

How Icelandic Legends Reflect the Prohibition on Dancing

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*Nú er glatt í hverjum hól,
hátt nú allir kveði,
hinnstu nótt um heilög jól,
höldum álfa gleði.
Fagurt er rökkrið
við ramman vætta söng,
:::syngjum dátt og dönsum,
því nóttin er svo löng.:.*¹

The following article² is about repression, and how repressed culture can find expression in legends. As a discussion of culture in the broader sense would probably demand extensive research and a lot of space, I have chosen to narrow the focus and concentrate on one manifestation: dancing. I will begin by describing the opposition of the Icelandic authorities to dancing, which resulted in its apparent disappearance in the eighteenth century. Then I propose to examine this opposition to dancing in relation to the Icelandic legends in which the “hidden people”, or elves, feature. After that I intend to analyse the attitudes towards dancing that we find reflected in these legends and the “underground” culture that lived on in them.

I

To judge by the written sources that mention dancing as part of ordinary people’s amusements, it seems that dancing as such was practised early on in Iceland, at least as early as the twelfth century. Vésteinn Ólason (1979: 79; 1982: 36–37), regards these sources as indicating that organized dances were commonly held in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and that from the point of view of historical

accuracy it can be stated that they were held in Iceland from shortly after 1170, though it is quite possible that dancing was practised before that time, as the saga of Bishop Jón Ögmundsson implies.³

However, the sources not only testify that dancing took place in Iceland from as early as the twelfth century, but also that it was regarded in a bad light. Official opposition to organised dancing parties (*gleði*⁴) seems to have arisen at least as early as the twelfth century, when Jón Ögmundsson, who became Bishop of Hólar in 1106 (d. 1121), campaigned against, and caused to be banned, a game or pastime (*leikur*⁵) that was common at the time, in which a man and a woman called to each other in verses that were not fit to be heard (*Biskupa sögur* I 2003: 211). This is stated in the saga about the bishop, *Jóns saga helga*, and a younger version of the same saga makes it clear that the *leikur* referred to here was a dance. We must remember here, however, that *Jóns saga helga* is not a contemporary source; it was written at the beginning of the thirteenth century, based on a Latin version that is now lost but is believed to have dated from shortly after 1200 (Foote 2003: ccxiv–ccxx). While it can therefore hardly be seen as a reliable source, it is considered certain that it describes practices and attitudes that were current at the time that the author was alive, “before his day or both before his day and during his life”, that is about or before 1200.⁶

For most of the time, the church was opposed to dancing, and other bishops followed Jón’s example in this respect. So it is not surprising to find that St Þorlákur, Bishop of Skálholt (c. 1133–1193), also seems to have taken a dim view of dancing, at least if we see the word *leikur* as being used to refer to or include dancing here, which seems likely in the context:

He found amusement in stories and songs, and all stringed instruments and singing and wise men’s counsels and dreams, and everything that was entertaining to good men; except play [*leikar*], because he thought such to be useless business of bad men (Stories of the Bishops of Iceland 1895: 104; addition in brackets by the author).⁷

From the B text of *Þorláks saga*, on the other hand, it seems that the bishop’s attitudes with regard to dancing were not as negative as this, even though it is suggested that such an activity was not altogether to his liking: “The holy Bishop Þorlákur often had entertain-

ment provided for himself and others, and very much enjoyed things that are the amusement of good men, both singing and harp music and games [*leikar*], though dancing least.”⁸

The opposition continued. It is related that, in the thirteenth century, Bishop Heinrekur Kársson (d. 1261) drove his priest forcefully out of the church and did not want to see him, since the priest had taken part in a dance (*dansleikur*) that was held in Viðvík in 1255 (*Sturlunga saga* II 1988: 711). Bishop Árni Þorláksson (1237–1298) is said to have regarded dancing as a senseless amusement (“óskynsamlega skemmtan”; *Biskupa sögur* III 1998: 6) and in the fourteenth century Bishop Laurentíus Kálfsson kept his predecessors’ flag flying by going to where dances were held and banning them (*Biskupa sögur* III 1998: 380). Opposition to dancing by churchmen in other parts of Europe was common at the time, and was doubtless the inspiration for these five Catholic bishops in Iceland (see Jón Samsonarson 1964: I, xi), but the difference was that the foreign church leaders seem only to have been against dancing in church, in churchyards and at funeral wakes.⁹ In fact, we are entitled to ask how reliable these Icelandic sources are, whether what they say on this point is really true and whether this might not be a *topos* that has been borrowed into source after source. Naturally we cannot exclude this possibility, but it is unlikely. Firstly, these five sources are each independent in style and the phrasing is not closely similar, as might be expected if this were a formula. Secondly, some of these sources give the impression that they are relating real events, for example the passage in *Sturlunga saga*, which describes Bishop Heinrekur’s reaction to the fact that his priest, Hámundur, has danced: “... and he never again treated him in the same way as before”;¹⁰ this shows how seriously the bishop viewed his subordinate’s conduct.

In addition to the contemporary Icelandic sagas that mention the moral views of the bishops, we find an instance of a negative attitude towards dancing in a worldly chivalric romance dating from the end of the fourteenth century, *Viktors saga og Blávus*, where reading books is commended as a beautiful pastime, in contrast to “laughter and leaping, dancing and foolishness”, which people should refrain from.¹¹ After this, mentions of dancing and the disapproval in which the church regarded it become less numerous, keeping pace with the decline in saga-writing (cf. Jón Samsonarson

1964: I, xvii), but it can be assumed that the church's position remained unchanged. The *Íslandslýsing* which has long been attributed to Bishop Oddur Einarsson (1559–1636)¹² states that the church authorities had turned against dances, which are likened to pagan immorality, and that these had been stamped out in most places (Oddur Einarsson 1971: 131). This was most likely written in the winter of 1588–89 (cf. Jakob Benediktsson 1971: 9), by which time dances gatherings were so uncommon that they were thought to have been virtually eradicated.

