An Icelandic Noctuary of 1794

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Introduction

Image 1.

27. 28. Sá orm mjög langan so [drawing] 2 kvartel á lengd, hljóp á mína vinstri hönd og í lófann og smaug í skinnið lítið og út aftur en tollði í þessari skinnsprettu á miðju. Þá sagði einhver „gáðu að ormi á vinstri hendi“, eg leit á og tók í báða enda og sleit hann í þrjá parta, var þá sá eini partur í skinninu og tók eg hann líka burt og kastaði niður og hvorfu allir partarnir burt, en kenndi ei til minnsta og greri strax.

On the night to 27 February 1794, the Rev. Sæmundur Hólm at Helgafell on Snæfellsnes dreamt that a worm, some 25 cm long, appeared on his left hand. It crawled onto his palm, then into and out of the skin, before staying put in the rift. Sæmundur examined the worm, before seizing both ends and tearing it into three pieces; one of these did not move and so he threw it away. All three pieces immediately disappeared. He felt no pain and the wound healed at once. Sæmundur duly wrote a brief note about

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this and included a drawing of the worm.¹ At this time, he had lived at Helgafell for just over four years, was 45 years old and unmarried. He is now known for his portraits of prominent Icelanders as well as for several colourful pictures of volcanoes and phantasmagoric landscapes. His poetry, not all of which has yet been published, is considered to be somewhat awkward and uninspired. The diary of his dreams, or “noctuary” (to use the eighteenth-century English term), marks him out as the author of the only extant accounts of ordinary dreams in post-medieval Icelandic literary history. Indeed, few such texts exist anywhere in the world from this period.

Sæmundur seems to have made notes on his dreams over many decades, though only some of these accounts survive. The most substantial cluster can be found in an autograph notebook, beginning in a middle of a dream from late January 1794 and ending with one from the last day of the same year. The worm-dream noted above is one of many included in this booklet, along with poems, accounts and any current news that Sæmundur judged to be of interest. Several more dreams from the beginning of 1795 and others from 1807 and 1819–1820 are preserved in a mid-nineteenth century copy of the original text. The present article examines the oldest dreams with the aim of demonstrating their close and vivid association with Sæmundur’s worldly concerns at that time and his overall life experiences until then, with emphasis on the years 1789–1795.

A biographical sketch

On 13 July 1789, Sæmundur Hólm arrived in Reykjavík, after three weeks at sea, returning to his home country after fifteen years abroad. The ship had left Copenhagen on 20 June and the passage had been a rough one. Sæmundur had been promised an appointment as priest at Helgafell, one of the richest parishes in the country. A farmer’s son, born in 1749 at Hólmasel in Meðalland in Southeast Iceland, he had shown great promise as a boy, and was sent to the cathedral school at Skálholt in 1766. He graduated five years later and, according to rector Bjarni Jónsson (1725–1798), on 3 June 1771, he was a polite and well-disposed young man,

¹ *Draumadagbók Sæmundar Hólm*, 100. I wish to thank Andrew Wawn for reading the article closely, correcting language and style.

always respectful to his superiors, and an eager and gifted student: “sið-prúður og vel innrættur unglingur, er ávallt hefur gefið gaum orðum yfirboðara sinna. Námfús er hann í góðu lagi og vel hæfur til bóknáms.” His greatest talent, however, lay in drawing (“dráttlist”); with proper instruction, Bjarni believed, Sæmundur could become a second Apelles, the famous fourth-century BC Greek painter. He stayed first with his parents at Staðarholt, before being appointed (on 18 May 1772) deacon at Kirkjubæjarklaustur, some 40 km away.² He had also been considered for a position as assistant to Eyjólfur Jónsson (1735–1775), a newly appointed Royal astronomer. On that occasion, Bishop Finnur Jónsson had written in support of the young man: he was exceptionally talented in carpentry and drawing (“til allra smíða, til að teikna eður draga upp”), indeed, in anything related to the imagination and to working with his hands (“annað þvílíkt sem kemur uppá imaginationen og handatiltæktir”). Not only could he imitate whatever he saw, but he was also better than any other student at imagining something and then finding a way to make it: “ei einasta í því að gjöra eftir því sem hann sér, heldur og til að uppfinna sjálfur modell til hlutarins og aðferðina að gjöra hann, er hann so skjaldfengið subjectum að eg þekki nú ei hans líka af þeim studiosis sem eg hefi viðkynnst.”³ Though nothing came of that potential opportunity, the bishop and others encouraged Sæmundur to pursue his studies in Copenhagen. Accordingly, on 2 August 1773, the bishop informed the Royal governor at Bessastaðir that Sæmundur was about to leave for Copenhagen to study fine arts and related subjects: “for at lade sig informere i graphicen og der til hørende videnskaber.”⁴

For some reason, however, the trip was postponed for a year, and it was not until 25 August 1774 that Sæmundur set sail from Eyrarbakki on board a merchant ship, arriving in Copenhagen on 4 October. He completed the university’s entrance examination (*examen artium*) on 22 December, and then the first part of the general studies curriculum (*examen philosophicum*) in the Spring of 1776.⁵ On 10 April, he applied,

² Matthías Þórðarson, *Íslenzkir listamenn* I, 12; National Archives of Iceland (NAI). Rtk. B11/5. Letter journal 7, sheet 32: 29 December 1786, attestation nr. 1. On Apelles, see *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 118–119. The first half of this article is based on my introduction to *Draumadagbók Sæmundar Hólm*, 11–59, but references to most of the secondary sources are given here, as well as to the principal unpublished sources.

³ NAI. Bps. A-IV, 18. Copybook of Skálholt 1770–1773, 639; Matthías Þórðarson, *Íslenzkir listamenn* I, 13.

⁴ NAI. Bps. A-IV, 18. Copybook of Skálholt 1770–1773, 880–881.

⁵ Hannes Þorsteinsson, *Guðfræðingatal*, 273; Bjarni Jónsson, *Íslenzkir Hafnarstúdentar*, 122.

as Sæmund Magnusen Holm, for a grant in order to study mathematics and drawing at the Royal Academy of Arts (Det Kongelige Kunstakademi), founded in 1754. He forwarded with his application six drawings of Icelandic volcanoes and a map of the southern part of the country. On 10 July 1776, the application was approved, and Sæmundur was awarded an annual stipend of 50 rixdaler for three years.⁶ He thus became the first Icelandic to attend the Academy. He was a diligent student, and in just three semesters had advanced to the fourth class. On 27 September 1779, two of his professors, Johannes Wiedewelt (1731–1802) and Cornelius Høyer (1741–1804), attested that Sæmundur had received his first silver medal and that, with further hard work, he would come close to achieving perfection: “opnaae megen Fuldkommenhed.”⁷ That autumn, Sæmundur published a leaflet in which he described a tornado witnessed in Copenhagen, albeit that the accompanying drawings are not his own. In 1781 and 1782, his essay on lymegrass (melgresi) was printed in the learned journal *Rit Lærdómslistafélagsins*, again with drawings by someone else.⁸ However, several of his own drawings did appear in *Oeconomisk Reise igiennem de nordvestlige, nordlige, og nordostlige Kanter af Island* (Copenhagen, 1780), a travel book by Ólafur Olavius (1741–1788). Indeed, Ólafur had wanted to include an essay by Sæmundur on glaciers and volcanoes, with numerous drawings, but the proposal was rejected by the Danish government on the grounds that Sæmundur had not undertaken this study at its behest, and also because the illustrations did not accord with the rules of artistic decorum: “Konstens Regler”.⁹

Sæmundur’s parents did not have the means to support him and he survived on state grants and other occasional work, such as copying old manuscripts and drawing runes for the wealthy book-collector Peter Frederik Suhm (1728–1798), or producing pictures of distorted Icelandic landscapes and imagined medieval artefacts for the even wealthier Count

⁶ *Pf.* Rtk. B7/2. Bréfadagbók 3, sheet 6: 10 Apríl 1776; B7/3. Bréfadagbók 3, sheet 13: 10 July 1776.

