

The Colour Green in Medieval Icelandic Literature: Natural, Supernatural, Symbolic?

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According to Cleasby-Vigfússon, the Old Norse adjective *grænn* stems from the verb *gróa* ('to grow', of vegetation). The connection between the colour green and the natural world is clearly represented in medieval Icelandic literature, where the term is most often associated with plants, pastures and the colour of the sea. References to green slopes and meadows appear *passim* in the corpus in question, often in the form of place-names. Finnbogi rammi is said to have dwelled at Grænmór ('Green Moor') during his stay in Hálogaland, Norway (*Finnboga*, 272), while *Hrafns þáttur Guðrúnarsonar* refers to the trading of a certain Grænatéigr ('Green Paddock') between two Icelandic farmers (*Hrafns*, 320). Perhaps the most famous occurrence of the toponomastic use of *grænn* is provided by the Norse colony Grænland, which, according to *Íslendingabók*, was so named by Eiríkr inn rauði since he *kvað menn þat myndu fjýsa þangat farar, at landit ætti nafn gótt* ('said that people would be more willing to journey there, if the land had a promising name') (*Íslendingabók*, 13).¹

If the examples mentioned so far seem to point to a descriptive usage of the adjective *grænn* as related to the natural elements, the evidence from the poetic and prose *Edda* suggests its parallel metaphorical connotation. In both works, the colour green appears, more often than not, in conjunction with Yggdrasill, the ever-green tree of Norse mythology, symbol of cosmic order, but also of eternal life (see for instance *Gylfaginning*, 19 and *Völuspá*, st. 19). A similar significance seems to be attached to the tree appearing to king Hálfðan inn svartí's wife in a dream, as related in the *konungasaga Hálfðanar saga ins svartar*. Queen Ragnhildr dreams of the birth of a gigantic tree in her garden, its stem *rauðr sem blóð* ('red as blood'), its trunk *fagrgrænn* ('light green') and its branches *hvítar sem snjór* ('white as snow'), so long as to stretch over all of Norway and beyond (*Hálfðanar*, 90). The symbolism at the root of the tree's colouring finds explanation towards the end of *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, where the tree is clearly revealed as an allegorical image of the Norwegian royal house and its long-standing lineage (*Haralds*, 148).

On the other hand, the tree and its *græn epli* ('green apples') featured in *Jómsvíkinga saga* seem to incorporate a more negative undertone. On the way to a Yule feast at his father's court, Haraldr Gormsson comes across a tree which he deems *mjög með kynlegu móti vera* ('of a very strange nature') on account of its unconventional winter blossoming. Some apples are green and small, while some others lie rotting on the ground. This phenomenon is interpreted as such a dreadful omen by Haraldr and his men that they decide to turn back and go home. Haraldr later excuses himself to the king by interpreting the bizarre sighting, in a somewhat Christian key, as symbolic of the coming of the new religion to Denmark, and the forsaking of the old one (*Jómsvíkinga*, 68-71).

¹ The works analysed include: *Edda* and *Snorra Edda*, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, *Færeyinga saga*, *Heimskringla*, *Íslendingabók*, *Íslendingasögur*, *Íslendingaþættir*, *Jómsvíkinga saga*, *Landnámabók* and *Þiðreks saga af Bern*.