While Bishop Oddur realized that final victory was yet to be won, he probably did not foresee that the struggle would last for another two centuries. He made his own contribution a few years later, in the *Kýraugastaðasamþykkt* (“Kýraugastaðir Agreement”) of 1592, in which he ordered his priests to ban night wakes, put a stop to them and report them to the local sheriff (cf. Jón Samsonarson 1964: I, xxxv–xxxvi and ccxxviii).¹³ After this date the sources become more plentiful, with the opposition of the Lutheran bishops and cler-

gy intensifying so greatly through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that the *gleði* stops completely, probably in the late eighteenth century.

We do not have to take this as meaning that all members of the Icelandic clergy were opposed to dancing, but the number of sources reporting them as demonstrating opposition of some sort, whether this took the form of direct intervention, letter-writing or poetry, is considerable. These examples are discussed by Jón Samsonarson in his *Kvæði og dansleikir* (1964: I, ccxxviii–ccxl), where he also refers to prominent persons in Iceland from the seventeenth century onwards who attributed the decline of dancing directly to interference by the church authorities, testifying to the effectiveness of their opposition and to the complete cessation of dancing in some localities as early as the end of the sixteenth century. Jón (1964: I, ccxxxviii) sees no reason to cast doubt on the opinions he quotes, as what was involved here was opposition to dancing in the form of a constant campaign by people in Iceland until 1741, when the Rev. Ludvig Harboe, a Danish pietist, was sent to Iceland by King Christian VI. Harboe's mission was to examine the status of religion and church affairs in Iceland. As a result of the report that he and his assistant Jón Þorkelsson compiled, the king issued decrees in the years 1741–46 in which Icelanders were, in effect, prohibited all forms of amusement. Dancing is not mentioned specifically in these decrees, but games (*leikir*) and other types of amusement were named among other things that people were to avoid in order to be able to give better attention to the word of God (see Páll Eggert Ólason & Þorkell Jóhannesson 1943: 172–81 and also Ingibjörg Björnsdóttir 2004: iii and 73).¹⁴

It is possible that the upper class would have been the first to yield to pressure by the clergy, in which case dancing would have survived mainly as an ordinary people's pastime as time wore on. When Eggert Ólafsson and Bjarni Pálsson travelled around Iceland in 1752–57, *hringbrot*, a dance in which ten or more men participated, was still practised, and Eggert mentions specifically that men of the upper classes also used to dance it “in the olden days” (*til forna*; Eggert Ólafsson 1974: I, 205). In accordance with this view, examples show that sheriffs and lawmen joined forces with the clergy, not merely by applying their prohibitions, but also by declaring their disfavour towards dancing (Jón Samsonarson 1964: I,

ccxxx and ccxxxv). This need not have been a simple picture of a black-and-white situation, however: there is a report of people of the upper classes taking part in a Christmas party (*jólagleði* – including dance), in Þingeyrar in 1757. However, this was something worthy of special mention, and it was seen with disfavour and condemned.¹⁵

It is not impossible that dancing parties in the other Nordic countries met with the same sort of opposition from the bishops or individual clergymen, but there are very few reliable medieval sources on this point. One such piece of evidence comes from a bishops' congress in Schleswig-Holstein, which was then a Danish possession, in 1222, when a high-ranking priest from Rome announced a papal decree imposing a ban on round-dances, games, and other unruly behaviour in churches.¹⁶ But while many European church dignitaries maintained prohibitions of this type, there is no mention of their being applied by Scandinavian bishops until the early fifteenth century, or slightly earlier, when the Archbishop of Lund banned round dances and singing in churches and churchyards (Backman 1945: 206–208); similarly, a Danish bishop warned against the use of churches as dance halls in the sixteenth century (Nielsen 1933: 132). These bishops were not opposed to dancing as such, but only to dancing in churches and churchyards.¹⁷ Apart from this, there is nothing to suggest that the Scandinavian bishops aimed at putting an end to dances.¹⁸ In later times there have certainly been instances of individual religious sects being opposed to dancing, though this cannot be equated with an official church policy.

In the traditional way, people in the Nordic countries danced at weddings, and wedding dances in the Faroes seem to have taken on a religious character in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when for example people danced to hymns, with the vicar joining in. In Denmark it was also customary for the vicar to take part in wedding dances, and in the seventeenth century the Bishop of Trondheim in Norway took part in both the drinking and the dancing at a wedding (Nielsen 1933: 144, 153 and 157; Ólafur Davíðsson 1894: 93). Thus, dancing was recognised by the clergy in certain contexts. The Icelandic bishops and clergy, on the other hand, seem to have disapproved of dancing wherever it took place, no matter whether this was in church, churchyards, private homes or seasonal fishermen's shacks, and they believed that God Almighty took the same

view, as is indicated by this verse from a hymn on the Resurrection by Bishop Steinn Jónsson of 1743 (Steinn Jónsson 1743: 8):

Leikar, Ofdryckia, Dans og Spil,
DRottni giörast þa sijst i Vil,
einga Guds Dyrkan eflir slijkt,
Oskickan sw þo gangi rijkt.¹⁹

From what is mentioned above, it can be seen that the position adopted by the Icelandic authorities was in many ways different from the situation in the other Nordic countries.

