

# Remnants of Revenants: The Role of the Dreaded *Draugr* in Medieval Iceland

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*“Just as the day is given over to the living, the night is the domain of the dead.”*  
– Brigid, Abbess of the Monastery of Saint Laurent

European legends of deadly revenants date from ancient Germanic folklore and literature. Like their ghostly namesake, the stories were resurrected in post-Icelandic Conversion sagas and in medieval ghost stories from northern England.

The term “revenant” is a French term for ghost, derived from the verb *revenir*, “to return.” The Icelandic term is more specific to the returning and violently unhappy dead: the feared *draugr*. These Scandinavian ghosts are almost always purely physical. They rise from the burial grounds (howes), bash the living, and generally make horrible nuisances of themselves until heroes overpower them and destroy their corpses for good. They owe their place in folklore to earlier Germanic literature: a heroic and supernatural tradition that shows up in the medieval Icelandic sagas and ghost stories from northern England.

## ***Tracing the Ancient Germanic Story***

The Vikings brought the ancient Germanic literary tradition from Scandinavia to the rest of Europe. The literary form survived in several related language groups including Anglo-Saxon (Old English), Old Saxon, Old and Middle High German, and Old Icelandic. Not all of the Germanic influences stayed strong -- the Vikings who settled in non-Scandinavian countries readily adopted Christianity and dropped their pagan practices and beliefs, and by the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century Christianity was well established in Denmark and most of Norway. (Sweden eventually followed suit in the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century.) Since Viking settlers eventually assimilated into well-entrenched Christian cultures in England and the Continent, the Germanic literary tradition of heroic sagas and violent ghosts paled against the French courtly traditions and Arthurian romances.<sup>1</sup> (In England, the Viking influence that spawned *Beowulf* and the gruesome ghost stories of Yorkshire came from north and east England – the territory of the Viking Danelaw.)

However, ancient Germanic tradition thrived in Iceland where the Viking settlers did not have to contend with a native culture. Even though Iceland converted to Christianity in 1000 A.D., its 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> century poets and writers produced an amazing body of work modeled on the ancient Germanic traditions of their Viking ancestors -- complete with Germanic monsters, gods, heroes and ghosts.

## ***The Scandinavian Ghost Story***

A common element in the Icelandic sagas is the hostile corporeal ghost, the *draugr*. *Draugr* differ in some details, but they share important characteristics. They were physical spirits, and intimidating ones: large and strong, they were often described as being as big as a cow (*neat*). They were far heavier than even their large bodies make them, and were difficult or impossible to carry or drag. The closer a *draugr* got to a church – dragged by men who were tired of being attacked -- the heavier it would get. They were usually violent and often stupid, although occasionally one would spout a sophisticated prophetic utterance.<sup>ii</sup>

Their resting place was quite important in the *draugr* scheme of things. Scandinavian barrows, called howes, were reported to be ringed by barrow fires that formed a barrier between the living and dead worlds. In *The Saga of Grettir*, Grettir sees such a flame on the barrow of Kar the Old. Grettir commented that the fires may signal the presence of buried treasure, but the farmer he was speaking to replied, “The owner of this fire, I think, is one whom it is better not to enquire about.”

Some *draugr* stayed in their howe, only stirring themselves to attack grave robbers and treasure hunters who ventured to enter their domain. Other *draugr* would poke about just outside their howes, waylaying any beast or human unlucky enough to pass by too closely. In these cases, moving the howe to a more remote site usually stopped the attacks. However, the most feared and violent of all the *draugr* would roam an entire region. These *draugr* traveled into towns and broke into great halls to kill people and animals and to ride the rooftops of the houses, apparently a favorite sport among the giant-like creatures.

### **The Draugr at Home – or Not**

*Unliving in the Howe*. Of all the *draugr*, the least dangerous was the *haugbi*, or howe-dweller. They could be as violent and deadly as any other revenant, but since they stayed in their howes their victims usually brought their fate on themselves. Some *haugbi* attacked physically as they would have in life, but others were capable of using evil magic against trespassers, or were so plague-ridden and noisome that the living would flee or be overcome by the fumes. According to the Danish history *Saxo Grammaticus*, the evil sorcerer Mithothyn’s corpse “emitted such foul plagues that he almost seemed to leave more loathsome reminders of himself dead than when alive.”

