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Contact with the Dead in Iceland Past and Present: The Findings of a New Survey of Folk Belief and Experiences of the Supernatural in Iceland

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Abstract: This article focuses on the figures concerning experiences of and beliefs in possible contacts with the dead amongst Icelandic people that have come to light from three national surveys that were undertaken in 1974, 2006–2007, and 2023, focusing in particular on the most recent figures. It starts by reviewing the earliest evidence of such beliefs in Iceland (expressed in both Old Icelandic literature and Icelandic folk legends), which evidently laid down the foundations for modern-day beliefs. After listing the main findings of the surveys and noting the changes in belief that appear to have taken place over the last 50 years, the article offers some brief conclusions relating to what seems to have caused not only some obvious gender and age differences in belief and experience, but also differences in figures between urban and rural areas.

Keywords: ghosts; belief; Iceland



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1. Introduction

The following article aims to provide an introduction to the beliefs of Icelanders regarding contacts with the departed over the course of time, placing emphasis on figures regarding present-day beliefs that have come to light in the national surveys of folk belief carried out in 1974 (Erlendur Haraldsson 1978, 1988), 2006–2007 (Ásdís Aðalbjörg Arnalds et al. 2008), and 2023 (https://fel.hi.is/sites/fel.hi.is/files/2024-02/Folkbelief_2023_en.pdf, accessed on 25 May 2024), all of which also asked participants to provide information about the nature of any personal experiences that they might have had. The article begins by outlining the historical and cultural background of those beliefs found in early medieval records telling of the early years of the Icelandic settlement. It then proceeds to consider briefly how such beliefs and experiences are described in the Icelandic folk legends collected from the nineteenth century onwards.

2. Earlier Icelandic Folk Belief Regarding the Spirits of the Departed

2.1. Old Icelandic Literature

The beliefs of the early Icelanders who settled Iceland in the late ninth century had roots, for the main part, in mainland Scandinavia, and especially in western Norway, from whence a majority of the settlers came. Other influences are likely to have come from the Gælic world, a large number of the slaves and wives brought with the settlers having originated in northern Scotland and Ireland. The earliest literary evidence that the wide range of beliefs that the Old Nordic peoples had about the world of death (see Ellis 1943; Abram 2003; Green 2022), evidently including the idea that the dead could also visibly re-visit the world of the living and have potential influences on our lives, can probably be found in the ancient Eddic poem, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* (sts 43–51; Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn 2014, II, pp. 280–82). The poem, recorded in the late thirteenth century but almost certainly with roots in pre-Christian times, tells of how a grieving widow, Sigrún, visits her husband's grave mound, where she encounters him at night, riding in from the next world. This account, which seems also to make one of the earliest references to the

famous Wild Ride of the Dead (ML 6015: [Christiansen 1992](#), pp. 144–56), also underlines the idea that the husband has to depart before the sun comes up.

It is noteworthy that apart from the above suggestion that the visitation rights of the dead are limited to the night hours (an idea naturally echoed much later in [Shakespeare's \(1968\) Hamlet](#) [Act I, scene v, lines 2–13 and 88–90]), one notes that *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* makes no reference to the dead person (Helgi) being any different in shape or nature from living human beings. In short, he is essentially corporeal, an idea that would be reflected in the Icelandic word *afturganga* (Old Icelandic: *aptrganga*), meaning literally “walking again (after death)” (cf. revenant), a word that has commonly been used ever since as a means of referring to the activities of such a being. Indeed, in later times, *afturganga* (sing.) would come to be regularly used in Icelandic as a means of referring to any ghost or spirit. Indeed, such beliefs in the corporeal nature of these revenants would also seem to be reflected in an account given in [Sigurður \(1933\)](#), pp. 174–75), in which the corpse of a dead man is removed from a house by means of a temporary hole cut in the wall which is later blocked, the idea being that this will prevent the dead man from getting back into the house if he took to making excursions from his grave.

Another Icelandic term with apparently similar connotations, and also often used for haunting from early times, is *reimleikar* (*reimt* meaning “haunted”), an expression that possibly has a background in the Anglo-Saxon verb *a-ræman* meaning “to lift, raise up, elevate” ([Bosworth and Toller 1882–1898](#), I, p. 48; [Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon 1989](#), p. 750).