It seems that where dancing survived at all in Iceland, it stagnated, and the new varieties of dance that were current in other countries either did not make their way to Iceland or else did not succeed in becoming established there until the nineteenth century, after the old styles of dancing had died out. In the eighteenth century, and in fact far earlier, Icelandic dancing (*gleði*) was conspicu-

ously different from the fashions elsewhere; it was seen as “an antiquated and isolated cultural tradition without any support from abroad”.²⁰ In his description of Iceland in 1747, a German, Johan Anderson, says that Icelandic dancing was archaic and simplistic. A year later, when Anderson’s description was published in a Danish translation, a note was added stating that Anderson’s comment was not to be taken seriously, as it was so much in vogue to look down on traditional Icelandic dancing and poke fun at it (cf. Ólafur Davíðsson 1894: 19). Other writers also saw Icelandic dancing as being of ancient origin. For example, Eggert Ólafsson says the *vikivaki* is the remnant of an old type of dance that was once current both in Iceland and in many other parts of the Nordic countries (1999: 125–26).²¹

This “archaic” practice in Iceland probably annoyed progressive spirits who found the cultural stagnation of their fellow Icelanders intolerable, but there are two sides to every coin, and there were divided opinions about the demise of dancing. Both Icelanders and foreigners commented on the extraordinarily harsh position adopted by the authorities in the eighteenth century, and saw the ban on amusements as a setback for the nation. Ólafur Olavius, a tax collector from Jutland who wrote about the abolition of dancing in his travel book about Iceland in 1780, considered the possibility that some of the diseases that plagued the Icelanders could be attributed to the ban. He considered that the abolition of entertainments and amusements resulted in a lack of physical movement among women and a lack of social life and refreshment for the mind (1964: 262–63). Christian U. D. Eggers, who wrote a book on Iceland in 1786, also thought the clergy had acted harshly, and Konrad Maurer took the same line in 1842, saying that the lack of amusement caused dullness and a lack of pluck for useful work. He said the situation was different in the Faroes and in Norway (Maurer 1842: 65, cf. Ólafur Davíðsson 1894: 29 and 31). In a few places in his *Ferðabók* (written with Bjarni Pálsson), Eggert Ólafsson mentions the damaging effect of the lack of amusement, and says it aggravates depression. He saw the dance form *hringbrot* as a sensibly designed activity (*leikur*) that provided men with good exercise (Eggert Ólafsson 1974: I, 26–27, 107, 205 and 270). In this connection we can perhaps ask the question whether the church authorities in Iceland succeeded literally in “boring the Icelanders to death”.

II

It is clear that dancing parties (*gleði*) as such, and presumably the poems that were sung or chanted as an accompaniment, were frowned upon from the outset by the Icelandic church authorities, which kept up their campaign until they succeeded in apparently putting a complete end to it. This interference by the authorities is probably the main reason why dancing died out in Iceland, though it is not impossible that other factors, such as the structure of society, also had a discouraging influence.

From the outset, the demographic pattern in Iceland developed along lines that were different from those in the other Nordic countries; this was probably mainly due to the difference in landscape. The population in Iceland was scattered, social units being confined to farms ranging in size from small crofts to large manor farms. Iceland is also a large country that was sparsely populated, and distances between the farms were often great; in this respect it differs from the other Nordic countries where the population was less scattered and generally lived in towns and villages as well as farms. Factors such as these must inevitably have had an effect on the type of entertainment and amusement available; it is easier for townspeople and villagers than for people in rural areas to meet for social functions. The evidence points to this: for example, dancing parties were so common in the Faroes that by the twentieth century there were special dance halls in almost every population centre (Nielsen 1933: 150). It was then common to begin dancing in private houses and then continue in the dance halls as the evening wore on. This is a completely different situation from the isolation that was the dominant pattern in Iceland, and was exacerbated in the winters when weather conditions must have dampened the spirits of even those dance enthusiasts who otherwise might not have been discouraged by the necessity to make long journeys to meet other people.

It is likely that this difference in the social structure of the Nordic countries had its effect on dancing, which by its nature depends on group participation; I have heard it said that at least fifteen people are needed for a good dance, ten being seen as a rather poor number (at least by Faroese standards).²² Thus, we can say that urban communities were suited to dancing, and vice versa. It follows that there must have been far fewer opportunities for holding dances in Ice-

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land than in most areas in the other Nordic countries, with the result that other types of entertainment became more common: instead of dancing, people read or told stories, especially during organised evening entertainments (*kvöldvökur* – similar of course to other Nordic countries) involving all the people at each individual farm. They also chanted *rímur*; these do not need any minimum number of listeners in the same way as dancing requires a minimum number of dancers. It can be assumed that dancing in earlier times took place mainly at Iceland's larger farms and where people gathered to celebrate during the winter, particularly at all-night wakes before the Saints' days.²³ We can also assume that dancing must have taken place in the seasonal fishing stations (Jón Samsonarson 1964: I, ccxviii–ix, Gunnar M. Magnúss 1963: 95, Eggert Ólafsson 1974: II, 226 and Ingibjörg Björnsdóttir 2004: 15).