⁷ *Pf.* Rtk. B11/5. Letter journal 7, sheet 32: 29 December 1786, attests nr. 7, 8; Matthías Þórðarson, *Íslenzkir listamenn* I, 15n. On these men and other Danes mentioned here, see C.F. Bricka, *Dansk biografisk lexikon*.

⁸ Matthías Þórðarson, *Íslenzkir listamenn* I, 15; Þorvaldur Thoroddsen, *Landfræðissaga Íslands* III, 93–94.

⁹ Ólafur Olavius, *Ferðabók* II, 54, 61, 193, 201, 215, 217, 228, 231, 236, 258; *Lovsamling for Island* IV, 450; *Katalog over de oldnorsk-islandske håndskrifter*, 106–109; Haraldur Sigurðsson, “Sæmundur Magnússon Hólm og kortagerð hans”, 140, 142–143; Web. Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, “Eldgosamyndir Sæmundar Hólm”.

Otto Thott (1703–1785).¹⁰ He would have liked to remain in Copenhagen, but he was strapped for cash, as he explained in a letter to Bishop Hannes Finnsson on 29 May 1779, and he also worried that he would never again see his ageing parents: “Pau eru gömul farin að verða, guð veit hvort eg fæ meir þau að sjá.”¹¹ With the prospect of pursuing his future in Iceland, he undertook further studies in theology, completing his examinations on 16 January 1783. At this time, it was the Danish king who decided on clerical appointments to the best parishes in Iceland, and one of these had become available, Oddi á Rangárvöllum, just 150 km to the west of Staðarholt. Sæmundur duly applied for the position. That same spring, he was awarded a gold medal at the Academy of Arts for having produced a new kind of varnish paper (“Fernis-Papir”), an invention lavishly praised by Johan Martin Preisler (1715–1794), professor and Royal engraver.¹² All in all, life was good for Sæmundur, as he explained in a letter to Bishop Hannes on 11 June 1783.¹³

Three days earlier, on 8 June 1783, the volcanic eruption now known as Skaftáreldar had begun, with earthquakes, acid rain, lava flows and clouds of ash. Two weeks later, the newly built church at Hólmasel (and other buildings) were burnt to the ground. Several farms in the parish were destroyed by lava, sand and floods.¹⁴ Staðarholt, the farm where his parents lived and Sæmundur grew up, remained mostly intact but his mother, Guðleif Sæmundsdóttir (b. 1709), died and was buried on 3 August that year.¹⁵ News of the eruption reached Copenhagen via merchant ships arriving from Iceland on 4 and 5 September.¹⁶ On that second day, the front page of *Kiøbenhavnns Adresse-Contoirs Efterretninger* featured excerpts

¹⁰ *Katalog over de oldnorsk-islandske håndskrifter*, 115, 408; *Web*. Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, “Furðumyndir frá 18. öld á Listasafni Íslands: Fyrri hluti” and “Furðumyndir frá 18. öld á Listasafni Íslands: Síðari hluti”.

¹¹ *Lbs*. *Lbs* 27b fol. Bréfasafn Hannesar Finnssonar: Sæmundur Hólm 29. maí 1779; Matthías Þórðarson, *Íslenzkir listamenn* I, 15n–16n.

¹² *NAD*. Royal Academy. Akademiforsamlingen. Journalsager 1.2-3. Indkomne breve 1779–1788.

¹³ *Lbs*. *Lbs* 28 fol. Bréfasafn Hannesar Finnssonar: Sæmundur Hólm 11. júní 1783.

¹⁴ Sigurður Þórarinnsson, “Annáll Skaftárelda”, 11–22; Þorleifur Einarsson and Edda Lilja Sveinsdóttir, “Nýtt kort af Skaftáreldahrauni og Lakagígum”, 38, 42; “Heimildir til sögu Skaftárelda og Móðuharðinda”, 296.

¹⁵ Sæmundur Hólm, *Om Jordbranden paa Island*, 68; Már Jónsson, “Sorgarviðbrögð Sæmundar Hólms vegna Skaftárelda”, 173.

¹⁶ *Kiøbenhavnnske Tidender* 8 September 1783, 3. Danish newspapers from these years are available at *Web*. Det Kgl. Biblioteks mediesamlinger, <http://www2.statsbiblioteket.dk/mediestream/avis/>

of a detailed account from the merchant J.C. Sünckenberg (1757–1806), with a longer version appearing five days later in a different newspaper. On 25 October, the government decided that collections for needy Icelanders would be taken up in churches in Copenhagen on the first two Sundays in the new year. The Icelandic Jón Eiríksson (1728–1787), an influential official, prepared a detailed description of the catastrophe in Danish, which was read aloud in churches on 4 January 1784.¹⁷

As for Sæmundur, despite being refused access to official reports, he drew on all available information while writing *Om Jordbranden paa Island i Aaret 1783*, an 80-page booklet that included two maps of Vestur-Skaftafellsýsla. One of these was based on a map prepared by Sæmundur in 1771, while the other showed the extent of the destruction, as described in his sources. The preface is dated 25 February 1784, and the book was available in bookshops as early as 4 May.¹⁸ A month later, the curacy at Oddi was awarded to someone else. On June 25, Sæmundur wrote to the Chancery asking for a promise on any of the other parishes to which the king would make appointments, arguing that he had spent ten years in Copenhagen and earned high praise on completion of his studies. He added that he was a native of the area hardest hit by the recent eruption, and that his father's property had been all but destroyed. The Chancery recognised the force of Sæmundur's case and on 17 July it asked the resident Governor of Iceland, Lauritz Thodal (1718–1808), to find a parish for Sæmundur.¹⁹

Sæmundur's sister Valgerður (b. 1744) and brother Þorvaldur (b. 1767) died of hardships resulting from the eruption. Their father, Magnús Guðmundsson (1714–1788), survived, however, and, despite the prohibitive costs involved, Sæmundur travelled to Iceland in the summer of 1786 to visit him. He sought to defray some of the expenditure by applying for a Royal grant on the grounds that during his stay he could undertake research relating to the eruption, but his application was unsuccessful. He sailed from Copenhagen on 4 July and arrived in Reykjavík on 9 August. He remained at Staðarholt from 23 August to 5 September, before travelling to the port of Berufjörður in the East. He was back in

¹⁷ *Lovsamling for Island* IV, 763–764; Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson, “Viðbrögð stjórnvalda í Kaupmannahöfn við Skaftáreldum”, 192–193.

¹⁸ Sæmundur Hólm, *Om Jordbranden paa Island*, 40, 41; *Kiøbenhavns Adresse-Contoirs Efterretninger* 4. mai 1784, 7.

¹⁹ ÞÍ. KA/32. Innkomin bréf og önnur skjöl 1784, sheet 22: 25 March 1784; sheet 35: 25 June 1784.

Copenhagen by 11 November. On 22 March 1788, the Rev. Sigurður Stefánsson (1744–1798) of Helgafell was appointed bishop at Hólar in Hjaltadalur. Ten days later, on 1 April, Sæmundur applied for the vacant Helgafell parish, with letters of recommendation from former teachers. The Chancery decided to support him, and both Governor Hans Levetzow (1754–1829) and Bishop Hannes Finnsson agreed. On 14 March 1789, the Chancery informed Sæmundur that he could be reasonably certain that his wish would be granted: “giöre sig grundet haab om Deres önskes opfyldelse.”²⁰ On 11 June he received a loan for 200 rd., to be repaid out of the inheritance from his father. Five days later, he requested free passage to Iceland on a vessel whose departure was imminent, so that he could find falcons for the king, as the earlier loan he had received had barely covered essential expenses. He also noted that while in Iceland he would also need to undertake a lengthy trip in order to secure his inheritance.²¹

Arrival

On 14 July 1789, the day after his arrival, he met with Governor Levetzow at Bessastaðir, who had still not received confirmation from Bishop Hannes of Sæmundur’s move to Helgafell. Sæmundur then travelled to the national assembly at Þingvellir, and from there to Skálholt. There, on 20 July, Hannes wrote to Levetzow, who in turn authorised the appointment four days later.²² At that moment, Sæmundur was on his way to Vík í Mýrdal, where, on 4 August, he duly received his inheritance. His father had died on 30 September 1788 and an inventory was made at Staðarholt on 8 June 1789. The property was valued at 138 rd. 54 sk.; after all debts and costs had been paid, the modest sum of 116 rd. 90 sk. remained. By law, sons inherited twice as much as daughters, which meant that Sæmundur received 77 rd. 92 sk. while the four children of his sister Valgerður

²⁰ *ÞÍ.* KA/40. Innkomin bréf og önnur skjöl 1788, sheet 20: 22 March 1788; KA/42. Innkomin bréf og önnur skjöl 1789, sheet 18: 14 February 1789; Bps. A-IV, 40. Kansellibréf til Skálholtsbiskups 1742–1801: 1 April 1788.