Yet another interesting expression is found in a version of the Icelandic *Landnámabók*, or *Book of Settlements*, from the late thirteenth century, in which the spirits of one of the first settlers and his followers that are haunting a certain area are referred to as “landvættir” (lit. land-spirits) ([Jakob 1968](#), p. 330). This expression would appear to be a variant of another expression which occurs on a number of occasions in early Icelandic literature, namely *náttúruvættir*, meaning nature spirits, used for beings that later came to be referred to in Iceland as “huldufólk” or “álfar” (cf. elves) (see further [Gunnell 2007](#), pp. 117–18). The implication is that a belief existed at one point that the dead became nature spirits, an idea potentially reflected in several accounts in the sagas suggesting that the dead “died into” certain mountains, and that they could even be observed merrymaking (involved in “glaum ok hornaskvöl”) there (see [Sveinsson and Þorðarson 1935](#), pp. 9 and 19; see also [Jakob 1968](#), pp. 139–40 and [Sveinsson 1954](#), p. 46).

The dead were nonetheless not only seen as having become “part of” the existing natural landscape. For logical reasons, they were also often viewed as living on in their man-made grave mounds, where they could sometimes be physically encountered, especially by those breaking into their graves. In [Sveinsson \(1954\)](#), p. 192), for example, the hero Gunnar Hámundarson is observed happily chanting poetry in his grave. Elsewhere, in [Jónas Kristjánsson \(1956\)](#), pp. 227–29), the poet, Þorleifr *jarlsskáld* (the poet of the jarl), is called up to give poetic advice. The inherent corporeal nature of most of these beings is stressed by the fact that so-called “haugbúar” or “kuml-búar” (mound dwellers; a parallel to Tolkien’s “barrow wights”: see [Tolkien 1999](#), I, pp. 180–90) are said to physically attack those attempting to rob their graves (see [Guðni 1936](#), pp. 57–61; [Jónsson and Vilhjálmsón 1944](#), pp. 276–78 [a seventeenth-century manuscript of a much older narrative in which the irritated inhabitant of the grave is directly referred to as a “draugr” or ghost]; see also the early fifteenth-century [Jónsson and Vilhjálmsón 1943](#), pp. 200–3 in which the grave-mound-breaker and the inhabitant of the grave converse in poetry).

The commonly violent nature of both the mound- and hill dwellers is echoed particularly well in two of the most famous early Icelandic ghost stories, both of which appear to connect encounters with the undead not only to night-time, but also the winter (and especially the Christmas period). The first, described in [Guðni \(1936\)](#), pp. 108–23), tells of a Swedish man called Glámr who, after having been slaughtered by some (unidentified) evil spirits while guarding sheep at Christmas, “lá eigi kyrr” (lit. did not rest in peace, another common expression), and started himself returning at the same time of the year, killing people and “að ríða húsum á nætr” (lit. riding the roofs of houses at night). The only person

able to deal with Glámr by engaging with him in a wrestling match is the hero Grettir, who is said to have been never the same afterwards (see further [Ármann Jakobsson 2009](#)).

The aforementioned account has obvious parallels with the story of Beowulf and Grendel (see [Gunnell 2004](#), pp. 60–61), a narrative which itself has parallels with other, later Nordic folk narratives telling of how groups of spirits (both nature spirits and the spirits of the dead with a somewhat violent temperament) would literally take over farms at Christmas time. The oldest story of this kind is found in the earlier-noted thirteenth-century *Eyrbyggja Saga*, which also talks of the violent “aptrgöngur” of another man who “lá eigi kyrr” named Þorólfr *bægifótr* (club foot) ([Sveinsson and Þorðarson 1935](#), pp. 93–94; see further [Ármann Jakobsson 2011](#), pp. 295–300; for the similar account of the activities of the dead Víga-Hrappur, see also [Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1934](#), pp. 39–40). The famous story of the so-called “Fróðárundur” (the Fróðá river wonders: *Eyrbyggja saga* pp. 139–52; see also [Kjartan G. Ottóson 1983](#)), which occurs later in the same saga, commences by describing how a dead woman (unsatisfied with how her belongings are treated after her death) starts appearing naked in the kitchen, where she is engaged in cooking. Later, two groups of dead people, one drowned and the other from the church graveyard, start literally taking over the farmhouse at nighttime, the drowned splashing water over those from the graveyard while the others cast earth over the drowned. As starts to become the norm after the formal acceptance of Christianity in 1000 AD, the only way to deal with such problems is to call in the local priest.

