

Blåkulla and Its Antecedents: Transvection and Conventicles in Nordic Witchcraft

Few aspects of human society have excited as much scholarly activity in recent decades as have those concerned with witchcraft — questions on the nature of the phenomenon itself, of the practices associated with it, of its discovery, of the means of protecting oneself against it, and so on (see Douglas 1970). The impressive response to this surge of interest by Nordic researchers (e.g., Alver 1971; Ankarloo 1971; Brynleifsson 1976; Næss 1982; Jensen 1988) has generally focused on the post-Reformation witch persecutions and frequently yielded scintillating results. Witchcraft in the Viking Age, at the other extreme, despite considerable attention by an earlier generation of scholars (e.g., Bætzmann 1865; Lehmann 1893; Bang 1896; Gadelius 1912–13; Linderholm 1918a, b) remains a largely mysterious and poorly understood topic.¹ In a class by itself is Strömbäck's study of principally literary representations of *seiðr* 'enchantment, incantation', including a discussion of possible influence on Nordic traditions of Sami understandings and practices (1935). Strömbäck's line of investigation is subsequently taken up by Buchholz (1968, 1971) and Davidson (1973), whereas a recent assessment of Icelandic representations of the female conjurer (Morris 1991) looks to account for the relationship between gender and magic, especially the tension between the varying interpretations of female practitioners as witches and sorceresses in the early Middle Ages.

Amid all of this activity, however, an understanding of the period between the Viking Age and the early modern period remains an important *desideratum* (see Eriksson 1994, 40), that is, a review of events in the later Middle Ages that can connect the two temporal extremes in early Nordic history. It is in this period that the presentation of witchcraft activities on the Continent changes from accusations of relatively simple magic to a much more complex image of organized, diabolical activities by witches. This construction of witchcraft has its origins, it

1. In the absence of a comprehensive catalogue of older Nordic witchcraft materials, most students of the topic employ Strömbäck's monumental study (1935) and the entries G200 through G286 in Boberg 1966; useful as these texts are, however, they do not take up many important items from the East Norse area.

has been argued (e.g., Cohn 1975), in the church's battle against heresy. Thus, for example, in *Vox in Rama*, four decretal letters of 1233 calling for cooperation in purging heretics, Pope Gregory IX describes the activities of devil-worshippers in northern Germany as including an initiation ceremony and a banquet, after which the participants offer to the hind quarters of a large black cat the so-called obscene kiss. When the ceremony is over, the lights are extinguished and a concluding orgy ensues, with the pope emphasizing especially the often homosexual nature of this lascivious rite (Rodenberg 1883, 432–35, esp. 433.8–44; Kors and Peters 1972, 48–49). A century later (1335), this same general scenario has been adapted to a French case of witchcraft, in which a woman admits that she has made a pact with the devil as a direct result of an adulterous relationship with a shepherd. Every Friday night since, she has been transported to an assembly at some distant location, where, according to her testimony, she serves the pleasure not only of a goat, but of all those present (Hansen 1901, 452–53; Kors and Peters 1972, 96). The roots of this saturnalian view and its later development as part of the elite understanding of witchcraft have been well explored and require little comment, other than to underscore the fact that belief in the activities, particularly the orgiastic activities, of assembled witches comes to figure prominently in the church's abhorrence of witchcraft (see Russell 1972, 23, 100, et passim; Cohn 1975, 1–32). This view has been challenged by Carlo Ginzburg's arguments regarding shamanism and witchcraft in Europe (1989, 1990), building on — and expanding considerably beyond — the positions of Strömbäck, Buchholz, and others. The location of the Nordic traditions, adjacent as they have been throughout history to cultures which practiced shamanism, makes a clarification of Ginzburg's argument vis-à-vis Scandinavian beliefs critical. Early indications are mixed: there is certainly some evidence of shaman-like qualities in reports of witchcraft and magic in Nordic sources, yet the cases Ginzburg cites are not precisely mirror-quality reflections of the situation in northern Europe.²

2. As an example, Ginzburg misunderstands a critical scene in *Hávarðar saga*, where one supernaturally empowered character rides “með mikít fjölmenni,” meaning simply “with a great many men,” not, as he writes, “un gruppo di uomini esperti nelle arti magiche” [a group of men expert in magical art] (Ginzburg 1989, 247; translation Ginzburg 1991, 264). (On the other hand, bands of *seiðmenn* are indeed attested in the *konungasögur*; see Strömbäck 1935, 40–48, 192.) Ginzburg's candidly Murrayesque argument favoring the possibility of “real” witches, of the influence of Asiatic-style shamanism on European witchcraft, and of a medieval synthesis in the Alpine region of native and foreign elements representing the witches' sabbat has had a mixed reception (e.g., Kieckhefer 1992). With Sami and other shamanistic worldviews so proximate to Nordic cultures, however, the Scandinavianist must weigh carefully the possibilities Ginzburg's hypothesis holds out. If Ginzburg and his followers want to account for the presence of shaman-like qualities in European witchcraft descriptions, what more fertile ground could they find than the Nordic world, stretching along the Arctic rim from Greenland to Lapland? This is not to say that the ideas Ginzburg has presented (1989, 1990) are necessary to account for the shape of Nordic witchcraft in the later Middle Ages, but elements of Nordic witchcraft are surely to be understood by looking southward, especially to Germany. Indeed, we should consider the possibility that Scandinavia may have had a significant role in the transfer of witchcraft concepts between various cultures in Europe and was not merely the peripheral region with respect to witchcraft it is sometimes made out to be (e.g., Barstow 1994, 83–87).