²¹ *ÞÍ.* Rtk. B12/5. Bréfadagbók 8, sheet 60: 16 June 1789; Hannes Þorsteinsson, *Æfir lærðra manna* 58. Sæmundur Magnússon Hólm, 11.

²² *ÞÍ.* Bps. A-IV, 28. Bréfabók Skálholts 1789–1790, 217; Stift. I-24. Bréfabók 1789–1791, 169.

received 38 rd. 94 sk. between them.²³ According to Sæmundur himself, in a diary fragment, his share amounted to 35 rd. 32 sk. and two horses. Returning to Skálholt, he was ordained on 7 September 1789. Then, after a further tortuous journey in bad weather, he finally arrived at Helgafell on 4 November.

Sæmundur seems to have suffered some sort of a nervous breakdown on his arrival there, and a letter to Bishop Hannes on 2 January 1790 finds him complaining bitterly. The houses were cold, and the winter weather had been severe; only a few days earlier, the sea had frozen over and it had been possible to walk on the ice. Hallgrímur Backmann (1739–1811), the district doctor, acting in his role as representative of Bishop Sigurður, proposed that the church and buildings at Helgafell should be assessed as soon as possible, but Sæmundur refused to agree because of the weather conditions. He prevailed and the assessment did not take place until 1 June 1790. Hallgrímur was in attendance at Setberg í Eyrarsveit, as was the Rev. Björn Þorgrímsson (1750–1832), the provost, who had been a fellow student with Sæmundur during the winter of 1766–1767.²⁴ The last assessment took place on 16 July 1781, and just two months later, on the night to 25 September, most of the buildings had been destroyed by fire. The Rev. Sigurður had subsequently received a royal grant of 120 rd. for their reconstruction and they were now worth 232 rd. The amount of the grant would be subtracted, as would a further sum of 33 rd. 60 sk. for essential repairs to cattle sheds and other small buildings, which meant that Sæmundur would have to pay 78 rd. 90 sk. He agreed to this in principle but indicated that payment would have to wait. A further financial issue was that the Rev. Guðmundur Eiríksson (1759–1805) was owed money for having taken care of the parish and church after Sigurður's departure.²⁵ Accordingly, on 24 July 1790, Sæmundur paid 41 rd. 59 sk. to cover this cost. Thus, for all that he had been appointed to one of the best parishes in Iceland, Sæmundur was heavily in debt. The annual income from the parish was 81 rd. 61 sk., whereas the annual income of Björn Þorgrímsson, provost at Setberg, was 46 rd.

Sæmundur viewed the situation with considerable displeasure, and in the years that followed complained loudly and frequently to the relevant authorities. In a letter to the Chancery, dated 6 October 1790, he challenged

²³ Þf. Sýsl. Skaft. ED2/1. Dánarbú 1760–1809, 322r–328v.

²⁴ *Íslenzkar æviskrár* I, 254.

²⁵ *Íslenzkar æviskrár* II, 140–141.

the current assessment and demanded a new one. After advice from the Rev. Björn, both bishops, and the governor, the Chancery rejected Sæmundur's demand on 14 April 1792.²⁶ A year later, he reopened the case, addressing letters to Bishop Hannes and Governor Levetzow. On 3 May 1793, he forwarded to them a report on the situation at Helgafell on his arrival, and a month later he wrote again, addressing in great detail all aspects of his case.²⁷ In late August 1794, Bishop Hannes visited the region and Sæmundur promised not to mention the assessment again. However, just a few days later, on 1 September, he broke his promise, insisting that a new assessment should be made. The bishop replied on 24 October, indicating that the decision had been made and would stand.²⁸ In his yearly report to the Chancery, he noted that Sæmundur was a genius in mechanical matters – “til mechaniske kunster især oplagt genie” – and had been a medal winner whilst at the Academy of Arts. The bishop concluded that Sæmundur should rather have pursued those interests: “at manden havde blevet paa den löbebane.”²⁹

Sæmundur now turned his attention to the Rev. Björn. On 1 November, he sent him seven written questions on his alleged mishandling of various issues. He subsequently made it clear that he rejected Björn's explanations and requested a fuller response. On 9 January 1795, Björn replied for a second time, indicating that he would only provide further answers in court. A month later, Sæmundur, much offended, wrote to the bishop and governor requesting permission to sue his superior. On 24 July, Bishop Hannes reluctantly agreed, but asked him to consider the matter carefully before proceeding.³⁰ Sæmundur would not be deflected, however, and took Björn to court, just as, a few years later, he would take legal action against Hallgrímur for various alleged insults. Though both cases came to nothing, Sæmundur continued to involve himself in other quarrels, and spent much of his life either making accusations or defending himself against the accusations of others. He served as priest at Helgafell until 23 March 1819 and died in Stykkishólmur on 5 April 1821.

²⁶ *ÞÍ*. Bps. A-IV, 40. Kansellíbréf til Skálholtsbiskups 1742–1801: 14 April 1792 and 20 April 1793; KA/48. Innkomin bréf og önnur skjöl 1792, sheet 22: 14 April 1792; cf. sheet 39: 31 July 1792.

²⁷ *ÞÍ*, KA/57. Innkomin bréf og önnur skjöl 1798, sheet 1: 26 July 1798, nr. 5.

²⁸ *ÞÍ*. Bps. A-IV, 30. Bréfabók Skálholts 1793–1795, 604.

²⁹ “Úr ferðabók Steingríms Jónssonar á vísitasíum með Hannesi Finnssyni”, 96; *ÞÍ*. Bps. A-IV, 30. Bréfabók Skálholts 1793–1795, 619.

³⁰ *ÞÍ*. Bps. A-IV, 31. Bréfabók Skálholts 1795–1798, 74.

The notebook

An inventory of Sæmundur's belongings was made on 11 April 1821. He had left two chests full of manuscripts and papers that the provost had no time to examine, but Sæmundur's good friend, the district doctor Oddur Hjaltalín (1783–1840), took over the task. In his report on 21 September, he explained that most of the papers were in poor condition and in disarray: “velflestir illa meðhöndlaðir, sumpart fúnir, sumpart ruglaðir og illa brúkanlegir.” He had managed to classify them, however, and found that there were drawings and maps, court documents and church records, official and private correspondence, sermons and 31 fragments of various political diaries: “31 stykki ýmislegra pólitískra dagbóka.”³¹ The meaning of “political” here is unclear. Some of these items may have been brief essays on the dismal state of Icelandic society, but Oddur may well also be referring to actual diaries, including the noctuaries. These papers were sold on 12 September 1822 for 14 rd. 48 sk., but the details of the auction have not survived and the purchasers are unknown.³²

The account of Sæmundur's 1794 dreams is preserved as a sizeable booklet written in his own hand, which can now be found at the bottom of a specially designed box (JS 318 8vo, item VII, in an extensive autograph collection of poetry; the first half of the booklet is in JS 317 8vo). To create these booklets, Sæmundur took folio-sized sheets and folded them in two to produce an oblong format (218 by 91 mm). Some parts of this collection, or perhaps all of it, came into the possession of the poet Bjarni Thorarensen (1786–1841), who had known Sæmundur in his final years and composed an elegy after his death. Bjarni gave the manuscript to his son Vigfús (1821–1861), who in turn handed it to his brother Bogi (1822–1867). Bogi went to Copenhagen in 1846 to study law, and while there he presented it to the scholar and politician Jón Sigurðsson (1811–1879), who was an avid collector of manuscripts. Jón provided covers for the various parts of the collection, noting on the one for the noctuary that it was a journal, an annal and a book of dreams in Sæmundur's hand: “Dagbók, annáll og draumabók. (Frumrit eftir Sæmund Holm) 1794.”³³ Though Sæmundur's noctuary has been known to Icelandic scholars its

³¹ *Pf.* Sýsl. Snæf. ED2/3. Probate inventories 1811–1833, sheet 3: nr. 3 and 4.

