Iceland, which converted to Christianity only around the turn of the millennium, lay far from the center of Latin Christian culture. Nevertheless, stories from Iceland connect various church figures with necromancy, Latin magic, and the devil. For Icelanders, it was not Arabic learning, but their own heathen past which stirred anxiety. By examining tales in which clerics demonstrate unholy supernatural power, I hope to demonstrate how continental ideas about magic blended with local ones in reflecting the conditions of Icelandic society.¹ I will begin with a recapitulation of the tale of Gerbert told by William of Malmesbury, since this forms a touchstone for the Icelandic material.

**William of Malmesbury’s Tale of Gerbert**

The twelfth-century historian William of Malmesbury (d. c. 1143) recounts the tale of Gerbert, the notorious Pope Sylvester II (d. 1003).² According to the tale, Gerbert studied in Spain where “the Christians have Toledo for their capital and the Saracens Hispalis commonly called Seville; there they devote themselves to divination and witchcraft, as their national custom is.”³ From the Saracens, Gerbert learns a variety of arts:

There he surpassed Ptolemy in knowledge of the astrolabe, Al-handreus in that of the relative positions of the stars, and Julius Firmicus in judicial astronomy. There he learnt to interpret the song and flight of birds, to summon ghostly forms from the nether regions, everything, in short, whether harmful or healthful, that has been discovered by human curiosity; for of the permitted arts, arithmetic, music, astronomy, and geometry, I need say nothing—by the way he absorbed them he made them look beneath the
Clerical Magic cont’d
level of his intelligence, and re-established in Gaul through his untiring efforts. He was the first to seize the abacus from the Saracen, and he handed down the rules which calculators for all their efforts hardly understand.4

The association of Arabic knowledge, astrology, and magic is here clear, as is the use of spirits. Such knowledge takes on a dual character, desirable in part, and execrable beyond certain bounds, which seem embodied in the division of Spain’s principal cities into Saracen and Christian capitols.

Gerbert’s studies among the Saracens clearly proceeds beyond the bounds of acceptable. He takes one particular master, whom he hires to teach him and to provide books. This master, however, keeps back one book “to which he had committed all his art and which Gerbert could by no means get out of him.”5 Gerbert seduces the master’s daughter, and with her help, he steals the book and makes his escape. When the Saracen uses astrology to track him, Gerbert avoids detection by hiding suspended under a bridge so that he touches “neither earth nor water.”6 To complete his getaway, Gerbert summons the devil to whom he “covenanted to pay him perpetual homage if he would protect him from the Saracen … and convey him overseas.” 7

We can see the lineaments of the necromancer in William’s tale: he possesses forbidden knowledge, contained in secret books, is capable of making (and foiling) divinations, and of commanding spirits. Moreover, even for William, Gerbert represents the prototype of a branch of learning which (for good or ill) is already well-advanced throughout Europe.

Saemundur the Learned
William’s tale of Gerbert forms the earliest bridge between Latin necromancy and Iceland. The thirteenth-century Jón’s Saga Helga about the early Icelandic bishop Jón contains the earliest recorded version of the story of Saemundur “the Learned” (d. 1133), a priest-magician of mostly benevolent character. This account so closely resembles William’s that the two presumably have a common source.8 Saemundur’s great learning and his foreign studies provide a figure to which necromantic material could also be attached in an Icelandic context. Jóns Saga recounts that the Icelander Saemundur studied in Europe “with a certain understanding magister, there acquiring such unknown wisdom that he had abandoned everything that he had learnt in his youth, even his baptismal name.”9 Instead, he went by Kol (Coal).

Jón convinces Saemundur to flee his master, who like Gerbert’s Saracen, pursues him using “astronomia.”10 Clever Saemundur outwits his master, first by putting water in his shoes and his shoes on his head. The master thinks that “Jon, the foreigner, has drowned his head. The master thinks that he had learnt in his youth, even his baptismal name.”10 Instead, he went by Kol (Coal).