The adjective *grænn* is also applied, in a few cases, to inanimate objects. It is curiously used to describe the giant Geitir's burnished sword featured in *Flijótsdæla saga* (*Flijótsdæla*, 227), and also, somewhat grotesquely, Þormóðr's heartstrings in *Fóstbraðra saga* (*Hauksbók* version), which are depicted as red, white, yellow and green (*Fóstbraðra*, 276). In addition, two *fornaldarsögur* include the colour green in the description of superlative royal ships. *Sörla saga sterka* relates of King Hálfðan's *dreki*, which is impressively decorated with gems and painted *með alls konar ýmsligum litarhætti, grænum ok hvítum, gulum ok bláum, bleikum ok svörtum* ('with all sorts of colours, green and white, yellow and blue, pink and black') (*Sörla*, 386). Similarly, king Hrólfur Gautreksson spares no effort in ornamenting the rostrum of his ship with precious stones, which are described as yellow, red, green, blue, black and marbled (*Hrólfur*, 105). The passage is reminiscent of King Hjálmpér's fantastic city, as described in *Hjálmpés saga ok Ölvis*, which is portrayed as *fagrliga múruð með rauðum steinum, blám, gulum, grænum, hvítum ok svörtum* ('beautifully walled with red, blue, yellow, green, white and black stones') (*Hjálmpés*, 236). Whether referring to realistic or imaginary entities and landscapes, it is clear that here, too, the adjective *grænn* is featured for its descriptive quality, rather than embodying any specific allegorical value.

Save for the examples discussed above, the adjective in question is most often featured in connection with dress, which the present analysis will focus on. The colour green presents interpretative issues, from a literary point of view, when applied to clothing items, as their green colouring seems at times to perform a symbolic rather than a descriptive function. This assumption is particularly true of the *Íslendingasögur* and *Íslendingaþættir*. In any case, a very few green garments appear in the sagas and tales in question, while they are virtually non-existent in the rest of the medieval Icelandic literary corpus. Valtýr Guðmundsson points out how green dyes most probably constituted imported goods rather than local produce – although plants from which to obtain green colourings were also present in Iceland (Valtýr Guðmundsson, 197). Whichever the case, there is no evidence to support the assumption that this particular dye was harder to get than the often mentioned red or blue ones. It is probable that we might here be dealing with localised fashions, which disapproved of green garments or did not place them at an equal level as, for instance, their red counterparts. On the other hand, Roscoe speculates on a possible literary connection between the colour green and medieval symbolism, which will be evaluated later in this study (Roscoe, 67-89).²

Three green mantles and three green over-tunics appear in the *Íslendingasögur*. Conspicuously, the use of both garment types seems to follow definite patterns within the narrative. Green tunics are worn by notable men on the move, travellers or newcomers who are identified by means of their dyed outfit. Also, as can be noticed in the context of *litklaði* as a whole – that is dyed clothes, as opposed to those where wool's natural shades, *sauðalittir*, were retained – there seems to be a sense of impending danger, or death, attached to the 'green men' in question. As Geoffrey I. Hughes pointed out in his article on coloured clothing in the *Íslendingasögur*, there appears to be 'a definite association between the description of bright clothes or

² Cf. also Björn Halldórsson, s.v. *grænn littr*, Oddur J. Hjaltalín, s.v. *grænan lit gefa* and Guðmundur Finnbogason, 114-5.

armour and the impending danger or crisis for the wearer' (Hughes, 172). For instance, Bárðr is collecting timber in his woodlands when he is spotted by Vígfús's shepherd, clothed *i grænum kyrtili* and carrying a shield by his side. Having learned of Bárðr's proximity, Vígfús sets off immediately against his old enemy, and eventually kills him (*Víga-Glúms*, 63-5). Also, the chieftain Ólmóðr inn gamli arrives on the scene of the battle at Hisargafll, Norway, to help his kinsman Leifr. According to *Flóamanna saga*, Leifr notices the arrival of five ships in the middle of the fight, the largest ship being commanded by a man *mikill ok friðr, i grænum kyrtili ok hafði gylltan hjálm á höfði* ('large and handsome, dressed in a green tunic and wearing a gilded helmet on his head') (*Flóamanna*, 236). In this case, Ólmóðr is not the victim of an attack, rather the perpetrator, and his green clothes seem to introduce Leifr's enemies' downfall. In the third case, a green-clad man is sighted from a distance at the Alþingi by Sámur in *Hrafnkels saga*. The man is handsome and dignified, dressed *i laufgrænum kyrtili* ('in a leaf-green tunic') and carrying an inlaid sword in his hand. Reluctant to reveal his intentions at first, the man identifies himself as Þorkell Þjóstarsson and reveals:

'Ek em einn einhleypingr. Kom ek út í fyrra vetr. Hefi ek verit útan sjau vetr ok farit út í Miklagarð, en em handgenginn Garðskonunginum. En nú em ek á vist með bróður mínum, þeim er Þorgeirr heitir'
(I am an unmarried man. I came back to Iceland last winter. I have been abroad seven winters and have journeyed to Constantinople, and I am a follower of the Emperor of Byzantium. I am now residing with my brother, whose name is Þorgeirr').

