ROBERTO LUIGI PAGANI

THE MEDITERRANEAN ORIGIN OF THE *GALDRASTAFIR*

Tracing the Transmission of the Learned European Magical Tradition into Icelandic Popular Lore

1. Introduction

The *galdrastafir* – magical staves preserved in Icelandic manuscripts from the late medieval and early modern period – have sometimes been interpreted as native products of Norse magical thinking. For instance, they are sometimes associated with 'vikings' and runes in popular culture. While local traditions and pre-Christian beliefs undoubtedly influenced their reception and use, their ultimate origin resides elsewhere. This paper situates the *galdrastafir* within a pan-European context, arguing that their form and function are best understood as adaptations of esoteric motifs originating in the Mediterranean area. As will be discussed, the presence of Solomonic sigils, Latin invocations, and hermetic formulations in Icelandic grimoires reflects a broader cultural process of transmission and localisation.

Unfortunately, not many such books survive, undoubtedly because many of them were destroyed either by authorities or by their owners for fear of consequences. This fact significantly complicates any attempt to understand the evolution of the tradition. Previous commentators have lamented the difficulty in reconstructing the origin of this tradition due to a lack of sources (Magnús Rafnsson 2018, 16). Rare similarities have been identified between different texts, such as the same charm appearing in almost identical shape in more than one book (Cf. Matthías Viðar Sæmundsson 1992, 307, 373–375), but identifying any tradition, let alone its earlier origins, remains daunting. The four earliest and most important texts date from the period starting around 1500 until roughly the seven-

Gripla XXXVI (2025): 241–269

teenth century. These manuscripts are characterised by a large variety of contents, the presence of prayers and invocations, and less elaborate magical staves. After this period, and particularly from the eighteenth century, many more magical texts survive, but they become quite different in some respects, for example in the inclusion of ciphers, and they turn increasingly into catalogues of magical symbols, which also evolve to become more complex in their design. In this paper, an attempt will be made to describe and interpret the history of these symbols, showing how they appear to be derived by a European esoteric tradition beginning, in all probability, in the late Middle Ages around the Mediterranean, between Greece and Italy.

1.1 The Corpus

The Icelandic magical tradition, as preserved in manuscript form, offers one of the most visually and conceptually distinctive manifestations of early modern European esotericism. The considerations discussed in this paper are essentially drawn from an analysis of the earliest examples of grimoires preserved:

AM 434 a 12mo, *Lækningakver* (c.1500): This is the oldest extant Icelandic manuscript containing magical material. It blends medicine, the use of metals, and herbal remedies with protective charms. The coexistence of Latin formulas with vernacular spells reflects a liminal moment in which learned and popular magical traditions overlapped. It was written by two scribes, one of which was a *bóndi* from Steingrímsfjörður, in the Strandir region (Stefán Karlsson 1999, 155), a person with some education, but not a member of the learned elite. It was published in a diplomatic edition by Kålund (1907) and translated into English (Waggoner 2011).

Lbs 143 8vo, *Galdrakver* (1670): This is a fully developed *galdrabók* containing an extensive series of magical texts, such as a pseudoepigraphic epistle, prayers, and staves linked to a specific purpose (mostly designed for protection against magic, evil, enemies, and for the health of livestock). The manuscript is notable for its clean design and visual clarity, often dedicating full pages to individual *stafir*. Despite the presence of lengthy texts such as a pseudepigraphic

epistle and prayers, it also contains symbols that exemplify the shift towards a symbolic, talismanic logic where power is embedded in graphic form. It has been published in a facsimile edition with normalised transcription and translations in English, Danish, and German (Ögmundur Helgason 2004).

ATA Ämb2 F 16:26, *Galdrabók* (sixteenth–seventeenth century?): Preserved in the archives of the Swedish National Heritage Board, this text contains a comparable selection of staves and magical instructions. It was written by multiple hands over a prolonged period, starting perhaps sometime in the sixteenth century. It includes prayers, invocations, and a list of magical staves. Interestingly, it shows the conflation of Judaeo-Christian names with the names of Norse Gods. An early edition appeared with a Swedish translation in 1921, an Icelandic facsimile edition with commentary was published in 1992, and a new English translation and edition has recently appeared (Kári Pálsson 2024).

Though it will not be referred to directly in this discussion, it is important to mention another very special manuscript that has recently been translated into English for the first time and published together with ATA Ämb2 F 16:26, *Galdrabók* (Kári Pálsson 2024):

AM 434 d 12mo: This is a concise Icelandic manuscript dating from the late seventeenth century. Unlike its counterpart AM 434 a 12mo, *Lækningakver*, which contains a broader mix of medicinal and magical content, AM 434 d 12mo is focused on practical magic, comprising a series of symbols, and invocations aimed at establishing contact with *jarðbúar* (Kári Pálsson 2024, 156). This manuscript will not be discussed as it seems to represent a different, and more markedly localised, Icelandic practice not necessarily stemming from the same European tradition as *galdrastafir* in general.[1]

1 The purpose of this paper is to identify the origin of the Icelandic *galdrastafir* tradition in European sources, but it should not be forgotten that the reception of such material was not merely passive: localised elements were added, such as runes and names of Norse gods, as we shall discuss.

Together, these four manuscripts reflect the evolution of a distinct Icelandic magical genre. They document the localisation of European esoteric ideas – especially those of the Solomonic and Christian magical traditions, as we shall see – into a visual and vernacular system that emphasised symbolic efficacy, portability, and practical outcomes.

2. The Solomonic Legacy in Iceland: Magical Sigils and Mediterranean Sources

Starting in the thirteenth century, the Latin West saw an increasing spread of so-called pseudo-epigraphic texts attributed to King Solomon (Véronèse 2019, 187). The dissemination of Greek material in western Europe may have started from Italy, where Greek scholars fled after the collapse of the Roman Empire in the East by the mid-fifteenth century. An early precursor of this tradition appears to be a text known as the *Testament of Solomon*: an apocryphal text of the Old Testament belonging to the genre of the *Testamenta* (Cosentino 2013, 5) likely composed in a Christian environment in the first centuries of the Common Era (Duling 1983, 940–943) and whose oldest witness is a papyrus from the fifth–sixth century, Vindobonensis G330 (Cosentino 2013, 23).

In it, King Solomon receives from Michael the archangel a ring with a precious stone carved with the 'seal of God' (a seal called the "Seal of Solomon" is found in multiple Icelandic magical books, as we shall see), which enables him to control the demons and complete his temple. The use of magical formulas and symbols in the practice of exorcisms was already attested in the Jewish tradition, though infrequently (Cosentino 2013, 6). The king evokes one demon after the other, using the binding force of the magical seals, asking each of them what their evil deeds are, what their name is, and what angel is their antagonist. These demons are responsible for a wide variety of physical, moral, and psychological evils, but they can be controlled by the binding power of the seal. The text combines the story with magic lore, astrology, angelology, demonology, and primitive medicine (Duling 1983, 935), a mix which we will also find in the earliest example of magical books in Iceland.

