

Waking the “Wiggle-Waggle” Monsters (Animal figures and Cross Dressing in the Icelandic Vikivaki Games)

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In the context of the present conference, one can say that Iceland has a unique position, because unlike all of its neighbouring countries, it seems to lack any continuing and deeply rooted tradition of guising or mummung. Certainly, the Icelanders are relatively *dramatic* people. They visit theatres with regularity, and tend to tell stories in a highly dramatic fashion. They also like dressing up: Once or twice a year, one finds the streets of most larger towns inundated with costumed figures, that is to say, on Ash Wednesday, and on what we call “dimission”, the pre-graduation days when up-and-coming sixth form graduates who are about to take their final exams dress up and “invade” not only their schools but also the neighbourhood, starting with satirical songs outside their teachers’ windows at five or six a.m. Neither of these traditions, however, is of any great age. The first develops largely out of imported Danish traditions in the late nineteenth century, and rather than involving house-visits, concentrates on shops and the town centre (the Icelanders have always been commercially minded... if you want goodies, go to where the goodies come from). It also seems to have always been a children’s activity, and has never really demanded complete disguising, rather a symbolic form of guising involving little more than face painting. And it seems to have evolved in larger towns rather than the countryside. The same, of course, applies to the school activities. While they offer a number of striking parallels to the old house-visiting guising activities that we find, for example, in Shetland, the Faroes, even Greenland, and all over mainland Scandinavia, they are nonetheless of very recent origin, evolving over the last thirty years. Yes, Iceland has a couple of isolated and hitherto unrecorded traditions involving “winter” or Christmas guising which we have found over the last couple of years, but it must remain questionable exactly how old these are.

In short, as I say, Iceland seems to show a near unique lack of older dramatic traditions. This of course raises the question of why, especially in the light of the fact that some of the earliest material that we have for popular dramatic traditions in northern Europe seems to have been recorded there, in the shape of the dialogic and monologic poems of the Elder Edda of the early middle ages, and then other evidence from the early Middle Ages concerning figures like the “skin-Grýla”, which seems to point to the existence of a very early form of the guising traditions still known in Shetland and the Faroes. I have discussed both of these traditions in more detail elsewhere, and so I will largely refrain from taking them up again here as part of my main talk. I can maybe answer questions on them afterwards. What I mean to concentrate on here, however, is another tradition that also seems to have died out in the early nineteenth century if not before. There is good reason to believe that *this* particular

tradition, involving so-called "vikivaki dance games", or "dance-guising" has roots in the aforementioned speculative earlier guising traditions, but shows an intriguing development out of these into a more "organised" form of public entertainment. Some scholars have also argued that the games represent the beginning of public theatre in Iceland, albeit in a very rudimentary form. That is something else that I will pass by for now.

I should stress, before I start, that I have previously discussed these games in my book *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*. The new material here comes first of all in the more complete translations of the material concerning the costumes, which you have in your handouts, and then the angle that I would like to take. In short, in addition to saying a little more about the origins of these dance "games", I would like to try and examine the nature of the *performances* themselves, their context, structure, purpose and effect.

I should start by explaining briefly what the so-called vikivaki dance gatherings were, and why they came to an end. In short, these were night long dance "wakes" often held around the Christmas period. They took place in large farm houses (perhaps even churches, if we believe the legends), drawing people from a wide area of land. They involved a great deal of drinking, and (again if we believe the legends), had the potential of increasing the local birth rate by double figures. One infamous gathering at Jörfi is supposed to have produced nineteen children, and brought about a visit from the Devil into the bargain. As I have often pointed out to my students, there are close parallels here to the more recent Acid House phenomenon, where the atmosphere and the volume is "pumped up" by large quantities of "ecstasy" pills. Close encounters of the vikivaki kind (in a slightly calmer, if not less hypnotic form) are of course still known in the Faroe Islands, where the communal traditional dance season begins at Christmas, and finishes just before Lent (which people there symbolically talked of as being the end of the Christmas season). I'll also come back to that later.

There is evidence showing that dance gatherings of this kind were already taking place in Iceland in the thirteenth century. At that time we find the European word *dans* starting to take over from the words *hopp* (jump) and *leikur* (game) which seem to have described the activity in earlier times. Three key features of these earlier gatherings display close parallels to the later vikivaki gatherings of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. First of all, we know that the dances were accompanied by songs or ballads (little is said about musical instruments, which would have been seen as an additional luxury), and that there were verses (perhaps sung by individuals), and refrains sung by all. These ballads had a strong dance beat (similar to the bramble-simple), and were often highly satirical. Inflammatory love songs were also known. Passions of various kinds tended to flare. And then, we have Steingrímur Skinn-Grýluson, a known satirist in the thirteenth century who ended up biting the dust for his trouble. His name means literally: Steingrímur (or Stone mask), son of Skinn-Grýla, Grýla being this costumed figure that we still find in the Faroes guising traditions (called "going Grýla") and in Unst in Shetland (where the guisers are referred to as Grøleks). In short, as I mentioned, it seems that people were already dressing up in skins and cross dressing as part of dances in Iceland at Steingrímur's time.

This all comes from saga material. Later, more official records demonstrate that so-called vikivaki dance gatherings were definitely well known in the late sixteenth century. And what is vikivaki? Well, all indications suggest it was a circle dance like that known today in the Faroe Islands, accompanied by dance songs or ballads of the kind known earlier. The actual meaning of the word is unsure. One scholar suggests it

comes from the Dutch, and means Wiggle-Waggle, referring to the dance itself. Others stress links to the word *vaka*, meaning wake, and I think this is probably most likely. Whatever, the *vikivaki* gathering seems to have remained in vogue in Iceland over a period of about two hundred years. Sources then point to dance gatherings of this kind fading out of existence by the early nineteenth century. This may have been the result of several things: continued pressure from the authorities (both Danish officialdom and the eighteenth-century Protestant church, fired by similar polemics from Denmark); the arrival of a new fashion for a different sort of pair dance (reels and polkas coming in from England and Scandinavia); or simply the overall effect of the natural catastrophes of the late eighteenth century in the form of volcanoes, earthquakes, and iceflows blocking harbours. As has been made very clear for me recently in Shetland, large scale disasters like the First and Second World Wars could have a drastic effect on local traditions of entertainment.

