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Autor: Gunnell, Terry
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From *Sagen* to Translated *Sagnir* A Previously Uncharted Chapter in the Evolution of the Icelandic *Fjallkona*

TERRY GUNNELL (REYKJAVÍK)

The image of the *Maiden of Iceland* by the German artist and illustrator J. B. Zwecker (1814-1876)¹ first appeared as the frontispiece to the second volume of translations by George E. J. Powell and Eiríkur Magnússon (1833-1913) of folk tales contained in Jón Árnason's *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og æfintýri* (1862-1864), which were published under the title of *Icelandic Legends* (1864-1866) (img. 1). The image, also reworked as a watercolour (img. 2), is most commonly referred to as the first visual representation of a figure that had previously only been referred to in romantic poetry, and has since taken on the role of a personified symbiosis of Iceland and the Icelandic nation who annually appears alongside the Icelandic Prime Minister as part of the formal celebrations of the Icelandic national day, 17th June: in other words, the *Fjallkona* ("Mountain Woman") (see Árni Björnsson and Halldór J. Jónsson, 1984: 152; Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir, 1996; Gunnell, 2012: 320-322; and Gunnell, forthcoming). However, as will be noted below, considering its published context, the probability is that the image in question was not originally designed to represent Iceland and Icelandic culture as a whole, but rather the Icelandic *Volksgeist* contained within its oral tradition. Indeed, its design implies that it should be viewed as a response to a similarly structured image that had appeared in another collection of folk legends just one year previously.

The image in question is that of *Die Sagen* (img. 3) which served as the frontispiece to the first volume of the second edition of the Grimms' highly influential *Deutsche Sagen*, published in 1865, a year after Prussia's devastating victory over Denmark in 1864. Bearing this in mind, the image of the *Iceland Maiden* from 1866 appears to underline an inherent relationship to the German legendary tradition, while simultaneously stressing the quintessential individuality (and cultural value) of the tradition still flourishing in Iceland. Both figures are depicted as being ancient and essentially feminine in nature (thereby allying themselves to other female national figures such as Britannia, Marianne, Helvetia and the Danish *Moder Danmark*).

¹ In a letter to George E. J. Powell from January 1st 1866 (see further below), Zwecker also refers to the image as *Iceland Maiden*. Elsewhere, in an inventory of Zwecker's paintings belonging to Powell (which, like the watercolour image itself, belongs to the George E. J. Powell Bequest at Aberystwyth University School of Art Gallery & Museum), the image is simply referred to as *Iceland*.



Image 1: The Maiden of Iceland/ Iceland Maiden by J. B. Zwecker: frontispiece to Jón Árnason (ed.). 1866. Icelandic Legends, translated by George E. J. Powell and Eiríkur Magnússon, vol. II (London: Richard Bentley)



Image 2: The Maiden of Iceland/ Iceland Maiden by J. B. Zwecker (George E. J. Powell Bequest; courtesy of Aberystwyth University School of Art Gallery & Museum, 1866)

Image 3: Die Sagen by Wilhelm von Kaulbach: frontispiece to Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm. 1865. *Deutsche Sagen*, 2nd edition, vol. I (Berlin: Nicolaische Verlagsbuchhandlung)

Die Sagen was a work produced by Wilhelm von Kaulbach (1805-1874), another book illustrator who, like Zwecker, belonged to the so-called *Düsseldorf School* of art. Direct connections between the two male artists (seemingly moustachioed look-alikes) are seen in the fact that in 1845, Zwecker made a drawing of an image of Goethe's *Alexis und Dora*, originally executed by von Kaulbach, for a book engraving.

There is some question as to the principle designer of the image of the *Maiden of Iceland*. According to the web site of the Museum of Aberystwyth (based on the fact that his monogram accompanies the name of the work in a handwritten inventory²), the idea was George Powell's. Certainly, as a letter written by Zwecker to Powell on January 1st, 1866 states, it was Powell who paid for the various images in the book.³ Elsewhere, however, Árni Björnsson (Árni Björnsson and Halldór J. Jónsson, 1984: 152), credits Eiríkur Magnússon as designing the image, on the basis of a letter from

² As Neil Holland, curator of the School of Art at Aberystwyth University notes in a private communication from 11th March 2014, "The 'GP' monogram on the inventory is not always a reliable indication that the works are in fact from Powell's designs."