It is within this tradition that medieval European esotericism and magic will take their place: the idea of a magical seal that can be used to evoke and control demons will become a central concept of the so-called

Solomonic magic (cf. Cosentino 2013, 9–12). Indeed, from the first centuries of the second millennium, we possess a number of incomplete manuscripts of a text known as Ὑγρομαντεία (*Hygromateia* 'water prophecy'), also called *The Magical Treatise of Solomon,* which appears to be a precursor of (if not a model for) the much more famous and widespread *Clavicula Salomonis* ('Key of Solomon'). Though the link between the two traditions is yet to be satisfactory described (Véronese 2019, 193), the former text is preserved in manuscripts dating from the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries and seems to have originated in southern Italy (Torijano 2002, 174). The latter is mostly preserved in manuscripts from the late sixteenth century or younger. This is about the same time in which the magical tradition making use of *galdrastafir* starts appearing in Iceland, and it may not be a coincidence, as we shall see.

These Solomonic texts incorporate elements of Judaeo-Christian and Graeco-Roman esoteric traditions, and they can be ascribed to that branch of magic called *goetia* (from Greek γοητεία 'witchcraft'). These texts illustrate the rituals and the procedure to manipulate reality through the invocation and control of demons. There are dozens of demons, each with a particular name and specialised powers, and the magician can evoke them through rituals involving the use of sigils.

The most famous manuscript preserving the earlier text, the *Hygromanteia*, is a Greek codex bearing the shelf mark *Harleianus 5596*, which includes a number of sigils (see Figure 1) to be used for the conjuration of demons. Some of them bear a striking resemblance to Icelandic *galdrastafir*.

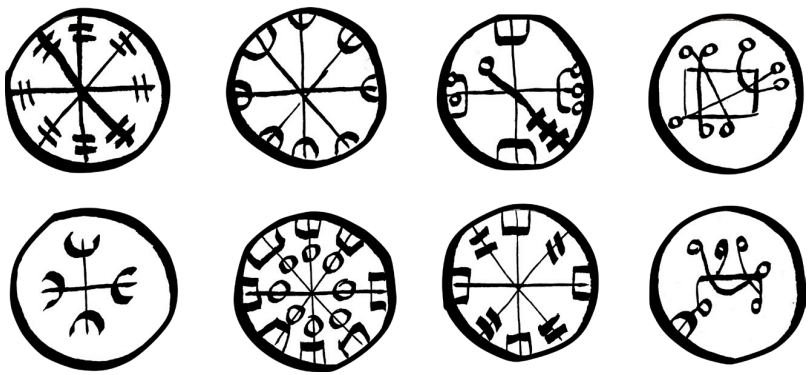

Figure 1: Examples of sigils from the Harleianus 5596 (fol. 33v).

Despite the name, *Hygromanteia* does not include any instruction on water divination, as it deals with invocation and planetary magic. It may have done so, however, in a part lost in the transmission. It is interesting to note that a form of divination involving the use of water is indeed recorded in the earliest Icelandic grimoire, AM 434 a 12mo (fol. 4v), prescribing the use of a magical stave (see Figure 2) to identify a thief. The person must fill an *askur* (sort of wooden bowl) with water and yarrow (*Achillea*, a flowering plant), recite "*in nomine domini, amen*", and the face of the thief will appear in the water.

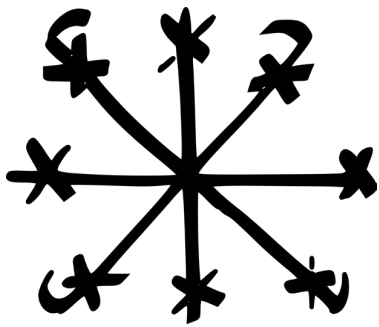

Figure 2: Þjófastafur.

The resemblance between the sigils of the *Harleianus 5596* and the earliest *galdrastafir*, such as that shown in Figure 2, is quite striking. We can still see a strong similarity if we observe what has perhaps become the most famous of all *galdrastafir* in the popular imagery, the so-called *Ægishjálmur* (Figure 3) from Lbs 143 8vo, *Galdrakver* (fol. 11r).

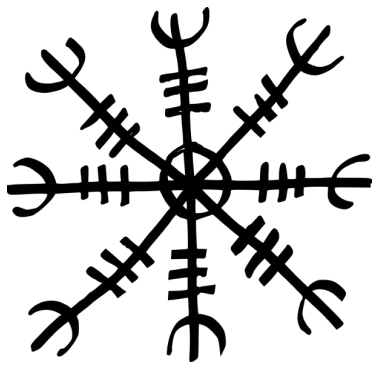

Figure 3: The Ægishjálmur.

On its own, visual similarity, although uncanny and intriguing, is insufficient proof of direct influence or derivation. However, that and the context in which the first *galdrastafir* are situated, interspersed with known esoteric motifs, strongly indicate that both these themes and the staves must share the same origin: Lbs 143 8vo, *Galdrakver*, for instance, begins with an epistle claiming to be written by God himself and brought by an angel to Pope Leo III (similarly to the magic seal Solomon gets in the *Testament*), followed by symbols called 'rings of Charlemagne'; fol. 13v displays the 'Seal of the Holy Spirit', and on 14r we find a 'Seal of Solomon'. These symbols have been called *galdramyndir* in Icelandic and are named in Icelandic court cases from the seventeenth century (Ólína Þorvarðardóttir 2000, 210). On fol. 12r we also encounter the Greek-derived form ihs (Jesus) and Latin expressions such as "*re demtor* [sic] *et saluator*" or "*conserfa seruam tuum* [sic]".

ATA Ämb2 F 16:26, *Galdrabók*, also displays two examples of the 'seal of Solomon' (fols. 8r and 14r), though aesthetically rather different from that in Lbs 143 8vo, *Galdrakver*. The second one is followed by 'The 109th Psalm of David' (14v–16v). Beginning on fol. 11v, we find a prayer against dangers posed by nature and animals, including an invocation (on fol. 12r) to "Adonaij agijos otheos agijos yskyros agijos athanathos Eleyson ymas Zebaoth Emanuel", a mixture of Hebrew and Greek words. We also find a list of days that were considered unlucky 'particularly by the Egyptians' (fols. 13r–13v).[2] It would be more difficult to find an explanation as to why the *galdrastafir*, if they had a completely different origin from the surrounding material, would have been inserted in this Judaeo-Christian esoteric context. The explanation that they must share the same origin as the rest of the material surrounding them is more economical.

Page (2019, 438–445) describes the widespread use of textual amulets, including magic symbols or sigils, copied alongside prayers or charms and carried around for protection. She also describes how these circular symbols became more numerous and complex in the late Middle Ages. A similar tendency is observed in the Icelandic *galdrastafir*, whose complexity appears to progress incrementally from the earliest attestations in AM 434

2 While a systematic comparison with parallel motifs in continental European grimoires lies beyond the scope of this paper, this nonetheless constitutes a promising avenue for future research and could yield valuable insights into patterns of transmission, adaptation, and local innovation.

a 12mo, *Lækningakver*, to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century attestations and even later ones.

The Icelandic *galdrastafir* have sometimes been regarded as part of a unique and isolated magical tradition. Their aesthetic and symbolic vocabulary appears distinct and apparently recognisable at first glance: angular symbols, symmetrical radial designs, and rune-like components often associated with Icelandic folklore and Norse heritage. The fact is that Solomonic sigils are not widely known among the general population to begin with, while *galdrastafir* enjoy a significant popularity, at least judging by how frequently people choose them for a tattoo. Indeed, the chances are that the sigils from *Harleianus 5596* would be identified as Icelandic *galdrastafir* by anyone who is unaware of their provenance.