In the handouts I've given you, you'll see a list of the main sources of material on their dances and the dance games, most of which are given in their original form in Jón Samsonarson's excellent *Kvæði og dansleikir* from 1964. Much of this material was collected along with Icelandic folktales in the mid-nineteenth century, and published by Ólafur Daviðsson in 1894. It has since been discussed by several other scholars, such as Dag Strömbäck (who published two articles in English), the theatre scholar Sveinn Einarsson, and the dance scholar Sigríður Valgeirsdóttir. The key problem with most of these scholars is that while being excellent in their own fields, they know – or knew – little about folk traditions in other countries: indeed, in earlier times the material, especially from Scandinavia, was relatively limited. But this has long been a problem with Icelandic folkloristics, which is still, to some extent, struggling to free itself from the influences of nationalism that were stressed in the legal struggle for independence up until 1945.

I've also given you a map of the country marked out with the sites where dance gatherings are supposed to have taken place, and the living places of informants. What becomes clear from this is that there was a stress on the south and west of the country, especially the isolated western fjords, and those sites where fishing took place in the winter: at that time, farm workers would migrate from the north to the west and the south to work at fish stations. Dance gatherings, as well as a being a way of lightening up the particularly “bleak midwinter” of Iceland, would have been a way of meeting the local women-folk, who of course were also interested in meeting young men outside their family circle. (I might stress that Iceland had particularly complex rules about what constituted the family, and whom one was entitled to marry... godparents, priests and their families were also ruled out.) This was one reason for the distribution. Another was that the western fjords and the Snæfellsnes peninsula here were, and are, very isolated, and difficult to control.

So, what seems to have happened at these gatherings? Our main source is a manuscript written before 1800, possibly around 1760, in the south of the country. It is called *Niðurraðan og undirvísan hvurninn gleði og dansleikir voru tíðkaðir og um hönd hafðir í fyrri tíð* (The order and description of how dance gatherings took place and were organised in earlier times). Unlike some of our other early sources of evidence, which are written by irate clergymen foaming at the mouth about bacchanalia and bawdery, the *Niðurraðan* is surprisingly objective, its purpose seemingly being to record an old tradition that was beginning to fade. It was probably written by a self-educated farmer interested in historical material. I've added a summary of the order of events as outlined by the *Niðurraðan* in your handout... where you'll also find new translations of

the descriptions of the dramatic costumes that this work gives. I should stress, though, that this is of course only one man's description, from one part of the country. Certainly it is well supported by the other accounts that we have from other parts of the country, suggesting that the description is given was fairly typical, but we should nonetheless be wary about taking it as an accepted handbook.

Before going through the order of events, which actually tell us a great deal about the proceedings and the role of the dances, I would like to help you try and imagine the setting, because the context, which earlier writers naturally take for granted, is highly important if we wish to grasp the actual nature of the performance as it was. Iceland changed little between the fourteenth and the late eighteenth century. In many ways, owing to the gradual worsening of weather conditions, and the lack of control of trade, it remained medieval. Most people lacked farms of their own, and worked for a small class of wealthier farmers. They lived with their employers in warren like, almost hobbit-like farmhouses, often sleeping in the same communal living quarters, and changing employment if necessary in the spring. There was little job security. Distances between farms were often much greater than in Shetland and the Faroes, and the concept of villages almost unknown. Considering the weather, conditions were simply non-conducive for a house-visiting guising tradition in Iceland during this period. It seems that instead of the tradition going round to the people, the people came together for the tradition. It had the same result: a strong underlining of what Victor Turner calls *communitas*. And there was a direct clash: as churchmen were aware, there were close similarities between the people travelling long distances to go to a joint gathering in church at Christmas, and travelling long distances to a joint *vikivaki* gathering during the same period. The first involved singing slow hymns and sitting in rows in cold seats. The other involved singing songs with a beat, taking hands, touching in a circle, and breaking down moral rules and regulations. It was an unequal competition.

The poverty and starvation of the time, similar to that known in Ireland, but exacerbated by the Icelandic weather, and the darkness of the Scandinavian winter season, gave even more need for release. As I say, the destination would usually have been a large farm, with enough space for 20 or more people (some accounts suggest 32, and the nineteen *Jörfagleði* babies points to at least 38, unless there were twins involved, or a very active womaniser.) You can see on the plans here what the farms were like: we have a grouping of several rooms around a dim, narrow central corridor made, like the farmhouse itself, of turf and stone. In some cases, rooms might have wooden walls. The main heating comes from the kitchen fire, and warmth from human beings themselves, along with that of the animals, which are often kept nearby. Most people sleep in the *baðstofa*, which is a communal sleeping and working environment farthest in (again to preserve warmth). Some dances might have taken place here between the beds... (a couple of accounts talk of people getting into costume "fram í skáli" (out in the front room), suggesting that the front room was not used for the dance. In most cases, however, I would expect that it *would* have been in this front room, or *skáli*, emptied of whatever furniture it held. There would have been a platform where the host used to sit, and the lead singers sang (according to our accounts). It would also have had more space than in the living room... But, windows, if they existed, were tiny. These were very dark *midwinter* nights, near Christmas, the time at which which various spirits were believed to be outside. The lighting from cod, seal or shark-oil lamps would have created a lot of smoke, in addition to effective flickering shadows capable of working on the imagination. And while there might have been more space, there still was not much. I would guess maybe three metres by maybe six at the most in

a large farmhouse. Possibly there was a small fire in the centre, as in the old viking long houses, but otherwise, as I noted the heat would have come first and foremost from alcohol and dancing. Bear all of this in mind as we now go over at the Nidurraðan order of ceremonies.