Sometimes the living came seeking advice, helpful spells or items they had some right to. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century *Hervarar Saga*, Chapter IV, a female warrior named Hervör insisted on visiting the haunted island where her father and uncles were buried so she could claim a famous sword from her father’s grave. When she approached, she saw cold fires blazing around the howes and the dead men standing in the dark doorways. She roused them by reciting a ritualistic verse claiming her right to speak with the dead:<sup>iii</sup>

Awake, Angantýr! Hervör rouses you—  
Only daughter of you and Tófa...

Hervarðr, Hjörvarðr, Hrani, Angantýr,  
I rouse you all from under the roots.

Her father seems nice enough about it, but warns her about her actions:

Hervör, daughter, why call you so?  
Why such fell curses? You do yourself ill.  
Mad must you be, all too witless,  
And lost to wisdom to rouse dead men.

Indeed the sword Tyrving was cursed, and the girl's comment at the end of the chapter proved prophetic:

I seemed to be lost between the worlds,  
While around me burned the fires...

***Around the Howe.*** Some *draugr* would leave their howe to haunt the surrounding countryside, attacking people or animals that approached too closely. In these cases, the living would move the howe to a more remote place. This often did the trick, since the revenant would only charge out of its resting place if a living being got too close. This happened in a morbidly funny story where a cruel and violent man named Hrapp insisted to his wife Vigdis that she bury him upright underneath the doorway of his great hall ("fire hall") so he could "keep a more searching eye on my dwelling." When he died she buried him according to his wishes, too frightened to do anything else. Sadly he kept walking out of the grave and killing the servants, so Vigdis left to live with her brother. The hero Hoskuld took his men and went to Hrappstead, dug Hrapp out of the floor, and buried him in a remote place. This cut down on Hrapp's walking about, but a curse seemed to cling to Hrappstead. After her son died there "in a frenzy" Vigdis flat-out refused to go home.<sup>iv</sup> (*Laxdaela Saga, Chapter XVII*)

***Wide-Ranging Revenants.*** Some *draugr* were so driven, strong and bold that they left their howes far behind to ravage an entire region. These powerful *draugr* ripped great hall doors off their frames, danced on town roofs, and smashed beasts and humans to smithereens. The story of Grendel from *Beowulf* is this type of *draugr*, and so is the revenant Glam from the *Grettis Saga*.

## Living with the Dead

The living had several weapons in their arsenal for foiling the *draugr*, including cremation. Cremation was by no means limited to the laying the dead, but it was a common way to dispose of stubbornly active corpses. It usually worked like a charm, but there were exceptions. In the *Eyrbyggja Saga*, the hero Thorod came to the aid of one of his bonders. A dead man named Thorolf Haltfoot was haunting Lairstead and killing both men and beasts. Thorod was reluctant to deal with the matter, but was duty-bound to do so. He called his men to him and came to Thorolf's howe. When they found him there he was "even yet unrotten, and as like to a fiend as like could be, blue as hell, and big as a neat cow; and when they went about the raising of him, they could in nowise stir him."

Thinking fast, Thorod and his men gathered logs and placed them under the monster to lever him up and roll him down the hillside. There they burned the corpse, and a stiff breeze carried most of the ashes out to sea. Unfortunately for Thorod, a few of the ashes landed on a rock and a cow licked them up. She eventually gave birth to a huge bull calf, which bellowed in the voice of a demon and gored Thorod to death (*Eyrbyggja Saga*, Chapter LXIII).

Some *draugr* never even made it to the howe before being burned. In the *Flóamanna Saga*, a witch's body kept trying to get up and kill people on its way to the burial ground, so the exasperated bearers put her down and burned the corpse.

Due to the threat of the roaming *draugr*, most Icelanders knocked on doors using code. This is because one night, an unfortunate servant heard a single loud knock on his lord's door and went to investigate. He was a long time returning, and when his master and men went out to look for him they found him stark raving mad from sighting a *draugr* (*Floamanna Saga*). To make sure this didn't happen to them; most Icelanders would knock on each other's door three times after dark. Only evil creatures would give one thundering knock.

Weather and the time of year also played a part in hauntings. The worse the weather was the worse the attacks; which made *draugr* invasions quite the problem in the winter time. Some *draugr* didn't have to wait for weather, but could create their own darkness or mist to hide their actions in daylight.<sup>v</sup>

Not all revenants were that bad. One ghost walked after death but was frightened by the living and ran away, while another was rather sad. This ghost, from the *Svarfdæla Saga*, was a warrior named Klaufi. Klaufi was murdered and returned to haunt the woman who caused his death. The woman's brothers cut the corpse's head off, but Klaufi simply tucked his head under his arm and kept on coming. He spoke with his kinsmen, who fought to avenge him, but later decided that Klaufi was a bit too active and burned him to ashes.