However, a comparative analysis reveals apparent and significant stylistic and functional correspondences with the magical sigils found in early modern European grimoires – especially those associated with the Solomonic corpus. Previous authors have already noted this relationship with Judaeo-Christian magical traditions (Matthías Viðar Sæmundsson 1992; Mitchell 2011, 41; Bauer 2020, 290). This suggests that *galdrastafir* were not purely indigenous innovations but rather peripheral adaptations of Mediterranean esotericism, filtered through the cultural and linguistic context of late-medieval and early modern Iceland. It is impossible to trace the evolution of the Icelandic tradition from the European one in a direct and univocal way directly through the texts, given how few they are, but the connection with the European tradition is very difficult to refute in light of the striking similarities.

The key to understanding this process lies in recognising the transregional circulation of magical texts in the medieval and early modern period. Pseudepigraphic magical texts or spells attributed to a number of famous ancient figures, such as Charlemagne, Cyprian, or Honorius, circulated in a number of versions across Europe, and the body of texts attributed to King Solomon enjoyed a remarkable popularity. A survey of this heterogenous body of texts and its history can be found in Véronése (2019). Though their content varied depending on the compiler and scribe, they shared certain recurring features: the use of geometric sigils, the invocation of spiritual intelligences (angels or demons), and an emphasis on linguistic magic – often in Latin, Hebrew, and Greek. These features appear, albeit

transformed, in Icelandic magic books, which typically reframe them in visual and vernacular terms. References to King Solomon, Charlemagne, and other characters typically associated with mediaeval pseudo-epigraphic texts are to be found throughout the Icelandic manuscripts.

Let us consider the *Clavicula Salomonis*, arguably the most influential grimoire in European magical history (Davies 2009, 15). The text first appears in the fifteenth century (Davies 2023, 72) and purports to be a manual written by King Solomon, teaching the reader (among other things) how to summon spirits and compel them to perform tasks and to protect them from spiritual harm. Central to this tradition are magical sigils – diagrams composed of intersecting lines, letters, and divine names – believed to hold inherent power. These sigils are often accompanied by instructions regarding ritual purity, timing (e.g., planetary hours), and verbal incantations.

These symbols, in their simplest form, begin to appear in Icelandic manuscripts not much later, given that the earliest text dated with some certainty is AM 434 a 12mo, *Lækningakver*, and this cannot be a coincidence. When we compare these Solomonic sigils with Icelandic *galdrastafir*, as shown above, we cannot help noticing striking formal similarities. The designs often consist of a central axis with symmetrical arms and repeating motifs, crosses, forks and circles, such as in the *Ægishjálmur* shown in Figure 3, displaying a radial pattern with tridents or spears radiating from a central point. Though the Icelandic staves often lack explicit divine names or invocations, their structure echoes the geometric logic of the Solomonic model. While it may be tempting to interpret this symbol as deriving from ancient Norse magical thought, perhaps as a collection of Ψ-runes, it bears considerable resemblance to medieval and Renaissance defensive talismans, especially planetary pentacles found the *Key of Solomon*, some of which are used to protect the wearer in combat and contain a circular structure with stylised points radiating outward. Both serve similar functions and share a similar visual language although the *Ægishjálmur* lacks the Latin inscriptions and divine names that characterise the Solomonic model. It is advisable to resist the temptation of seeing runes everywhere within any given *galdrastafur*: most runes are made by a couple of intersecting lines, while *galdrastafir* are formed from several intersecting lines, so it becomes inevitable that some of those should intersect in a manner reminiscent of runes.

Either way, the Icelandic treatment of these symbols suggests a process of visual distillation: diagrams once embedded in a ritual and theological framework must have been gradually transformed into simpler, vernacularised symbols, first accompanied by a simple prayer or invocation, but eventually self-contained and sufficient. The Solomonic sigil, often accompanied by names and depending on planetary positions and ritual for their efficacy, became in Iceland a figure of power in itself – divorced from its original invocatory context but retaining its symbolic force while moving away from the ritual and scholastic apparatus of continental magic. Access to learned commentaries and Latin texts must have been limited, especially in rural Iceland. As a result, the visual component of magic – the sign or *stafur* – became the primary locus of efficacy.

In light of these considerations, we may assume that the transferral and transformation of these motifs into the Icelandic context likely occurred not only through direct copying but through a long process of diffusion and reinterpretation, perhaps involving a degree of oral transmission. Copies of grimoires circulated throughout Europe. Once in the hands of Icelandic readers, their content could be reworked to suit local idioms and expectations. Latin prayers were corrupted or replaced by Icelandic instructions, demonic names were either omitted, integrated with those of Norse gods, or modified, and complex rituals were reduced to simple prescriptions, such as this from ATA Ämb2 F 16:26, *Galdrabók* (fol. 7r): "while fasting, make the latter (symbol) with your saliva in your palm when you greet the girl whom you want to have. It should be the right hand."

Yet, the core belief – that certain shapes and diagrams could mediate unseen forces – remained intact. This process can be understood through the lens of a sort of 'vernacular Hermetism', that is, the appropriation of learned magical traditions by non-scholarly audiences. It is a possibility that Icelandic students may have come into contact with at least some examples of European esoteric tradition in the course of their studies on the continent, perhaps in Denmark or Germany, and that they may have taken some of these ideas with them upon their return home. Icelandic folklore collected in the nineteenth century includes many folktales about the meddling with dark arts by clerics and in the cathedral schools of Skálholt and Hólar. Though these tales are more likely to reflect popular

paranoia about powerful people playing with superior forces to manipulate society (a fear that even our contemporaries are sometimes subject to), they may also reflect a historical reality by which magical material would have circulated first in those circles only to then trickle down into the general farming population. Indeed, we do know of cases in which students or priests were accused of practising magic and expelled (Ólína Þorvarðardóttir 2000, 147–149; Már Jónsson 2021, 1:397–405). It is worth noting that a symbol of this kind appears on fol. 14r of GKS 2367 4to, the *Codex Regius* of *Snorra Edda*, dated to the mid-fourteenth century. The symbol is located in close proximity to the word "fjolkyngi" (normalised: *fjölkynngi*), meaning 'magic' or 'witchcraft', as if serving to illustrate the very concept mentioned in the text. The passage in question features the wanderer Gangleri (King Gylfi in disguise) commenting on the magical powers of the jötunn king Útgarða-Loki. Although the symbol in the right margin appears to be a later addition, it may nonetheless suggest that learned individuals, such as those that would have handled a manuscript like this, were familiar with such symbolic traditions and engaged with them in meaningful ways.

In Iceland, once they had spread from learned circles into the general population, hermetic ideas and Solomonic motifs were no longer studied or used chiefly in monasteries (which ceased to function after the Reformation) or schools but deployed in barns, kitchens, and fields to suit the needs of the rural population. The *galdrastafir* became part of a living magical economy, traded among farmers and workers. Though severed from their Mediterranean roots, their symbolic grammar retained a surprising degree of continuity with their source material.