As you can see, the evening begins with a women's vikivaki (the men, presumably watching, and lubricating themselves with home-made spirit or the ale that had been bought with a shared kitty). This is followed by a dance called *hringbrot* (or circle breaker), which involves at least twenty people in pairs, bringing them into physical contact for the first time that evening. The next feature a men's vikivaki, now giving the women to get a chance to have a drink, and discuss the evening's prospects. As can be seen, there seems to be a clear progression in the entertainment, which is designed essentially to break the ice between people who might not otherwise have come that often into contact. This certainly applies to the role of the acted figures, the first of which now appears in the shape of the *hestleikur* or horse game. As you can see from the description sheet, the eighteenth-century Icelandic horse figure seems to have closely resembled the sixteenth-century figure seen on this transarency which comes from the Betley Window in England: The account in Niðurraðan goes as follows: "First of all a frame is put together, somewhat like a manure box. This should be big enough to be squeezed up over the man's hips. A strong hoop is bound to this frame, running out behind the man. A red pinafore is placed on this, and sewn firmly all the way around. To this, two or three long strips of material are attached, which run equally to the sides. Cloths of various colours are placed on the pinafore. As many as 10 brass strips are also placed on it, with so much decoration that everything glows. A bunch of keys is attached to the front of the frame, and the horse jangles this as he runs into the dance-room. He is put into a smock or dress, if one is available, with a white scarf running down his back and over his chest. He also has a hat on his head with the front brim folded down. To this white towels are knotted, the tassels of which run back down to his thighs. Two *skjaldmeyjar* accompany him. They both have wear *skaut* (national headwear) and the same finery and jewelery as the horse."

The *skjaldmeyjar* or Shield Maidens are elsewhere referred to as Valkyries or even Vestal Virgins. In short, they are men in women's clothes, and are closely associated with at least two other costumed games, possibly linking the three of them together. Like the horse, the *skjaldmeyjar* enter the room from the *outside*, knocking first. All of them then rush in, the group grabbing the "female helpers" and swinging them back and forth, pushing the horse too and fro until it suddenly starts hopping on one leg. The *skjaldmeyjar* then spit on its foot, and hit it with clubs, bringing it suddenly back to life. (Cf. The English tradition referred to elsewhere in this conference [TP] called "Shoeing the Mare") The horse is then up-ended and lifted up into the air, with a great amount of rattling, shaking and dancing. After this, it leaves, its costume and a great deal more in the room now being in great disarray. Note the fact that the audience are drawn into the act, and that unlike most guisers, the horse is not integrated, but rather rejected by the insiders. As you'll see the same applies with the other "acts".

After the "Horse Game" comes another women's vikivaki, and this is followed by the arrival of the second creature from the outside and the wild, namely the *Þingálp*, or *Finngálkn* (literally man-beast), which is once again brought in by the shield maidens. Bear in mind once again, the darkness in the room, the smoke and shadows, and the effect (by now) of alcohol, as well as the fact that this was all probably taking place in a liminal period when various threatening spirits were believed to be on the prowl out there in the darkness. The *þingálp*, one of my personal favourites, should be

immediately recognisable to most of you, and would certainly have been well-known to many Scandinavians of the time: The costume is described in *Niðurraðan* as follows.... It offers an interesting potential context for this intriguing sixteenth-century mask recently found at a large farm in southern Iceland: "First of all, a rectangular piece of wood of taken, about half an ell (28.5 cm) in length, and about a quarter of an ell wide (c.14 cm). To this piece of wood are nailed two ram's horns, and below the horns, eyes are made, and glass knocked into these. Down the cheeks, grey sheepskin is nailed. Nostrils are also made, and in these are placed two candle-holders, that is to say objects of wood that look like them, with holes in, and in these are placed two candles which are lit when it comes into the room. A square hole is made below the eyes. Into this is thrust a pole that is held by the man when he acts this monster. This is about one and a half ells in length (c. 90 cm). It is wrapped in a blanket, and under the blanket goes the man who acts the part in the game. Another piece of wood is used below the pole, and attached to the animal-head. The actor claps this over everyone in the house causing so much dust and smoke that some rub their eyes, and those who are more sensitive start crying. This goes on with dance actions, *skjaldmeyjar* and terrorising (*skrekkigangi*), because in appearance the head looks like the worst of creatures or a monster." As I say, clear parallels are seen with the Scandinavian *julebukk* (Christmas goat), the Faroese *jólahestur* (Christmas horse), and several similar beings from the British Isles. Note, once again, the elements of dust, smoke, terrorism, and monstrous appearance. Here too, the threat and the action breaks down divisions, fear and excitement helping to bring the group into physical and social contact. Us and it. Inside and outside.

A natural follow up is a joint men's and women's *vikivaki*, danced by both sexes, the circle once again restored following the expulsion of the threat. However, the attack is not yeat over: The *vikivaki* is quickly succeeded by the arrival of yet another monstrous figure, now not only coming to dance or frighten, but rather, like everyone else in the room, looking for *love*: this is the Old Hag and her daughter, both of them acted by men, the daughter apparently usually acted by one of the most well-spoken men in the room. Here we have of course a parallel to the valkyries, but now with gross distortion, probably echoing the vision of some in the room at the time. The costume of the Old Hag is described as follows: "First of all, a hairy dogskin bag is filled with flour, and this is forced onto her head and firmly bound under her chin. She is then clad in a ragged dress of horsehair sacking which reaches down to her backside. Apart from this, she is covered in old flour-bags, and other rags and tatters. A mask with spectacles on covers her visage. She has a fishskin bag on her back and some tattered seaman's gloves on her hands." In short, she is not only quite a sight in the shadows of the doorway, but also quite a smell. Considering the natural of all the recrnt arrivals though that door, one also starts to wonder exactly what the world outside has turned into. Now, however, the threat is essentially directed towards the men in the room. Icelandic folktales often tell of men who have been robbed for the physical delectation of lonely troll women (especially at Christmas time), and this old hag is no exception. She and her daughter present their credentials, enter the room, and start evaluating the raw material. A sixty year old man is not up to much, a twenty year old far too inexperienced. A thirty year old, "that'll do nicely". Horns are blown, and eating motions implied, after which dust is blown about, and a wild dance ensues, involving insults, satire and general lewdness, until the old hag finally snuffles her way out of the room, *her* costume also in great disarray. Bacchanalia is probably the correct word for what has taken place. This, to my mind, is the anarchic climax of the evening, underlining a change of things, and the alteration of accepted rules. The outside has come in, and, as I say, the audience are now clearly part of the play world. This is total theatre of the kind Artaud dreamed of.