One further motif that would reoccur in later times (and even in our own time) is the idea that the dead can sometimes appear in dreams, a motif encountered in [Vilmundarson and Vilhjálmsón \(1991\)](#) (in which a so-called “draummaðr” [dream man] demands the return of objects stolen from his grave mound) and then twice in [Einar Ólafur Sveinsson \(1934](#), pp. 223–24). (For further discussion of such Old Norse narratives dealing with encounters with the dead, see [Chadwick 1946a, 1946b](#); [Ármann Jakobsson 2009, 2011](#)).

2.2. The Dead in Later Icelandic Folk Belief and Folk Legends

It seems evident that the beliefs outlined in the previous section set the tone for the ways in which encounters with the dead would be described in those narratives recorded in Iceland over the centuries that followed, and particularly during the nineteenth century and onwards (see the overview of beliefs in [Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 2003](#), pp. 183–88) and the material in the *Sagnagrunnur* database, *Sagnagrunnur* n.d.). As [Einar Ólafur Sveinsson](#) notes (2003, p. 186), while foreign authors in the sixteenth century emphasise the idea that the Icelanders seemed to be particularly preoccupied by fears of haunting, the Icelanders themselves seem to have largely avoided the subject in works from those times—partly because they were worried about their self-image they were attaining elsewhere (see also [Erlendur Haraldsson 1978](#), p. 7).

Nonetheless, when we come to the Icelandic folk legend collections such as Jón Árnason’s initial folk legend collection, *Íslenskar þjóðsögur og æfintýri* (1862–1864; extended six-volume edition 1954–1961) and those that followed in its wake, one encounters almost 1500 legends dealing with ghosts (referred to variously as *afturgöngur* [pl. revenants]; *draugar* [pl. ghosts; on the use of this word, see further [Ármann Jakobsson 2011](#), pp. 283–85]; *svipir* [pl. spirits/ phantoms/visions]; *vofur* [pl. spectres]; *slæðingar* [pl. emanations]; *útburðir* [pl. the spirits of children borne out to die of exposure]; *uppvakningar* [pl. woken dead]; *sendingar* [pl. woken dead sent to attack others]; or (*ættar-*) *flygjur* [lit. pl. family followers]) out of a total of c. 10,000 legends recorded in the *Sagnagrunnur* database, which includes a list of the works from which material is included. Indeed, 178 of the roughly 1000 pages in the two volumes of Jón Árnason’s initial collection deal with stories of this kind, a further 142 pages being contained in the later complete six-volume set ([Jón Árnason 1954–1961](#), I, pp. 213–391; and III, pp. 289–431; for a selection of translations of such stories [most taken from Jón Árnason’s collection], see [Jón Árnason 1864–1866](#), I, pp. 155–202; [Boucher 1977](#), pp. 46–77; [Simpson 2004](#), pp. 120–68;

[Kvideland and Sehmsdorf 1991](#), pp. 92–93, 96–97, 106–7, 111–12, 118 where the legends are placed in a wider Nordic context).

The legends in Jón Árnason's collection (accompanied with detailed introductions to Icelandic beliefs about encounters with the dead: see [Jón Árnason 1954–1961](#), I, pp. 213–16, 219, 221, 226, 233, 237, 254, 265–67, 269, 297, 304–7, 340–41, 343–44, 346, and 378) are broken up into several main types: "Afturgöngur" (revenants), which tend to resemble the types of legend described above, in which the largely corporeal undead return to get revenge on the living (see further [Gunnell 2005](#)); "Uppvakningur og sendingar" (the raised dead, including those sent to attack others); and "Fylgjur" (family followers). Particularly striking in the first group are those accounts of so-called *útburðir* (the spirits of dead children left out to die of exposure: see [Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir 2022a](#), pp. 133–59; [2022b](#); and [Pentikäinen 1968](#) for the wider Nordic context); and then the numerous legends dealing with the undead that return motivated by love or hate (see further [Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir 2020](#), [2022a](#), pp. 99–131; and [Bryan 2021](#), pp. 23–44 on one of Iceland's most famous ghost legends, "Djárninn á Myrká" [The Deacon of Dark River], a legend which belongs to the "Lenore" group of narratives [ATU 365: see [Uther 2004](#), I, p. 229]; and for a translation, see [Simpson 2004](#), pp. 146–50). As in the sagas, the corporeal nature of many of these revenants is stressed by their physical violence and, not least, their interest in wrestling with the living (see [Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1998a](#), [1998b](#)).