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Clerical Magic cont’d
School.” Lessons appeared on the wall, and the Devil took as payment the soul of the last student of each class to leave. Saemundur, of course, is this last student.14

In some versions of these tales, Jón remains a significant figure who helps Saemundur make his escape. Eventually, however, Jón drops out of the legend-cycle, and only Saemundur remains as a significant character. In these tales, Saemundur escapes the Devil, sometimes by hiding suspended under a bridge like Gerbert, but more often by tricking the Devil into grabbing his cloak or his shadow in his place.15 We can see that Icelanders remained concerned that learning might be tainted with magic, but the source of that magic has become fully demonized.

Magic in these later tales is often clearly associated with pre-Christian religion. In one tale, Saemundur and a rival go to the king of Norway to seek a church appointment in Oddi, Iceland. The king promises the benefice to whoever can arrive there first. Saemundur summons the devil and promises him his soul, if the devil can convey him to Iceland without getting him wet. The devil obligingly takes the form of a seal and carries Saemundur on his back. When they come in sight of shore, however, Saemundur strikes the Devil on the head with his Psalter, causing the Devil to sink. Saemundur gets wet, but he also gets to Iceland, gains the church, and keeps his soul.16 The motif of travel in an animal form has deep roots in Icelandic religio-magical practices. In much Old Norse literature, heathen magicians can project their spirit in an animal form and travel great distances.17

Loftur the Magician

Our final set of tales concern the post-Reformation figure of Loftur (born c. 1700).18 A far more sinister character than Saemundur, Loftur combines the figure of the clerical magician with a typically Icelandic concern for the revenant dead.

Loftur studied at the clerical school of Hólar, where he supposedly had access to a magical manual known as the Greyskin.19 Magical texts do seem to have circulated in Icelandic schools. Legal records from the seventeenth-century record the punishment for magic of students at Skálholt.20 We have several surviving Icelandic magical books, which contain elaborate compound runes, and in some cases Solomonic and Necromantic material as well.21

The most important tales about Loftur concerns his desire for the Redskin, a magical book supposedly “written in runes, like other books of spells” by the notorious Bishop Gottskálk (d. ca. 1522), who “gathered together all the black spells, which had never been used since heathen times.”22 When Gottskálk died, he had the book buried with him in his tomb so no one could read it.23 Without the Redskin, Loftur is damned. As he explains to a fellow student:

Those who have learned as much magic as I have can only use it for evil, and must all be lost whenever they die. But if a man knows enough, then the Devil will have no power over him, but must serve without pay as he served Saemundur the Wise, and whoever knows as much as that is also his own master, free to use his arts for whatever purpose he wishes. It is not possible to attain this degree of knowledge nowadays, since the Black School closed down, and Gottskálk the Cruel had his book Red Skin buried with him. That is why I want to raise him up and force him by spells to let me have Red Skin.”24

Loftur and his companion enter the church at night, where Loftur summons the spirits of the dead Bishops. Gottskálk appears, bearing the Redskin. They engage in a duel of magic, which Loftur loses when his companion rings the church bell too soon. Despairing, Loftur leaves the school and later dies.25

These tales combine Latin, Icelandic and Lutheran features into a composite picture of the nature and dangers of clerical magicians. The magical use of the dead is a particularly Icelandic motif. In Old Norse literature the dead (especially the heathen dead) often guarded treasure in their tombs. As with Gottskálk they are prone to physical manifestations, sometimes engaging heroes in violent combat.26 Loftur’s magic strongly resembles Latin necromancy. In the magical duel he inverts and perverts Christian ritual:

He turned the penitential psalms of David to the Devil’s name, and made a

cont’d on page 5
## Sessions Sponsored by the Societas Magica at the Fortieth International Congress on Medieval Studies May 13–16, 2010

### 1. Session 412, Saturday 10:00 AM, Schneider 1325

**Politics, Condemnation, and Sorcery in the Fourteenth Century**  
(Co-sponsored by the 14th Century Society)  
Presider: Claire Fanger

- **Trials for Sorcery in Early Fourteenth-Century Avignon**  
  Robert Ticknor, Tulane Univ.
- **Acknowledging the Annals: A New Perspective on Witchcraft in the Alice Kyteler Trial**  
  Vanessa R. Taylor, Catholic Univ. of America
- **Maleficae et Maledictae Feminae: Fourteenth-Century Sources for Key Features of the Learned Interpretation of Witchcraft in Italy at the End of the Middle Ages**  
  Fabrizio Conti, Central European Univ.