After this, things start easing off slightly. The visits from the Twilight Zone, however, are not totally over: The men now dance solo, while the women rearrange themselves, only to find that *they* are the next targets, when the ensuing Hjörtleikur or the Hart game commences. Now, to properly understand this, you need to bear in mind that reindeer did not start being imported to Iceland until 1771 (the main importation from Norway going on until 1789). We should note, however, that this particular game is referred in at least six accounts stemming from before that time, the earliest coming from the mid seventeenth century. The name and concept suggests clear links with Norway, but for the average untravelled Icelander, this horned being would have as fantastic as a unicorn or a rhinoceros, a þingálp or a trollwoman. The uncertainty is evident in the Niðurraðan description of the costume, which talks of the actor being completely hidden from view under a cloth. On his back, however, is a cross of wood with candles in the end of each of the arms, an attempt to imitate the horns that people had heard about. In this guise, the hart slowly but definitely enters and moves around the room on all fours (or using stumps of wood on the front). Accounts suggest that he went mainly for the women, shepherding them together. Beauty (in the additional light and decorative costume) is mixed with sexual threat. One shouldn't forget that one Icelandic legend tells of the devil suddenly appearing out of nowhere the moment the hart entered the room. It is said elsewhere that this was not a popular role to play, because of the lack of vision. It would not surprise me if there were other imagined dangers, both physical and spiritual.

The word *hjörtur* or hart in Icelandic as in English implies the need for a hind, and a logical progression in the Niðurraðan Order of Ceremonies is the next game, Þórhildarleikur (which, apparently could be replaced by another well-known game from the Scandinavian mainland literally called the Hind Game. This was really an early literal version of Cilla's Blind Date, where someone known as the Hind Mother blindfolds girls and guys and leads them to choose their partners for the final dance, and perhaps the rest of the evening if not life.) Þórhildarleikur, the Game of Þórhildur, is a little more formal but has the same aim in mind. Here, another cross-dressed male actually does the choosing for the participants, following this up with a mock marriage, very much like what happens in the the Danish tradition of the Julebisp, or Christmas mock bishop. Once paired, the thrilled, exhausted and highly tipsy couples go on to dance at least two more deliberately mixed dances (including the imported *Hoffinsleikur*) before the eventual culmination of the evening, when they (in time) start setting out for home.

I should note, however, that Niðurraðan does not stop here, but goes on to describe one other game that we also read about in other sources. This is a game called Háa-Þóra, which supposedly can replace the Þingálp, but has a similar chaotic effect to the game of the Old Hag. Here we have a man carrying a large effigy of a woman, built around a pole with a cross bar. He starts by entering the room, and creeping around amidst the dance, with the effigy slipping amongst people's legs, before leaping up and dancing around, until the costume is in tatters.

“It is made in such a fashion, that a two-ell (c. 114 cm) long pole is taken, like a wooden spade in size. This (pole) is topped with a tall woman's head-dress, and a white strip of cloth is bound around this in such a way that the end is left trailing down. Another pole is then placed across the first one, and tied to it. A large bunch of keys is hung from this. After that, a long, black woman's coat is (placed around the frame, and) done up at the neck, and a man goes underneath. An apron is fixed

to the front, and a decorative belt drawn over it. When the god (idol?) has been prepared in this way, a man goes under the dress, holds the pole and hammers at the stone or the floor. When he comes to the door, he politely lays the pole flat on the ground, and then creeps between the legs of most of those standing around, as slowly as he can, and then breaks loose, and runs around the whole house, as far as the pole reaches up into the rafters, shaking and rattling, so that everything goes mad and breaks, the keys and the strips/ ribbons. The skjaldmeyjar play around on both sides. They act as badly with everyone as they can."

These then, are the vikivaki games. Hopefully I've given you some idea of the atmosphere and structure of the performance itself, which, as I say, needs to be considered alongside the costumes. It is also always worthwhile noting which features the authors place emphasis on in their accounts, because these give us some idea of the impression that beings left behind them. And of course, in many cases here, we are getting a child's-eye view. We note the emphasis on the sound effects, which the costumes seem designed to compliment: The rattling and jangling of keys and other metallic objects on the horse, Háa-Þóra and the Þingálp (which in another account is said to have been covered with shells). The thumping and battering on the door and the floor by the valkyries' clubs, and the pole of Háa-Þóra; the clapping jaws of the þingálp. The dust, flour and smoke of the Þingálp and Old Hag, the intense stench of the latter. The primitive lighting – and shadow creating – effects of the flickering and smoking tallow flames licking out of the nostrils of the Þingálp and off the back of the Hart. The stamping of the dancers, the rhythm of the songs, and the overall excitement and anticipation of the evening as a whole. The internal circle vs the individual external grotesque threats. As I mentioned earlier, this is intense and very basic total theatre. One can see how the lonely priest left behind to write sermons in his windy turf rectory might have felt a little piqued about things.