The equally numerous narratives dealing with the raised dead strike a relatively new tone, playing off the regular Icelandic interest in magic and magicians (for a translation of the rather unsavoury methodology involved in such magical activities, see [Simpson 2004](#), pp. 164–67). With a potential early forerunner in one of the Old Norse narratives dealing with the earlier-noted poet Porleifr *jarlsskáld* ([Jónas Kristjánsson 1956](#), pp. 225–26), these particularly Icelandic legends (which echo some of the *noaide* legends of the Sámi) tell of the dead being raised in corporeal zombie-like form and then being sent across the country to carry out errands and/ or attack other people (see further [Gunnell 2012](#)).

Also particularly Icelandic are the numerous legends telling of those troublesome ghosts that attach themselves to particular families (*ættarfylgjur*), often for generations, beliefs that can still be encountered today (see below), male *ættarfylgjur* commonly being referred to as *mórar* (lit. peat-reds), while females of the persuasion tend to be called *skottar* (lit. tasselled caps). Often having roots in a particular crime (such as that of failing to help someone in trouble), in Iceland, these beliefs can be said to replace legends dealing with haunted houses, Iceland having very few houses that go back much further than the mid-nineteenth century (see further [Bryan 2021](#), pp. 67–88). As with so many of the folk narratives mentioned above, these legends tend to contain a moral message about correct and incorrect social behaviour (see, for example, [Gunnell 2005](#), p. 70).

Folk legends of this kind, along with readings of the sagas, would regularly be told as part of the so-called *kvöldvökur* (lit. evening wakes) that took place for centuries in Icelandic farmhouses (especially during the winter), and can thus be considered to have provided both a cultural vocabulary and a cultural background for any new personal experience narratives that came to be told relating to encounters with the dead up until the mid-twentieth century (see further [Magnús Gíslason 1977](#) and [Júlíana Þ. Magnúsdóttir 2023](#), pp. 86–88 and 144–49 [on the wakes], and [Honko 1964](#) and below on personal experience narratives and the ways in which they draw on cultural stereotypes). As implied above, it can be argued that such readings and oral storytelling sessions perpetuated older beliefs, bringing them into the present, where they blend with more recent experiences.

3. Modern Icelandic Beliefs and Legends Concerning Contact with the Dead

In the 1960s and 70s, the earlier printed collections were succeeded by a new approach when Hallfreður Örn Eiríksson and several others began making the first sound recordings of wonder tales and legends in Iceland on behalf of the Arnarnáttúla Institute ([Júlíana Þ. Magnúsdóttir 2023](#), pp. 56–64). Once again, it is noteworthy exactly how many of the c. 10,000 legends that were collected deal with encounters of one kind or another with

the dead. According to the list of keywords in the online *Ísmús* database (linked to online sound recordings, *Ísmús* n.d.), around 600 accounts deal with “draugar” of some kind, just over 400 apparently dealing with *ættarfylgjur*, accounts which might naturally also come under the heading of *draugar*. For logical reasons, there are much fewer accounts of *uppvakningar* (54) or *útburðir* (158) than in the past, and it is also evident that there is much less emphasis on the corporeal nature of the revenants (see also [Gunnell 2005](#)). (Accounts of physical fights with ghosts nonetheless seem to occasionally still be told: see, for example, an oral account of such a fight collected along with a number of ghost stories by Rosemary Power in the north of Iceland in the 1970s and early 1980s: see [Power, forthcoming](#)).