³² *Pf.* Sýsl. Snæf. ED1/2, 1. Skiptabók 1822–1834, 36; cf. Snæf. EC1/1, 2. Uppboðsbók 1819–1834, 39v–41v.

³³ *Lbs.* JS 318 8vo. Kvæðasafn Sæmundar Hólm, 206r. The noctuary is at ff. 206r–305v, according to images at *Web.* <https://handrit.is/en/manuscript/imaging/is/JS08->

contents have attracted little interest. In a book published 1900–1902, Þorvaldur Thoroddsen notes that the manuscript contains many poems and a book of dreams: “allmikil syrpa af kvæðum eftir Sæmund og draumabók”.³⁴ Two decades later, when Matthías Þórðarson published a selection of Sæmundur’s verse, he barely mentions the “drauma- og minnisbók”. Again, Hannes Þorsteinsson, in an extensive collection of documents and information relating to Sæmundur, refers to a “dagbók, annál og draumabók” but failed even to examine the factual material it contains.³⁵

Dreams tend to be immediately forgotten. To survive, they need to be written down. A fervent admirer of dreams, the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834), at the age of thirty, began to produce written descriptions of his dreams, most often, as Jennifer Ford has noted, immediately after waking up: “What Coleridge records in his notebooks is often written immediately after waking from a dream.” He recorded as much detail as he could: “His notebook writings, often set down in haste and confusion, attempt to be an accurate record of the dream experience.”³⁶ Sæmundur probably worked in much the same way, preparing notes when he woke up, perhaps on loose slips of paper, though the noctuary entries are not always in chronological order and a copy must have been made soon afterwards. The notebook also contains a somewhat confusing jumble of other texts, such as drafts of poetry, records of births and deaths in the parish, local news and shopping lists, all written in 1794 and 1795. The pages have been numbered in pencil at some later date. Pages 1–37 and 56–62 belong together in a quire, whereas pp. 39–54 have been inserted, and pp. 46–53 are blank. Subsequent quires are pp. 63–78, 79–120, 121–134, 135–166 and 167–198. The dream narratives total 14,400 words, with the longest almost 400 words, while the great majority are much shorter.

Numerous dreams are illustrated with small drawings or signs. The drawings are easy to understand, with depictions of worms and faces, the moon and the sun, whereas the signs are harder to interpret: triangles, small clouds, circles dots and more (see here on p. 141–142). Most

0318#page/206r++(431+of+636)/mode/1up and [https://handrit.is/en/manuscript/imaging/is/JS08-0318#page/305v++\(634+of+636\)/mode/1up](https://handrit.is/en/manuscript/imaging/is/JS08-0318#page/305v++(634+of+636)/mode/1up)

³⁴ Þorvaldur Thoroddsen, *Landfræðissaga* III, 98.

³⁵ Matthías Þórðarson, *Íslenzkir listamenn* I, 35–37; ÞÍ. Hannes Þorsteinsson, *Æfir lærðra manna* 58. Sæmundur Magnússon Hólm, 3.

³⁶ Ford, *Coleridge on dreaming*, 56, 67.

of these appear in the account of Sæmundur dreaming that he was back in Copenhagen. However hard to decipher, these images were certainly significant for him, as were the moons and circles in the diaries of the English writer Mary Shelley (1797–1851), where the editors concluded: “Any analysis of the symbols Mary used must remain largely a matter of conjecture; they were introduced for the purpose of concealment, and in this they are largely successful.”³⁷

More of these dreams are preserved in a copy made by the learned Gísli Konráðsson (1787–1877) on Flatey á Breiðafirði (Lbs 1168 8vo), who explains that they derive from Sæmundur’s booklet or diary fragment: “tínt saman eftir skræðu hans eður dagbókar rifrildi”.³⁸ The dreams are numbered from 1 to 61, but 10, 11 and 25 are lacking and 16 appears twice. The first dreams are dated April and May 1807, followed by those from January and February 1795 that appear consecutively in the autograph notebook. The rest are from the last months of 1819 and January 1820. In total, 6500 words are devoted to these dreams, including 1600 words on those from 1795.

These texts must be taken as they stand and should simply be trusted. They are certainly as plausible as any description of a dream can be. Sæmundur can have had no other purpose in recording his dreams than simply that of wishing to remember them and they were not part of his various quarrels or court cases. The only comment he ever made as to why he wrote down the dreams dates from the morning of 14 October 1819, after he had dreamt that a woman had dressed him up in an oversized, wet and slimy overall, made of shaven hides (“mikið stór og víður smokkur, sliktju-blautur og rakaður”). This could not signify anything bad, he commented, although it certainly looked ugly, as he placed no particular trust in any dream and was recording them to help try to understand their nature: “Ekki mun þetta merkja illt, þó ljótt sýnist – ekki reiði eg mig uppá neinn draum, en skrifa þá til að ná þeirra náttúru.”³⁹ He was intrigued and he wanted to understand – and all that a modern reader can do, in the words of Lynn Struve, is to accept “the utter interiority of what is reported”, and believe that “what is recorded bears some relation to what has been recalled from a spate of dreaming.”⁴⁰

³⁷ *The Journals of Mary Shelley* II, 581.

³⁸ *Draumadagbók Sæmundar Hólm*, 100.

³⁹ *Draumadagbók Sæmundar Hólm*, 166.

⁴⁰ Struve, “Dreaming and Self-Search during the Ming Collapse”, 164–165.

Fantasy dreams

The diaries of William Laud (1573–1645), Archbishop of Canterbury, record numerous dreams in detail. At court, just before he was executed for treason and as his dreams were being used against him, he explained: “Dreams are not in the power of him that hath them, but in the unruliness of the fancy, which in broken sleeps wanders which way it pleases.”⁴¹ In 1766, Jérôme Richard (b. 1720) explained that the strangeness of dreams was due to the fact that in sleep the soul was not in any contact with the world but had access to all previous experience and thought, mixing everything together in every conceivable way.⁴² Twenty years earlier, the German theologist Samuel Formey (1711–1797) had concluded that in dreams the soul certainly had feelings but was not affected by the environment: “éprouve des sensations, sans que les objets externes paroissent faire aucune impression sur elle.” It could thus travel around the world, and things could either appear or disappear, and could be agreeable or disagreeable, or even both at the same time.⁴³

Such apparent incoherence is a strong characteristic of Sæmundur’s dreams. His noctuary starts at the end of January 1794 in the middle of a sentence with a storm coming from the east and an enormous river flowing towards the southwest, with huge waterfalls, and with the earth shaking. A boy arrived, along with others whom Sæmundur did not see, and prepared to attack him with hostile words and cruel demeanour (“með illum orðum og drápsbragði”), but Sæmundur confronted him with anger and threats, and he disappeared. Next, Sæmundur was walking on a mountain and found fragment of a meteorite (“geimsteinn”), which he brought to his mother in a dimly-lit house. She received him with kindness and took the stone, which was the size of a fist, and struck something with it. A great fire erupted, again and again, for an extended period – and then he woke up: “vaknaði eg morguninn”.⁴⁴ Here we find a curious mixture of elements: nature, weather, angry but faceless people, and a mysterious stone, but also his mother. Similar contrasts are common, as when Sæmundur’s former schoolmate at Skálholt, Benedikt Bogason (1749–1819), one of Iceland’s wealthiest men, appeared to him, happy and bombastic, on the night

⁴¹ Barbour, “Liturgy and Dreams in Seventeenth-Century England”, 228–229.

