OLD MAGIC Officistmas

Yuletide Traditions for the Darkest
Days of the Year

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few of his followers believed him to be the reincarnation of an earlier king, Olav Geirstader, who, upon his death and laying "in howe" (i.e., in his grave mound), received both offerings and the epithet of álf, or "elf," after his name. It is also interesting to note that Hov lay just to the east of the limits of a kingdom still known in the early Middle Ages as Álfheim. Scholars argue that the name has nothing to do with elves but refers instead to the bed of gravel that lies beneath the tillable soil of this district, a fact that Tolkien fans will quickly forget when they hear that, in the ninth century, Álfheim was ruled by a king named Gandálf. According to one of the Fornaldar Sagas, or "Sagas of Ancient Days," the inhabitants of this earthly Álfheim were so fair of face that only the risir outshone them. As to who the risir were, I suppose that is another story.

LIKE CHRISTMAS ITSELF

You probably have to clean house before Thanksgiving anyway, so why not host your own Álfablót this year? (Elves, like most Christmas spirits, love a clean house.) As witnessed at Hov, the door need not be opened to anyone outside the family—anyone living, that is—so you won't have to do much shopping or decorating. Now, the question to ask is: How would the elves wish to be fêted?

If you are already following a Norse or Saxon Pagan path, you may be able to commune with the elves and ask them yourself. The rest of us must turn to the old tales for clues. One of the most helpful is the Norwegian fairy tale "The Finn King's Daughter." Here we have a Finnish princess playing the starring role in a Norwegian story whose roots have

been traced back to Jutland in Denmark, a pan-Scandinavian folktale if ever there was one.⁷ All that's missing is the Swedish element, but I say the Swedes missed the chance to put in their two *kronor* when they shut the door in Sigvat's face back in 1017.

Although she is not identified as an elf in the tale as it was collected by Rikard Berge in 1900, the Finn King's daughter bears such a close resemblance to the Álfar that she must once have been one. Here are the bare bones of the story:

Before going off to war, the Finn King encloses his beloved daughter inside a mound, mostly because he's caught her exchanging glances with the new serving boy. When the princess and her nine handmaidens are well and truly shut up in their well-appointed house of earth, the king departs, never to return. The princess and her maids begin at once to try to dig their way out. The effort takes nine years and the life of each of her maids. At last, the princess claws her way out into the now unfamiliar countryside. While she is rambling round the forest, lost, the king's men finally return to the mound to release her, the Finn King himself having died of sickness. They find nothing except, presumably, the bones of her handmaidens.

After a search of the kingdom turns up no princess, a troll woman presents herself at the Finn King's hall and claims to be the missing girl. She immediately starts planning her wedding to the serving boy, who, by this time, has revealed

^{7. &}quot;The Finn King's Daughter" is an example of what is known to folklorists as Tale Type 870: The Princess Confined in the Mound, and is found outside Scandinavia as well. See Reidar Christiansen's book *Folktales of Norway*.

himself as an exiled prince—of course!—and, having earlier earned the Finn King's deathbed blessing, has taken up residence in the hall. He goes along with the wedding plans (People change, don't they? And this girl had been in a *mound* for nine years!), but he is clearly not looking forward to the upcoming nuptials.

At last, the real princess emerges from the forest, chilblained and emaciated. Rather than declare her true identity, she takes a job as a maid at her old home and helps the troll woman to pass a series of tests by which the prince is hoping to expose her as an impostor. We are not told why the real princess lets it drag on for so long, but eventually the troll woman is tripped up by an incident involving a pair of gloves, and the Finn King's daughter takes her proper place at the prince's side.

Those are the bare bones; the elvishness emerges in the details of the story. Unlike the trollish impostor who can barely thread a needle, our plucky princess is a whiz at sewing and the textile arts, both elvish traits in nineteenth-century folklore—think of "Rumpelstiltskin" and "The Shoemaker and the Elves." She's also good with the horses, like the Scandinavian household sprites who mucked out the stables and braided the horses' manes.