This shift – from invocation to inscription, from ritual to symbol – is what defines the Icelandic reinterpretation of European magic. The *galdrastafir* are thus not mere remnants of an older tradition: they are evidence of how that tradition adapted, survived, and flourished on the periphery of Europe, adapting innovations coming from the centre. As we shall see further in the next section, the Icelandic magical tradition bears the signs of popular reinterpretation of elements from a learned tradition that had perhaps been encountered but to which Icelandic practitioners had not been adequately exposed to fully absorb. Rather, they adopted some elements and ideas and built a new creative tradition around them.

3. The Evolution of the Icelandic Tradition

One of the most interesting features of the Icelandic *galdrastafir* in relation to the European tradition is their apparent disconnection from the theological and ritual frameworks that underpin the broad early modern European magical traditions. Unlike the grimoires of the Mediterranean world – where sigils function as part of a larger magical apparatus involving invocations, planetary timings, and spiritual hierarchies – Icelandic magical staves often appear self-contained. A stave is drawn, named, and sometimes given a simple set of instructions for activation, but rarely is there any reference to summoning spirits or performing complex rites, though these do occasionally appear – a further indication of the European derivation of such tradition. In other words, there is no explicit reference to the cosmological premises that enable the practitioner to perform this magic. To be sure, the Christian or Judaic references implicitly assume the Judaeo-Christian cosmos, made up of angelic and demonic forces, but this reference is gradually lost in favour of a simpler attribution of magical power to the symbol itself. While references to angelic and demonic powers are recurrent in the grimoires discussed thus far, they progressively disappear by the time of the later grimoires of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Though references to biblical figures or to the trinity and *nomina sacra* persist here and there, for example in Lbs 764 8vo from 1780; texts such as Lbs 2413 8vo from around 1800; ÍB 383 4to, *Huld*, from around 1860; and (particularly) Lbs 5472 I 4to from 1870–1918, increasingly resemble catalogues of *galdrastafir*, accompanied by terse and almost mechanical instructions for their carving. Prayers, invocations, and references to angelic and demonic figures largely disappear. This apparent simplicity belies a deeper transformation: the absorption and reinterpretation of motifs from the *Solomonic tradition* into a visual, demonic-free magical practice.

It can thus be suggested that the *galdrastafir* reflect a localised development of the Solomonic magical tradition and particularly its system of sigils linked to specific tasks and spiritual entities. In Icelandic magic, however, the power once attributed to angels or demons is transferred to the signs themselves. This shift did not happen overnight, and the earlier Icelandic magical books do contain rituals and invocations, but the trajec-

tory is clear: the symbols cease to be one element of a ritual but become the focus of the magical practice, the carriers of the desired supernatural power: any rites or invocations are merely an accessory to the symbols. This represents a profound conceptual shift, one in which magical authority becomes embedded in graphic form rather than mediated through supernatural negotiation.

Since the present study focuses on the symbols, it will not delve into the accompanying instructions, although they must be acknowledged as a highly interesting avenue for further research. However, a comparative analysis of the textual directions would be beyond the scope of the present work, both due to space constraints and the likelihood that it would yield limited results. While certain connections between grimoires may appear suggestive, they are often tenuous and difficult to substantiate. Similar symbols are frequently employed to perform markedly different operations across different texts, while identical or comparable effects are sometimes achieved through entirely distinct symbolic means and instructions, without it being obvious why the swapping or substitution of either the symbol or of its effect has happened and in which order – see, for instance, all the variations of the *Ægishjálmur*.

3.1 The Ars notoria *and the Visualisation of Knowledge*

It may be interesting, in this context, to cite yet another example of the Solomonic magical tradition originating in the Mediterranean and bearing conceptual similarities with the way *galdrastafir* are conceived and used: the *Ars notoria* ('Notory art', in the sense of 'Art of the notes/signs'). This text can be traced to thirteenth-century Italy (Page 2019, 442) and occupies a unique place in the medieval magical tradition. An edition, translation, and commentary of a version of the text, complete with facsimile pictures of manuscript witnesses, commentary, and a catalogue of staves, has appeared in Skinner and Clark (2019). Unlike the other books of the Solomonic corpus, it does not seek to command demons or manipulate natural forces through rituals. Rather, it presents a system of spiritual contemplation, wherein the practitioner uses specific images (*notae*) and prayers to receive divine knowledge through the help of angels invoked for the purpose (Collins 2015, 349). The practitioner is promised mastery of memory, eloquence, and the liberal arts – particularly grammar,

rhetoric, and logic – through sustained devotion to a ritual cycle involving meditative contemplation of the visual figures. Figure 4 shows some examples of *notae* from fol. 22v of the codex Latin 9336, *Sacratissima ars notoria*, housed in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, and dated to the fourteenth century:

Figure 4: Notae from fol. 22v of the codex Latin 9336, Sacratissima ars notoria.

Certain *galdrastafir* that do not belong to the more stereotypical type with radial shapes bear some similarity to the kind of notae shown in Figure 4 in their use of forks, loops, curls, straight and curved lines etc. (Figure 5).

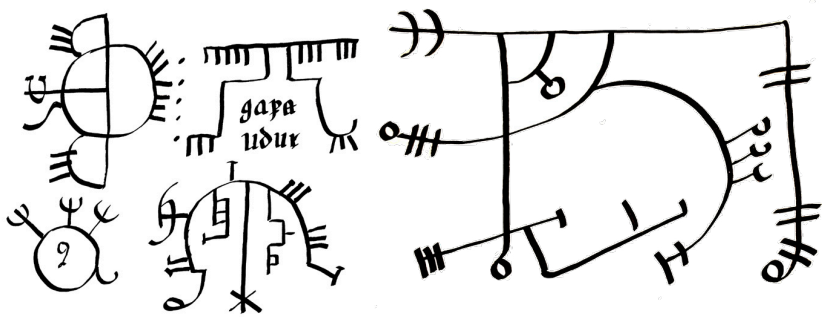

Figure 5: (left) Galdrastafir to conquer a girl from fol. 22v of ATA Ämb2 F 16:26, Galdrabók; (right) 'Stave of King Ólafur' from fol. 47r of Lbs 2413 8vo (1780–1820).

As can be observed in Figure 4, the *notae* in the *Ars notoria* are often elaborate circular or diagrammatic images, sometimes appearing as complex sigils or geometric compositions surrounded by text. They are not ornamental, but functional: each is connected to a particular goal, such as perfect recall of sermons, understanding of sacred texts, or rhetorical fluency.

Their power is not in their form alone but in the sequence of prayer and contemplation that unlocks their efficacy.

Interestingly, Icelandic magical staves serve analogous functions: They have a number of desired effects if drawn on paper or other supports and kept close to the body. While they lack the theological infrastructure of the *Ars notoria*, they perhaps echo its intent: a number of desired goals reached through visual-symbolic magic. It will not be argued here that the *Ars notoria* constitutes an influence or a source for Icelandic magical practice, though this possibility should not be excluded. However, this branch of European magic should be mentioned in this context, as there are some interesting parallels to be drawn between it and Icelandic magical practice. Indeed, the reliance on the symbol as a vehicle of the magic and as something that intrinsically holds a special power may have played a role in the shaping of the Icelandic tradition. At any rate, where the *Ars notoria* requires Latin education and access to ecclesiastical learning, the Icelandic stave tradition offers a democratised alternative: a visual magic of compressed intent, disconnected from learned prayer but grounded in the belief that symbols may shape reality. To be sure, it is not necessary to postulate a direct influence from *Ars notoria* on this development, and the parallel between the two traditions may be coincidental. On the other hand, the connection with the tradition of *goetia* appears much stronger.