³ Zwecker had previously illustrated a translation of Hans Christian Andersen's *Iisjomfruen* (The Ice Maiden) in 1863, and also provided images for the first volume of *Icelandic Legends* in 1864. As with the water-colour of the *Maiden of Iceland*, the letter in question forms part of the George E. J. Powell Bequest at Aberystwyth University School of Art Gallery & Museum.

Eiríkur to Jón Sigurðsson dated 11th April 1866, in which Eiríkur gives his own personal interpretation of the images, underlining that the woman is supposed to represent Iceland. Eiríkur notes deliberate connections between the raven in the image and Óðinn, and how “yfir brimsævi tíma og sögu berast rúnakefli að landi eða upp í fang konunni [...]. Þetta átti svo sem að vera symbolum (tákn) bókmennta-landsins og sögulandsins okkar” (Árni Björnsson and Halldór J. Jónsson, 1984: 152) (“across the surf of time and history rune-staves are borne to the land and up into the embrace of the woman [...]. This is intended as a symbol of our literary land and our historical land”; my translation).

While the stress here is on literature, in neither of these letters is any direct mention made of von Kaulbach’s image. Nonetheless, a direct comparison of the images leaves little doubt about either the borrowing or the deliberate reference (indeed, for those interested in Germanic/ Nordic folk tales in the 1860s, it would have been natural to own both books and hard to ignore the similarities⁴): Over and above the obvious mirroring of posture in which both blond-haired figures are depicted sitting on stones (the glaring, somewhat larger built *Die Sagen* is enthroned on a grassy Stone-age dolmen, while the more demure *Maiden* seems to be perched on a basalt rock in the sea); both are wearing crowns (*Die Sagen* one of leaves, while the *Maiden*’s two-levelled crown is constructed made of ice and fire); and both have birds either side of their heads (*Die Sagen* has two flying birds [probably meant to be ravens] whispering into her ear, while the *Maiden* has a raven on her right shoulder and a flying seagull to her left). Both figures also have a dominating artefact resting in their right hand, *Die Sagen* holding a rod with a loop on top (possibly a magical staff of power, referring to a figure like Veleda), while the *Maiden* grasps a sheathed Viking sword (implying parallels with female warrior figures like the *valkyrjur* and *dísir*). Both figures have other archaeological artefacts distributed about their feet: *Die Sagen* has funereal pots containing bones, Stone- and Bronze-Age axes, swords, a crown, a skull and a neck ring, while the *Maiden* has a chalice and two manuscripts (rather than staves) washing up on the shore by her feet, one in the process of unrolling with runic figures on, while yet another is held in her left hand.⁵ Both figures are clad in long dresses. *Die Sagen* has a cloak draped over her head and shoulders, while the *Maiden* has tresses flowing over her shoulders and down her back. While *Die Sagen* has no obvious background, the *Maiden* has snow-tipped⁶ mountains behind her, stars in the sky, and a resting new moon to her left. This and the blue colour of her golden-hemmed Viking-Age dress raise the possibility of indirect faint reference to images of the Virgin Mary.

All in all, the implication of the comparisons noted above are that the German figure was viewed by the designer of the image of the *Maiden* as being the older

⁴ It is worth remembering that the first edition of Jón Árnason’s folk tales were dedicated to Jacob Grimm. At this time, such a cross reference would have been natural.

⁵ In an enlarged version of the image from 1875-1879, the somewhat questionable runes of the original have been dropped (see Árni Björnsson and Halldór J. Jónsson, 1984: 152).

⁶ This is naturally more obvious in the water-colour.

figure of the two in evolutionary terms (her Stone and Bronze associations opposing the *Maiden's* close associations with the more recent Viking Age), something further emphasized by the fact that the Icelandic figure is more obviously girlish than her forebear. *Die Sagen*, with her left hand raised in declamatory mode, is also much less associated with the written word (another later development, and naturally a reference to the *Eddas* and sagas which the Icelanders had reason to be proud of). As noted above, everything implies that rather than simply trying to create a totally different national image in his *Iceland Maiden*, Zwecker also wanted to underline genetic links between the Icelandic oral tradition and the Germanic tradition of folk legends, and not least to stress the cultural debt that the Icelanders owed to the Grimms and the cultural ripples that they had set in motion with *Deutsche Sagen*.

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Digital Resources

- Web site of the Museum of Aberystwyth: <http://museum.aber.ac.uk/object/WD456> (last viewed 17th October 2016).