Subsequently, Sámur manages to persuade Þorkell to help him in his suit against Hrafnkell for the slaying of Einar Þorbjarnarson, and with Þorkell and his brother's aid, he wins the case (*Hrafnkels*, 110-19). Here too, the green-clad newcomer is a positive figure in regard to those who have approached him, but a negative one for his enemy. It is also interesting to note that Þorkell is said to have recently returned home from Constantinople, where he had served the Emperor, presumably as a member of the Varangian Guard. His unconventional *litklæði* may thus find justification in his long stay abroad, which had also surely granted him wealth and enhanced his social position; dyed clothing could only be afforded by well-off individuals, who flaunted their precious outfits as standards of power, affluence and status. On the other hand, Roscoe postulates the influence of romance literature on the description of Þorkell, the handsome wanderer from Byzantium, who offers to help Sámur against Hrafnkell's injustice. She also finds a romantic echo in the portrayal of *Víga-Glúms saga*'s Bárðr, dressed in green with a shield at his side. However, the saga in question is dated to 1220-1250, somewhat before the influence of the *riddarasögur* on the *Íslendingasögur* corpus becomes noticeable (cf. Jónas Kristjánsson, ed., xlviii-liii). Roscoe suggests that the detail of Bárðr's clothing and weaponry in the forest could have been added by a later scribe (Roscoe, 80-2). Although a close analysis of the impact of romance literature on the *Íslendingasögur*'s authors or scribes exceeds the scope of the present study, Roscoe's suggestions are attractive. On the other hand, the evidence of green clothing in medieval Icelandic literature is too scanty and too scattered to allow for clear-cut conclusions on the matter.

Green cloaks also appear three times in the *Íslendingasögur*. As in the case of green tunics, they too are associated with travellers and men on the move, who are noticed or recognised by their green outfit. Víga-Glúmr's ingenious stratagem to escape Víga-Skúta's ambush is illustrated, more or less identically, in *Víga-Glúms saga* and *Reykðæla saga*, the latter narrative dating to a little later than the former. A large man dressed *í kápu grænni* ('in a green hooded cloak') is spotted by Skúta riding in the Þverá river area. He is immediately recognised as being Glúmr. In the ensuing battle, Glúmr is saved by his cloak, which he throws into the river, so that the deceived Skúta strikes at the garment, rather than at its owner (*Víga-Glúms*, 51-3 and *Reykðæla*, 232-4). *Hallfreðar saga*, on the other hand, tells of Hallfreðr's difficulties at sea in Norway. On a stormy night at Þrándheimr's harbour, he and his crew are offered assistance by a large man, the owner of a merchant ship, who, according to *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta's* version of the story, is dressed *í ólpu grænni* ('in a green hooded cloak'). The same outfit appears in the verse subsequently spoken by the *ólpuaðrinn* ('the cloaked man') himself, which is recorded in both the *Íslendingasaga* and the *konungasaga* (*Hallfreðar*, 152-3 and *Óláfs*, 340-1). According to the narrative, Hallfreðr and his men are later told that their mysterious benefactor had in fact been King Óláfr himself.