3.2 The Goetia *and the Displacement of Demons*

In contrast to the contemplative aspirations of the *Ars notoria*, the *Ars goetia* has the purpose of enabling the magician to summon and command spirits. Texts illustrating this art, such as the *Hygromanteia* or the *Clavicula Salomonis* catalogue several demons, each with a sigil, specific abilities, and hierarchical rank. The magician invokes these spirits through ceremonial means, compelling them to appear in a protective circle and carry out tasks such as finding treasure, revealing secrets, or conferring love and favour.

The sigils associated with each demon are central to their summoning. Each sigil functions as a signature or a magical key, linking the practitioner to the corresponding entity. Invocation is crucial: the magician must name and command the demon, often using divine names, threats, and elaborate rituals. In this system, the sigil has no power in itself; it is effective only within a complex web of symbolic correspondences and spiritual authority.

What we find in Icelandic magic, however, is a significant departure from this framework. Several *galdrastafir* closely resemble goetic sigils in form, as we have seen – abstract, geometric, and highly stylised – but usually lack any reference to demonic spirits. Instead, these staves are ascribed independent magical functions. Many of them visually mimic the sigil-structure of goetic sigils, yet the instructions surrounding them contain no mention of spirits nor any requirement for invocation. Power resides not in commanding a spirit but in possessing or carrying the sign.

To be sure, the earliest grimoires – AM 434 a 12mo, *Lækningakver*; Lbs 143 8vo, *Galdrakver*; and ATA Ämb2 F 16:26, *Galdrabók* – do contain various invocations to demonic or angelic entities, even conflating names of Judaic tradition with those of Norse gods, lumped together as demons and, as in one instance in ATA Ämb2 F 16:26, *Galdrabók*, where they are all considered to reside in Valhöll (Cf. Matthías Viðar Sæmundsson 1992, 417–427). However, many of the symbols are simply listed with brief instructions on how they should be used and the effects that they cause, while later grimoires from the eighteenth century or later have largely abandoned the invocational nature of the spells.

This separation of the sigil from the spirit constitutes a critical transformation. The *galdrastafir* preserve the visual grammar of the *goetia* – particularly the idea of the function-specific sigil – but reassign agency to the symbol itself. The stave becomes an autonomous magical unit, no longer a communicative device but a magical tool in its own right. This can be interpreted as a vernacular appropriation of learned magic: the form is retained, the theology stripped away, and the function made direct and immediate. There is a very curious parallel here with the Protestant idea of removing the excess construction of the mediaeval church to return to a 'purer' version of Christianity, where scriptures speak for themselves without the need of the sophisticated theological commentaries that were inherited from the learned tradition.

This displacement of the mediation of spirits may also reflect theological caution. In Lutheran Iceland, as elsewhere in Protestant Europe, overt invocation of spirits – especially demons – was legally and theologically dangerous. In fact, the theological climate of the early modern period was marked by an acute preoccupation with the real and active presence of demonic forces in the world. Within this framework, Satan was not merely

a symbolic adversary but a tangible agent "searching for allies for his final battle against God" (Nyholm Kallestrup 2025, 7). In such a context, any magical practice that could be construed as consorting with demons would have been subject to heightened suspicion and persecution. It is therefore plausible that the more explicitly diabolical aspects of *galdrastafir* were gradually suppressed or reinterpreted, not necessarily due to a decline in belief in their efficacy but as a strategic response to the theological and juridical dangers of associating with the demonic.

Moreover, some reformers, as Nyholm Kallestrup (2025, 70) also notes, made little or no distinction between witchcraft, heresy, and even Catholic devotional practices, a conflation that may also help to explain the disappearance of *nomina sacra*, invocations, and references to scriptural figures such as angels and other positive intermediaries from the magical repertoire, as even benign-seeming invocations could fall under suspicion of spiritual subversion. The reattribution of magical power from demons to symbols would have allowed practitioners to continue magical practices while avoiding charges of necromancy or heresy. It also speaks to a deeper shift in magical epistemology: one in which power is embedded in form, not in intercession. It is worth noting, however, that the systematic removal of demonic and angelic associations from the *galdrastafir* did not gain real momentum until well after the end of the witch trials, unfolding gradually from the late eighteenth century into the nineteenth. In other words, if Lutheran theology and its intense preoccupation with demonic forces did indeed catalyse the displacement of such references from Icelandic grimoires, its influence was not immediate but rather initiated a longer process of sanitisation – one that continued long after the original theological and judicial pressures had faded.

From this perspective, it may be suggested that the original theological pressure was eventually supplanted by the antiquarian and romantic impulses of the nineteenth century, which favoured forms of the occult deemed 'ancestral' and largely detached from Christian frameworks. This shift in attitude reflects the same impulse that underlies the modern conflation of *galdrastafir* with Elder *Futhark* runes and Viking imagery in popular culture – a retrospective construction of a pre-Christian Nordic esotericism, often more reflective of romantic imagination than historical reality.

3.3 A Vernacular Model of Magical Transmission

The evolution of the continental *goetia* (witchcraft) tradition in Iceland suggests a vernacular model of magical transmission. The *galdrastafir* inherit the association between vision and knowledge, the idea that symbols can mediate intellectual or psychological transformation (similarly to what we encounter in the *Ars notoria*), and acquire the status of purpose-built sigils – diagrams designed for specific effects, from love to wealth to protection (similarly to what we encounter in the *Ars goetia*). In both cases, the Icelandic tradition internalises and materialises the process: instead of mediating between spirit and human, the stave ends up acting directly on the world. The process is simplified and purged from its theological and ritualistic aspects, leaving space for the pure performative act of the carving.

This model aligns with what Frank Klaassen has termed "illicit learned magic", whereby complex magical ideas were transmitted in fragmented or corrupted form into vernacular contexts (see Klaassen 2013). In Iceland, where Latin learning was restricted and elite magical texts scarce, the adaptation took a visual and functional form. What survived was not the theology or ritualism of Solomonic magic, but its operational logic that signs have powers.

Several medieval magical texts claimed to be founded upon divine revelation (Klaassen 2013, 120), and this is an aspect that we find, for example, in Lbs 143 8vo, *Galdrakver*: The first charm (1r–7v), as mentioned, is an epistle claimed to be written by God himself and brought by an angel to Pope Leo III. It should be carried as a protection against ailments, full accusations, hatred, difficulties in childbirth, and more.

This also sheds light on the social function of *galdrastafir*. While the *Ars notoria* served monks and scholars, and the *goetia* catered to elite ceremonial magicians, both presupposing a high level of knowledge and complex rituality, *galdrastafir* belonged to farmers (and perhaps to some rebellious students) of rural Iceland. They are not abstract metaphysical devices but tools of survival and control in a harsh landscape – used to win legal disputes, succeed in love, protect livestock, or repel ghosts.