Certainly, it would appear that Scandinavian belief structures concerning witchcraft change dramatically in the years around 1300, as, for example, Norwegian laws which once called for witches to be exiled now demand capital punishment (Keyser and Munch 1846, 17; Storm 1885, 18; see Mitchell 1997). The accepted view holds that medieval Nordic witchcraft beliefs were at this time developing in line with the elite belief systems known elsewhere in Europe, as propaganda, circulated, at first, about Christians themselves, and later, about Waldensians and other heretics, was now put to use against what had come to be viewed as devil-worshipping, congregational witches. It is this transfer of ideologies to the North, and the resulting transformation of Nordic witchcraft, set against Ginzburg's view, that the present essay looks to explore, in particular, two of the most prominent aspects of the emerging elite perception of witchcraft: that of witches flying or otherwise magically transporting themselves (i.e., transvection) to a place of assembly, and that of the conventicles that followed, typified as they were by stereotyped anti-Christian conduct.

The Journey to Blåkulla

The evolution of witchcraft beliefs in Scandinavia is most evident in the "Journey to Blåkulla" complex, aspects of which were apparently developed already by the early fifteenth century. One of the central tenets of the "Journey to Blåkulla" is that the witches travel — usually by flying — to a location variously called Blåkulla, Blaakolden, Bloksbjerg, and so on, often conceived of as a mountain in a distant country or an island in the south Baltic, where they engage in markedly deviant behavior, including lascivious conduct, and boast of evil deeds performed.³ The name itself is generally traced to German place-names, usually Brocken or Blocksberg. An early indication of this complex in Scandinavia is the Swedish miracle "De nauicula a periculo tempestatis liberata" from 1410, a notice concerning, as the name suggests, how a ship was imperiled and then saved in the sound between Sweden and Öland near a place called "Blaakulla":

NAuis quedam dicta snekkia domini Thuronis Bentson militis, de Lubek versus Stokholmian velificans, in via prope Blaakulla grande tempestatis periculum subiit. Nam ipsa tempestatis vehemencia velum cum malo elidens in medias vndas subito prosternebat. Homines vero in ea existentes desperantes se posse mortem penitus euadere diuinum auxilium implorabant. Facto igitur voto ad memoriam defixionis domini et cunctis consternatis, velo iuxta nauem die ac nocte in funiculis suis defluente, tandem prospero

3. An excellent example is the Norwegian trial against Helle Joensdatter, 1652, printed in Alver 1971, 135–36. Although the accusations against witches in the various Nordic countries often involved somewhat different locations (e.g., the Norwegian witches to Blocksberg and Lyderhorn; the Danish witches to Blocksberg, or Hekkenfelt in Iceland, or Bredsten in Norway; the Swedish witches to Blåkulla in the Baltic), the overall pattern is much the same. On the origins and nature of *Blåkullafärden*, see Sahlgren 1915; Sahlgren writes that the transformation of *Blåkulla* from the habitation of trolls to the meeting-place of witches probably took place on Norwegian soil (1915, 159).

adueniente vento deo gracias agentes Stokholmis incolumes applicuerunt. (Lundén 1950, 14)⁴

[A ship (of the sort) called a *snekkja*, belonging to Sir Ture Bengtsson (Bielke), sailed from Lübeck to Stockholm and in the sea-lane near Blåkulla was imperiled by a great tempest. The sheer violence of the storm destroyed the sail and mast, suddenly knocking them into the waves. Those on board feared that they would experience death and implored God for aid. Accordingly, they made a vow to the altarpiece (with the picture) of the Lord's removal from the Cross and were all terrified. The sail floated in its ropes beside the ship day and night, but at length a favorable wind arose, and, giving thanks to God, they made a safe landfall in Stockholm.]

This event was recorded in the early 1420s as one of the miracles associated with the altar of the Dominican cloister in Stockholm, especially the triptych of Christ being taken down from the Cross (Lundén 1950, viii–ix, 4). The place of Blåkulla as a site of peril is thus secured at least as early as the first decades of the fifteenth century, although witches play no discernible role.

A century later, however, the “Journey to Blåkulla,” in Swedish tradition now firmly identified with the island Jungfrun, presents a fully saturnalian view of devil-worshipping witches assembled in conventicles, exchanging trade secrets. The earliest clear evidence of this Scandinavian sabbat scenario is provided by Olaus Magnus, Sweden's last Catholic bishop, while living in exile in Rome. There he published in 1555 his great ethnological work, *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*. He devotes much of this massive survey to questions of the supernatural, including what appears to be the “Journey to Blåkulla,” albeit referred to by the circumlocution Jungfrun:

Praeterea prope Aquilonare littus eius exurgit mons excelsus: quem nauticum vulgus vitandi infelicis ominis, & marinae tempestatis gratia, Virginem vocat . . . In eo monte certis anni temporibus dicitur esse conuentus Aquilonarium maleficarum, vt examinent praestigia sua. Tardius ministerio daemonum accedens, dira afficitur correptione. Sed haec opinioni, non assertioni cedant. (Magnus 1555, 85 [bk. 2, chap. 23])

[Again, neer the North sea thereof, there ariseth a very high Mountain, which the Marri-ners to avoid an ill *Omen*, and Tempests at Sea, call the *Virgin* . . . In that Mountain men say at set times of the yeare, there is a meeting of all the Northern Hags, that they may try their witchery: he that comes late to the Devills Ministry, is cruelly tormented. But these are but opinions, and no(t) assertions to be granted.] (Magnus 1658, 28–29)

Magnus' own critical spirit notwithstanding, it is clear that we are here dealing with a familiar sabbat theme, an image of massed enemies on an island which has

4. It should be noted that the owner of the ship, Sir Ture Bengtsson [Bielke], was an outstanding supporter of the Birgittine Vadstena Abbey, having been responsible in 1412 for bringing St. Birgitta's reliquary-shrine (*skrin*) to Sweden. See the entries for 1 July 1412, 14 January 1415, and 8 September 1431 in Gejrot 1988, 163, 168, 192. See also Lindblom 1963, 19–20. One wonders too if this event was not perceived as part of a general rise in evil in this year of 1410, in which King Erik of the united kingdoms begins a war against Holstein. *Karlskrönikan*, which mentions Sir Ture (line 168), says of this year a scant forty lines later: “Genstan epter litla stundh / öpedes ater onth manga lundh” [Soon after a little while / evil was again loosed in many ways] (Klemming 1866, lines 202–3).