The above analysis of green cloaks clearly highlights, I believe, not so much the imminent danger which the wearer is about to face, but rather the wearer's air of secrecy, his anonymity or concealed identity. The assumption is confirmed by the type of cloak that the authors chose for the description of this particular green overgarment, namely a *kápa* and an *ólpa*, the former a hooded cloak, the latter an enveloping one, often accompanied by a hood (see Falk, 185-90). In other words, the two garments were particularly effective as concealment devices, and were often used as such. The perception of green hooded cloaks as expedients for secretive or enigmatic figures who choose to disguise their identity for a while is further corroborated by the two green cloaks appearing in the *fornaldarsögur*, one in *Norna-Gests þátr*, the other in *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*. Interestingly, the garment is in both instances portrayed as a *græn hekla*, that is to say, a green hooded cloak. Þorsteinn enters a village on the Brenno Islands and is greeted by a man *í grænni heklu ok furðu digr* ('in a green hooded cloak and unusually large'). Asked by Þorsteinn about his identity, the man lowers his guard and reveals himself to be Þorsteinn's uncle (*Þorsteins*, 60). *Norna-Gests þátr*, on the other hand, reports that Sigurðr and his men, while sailing their ship by the coast, sight a man standing on a cliff, dressed *í heklu grænni ok blám brókum ok knepptá skó á fótum uppháva ok spjót í hendi* ('in a green hooded cloak and blue breeches, with high nailed boots on his feet and a spear in his hand'). The handsomely dressed *heklumaðrinn* ('the cloaked man') reveals his name to be Hnikarr, and, having joined Sigurðr on the ship, advises him on how to defeat the sons of king Hundingr. However, once Sigurðr has overcome his enemies in battle, the mysterious *heklumaðr* disappears without a trace, and, according to the tale, *[h]jygga menn, at þat hafi Óðinn verit* ('people believe that he had been Óðinn') (*Norna-Gests*, 317-21).

A connection between Óðinn and green cloaks has been postulated by Roscoe, who draws examples from the above-mentioned *Norna-Gests þátr*, but also from *Færeyinga saga*, and Óðinn's parallel portrayal in *Völsunga saga* (Roscoe, 76-9).

According to the two latter narratives, a stranger appears on the scene *in medias res*, barefoot and clad in a green *hekla* accompanied by a low hood – in *Völsunga saga*, the cloak is *flekkótt* ('spotted') – and linen breeches tied at the calves. While *Færeyinga saga* relates that the man carried a staff in his hand, *Völsunga saga* portrays him holding a sword, and adds that he was *hár mjök ok eldiligr ok einsýnn* ('very tall, aged and one-eyed'). In *Völsunga saga*, the mysterious newcomer is instrumental in Sigmundr's acquisition of a new sword, but reappearing from nowhere during Sigmundr's final battle, dressed this time in a *blá hekla* and low hood and carrying a spear, he shatters the sword he had once given him, thus sealing Sigmundr's downfall. The man's portrayal in *Færeyinga saga* also depicts him as a figure of ambiguous intent. According to the narrative, Karl, accompanied by Leifr, is counting the silver that King Óláfr Haraldsson had sent him to exact as tribute from Þrándr when a stranger appears: *'Sé þú við, Mæra-Karl, að þér verði eigi mein að reŕði mínu'* ('Beware, Mæra-Karl, that my staff will cause you no harm'). Sure enough, as soon as Leifr's attention is diverted, Karl is slain by Þrándr with the staff that the stranger had dropped to the ground before his departure (*Færeyinga*, 151-2 and *Völsunga*, 114 and 136-7). The green cloak in *Víga-Glúms saga*, Roscoe maintains, also fits into the grouping, as Glúmr 'is an Odinic hero' (Roscoe, 82).

While an interpretation of Hnikarr and the two hooded strangers discussed above as impersonations of Óðinn is essentially correct, Glúmr's connection to the god, based on the use of a spear as his weapon of choice and the 'heritage of his Norwegian grandfather' (Roscoe, 39), seems to me somewhat far-fetched. Although the green hooded cloaks featuring in the *Íslendingasögur* appear to imply secrecy and disguise, perhaps even ambiguity and, as green tunics, a sense of danger, Roscoe's claim of a supernatural element in the depiction of green garments in the literary corpus in question is likewise questionable. The critic finds examples and analogies in medieval European folktales and ballads, shedding light on the association between the colour green and the supernatural. She concludes by pointing out green's 'strong tradition as an unlucky, ill-omened colour for dress' (Roscoe, 76). However, given that medieval European symbolism on this particular colour had reached Iceland, it is still doubtful whether it would have influenced local literature and social customs in the same way as it did in the continent, and non-Icelandic sources should therefore, in this case, be considered with caution.