Thus, the manipulation of European magical practice, particularly in the form of the *goetia*, in the Icelandic stave tradition represents not a misunderstanding or a corruption but an innovation: a way to preserve the efficacy of medieval and Renaissance magic in a context of material scar-

city, and linguistic isolation. In this light, *galdrastafir* are neither degraded remnants nor folkloric curiosities but artefacts of vernacular esotericism – where vision, symbol, and action are fused into a single magical gesture.

3.4 Galdrastafir *as 'Peripheral Salomonica': Localised Esoteric Symbolism in the Icelandic Periphery*

To understand the nature of Icelandic *galdrastafir* is to confront a broader question in the history of Western esotericism: how do elite magical traditions, born in centres of learning and deeply entwined with complex theological and philosophical systems, survive and transform in peripheral, vernacular contexts? In this section, it will be argued that the Icelandic magical staves constitute a form of what can be called 'peripheral Salomonica' – localised, visual, and functional elaboration of the learned esoteric systems of the European Renaissance, particularly those rooted in Hermeticism, Neoplatonism, and the Solomonic grimoire tradition.

The term 'Salomonica' typically refers to a body of late antique texts attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, dealing with cosmology, astrology, theurgy, and the unity of the divine and the material. During the Renaissance, these texts were rediscovered and fused with other traditions – Christian Cabala, Neoplatonic philosophy, and the magical sciences – culminating in a vast, elite esoteric current that expressed itself in learned grimoires, philosophical treatises, and ceremonial magical practices. Yet these traditions were never fully contained within the Latin-educated elite. As early as the sixteenth century, fragments of this Hermetic and magical worldview were circulating among laypeople, artisans, and marginal figures through simplified manuals, chapbooks, and handwritten compendia.

Iceland, culturally and geographically distant from the European centres of magical innovation, nevertheless participated in this transmission, though we cannot prove whether this happened through direct engagement with the European sources, through the reception and adaptation of magical handbooks – often in manuscript form, through oral traditions containing vestiges of Hermetic and Solomonic thought, or through a combination of these. Either way, what we encounter in the Icelandic *galdrabækur* is a vernacular esoteric system: a world of protective staves, love charms, and magical recipes that, while stripped of some of the Latin complexity and theological depth, preserves the structural and symbolic

features of learned magic. The *galdrastafir* are not random folk inventions; they are systematised visual devices that in many cases appear to echo the logic, goals, and cosmology of their Mediterranean antecedents. They bear the signs of the transmission to a non-learned environment in uncertainties over the transcription of Latin or Hebrew names but also in the simplicity of the charms, usually involving the use of everyday objects available to the average Icelander in the early modern period: pieces of wood, eating knives, pieces of lead etc. Thus, what we are confronted with seems to be the popular attempt to create and systematise a coherent tradition that could suit the local needs of Icelandic rural society while still building on the reputable tradition of European magic.

There are more considerations to be made in this regard, which carry implications for our understanding of the material: the difficulty in reconstructing the tradition of the *galdrastafir* has been attributed to a lack of sources (Magnús Rafnsson 2018, 16), but this idea seems to be the product of the expectation that such sources should be found in indigenous material, on the one hand, and with a traceable transmission history, such as that between witnesses of a saga on the other. With this in mind, the tradition of the *galdrastafir* appears impenetrable due to the considerable differences between the few magical books that have survived.

The assumption is that the missing links showing the relationship between these manuscripts must have been lost. This is, in all probability, wrong. Klaassen (2013, 126) writes: "In examining these collections, we find that the manuscripts of necromancy and scholastic image magic are very different from each other", and this is also what we find in the Icelandic material: an extreme degree of variability. This is confirmed by Véronèse (2019, 193): "these texts were sometimes subject to significant revision processes, which exceeded the inevitable variance that can be found in any single manuscript copy". Indeed, this appears to be a defining trait of the tradition of Solomonic texts, given what Jackson (1988, 19) remarks about the *Testament of Solomon*: "unlike the great literary and philosophical works of antiquity, *TSol* and all the tracts of its kindred genres in occult science-herbals, lapidaries, bestiaries, and the like-were living texts, where scribes felt themselves free to redact as they saw fit".

With a corpus characterised by this extreme variability, it would perhaps be pointless to approach this tradition with the tools of textual

criticism in the hope of shedding light on the transmission and evolution of the tradition in the same way as we would do with witnesses of a particular text: it may have been in the very nature of these texts that they were highly personalised to suit the very specific needs of the scribe, and their relationships are possibly more likely to be found in themes, methods, and aesthetic similarities than in the direct borrowing of discrete elements.

In all likelihood, there never were similar copies of the same grimoire in the same way as there were similar copies of the same saga: every grimoire may have been unique to a much larger degree than an exemplar of a saga. In other words, there have never been 'missing links' to be found, and our understanding of the tradition would not significantly improve by the addition of a few more texts; if anything, they would likely complicate the picture. It is possible to trace similarities between charms, and even almost identical symbols performing the same function, such as in the charm to identify thieves from ATA Ämb2 F 16:26, *Galdrabók*, which is identical to AM 434 a 12mo, *Lækningakver*, but identifying any tradition, let alone its earlier origins, by looking for such connections in the attempt to reconstruct some kind of ideal coherent tradition could mean missing the point.

To illustrate this, we can observe the difference between symbols performing the same function – scaring off enemies – from different manuscripts (*Figure 6*).

The symbols shown in *Figure 6* share a radial pattern, but in *a*. the arms are surmounted by circles, in *b*., *c*. and *d*. by fork-shapes, all slightly different; *d*. also presents a central circle which is absent in the first three, and all its arms are cut by three short strokes.

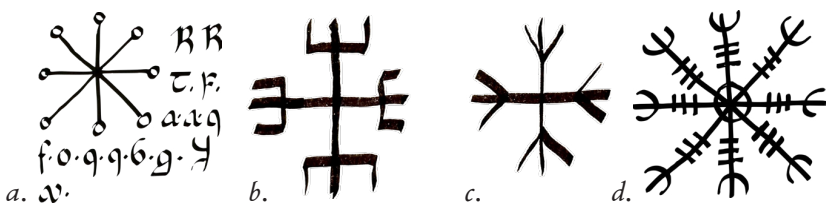

Figure 6: Different kinds of Ægishjálmur. *From left to right:*
a. *AM 434 a 12mo,* Lækningakver; b. *and* c. *ATA Ämb2 F 16:26,* Galdrabók;
d. *Lbs 143 8vo,* Galdrakver.

It could be that one of the simpler shapes inspired the more complex one to the right, but looking for such a connection may be to misunderstand the nature and purpose of this tradition and the highly personalised use that individuals must have made of the knowledge they acquired. These texts were the expression of the subjective needs and ideas of their creators, but such needs and ideas we can only speculate on.

A useful analogy may be drawn between grimoires and kitchen notebooks in which individuals collect recipes over time. Rather than transcribing entire cookbooks for personal use, people typically compile their own collections drawn from a variety of sources – written, oral, and experiential. Each notebook represents a curated assemblage of recipes that have been freely adapted and modified to suit the cook's preferences and the specific context of use. Ingredients may be substituted to reflect local availability, proportions may be adjusted to taste, and the resulting dishes are often unique, bearing only faint traces of their original source. Due to the extent of individual intervention, identifying the precise origins of any given recipe becomes exceedingly difficult, if not impossible. Similarities and relationships between texts may appear more or less obvious, but these are obscured by the individualised nature of such texts.