Although Oddur Einarsson claimed, just before 1600, that dancing parties had been “much more common” before that,²⁴ it is unlikely that they were as common in Iceland as they were in other countries where conditions were more conducive to dancing, and it is unlikely that people took the trouble of travelling to other farms to dance except in the case of organised social gatherings. This, of course, is not to deny that organised gatherings, or dances, must have been something for people to look forward to when they did happen, and the evidence seems to suggest that they often went out of control. Thus, dancing parties (*gleðir*) probably tended to degenerate into drinking parties; drinking is one of the things that people deplored when dances were mentioned. The *Íslandslýsing* cited above compares dancers to Bacchantes (Oddur Einarsson 1971: 130) and the Rev. Þorsteinn Pétursson of Staðarbakki, who wrote about dancing after the middle of the eighteenth century (see note 17) says that at dances, alcohol (*brennivín*) is “on hand to refresh Old Adam so that he neither tires nor gives up until the measure of sins is full”. According to this upright clergyman, the situation seems to have been intolerable, and caused him a great deal of concern. “*O, bone Deus!*” he writes, “How inappropriate dancing and drinking are, with the common people in such a wretched condition.” Like Oddur Einarsson, he compares dancing parties to the Bacchic festivals of old, and says one such gathering will go through a keg of *brennivín*.²⁵

As sometimes tends to be the case, drinking led to bad behaviour; in his *Crymogæa* (published 1609), Arngrímur *lærði* says that im-

moral dancing parties were held (Arngrímur Jónsson 1985: 149) and a letter in the correspondence book of Jón Illugason, steward of the cathedral at Hólar, shows that he felt that nocturnal parties (*gleðinætur*) were characterised by excess and a tendency to amatory conduct and sordid behaviour, and that doors, together with the architraves and the uprights, were broken. In a letter written in 1733, Bishop Jón Árnason describes wake-nights and dances (*gleðileikir*) as “the seed of the devil in men of little faith who are full of hedonism and evil desires and tendencies”.²⁶ This is rather reminiscent of the way Icelanders behave at parties to this day: anticipation gives rise to expectations; expectations call for a sip to get rid of inhibitions; one sip calls for another and so on until the party ends in the opposite of the original expectations. To some extent, this pattern may explain why dancing had such an appalling reputation in Iceland and incurred the disfavour of the clergy.

Two other points should be mentioned that each might have contributed towards the decline of dancing. Firstly, the free-and-easy attitudes that prevailed at dance gatherings could have consequences that proved an economic burden for the local community, i.e. “undesirable” or ill-timed births. Magnús Stephensen reports that no fewer than nineteen children were conceived at the *Jörfagleði* (*gleði* at Jörfi) in the county of Dalasýsla the year before it was abolished, i.e. 1706 (1806: 346–347). Whether or not this is an exaggeration, an occurrence of this type would have added to the burdens of the local farmers and the administrative tasks of the authorities and given them a motive for suppressing these gatherings. A folktale in Jón Árnason’s nineteenth-century’s collection (1954–61: II, 217–18) gives an indirect insight into how this situation might have been regarded from another viewpoint; it gives a moving picture of a young serving-girl who falls pregnant, has the child and causes it to die of exposure. Shortly afterwards she is invited to a *gleði*, but faces the prospect of having to stay at home because she has no suitable clothes for the dance. After the *gleði* begins, as she sits milking the ewes in their fold and lamenting her lot, she hears a voice singing:

Móðir mín í kví, kví,
kvíddú ekki því, því;
ég skal ljá þér duluna mína
að dansa í
og dansa í.²⁷

Perhaps the plight of the girl in this folktale reflects the reality described above?

The other factor is one of population size: the hardship and destitution that followed the Skaftáreldar eruption of 1783–1784 resulted in one of the greatest declines in population in the history of the country (Guðmundur Hálfðanarson 1984; Gunnar Karlsson 2000: 177–181; see also Ólafur Davíðsson 1894: 42). This must have contributed to some extent towards the final demise of *gleði*, though it must be borne in mind that the practice had already seemingly become very uncommon before that date. It should also be pointed out that the thinning of the population towards the end of the eighteenth century, the deepening poverty and the fact that many people became rootless and homeless, must have made it impossible, or at least far less likely, that people could have continued to dance “in secret” without being discovered. It must have been very difficult to hold clandestine dances in the sparsely-populated regions of the country, since, as has been stated above, a reasonable number is necessary in order to hold a dance at all. Jón Samsonarson, who favours the view that dancing was in fact stamped out completely, says some scholars assume “that a society without dancing is unthinkable, yet it seems to have been the case in Iceland” (1964: I, ccxI).

III

Whether Icelanders contributed towards this themselves with their bad behaviour or whether the Icelandic clergy were simply more excessive in their moral zeal than their foreign counterparts, all the sources indicate that deliberate efforts were made to eradicate parties, and thus dancing, from Icelandic culture: dancing was suppressed and repressed, like an undesirable basic instinct in the national mind, by the spiritual and temporal authorities, which saw themselves as its moral watchdog. Dancing was considered damaging, the texts of the poems accompanying the dances being likely to encourage the more basic instincts, “insinuate themselves one way or another into people’s innermost being and ignite all sorts of passions in their breasts”,²⁸ this was something that had to be nipped in the bud.

Although, as stated above, it is thought that the old dances of Iceland had disappeared by the late eighteenth century, this does not mean that the organised campaign against dancing had been completely successful and that dancing had disappeared from the national consciousness; it is well known that repressed desires live on in the subconscious. Memories of earlier dancing parties had found their way into traditional oral legends in which they became an attribute of the elves. In time, these legends, which can be seen as mirroring the national subconscious, became the last refuge of the dance and the place where the memories were kept alive.