But what was the origin of all this? One nineteenth-century scholars pointed to parallels between the Hart and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Others later made vague mentions of similar beings existing in Danish and Swedish tradition. The most recent proposal (from the 1950s) by the Swedish scholar, Dag Strömbäck, noted parallels between the Icelandic horse and the hobby horses known in English folk custom, but argued that the closest parallels were to be seen amongst the Basque people, where the horse is eventually gelded as part of the dance, giving it particularly good reason for leaping high in the air. Parallels, however, are one thing. Proving and explaining such links, however, is quite another. Certainly, the horse costume described here is not Scandinavian. Certainly, Basque sailors occasionally came to Iceland to trade, but I very much doubt whether they ever brought a dance horse along with them for the ride. Icelandic contact with England, on the other hand, was of quite another persuasion. Until they became hampered by the Hansa merchants and the Danish trading monopoly, the English had strong and regular trading contacts with the Icelanders, particularly during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It is quite possible, if not probable that the Icelanders picked up the horse *costume*, along with its cavalier-like rider in the broad brimmed hat from them. One notes, however, that the game, and even the song that might accompany it, concentrates on the horse itself, rather than the rider who is an extra. We should also remember Faroese clapper-jawed *þingálp*, which also appeared at dances, was referred to as a *jólahestur*, and that the same word is found in a thirteenth century record from Bergen in Norway, concerning a man named Arnaldus jólhestur: literally Arnold the Christmas horse. In short, it seems to me that what we have here,

and in the Christmas goat-like Þingálp, is essentially a development of older pan-Scandinavian guising traditions, underlined by the way that the figures enter and leave the dance room, coming from the outside. As I say, house-visiting traditions seem to have been deeply rooted in Shetland, Scandinavia and the Faroes. However, as I have stressed earlier, guising in Iceland at the time of the vikivaki games would have been very difficult. Indeed, those who actually still tried it in the Western Fjords in the nineteen fifties have stressed this fact to me: it could take them twelve hours to visit eight or nine farms. The most logical move was to follow the pattern adopted by the eighteenth-century bourgeoisie in Copenhagen, who would gather in a drawing room to dance and drink hot toddy, and then be visited by a token Christmas goat. This social pattern is particularly well reflected in Holberg's play *Julestue* (the Christmas Party) from 1724, and probably occurred in the homes of Danish merchants in Iceland in growing centres like Reykjavík. Certainly, direct links with such social gatherings are underlined in the Icelandic adoption of mainland Scandinavian pairing games like the Hind Game and Hoffinn's Game (and less directly The Game of Þórhildur), all of which were well known in Norway and Denmark, and precisely in the context of this kind of civilised Christmas gathering. In Denmark and Norway, we also hear of the same kind of rudimentary lighting effects whereby candles are held on sticks born in the mouth. We also hear of stumps of wood being used for the thumping forefeet of disguised animal figures, and of course of animals being built around poles with horned heads stuck on top. The Hart Game points a finger directly towards Norwegian origins. In short, everything suggests that we should first of all look towards Scandinavia for a possible origin to these traditions, before we start looking further afield. From that point, however, we also need to consider differences: and in this context, first of all, we should be aware that the Danish *julestue* hardly ever involved more than one animal disguise (i.e. the Christmas goat). Secondly, in spite of the close parallels between the Scandinavian Christmas goats, and the horned Icelandic Þingálp, it is noteworthy that we *never* find the Icelanders referring to this being as a goat or even drawing comparisons between the two. Goats were admittedly as unknown as reindeer at this time in Iceland. It would seem that if the Icelandic þingálp and the *julebukk* had shared roots, which I think they had, then they already were well beyond living memory in the sixteenth-century, when all of these figures were clearly well established in Iceland. This encourages me to go back to what I mentioned at the start about possible links between the Icelandic vikivaki game figures and the contemporary medieval accounts concerning the figure of "skin Grýla", a figure that, as I noted, went on to reappear in guising traditions in Shetland and the Faroes. It is worth remembering that the disguised Faroese *grýlur* (who once dressed in skins and/ or seaweed) go round (and supposedly return to the mountains) the day after the Christmas dancing season is over, that is to say, at the start of Lent. Now the old Faroese dancing tradition, very much like that known in Iceland, used to sometimes involve disguised animal figures like the aforementioned *jólahestur* and another one called the *jóla-høna* (or Christmas Chicken). In simple terms, the sudden appearance of disguised figures outside the dance room, at the doorways of local houses at the end of the Faroese dance season seems to be simply outlining that "The Christmas Chicken has left the building"... We see a similar tradition in the St. Knut's Day mummers in Scandinavia who go round houses with brooms to mark the end of Christmas, sweeping or banging out the Christmas spirits. In short, then, I feel that the animal disguises in the Icelandic – and Faroese – dance traditions, and the Scandinavian house-visiting are really inseparable. In essence they belong to the same tradition, and both have early roots. Indeed, parallels to the insulting verses that spout from the mouth of a visitor who has come from afar, and party crashes

a banquet of the gods can be clearly seen in the early medieval dramatic Eddic poem *Lokasenna*. There are of course also clear parallels between the monstrous ogress skin Grýla and the troll-like Old Hag and Háa-Þóra, all of which along with the Valkýrjur stress that a tradition of dramatic cross-dressing was well-known in Iceland. An early version of this might be seen in the Eddic poem *Þrymskviða*, where Þórr dresses up as the goddess Freyja for a mock wedding.

It is worthwhile noting, however, that such cross-dressing traditions seem to have been less common in the Scandinavian traditions that we know from later centuries. And it is here that I would like to come towards an end, by raising the question of whether it is possible that this feature might originate, like the costume of the horse, in the British Isles. Certainly, the Old Hag figure of the Cailleach is well known in Scottish folk belief. I would thus like use the opportunity to asking whether any of you know of any costumes similar to that of Háa-Þóra (Tall Þóra) in the UK or elsewhere. I'm also wondering whether the visit of the Old Hag and her daughter should be viewed in the context of the northern English wooing plays. In general terms, this is a subject that needs to be opened to more scholars with a better knowledge of the traditions in Iceland's neighbouring countries. It's my hope that the information I have given you both in this lecture and especially in the handouts, will enable us to make a start to this cooperation.