This very high degree of variability is also present in the later *galdrabækur*. Magnús Rafnsson (2018, 10) comments that these texts, mostly from the nineteenth and twentieth century "are as different as they are many."[3] This must be kept in mind when approaching these texts: their tradition cannot be explored by searching for scribal errors or interpolations (though such a study may still yield interesting results) but is perhaps best analysed within a larger scope, exploring patterns of cultural diffusion, vernacularisation, and reception. The next section does not have the expectation of doing justice to this topic, since it may prove to be incredibly vast, but it will try to suggest a different way to approach the *galdrastafir* and Icelandic magic books in general.

3.5 From Learned Grimoire to Vernacular Compendium

One of the notable characteristics of the *galdrastafir* is their reliance on visual presentation. Icelandic magical books, whenever they use symbols,

3 'eru jafn ólík og þau eru mörg.'

privilege them over words. Many staves are presented without framing them into a ritual or esoteric context: we are not told explicitly from what supernatural forces the power of the symbols is derived. In some cases, invocations or the presence of prayer or *nomina sacra* may provide a hint to the cosmology that underpins these works. The authors did not concern themselves with framing this magical practice within a canon, nor did they seem strive to establish a new one. These symbols are thus not embedded in a narrative; on the contrary, in Icelandic practice, the stave itself becomes the ritual. The visual economy of the *galdrastafir* subsumes the multi-step processes of ceremonial magic into a single iconographic gesture. If we take, for instance, the *Ægishjálmur* from Lbs 143 8vo, *Galdrakver* (fol 11r), we find that the symbol is accompanied by this brief annotation:

> Ægir's Helm; it shall be carved on lead and pressed upon one's forehead when a person expects to meet their enemy, and thus they will prevail [over the enemy]. (It is as shown below).[4]

This provides a very succinct description of where to carve the sign (on lead), how to use it (pressing it onto one's own forehead), and to what effect (defeating one's enemies). This kind of magical minimalism is a hallmark of the *galdrastafir* tradition. Where Mediterranean grimoires often require consecrated tools, sacred space, and a cycle of purifications, Icelandic magic often requires only ink, paper, or even just saliva, and intention. This dematerialisation of ritual can be seen as both a theological adaptation and a cultural necessity.

On the one hand, the post-Reformation religious climate was inhospitable to forms of popular devotions or rites, especially those involving invocations to saints, offerings, purifying rituals (fasting), or prayers that could be reminiscent of Latin rites and liturgy. Lutheran orthodoxy suppressed overt magical practices, and those accused of witchcraft in Iceland were prosecuted with increasing frequency in the seventeenth century. The simplification of magic into signs – silent, compact, and easily concealed – offered practitioners both speed of execution and a degree of plausible

4 'Æirz hialmur h*ann* sk*al* / giorast á blij *og* þrickia / J en*n*i si*er* þa m*adur* a uön a / ouin sijnu*m* ad h*ann* mæti / ho*nu*m og muntu han*n* Jferuinna /(h*ann* er so s*em* hi*er* ept*er* filg*er*)'

deniability. This simplification curiously reflects the Protestant attempt to purge Christianity of Catholic rituals and traditions seen as superfluous. The *galdrastafir*, being an unorthodox expression of belief, were never intended to show any kind of coherence but reflected the idiosyncrasies of their scribes and how they interpreted them, not unlike how the different Protestant denominations came up with (sometimes) radically different interpretations of the Scriptures.

On the other hand, the geographic isolation and sparse population of Iceland made the complex apparatus of ceremonial magic impractical. Access to ritual implements, calculation of planetary position, and trained collaborators was limited. The staves offered a portable, efficient alternative: a personal, adaptable, and immediate form of magical practice. A stave could be drawn on the fly, hidden in clothing, or etched into everyday objects. This functional pragmatism is an interesting characteristic of these texts. Later grimoires, such as Lbs 2413 8vo, increasingly appear as catalogues of *galdrastafir*, and despite their later date, they appear to be directly connected to the older tradition, rather than being modern creations (Magnús Rafnsson 2018, 10).

The popularity of this form of magic is testified by the frequent mentions of magical staves in court cases from the so-called *Brennuöld* (for an extensive discussion on all the documents from the trials for witchcraft in the seventeenth century, see Már Jónsson 2021). For instance, a father and his son, both named Jón Jónsson, were sentenced to death in 1656 for having possessed magical staves written on some pages, which they later burnt (Már Jónsson 2021, 1:270–272), while a certain Halldór Bjarnason was sentenced for, among other accusations, carrying the 'Seal of Solomon' (Már Jónsson 2021, 1:321).

Indeed, if we adopt a structural view of magical practice – focusing on intention, medium, and expected outcome – the similarities between *galdrastafir* and their Mediterranean counterparts become more apparent. Even ignoring the aesthetic similarities, both seek to influence reality through signs, both presuppose a cosmos responsive to symbolic intervention, and both rely on a combination of inherited tradition (real or invented) and creative adaptation.

4. Conclusion

In the course of this paper, we have traced the origin of the Icelandic magical staves (*galdrastafir*) to the Mediterranean area, where pseudepigraphic texts attributed to king Solomon began appearing in the late Middle Ages. Some of these texts, such as the *Hygromanteia* and the *Clavicula Salomonis*, enabled the magician to evoke demons to perform tasks through rituals, the use of astronomical hours, and importantly, through sigils. The idea about the use of sigils to perform magic must have spread from the European continent to Iceland, where it gave rise to a popularised branch of this magical tradition. In Iceland, this form of magic was gradually purged of its theological and ceremonial elements and of the connection with demons, and was adapted to the psychological needs and material resources of the rural population. The earlier Icelandic grimoires, such as AM 434 a 12mo, *Lækningakver*; ATA Ämb2 F 16:26, *Galdrabók*; and Lbs 143 8vo, *Galdrakver*, still betray their Judaeo-Christian origin through the presence of biblical names, words in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, as well as other elements, but all the ritualistic and esoteric elements are progressively removed until Icelandic magical books from the eighteenth century onwards increasingly resemble catalogues of magical symbols, with brief instructions on the way in which they should be carved and the desired effects.

European grimoires were not copied in the same way as other texts, and Icelandic *galdrabækur* are no exception: each of them was a unique product reflecting the highly individualised needs of its compiler. In that sense, the relationship between these books, or between the Icelandic books and the broader European tradition, should not be traced by attempting to philologically identify and reconstruct the changes undergone during the transmission, but rather by looking at the broad context in which these symbols are situated, and considering their intents and uses.

By tracing the Mediterranean roots of the *galdrastafir*, this paper has argued for their inclusion within the broader taxonomy of European esotericism. Icelandic magical staves should be seen not as isolated folk symbols but as the witnesses of survival and reinterpretation of late medieval and early modern ritual magic. The Icelandic transformation of themes and motifs from the *Ars goetia* – purged of its demons and re-centered on the inherent efficacy of symbols – demonstrates the adaptability of esoteric traditions as

they migrated from elite to popular contexts, and from the Mediterranean to the margins of Europe.

