

Taboos at the Boundary of Order and Chaos¹

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In this paper I examine the role space plays in taboo phenomena in Old Norse literature. After a brief overview of what constitutes a taboo, and how taboos can be grouped typologically, we will analyse taboo-related phenomena from a wide range of sources. This will also include examples of alleged spatial taboos that according to our typology must be dismissed as non-spatial or mere prohibitions. Finally, we shall look into how space in a metaphorical sense plays a role even in taboos that are not strictly spatial.

Taboos and Categorisation

Taboo is a loanword of Polynesian origin that quickly spread through the Western world from the late 18th century onwards. While originally viewed as a Polynesian curiosity, ‘taboo’ is now considered a universal concept.² Seibel rightfully points out that the word *taboo* only spread through the Western world as fast as it did because it referred to something that, at least in principal, was already known, i. e. the word was foreign but not the sociocultural context.³ The Proto-germanic terms **χailagaz* and *weiχaz* betray a notion that overlaps with the one underlying the Tongan *tapu*.

For our use, ‘taboo’ shall denote a prohibition that is part of a non-individualistic behavioural norm and affects different forms of interaction, including physical contact and communication. Taboos are moral laws insofar as breaches entail ‘seemingly automatic’⁴ consequences or sanctions of a vague or diffuse nature inflicted by an authority “closely bound with the anonymous”⁵.

¹ This paper was originally presented at the *Sixteenth International Saga Conference: Sagas and Space* in Basel, 11 August 2015.

² Cf. Buckser, Andrew (1997). *taboo*. *The Dictionary of Anthropology*, ed. Thomas Barfield. Oxford/Malden, p. 464.

³ Cf. Seibel, Karin (1990). *Zum Begriff des Tabus*. Frankfurt a. M., p. 9.

⁴ Schmidt, Axel (2001). *Tabu*. *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe*, vol. 5, eds. Hubert Cancik, Burkhard Gladigow & Karl-Heinz Kohl. Stuttgart et al., pp. 160-162, p. 160.

⁵ Waldenfels, Bernhard (1996). *Order in the Twilight*. Athens, p. 43: “The authority for such sanctions remains closely bound with the anonymous; it is embodied in society but variously differentiated

Taboos at the Boundary of Order and Chaos

Before we go into a brief typology of taboos, however, let's recall that reality is a continuum. Yet, to discuss reality, we have to employ discrete terms and methods, so that we can effectively only hope to model an approximation.

The idea underlying this thought also seems to resonate with Jurij Lotman:

In modeling an infinite object (reality) by means of a finite text, a work of art substitutes its own space, not for a part (or rather not only for a part), but also for the whole of that reality, the aggregate of all its parts. Each individual text simultaneously models both a particular and a universal object.⁶

Man-made orders, of which taboos are a by-product, work just like the text in Lotman's analysis. A property shared by all taboos is that they touch a raw nerve, because, as Dagfinn Skre points out,

[c]ategorisation is a constant preoccupation of humans, scholars in particular. The uncategorised world is a chaotic mess of individual phenomena and unique events. We cannot possibly cope with the world without simplifying the chaos by grouping the endless number of phenomena into fewer categories.⁷

So let's start by categorising taboos into different types. We can do this on two levels,

- first by **primary aspects**, i. e. essential properties of the prohibition itself, and
- second by **secondary aspects**, i. e. preconditions limiting the field in which a prohibition can be applied.

When grouping by primary aspects, we can distinguish

- **performance taboos** that prohibit or require performing a certain act, in a wider sense without spatial restrictions, and in a stricter sense with restrictions on space, the latter of which we shall call **spatial taboos** or **taboos of transgression**,

according to milieus, strata, stations, and classes, each of which have their specific moral code and administer their determinate set of rules.”

⁶ Lotman, Jurij M. (1977). *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, transl. Ronald Vroon. Michigan Slavic Contributions 7. Michigan, p. 211 = c. 8. Моделируя безграничный объект (действительность) средствами конечного текста, произведение искусства своим пространством заменяет не часть (вернее, не только часть) изображаемой жизни, но и всю эту жизнь в ее совокупности. Каждый отдельный текст одновременно моделирует и не [205] который частный и универсальный объект. (Лотман, Юрий М. ([1970] 1998). *Структура художественного текста*, pp. 204 f.).