⁴² Richard, *La théorie des songes*, 81–84, 139–140.

⁴³ Formey, “Essai sur les songes”, 174.

⁴⁴ *Draumadagbók Sæmundar Hólm*, 95. In what follows page numbers from this edition are put within parenthesis right after the citation.

of 8 May 1794. Benedikt's head then removed itself without bleeding, placed itself at Sæmundur's feet and began talking gibberish: "þókti mér af honum verða sett höfuðið og blæddi ekki úr og settist höfuðið til fóta minna og var að tala einhverja heimsku." The head then returned to its correct place and only then did pus appear, causing Benedikt to prostrate himself face down. Sæmundur continued to dream, meeting his father in good spirits, and then visiting Copenhagen, where he saw the royal palace that had just burnt down (113).

In that same vein, in Nürnberg, Germany, the poet Sigmund von Birken (1626–1681) had dreams that were simultaneously realistic and disordered, as when, while preaching, he was suddenly unable say a word, or as when his head was cut off and placed on a pillow. On the night to 14 November 1677, he dreamt of brown worms and thought that this would result in wealth.⁴⁵ In his dreams, Sæmundur himself often saw an impressive variety of worms that appeared and then vanished, at times in connection with food (106, 114, 149); one of them even appeared in his faeces (146–147). As priest, Sæmundur must have been familiar with the plethora of dreams and revelations in the Bible and although it can not be seen in his letters or writings he may have been familiar with writings produced by theologians and other members of recent spiritual movements, such as the Swedish scientist Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). Religious visions, however, are notable by their absence in Sæmundur's dreams, compared, for instance, with those described by Swedenborg (1688–1772), who started writing a diary while travelling through Holland in the spring of 1744, but was soon recording nothing but his dreams, which he interpreted immediately. On the night to 25 March, to take just one example, he descended a huge staircase towards a deep and apparently almost impassable chasm. There were people on the other side and he reached towards them with his hand in search of assistance. He then woke up and concluded that damnation might be awaiting him unless he sought help: "Voro på andra sidan personar, dem jag räckte handen att komma över. Vaknade. Är faran jag är uti att falla i avgrunden, om jag inte får hjälp."⁴⁶

Such revelatory dreams appear in the autobiography of Sæmundur's benefactor the Rev. Jón Steingrímsson (1728–1791), most of them in the spirit of Swedenborg. To Jón, dreams always contained a message, in all

⁴⁵ Gantet, *Der Traum in der frühen Neuzeit*, 358–367.

⁴⁶ Swedenborg, *Drömboken. Journalanteckningar 1743–1744*, 12.

likelihood from God, who would either warn or bless him, and he was supposed to share these visions with his wife and others. On the basis of Jón's texts alone, Adriënné Heijnen has concluded that in eighteenth-century Iceland dreams were "an accepted source of knowledge that provided guidelines for action among the common people and the clergy."⁴⁷ This is a somewhat overstated claim. Although there is evidence that Sæmundur did discuss dreams with his workers and friends, he never saw them as guidance and refers to God only occasionally, when threatening his enemies with divine retribution (126, 138). On the other hand, once, on the night to 28 April 1794, the devil made an unsuccessful attack on him. Sæmundur was standing in darkness at some high location, from which, close by to the north, he saw the devil preparing an assault. Though barely able to see him in the dark, Sæmundur nonetheless he managed to repel him with great force; after further attacks the evil one finally disappeared into the ground: "eg bölvaði honum í burt með grimmilegum krafti, en hann kom upp aftur og aftur þar til eg rak hann niður úr jörðinni og hvarf hann so að öllu." The gruesome-looking creature was pitch-black, had four legs and resembled a snake: "ferfættur með mjög ljótri ásýnd og dimmkolsvartur og nokkuð í höggormslíki" (111). We cannot, of course, say how Sæmundur discussed his dreams with friends and neighbours and he may certainly have intended his notes for later use as he wished to think more deeply about his nocturnal experiences, but if he had such thoughts he did not write them down.

Current affairs

A Chinese official, Xue Cai (1598–1665), recorded dreams extensively in his diary during a period of intense warfare in 1642–1645. Many directly related to current events, as he saw the spilling of blood, or imprisonment and great danger. He woke up trembling with fear.⁴⁸ In 1699, a merchant in Mexico City, Diego Martínez de Arce, sensed a crisis in his religious beliefs and handed over to the inquisition a booklet containing descriptions of numerous dreams. Most of these concerned day to day affairs,

⁴⁷ Heijnen, *The Social Life of Dreams*, 82. On visionary dreams in Iceland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see Ólafur Davíðsson, *Galdur og galdramál*, 16–24.

⁴⁸ Struve, "Dreaming and Self-Search during the Ming Collapse", 163–164, 175–176.

such as fraudulent merchandise and non-payment of debts.⁴⁹ Sarah Morgan, a young woman in Louisiana, wrote down her dreams during the American Civil War, meeting with Shakespeare and Charlotte Brontë, but also flying in space. Her worst dream was that she was about to be married.⁵⁰ The soldier Alexander Paxton kept a diary of dreams for two months in 1864. He dreamt of fights and attending church, or, once, of harvesting potatoes as a sow approached, attacked and devoured him.⁵¹ Most of Sæmundur's dreams were also closely connected to his current situation at Helgafell and to the treatment he had already endured. On 28 January 1794, a merchant ship approached and, five nights later, the smithy burnt down, a terrible sight to see and one that continued for a long time (97). On 18 February, he had a vision of large fat foxes, brown and grey, who were not at all scared of him (99). Two nights later, he prepared to dig up Christ from what he thought was his grave at Helgafell church, to see whether the body had decayed: “þókti mér Krists líkami vera grafinn hér að kirkju og átti að fara að grafa hann upp til að vita hvort ei væri rotnaður” (104). On 14 September, Sæmundur was digging a deep hole “hér á Helgafelli” and it turned out to be full of water. An ugly worm then dropped from the sky, and disappeared into it as if dead (130). On 14 January 1795, Sæmundur found himself at the top of a mountain, building a house, and saw many birds there. One of the dogs at Helgafell, called Kólur, came along and bit the leg off one of the birds, whereupon Sæmundur struck him hard on the neck with a stick so he howled and ran away (158). On 25 January, we find Sæmundur preparing to cut grass with a sword (159).

His enemies, Björn (the provost) and Hallgrímur (the physician) featured regularly in the dreams. On the night of 4 February, Sæmundur dreamt of Hallgrímur inspecting corpses and coffins (96). Six nights later, Sæmundur was in Copenhagen, showing the Helgafell assessment of 1781 to Jón Eiríksson, who claimed that Sæmundur would prevail in his dispute. Björn arrived, a diminutive figure looking grey and tired, and saying nothing: “leit illa út grár, gugginn og lítill og þagði” (98). On the night of 11 April, Sæmundur was at Staðarholt writing as Björn arrived to persecute him. Sæmundur escaped by running away. Björn appeared again but eventually cleared off and dawn broke: “seinast hvarf hann eða snáfaði í burtu, bjart

⁴⁹ Jordán Arroyo, *Entre la vigilia y el sueño*, 156–160, 163–183.

⁵⁰ White, *Midnight in America*, 76–78.

⁵¹ White, *Midnight in America*, 45.

varð” (108). On 9 May, Sæmundur fought with three or more ugly-looking men in a dark house but managed to overcome all of them. As they vanished, Hallgrímur arrived and praised Sæmundur, who did not reply. This dream continued with Sæmundur on a hill, where he kept three somewhat rusty canons, that were meant to be used for killing his enemies (114).