Sometimes the revenants appear in groups, as with the plague victims from *Eyrbyggja Saga* who try to come back home, and a crew of drowned sailors who drippingly appear in the *Laxdaela Saga*. In all these cases, when the bodies are dug up and burned the hauntings stop.<sup>vi</sup>

Sometimes householders took matters into their own hands and made sure the dead couldn't return home – they knocked a hole in a wall and took the corpse out that way, then walled it up again. Since a corpse could only come back the way it had been brought out, it would be confronted by a solid wall!

Contemporary Iceland was Christian, and many of the anti-*draugr* measures had Christian elements. In the story of Glam from the *Grettis Saga*, the men who found Glam's cursed corpse fetched a Christian priest to exorcise it, but Glam's body disappeared until the priest gave up and went away. Icelandic priests were apparently

used to dealing with the walking dead and didn't turn a hair when asked to protect their flock against a revenant. In the *Eyrbyggja Saga*, the Christian priest Arnkel builds a high wall around the suspect grave of Thorolf Halt-Foot. And Snorri the Priest, the lead character in the saga, advises a haunted community to use a sort of ghost trial to banish errant spirits.

Not all revenants come back on their own power but are forced back by witchcraft and sorcery. The *Saxo Grammaticus*, Book I tells the story of an unsavory giantess and shape-changer named Hardgrip. She raised an orphaned prince named Hadding from birth, and then later seduced him.

The two traveled together, and one night they passed a hut where a man had died. Hardgrip practiced black arts to draw the spirit back from the underworld. The spirit cried out and cursed Hardgrip: "For when the black pestilence of the blast that engenders monsters has crushed out the inmost entrails with stern effort, and when their hand has swept away the living with cruel nail, tearing off limbs and rending ravished bodies; then Hadding, thy life shall survive, nor shall the nether realms bear off thy ghost, nor thy spirit pass heavily to the waters of Styx; but the woman who hath made the wretched ghost come back hither, crushed by her own guilt, shall appease our dust; she shall be dust herself." That same night, a disembodied giant's hand tore Hardgrip to pieces in front of Hadding.

It was a fearful thing to rouse the dead.

Many of the *draugr* are outright jealous of the living, which fueled their attacks. They are also really, really hungry. One encounter in *Gautreks Saga* (also told in *Saxo Grammaticus*), was between the sword brothers Aran and Asmund. The two of them had sworn to each other that when one of them died, the other would keep watch for three days inside the howe. Aran later died, so Asmund brought Aran's living hound, hawk and horse with him into the howe and settled down to wait. The first night, Aran's corpse got up and killed and ate the hawk and hound, and the second night did the same to his horse. The third night Asmund started to feel drowsy, and before he knew it Aran was munching on his ears. One assumes that Asmund left after that.<sup>vii</sup>

## The Draugr in a Green and Pleasant Land

Surviving English heroic lays and some strange tales from Yorkshire bear a strong resemblance to the Scandinavian revenant stories. Although Germanic literary influence was faint in England, some early Anglo-Saxon poetry included the heroic lays characteristic of the Germanic tradition. Some of these surviving works include *Beowulf*, *The Battle of Maldon*, *Cynewulf and Cyneheard*, and *The Battle of Finnsburh*<sup>viii</sup>. The strongest parallel between these works and the Icelandic *draugr* is the monster Grendel from *Beowulf*. This famous English heroic poem is the subject of debate as to the time (or times) it was written and its authors. It is from the Scandinavian literary tradition with its verse form, hero and supernatural monsters, and Scandinavian setting. Just like the terrible *draugr* Glam from the *Grettis Saga*, *Beowulf's* Grendel is huge and bloated, possesses terrible strength, has glowing eyes, and insists on breaking into royal halls.<sup>ix</sup>

Grendel's mother, who was even worse than Grendel, also has roots in the Scandinavian ghost story. Some Icelandic sagas refer to the mother of a dead revenant, who sports long claws and is even stronger than her *draugr* son.

Other *draugr*-like ghosts appear in a set of Yorkshire tales from William of Newburgh. William, a Yorkshire monk born in 1136, wrote an English history called *Historia Rerum Anglicarum* and included reports of hauntings in contemporary Scotland, Buckinghamshire and Yorkshire. The stories with their threatening corporeal ghosts were quite unusual for the England of *miracula* and *mirabilia* literature, and display a commonality with the Scandinavian revenant stories.