Translations of Source Material on Vikivaki Games

General

Bishop Oddur Einarsson (?), *Qualiscunqve Descriptio Islandiae* (1588-89): Refers to certain gatherings of people on Christian holidays (“uigilijs sanctorum”), who “between dances presented other play activities and ridiculous spectacles” (“et alternatim alias ludicras actiones et ridicula spectacula exhibendo”). Later mentions the “ridiculous, effeminate and lascivious activities” (“ridiculas, effæminatas et lasciuas actiones”) that occurred at these gatherings: quoted in Jón Samsonarson, *Kvæði*, I, p.xxxiii.

Séra Gunnar Pálsson: (Vikivaki poem): “Some make themselves into reindeer, some go and ride a horse” (clxxii)

Disguises and Games

a) Þingálp

i) Jón Lærði Guðmundsson (1644)

“Þingálpn on the moors and in the woods”: “This forest creature (?) wants to capture and defeat handsome, and well dressed people. A game played at wake nights was built around this. A man was got and dressed up, and the same goes for the one he wants to catch. I saw this in my youth.”

Quoted in Jón Samsonarson, *Kvæði*, I, p.clxxiv.

ii) Árni Magnússon (early 18th century)

“þingálpn”: “a contraption in a Christmas game ... a man in a monstrous costume, walking, so to speak, on all fours.”

Quoted in Jón Samsonarson, *Kvæði*, I, p.clxxiii.

iii) Niðurraðan (before 1800)

“And while that is going on (I mean the vikivaki), the game called “þingálp” is prepared. It is prepared as follows. First of all, a rectangular piece of wood of taken, about half an ell (28.5 cm) in length, and about a quarter of an ell wide (c.14 cm). To this piece of wood are nailed two ram’s horns, and below the horns, eyes are made, and glass knocked into these. Down the cheeks, grey sheepskin is nailed. Nostrils are also made, and in these are placed two candle-holders, that is to say objects of wood that look like them with holes in, and in these are placed two candles which are lit when it comes into the room. A square hole is made below the eyes. Into this is thrust a pole that is held by the man when he acts this monster. This is about one and a half ells in length (c. 90 cm). It is wrapped in a blanket, and under the blanket goes the man who acts the part in the game. Another piece of wood is used below the pole, and attached to the animal-head. The actor claps this over everyone in the house causing so much dust and smoke that some rub their eyes, and those who are more sensitive start crying. This goes on with dance actions, *skjaldmeyjar* and terrorising (*skrekkigangi*), because in appearance the head looks like the worst of creatures or a monster. Now something has been said about this, but more detail could be given is there is need.”

Quoted in Jón Samsonarson, *Kvæði*, p.liv-v)

iv) *Magnús Andrésson (1864)*

The "*finngálkn* crawling on all fours"... "monstrous in all ways, covered in the ugliest rags it was possible to find, and clusters of shells which clattered and rattled." "The *finngálkn* tried to go under the women's skirts, and also shook ash off its rags or body until the men attacked it and drove it back out the same way that it had entered."

Quoted in Jón Samsonarson, *Kvæði*, I, p.lxxiii-lxxxiv.

b) **Hestleikur**

i) *Jón Ólafsson From Grunnavík (mid 18th century)*

"*Hestreið*: riding a horse. A rectangular frame is covered with clothes, a head and tail. The man goes into this frame, and then acts like he is riding, even though in actual fact he is walking and carrying the frame with him. In addition, there are *valkyrjur*, or vestal virgins, who are young men dressed in women's clothes who dance around the horse."

Quoted in Jón Samsonarson, *Kvæði*, I, p.clxix.

ii) *Niðurraðan (before 1800)*

"While the men's vikivaki is going on, the *hestleikur* is prepared. This is prepared as follows: First of all a frame is put together, somewhat like a manure box. This should be big enough to be squeezed up over the man's hips. A strong hoop is bound to this frame, running out behind the man. A red pinafore is placed on this, and sewn firmly all the way around. To this, two or three long strips of material are attached, which run equally to the sides. Cloths of various colours are placed on the pinafore. As many as 10 brass strips are also placed on it, with so much decoration that everything glows. A bunch of keys is attached to the front of the frame, and the horse jangles this as he runs into the dance-room. He is put into a smock or dress, if one is available, with a white scarf running down his back and over his chest. He also has a hat on his head with the front brim folded down. To this white towels are knotted, the tassels of which run back down to his thighs. Two *skjaldmeyjar* accompany him. They both have wear *skaut* (national headwear) and the same finery and jewelery as the horse. And when the game is about to begin, the *skjaldmeyjar* knock on the door, and then run in, ringing and jangling. And now the horse comes to the door and shoots in. People take the *skjaldmeyjar* by the hand and swing back and forth for a long time, until the horse starts limping. Then he has only one foot. The *skjaldmeyjar* then take the bad horse-foot and spit on the hoof, hitting it with their clubs until he shows that he no longer has a limp. And now they take him, turn him upside down, and lift him up over the rafters, as he sways and calls, pulls faces and shakes, jingles and plays as much as he can. The dance is chanted as close to the action as possible, as with the following: "What will cause my horse..." etc. And then the game is finished. By then, all of the preparations and costume that was put together at the start has been broken and smashed."

Quoted in Jón Samsonarson, *Kvæði*, I, p.liii-liv

iii) Guðni Guðmundsson (1870)

“Hestleikur: This was a man dressed up with a hoop around his waist, and over this a wide cloth; on this are placed burning candles, but I do not know how many. With this, he ran across the floor, with a man on either side dressed in *skjaldmeyjar* costume. The horse was regarded as well-ridden if the candles did not go out. This was chanted: What controls my horse?/ He doesn't come to the green field./ He bears a young woman./ He gallops on his hooves.”

Quoted in Jón Samsonarson, *Kvæði*, I, p.lxxix.