Also evident is that many of the traditional folk beliefs of Icelanders now seem to be on the wane, something underlined by the three national surveys of Icelandic folk belief that have been carried out over the course of the last 50 years. The first of these, organised by the parapsychologist Erlendur Haraldsson in 1974 and run by the Social Science Institute (*Félagsvísindastofnun*) of the University of Iceland, can be said to have set the pattern for these surveys, participants being asked about both experience and belief and being requested to assess the strength of their beliefs on a scale of 1–5 ranging from “impossible” (1) to “certain” (5) (see [Erlendur Haraldsson 1978, 1988](#); and [Erlendur Haraldsson and Houtkooper 1991, 1996](#)). In this case, questionnaires were sent out by post to c. 1132 people, and 902 answered, 425 men and 477 women of a range of ages, from both urban and rural areas. The surveys were then followed up by c. 100 focused qualitative interviews, which provided additional information about the nature of the informants’ personal encounters with the deceased (such as the different ways in which such encounters took place as well as the varying feelings associated with the experience: see further [Erlendur Haraldsson 1978](#), pp. 113–32).

In 2006, bearing in mind the degree to which Iceland had changed over the last 30 years, the present author decided to apply for grants from the University of Iceland and the Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademien för svensk folkkultur to cover the cost of a new survey being carried out with Erlendur’s help containing a number of additional questions. Once again, the survey was run by the Social Science Institute and sent out by post. Because of the relatively problematic number of answers (666 answers out of 1500 questionnaires that had been initially sent out), it was decided to make use of students in Folkloristics in a new round in 2007, each student being asked to distribute and then collect the answers from 10 participants of both sexes, with a fair range of ages and backgrounds. The 325 answers (60% women and 40% men, as in the 2006 survey) gave very similar figures to those from 2006 in terms of both experience and belief, indicating that there was good reason to trust the original results of the 2006 postal survey. Once again, a number of interviews were taken with some of the participants, who provided additional *detail* about their experiences (see, for example, [Gunnell 2009](#), p. 347 for an account of a ghost car collected as part of such an interview).

The most recent survey, from 2023, once again financed by a research grant from the University of Iceland (along with another from the Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademien) and organised by the present author in cooperation with the Social Science Institute, and using most of the same questions, was carried out slightly differently. Now taking the shape of an online panel survey, this new project was motivated by the facts that social media was only starting to take off in around 2006; that a financial crash (2008) had led to many Icelanders moving away for a number of years; and that both the rise of tourism and increasing access to international media were leading to an influx of ideas from abroad. We were interested in seeing what effect this might have had. Sent out twice in July and September 2023, a total of 2792 answers came in, 1350 men and 1442 women, answering roughly 45% of the questionnaires that were sent out. Because of slight differences in the numbers of those who answered from different age groups (more older people than those in younger age groups) and different areas (urban and rural), some weighting was applied to the final figures to ensure that they reflected the nation as a whole (hence the W in the results from 2023 in the tables below).

All of the surveys noted above posed questions about a wide range of beliefs, ranging from those relating to nature spirits and the prophetic quality of dreams to beliefs in the existence of god, flower divas, and UFOs. As can be seen in the following four tables containing the overall results of those questions dealing with beliefs relating to contact with the dead (on clairvoyance (Table 1); seeing the spirits of the dead (Table 2); haunted sites (Table 3); and family-following spirits (Table 4)), belief in the supernatural is evidently decreasing in Iceland, and especially over the last 16–17 years.

Table 1. Do you think that clairvoyance (the ability to see dead individuals) is...?: (Icelandic Folk Belief Survey 2023) compared with previous surveys (https://fel.hi.is/sites/fel.hi.is/files/2024-02/Folkbelief_2023_en.pdf, accessed on 25 May 2024). (W: weighted).

	1974	2006	2007	2023 (W)
Impossible	2%	6%	7%	16.2%
Unlikely	5%	8%	9%	20.6%
Possible	33%	35%	35%	29.5%
Probable	27%	26%	23%	16.9%
Certain	33%	25%	25%	16.7%

Table 2. Do you think that the appearance of images/shapes of dead people is...?: (Icelandic Folk Belief Survey 2023) compared with previous surveys (https://fel.hi.is/sites/fel.hi.is/files/2024-02/Folkbelief_2023_en.pdf, accessed on 25 May 2024).