parallels in the North outside the witchcraft orbit.⁵ By the end of the sixteenth century, this image of the congregating witch begins to appear regularly in court records as well, as, for example, when one accused witch in Stockholm declares of another, Whore-Geska, that she “hade åfta warit i Blåkulla, och ähr vtaf thet sällskapet, som ridende ähro, och hafuer märket i näsenn” [had often been in Blåkulla, and is of that society that rides (there), and has the mark in her nose] (Almqvist 1939–51, 2:166), and subsequently says of yet a third accused witch, Brita, that she too “ähr icke vtaf thet bäste släcted, honn war och thet slaget som pläga rida til Blåkulla . . . och ähnn mera sade honn, thet ähr icke länge sädenn at hon hade boolet medh diefwulenn” [is not of the best family, she was also that sort that usually rode to Blåkulla . . . and further, she said that it was not long since she had consorted with the devil] (Almqvist 1939–51, 2:167).

The question of interest is the following: was this theme of the congregating witch, with its associated activities, a relative newcomer in the post-Reformation period, or did it have currency already in Catholic Scandinavia? And in either case, what is its relationship to native traditions about witchcraft? First, it must be said that the medieval historical records, such as summaries of trials and other nonliterary documents, give few indications of such beliefs. The trials of Ragnhildr Tregagás in Bergen in 1325, of Kolgrímr in Greenland in 1407, of “galna kadhrin” [crazy Kate] and Birgitta Andersdotter in Arboga in 1471, and other notorious witch trials from the later Scandinavian Middle Ages generally focus on sex, love, and more sex, but always in the context of love triangles, where passions of the heart are clearly at the forefront, not on indiscriminate, lascivious, orgiastic activities of the sort that so distress Pope Gregory IX in the thirteenth century. There are, however, occasional references in historical documents indicating the growth of the Blåkulla complex. In his trial in Stockholm in 1492, Erik Claueson, accused of witchcraft and eventually condemned to death, admits that he has denied God by going on nine journeys on nine Thursday evenings and accepted the devil Odin for the sake of money (cited in Ankarloo 1971, 42). Of course, separating native and foreign traditions of assembled forces that threaten society is by its very nature problematic. Virtually all of Norse mythology as we have it, for example, builds toward the moment when the forces of evil gather under Loki’s leadership and launch their all-out assault on the gods. Correspondingly, foreign texts too,

5. The Danish rhymed chronicle, e.g., presents a similar image, albeit unconnected with witches (Nielsen, 1895–1911, lines 1573–84). King Gorm claims to have sailed to an island off the coast of Norway where many monsters (*tiighæ*) live, who come out in their multitudes at night. “Saa segledhe iek hædhen vdhi then søø / paa hyn siidhæ norghæs riighæ, / saa lenghæ iek kom ther tiil en øø, / ther bodhæ saa arghæ tiighæ. / Jek kasthæ mith ackæræ vppaa then sandh, / jek hadhe saa lideth ath thæræ, / thi sændhæ jek bwth vppaa theth landh, / smaa dywr tha bethæ the thæræ. / Om natthen komme ther saa manghe throldh / vppaa then sthrannhæ banckæ, / the spordhe ath, hoo oss gaff theth woldh, / ath wi theres dywr skullæ sanckæ” [So I sailed out to sea, on the other side of the Norwegian realm, until I came to an island where terrible monsters lived. I cast my anchor onto the sand. I had too little to eat, and therefore I sent men up to the land, they caught small animals there. In the night, many trolls came onto the shore; they asked who gave us permission to gather their animals].

including those well-known in Scandinavia, frequently employ the image of assembled demons. Thus, *Siælinna thröst*, a Swedish translation from Middle Low German (ca. 1430), contains an *exemplum* from Gregory's *Dialogues* concerning the devils' meeting, which puts on display a highly sabbat-like, diabolical scene of devils gathering to report their deeds to Lucifer.⁶

In native monuments treating Nordic witchcraft, particularly where it relates to the sort of magic understood to have been used in the pagan period, practitioners are frequently presented as needing assistants, and these texts thus project the image of individuals gathered together in groups in order to practice witchcraft. The witch Heiðr in *Orvar-Odds saga*, one of the Icelandic *fornaldarsögur*, provides an example:

Kona var nefnd Heiðr. Hún var völvá ok seiðkona, hon vissi fyrir úorðna hluti af fróðleik sínum. Hún fór á veizlur ok sagði mönnum fyrir forlög manna ok vetrarfar. Hún hafði með sér xxx manna, þat váru xv sveinar ok xv meyjar. (Boer 1888, 11)

[There was a woman named Heiðr, a prophetess and a magic woman, who through her witchcraft knew about things before they happened. She went to feasts and foretold people's destinies and the course of the winter. She had with her thirty individuals, that is, fifteen boys and fifteen girls].

The older, early-fourteenth-century manuscript of this saga (S=Stockh. perg. 4^o no. 7) is more elaborate than the younger, late-fourteenth-century main manuscript (M=AM 344a 4^o) on two points concerning the assistants: it explains that Heiðr needs this company in order to provide her with chanting ("þat var raddlið mikit, þvíat þar skyldi vera kveðjandi mikil, sem hon var") and that Heiðr goes outside with this group in order to perform the magic rites ("gekk hon þá út með liði sínu . . . ok efldi seið" [Boer 1888, 11]). The significance of the second point resides in its similarity to historical materials that forbid such activity. Thus, as one example among many, the thirteenth-century Older Law of Gulaping states "ero þeir ubota menn . . . er lif þitt lata . . . oc þva þiri morð oc ffordæðo þkape. oc utifetu at vekia troll upp. at fremia heiðrni með því" [those . . . are to be regarded as outlaws . . . who are killed . . . for (deeds of) murder or for (the practice of) witchcraft or for going abroad at night to call forth evil spirits and to promote heathendom thereby] (Keyser and Munch 1846, 19; translation Larson 1935, 58).