One of the stories concerns a revenant from Buckinghamshire with distinct similarities to Hrapp from the *Laxdaela Saga*, the *draugr* who haunted his own house. After the Buckinghamshire man died, his ghost repeatedly entered his house and kept trying to sleep with his wife. The alarmed woman fought him off three nights in a row, at which point she got people to stay with her. The ghost then turned from her to haunting his brothers in the same house, and when they got companions too he started to annoy the local livestock. The community sought advice from their Archdeacon, who in turn consulted the bishop of Lincoln. The bishop's advisors told him quite candidly that it was common to dig up the body of the restless dead and cremate it – another holdover from Scandinavian ghost stories and folklore. But the bishop was appalled at the idea and instead told the community to open the grave, place a scroll of absolution from the bishop on the corpse's chest, and close it up again. This was done, and to the community's vast relief the man lay still after that. William included several more ghost stories starring the physical undead. One blood-sucking ghost, an early form of vampire, is also found in the *Saxo Grammaticus*.

An anonymous monk from the Cistercian abbey of Byland in Yorkshire reported another set of alarming regional hauntings. One of them is the ghost of a former mercenary soldier that takes the form of a rearing horse, then changes into a haystack with a light in the middle of it, and finally assumes a human shape. In this shape, he suggests that the living man he is confronting carry the ghost's sack of beans as far as a waterfall! Other ghosts from the Byland reports are quite similar to Scandinavian *draugr*. In one of them, a revenant named Robert escapes from the cemetery every night to scare the nearby town and make the dogs howl. And the ghost of a curate is even worse – he comes back to visit one of his ex-mistresses and gouges out her eyes.

The living's defense is also similar to the Scandinavian tales. The wicked curate is dug up and thrown into a pond, and a large villager manages to hold the ravaging Robert at the cemetery entrance until a local priest could arrive to exorcise it.

## **Conclusion**

The Germanic tradition of the dangerous dead lived on in the folklore and tales of the Vikings. Carried to other lands by their raids and settlements, the stories of the hideous *draugr* were preserved in Icelandic literature and English folklore. The message of the

*draugr* stories was clear: revenants threatened the natural order and must be banished to the underworld. Divine power, heroic strength, and common courage would triumph over the power of darkness. Witness the *draugr*/monster Grendel's bleak and lonely end:

The end of Grendel's life was  
miserable, and he would travel  
far into the hands of fiends.  
Grendel, the foe of God, who had  
long troubled the spirits of men  
with his crimes, found that  
his body could not stand against  
the hand grip of that warrior.  
Each was hateful to the other  
alive. The horrible monster endured  
a wound: the bone-locks  
of his shoulder gave way,  
and his sinews sprang out.  
The glory of battle went to  
Beowulf, and Grendel,  
mortally wounded,  
sought his sad home  
under the fen slope.<sup>x</sup>

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Examples are the Breton lays written by Marie de France (1170), and Geoffrey of Monmouth's history of Arthur in his *Historia* (c.1135).

<sup>ii</sup> Both the *draugr* Glam in *The Grettis Saga* and the newly dead man in *Saxo Grammaticus* accurately predicted death and destruction to their enemies.

<sup>iii</sup> Other seekers spoke similar lines to awaken magical beings and witches who could give them wisdom or spells.

<sup>iv</sup> Since the move to a remote area proved to be insufficient, another hero named Olaf eventually wrestled with the revenant, won, and burned the corpse. This was the end of the matter, though Vigdis never did go home.

<sup>v</sup> The medieval Arab traveler Ahmed ibn Fozzlan (or Fadlan) reported that a bestial demon-race was able to raise a mist to cover its attacks. Fozzlan's diaries were popularized in Michael Crichton's *Eaters of the Dead* and the movie *The 13th Warrior*.

<sup>vi</sup> The living had to do something – the dead sailors were holding mud fights every night and ruining the hall (*Eyrbyggja Saga*).

<sup>vii</sup> In an early section of this strange saga, members of a particular family have a habit of climbing up a peak and jumping to their deaths for the most trivial of reasons, including head colds.

<sup>viii</sup> *The Battle of Finnsburh* only survives in a fragment of a longer poem, but *Beowulf* retells it.

<sup>ix</sup> . Unlike many of the Scandinavian sagas, which were written by Christian authors but do not contain Christian elements, the *Beowulf* poet makes frequent comments about God. Grendel is even descended from Cain's cursed line.

<sup>x</sup> *Beowulf*, Chapter IV.