Elves were believed to dwell in mounds, and it was to these mounds that mortals went to offer sacrifice. In the opening of "The Finn King's Daughter," the father stocks the mound with "food and drink, clothing and cups and vessels." The poor girls are going to need all these things, of course, but these are also exactly the sorts of gifts that were laid with the dead in howe in pagan days. (Celtic fairies and brown-

ies were highly offended by gifts of clothing, but their Nordic counterparts expected them.) Other than these basic provisions, the Finn King does not take into account any practical considerations such as a conduit for fresh air or waste disposal system. And would it not have been simpler and far more humane for him to have appointed a guardian to look after his daughter in his absence? Could he not have sent her to stay with relatives or at the very least have banished the serving boy? The answer is no, because practical considerations are for the living, and as soon as she enters the mound, the princess enters the elvish realm: the realm of the dead.

So there they are, the princess and her nine doomed handmaidens, without door or smoke hole such as Gardner's euhemeristic pixies enjoyed. They blink at one another in panic as, within, the candlelight glances off the silver cups and plates and, without, the last shovelfuls of clay are tamped down above their heads. Those nine years inside the mound must have seemed like a lifetime to the princess, and when she finally scrabbles her way out, it really does seem like a lifetime or more has passed. Even before he departed, the Finn King had ordered the mound leveled—suggesting that the "living" space was very deep inside the earth—and sown over with grass. By the time the princess breaks out, the forest has taken over the razed site, obliterating all familiar features of the landscape. Like Rip Van Winkle, she recognizes no one at her old home, with the exception of the former serving boy, and no one recognizes her. Our princess is not simply a lost daughter; she is one of the mighty dead, coming home to a world much changed. Toward the end of the tale, she and her prince enjoy a church wedding, so it is obviously a Christian world to which she has returned. Originally, she would have been a heathen princess, most likely also a priestess, buried along with a sacred number of her servants and the finest of her worldly goods and ritual paraphernalia.

But where was our princess all that time the Finn King's men were scouring the forest for her? It turns out she was attending a sort of Álfablót. Devastated and disoriented, she is taken in for a time by a party of charcoal burners. This is the first human company she has had since her last handmaiden died. The charcoal burners offer her a bed inside their leafy shelter, a bowl of rabbit stew, and a seat close by the fire. The story tells us, "It seemed like Christmas itself to her after what she had been through." What did they talk about there in the firelight? Conversation would not have been easy, for the princess's courtly speech was probably no more closely related to the deep woodsmen's jargon than the language of the light elves was to that of the dark elves. What mattered was the treatment she received.

Heat, light, food, and a human welcome: keep these in mind if you want to host the Álfar. Schedule your "Christmas for the Elves" somewhere in that empty stretch of time between Halloween and Martinmas (November 11), or even between Martinmas and Thanksgiving, so they won't have to share their special day. The elves are bearers of light, so if you cannot manage a full moon for your feast, a waxing crescent

^{8.} Had it actually been Christmas, the charcoal burners would not have been in the forest to meet her, for charcoal burning was done only during the windless days of summer.

is better than a waning three-quarter moon. Just as the princess had to claw her way out of the earth, wander the forest barefoot, and cross a river on the back of a wolf, your guests will have completed a long and arduous journey. They have left their usual haunts and howes in order to join you, so greet them warmly. I suggest the following: "Let them come who wish to come, and let them go who wish to go, and do no harm to me or mine." Once you have issued this invitation, I would advise you not to address the elves directly.

You don't know how far some of them may have come in space or time, so it's a good idea to turn off the television and most electric lights, which the oldest of the company may find glaring. If you have a fireplace, make a fire. Otherwise, light plenty of candles. Set the table with your best dishes but offer simple foods: bread, meat, milk. If you are very lucky, you will get some disir along with the Álfar. These ladies may be expecting a reddened altar, so now would be the time to bring out that blood-red Christmas tablecloth or runner. Feel free to talk and laugh with any living company—it's a party, after all—but keep in mind that it is all done in honor of the elves. Don't be a Hovian; leave the door ajar for the duration of the feast, and don't be surprised if you see a few familiar faces shining out from the shadows.

^{9.} These words are spoken by the Cinderella figure in "The Sisters and the Elves," on page 55 of Jacqueline Simpson's book *Icelandic Folktales and Legends*. In the West Fjords of Iceland, it was customary to speak such formulae at either Christmas or New Year's Eve.