This image of the prophetess surrounded by chanting assistants cannot help but bring to mind the dramatic treatment of similar material in *Eiríks saga rauða* in its presentation of the Greenland colony. There we are told of a woman in the settlement named Þorbjörg, a seeress and one of nine sisters, all of whom were seeresses. Þorbjörg travels about attending feasts in a fashion highly comparable to

6. Translations of Gregory's *Dialogues* into West Norse occurred already in the mid-twelfth century. See Turville-Petre 1953, 135–37. The Old Swedish text is published in Henning 1954, 226–27. See Tubach 1969, no. 1663 ("Devils render accounts"), for evidence of the tale's popularity in the Middle Ages. For Gregory's original text (*Dialogues* bk. 3, chap. 7) consult Migne 1896, 229–32; a translation of this text is provided in Zimmerman 1959, 121–23.

the scene in *Orvar-Odds saga*, except that she lacks the band of assistants: “En um morgininn, at áliðnum degi, ver henni veittr sá umbúningr, sem hon þurfti at hafa til at fremja seiðinn. Hon bað ok fá sér konur þær, er kynni fræði þat, sem til seiðsins þarf ok Varðlokur hétu” [Late next day she was supplied with the preparations she required for performing the witchcraft. She asked for the assistance of women who knew the spells needed for performing the witchcraft, known as Warlock-songs] (*Eiríks saga rauða* chap. 4; Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1935, 207; translation Magnusson and Pálsson 1965, 82). After the heroine, Guðríðr, agrees out of concern for her host to overcome her reluctance as a Christian to participate in pagan rites, the saga writer continues: “Slógu þá konur hring um hjallinn, en Þorbjörg sat á uppi” [The women formed a circle round the ritual platform on which Thorbjörg seated herself] (Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1935, 208; translation Magnusson and Pálsson 1965, 83). We cannot say with certainty whether these scenes from *Orvar-Odds saga* and *Eiríks saga rauða* represent empirical knowledge of pagan practice or, as some have suggested, romantic interpolations, yet certainly their testimony assures us that the image of the congregating witch, especially of female witches, was already in vogue by the fourteenth century and that the fourteenth century’s own interpretation of the past, whether accurately or not, understood such conventicles to be one of the activities associated with witchcraft.

Transvection and assembly are brought together in *Ketils saga hængs*, another Icelandic *fornaldarsaga*, where the idea of witches gathering is couched in terms of the native legal tradition of the “assembly,” the *þing*.⁷ This text may have been composed already by ca. 1300, although we know it from fifteenth-century and later manuscripts (e.g., AM 343a 4^o, AM 471 4^o; see Kålund 1889, 578, 654–55), and clearly the extant text must be read in the context of the sabbat in the broadest sense:

Þat var eina nótt, at hann vaknar við brak mikit í skóginum; hann hljóp út, ok sá tröllkonu, ok fell fax á herðar henni. Ketill mælti: hvert ætlar þú, fóstra? hún reigðist við honum, ok mælti: ek skal til tröllapings, þar kemr Skelkingr norðan úr Dumbshafi, konungr tröllla, ok Ófóti úr Ófótansfirði, ok Þorgerðr Hörgatröll ok aðrar stórvættir norðan úr landi; dvel eigi mik, því at mér er ekki um þik, síðan þú kveittir hann Kaldrana; ok þá óð hún út á sjóinn ok svá til hafs; ekki skorti gandreidir í eyjunni um nóttina, ok varð Katli ekki mein at því (Rafn 1829–30, 2:131)

[One night he was awakened by a great crack in the woods. He jumped up and saw a witch, and her mane fell to her shoulders. Ketill asked, “Where are you off to, mother?” She stiffened at him and said, “I am going to the witch-moot. Skelkingr, north out of Dumbshaf, king of the witches, and Ófóti from Ófóti’s Firth, and Þorgerðr hörgatröll and other great wights from the north of the country are going there. Don’t detain me. I don’t

7. A similar indication of assembly and adaption to other traditions may be present in *Bárðar saga*, where Bárðr Dumbsson and his men make landfall in Iceland: “þá blótuðu þeir til heilla sér; þat heitir nú Tröllakirkja” [they made sacrifices for their good fortune at a place now called Trolls’ (Witches’) Church] (*Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* chap. 4; Vilmundarson and Vilhjálmsson 1991, 111).

like you. You're the one who did in (the giant) Kaldrani." And then she waded out into the water and then to the sea. There was no shortage of witch-rides (*gandreiðir*) among the islands during the night, but Ketill wasn't harmed]

Moreover, in the immediately preceding episode, Ketill encounters, and apparently kills, another witch, who also appears to be on the move, having just come, "black as pitch," up out of the sea, and who tries to return to it in the shape of a whale (Rafn 1829–30, 2:127).

This idea of the *gandreið* (*renna gand* [or *gøndum*]) usually implies a witch going out, often in a noncorporeal sense, to gather information, as opposed to the sabbat-like association of *Ketils saga*. When, for example, the witch Þórdís awakens in *Fóstbræðra saga* after being observed having a troubled night's sleep, she reports on the activities and whereabouts of her enemy, saying "víða hefi ek gøndum rennt í nótt" [afar have I ridden the witch-ride this night] (*Fóstbræðra saga* chap. 23; Þórólfsson and Jónsson 1943, 243). In a slightly different vein, the sighting of a witch-ride can portend great events, as when Hildiglúmr has a vision before the burning-in in *Njáls saga* (Sveinsson 1954, chap. 125), which the community spokesman Hjalti Skeggjason interprets as a witch-ride. Other terms, such as *kveldriða* 'evening-rider' and *myrkriða* 'dark-rider', are used for the practitioners of this phenomenon, and *trollriða* 'witch-ridden' for those subjected to it.⁸