### 2. Session 469, Saturday 1:30 PM, Schneider 1355

**Love Magic**  
Presider: Amelia Carr

- **Love and Body Parts: A Study on the Use of Cadavers in Love Magic in the PGM, the Picatrix, and the Munich Handbook**  
  David Porreca, Univ. of Waterloo
- **Love Potion #9: Examining Tristan and Isolt for Popular Notions of “Love” and “Magic” in the Medieval British Isles**  
  Jennifer Pluck, Univ. of North Carolina–Charlotte
- **Love Magic in Late Medieval English Confession and Preaching Manuals**  
  Catherine Rider, Univ. of Exeter
- **What Do We Mean by “Love Magic”?**  
  Frank Klaassen, Univ. of Saskatchewan

### 3. Session 519, Saturday 3:30 PM, Schneider 1350

**Magic in its Manuscript Context**  
(Co-sponsored by the Research Group on Manuscript Evidence)  
Presider: Mildred Budny

- **A Household Approach to Magic: Charms in Cambridge, Trinity College MS 1081**  
  Laura Mitchell, Univ. of Toronto
- **Use of Mysterious Symbols in the Liber florum Old Compilation, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS liturg. 160**  
  Claire Fanger, Rice Univ.
- **Fashionable Magic: Characters and Ciphers in Conrad Buitzruss’s Compendium (Munich, Clm 671)**  
  Elizabeth I. Wade-Sirabian, Univ. of Wisconsin–Oshkosh

### 4. Session 549, Sunday 8:30 AM, Schneider 1220

**Ciphers, Codes, and Mysterious Symbols I: Manuscript Evidence**  
(Co-sponsored by the Research Group on Manuscript Evidence)  
Presider: Richard Kieckhefer, Northwestern Univ.

- **Encoding, Decoding, and the Milieu of Virgilius Maro Grammaticus**  
  Jen Reid, Univ. van Amsterdam
- **Angelical Alphabets: What Do They Mean?**  
  Marla Segol, Skidmore College
- **Outdated Cipher-Systems in Magic Texts**  
  Benedek Láng, Budapesti Muszaki és Gazdaságtudományi Egyetem

### 5. Session 588, Sunday 10:30 AM, Schneider 1220

**Ciphers, Codes and Mysterious Symbols II: Objects of Power**  
Presider: Richard Kieckhefer, Northwestern Univ.

- **Symbolic Power in Traditional Ethiopia**  
  Sean M. Winslow, Centre for Medieval Studies, Univ. of Toronto
- **Runic Books, Clerical Magicians, and the Dead in Icelandic Folklore**  
  Thomas B. de Mayo, J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College
- **The Hooked X, a Grail Code, and a New Translation of the Kensington Runestone**  
  James L. Frankki, Sam Houston State Univ.
confession of all the good he had ever done as if were a sin. … He recited the Lord’s prayer to the Devil, and gave the blessing in the Devil’s name, till the whole church shook and rocked as if in an earthquake. 27

Gottskálk’s book-burial demonstrates how thoroughly magic was seen as a pagan survival, made dangerous by its eruption into Christian society. As Simpson notes, the book-burial turns its possessor into a type of ancestral figure. Thus, Gottskálk is both pagan (in his knowledge) and Christian (as a Bishop). His power comes from unnaturally retaining knowledge of the older era into the new. Indeed, there is a triple-layering of the past, for Gottskálk was a Catholic bishop in a now-Lutheran country, and Loftur therefore has greater power over him than over the later Bishops who “were all buried with the Bible on their breasts.” 28

Conclusion

The stories of Loftur and Saemundur reveal the complexities of Icelandic clerical magic. The Arabic-inspired necromancy that vexed the authorities of Latin Europe traveled to Iceland via the same channels as Christianity itself. There it blended with local ideas about spirit projection, the dead, and the power of runes. In the popular imagination it became more fantastic as well as more revealing of Iceland’s own cultural concerns. Remote from fears about Arabic learning, medieval and early modern Icelanders instead saw learned magic as a dangerous reminder of the practices they had already abandoned.