⁷ Skre, Dagfinn (2012). Markets, towns and currencies in Scandinavia ca. AD 200–1000. *From One Sea to Another. Trading Places in the European and Mediterranean Early Middle Ages*, eds. Rodger Hodges & Sauro Gelichi. Brepols, pp. 47–63, p. 47.

Taboos at the Boundary of Order and Chaos

- **category taboos** that allow only a subset of a number of possible features for members of a certain category, and
- **language or speech taboos**, that prohibit or require certain expressions, including the subtype of **name taboos**.

When grouping by secondary aspects, we can distinguish taboos with

- **spatially**,
- **temporally**, and
- **socially**

limited scopes. Notice that these scopes always reference a subject (usually human) and never an object that the subject may interact with.

The distinction between primary and secondary aspects is easily expressed using predicate logic, i. e. $\forall x(F_1(x) \wedge \dots \rightarrow T(x))$ 'For all subjects x , if precondition F_1 applies to x , and optionally further required preconditions apply to x , the taboo T applies to x .' We will see what this means as we dive into our sources.

Primary and Secondary Spatiality

In a famous episode from *Germania* Tacitus relates the strange customs of the Semnones:

At a set time, the peoples who share that name and bloodline send embassies to assemble in a forest hallowed by ancestral auguries and ancient dread, and by slaying a man on behalf of the people they begin the barbaric celebration of their fearful rites. They revere this grove in other ways too: no one enters unless bound by a shackle [or: ligature], as an inferior who makes manifest the might of the divine. If by chance he stumbles, it is not lawful to lift himself up and rise: they roll out over the ground.⁸

So, whoever wants to enter this grove, has to be *vinculō ligatus* 'bound by a shackle (or: ligature)'⁹. The precise way in which one has to be bound remains unclear.¹⁰ Allan A. Lund dismisses this detail as an example of a looking-glass world in light of the fact that in many Roman rituals knots were entirely prohibited.¹¹ But doubts about the au-

⁸ Transl. Rives 1999, p. 93. *stato tempore in silvam auguriis patrum et prisca formidine sacram nominis (eiusdem) eisdemque sanguinis populi legationibus coeunt caesoque publice homine celebrant barbari ritus horrenda primordia. est et alia luco reverentia: nemo nisi vinculo ligatus ingreditur, ut minor et potestatem numinis prae se ferens. si forte prolapsus est, attolli et insurgere haud licitum: per humum evolvuntur.* (*Germania*, ed. Lund, p. 100 = c. 39).

⁹ *Vinculum*, n. 'instrument of binding', *ligatus* 'bound'.

¹⁰ Jan de Vries (1957. *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, vol. 2. Grundriß der germanischen Philologie 12. Berlin) points out that the ON *hopt* and *bōnd* 'gods' both allude to binding (§ 342).

¹¹ Cf. Lund 1988, pp. 216 f. Ludwig Uhland was the first one to connect the *silva* from *Germania* with

thenticity of this episode aside, it is a very useful case study for the two kinds of spatiality we mentioned in our typology – space as a primary aspect and space as secondary aspect.¹²

Entering the grove is prohibited for all, if they are not bound in fetters. In predicate logic this would be $\forall x(\neg L(x) \rightarrow T(x))$ ‘For all subjects x , if x is *non ligatus*, the taboo T of entering the grove applies to x .’ This clearly is a **spatial taboo**, because spatiality is a primary aspect. And as for the second prohibition, **getting up is prohibited for all, when they are inside the grove and have fallen.** In predicate logic this would be $\forall x(S(x) \wedge P(x) \rightarrow T(x))$ ‘For all subjects x , if x is *in silvam* and x is *prolapsus*, the taboo T of getting up applies to x .’ This is a **performance taboo** in the wider sense, because spatiality is merely a precondition limiting the field in which the prohibition applies.

Taboos in the Sagas

A Taboo Against Opening the Door?