These materials suggest an evolution in the concept of the witch-ride, since *Njáls saga*, *Fóstbræðra saga*, and other relevant sagas are preserved in manuscripts already from the early fourteenth century. *Ketils saga hængs* with its more Continental view of the witch-ride, on the other hand, is known only from fifteenth-century manuscripts. Another fifteenth-century manuscript tells of Þorsteinn bæjarmagn, one of King Óláfr Tryggvason's retainers, who, on a trip to Finland, sees a bald boy on a beautiful mound. The boy calls out:

Móðir mín . . . fá þú mér út krókstaf minn ok bandvetlinga, þvíat ek vil á gandreið fara, er nú hátíð í heiminum neðra; þá var snarat út úr hólnum einum krókstaf, sem elzskara væri, hann stígr á stafinn, ok dregr á sik vetlingana, ok keyrir sem börn eru vön at gjöra. (Egilsson and Guðmundsson 1825–27, 3:176)

[“Mother . . . hand me my crooked stick and gloves, I want to go for a witch-ride. They're having a celebration down below in the Underworld.” Then a crooked stick, shaped like a poker, was thrown out of the mound. The boy put on the gloves and sat astride the stick and started riding it, as children often do.] (Pálsson and Edwards 1985, 259)

Þorsteinn too acquires a stick from the woman in the mound, follows the boy to a feast in the otherworld, and returns, after a near misadventure, with various treasures from the “world below,” which has been presided over by its own king and queen. There is no question here of a witches' sabbat, but rather of a very traditional visit to the world of the elves and assorted otherworldly creatures often made in Nordic (and Celtic) folklore (see Feilberg 1910). On the other hand, this

8. E.g., *Helgaqviða Hiðrvarðzsonar* 15.6 and *Hárbarðzlióð* 20.2 (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 144, 81); *Eyrbyggja saga* chaps. 16, 34 (Sveinsson and Þorðarson 1935, 29, 93).

tale of transvection on a *krókstafr* ‘crooked stick’ to a great celebration in a topsy-turvy world like-yet-unlike our own is suggestive, an association made explicit by the author’s use of the term *gandreið* ‘witch-ride’. Thus in the two fifteenth-century manuscripts, ‘witch-ride’ is used to designate physical transvection to the site of an assembly or feast, whereas earlier manuscripts use the term to designate a generally less corporeal, and certainly non-congregating, image of the solitary witch undertaking a specific mission.

Of course, there is nothing in these texts that absolutely demands that such concepts as the *gandreið* need be understood as native in origin rather than imported. That magical archvillain of medieval theology, Simon Magus, claims in the early fifteenth-century Swedish *Siælinna thröst*, for example, that he can fly (“Jak kan flygha j wædhreno” [Henning 1954, 95.12]), and the same collection contains a story about Saint Germanus, the interpretation of which, within the broad scope of international witchcraft beliefs, would appear to relate to the notion of nocturnal vectitation, although in the *exemplum* itself, the tale is used to moralize against secret pagans and other unfaithful miscreants.⁹ In it, Bishop Germanus takes lodging overnight and sees the housewife setting the table with a white tablecloth and good food, just as everyone is going to bed. Germanus asks who will eat the food and she answers that “tompta gudhane” [sprites] come at night, and that she must do as she does in order for her livestock to thrive. Germanus immobilizes the creatures and ascertains that they come in the shape of the woman’s neighbors. When a messenger is sent and reports that he has visited the homes of these neighbors and discovered them asleep in their beds, the “tompta gudhane” admit that they are really devils sent to plague those who do not follow the right faith. Germanus sends them away in shame, and the housewife and her household are converted from their unbelieving ways (“Oc hustrun oc folkit vm-wændos fran thera wantro oc diæfwlslike willo” [Henning 1954, 24.28–29]). The motif of the witch out traveling, especially to gather food from neighbors, is certainly one of the most widespread of witchcraft beliefs, extending far outside of the European orbit.¹⁰ It seems likely that this framework has been used as the basis for the moralizing Christian tale contained in the *exemplum*.

Still, by any measure, these texts are relative latecomers to the Nordic scene, and there exist many antediluvian indicators of a belief in conveyance by unusual means. Perhaps the most suggestive testimony of all with respect to assembly and transvection is the famous passage from *Hávamál*:

9. Henning 1954, 23.31–24.31. See Tubach 1969, no. 1648, for examples from other traditions, including the Middle Low German *Seelentrost* from which the Swedish version is translated.

10. Many disparate cultures bring these motifs together. Examples from a well-known anthology include that of the Lobedu of South Africa (Krige 1982, 264), the Zande of the southern Sudan (Evans-Pritchard 1982, 30–31), the Dobu islanders of the western Pacific (Fortune 1982, 102–5), and the Nyakyusa of Tanzania (Wilson 1982, 277).

Þat kann ec iþ tíunda, ef ec sé túnriðor
 leica lopti á:
 ec svá vinn, at þeir villir fara
 sinna heim hama,
 sinna heim huga.

(*Hávamál* 155; Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 43)

[That tenth I know, if night-nags sporting
 I scan aloft in the sky:
 I scare them with spells so they scatter abroad,
 heedless of their hides,
 heedless of their haunts.]