It is not clear when dancing first became associated with elves and other spirits, but the earliest mention we have of dancing elves in the sources is the fifteenth-century *Jarlmanns saga og Hermanns*, (1963: 51 and 53–54), in which they perform a dance as an entertainment, first by themselves and then in the company of spirits of various types.²⁹ After that there is no mention of dancing elves until more recent centuries, though people with second sight said there were a lot of “invisible” guests at the aforementioned Jörfagleði, and elves are supposed to have joined in. Interestingly enough, the supernatural beings that were supposed to have danced at Jörfi not only reflected human conduct in these amusements, but also took a stance with the common people against the authorities by taking revenge on the sheriff who banned their festivities (see Ólafur Davíðsson 1894: 39–40; Jón Samsonarson 1964: I, ccxxxviii). It should also be mentioned, finally, that according to the dictionary compiled by Jón Ólafsson of Grunnavík, a poetic metre similar to that known as *langlokur* (see Jón Samsonarson 2002: 78–82) was known under the name *álfadans*, at least at the time that Jón was alive, that is, in the eighteenth century (Seðlasafn OH [Records of the Dictionary of the University of Iceland]; see also Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2003: 235).

As the opposition to dancing lasted a long time before dancing was actually eradicated, it can be assumed that the movement of dancing away from the human world and into the fairy world took a considerable time. Originally, of course, the dancing of the “hidden people” probably reflected, for the most part, human practices, but after dances had been abolished in Iceland it could be said that dancing passed across the divide and became limited to this parallel world. The majority of the Icelandic legends about the hidden

people were written down in the nineteenth century, and so do not give a clear picture of people's ideas about them before that time. Nonetheless, these latter-day legends contain many mentions of elves' parties or dances, and dancing can be said to be a common feature of Icelandic hidden people and their behaviour; they dance both in their own hills and in human habitations. Dancing elves certainly occur frequently in the legends that Jón Árnason collected in the mid-nineteenth century, particularly in the group that he entitled *Jóla- og nýársgleðir álfa* ('The Christmas Dances of the Elves').³⁰

As the title of this group of legends indicates, the elves' main dancing season is around Christmas, that is, the season when it is most common – in folk belief – for spirits to appear in the human world. The Yuletide spirits in these stories seem to have undergone a transformation in the course of time; according to Terry Gunnell, in medieval Icelandic literature those who take over farmsteads to hold parties are usually ghosts or trolls, and these spirits did not become elves until "in the latter-day folktales of the 19th and 20th centuries"; thus, the belief that the elves were active party goers around Christmas and New Year probably dates from recent times.³¹ It should be mentioned, however, that the dance of the elves and other spirits in the fifteenth-century *Jarlmanns saga og Hermanns* (see above) appears to take place at Christmas or New Year.

Some of these legends dealing with the dances of the elves fall under the migratory legend types that are common in Iceland's neighbouring countries, particularly in Western Norway;³² these legends describe attacks on farmhouses by spirits at Christmas. Gunnell, who has made a special study of these legends, considers that they are of Scandinavian origin and took root in Iceland. One difference between the Icelandic and the Scandinavian legends should nonetheless be noted. The spirits in the Scandinavian legends are trolls and ghosts, but when these legends took root in Iceland they were adapted to fit Icelandic folk belief, with the hidden people or elves taking over the role of other figures, and dancing while the Scandinavian spirits had been content simply to eat their fill, which was actually the main aim of their visits to human habitations (cf. Gunnell 2002: 200–202). Gunnell therefore regards the Icelandic legends which are characterised by an elves' dance as a variant of these legends, which came about in connection with the Icelandic custom of holding a Yuletide or Christmas celebration (2002: 202).

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The remarkable point about the adaptation of these legends in Iceland is the element of dancing: in the eyes of the Icelanders, living under cultural repression, the hidden people were regularly dancing.³³

The legends in question, referring to the Christmas dance of the elves, reflect in the clearest form the idea of the hidden people's homes as being sumptuous and full of lights; the atmosphere is cheerful, with dancing and instrumental music, and the richly-dressed elves appear not to know any social restrictions; they dance through the night and there is plenty to eat and drink. In these respects, the world of the elves is everything that the real world is not, and in this sense it is an emblem of people's dreams. Furthermore, the elves are cheerful, the opposite of the frequently gloomy Icelanders, as can be seen from this verse from a *vikivaki* poem (Ólafur Davíðsson 1984: 293):

Huldufólkið heims um bý,
þá heyrir svoddan læti,
hleypur upp með glens og glý,
svo glymur í hverju stræti.³⁴

On the other hand, there is a tendency to reflect the attitude mentioned above, i.e. that dancing is primarily something that belongs to the common people, since the highest dignitaries among the elves, the kings, queens and royal children, tend to sit and watch the dancing without taking part in it themselves, as in the legends *Álfakóngurinn í Seley*, *Hildur álfadrottning* and *Snotra* (Jón Árnason 1954–61: I 86–89, 105–111). However, the free and untrammelled dancing among the elves in the folklore of more recent centuries in Iceland is not least remarkable because the elves were seen as being Christian, with a clergy and bishops, just as in human society. But the authorities of the world of the Icelandic elves make no attempt, legal or otherwise, to stop the activities of their people; indeed, they seem to often preside over them.