The findings have broader implications for our understanding of cultural diffusion and vernacularisation processes. They invite further exploration of other peripheral adaptations of elite intellectual traditions, potentially offering insights into the mechanisms by which learned ideas were transmitted and transformed in non-academic settings. Future research might investigate specific historical routes, such as clerical or scholarly networks, that facilitated the dissemination of esoteric texts to Iceland, or explore parallel adaptations in other geographically or culturally remote European contexts. In sum, the Icelandic *galdrastafir* represent a distinctive expression of Europe's broader esoteric heritage. They highlight not merely the endurance but the creative transformation of magical traditions, offering a compelling illustration of how local conditions shape the reception and redefinition of learned knowledge.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

MANUSCRIPTS

Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, Reykjavík
AM 434 d 12mo
GKS 2367 4to

Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, Copenhagen
AM 434 a 12mo, *Lækningakver*

Landsbókasafn Íslands–Háskólabókasafn, Reykjavík
Lbs 5472 I 4to
Lbs 143 8vo, *Galdrakver*
Lbs 764 8vo
Lbs 2413 8vo
ÍB 383 4to, Huld

Riksantikvarieämbetet, Stockholm
ATA Ämb2 F 16:26, *Galdrabók*

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris
Latin 9336, *Sacratissima ars notoria*

Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Wien
Papyrus Vindobonensis G 330

British Library, London
Harleianus 5596

TEXT EDITIONS AND SECONDARY LITERATURE

Bauer, Alessia. 2020. "Biblical Magic as Manifestation of Folk Belief in the North." *Faith and Knowledge in Late Medieval and Early Modern Scandinavia*, ed. by Karoline Kjesrud and Michael Males. Turnhout: Brepols, 269–296.

Collins, David J. 2015. "Learned Magic." *The Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft in the West. From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. by David J. Collins. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 332–360.

Cosentino, Augusto. 2013. *Testamento di Salomone*. Roma: Città Nuova.

Davies, Owen. 2009. *Grimoires.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Davies, Owen. 2023. *Art of the Grimoire. An Illustrated History of Magic Books and Spells*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Duling, D.C. 1983. "The Testament of Solomon." *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. by J.H. Charlesworth. New York: Doubleday, 935–959.

Jackson, H. M. 1988. "Notes on the Testament of Solomon." *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 19/1, 19–60

Kári Pálsson. 2024. *The Galdrabók: Forbidden Icelandic Folk Magic*. Olympia: Hyldyr.

Klaassen, Frank. 2013. *The Transformations of Magic: Illicit Learned Magic in the Later Middle Ages and Renaissance*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Kålund, Kristjan. 1907. *Den islandske lægebog*. København: Bianco Lunos Bogtrykkeri.

Magnús Rafnsson. 2018. *Tvær galdraskræður. Lbs 2413 8vo, Leynileturskræðan Lbs 764 8vo. Two Icelandic Books of Magic.* Hólmavík: Strandgaldur ses.

Matthías Viðar Sæmundsson. 1992. *Galdrar á Íslandi: Íslensk galdrabók.* Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið.

Már Jónsson. 2021. *Galdur og guðlast á 17. öld*. 2 vols. Reykjavík: Sögufélag.

Mitchell, S. A. 2011. *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Nyholm Kallestrup, Louise. 2025. *The Construction of Witchcraft in Early Modern Denmark, 1536–1617*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

Ólína Þorvarðardóttir. 2000. *Brennuöldin*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan.

Page, Sophie. 2019. "Medieval Magical Figures." *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic*, ed. by Sophie Page and Catherine Rider. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 432–457.

Skinner, Stephen and Daniel Clark. 2019. *Ars Notoria: The Grimoire of Rapid Learning by Magic*. Singapore: Golden Hoard.

Stefán Karlsson. 1999. "The Localisation and Dating of Medieval Icelandic Manuscripts." *Saga-Book* 25/2, 138–158.

Torijano, Pablo A. 2002. *Solomon the Esoteric King: From King to Magus, Development of a Tradition*. Leiden: Brill.

Véronèse, Julien. 2019. "Solomonic Magic." *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic*, ed. by Sophie Page and Catherine Rider. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 187–200.

Waggoner, Ben. 2011. *Norse Magical and Herbal Healing: A Medical Book from Medieval Iceland*. New Haven: The Troth.
Ögmundur Helgason. 2004. *Galdrakver. Ráð til varnar gegn illum öflum þessa og annars heims*. Reykjavík: Landsbókasafn Íslands–Háskólabókasafn.

SUMMARY

The Mediterranean Origin of the *Galdrastafir*: Tracing the Transmission of the Learned European Magical Tradition into Icelandic Popular Lore

Keywords: *galdrastafir*, Icelandic magic, Solomonic magic, grimoires, cultural transmission, Western esotericism, early modern period, Iceland

This paper argues that the Icelandic magical staves known as *galdrastafir* are a peripheral offshoot of the broader European esoteric tradition. Their iconographic and conceptual features indicate a lineage traceable to medieval and early modern grimoires, particularly those in the Solomonic tradition. This paper argues that the *galdrastafir* emerged through a syncretic process involving the conflation of different ideas taken from the learned European traditions such as the *goetia*, with the demonic component of the latter displaced and its powers reattributed to the symbolic power of the sigils themselves. The Icelandic tradition thus represents a localised, demythologised, and popularised expression of Renaissance and post-Renaissance ceremonial magic, shaped by the transmission of esoteric knowledge from the Mediterranean to the Nordic periphery.

ÁGRIP

Galdrastafir og uppruni þeirra við Miðjarðarhafið. Ferill lærðrar evrópskrar galdrahefðar inn í íslenska alþýðumenningu

Efnisorð: galdrastafir, íslenskir galdrar, Salómonskur galdur, galdrabækur, menningarmiðlun, vestræn dulspeki, árnýöld, Ísland

Í þessari grein eru færð rök fyrir því að íslensku galdrastafirnir séu „jaðargrein“ af mun útbreiddari evrópskri dulhyggjuhefð. Myndrænir og hugmyndafræðilegir eiginleikar þeirra benda til tengsla við galdrabækur (grimoire) frá miðöldum og árnýöld, einkum þær sem tilheyra hinni svokölluðu Salómonshefð. Hér er því haldið fram að galdrastafir hafi orðið til við samruna ólíkra hugmynda úr evrópskum lærdómshefðum á borð við Goetia en í því tilfelli hafi djöfullega þættinum í Goetiu verið ýtt til hliðar og kraftar hans yfirfærðir á táknrænt afl stafanna sjálfra. Íslenska galdrastafahefðin endurspeglar þannig staðbundna, afgoðavædda og alþýðlega útfærslu á helgisiðatengdri galdrahefð endur-

reisnarinnar og tímans eftir hana, mótaða af miðlun dulfræðilegrar þekkingar frá Miðjarðarhafssvæðinu til norrænna jaðarsvæða.

Roberto Luigi Pagani
Faculty of Icelandic and comparative cultural studies
University of Iceland
Eddu, Arngrímsgötu 5
IS-107 Reykjavík
robertop@hi.is