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“Pur sarriþu þursa trutin”: Monster-Fighting and Medicine in Early Medieval Scandinavia’

Healing does not feature prominently in those medieval texts traditionally deemed to comprise ‘Old Norse mythology’. It pops up in connection with Óðinn and his arcane wisdom (ref XXXXX), XXXXX or XXXXX, but is not presented as a central characteristic of medieval Scandinavians’ mythical understanding of the world—and accordingly has received relatively little attention from scholars (XXXXXhandbooks; XXXXXexceptions—Dubois?). This contrasts with the medieval Christianity with which non-Christian Scandinavian traditions co-existed: miracles of healing are central not only to the New Testament, but also to the many saints’ lives which it inspired, putting the healing of the sick at the centre of medieval Christian mythological texts, and wider Christian ideologies. And there is no need to doubt that the differences in emphasis between the Christian and traditional mythological texts circulating in medieval Scandinavia meaningfully reflect different ideological emphases in these cultural systems. On the other hand, the contrast is also sufficient to suggest that interactions between ideas about health and healing and wider belief-systems might have been more important in traditional Scandinavian beliefs than our texts would suggest. This paper responds to this: XXXXXwords for illnesses and words for monsters overlap semantically, making monster-fighting and illness-fighting pretty similarXXXXX.

There has long been a tendency to regard our words for mythical beings in Old Icelandic to represent a lexical set like *robin*, *sparrow* and *hawk*, in which each word denotes one discrete species. A more common kind of lexical set, however, is that represented by *monarch*, *king* and *ruler*, in which words potentially overlap in meaning. It would be possible to find people who could only be described by one of these words at a time, and to find people who could be described by all at once—and I have argued elsewhere that this model better describes many Old Icelandic words for otherworldly beings (Hall 2007, XXXXX). That this situation holds with *þurs* and various other words for monsters in Old Icelandic is also easy to demonstrate. XXXXX. It would in theory be possible to claim that our sources reflect redaction by people who were confused or careless about traditional beliefs (e.g. XXXXX)

Parallels for this reading

(Dubois? XXXXX)