On the other hand, green garments appear in a variety of Icelandic folktales, and, noticeably, almost exclusively with reference to ghosts, elves and *huldufólk* ('hidden people'), bearing at times positive, at times negative connotations. How far back medieval Icelandic folk traditions on green dress go, whether such traditions had been present at the time that the sagas were written down, or whether they had influenced saga literature at all is a thorny issue which does not find space for further discussion in the present study. However, a close examination of Icelandic folktales reveals such a striking and almost invariable connection between the colour green and the fantastic element as to deserve a brief overview.

Jón Árnason and Sigfús Sigfússon's collections are particularly revealing. Sigfús reports a verse in which green clothing is explicitly referred to as typical elvish attire:

Grænn og rauður litur eru álfum best að skapi; er þessi vísa því til sönnunar sem álfkona ein orti: Vænt er það sem vel er grænt; / blátt er betra en ekki. / Allt er snautt sem ekki er rautt; / dókkva sæti ég ekki.

(‘Green and red are the most appreciated colours by the elves; this verse composed by an elvish woman proves it: Beautiful is that which is very green; / blue is better than nothing. / All that is not red is empty; / but I do not like dark shades’) (Sigfús Sigfússon, vol. 3, 7).

Elvish women’s preference for green clothes is corroborated by a number of folktales, where an *álfkona* is quite often portrayed in green. For instance, the tale *Grænklaedd* is dedicated to one (Jón Árnason, vol. 5, 226-7), while, in *Huldufríður, Sigríður og Helga*, an old *grænklaedd* woman appears to a destitute Sigríður and gives her red cloth out of which to sew her wedding dress (Jón Árnason, vol. 3, 103-4). Also, one of the mysterious women encountered by an unnamed king in *Sagan af Hermóði og Háðvöru* is dressed *i grænum möttli* (‘in a green mantle’), which, she later explains, had so far protected her from evil (Jón Árnason, vol. 5, 371-2). Textile gifts from elvish women are also often portrayed as green, such as the *álfkonunaut* (‘elf woman’s gift’) given to Helga in *Kollu saga* (Jón Árnason, vol. 3, 15-17) or, similarly, the magical *grænt klæði* with which the *álfkona* Bóthildur transports Guðmundur to her equally magical underwater realm (Jón Árnason, vol. 5, 166-7). Green-clad elves or *huldufólk* appearing in dreams also constitute a common motif in Icelandic folk tradition. In *Saga af grátlausu Gunnu*, Gunna falls asleep on a hill when she dreams of a *kona grænklaedd*, who reveals to be the *álfkona* to whom the hill belongs (Jón Árnason, vol. 3, 77). A similarly clothed elvish woman features in *Prestur á Melstað*, where she appears to Jónas in a dream, and advises him on the location of a lost sheep-herd (Jón Árnason, vol. 3, 125). In addition, Ólöf í Hvammí is said, in the tale of the same name, to have dreamt of an elvish woman she had helped, and who now wished to reward her with a gift of *grænt klæðisfat* (‘green clothing’) (Jón Árnason, vol. 3, 28).

