Villusvínaland, the dwarf Gustr turns into a wolf in order to fight the evil sorcerer Valbrand who himself took the appearance of a dragon (*Sigrarðs saga ok Valbrands*, 1965: 181). Dragon-transformations are also characteristics of late *Riddarasögur* and *Fornaldasögur*. If dragons (*dreki/ ormr*) are indeed found in mythic-heroical texts such as *Völuspá* or *Gylfaginning*,²³ only one case of dragon-transformation can be found in this pool of older texts, namely that of the dwarf Fáfnir who is said to have taken the likeness of such a creature (“Fáfnir lá á Gnitahéiði ok var í orms líki” *Reginismál*, 2014: 300). Besides this one case, all but one tales of dragon-transformation are found in *Riddarasögur* and *Fornaldasögur*.²⁴ In most instances, these later tales of dragon-transformation happen during a fight as in the aforementioned *Sigrarðs saga ok Valbrands* and it is typically the enemy (either a powerful witch or an evil king) who turns in such a beast. One of the most colorful example of this motif must be that of King Hárekr from Bjarmaland (the White Sea) in *Bósa saga ok Herrauds*. There, this evil king successively turns into a dragon, a flying bird and a pig before being dispatched by Bósa's supernatural trollish helper Busla, who herself turns into dog (*Bósa saga ok Herrauds*, 1954: 319-320). Another element that connects cases of dragon-transformations together with tales of dragon encounters is their association with the north and the north-east: Generally, dragons are depicted as being most common in Northern Fenno-Scandinavia or in the vicinity of Russia. Other sub-types of animal transformation also tend to be associated with far-away areas or with ancient times. There, one can find tales of a nagging princess turning a Roman hero into a horse (*Virgilesrímur* 1913-1921, II: 849, I, st. 43), a knight from east-Finnmörk turning into a lion (*Sörla saga Sterka*, 1954: 398), or a witch turning into a vulture in the fictional giant-kingdom of Rísaland (*Valdimars saga*, 1960: 75).

²³ In *Völuspá*, one finds the worm (“ormr”) Jǫrmungandr (*Völuspá*, 2014: 303, st. 48) as well as an unnamed dragon (“dreki” *Völuspá*, 2014: 307, st.63). In *Gylfaginning*, the worm Miðgarðsormr is mentioned several times (*Gylfaginning*, 2005: 27, 44, etc...).

²⁴ This one account is that found in the *Íslendingasaga Þorskfirðinga saga* and refers to the transformation of the saga's hero Þórir in Finnmörk (*Þorskfirðinga saga*, 2009: 186).

All in all, supernatural-transformation motifs found in sagas influenced by Medieval romances tend to function as either tools to embellish scenes of conflicts between characters or disruptive events negatively affecting either the hero or his love interest which will need to be overcome in order for the narrative to go further. In practice, the main difference between indigenous Scandinavian and romance-inspired transformation motifs is that the supernatural transformations are both more common and yet less covetable than in their indigenous mythic-heroical or far-northern counterparts.

6. Conclusion

After analyzing the surveyed data, one can discover a clear divide between the more straightforward functional value of some of the transformations found in indigenous Scandinavian sagas and the more “hands-off” treatment they receive in romance-inspired ones: While in indigenous myths and sagas, Óðinn could turn into various animals in order to overcome a narrative obstacle like obtaining the mead of poetry (*Skáldskaparmál*, 1998: 4-5) or the Norwegian queen Gunnhildr could turn into a bird in order to deprive her adversary Egill Skallagrímsson of sleep (*Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, 1933: 183), romance-influenced narratives nearly-never make use of shapeshifting elements in such a way. Instead of sometimes presenting supernatural metamorphosis as narrative elements that could positively bring the story forward, they are instead most-often pigeonholed into being either clearly negative incidents that will be revoked in order for the narrative to go on or mere cosmetic veneer seemingly brought in to spice-up already strongly-imaged scenes of confrontation and resolution. In order to explain such a marked dichotomy, one could possibly bring up the fact that indigenous mythic-heroical and far-northern narratives might have been based (at least in part) in either actual practices or beliefs most-likely stemming from a pagan worldview and the exercise of magic. As such, even if such stories of the pagan past (or the pagan other when confronting Sámi sorcery) might have been compiled and transmitted in Medieval Scandinavia to an extent, 13th and 14th-century Christian authors might have been unwilling to present supernatural metamorphoses (and magic in general) in a positive light or as practices honorable heroes could dabble in. This might explain why, in so many romance-inspired sagas, while the hero himself almost never make use of magic (besides, obtaining, at times, some inconspicuous magical items), he is often endowed with a supernatural helper (often a dwarf or a troll) that suffers no such restrictions: Changing one’s physical appearance or shape is not necessarily seen as a nefarious per se, but as more rightly belonging to far-away lands and eras, together with the vast array of semi-human pagan monsters associated with such spheres, and not to the gentle hero readers are to identify with. One final point that ought not to be ignored is that this narrative fault-line should not be understood as signifying a temporal evolution of Old Norse-Icelandic literature as a whole. While it is true that continental romances were willingly incorporated in the Old Norse-

Icelandic literary corpus, numerous Scandinavian writers, scholars and clergymen were most-likely well-versed in contemporary continental literature long-before that time. This might very well have influenced the way writers and compilers interpreted and transmitted otherwise indigenous Scandinavian concepts such as those revolving around supernatural-transformation that have been dealt with in the present article. The presence (or absence) of various narrative elements between say, *Íslendingasögur* and *Riddarasögur* could be argued to be less of a case of outright emergence of disappearance of said motifs and more of a manifestation of the Medieval Scandinavian's positive awareness about their origins and connection with the various narrative genres in existence at the time. While some elements would seem to indicate that this might be the case (such as the near-total absence of Sámi-Finnic protagonists and locales in *Riddarasögur*), one would need to more thoroughly analyze and compare narrative structures and components of various narratives in order to better understand and assert the place the supernatural and magic in general, including supernatural transformations occupy in Old Norse-Icelandic literature.

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