On 9 June, Sæmundur was digging vigorously in the ground looking for somewhere to hide, as he felt that he was not safe anywhere: “til að leita mér fylgsna, því mér þókti varla neinstaðar vært” (117). Five nights later, Björn made an unsuccessful claim for money before disappearing, small of stature and ugly in aspect (119). On 3 July, both men were present. Björn tried to crawl under Sæmundur’s coat (“smjúga undir kápu mína”), whispering that he should drop his accusations and show some fairness. Sæmundur was silent, and then Hallgrímur arrived, walking between them, all the while talking and shouting (120). On 12 August, Sæmundur found himself in a big house, well supplied with food and drink, and was able to eat and drink at his pleasure. Björn did his best to prevent him from doing so, but without success (124). On 26 October, Hallgrímur returned, unsettling and antagonistic as ever, though with no justification: “eins og hann plagar fullur með óeirð og fjandskap af öngri nauð.” Sæmundur surprised himself by just how harshly he addressed his antagonist; in his account he remembered just these words:

I am innocent but you never tire of persecuting me, with your deceitful evil. I wish you all well, you wish me all evil, and you will keep on with this until death, you wretched crook. The devil is blinding you more and more to do some terrible deed, but you will learn, if you continue in this way, that such devilish behaviour will be your destruction and damnation, and you will never defeat me. Satan will make you mad before you die. Just look what is happening to you; but your stubborn and evil pride stops you from seeing this until eventually you will go to hell, for the punishment of god will descend on you.

(Þér leiðist ekki að ofsækja mig saklausan og þinni lygafullri vonsku, eg vil þér allt gott, þú vilt mér allt illt, í þessu heldur æ áfram til dauðans þinn bölvauður skálfur, andskotinn forblindar þig æ meir so þú vinnir eitt staklegt níðingsverk, en þú munt reyna, ef þú so áfram heldur, að þetta djöfulsins athæfi verður þín bölván og foreyðing og þinna, en færð ei á mér unnið. Andskotinn ærir þig í bölváninni áður en þú drepst, sjáðu hvar þú ert aðkominn en þú sérð það ekki fyrir þínu forstokkuðu og skálfafullu bölvuðu drambi inntil þú ferð seinast til helvítis, því straff guðs mun með þessu móti á þér bitna.)

Hallgrímur said nothing, faded away and finally disappeared (137–138). However, not all Sæmundur’s interactions with his enemies were bad.

On the night to 3 November 1794, just after Sæmundur had sent his seven questions to Björn (see here on p. 131), he dreamt that they were working together on sailing a raft on a lake (139). On 11 December, they collaborated on fixing a door (142), and on 24 January 1795 Sæmundur found himself to be married to Björn's sister, though he did not know her name: "ei vissi eg hvað hét" (159).

Copenhagen

There is no doubt that Sæmundur missed Copenhagen, having lived there for fifteen years, although one could say that he did not get the opportunities that he deserved. On the night to 21 February, he was present at a house where King Christian VII was sitting with his government. Sæmundur was asked to eat with them, which he did, mostly enjoying a sweet and tasty green dish in the form of bread. He wore the same scarlet clothes as the king and most of the other courtiers; it was bright daylight and they did not speak: "Var í skarlatsrauðum klæðum og eins kóngur og flestir við það borð, vel bjart var, ei töluðum vær neitt" (104–105). On 30 July, he again spoke with the king and the crown prince on various matters (123), apparently with great satisfaction. At the time of Sæmundur's departure, Copenhagen was a thriving city of 90,000 inhabitants, with a rich cultural life and a major university, although the common people lived in cramped quarters, many of them in great poverty.⁵² On the night to 30 January 1794, he was at the house of a police officer by the name of Leth, whose wife and son were also present, along with three other unknown and scruffily dressed boys. The couple offered him fine food which he hardly touched. The weather was cold and though Sæmundur was well dressed, he was barefoot and his feet were dirty. He woke up only to fall asleep again after dawn ("eftir birtingu"), dreaming that he was back in the garden of the house where he had lived in the years 1781–1789, at 268 Aabenraa Street, gazing at what appeared to be a basin filled with hides: "í garðinum, sá [drawing] fullt með [drawing]" (see image 2). A naked boy came and stepped into it before heading back to his bed.

⁵² Henningsen and Langen, *Hundemordet i Vimmelskaflet*, 19–27, 194–196; Munck, "Keeping the Peace: 'Good Police' and the Civic Order in 18th-century Copenhagen"; Matthiessen, *Københavnske gader 1728–1795*, 7–33, 80–86, 104–134; Guðjón Friðriksson and Jón Þ. Þór, *Kaupmannahöfn sem höfuðborg Íslands I*, 385–410, 456–463.

Sæmundur also felt the urge to try out the basin, sensing that he really was present there (95). On 14 February, he returned and saw many wet hides that had been treated, some folded and some spread out, and also observed many basins filled with water and hides: “sá margar bereiddar húðir blautar, sumar samanvafðar sumar útbreiddar, og mörg ker stór full af vatni og húðum” (98). Aabenraa Street is situated in the neighbourhood between the Round Tower and the Rosenborg Castle. According to a 1787 census, four families lived in the building along with several tenants, twenty people in all. Sæmundur rented a room with a tailor and his wife. A buttonmaker and a shoemaker also lived there, but the most striking activity, if the dream is to be believed, was a tannery kept by a certain Jensen and his wife Karen Axt. At this time, there were at least three tanneries in the city, employing dozens of people.⁵³ This tannery made a lasting impression on Sæmundur, and at some point he must have undertaken work there, learning the tricks of the trade as he did so. Hides were amongst his strongest preoccupations in dreams.

30 January 1794

Var í Höfn No. 268 í Aabenraae, og í garðinum, sá [drawing] fullt með [drawing]. Kom þangað drengur nakinn og fór þar í og upp aftur og inn í rúm til sín (95).

Image 2.

On 2 April, he found himself at Aabenraa 268, observing basins with hides and water, again as if actually present, and depicting other items as a cluster of dots and a bone; he expressed regret at having ever left for Helgafell: “og iðraði af för hingað” (see image 3). On 5 May, everything was as before and he again stepped into a basin with water, remaining there for a long time and becoming like an L, which seems incomprehensible (see image 4). On the following night, he was in the garden; there were plenty of basins to be seen and there were hides in the basins and also lying around, perhaps unfolded, and as big as the basin themselves (image 5). He then went to visit Madame Axt, whose mother, Madame Petersen, was present; she gave him some books on medicine, tea-drinking and other such matters: “um lækniisdóma, um theevatns brúkun og soddan” (112).

⁵³ Bruun, *Kjøbenhavn* III, 81–82, 553.

Image 3.

2 April 1794

Var í Höfn í No. 268 í Aabenraa og sá [drawing] með [drawing] og [drawing]i allt eins og í birtunni og eg hefði þar með [drawings] verið og iðraði af för hingað (106).

Image 4.

5 May 1794

Kom í No. 268 í Aabenraa varð þar sem áður allt fór í [drawing] og voru í [drawing] allrahandu og varði lengi varð [drawing] (113).

Image 5.

6 May 1794

Var í Kaupmannahöfn þar í No. 268 í Aabenraa. Var í garðinum og var þar nóg af [drawing] og [drawing] bæði í [drawing] og liggjandi með [drawing] eins stórar (112).

Image 6.

22 December 1794

Var víða í Höfn og í No. 268 Aabenraa var þar eins og fyrr og sá mörg [drawing] með [drawing]. Þókti vænt eg var þar en hafði skilið eftir mín skrif í Íslandi, var sem um miðjan vetur hafði lítið, vel klæddur (146).

On 30 July, he was yet again at the tannery, working with others and enjoying the experience: “var sjálfur innanum það með öðrum, er mér þókti gaman.” As he met the Axt and Petersen ladies, he was tall and well dressed but without a hat: “eg var hár og vel búinn en hafði ei hatt.”

Everything was as it had been before, but this time the tannery was much bigger and better, and he thought that he had some part in this: “og garfarið mikið meira og betra er eg og þóktist hafa part í” (123). A month later, he was in the room where he had spent most of his time in the city: “Var eg í því sama kamersi og eg var í lengst í Höfn í No. 268.” It was dark and he opened a window; it was raining outside, with a wind from the southeast. Someone walked up the staircase into another house: “gekk einhver upp tröppurnar í annað hús.” He woke up but soon went back to sleep and dreamt that he was by a river in Iceland, north of Staðarholt, and had three horsehides with him. He made a hole in the ice that covered the river and put the hides into the water to keep them for later, although they were wet already, and one of them had no hair: “voru þó blautar og ein hárlaus ætlaði að geyma þær þar í til síðan” (127). On 22 December, he was in the tannery and saw several basins with hides and enjoyed being there but had left all his writings in Iceland. It was in the middle of winter and he had little money, but was nevertheless well dressed (image 6).