	1974	2006	2007	2023 (W)
Impossible	3%	7%	8%	19.1%
Unlikely	7%	11%	14%	24.2%
Possible	39%	41%	41%	30.9%
Probable	25%	21%	20%	15.4%
Certain	25%	19%	18%	10.4%

Table 3. Do you think that the haunting of places is...?: (Icelandic Folk Belief Survey 2023) compared with previous surveys (https://fel.hi.is/sites/fel.hi.is/files/2024-02/Folkbelief_2023_en.pdf, accessed on 25 May 2024).

	1974	2006	2007	2023 (W)
Impossible	11%	6%	8%	16.8%
Unlikely	26%	19%	16%	25.9%
Possible	39%	38%	43%	30.1%
Probable	14%	21%	19%	14.6%
Certain	11%	16%	14%	12.7%

Table 4. Do you think that *ættarfylgjur* (spirits that follow families) are...?: (Icelandic Folk Belief Survey 2023) compared with previous surveys (https://fel.hi.is/sites/fel.hi.is/files/2024-02/Folkbelief_2023_en.pdf, accessed on 25 May 2024). (Not asked in 1974).

	1974	2006	2007	2023 (W)
Impossible		13%	11%	26.1%
Unlikely		24%	24%	27.0%
Possible		43%	42%	26.0%
Probable		13%	15%	13.5%
Certain		7%	8%	9.3%

Particularly interesting with regard to these questions (as with many other questions in the survey) were the differences between men and women, and the capital city and the countryside, when it came to strengths of belief. In the case of beliefs in clairvoyance (in

which belief had an average figure of 2.97/5 on a scale in which 5 would indicate that everyone was certain (this being one of the stronger belief figures in the survey), 23% of women (average figure: 3.37) stated that they were convinced about the existence of the phenomenon, as opposed to 9.5% of men (average figure: 2.58). Those living in rural areas also had a greater degree of certainty than those living in the city (20.9% [3.29] in the countryside, as opposed to 14.4% [2.79] in the city). Younger people were also clearly more dubious than the old.

With regard to beliefs concerning ghosts or spirits (in which belief overall was again comparatively strong, with an average figure of 2.74/5), 15% of women (average figure: 3.11) said they were convinced about the existence of the phenomenon, as opposed to just 5.5% of men (average figure: 2.4), 27.7% of whom stated that such phenomena were impossible (as opposed to just 9.7% of women). Once again, those living in rural areas also had a greater degree of certainty than those living in the city (14.1% [3.03] as opposed to 8.3% [2.57]). Here too, older people were apparently more open to such beliefs than the young.

In the case of haunted spaces, beliefs were a little stronger, with an average figure of 2.81/5, a total of 20.2% of women (average figure: 3.22) stating that they were certain such places existed, while only 5.4% of men (average figure: 2.4) made similar assertions, 25.7% of men (as opposed to 7.6% of women) stating that no such places existed. Once again, slightly more certainty could be found amongst people living in rural areas (15.5% [3.06] as opposed to 11.1% [2.66]). Interestingly, in this case, there was more certainty about the existence of haunted sites amongst the young than the old (16.6% as opposed to 9.0%) (see further below).

Finally, with regard to the traditional Icelandic belief in family spirits, about which beliefs are clearly lower (and evidently weakening fast over the course of time, with a present average figure of 2.49/5), the same gender differences were nonetheless apparent, only 11.8% of women (average figure: 2.83) stating that they were convinced about the existence of such phenomena as opposed to 3.0% of men (average figure: 2.16), 36% of men (as opposed to only 15.9% of women) questioning their existence entirely. For logical reasons, beliefs relating to such traditional figures were slightly stronger in the countryside (but only slightly) amongst people living in rural areas (8.5% [2.75] as opposed to 6.7% [2.35]). There was little difference in attitudes between different ages, although the older groups were evidently less ready to rule out the existence of such phenomena than the young.

When it comes to experiences of contact with the dead (Tables 5 and 6) and accompanying spirits (or *fylgjur*) (Table 7), it is nonetheless noteworthy that there seems to have been relatively little change over the last 50 years, as can be seen in the following tables.

