



## A Place to Live

### *Iceland*

It is said that trolls are horrible beings and that they are not too clever ... Well, that is actually said of male trolls, because it seems that female trolls are quite cunning. It is also said that trolls, both male and female, are evil beings by nature. However, there are those who argue that they have kind little hearts and that they show a moving affection for animals. There are those who even say, 'Yes, they are primitive', but that, ultimately, 'they are misunderstood'. In fact, everything seems to indicate that trolls flee from human civilisation and that all they want is to be left alone, enjoying nature, trees, plants and animals.

According to legend, something like this must have happened in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century of the Common Era on the small island of Drangey, in northern Iceland. Apparently, a community of trolls took refuge here in an attempt to avoid contact with human civilisation.

However, within a few months, a good number of men had died on the island. They had all gone to hunt seabirds and search for eggs in the cliffs. But, one by one, they fell to their deaths, among the rocks drenched by the waves. Mysteriously, the sturdy ropes they used to lower themselves down appeared severed as if by a sharp blade.

'This is the work of the devil ... or trolls', the rumour began to circulate in the villages near the fjord.

So the Bishop of Hólar, Guðmundur Arason, known as Guðmundur Góði –Guðmundur the Good– decided to act in order to take care of his flock.

Guðmundur would have been declared a saint by the church, if it had not been for his firm defence of the disadvantaged, which had earned him the hatred of the lords of the region. He had also lost some of his collaborators on the steep cliffs of Drangey. They had gone to the small island in search of birds and eggs at his command. This was because the church was running out of provisions to feed the many poor people and beggars who came to Guðmundur requesting charity. Although he was a miracle worker –more than forty miracles were attributed to him–, he had not been able to avoid the death of those men and he felt guilty about having sent those compassionate men to their deaths. So he decided that, if the devil dwelled on the island of Drangey, he would go himself to get him out of there by grabbing him by his beard.

Thus, Guðmundur sailed to the island with a few priests, a large group of assistants, several ropes and a barrel of holy water. As soon as they arrived, he took out the hyssop and began spraying holy water in all directions as if there was no tomorrow.

When it was time to go down the cliffs to bless the rock walls, in case the devil was hiding behind them, Guðmundur tied a thick three-ply rope tightly around his waist and swung down over the precipice, hyssop in hand, ready to eject evil from all corners of the island. His priests began to sing sacred hymns to sustain the power of his miracles, and Guðmundur blessed all the precipices of the island one by one, until they reached a long concave cliff the bottom of which was covered with rocks. Guillemots, fulmars and gannets, shearwaters and small puffins crowded on the cliff, together with hundreds of nests and eggs all sheltered from human hands.

Guðmundur descended into the void for the umpteenth time and, when he was halfway between the edge of the cliff and the ocean, something surprising happened. A huge hairy hand emerged from the rock wall with a sharp knife and, without a word, began to cut the rope which held Guðmundur from the crest of the cliff.

The first of the three plies of the rope suddenly snapped, and severed, as the priests and assistants gathered at the edge of the cliff gasping in horror. But the strange hand with the huge knife did not stop, and continued to sever the rope until the second ply came loose.

The rope now twisted around the remaining single strand that still held the saint's weight.

The people above let out a wail, while their eyes seemed to pop out of their sockets, as the furry hand now orientated the edge of the blade into the indentations of the third ply of the rope. But –oh, surprise!– no matter how much the hand tried to cut it, the strand was as hard as a stone, to the point that the knife lost its edge, and even got nicked.

‘Oh, you evil trolls!’ –people in the edge heard Bishop Guðmundur shout from below– ‘You thought you were going to beat me. But, foreseeing your ambushes and those of the devil, I brought a rope with one of its three plies soaked in holy water!’

Then, a deep voice was heard emerging from the cliff wall.

‘Stop your blessing, Bishop Gvendur!’ –the trolls called him in this way because they could not pronounce his name properly– ‘Because even the bad ones need a place to live!’

Guðmundur stopped dead, his hyssop dripping. What the troll had said was not without meaning. Not only that. Something inside him had moved. It was an inexplicable compassion, because it was obviously strange to feel sorry for the beings who had caused the death of so many men.