In fact, not all Sæmundur’s dreams of Copenhagen were entirely positive. On 15 September, he found himself walking there and nobody paid him any attention. The city was almost empty of people and in a chaotic state: “var borgin nær auð af fólki og allt í ráðleysu”. He was thinking about his published writings (“var að þenkja eftir um prent mitt”) but had none of them with him, was barefoot and badly dressed – it was as if for him everything was dead and defeated, with uncertainty as to what lay ahead: “var allt samt sem dautt fyrir mér og lágt hvað í veginn vildi koma.” Then he donned fine new socks and decent shoes, also bright green (“fagurgrænar”) trousers and vest, and was now well dressed (130). On 12 December, he saw torn-down houses whose black gables were still standing; the streets were damp and there was no one in sight: “sá húsini niðurrifin og stóðu upp gafhlöðin svört var blautt á götum og svart og ei sá eg nokkurn” (143). These were fleeting moments and for the most part, as we have seen, Sæmundur wished that he had never left. On 9 April, he was at Staðarholt and stepped outside into the dark; a full moon shone to the east, and the place seemed a complete dump (“moldarbæli”). He then found himself by the sea, dark and wild, with a great river flowing from the north – and then he was on horse, heading for Copenhagen, deep in the water but with his feet still dry: “djúpsyndur og fóru fætur mínar ofaní en vöknuðu ekkirt” (107). On the night of 28 December, he was in church together with some of his teachers at the Royal Academy of Arts. He was given a marvellous illustrated book and expressed regret

that he had left the city and come to the dreadful slavery at Helgafell in which he now found himself: “eg átti bókina, og iðraðist að eg fór þaðan í þennan dauðans þrældóm sem eg nú er í” (149). On 7 January 1795, Sæmundur heard someone calling outside the window, asking for something in monosyllables that made no sense: “Eg vænti þessa nakdeil ampu, amru ampu, meir en vel, hei, hei, hei, hey, meir en vel, pí, pí, pí, pí”. He woke up but dreamt further that he was at Aabenraa 268, where a bitch was lying with her puppies. One of them attacked him and he beat it away. He was well dressed, in black, and there were workers around. A large and beautiful woman approached him, saying that he hadn’t been there for a long time, but that he had now returned and they were pleased to see him. He was welcome to stay and would have a good time; nobody would interfere with this: “Vertu velkominn hingað og langt er síðan eg sá þig hér og þú komst, nú ertu aftur kominn, það gleður oss, og þú mátt vera hér, og þú skalt hafa gott hvar þú ert. Það verður ei hindrað etc.” It was bright and everything looked natural, and then he woke up from this into the usual slavery: “Bjart var og allt náttúrlegt, og eg vaknaði frá þessu í þrældóminn” (156–157).

Youth

In the spring of 1783, Sæmundur wrote an essay in Danish about his health, including a description of accidents and other misfortunes that had befallen him in his youth (Lbs 817 8vo). At the age of three, he fell from a bed onto his head and later, aged nine, a huge pus-filled lump developed on his right thigh. He also describes a shocking episode at school in Skálholt, when he was sexually assaulted. There were some 35 students at the school and most of them slept in a common room, 32 square meters in size. Normally, two boys would share a bed, sometimes even three. Sæmundur states that he was twenty years old at the time and had just gone to bed. The boy with whom he shared a bed approached and then jumped on him and began to masturbate him: “begyndte at manustuprere mig”. Sæmundur was unable to move and lost all strength after the other boy had finished his assault: “fuldbyrdet sit öyemed”. Sæmundur asked his assailant why he had done this and threatened him but there was no reply: “hörte med taushed og foragtende koldsyndighed”. His brother was present but said nothing either. Sæmundur was afraid to report the attack

and the two young men continued to share a bed throughout the winter, with Sæmundur sometimes being woken up by the other's activities: "hans övelse". At the time of writing he was haunted by such episodes (200). If he ever dreamt of this in 1794 he did not write it down, but it would be possible to connect the two dreams related to Skálholt with Sæmundur's feelings of vulnerability as a young man, as in one of them he appears half-naked and in the other he is the victim of an assault. On 17 March, he was at school and supposed to recite from the New Testament. The prospect of this worried him and he had no book. The volume then appeared and he sat down, and was not wearing trousers until he started putting them on slowly: "settist niður, en var ei í buxum, fór þá í hægri skálmina en ei so brátt í hina". Bjarni Jónsson, the rector, was present, Sæmundur held his right hand but did not recite anything, and others then took over (103–104). On 23 June, he was going to school and was troubled that he could remember nothing from the New Testament. As a result, he failed to turn up at school, while all the other schoolboys did. He somehow felt superior to them, as if he had already graduated. Someone told him not to worry about being absent, since he had achieved good results in his studies, and done better than those who had bullied him; they would suffer in due course and be punished: "vertu ei áhyggjúsamur þú þarft aldrei meir að fara í skóla, þú hefur það vel aflokið og framar hinum öllum sem vilja þig þvinga, því þeir eiga sjálfir þvingun að líða, þeir gjöra fordjörfun og skaða og hefndin skal yfir þá falla" (120).

Another likely benefactor in Sæmundur's early life was the Rev. Björn Jónsson (1736–1808) at Hólmasel, who had come to the parish in 1761, before fleeing in June 1783 when Skaftáreldar began. On the night to 21 February 1794, Sæmundur was in a house with large windows, facing the east, and with the wind howling and the snow falling outside; the young man was shaking with fear. Sitting beside him was Björn, eating voraciously, so that Sæmundur had to feed himself as best he could: "dró allt frá mér, eg tók þá frá honum það ætlaði eg mér" (100). On 13 March, Sæmundur was at Hólmasel and entered a garden belonging to Björn (103). On 28 September, Björn was preaching in a church in a hoarse voice ("hás mjög") so that he could hardly be heard (133). Then, on 10 October, he found himself once more at the burnt-out Hólmasel farmstead, on a Sunday. Björn was also present and everything was just as before, on a beautiful summer's day: "þar var eins og áður; fagurt og sumar" (135). Finally, on 29 October, festivities were being prepared at Hólmasel and Sæmundur spotted Björn's cassock hanging outside at the

entrance to the house. The garment fell to the ground and nobody picked it up: “datt niður og tók enginn upp” (141).

Sæmundur's parents figure in many dreams, a few of which have already been mentioned. His mother accepted the stone from outer space (see p. 135) and two weeks later she was with him in Copenhagen (98). On 4 October, Sæmundur trudged with difficulty through deep snow and slush, until she came to his aid: “Óð djúpan snjó og krapa og komst ei áfram en móðir mín kom þar og hjálpaði mér” (134). On 17 November, Sæmundur had a dream that can be related to his father's having had two children out of wedlock. According to the law, Magnús should have been flogged after the birth of the second child, but on 1 August 1768 he applied for exemption from this penalty, and may well have been successful. In the dream, Sæmundur spotted a child on his left who rather resembled his father. There was also a woman looking on, whom, initially, Sæmundur failed to recognise as his mother. Nobody spoke: “faðir minn var innar á palli mín megin og barn við mína vinstri síðu nokkuð frá líkt honum nokkuð, móðir mín sneri að því en leit ei upp, við töluðum ekkirt. Hún var rétt eins og í lifanda lífi að öllu að sjá, meinti eg annars það væri í fyrstu önnur kona” (139).