Footnotes

1 An earlier version of this paper was originally given at the J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College 3rd Annual Faculty Research Symposium in Richmond, VA (April, 2009). Thanks to Benedek Láng for assistance with the legend of the Black School. See also his Unlocked Books: Manuscripts of Learned Magic in the Medieval Libraries of Central Europe (Penn State University Press, 2008), 1-3.

2 William mis-identifies Gerbert as John XV.


“Et sicut Christiani Toletum, ita ipsi [Saracen] Hispalim, quam Sibiliam uulgariter uocant, caput regni habent, diuitionibus et infectionibus more gentis familiari studentes.” See also 2:151 n.1.

4 Ibi uicit scientia Ptholomeum in astrolabio, Alhandreum in astrorum interstitio, Iulium Firmicum in fato. Ibi quid cantus et uolatus auium portendat didicit, ibi excire tenues ex inferno figuras, ibi postremo quicquid vel noxium vel salubre curiositas humana deprehendit; nam de licitis artibus, arithmetica musica et astronomia et geometria, nichil attinet dicere, quas ita ebit ut inferiores ingenio suo ostenderet, et magna industria reuocaret in Galliam omnino ibi iam pridem obsoletas. Abacum certe primus a Saracenis rapiens, regulas dedit quae a sudantibus abacistis uix intelliguntur. ii.167, 1:280-281.

“Vnus erat codex totius artis conscius quem nullo modo elicere poterat.” ii.167, translated on 1:281.

5 “Vnus erat codex totius artis conscius quem nullo modo elicere poterat.”

6 “… pendulum et pontem amplectens ut nec aquam nec terram tangeret.” ii.167, translated on 1:283.

7 “Ibi per incantationes diabolo accersito,

The Societas Magica invites proposals for essays to run in future issues of the newsletter.

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pepetuum paciscitur hominium si se ab illo qui denuo insequebantur defensatum ultra pelagus eucheret." ii.167, translated on 1:283.


10 “Enn hin heilagi Ion gat hann vpp spúran at hann var medr nokkurum aegaetum meistara, nemandi þar okunniga fræði sau at hann tyndi allre þeir er han hafði aa aesku allðri numit. Ok Iamual fraeði sua at hann tyndi allre þeir er han agaetum meistara, nemandi þar okunniga spurðan at hann var medr nockurum.


13 “… ok langaeligar nytir munu menn hafa hans hamingiu.” Foote, 75. Jón’s Saga Helga, Trans Simpson, Northmen, 73


17 In Ólafs Saga Tryggvasonar, for example, a hostile wizard travels from Norway to Iceland in the form of a whale, but the protective spirits of the land prevent him from coming ashore. Snorri Sturluson, Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway, trans. Lee M. Hollander (Austin: U Texas Press, 1964), 173-4.

18 See Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, The Folk-Stories of Iceland, Revised by Einar G. Pétursson, Translated by Benedikt Benedikz, Edited by Anthony Faulkes (London: The Viking Society for Northern Research, 2003), 204-213.

19 Several stories tell of his early, often murderous, magical misdeeds. Simpson, Legends of Icelandic Magicians, 73-79, 103. n1.


23 Gottskáll was a historical personage, but his activities as a wizard are probably fictitious. The book Redskin may be a remembrance of a red-bound tax register particularly hated by his subjects. By the time of our tale, however, he and his book have become the subject of sinister legend clerical and magical, secular and supernatural power have become conflated. Simpson, Legends of Icelandic Magicians, 103-4, n1.


26 See especially, Grettir’s Saga. In late Icelandic folklore, magicians could command the spirits of the newly dead, and employ them as “sendings” against their foes.


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