(Hollander 1962, 39)¹¹

The dating of any eddic poem is fraught with difficulty, and perhaps for no poem more than *Hávamál*, with its many distinct layers. Estimates generally place the Edda project as a whole to the middle of the thirteenth century, with *Hávamál* extant only in the principal manuscript, Codex regius from ca. 1270. Interpretations of this passage vary (e.g., Ólsen 1916; Löffler 1916), but central to all readings is the idea of “die wilde Jagd” (E501, etc.), of Diana, Frau Holle, or Herodias flying in the sky at night with a throng of women. Perhaps best known from the “Canon Episcopi” recorded in the early tenth century by Regino of Prüm (Baluzius 1880, 352A–353A), this complex had currency in late medieval Scandinavia (see Riising 1969, 340). The image of the night-riding hag is, as we have seen, well known elsewhere in Nordic sources. Already in the early-thirteenth-century Swedish Older Law of West Gautland, among the actionable slanders that can be uttered of a woman is mentioned the following: “Iak fa at þu reet a quiggrindu löfharæþ. ok i trolf ham þa alt var iamrift nat ok daghér” [I saw that you rode the ‘witch-ride’ (lit. the corral-gate), with your hair loose, and in a witch’s shape, ‘caught’ between night and day] (Collin and Schlyter 1827, 38).¹² This picture of a supernaturally empowered female figure riding an unusual object ought perhaps too to be connected with the frequent, and often quite archaic, projection of valkyries, female trolls, ogresses — indeed, apparently the entire range of supernatural female figures — astride wolves, a picture referred to in many different early Norse media: e.g., the runic phrase from Rök ca. 800 “histr kunar” (Gunn’s horse = a valkyrie’s horse = a wolf, as is clear from the context); the justly famous wolf-mounted figure with snake-bridle on the tenth-century Hunnestad monument, Skårby parish, Skåne; the similar figure in the thirteenth-century prose that accompanies the

11. One would only rarely want to quibble with Hollander’s translations, with their inventive solutions to age-old problems and their dedicated, and often felicitous, reflection of Norse meters; still, Clarke’s translation (1923, 85) may be useful here: “A tenth I know: if I see phantom riders sporting in the air, I can contrive to make them go bereft of their proper shapes and their proper senses.”

12. In translating a *quiggrindu* as ‘witch-ride’, I am following, e.g., Lidén (1914, 413–16), whose argument would equate the phrase with such Icelandic terms as *túnriða*. See the full discussion in Holmbäck and Wessén 1979, 125–26. Almost all authorities agree that the term refers in some sense to the idea of the ‘witch-ride’.

eddic *Helgaqviða Hiorvarðssonar*; and the ogress Hyrrockin riding a wolf to Baldr's funeral in *Snorra Edda*, also composed in the thirteenth century.¹³

Witches and Saints

The image of traveling females, albeit in the much more conventional setting of religious pilgrims, is fused with that of assembled, Nordic females threatening society in one of the legends associated with Saint Ingrid, the spiritual founder of the Dominican cloister in Skänninge, a story we know only from the mid-sixteenth-century *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* of Olaus Magnus (1555, 217 [bk. 6, chap. 19]). When Ingrid and her companions ("virginibus comitibus") return from the Holy Land, the devil is said to have ridden into the city in the form of a mighty lord and convinced the leading men that these women were, in fact, a group of terrible witches ("pessimarum incantatricum"). When the crowd begins to cross itself, the devil suddenly disappears, the truth about Ingrid and her traveling companions is revealed, and they are welcomed into the city and presented with gifts. No earlier version of this tale is known, and it has been reasonably suggested that Olaus Magnus himself knew this tale not from any written source, but rather from oral traditions in Skänninge (Magnus 1976, 296). The reputation and notoriety of Saint Ingrid, great in the Nordic Middle Ages, has largely been eclipsed by her vastly more famous albeit like-minded compatriot, Saint Birgitta (see Schück 1929, 127–46, and Lundén 1962). Indeed, the similarities between these two Swedish women, separated by a century, with their shared experiences of traveling to Rome to convince the church to establish gynocentric religious houses in Sweden has led some scholars to conclude that Ingrid's and Birgitta's biographies, and the stories associated with them, have on occasion been conflated. This idea is noteworthy in the context of the present discussion, for among Birgitta's *Revelationes extravagantes* (preserved in fourteenth-century manuscripts) is the story of the saint's arrival in Rome at a time when her ecstatic religious experiences were still without official sanction or interpretation. Confronted with her visions and claims, some of the roused populace of Rome assault Birgitta, saying that they want to burn her alive and that she is a witch:

Hwilka reuelaciones for romara stadz inbyggjara waro läsna oc framdragna, wptändos the, mz enne dödhelika affwndh, oc hat mote *sancte* birgitte, Aff hwario somlike aff them hotadho *henne* liffuandis bränna wilia, Somlike gabbadho hona sighiande *henne* wille fara, oc ena trulkärling wara (Klemming 1862, 57.17–23)

13. See, respectively, Brate 1911, 239–40; Jacobsen and Moltke 1941, plates 677–78; Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 147 pr. 8–9; Jónsson 1931, 65.15–23. Not every observer interprets this tradition in the same way; for an earlier generation of scholars, for example, the image of the witch on a wolf was considered certain evidence of Hellenistic influence (see Linderholm 1918b, 115–17). Dinzelbacher (1995, 236–39 et passim) makes the case for a corresponding Christian context for transvection within the hagiographic tradition of medieval female saints (levitation and visions).

[which Revelations were read and presented to the citizens of Rome, who were enraged with a deadly jealousy and hate against Saint Birgitta, which caused some of them to threaten her with being buried alive, and some took hold of her, saying they wanted to convey her (to the pyre) and that she was a witch]

The obvious strong parallels between these two stories make it probable that the story of Ingrid's return from the Holy Land has been influenced by — or perhaps rather has influenced — the story of Birgitta's arrival in Rome.