Table 5. Have you ever been aware of the presence of someone who has passed away? Icelandic Folk Belief Survey 2023 compared with previous surveys (https://fel.hi.is/sites/fel.hi.is/files/2024-02/Folkbelief_2023_en.pdf, accessed on 25 May 2024).

	1974	2006	2007	2023 (W)
Yes, I think so	31%	38%	44%	35.6%
No	69%	62%	56%	64.4%

Table 6. While awake, have you ever seen the shape/image of a man or woman who has passed away? Icelandic Folk Belief Survey 2023 compared with previous surveys (https://fel.hi.is/sites/fel.hi.is/files/2024-02/Folkbelief_2023_en.pdf, accessed on 25 May 2024). (Not asked in 1974).

	1974	2006	2007	2023 (W)
Yes, I think so		17%	22%	16.7%
No		83%	78%	83.3%

Table 7. According to Icelandic Folk Belief, *fylgjur* supernatural beings follow certain individuals or the members of certain families: Have you ever been aware of a *fylgja* in some way? Icelandic Folk Belief Survey 2023 compared with previous surveys (https://fel.hi.is/sites/fel.hi.is/files/2024-02/Folkbelief_2023_en.pdf, accessed on 25 May 2024).

	1974	2006	2007	2023 (W)
Yes, I think so	17%	16%	18%	17.3%
No	83%	84%	82%	82.7%

(In the case of this last question, which touches on a traditional belief that seems to be fading, it might be noted that 39% of those 17.3% who say they have had such experiences state that they are referring to experiencing the presence of an *ættarfylgja* as opposed to a guardian or accompanying personal spirit of some kind).

Interestingly, unlike general encounters with the dead, experiences of poltergeist activity and haunted houses seem to be on the increase, as the following two tables (Tables 8 and 9) indicate:

Table 8. Have you ever seen anything move supernaturally? (Poltergeist activity): Icelandic Folk Belief Survey 2023 compared with previous surveys (https://fel.hi.is/sites/fel.hi.is/files/2024-02/Folkbelief_2023_en.pdf, accessed on 25 May 2024).

	1974	2006	2007	2023 (W)
Yes, I think so	9%	12%	12%	12.4%
No	91%	88%	88%	87.6%

Table 9. Have you ever lived or stayed in a house which you have personal reason to believe was haunted? Icelandic Folk Belief Survey 2023 compared with previous surveys (https://fel.hi.is/sites/fel.hi.is/files/2024-02/Folkbelief_2023_en.pdf, accessed on 25 May 2024).

	1974	2006	2007	2023 (W)
Yes, I think so	18%	32%	36%	28.7%
No	82%	68%	64%	71%

With regard to the last two tables, it is noteworthy that most of the aforementioned increase seems to be in the hands of the younger generations, 37.3% of those between 18 and 30 saying that they have had experiences of haunted houses, as opposed to 30.8% of those between 31 and 45, 27.1% of those between 46 and 60, and just 20.9% of those over 61. The same seems to apply to the relatively weak beliefs in experiences of poltergeist activities, which also seem to have grown slightly in Iceland over the course of time, once again younger people (22.7% of those between 18 and 30 as opposed to just 10.4% of those over 61) being those who most talk of having had such experiences.

Otherwise, the same gender differences as those noted in terms of belief seem to be apparent in all cases, 46.3% of women saying that they have been aware of the presence of someone who has passed away (as opposed to 25% of men); 21.8% saying that they have seen the image of someone who has died (as opposed to 11.8% of men); and as many as 37.7% saying that they believe they have lived or stayed in a house that was haunted (as opposed to 19.7% of men). Similar differences to those encountered in connection with belief are also evident if one compares the figures from the city and rural areas.

In all cases relating to both belief and experience, those who have received more education evidently tend to be more doubtful than others with regard to belief and less open to admit to having had experiences of the supernatural.

A particularly valuable feature of all the surveys is that, in many cases, those who stated that they had had experiences of the supernatural were requested to provide further information about what happened: for example, those who talked of having been aware

of the presence of a deceased person were also asked to state who the person was (58.9% talking of close relations, 45.6% talking of unknown males or females, 2.1% mentioning their partner, 10.5% a distant relation, 9.5% a friend, and 11.6% someone else they have had acquaintance of, just 1.0% mentioning famous figures from the past). With regard to the ways in which they experienced the person in question, 50.8% of the participants talked of visual encounters, as opposed to hearing sounds (29.9%) or experiencing touch (25.8%) or smell (23.4%).