Now let’s turn to the sagas. In *Þiðranda þáttur ok Þórhalls*¹³, Þiðrandi, son of Síðu-Hallr, ignores a warning not to go outside during the Winter Nights feast (*vetrnætr*). While everybody else acts as if they were sleeping as someone knocks at the door repeatedly three times, after the third time Þiðrandi opens the door and steps outside where he sees nine women dressed in black (*í svörtum klæðum*) and mounted on black horses riding towards him from the north and nine women dressed in lightly coloured clothes mounted on white horses (*í ljósum klæðum ok á hvítum hestum*) riding towards him from the south. Þiðrandi fails to fend off the attack and is fatally wounded. The other men find him just in time for him to tell them about the incident before his eventual death.¹⁴

DuBois considers this a breach of a spatial taboo:

the *ffjóturlundr* ‘fetter grove’ from *Helgakviða Hundingsbana Qnmur* (cf. Uhland, Ludwig (1873). *Schriften zur Geschichte der Dichtung und Sage*, ed. Wilhelm Ludwig Holland, vol. 8. Stuttgart, p. 139). HH II, however, does not contain any material relevant to the issue of taboo. Regardless of how we interpret the potential binding taboo, there certainly is a taboo against getting up after falling. DuBois explains this by interpreting falling as an expression of divine will (DuBois 1999, p. 50).

¹² Rives refers to Pettazzoni (Pettazzoni, Raffaele (1954). *Regnator omnium deus. Essays on the History of Religions*. Leiden, p. 145 f.) who “rightly points out that it was hardly practicable for the tribal delegates to perform a human sacrifice while in shackles; this suggests that the report has been muddled, and that either the festival took place outside the grove, or that shackles were worn only on certain occasions.” (Rives 1999, p. 288).

¹³ Part of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*.

¹⁴ Cf. *ÞÞ* 147 f.

Taboos at the Boundary of Order and Chaos

In the description of the Winter's Nights ceremony..., Þiðrandi dies as a result of improper behavior on the night of the ritual, falling victim to the *dísir* when he breaks a taboo against opening the door.¹⁵

DuBois's analysis is wrong, however, because the actual breach of taboo is not opening the door, but rather something that had already happened a little earlier. As Hans Ellekilde points out,¹⁶ the real problem is that Hallr had stopped sacrificing to the *dísir* during the Winter Nights that year, which has nothing at all to do with space, making this a plain performance taboo in the wider sense, not a spatial taboo. And this is but one example where either the category of space or even the entire category of taboo is applied incorrectly.

Boberg's *Motif-Index*

Inger M. Boberg, in her *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature*, lists two spatial taboos under the motifs C612 and C617.

C612 (*Forbidden forest*)

The episode from *Færeyinga saga* that Boberg references under C612 (*Forbidden forest*) is easily summarised: Sigmundr and Þórir are staying with Úlfr, who forbids them to enter a nearby forest (c. 11). Sigmundr and Þórir, of course, enter the forest one day anyway and they meet a terrifying bear who starts chasing after them (c. 12). Sigmundr eventually slays the bear with an axe and they then prepare the bear to appear as if it were still alive. When they see Úlfr again they tell him of the incident, but leave out the fact that Sigmundr has slain the bear, making Úlfr believe that it is still alive. Úlfr then says:

This was to be looked for, that things would turn out so; yet I wish the beast had not followed you, for this beast is of such a kind that I have no great wish to meddle with it...¹⁷

¹⁵ DuBois, Thomas A. (1999). *Nordic religions in the Viking Age*. The Middle Ages Series, Philadelphia, p. 51.

¹⁶ *Tidrande má ganske selvfølgelig tænke sig, at det er straffen for en brøde, faderen og vel han selv med har begået imod diserne. Vi må antage, at Hall har begået den brøde imod diserne, at han har ophørt at blote til dem på nedarvet vis i høstfesten den første vinternat...* (Olrik, Axel & Ellekilde, Hans (1926). *Nordens gudeverden*, vol. 1. Copenhagen, p. 174). In interpreting the black riders as pagans in disguise intending to avenge the neglected sacrifice, however, Ellekilde goes one step too far (cf. Strömbäck, Dag ([1949] 1970). *Tidrande och diserna*. *Folklore och Filologi*, ed. Dag Strömbäck. Valda uppsatser utgivna av Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademien 13.8. Uppsala, pp. 166-191, p. 172).

