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

Introduction

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.

What is a *þurs*?

Sveinbjörn Egilsson (as revised by Finnur Jónsson) defined *þurs* as a ‘turs, jætte’ (1931, s.v.); Cleasby and Vigfússon as ‘a giant, with a notion of surliness and stupidity’ (1957, s.v. XXXXcheck def.); and Jan de Vries as ‘riese, unhold’ (XXXXXcaps? 1961, s.v.). (XXXXXOSw, Old Norwegian, Old Danish dictionariesXXXXX). 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’s meaning is mutually exclusive of the others’ (each in this case denoting 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. XXXXXevidenceXXXXX. 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), but that would be shiteXXXXX.

Monsters and illness

What I want to do here is push a step further beyond this, to argue that we must not only be willing to see different words for monsters as partial synonyms, but to be able to denote things which are in our world-views members of entirely different ontological categories—specifically illnesses. As my summary above shows, this is not a sense

which has been recognised for *þurs* in Old Icelandic lexicography. Tellingly, our principle evidence for this derives from a text-type which is little represented in our medieval Scandinavian corpus except by allusion: healing charms. The most useful of these survives not in Scandinavian tradition, but in a portion of the Anglo-Saxon manuscript MS Cotton Caligula A.xv dated to around 1073×76, and is known accordingly as the Canterbury Rune-Charm (ed. and trans. Frankis XXXXX; cf. McKinnell–Simek–Düwel 2004, 127 [O 17]): ‘kuril sarþuara far þu nu funtin istu þur uigi þik / þorsa trutin iuril sarþuara uifr aprauari’. This can be translated into standard Old Norse as ‘Kuril sárþvara far þú nú, fundinn ertu. Þórr vígi þik þursa dróttin, luril (leg. Kuril) sárþvara. Viðr áðravari (leg. -vara)’ and into English as ‘Kuril of the wound-spear, go now, you have been found. May Þórr consecrate you, lord of *þursar*, Kuril of the wound-spear. Against ‘vein-pus’. The charm is not without its problems; in particular, its use of *víga*, usually ‘to consecrate’ and used of XXXXX, seems curious here, but a sense along the lines of ‘exorcise’ seems likely. But it clearly envisages Kuril both as a supernatural being (and specifically lord of *þursar*), and as the root cause of poisonous fluid in the veins. Trying to decide whether Kuril belongs in our ontological categories of beings and illnesses will not help us to understand this text: what will is to recognise that illness could be conceptualised as a being, and interacted with on that basis.

That the Canterbury rune-charm is not entirely unique in its representation of *þursar* is shown by a roughly contemporary text, the Sigtuna Amulet, found in XXXXX (which may indicate one of the means by which the text of the Canterbury Rune Charm may have found its way to XXXXX monastery, Canterbury). The amulet is a thin copper plate with an inscription on each side. It is not certain whether the inscriptions are to be read consecutively or as two separate texts, but it is worth quoting both (ed. McKinnell–Simek–Düwel 2004, 126 [O 16]):

A: **þur x sarriþu x þursa / trutinfliuþunuf**[bind rune uf]**untinis**

B: **af þir þriar þraulf x**

af þir niu nöþir ulfr iii +

isiR [þ]is isir aukis unir ulfr niut lu -fia

A: Þórr (or *þurs*?) *sárriðu*, *þursa dróttinn*;
Flý þú nú, *fundinn es!*

B: [H]af þér þrjár þrár, úlf[r]!

[H]af þér níu nauðir, úlfr!

iii ísir þess, ísir eykis, unir úlfr!

Njót lyfja!

A: Þórr/*þurs* of wound-fever, lord of *þursar*,
flee now; you have been found.

B: Have for yourself three XXXXX, wolf!

Have for yourself nine XXXXX/n-runes, wolf!

Three ice[-runes] XXXXX

Benefit from the medicine!