The legends I have discussed that mention elves' dances show that Icelanders missed dancing;³⁵ it is natural to man, just like music, and when the beating of the heart finds an echo in the beat of the music, the feet – and the rest of the body – want to follow suit. So we can easily understand the shepherd who once came across an

elves' dance and, wanting to join in, went up to a beautiful elf girl and asked to be allowed to do so: after all, he was forbidden to dance with people of his own kind (Sigfús Sigfússon 1982: 61):

Má ég ekki, drottning dýra,
dansinum fagra með þér stýra?
Má ég ei við mund þér, hýra
meyjan, dansa til og frá?
Hvar mun fegra fólk að sjá?
Leyfðu mér þá skemmtun skíra
í skara þinna röðum.
Huldufólkið hérna býr í stöðum.

The shepherd disappeared into the parallel world with its memories of earlier ages, into the merriment that was hidden away inside the hills and the rocks. The inhabitants of this imaginary underground world – the world of fairy – were not subject to the moral precepts of human society and the laws and edicts of its authorities, the better judgement of the nation. The elves are sumptuously dressed and beautiful; they know how to enjoy life. This image was probably similar to the image of today's pop stars and film celebrities. Who would not want to dance with them?

The above discussion focuses mainly on Icelandic material concerning the Icelandic dance gatherings which, as has been mentioned, were not altogether comparable with the amusements that were held in Iceland's neighbouring countries in recent centuries.³⁶ No attempt will be made here to decide whether it can be applied to the folkloristic traditions of other countries, though the idea that elves or similar creatures danced seems to have been relatively common in other countries.³⁷ But in view of the number of these narratives in Iceland and the fact that dancing died out in the country in the eighteenth century, it is tempting to look at them as sort of collective national memory, and an expression of the nostalgic need to keep that memory alive in the face of oppression.

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- 1 Now rules joy in every mound, / everyone, let's chant loud, / the final night of holy Christmas, / let's hold an elves dance. / The dusk is beautiful / with the powerful song of spirits, / let's sing merrily and dance, / because the night is so long. From a poem written by Sæmundur Eyjólfsson (1891) to music composed by Helgi Helgason for a Twelfth Night bonfire celebration at Austurvöllur, Reykjavík, in 1891 (Árni Björnsson 1993: 404). The full text consists of nine stanzas. The custom of dressing up in costumes and dancing an "elves' dance" on New Year's Eve or Twelfth Night has been observed ever since schoolboys in Reykjavík first held a torchlight procession on New Year's Eve in 1872 (Ólafur Davíðsson 1888–92: 21; see also Vilborg Davíðsdóttir 2005).
 - 2 This article is an expanded version of a paper given at the 5th Celtic-Nordic-Baltic Folklore Symposium on Folk Legends, which was held in Reykjavík on 15–18 June 2005. I thank Terry Gunnell for some helpful remarks.
 - 3 This is not to say whether or not people in Iceland danced before this time, but to limit the discussion to what can be found in historical sources. Of course, dances were practised long before this date all over the world, among other things for religious purposes.
 - 4 The word *gleði* (as a singular noun) strictly means 'joy' or 'pleasure', but is used here to mean 'celebration' or 'party'. *Gleðir* (the plural form) were held in the Middle Ages and down to the eighteenth century, and more often than not included dancing.
 - 5 Judging from these earliest sources, the term *leikur* seems to have been used to refer to dancing, amongst other things; the terms *hringleikur*, *dans* and *dansleikur* were also used in this sense. However, *leikur* can have other meanings, referring to other types of activity or amusement; thus, it seems to have been used in both a narrow and a broader meaning, in which it covered dancing and associated activities (Jón Samsonarson 1964: I, xvii; Gunnell 1995: 24–36).
 - 6 "...fyrir hans daga eða hvort tveggja" (Jón Samsonarson 1964: I, x; see also Ólafur Davíðsson 1894: 9).
 - 7 "Hann henti skemmtan at sögum ok kvæðum ok at öllum strengleikum ok hljóðfærum ok at hygginna manna ræðum ok draumum ok at öllu því er góðra manna skemmtan var, útan leikum, því at honum þótti slíkt dvelja ónýtar sýslur vándra manna." (*Biskupa sögur* II 2002: 78)
 - 8 "Heilagr Þorlákr byskup lét optliga skemmta sér ok öðrum ok hendi at því mikit gaman sem góðra manna skemmtan er, bæði at kvæðum og harpslátti og leikum, en minnst dansi" (*Biskupa sögur* II 2002: 182). The A text is preserved in a manuscript dating from 1360, the B text in a manuscript from the first half