Those who stated that they had seen the shape of a dead person were asked how often they had had such experiences (25.6% of the 16.7% who had had such experiences saying “once”, 57.4% saying several times, and 16.9% saying “often”). A large number of people also added valuable, brief accounts of their experiences, providing some qualitative insight and (as with the previous surveys) underlining just how many uncollected new accounts exist in the community. To give just two examples:

“A close relation of mine died in a car accident, and shortly after that took place, I was driving by the place where the accident happened and felt a tug on my seat belt. Shortly after that, I smelt the smell you always noticed in his home in the car”.

“I decided to sit in a chair that I had never sat in before at home. It was my great-grandmother’s chair, and there was some of her handicraft work nearby. It felt like it was occupied. When I told my mother about this, she said that my dead grandmother sometimes sat there and that that is why no one ever sat there”.

This is naturally a treasure trove of material for folklorists and a logical source of follow-up interviews (those providing this information stating that they are open to being contacted). Plans exist for an application for additional funding that will enable students to collect some of this material for the archive.

4. Conclusions

Considering the results of the folk belief surveys noted above, and not least those of the most recent survey, it is evident that while there seems to be a growing degree of doubtfulness about the existence of the supernatural, it is also clear from the belief figures noted above (which are comparable to those relating to life after death [average figure: 2.95/5]; the ability to predict the future [average figure: 2.84]; the existence of untouchable enchanted spots in nature [*álagablettir*: 2.57]; and the existence of nature spirits [2.48]) that Icelanders remain comparatively open-minded in these matters, and somewhat wary about stating total denial. (In comparison, beliefs relating to the prophetic nature of dreams [3.16] and telepathy [3.01] were nonetheless evidently stronger, while those relating to flower divas [1.93] were very much lower.)

As noted above, all of the surveys that have been carried out reflect the fact that women appear to be more open to both beliefs and experiences relating to contact with the dead, something that also applies for the main part to older people and those living in the countryside. Whether this is to do with women being more sensitive or men being less comfortable about admitting to such beliefs and/or experiences is open to question. Whatever the case, it is clear that both early literature and the folk tales of the past point to a similar belief, women being those who are seen as having more prophetic skills and more common second sight, something reflected in the alleged abilities of Old Norse goddesses like Freyja, Frigg, and Gefjun; the mythological *nornir*; and, not least, those seeresses (*völur*) mentioned in the Eddic poems and sagas (see further [Gunnell 2020, 2021, 2023](#)). It seems also clear that there is a growing difference in attitude between the younger urban mentality and that of people living in the countryside, something especially apparent in the figures noted above relating to haunted houses and poltergeist activity. For those young people growing up in the city, under the particular influence of social media, films, and television, it seems clear that the countryside (with its growing number of derelict buildings) is becoming increasingly foreign. Indeed, both the idea of haunted houses and that of poltergeist activity (the latter being something rarely talked about in earlier narratives in which the dead are rarely invisible, unless one includes an early-noted

phenomenon like that of “riding houses”: see above) would appear to be under particular influence from outside media, something which evidently also explains the comparative rise in beliefs in the existence of UFOs (average figure: 2.71), about which there was more wariness in the past. (It nonetheless needs to be borne in mind that the survey took place at the same time that the U.S. Congress was holding a sub-committee hearing on UFOs, something widely reported in the media.)

All in all, it can be stated that beliefs of all kinds, and the ways in which we understand apparently supernatural phenomena, and especially those relating to encounters with the dead, are always under construction, influenced not only by the traditional cultural vocabulary that we have grown up with but also education and the ever-increasing sources of information that surround us daily in the media (see further Honko 1964 on the creation of memorates, or personal experience narratives). Less variable, however, seem to be the number of actual experiences that people attest to. It would be interesting to see whether similar figures to those attained from our surveys would be found elsewhere, suggesting that Icelanders are either very comparable to other nations in their beliefs and experiences or whether they are culturally unique in some way (as they would often like to believe). If the latter is true, there is good reason to go on to question exactly how and why this should be.

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