Ghosts are also frequently depicted in green garments in the literature in question, such as the *stofudraugurinn á Bakka* (‘the living-room ghost at Bakki’) (Jón Árnason, vol. 3, 408), or the eerie *manntetur á grænlitum kjól* (‘ghost in green clothing’) sighted, according to the tale *Valskoti*, at Loftstaðir (Sigfús Sigfússon, vol. 2, 154). Similarly, it is reported in *Afturgöngur* that *[ó]sjaldan hafa menn þóttt finna slíka vökumenn* (‘people have often believed that they have sighted such ghosts’), which some report as dressed in red clothing, some in green (Jón Árnason, vol. 1, 216). Interestingly, green dress is at times also assigned to non-magical personages who, however, display an equally suspicious, deceiving nature. The tale *Arni kemst undan* tells of the shady *sýslumaður* Guðmundur Sigurðsson, who was believed to have been responsible for a variety of misdeeds, including a theft at Ólafsvík, about which this verse was composed:

Ljótan sýndi lastahrekk
lundur stála ríkur,
á flauelskjólnum græna gekk
í gluggann Ólafsvíkur.
(‘A rich man
played an ugly trick,
he went in green velvet clothing

in Ólafsvík's window') (Jón Árnason, vol. 6, 217).

On return to Iceland from a trip abroad, Jón, son of the priest Ingimundur, is said to have become *atgervismaður að mörgu leyti en þó mjög blandinn* ('a very fine man in many respects but nonetheless very unsettled'). He was often clothed in green, *en hafði á sér slarkorð* ('but believed to be a trouble-maker') (Sigfús Sifússon, vol. 1, 92-3). Curiously, there seems here to be a connection between green clothing and behavioural refinement, which Jón obviously lacks. In other words, his green attire does not match his personality, and thus appears even more conspicuous.

The evidence from Icelandic folk tradition points, overall, to a clear connection between the magical or fantastic element and the colour green, as well as its usage in the portrayal of shady characters. Nevertheless, issues on the usage of green clothing in the depiction of folk characters, and their perception in pre-modern Iceland's system of beliefs, remain unsolved. Perhaps the best known green-clad figure of Icelandic tradition is Valtýr á grænni treyju, whose preference for green garments is as puzzling as that of the Middle-English Green Knight, and even of Sistram, the 'green knight' of *Þiðreks saga af Bern* (*Þiðreks*, 250). Valtýr's choice of clothing may be connected with his alleged misdeeds, as in the case of Jón Ingimundarson, although, it must be remembered, the folktale deals in fact with two different green-cloaked Valtýr's, only one of whom is a felon. According to the version of the story recorded by Sigfús Sifússon, Valtýr:

gekk jafnan á grænni treyju og segja svo munnmæli að það væri einkennisbúningur þeirra manna er í þá daga áttu 4 tigi hundraða í fasteign eða meira

('always wore a green cloak and, according to popular belief, that was the distinguishing attire of those men who, in those days, owned assets of four thousand or more') (Sigfús Sifússon, vol. 1, 99).

Although a wealthy man's wish to distinguish himself from the crowd is understandable, the above assumption does not explain the use of green clothing, rather than any other *litklæði*. Green Valtýr's riddle is, at present, still inexplicable.

All in all, the material at hand has proven too scarce to allow for unambiguous conclusions as to why green *litklæði* are not portrayed as much as their red and blue counterparts in the medieval Icelandic literary corpus. Whether because unpopular, unfashionable or unobtainable, or even because suggestive of medieval ideas of paranormality or ill-luck, green garments are rare in the literature in question, and their mention inevitably draws our attention to their inherent significance and implications. However, there is not enough evidence to support *grænn's* inauspicious or eerie connotations as unavoidably distinctive of this particular shade in medieval Iceland. I am inclined to agree with Derek Brewer on the supernatural value of the colour in question, in that green became associated with the fantastic element no earlier than in the eighteenth-century, as an element of English and Scottish 'literary Romanticism' (Brewer, 185). Incidentally, one must not forget that Jón and Sigfús's folk collections date back to the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth century respectively. As for the Old Norse corpus under discussion, the above analysis has shown no unequivocal allegorical implications attached to the very scanty allusions to *grænn* items. Not only was medieval symbolism essentially fluid, its imagery unpredictably changeable; the lack of evidence could also constitute a pointer to green's triviality from an Old Norse

literary point of view. Our symbolic or allegorical readings of *grænn* may well be influenced by Romantic preconceptions and, in a study of this type, the ever-impending danger is, as always, over-interpretation.

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