We may suppose that Sæmundur entertained somewhat ambivalent feelings towards his father, but the fact that he was determined to travel to Iceland in 1786 shows that there was an abiding affection. In some dreams father and son collaborated, as on 19 March, when Sæmundur came to Hvoll í Mýrdal with his father. They went towards the sea and climbed over a stone wall that had been built as a barrier to the sea. As the two headed back, the sea surrounded Sæmundur and he was unable to reach land: “sjór flóði kring mig; komst ei aftur uppá land” (104). On other occasions, they travelled together, as on 6 September, when they headed to the north from Staðarholt, with Sæmundur riding a horse with the ability to speak; the animal assured his rider that he would always be there for him, so he would never need to walk again: “og sagðist skyldu so bera mig að eg ei þyrfti framar að vera gangandi” (128). On 27 October, Sæmundur was at Staðarholt and journeyed to a lake to the north of the farm, where he had set hides in water and mud. Thunder and a snowstorm seemed imminent; his father was there and then walked away (137). On 12 November, Sæmundur helped his father feed hay to their sheep, and there is a detailed description of how plentiful the available supplies of fodder were. Again, neither of them did speak: “en ei töluðum við” (142). In these dreams, father and son were on an equal footing and only once

did Sæmundur do a better job. This was on the night to 22 December, as he stood on a peninsula by Hvammsfjörður, not far from Helgafell, and two women came towards him on horseback. As they traversed a small bay (“vogur”) a sudden storm caused the sea to rise (“og belgdi að sjónum með brimi”), so that one of the horses fell and the woman disappeared. His father came along and thought that she had drowned, whereas Sæmundur waded into the sea (“synti úti brimið”) and saved her: “náði henni lifandi á þurrt land” (147).

The fear of his father’s death appears in several of Sæmundur’s dreams. On 12 February, he was in a house with his father, who was in ill health, which worried Sæmundur, who feared that he would die. These anxieties troubled him; it was as if he did not know that his father was already dead: “því eg sem vissi ei að hann var dauður” (98). On 18 September, Sæmundur walked out of a house towards a stack of hay, where his father was sitting. He asked whether he was in pain: “er þér illt?” The father replied that he was not, and after Sæmundur enquired further as to how he was feeling, the reply was brief: “nógu vel” (well enough). He looked different and this made Sæmundur unhappy: “það ógladdi mig” (131).

Concluding remarks

What did Sæmundur’s dreams signify? The recurring themes described here reflected either his worries and quarrels in daily life at Helgafell or they echoed childhood memories and his longing for some sort of return to his former life in Copenhagen. A closer reading of single dreams or a series of his dreams in the context of modern psychological theories would be an interesting next step, but with caution. In the eighteenth-century, numerous manuals for the interpretation of dreams were published, all rather superficial. To dream of a snakebite, for instance, meant that “danger will befall you by secret and subtle enemies.”⁵⁴ An Icelandic manuscript from the latter part of the century (Lbs 624 4to) contains many such readings, explaining that dreams were useful when the blood stood still: “þá blóð er vel stillt og hefur skikkað sér í sinn stað, og maður hefur

⁵⁴ Rivière, *Dreams in Early Modern England*, 60–62, 73–74; cf. Ford, *Coleridge on dreaming*, 14–15, 26.

kastað af sér vatni, og sofnað síðan.”⁵⁵ Out of the hundreds of items listed, only a few correspond to anything that occurred in Sæmundur’s dreams. To see one’s mother alive was a positive sign and signified gladness: “Það merkir glaðværð og gott teikn” (178). To see or talk to one’s enemies meant that the dreamer would need to take care and be watchful (181). To see a severed human head pointed towards dishonour and illness for that individual (182). To kill a snake meant overcoming all one’s enemies (184).

Sæmundur would probably have found such readings superficial and as for his own dreams, he hardly ever bothered to interpret them – at least on paper. Generally speaking, his dreams were an instance of what the second century Greek author Artemidorus characterized as “*enhypnion*” as opposed to “*oneiros*”. A hungry man dreams of eating and a thirsty man dreams of drinking; this was “*enhypnion*” and such dreams vanished as soon as sleep was over. They meant nothing. The more interesting “*oneiros*”, however, operated “by bringing to our attention a prediction of future events”. After sleep, it would alert and excite the mind.⁵⁶ Such predictive dreams, it should be mentioned, are a common feature in Icelandic medieval literature and Sæmundur certainly was familiar with many of those texts, as some of his poetry relates events that happened in the first century of the country’s history, but he never refers to them or imitates any.⁵⁷ Only twice in 1794 he predicted bad weather (101, 112) but also war and his own longevity (132, 136). Again, we do not know how he talked about his dreams. In his later notes, the predictive element is a little stronger, as he continued to dream about Björn Þorgrímsson and Hallgrímur Backmann, as well as his parents, Staðarholt and Copenhagen. On 20 April 1807, Sæmundur dreamt of an ice-covered river; he undressed and jumped into the water, only to find that the water was warm and contained a variety of hides (“*slikjublautar húðir*”). He swam along for some time and he commented that this meant the onset of good weather (152). On 19 September 1819, he had the “natural but ridiculous” (“*náttúrlegan en afkáralegan*”) dream of being in bed, but feeling the wet hide of a horse

⁵⁵ *Lbs.* Lbs 624 4to. *Safnrit frá um 1770*, 438–439. On the manuscript, see *Runica Manuscripta: die Nordische Tradition*.

⁵⁶ Artemidorus, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 4–5; cf. Thonemann, *An Ancient Dream Manual*, 34.

⁵⁷ The first chapters of Heijnen, *The Social Life of Dreams*, discuss medieval Icelandic literature; see also Crocker, “Disability and dreams in the medieval Icelandic Sagas”; Helga Kress, *Óparfar unnustur og aðrar greinar um íslenskar bókmenntir*, 30–45.

(“blaut hrosshá”) at his feet. This indicated that things would develop in a positive way, even though he thought that this was unlikely: “Þetta merkir mér gengur eitthvað í vil til framgangs, þó ólíklegt sé” (164). But, as we have already noted, on 14 October 1819 he explained that he was only interested in understanding the nature of dreams (see p. 134), and on 28 December that year, after having dreamt of a certain configuration of the moon, he concluded that he did not trust dreams: “Ekki set ég traust á drauma” (172). In his old age, Sæmundur would not have been absolutely certain, and yet, in his penultimate extant dream on 3 January 1820, he saw a blackened piece of old meat (“svarta flygsu”) and many worms from fish (“fiskmaðkar”), some of them half-dead and unable to move: “en þeir komust ekkert”. He then produced a clear (and, for him, advantageous) interpretation: the worms were his enemies and they would not escape: “Þetta er fyrir mínum óvinum, og munu ekkert komast” (172). Thus, at seventy, his dreams still served for him as a safe haven, whereby he could either revisit his childhood and his years in Copenhagen, where he would have had more opportunities to practice his art and meet with other artists and thinkers, or find reconciliation with his enemies – or, even better, to beat them.

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Abstract

The Rev. Sæmundur Magnússon Hólm (1749–1821) is mostly known for portraits of prominent Icelanders as well as for several colourful pictures of volcanoes and phantasmagoric landscapes. He spent fifteen years in Copenhagen where he studied theology at the University and fine arts at the Royal Academy of Arts – the first Icelandic to graduate from that school. He wrote some poetry, most of it still unpublished, but the most noteworthy item of his writings is a notebook containing a diary of his dreams or noctuary, preserved from the year 1794. Indeed, Sæmundur seems to have made such notes over many decades, though only this notebook and a few later accounts survive. These texts have now been published and this article presents an overview of their contents as they relate to Sæmundur Hólm’s life and works, most importantly the period from his traumatic arrival at the parish of Helgafell in the autumn of 1789 to his dreams of 1794. Most of those dreams concerned his worries and quarrels in daily life at Helgafell, some of them interspersed with fantastic elements, or they echoed childhood memories or his longing for some sort of return to his former and more enjoyable life in Copenhagen. Very few of them are meant to be predictive and hardly any contain religious undertones. Numerous of the dreams are illustrated with small and simple drawings or signs, a few of them included here.

Keywords: Iceland, Copenhagen, eighteenth century, Sæmundur Hólm, dreams, sexual abuse

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