‘We have done nothing but defend ourselves’ –the troll continued– ‘and defend our animals from the preying hands of your parishioners who destroy everything in their path. By killing our birds and stealing their eggs, you are destroying all food on the island for your children and grandchildren.’

Guðmundur suddenly realised that trolls must not be as foolish as popular lore claimed. He was silent for a moment, reflecting on the troll's words. Meanwhile, his followers held their breath at the edge of the cliff, stunned as they listened to the conversation taking place in the abyss below.

‘Let's make a deal!’ –Guðmundur finally said– ‘You have to promise that you will stop cutting ropes and that you will not cause the death of any more of my parishioners. You will fulfil this promise for

generation after generation until the end of time. As for us humans, we will promise to leave you alone in and around this cliff. We will not touch you and your descendants or your animals, as well as their nests and eggs. We will keep our promise, generation after generation, until the end of time. Do you agree with this deal?’

After endless seconds, the troll’s voice was heard saying:

‘We agree to the deal, Bishop Gvendur!’

From that day on, that area that was left unblessed would receive the name of *Heiðnaberg*, the Heathen Cliff. It is said to be the place where many seabirds nest and where more life than ever bustles on the entire island. This is because nobody dares to steal eggs, or hunt birds, there.

Curiously, after this episode, Guðmundur changed his habits regarding blessing places where evil dwelled. He always left ‘a place for the bad guys to live’.

So, his compassion became legendary throughout Iceland, although the powerful elites in the region, and the church itself, never consented to the people’s desire to declare Guðmundur a saint. □

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## Comments

Guðmundur is regarded as a kind of national patron saint in Iceland, although the Catholic Church never declared his holiness. It is quite true that he had many serious and tragic conflicts with the chieftains of northern Iceland. Apparently this was due to the fact that, in some way, it bothered them that he cared for the most disadvantaged in the region.

Guðmundur was born as a natural son –out of wedlock– in 1161, and he needed a papal dispensation in order to be ordained a priest for being illegitimate. On the other hand, he never tried very hard to strengthen the institution of the church and, unlike other bishops of his

time, he never sought wealth or a comfortable life. In fact, he denounced such practices among the ecclesiastical hierarchies. It is possible that all this also had to do with the decision not to declare him a saint following his death, in 1237.

As for Drangey Island, this legend is told many times to explain the story of Heiðnaberg, the Heathen Cliff, where there is such a high concentration of seabirds and breeding nests. On the other hand, this island is also known for being the place where the protagonist of the Grettir Saga, the famous outlaw Viking Grettir Ásmundarson, the Strong (997-1031 CE), was hidden for three years, after being sentenced to twenty years of banishment as punishment for his murderings.

The current adaptation of this legend opens a door to the interpretation of the conflict between trolls and humans as a metaphor for the rejection, by Christian doctrines, towards everything natural as a source of sin. This means both the external forms of natural –nature itself– and internal forms of natural –the natural drives in the human beings. This doctrinal rejection of the natural has only recently been eased by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato si* ‘on care for our common home’, the Earth.

From this interpretation and perspective, Bishop Guðmundur, himself a ‘natural’ son, would have come into conflict with the church of his time by leaving, according to legend and from this story, *a place to live* for those beings of the collective imagination that are, somehow, more closely related to nature. This is a good metaphor for talking about reserves of biosphere.

## Sources

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### *Associated text of the Earth Charter*

Principle 5b: Establish and safeguard viable nature and biosphere reserves, including wild lands and marine areas, to protect Earth's life support systems, maintain biodiversity, and preserve our natural heritage.

### *Other passages that this story illustrates*

Principle 2: Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.

Principle 5c: Promote the recovery of endangered species and ecosystems.

Principle 5e: Manage the use of renewable resources such as water, soil, forest products, and marine life in ways that do not exceed rates of regeneration and that protect the health of ecosystems.

Principle 6a: Take action to avoid the possibility of serious or irreversible environmental harm even when scientific knowledge is incomplete or inconclusive.

Principle 6c: Ensure that decision making addresses the cumulative, long-term, indirect, long distance, and global consequences of human activities.

Principle 9c: Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations.

Principle 15: Treat all living beings with respect and consideration.