The legend of Saint Ingrid further confirms the proposition that the concept of assembled witches was familiar in late medieval Sweden; moreover, this motif of a holy woman accused of being a witch raises an important, and provocative, issue. What these two women wanted, and were willing to go to some lengths to get, was organized, female religious communities. This point is especially clear in the case of Birgitta's call for an entirely new religious order, *Ordo Sanctissimi Salvatoris*. The monasteries of this the Order of St. Bridget were to consist of two locally separate but proximate and institutionally unified convents composed respectively of sixty nuns and twenty-five monks, deacons, and lay brothers under the secular leadership of an *abbess* jointly selected by the two groups. Birgitta envisioned this monastery as an institution principally for nuns, and the supremacy of the abbess in worldly matters extended even to the head of the monks' section, the confessor general. Birgitta was under no illusion as to the difficulties the order would encounter: women, she opined in a discussion with the Virgin Mary, would have no trouble submitting to the order, "Än wansamlia finnas män, som sik wndergiffua wilia enna qwinno foresyn" [but it will be difficult to find men willing to submit themselves to the rule of a woman] (Klemming 1862, 70.11–13). The first monastery of the Order of St. Bridget was dedicated in 1384 at Vadstena in Östergötland, and the growth in the numbers of Birgittine monasteries throughout Scandinavia, Germany, Poland, England, Estonia, the Netherlands, and Italy in the later Middle Ages is striking. And in the context of shifting Nordic perceptions of witchcraft, it is useful to recall the one issue which inevitably, and properly, attaches itself to the study of witchcraft, well framed by Christine Lerner's rhetorical question, "To what extent, then, was the European witch-hunt (between the late middle ages and the beginning of the eighteenth century) a response to a perceived threat to the social order through some change in the status or power of women?" (Lerner 1984, 85).

One may well ask whether the rise in status and wealth of the Order of St. Bridget might not have fostered a climate in which the idea of assembled, organized females was perceived to be deeply threatening to society.¹⁴ The church had

14. It should be noted that, at least in the broadest sense, this relationship was recognized by Fogelklou's suggestive title *Helgon och häxor* [Saints and witches] (1952), a collection of essays on, among other topics, Saint Birgitta and Swedish witchcraft. The connection between witches and saints has been studied extensively by Dinzelbacher (1995). In this important work — in many respects an attempt to answer the famous question raised by Boyer and Nissenbaum a quarter of a century ago (1974, 23–30) concerning how society can shape and interpret differently what often appear to be similar phenomena, in

always had a place for women, but as it began to accept them not only in a context of Eva and of *Ave*, of noble female converts like Clotilda, and of suffering female martyrs like St. Lucy, but also of capable women administrators, and of a thriving female-led cult with fast-growing possessions and influence (the economic and political parallel to the Knights Templar is striking), and particularly in the context of women not merely governing other women but also governing men, would not the existence of a dynamic and growing institution such as the Order of St. Bridget reinforce fears of organized, assembled women?

In this connection, it is important to note that the opposition faced by the Birgittine Order at the Council of Constance 1414–18 (and to a lesser degree again at the Council of Basel 1431–49) was due not only to the interpretation of Birgitta's visions by many as heretical, but also to a very high degree to the Order's apparent status as a "double monastery." The idea of monks and nuns in the same monastery was not itself a new concept in the history of the church, although the leadership role given the abbess in the Birgittine houses was pointedly at odds with previous practices, and, one suspects, the particular issue of a woman possessing power, if only secular authority, over monks was an especially thorny issue for the church (see Höjer 1905 and, especially, Cnattingius 1963). Moreover, conflicts did indeed arise at Vadstena and other monasteries in the early fifteenth century that can at least partially be accounted for by the genders of the participants (for example, the struggles involving the monks, Abbess Ingegärd, and Conservator Lucas Jacobi; possibly even Queen Margareta [see Cnattingius 1963, 47–68]). Could the rapid rise in power, popularity, and prominence of the Birgittine monasteries have done other than to create a backlash in ecclesiastical quarters, as had the correspondingly rapid rise of the Knights Templar centuries before? Certainly, such an interpretation would help us better understand the environment which created such impassioned fear of assembled women in late medieval Europe and fits neatly with our perception of the motivations that drove, for example, the Dominicans Heinrich Kramer and Jakob Sprenger. It is they, after all, who write in their *Malleus maleficarum* (1487) that among the three qualities that typify women especially subject to witchcraft is *ambition*.¹⁵ Likewise, they applaud the view that a man who would allow a gynecocracy within his own house, who would permit his wife to govern him or impose laws on him, is the vilest of slaves (Schnyder 1991, 43c–d); moreover, they approve heartily of the view that the root of all women's vices is *avarice* ("mulieres ad omnia maleficia cupiditas vna ducit," Schnyder 1991, 41b). If we can imagine the *Malleus* having an ecclesiastical target

one case as witchcraft, in another case as spiritual renewal — Dinzelsbacher reviews many of the best-known female mystics of the Middle Ages, including Saint Birgitta (1995, 26–28, 187, 227–28, 254, et passim). One part of the answer, Dinzelsbacher notes with respect to the witch-saint dyad in medieval Europe, is that "Der Konzentration von Heil auf der einen Seite entsprach die Konzentration von Unheil auf der anderen, sowie die Funktion als Sündenbock" (1995, 154).

15. *Malleus maleficarum*, part 1, question 6: "infidelitas. ambitio. et luxuria precipue in malis mulieribus regnare vident" (Schnyder 1991, 45b). For the passage in translation, see Summers 1971, 47.

paralleling its secular object, what group would better fit such accusations than the Ordo Sanctissimi Salvatoris?