Hjörtleikur

i) Jón Ólafsson from Grunnavík (mid 18th century)

Hjörtleikur, vel hjartarleikur, seu hjartleikur. Ludus Cervæ, vel Cervinus, illi etiam skrimslī (monstrum) adjunctum est

Quoted in Jón Samsonarson, *Kvæði*, I, p.clxxvii.

ii) Nidurraðan (before 1800)

“... and while the vikivaki goes on, the fourth game is taken up, which is the *hjörtleikur*. He is made in such a way that a man stands on all fours. Then, a red pinafore is laid across his back. There are long cloths running down on both sides. A little square cloth is placed on his back. On this a wooden cross is sewn down, with round holes in each corner. Candles are attached to these, and these are lit when the *hjörtur* comes in. There are also strips of cloth (*listar*) running back and forth along the back, as neatly as possible. To the front of the pinafore is attached a long scarf, with which he is led in. He goes as slowly as he can by each person's feet. He walks with two long stumps. This goes on for a long time. The women are made to stand in a ring, and the *hjörtur* crawls behind the people and gets everything into a crowd. Meanwhile, a dance goes on, and a poem chanted: namely: “I saw the *hjörtur* run/ over the green heath;/ wild tongues bore him/ such a long way.” And so on. And when it has been played to the end, he leaves again, but the women turn to a vikivaki, all of those who stood around the hart, and they chant the most beautiful poems which few know, and everyone listens together.”

Quoted in Jón Samsonarson, *Kvæði*, I, p.lix.

iii) Brynjólfur Jónsson (1862)

“Another figure was the hart. This was usually the shortest man. He walked on all fours, and a red cloth was spread over him, so that he couldn't be seen at all. On the outside were candle-holders, and burning candles in these, so the hart was all lit up and walked back and forth across the floor, and was very beautiful, but he couldn't see anything himself because of the cloth, and thus no one liked being the hart.”

Quoted in Jón Samsonarson, *Kvæði*, I, p.xcvi.

iv) Sigurður Guðmundsson (1863)

"I have heard mention of the hjartarleikur being one of the vikivaki games. It looks like men put some kind of deer horns on and acted harts."

Quoted in Jón Samsonarson, *Kvæði*, I, p.lxxvii. iv)

"I have heard that in Arnarbæli in the west, there was once a vikivaki, and when they had dressed the hart, something historical happened (probably a nasty way of living), because Old Nick came in at that moment. I could not find out what happened, but it ended with the devil sinking down into the floor of the living room, and the hole can still not be filled. This proves that what old Magnús said about the hart must be right, and that it also appeared in the west. I have also heard a man from the north of the country say the the hart was a man in costume, decorated with candles."

Quoted in Jón Samsonarson, *Kvæði*, I, p.lxxvi.

v) Magnús Andrésson (1864)

"The hart was a man on all fours who was got ready in the front room (*skála*), but came in completely covered with a flowery striped (?) material over his back, and all the finery that accompanies this. On his back were four candles in a cross. He moved forward very slowly and quietly into the ring of people, but was a little too forward with the women. At last he crept back out into the front corridor."

Quoted in Jón Samsonarson, *Kvæði*, I, p.lxxiii.

vi) Guðni Guðmundsson (1870)

Hjartarleikurinn: "This was a man well done up. A cloth was spread across his back, and into this candles placed. He was regarded as well ridden (tamed?) if the candles did not go out."

Quoted in Jón Samsonarson, *Kvæði*, I, p.lxxix.

vii) Einar Jónsson (1877)

"When everyone had sat down, a man came in who was very strangely dressed, especially about his head. He had a head dress with three burning candles on it. This man was called the "light-hart". He walked in silently and went along by the tables while people were eating and then left."

Quoted in Jón Samsonarson, *Kvæði*, I, p.cii.

d) Valkyrjur/ skjaldmeyjar:

See other accounts, especially Niðurraðan (Jón Samsonarson, *Kvæði*, I, p.lv, liii) above: Háa-þóra/ Þingálp/ Hestleikur; and Jón Ólafsson (on Hestleikur)

Eggert Ólafsson (MS of *Reise igiennom Island: Sórey 1772*. "Amazoner eller skio-ldmøer" ("Amazons or shield-maidens") in these "skuuespill" ("dramas"): (Jón Samsonarson, *Kvæði*, I, p.xlviii).

e) **Háa-Þóra:**

i) *Niðurraðan (before 1800)*

“I have left out one dance game which is somewhat different to the other games. This is used instead of the *þingálp* when that is not available, and is called Háa Þóra. It is made in such a fashion, that a two-ell (c. 114 cm) long pole is taken, like a wooden spade in size. This (pole) is topped with a tall woman’s head-dress, and a white strip of cloth is bound around this in such a way that the end is left trailing down. Another pole is then placed across the first one, and tied to it. A large bunch of keys is hung from this. After that, a long, black woman’s coat is (placed around the frame, and) done up at the neck, and a man goes underneath. An apron is fixed to the front, and a decorative belt drawn over it. When the god (idol?) has been prepared in this way, a man goes under the dress, holds the pole and hammers at the stone or the floor. When he comes to the door, he politely lays the pole flat on the ground, and then creeps between the legs of most of those standing around, as slowly as he can, and then breaks loose, and runs around the whole house, as far as the pole reaches up into the rafters, shaking and rattling, so that everything goes mad and breaks, the keys and the strips/ ribbons. The *skjaldmeyjar* play around on both sides. They act as badly with everyone as they can. Háa-Þóra dashes up onto the platform, and up there does a lot of damage, so much so that people are on the edge of getting hurt. She does not even leave the dance-singer in peace. He has quite enough to do, protecting his face from all of her pushing and pulling. When she calms down, she creeps out, sticking all her costume (?) between her legs, all tangled up and tattered. By then all of the *pör* have broken and the keys gone out of place. The god is rarely used in dance gatherings. Most people chant insulting and satirical songs in the dance, such as:

I saw a beautiful headdress,/ so beautifully she spun./ The old
bitch lifted herself up at the back. And such like.”