- of the fourteenth century. The saga is thought to have been written originally in about 1200, or shortly afterwards (Ásdís Egilsdóttir 2002: xxxii). It should be noted that in the B text a distinction is made between *leikur* and *dans*, or that *dans* is considered to be part of *leikur* (cf. note 5). For further discussion, see Gunnell 1995 and Sveinn Einarsson 1991: 65–118.
- 9 In his book on religious dancing, E. Louis Backman (1945: 203 ff.) gives an account of the opposition of European church authorities to dancing. According to him, the opposition seems to have applied not only to cases like these but also, in some individual cases, to dancing outside churches and in church processions, and he gives one example of a ban on dancing on the eve of saints' days, without the location being restricted to the vicinity of a church or churchyard. In one of his examples the ban concerns only dancing in a church while the mass is in progress. Prohibitions of this type were most common in the period 1200–1500. While Backman's examples cannot be regarded as exhaustive, they can surely be taken as giving a representative picture of the object of official opposition.
 - 10 "...en hann var við hann aldri jafnvel síðan sem áður" (*Sturlunga saga* II 1988: 711–12).
 - 11 "...hlaatur ok hopp danss ok dáraskap" (*Viktors saga ok Blávus* 1964: 3).
 - 12 The authorship of this work has also been attributed to Sigurður Stefánsson, principal of the school at Skálholt (Jakob Benediktsson 1971: 6, see also Einar Sigmarsson 2003).
 - 13 These wakes were held on the evenings before church feast days; people tended to stay up and make merry.
 - 14 Harboe himself did not concentrate specifically on *gleði*; he did not expect it would be possible to abolish it, as he saw it as an ancient practice (Gunnar M. Magnúss 1963: 69). Regarding the last gatherings of this type (*gleðir*) to be held in Iceland, see Jón Samsonarson 1964: I, lxxxvii–xciv and ccxxiii–v, Sigríður Þ. Valgeirsdóttir & Mínerva Jónsdóttir 1994: 18–22; Ólafur Davíðsson 1894: 38–43.
 - 15 It should also be mentioned that Jón Hjaltalín, the sheriff of Reykjavík, held a *jólagleði* a little while earlier, probably just before the middle of the eighteenth century (Jón Samsonarson 1964: I, ccxxxiii). A *vikivaki* stanza (in *Eitt sunnlenskt vikivakavæði*) refers to this *gleði*: "Hjá hönum Jóni Hjaltalín / hopa menn sér til vansa, / allan veturinn eru þeir að dansa" ['Over at Jón Hjaltalín's / people flock, to their disgrace. / Dancing all winter about the place'] (Jón Samsonarson 1964: II, 94).
 - 16 See Adamson 1957: 652, who refers to "Quellensamml. d. Ges. f. Schlesw.-Holst.s Gesch. VI (1935), s. 35".
 - 17 See Jón Samsonarson 1964: I, xvi. On the disapproval of dancing by Swedish women watching over newborn children, see Klein 1933: 119, who also cites a few examples of undesirable dancing on church festivals on pp. 120–22. Similarly on Danish women, see Gunnell 1995: 104–105. Latter-day Swedish oral legends indicate that the church was opposed to dancing; the devil frightens people from taking part in sinful amusements such as drinking, dancing and card-games (Klintberg 1972: 35, and further Lindow 1978: 148–152). It also

seems likely that the pietistic movement of the eighteenth century, with its inflexible and narrow views on dancing and other amusements, had an effect throughout the Nordic countries. The Rev. Þorsteinn Pétursson of Staðarbakki (1710–1785), who was a representative of this movement in Iceland, wrote against the dance tradition (see below), referring to a number of foreign scholars, particularly in Chapter 5 of his *Leikafæla*. On the other hand, it is not possible to say that the works he cites actually contain much anti-dancing propaganda, even though his own work was intended as such (Ingibjörg Björnsdóttir 2004: v–vi and 36–44). However, it might be noted that the Danish bishop Erik Pontoppidan (1698–1764), who wrote against Christmas gatherings in Denmark, had a considerable influence and his writings were known to Icelandic priests and bishops. Much like Oddur Einarsson (before Pontoppidan’s time) and Þorsteinn Pétursson, Pontoppidan sees the dancing that took place on the nights before saints’ days as representing heathen remnants (Pontoppidan 1923:x and 15; on how the younger people used to dance at Christmas, see p. 27). See further Sveinn Einarsson 1991: 108–111.

- 18 As a further example of opposition to dancing in Scandinavia, it could be mentioned that funeral wakes were banned in Norway in 1607, in Denmark in 1656 and in Sweden in 1644 (Lund 1908–10: XIV 101 and Hansen 2005: 59–60), and that *leikar* at Christmas were banned under a Norwegian law of 1687. Bishop Jón Árnason of Skálholt (Iceland) quotes these laws in a letter from 1733 (cf. Jón Samsonarson 1964 I:xxxix, Ingibjörg Björnsdóttir 2004: 72, where the law is quoted, and Árni Björnsson 1993: 380–81). No conclusion will be drawn here concerning whether or not Norwegian *jólaleikar* (Christmas Game) in the late 17th century included dancing, and this reference should therefore be regarded with caution. A similar Danish law from 1683 exists (*Kong Christian den femtis Danske lov* 1891: 875), even though it is not referred to by Icelandic clergy. There are also a number of provincial Nordic laws banning various kinds of Christmas games which often had to be repeated (see further Gunnell 1995: 116 on laws from Malmö among others).
- 19 The stanza says that God dislikes dance and other games, and that it does not strengthen people’s religious practice.
- 20 “...forneskjuleg og einangruð menningarleif sem engan stuðning fær erlendis frá” (Jón Samsonarson 1964: I, ccxxxviii). This might also have been the case in the Faroes, but still the development of the dance was in some ways different there.
- 21 It should be borne in mind, however, that romantic ideas were already visible in the age of Eggert Ólafsson, such as the longing for the past, and thus the vision of Icelandic culture as representing ancient times.
- 22 According to the essay *Niðurráðan og undirvísan hvurninn gleði og dansleikir voru tíðkaðir og um hönd hafðir í fyrri tíð*, twelve, fourteen or even sixteen women take part in a *vikivaki*, while *hringbrot* is danced by twenty-four men, i.e. two rows of six pairs each (Jón Samsonarson 1964: I, lii).
- 23 Jón Samsonarson sees the *gleði* seasons as having been “in the autumn, at Christmas and on into Lent, and in the spring” (1964: I, ccxxv).
- 24 Oddur Einarsson 1971: 130. Another translation of the *Íslandslýsing* reads