Etymological Considerations

Were transvection and assembly traditional aspects of Nordic witchcraft, or were they imported into northern Europe in the later Middle Ages as part of an elite Continental view of witchcraft? Scandinavian source material is sufficiently suggestive to allow partisans on both sides of the issue to claim the upper hand. Certainly Nordic belief systems about witches and the supernatural appear to have long included an element of veneration and, by the close of the Middle Ages, if not earlier, of witches assembling.¹⁶ Witch rides, however, appear in the older sources to have had a different purpose than the one imagined in the Continental view of witchcraft, a purpose which seems consonant with witch beliefs in their broader international perspective. This native belief complex about the witch's journey to discover information, or to attack individuals, must have become an obvious candidate for inclusion in the Continental construction of the witches' sabbat as that image made its way into Scandinavia, and was assimilated to it, especially in elite paradigms of the witch.¹⁷ Of special import is the fact that none of the native traditions concerning the practice of *seiðr* and witchcraft in the pagan period contain descriptions of orgies, an image that resonates throughout the sixteenth-century testimonials concerned with "The Journey to *Blåkulla*." This idea, at least, may be best accounted for as a borrowing from the elite Continental model of sabbat activities. But as already Sahlgren understood (1915), a further element in the development of the complex in northern Europe may have been the fact that there existed additional, separate concepts concerning abduction by otherworldly creatures (so-called *bergtagningar*), especially where these tales involved elements from the Mountain of Venus, that "hollow mountain otherworld where men live a life of ease and lustful pleasure in company with beautiful women" (F131.1 in Thompson 1955–58, 3:20). In other words, the sources of influence that came together in forming the sabbat complex in Nordic regions may have been heavily reticulated with elements from native and foreign understandings of witchcraft. Although the testimony of the following ballad stanza comes well after the medieval period, it is quite possible that the image projected in *Jungfrurnas gäst*, recorded ca. 1670 from a performance by Ingierd Gunnarsdotter in Västergötland, Sweden, is that of much older traditions. In its story of how a knight is abducted by three elf maids, the ballad combines notions from the traditions of the

16. Additional examples of transvection are examined in Strömbäck 1935, 160–82.

17. Already Linderholm viewed the situation largely along these lines: "I det svenska Blåkullamötet hava skilda förkristna och medeltideskristna traditioner flutit samman" (1918a, 29), although he specifically imagines the witches' sabbat as a legacy of female worship within a phallogocentric fertility cult dedicated to Freyr.

bergtagning, the Mountain of Venus, and Blåkulla (the latter represented in one of its folk etymologies as ‘blue mountain’):

Hade icke Gudh den Nåden gifwit
at haanen hade flaxat sine Winger
Aldrig haar Jagh kommet vhr Berget blåå,
Ifrån dhe Elfweqwin nor.

(Jonsson, Jersild, and Jansson 1983, 428)

[Had God not granted the grace / that the cock flapped its wings, / never would I have escaped the Blue Mountain, / from the elf women.]

Although the necessary records are far from complete, it is noteworthy too that much of the vocabulary which by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries comes to be attached to accusations of trips to the witches’ sabbat in major trade cities (for example, *hekse* ‘witch’; *bole* ‘fornicate’; the names *Blåkulla* and *Jungfrun* themselves) has come from German. The noninsular Nordic languages were, of course, heavily influenced by German in the later Middle Ages, and in one sense, it can hardly be surprising that the lexical inventory of any of these languages would display loud echoes of the German presence in the North. In a more provincial city, such as Arboga in the late fifteenth century, witch trials are largely free of both German loanwords and the consolidated Continental view of witchcraft. The case of “galna kadhryn” in 1471, for example, is entirely concerned with frustrated love and “forgerningha” (Noreen and Wennström 1935–37, 360–61). By the end of the next century (1597), however, the Stockholm trials involving Whore-Geska, for example, encompass not only the accusations of the journey to Blåkulla and fornication with the devil, but also of the search for the witch’s mark: “at hustrw Brita skulde kläde vtaf sigh, så wilde honn låta ‘see’ huar honn hade märket” [that the housewife Brita should undress, so she could show them where she had the mark] (Almqvist 1939–51, 2:167). The relevance of German influence becomes all the more real in this case, given the scribe’s frequent Germanisms (e.g., *macht*, *tucht*, *ter på*).¹⁸ In fact, the native witchcraft vocabulary of Scandinavia comes to be heavily supplemented by loanwords, and concepts, from German. Indeed, the evolving inventory of witchcraft-related lexemes itself would appear to hold out many avenues for exploration.

On this point, a term that neatly summarizes several aspects of the transvecting and congregating witch figure is the Swedish compound *trollpacka* ‘witch’, also in evidence as *trollbacka* in several dialects. In the opinion of all authorities, the original form is that of the dialects: *-backa* is in evidence already in Old Swedish names for flying organisms (especially those with nocturnal habits, such as owls and bats), with the sense ‘travel about’, and is taken to be the original element in this term for witches. Thus, for example, Hellquist writes, “Formen med *b*

18. On the remarkable details of the authorship for the years 1597–98, see the introduction in Almqvist 1939–51, 1:xii–xxvi.

är säkerl. äldst o. den med *p* har möjl. uppstått genom inflytande från *pack*” [The form with *b* (*trollbacka*) is certainly the oldest, and the form with *p* possibly arose through the influence of *pack*] (Hellquist 1948, 1224). This interpretation has been reaffirmed by the editors of Svenska akademins ordbok, who have found even earlier evidence of the term in both forms than those known to Hellquist (Svensson 1996). This compound, which would appear to have derived from the sense ‘witch-flight’ (or perhaps ‘magic-flight’), clearly supports the image of witches as magically empowered individuals who can fly about.

The development of the alternating form with *-packa* likely came about, as Hellquist notes, through the influence of the German loanword *pack*, in its sense of ‘mob, rabble’, “[en] grupp av föraktade människor som inte anses uppfylla (ett minimum av) sociala normer” [a group of despised individuals who are not regarded as living up to a minimum of social norms] (Allén 1986, 882). This usage would parallel other compounds treating marginalized and despised groups, such as *horpack* ‘pack of whores’, *tjuvpack* ‘pack of thieves’, and *zigenarpack* ‘pack of gypsies’. That this sense lies behind the compound is apparent in the corresponding Danish and Dano-Norwegian *troldpak*, where the term is always a collective plural. And it is quite possible that *troldpak* is a borrowing from Swedish rather than an independent Danish development (Kalkar 1908–18, 1083). It is rare for scholarship to have the luxury of a single term that can conjure up so many different aspects of a problem, but in the various forms this one compound for ‘witch’ takes — *trollbacka*, *trollpacka*, *troldpak* — we find embodied references to both of the themes developed in this essay concerning the late medieval Nordic configuration of the hag — namely, that of the assembling, transvecting witch.

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