Quoted, in Jón Samsonarson, *Kvæði*, I, p.lxiii.-lxiv

ii) *Brynjólfur Jónsson (1862)*

“Others say about the vikivaki that in Háva-Þóra, the tallest man was dressed up in a women’s coat, with a tall headdress, and then played for the others. It was seen as being a lot of fun to act Háva-Þóra.”

Quoted in Jón Samsonarson, *Kvæði*, I, p.xcvi.

iii) *Magnus Andrésson (1864)*

“Háva-Þóra was a fathom-long (c.167 cm) weaving pole. On top of this was placed a big, wide women’s headdress which hung forward (*slutti fram*) as described in *Skautaljóð*. This was all waved up around the rafters of the living room to the delight of the audience.”

Quoted in Jón Samsonarson, *Kvæði*, I, p.lxxiii.

f) **Kerlingarleikur**

i) *Niðurraðan (before 1800)*

Now a men's and women's vikivaki is held. Then everyone chants nasty verses in turn. While this is going on, the damned old hag is got ready: it's hard to exaggerate about her. First of all, the daughter who follows the old hag will be described. For her, a well-spoken, calm, and well-behaved man is chosen. He is dressed up in finery, first of all given a headdress, the tassel hanging down his neck, and then they put a woman's coat on him. Then two long strips of cloth are sewn, one down the chest and the other down the back. She also carries a bunch of keys which she waves and rattles whenever she wishes. Next we have to describe the old hag. She is dressed up in the following decorative fashion: first of all, a hairy dogskin bag is filled with flour, and this is forced onto her head and firmly bound under her chin. She is then clad in a ragged dress of horsehair sacking which reaches down to her backside. Apart from this, she is covered in old flour-bags, and other rags and tatters. A mask with spectacles on covers her visage. She has a fishskin bag on her back and some tattered seaman's gloves on her hands. Dressed like this, she totters along to the living-room door. The daughter has come in, and chats with the host. Then the most well-spoken man is expected to ask her for the latest news. The old hag is accompanied by two slaves who are called Kári and tall Benedikt. The daughter asks after both of them, because she acts like she knows them well. But when the old hag hears their names, she lets loose an awful wail. The daughter asks for permission for her mother to enter the dance-room, and she is granted this, as long as she introduces herself. She takes a purse out of her bag, and the following testimony:

Here at the door
to add sparkle to the group
is Fleinhildur the ancient
from her trips to the east.

All men

she has asked
for favours
on her travels.

The mother has
a remarkable name:
She is called Gunnhildur
the Terribly Strong.
But the daughter is called
a beauteous girl
Eldgríður opin
which troubles her much.

One could write more here, but I've forgotten their introductions. I had three, and the introduction to the second runs as follows:

Here at the door
is an aging woman
and her daughter
a beautiful girl...

and so on....

When this is over, the daughter goes to the door and says the following to the mother:

Let's go to the palace
mother dear,
Let's go to the palace,
Mother dear of mine.

Then the old hag answers, and acts in such a way that no wild animal could behave in a worse fashion:

What to do there,
daughter dear,
what to do there,
daughter dear of mine?

The daughter chants:

Let us buy us,
Let us buy us a young man,
mother dear of mine.

The old hag answers:

How old should he be,
how old should he be,
daughter dear of mine?

The daughter chants:

Sixty years of age,
sixty years of age,
oh mother dear of mine.

The old hag answers

He is far too antiquated
daughter dear,
he is far too antiquated
daughter dear of mine.

The daughter says:

Twenty years of age,
twenty years of age,
oh mother dear of mine.

And then the old hag says:

He is far too youthful, he,
He is far too youthful,
daughter dear of mine.

The daughter chants again and says:

Thirty years of age,
thirty years of age,
oh mother dear of mine.

Then the old woman takes a ram's horn or an empty jug and trumpets into that, saying:

He'll do me quite well enough,
He'll do me quite well enough,
daughter dear of mine.

When that is over, they throw the old hag to the ground. She blows her horn, and makes the worst of threats, and then she acts as if she is going to eat. She reaches for the fish-skin bag on her back, and blows into everyone's face. Then Kári comes from under the platform and serves her as best he can. Tall Benedikt does the same. Then this family performs a vikivaki, each chanting to the other insults and jokes. After that everything gets going, while a chant is given to accompany the dance. Then all metallic objects in the dance-room are on the move, until the costume of the old hag starts getting into disarray. After that, the old hag sniffs her way out, but the daughter remains and runs madly around the house until she grows exhausted. Everyone spits after her, and then she leaves. And then this game has finished, and everything is silent, just like the proverb says: Joy is followed by silence.

Quoted in Jón Samsonarson, *Kvæði*, I, p.lv-lix

ii) *Eyjólfur Einarsson Í Svefneyjum (Reported by Sigurður Guðmundsson)*
(mid 19th cent.)

"Eyjólfur also mentioned that one form of game was called Þórhildarleikur, or the tröllkonuleikur (the Trollwoman game). This game involved the tallest man who had come to the vikivaki being chosen and given a headdress of sheepskin, and then being dressed in women's clothing. He was probably supposed to represent a troll woman who was called Þórhildur (but what did this Þórhildur do?). Eyjólfur also mentioned that a man was chosen to be responsible for all the ale that had been bought with the general kitty."

TAG: Probably a muddle of Háa-Þóra, the Kelling, and Þórhildur?

Further Material on the Vikivaki Games (and Related Traditions) in English:

Gunnell, Terry, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (Woodbridge, 1995)

Gunnell, Terry, "Grýla, Grýlur, Gröleks and Skeklers", *Arv* (2001)

Strömbäck, Dag, "Cult Remnants in Icelandic Dramatic Dances", *Arv*, 4 (1948), 132-145

Strömbäck, Dag, "Icelandic Dramatic Dances and their Western European Background", *Universitet I Bergen Årbok, Historisk-antikvarisk rekke* (1955), 92-99.

Original texts in Icelandic in: Jón Samsonarson, *Kvæði og dansleikir* I-II (Reykjavík, 1964): All texts quoted here from the first volume.