- geysialgengir* ‘extremely common’ here (Jón Samsonarson 1964: I, xxxiii).
- 25 “...við höndina að hressa hinn gamla Adam svo hann þreytist hvörki né uppgefist fyrri en mælir syndanna er uppfylltur” ... “Ó bone Deus! Hvörsu lítt eiga danslæti og drykkjuskapur við soddan eymdartilstand almúgans!” (Ingibjörg Björnsdóttir 2004: 16–17 and elsewhere; on Þorsteinn Pétursson’s comparison of Icelandic dancing parties to Bacchic festivals, see also Jón Samsonarson 1964: I, xlili and xlvi)
- 26 “...sæði andskotans í vantrúðum mönnum sem eru fullir af gjálifi og vondum girndum og tilhneigingum” (cf. Jón Samsonarson 1964: I, xxxvii–xxxix).
- 27 “My mother in the fold with sheep, / do not worry, do not weep / I shall lend you my caul / to dance in / and dance in.”
- 28 “...smjúga inn í merg og bein með nokkrum hætti, og kynda upp alls konar loga í brjóstum manna” (cf. Oddur Einarsson 1971: 130–31).
- 29 Trolls hold a dance at a wedding feast held at Christmas (*jól*) in the fourteenth-century *Sagan af Eigli einhenda og Ásmundi berserkjabana* (1830: 400).
- 30 Jón Árnason 1954–61: I, 100–121 and III, 162–186. Elves do admittedly dance in individual legends not included in this group, e.g. in I, 11–12, 24, 86–89, 506–7 and 629–30 (sea-elves), II, 548–49 and III, 7–8 and 80–81. In Sigfús Sigfússon’s collection of folktales, the dance of the elves is restricted mainly to the group entitled *Samkomur* (1982: 149–168, but see also 60–62). Reference may also be made to: Arngrímur Fr. Bjarnason 1956: 157–158; Jón Thorarensen 1971: 87–88; Jón Þorkelsson 1956: 142–44 and 171; Maurer 1860: 26–27; Oddur Björnsson 1908: 294–303; Ólafur Davíðsson 1978: 93–97 (referring to a party – *gleðskapur*) and 98–104; Þorsteinn M. Jónsson 1965: 138–140 and 337–339. Of twentieth-century sources, mention may be made of an account by a woman with second sight who reported having seen elves dance a round dance (Árni Óla 1973: 158–59), and other accounts of dancing by the hidden people are to be found in the sound archives of the Arnarnaganean Institute in Iceland (Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, under the keywords “samkomur huldufólks”: <http://ismus.musik.is>). Poetry of the Romantic period should also not be ignored in this context: many of the poets made use of material from the folktale heritage.
- 31 “...í seinni tíma þjóðsögum frá 19. og 20. öld” (2002: 191–92).
- 32 See the classification of migratory legends by Reidar Christiansen (1958: 46–48 and 144–158): ML 3045 “Following the Witch”, ML 3050 “At the Witches’ Sabbath”, ML 6015 “The Christmas Visitors” and ML 6015A “The Christmas Party of the Fairies” (see also Gunnell 2002: 192–97, particularly endnotes 6 and 25). Gunnell’s article to which I refer above includes some discussion of legends that are comparable to the ones discussed here, e.g. about a girl who looks after the farmhouse on Christmas Eve and is forbidden to take part in the elves’ dance. In these legends the girl is rewarded for resisting the temptation to join in the dance, which is evil. A revised version of Gunnell’s article appeared in English under the title “The coming of the Christmas Visitors... Folk legends concerning the attacks on Icelandic farmhouses made by spirits at Christmas”.

- 33 Another point is that at a church congress in 1679, clergymen were reminded not to tolerate dancing on Christmas Eve any more than on other sacred occasions (Jón Samsonarson 1964: I, ccxxx). Thus, Christmas Eve is a particularly sacred time, but as human laws and practices do not apply to elves, the elves were seen as a threat to the rules and thus to the sanctity of Christmas Eve itself.
- 34 The stanza tells of merriment of elves that run about streets with joy and gestures.
- 35 It is reasonable to assume that Icelanders in general missed the tradition of *gleði* (see for example Gunnar M. Magnúss 1963: 102), the poet Davíð Stefánsson looks back to it with nostalgia in his poem *Jörfagleði* (Davíð Stefánsson 1947: 73–76).
- 36 Still, see footnote 20.
- 37 Ólafur Davíðsson saw it as a widespread belief “that elves and other creatures were very fond of dancing, music and other amusements” (“að huldufólk og aðrar vættir unni mjög dansi, hljóðfæraslætti og annari gleði”; 1894: 44). As an example of comparable belief elsewhere in the Nordic countries, mention may be made of ideas about ring formations in grass, which were said to be made by elves dancing (see for example Thiele 1860: 193). The idea of elf or fairy rings is found widely across Europe (see Hazlitt 1995: 230–31), but appears not to have become established in Iceland. However, the idea of dancers who dance their way down to the devil in a round-dance is probably related (see Jón Árnason 1954–61: II, 11–12; for Swedish legends, see Lindow 1978: 148–150). This particular motif seems to be derived from the story about a dance in Kølbigk (see Strömbäck 1961 and 1968).