Besides the uncertainty as to the relationship between the two inscriptions, these texts present a number of complications. Two things are clear, however. The inscription on the second side seems unambiguously to associate itself with *lyf* ‘medicine’, encouraging our confidence that the shorter inscription on the first side too was intended for medicinal purposes rather than, for example, helping the bearer in other kinds of encounters with supernatural beings. Meanwhile, the inscription on the first side is verbally similar enough to the Canterbury Rune-Charm to show that it represents a wider tradition of similar incantations, and specifically the idea that the cause of an illness might be a ‘lord of *þursar*’. Whether the ‘lord of *þursar*’ in question should be identified as the pagan god Þórr or simply as a *þurs* is hard to judge. It was conventional, when two identical consonants appeared next to each other, to write only one rune, meaning that the first word of the inscription could be read as *Þórr* or *þurs*. If we read *þurs sárriðu*, the metrical requirement for alliteration would be met by repeating the word with *þursa dróttinn*, which from the point of view of literary merit is not promising; but if we read *Þórr sárriðu* we must probably envisage the demonisation of the generally benign god Þórr such that he becomes aligned with his

traditional enemies the *pursar*.

Even taken together, these two texts provide rather slight evidence for traditions associating supernatural beings with illness. However, wider parallels are easily come by. One set is provided by medieval Christian thought, in which possession by a demon was a reasonably prominent aetiology of certain kinds of illness, and given the prominence of this it is curious that similar associations have not been made for *pursar* and other monsters before (check Title: Discerning spirits : divine and demonic possession in the Middle Ages / Nancy Caciola. Published: Ithaca, N.Y. ; London : Cornell University Press, 2003. Maybe also cite Newman 1998 in texts folder; something on A-S stuff (Jolly) if she lacks early medieval dimension? Luke 9.1-6, Matthew?XXXXX). In such cases, the illness is usually identical with the supernatural being, commencing with its arrival and ceasing with its expulsion. Analogues can also be found, however, in the non-Christian traditions of Germanic-speaking cultures. The strongest case is that of *dvergr* and its Old English cognate *dweorg*. The modern English reflex of this word is *dwarf*, and in our medieval English and Icelandic manuscripts it indeed denotes small beings, usually, in the Scandinavian tradition, supernatural. We have, however, just enough evidence in Scandinavia to discern a quite different side to the word's meaning, in the form of a fragment of a human cranium from Ribe inscribed, around the eighth century, with the text

'ulfuraukupin auk hutur · hialbburiisuipr /

þaimauiarkiauktuirkunin[underdotXXXXX] [hole] **buur'**, which can be rendered into standard Old Icelandic as *Ulfr auk Óðinn auk Hó-tiur. Hjalp buri es viðr / þæima værki. Auk dverg unninn. Bóurr*. This we might tentatively translate as '(?) Ulfr/Wolf and Óðinn and high-tiur. bur is help against this pain. And the dvergr (is) overcome, BóurrXXXXX' (ed. McKinnell-Simek-Düwel 2004, 50 [B 6], where a further selection of translations is provided). This evidence is consolidated by Old English material: by contrast with the other earlier medieval Germanic languages, surviving writings in Old English include a large number of medical texts, ranging from poetic charms through mundane prose remedies to translated Latin medical writing. Without this corpus, the meaning of *dweorg* would have seemed limited to short people: most prominently, the word glosses *nanus*, *pumilio* XXXXX. However, the medical texts tell a different story: XXXXXwið *dweorg*; *Peri didaxeon*: remedy for asthmatic includes: 'hwile he riþaþ swilce he on dweorge sy' ('sometimes he shakes/writhes as though he was on *dweorge*') for 'interdum et februnt' ('sometimes they also suffer fever'). Whether or not *dweorg* here should be taken primarily to denote a being, the fact that this is a practical, mundane translation from Latin emphasises that its appearance represents a routine usage in Christian, scholarly writing. Moreover, the phrase *on dweorge* would literally mean 'in/on a dwarf', but it seems unlikely that the patient was envisaged to writhe as though he was inside or on top of a dwarf. It seems rather as though by the eleventh century, *dweorgas'* associations with fever were intimate enough that the word had a meaning in medical discourse in which it primary meant 'fever'. XXXXXcheck DOEXXXXX

http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sites/entrez?cmd=Retrieve&db=PubMed&list_uids=6387755&dopt=Citation

put in ref to elves book discussion of the word *supernatural*.