¹⁷ Transl. York Powell 1896, c. 12. *sliks var at von at sua munde fara en þat munda ek vilea at hann elli ykkir æigi oftar en þo er þetta dyr sua at ek hefir æigi traust aborit at glettazst vid en þo skulum nu freista sagdi hann*. (Ed. Ólafur Halldórsson 1987, p. 29 = ms. F/Gl. kgl. sml. 1005 fol.), *en þo þickir mer nv vanum betr ef hann hefir eigi meiðt ykkir. mundi ek þat ok uilia at hann meiddi ykkir eigi opt. en þo er þar dyr sva at ek hefi nóckut helldz æðraz við at eiga en <þo> skal nu freista at finna hann*. (Ed. Ólafur Halldórsson 1987, p. 29 = ms. A/Am 61 fol.).

What we can see from Úlfr's statement is that this isn't even a taboo of any kind, because there are no 'seemingly automatic' consequences or sanctions of a vague nature inflicted by an authority closely bound with the anonymous to be expected.¹⁸ The simple truth of the matter is that Úlfr is afraid of the bear – a very tangible danger and not vague at all.

C617 (*Forbidden country*)

Boberg's second example, C617 (*Forbidden country*) doesn't look much better. In *Óláfs saga helga* it says of king Óláfr:

It happened one day that the king was riding on his way singing his psalms, and when he came to face these mounds, he stopped and said:

'These words of mine shall pass from man to man, that I declare it advisable that never again should a king of Norway pass between these mounds.'

It is moreover reported that most kings have avoided this since.¹⁹

What we can say pro-taboo in this episode, is that the consequences of a breach are not explicitly mentioned. So we may conclude that they are in fact vague. But is the authority from which the prohibition originates truly anonymous? In other words, is Óláfr merely relaying the prohibition or does it originate from him? I see no evidence in here that would point to Óláfr proclaiming God's will, so we must surely conclude that Óláfr himself is the authority behind the prohibition, which in turn is likely meant to underline his claim to power. And that means it doesn't qualify as a taboo.

A *helgistaðr* at Þórsness

But now for something that actually is a taboo. As Mary Douglas has shown,²⁰ dirt can be considered a universal symbol and can effectively be described as 'matter out of place':²¹

Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing;...²²

¹⁸ See the definition in the introduction above.

¹⁹ Transl. Finaly & Faulkes 2014, p. 137 = c. 121. *Þat var einn dag, at konungr reið leið sína ok sǫng psálma sína, en er hann kom gegnt haugunum, nam hann stað ok mælti: "Þau skal segja orð mín maðr manni, at ek kalla ráð, at aldri síðan fari Nóregskonungr í milli þessa hauga." Er þat ok sǫgn manna, at flestir konungar hafu þat varazk síðan.* (Ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1945, vol. 2, p. 207 = c. 121).

²⁰ Douglas, Mary ([1966] 2001). *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. New York (reprint of the 1984 edition).

²¹ Douglas 2001, p. 36.

²² Douglas 2001, p. 37.

Taboos at the Boundary of Order and Chaos

Notice how both the definition and the examples employ the concept of space in a very concrete sense. Shoes may not cross into the space that constitutes the dining table. Cooking utensils may not cross into the space that is the bedroom.

We can also find this very basic notion of pollution in the sagas. To name but one example, there is an episode in *Eyrbyggja saga*, c. 4–10. Þórólfr mostraskegg leaves Norway under the rule of Haraldr Hárfagri and takes land in Breiðafjörðr.

Thorolf used to hold all his courts on the point of the headland where Thor had come ashore, and that's where he started the district assembly. This place was so holy that he wouldn't let anybody desecrate it either with bloodshed [í heiptarblóði] or with excrement; and for privy purposes they used a special rock in the sea which they called Dritsker.²³

A conflict arises years later when the Kjalleklingar, descendants of Björn (son of Ketill flatnef), who had left Norway together with Þórólfr, refuse to go out to Dritsker to ease themselves. The attempted desecration eventually leads to a battle on site between the Þórsnesingar and the Kjalleklingar. Blood is spilled and men die. Þórðr gellir is named arbitrator in this dispute and rules as follows:

The field, he said, had been defiled by the spilling of blood in enmity, so the ground there was now no holier than any other. He said that those who were the first to attack and shed blood should be held responsible, as they were the ones who broke the peace...²⁴

Space obviously plays a critical role in this episode. But to determine whether there is a spatial taboo in there, we first have to ask ourselves what constitutes the taboo in this case. I consider this a classical case of 'matter out of place', just as in Douglas's example of shoes on the dining table. Neither faeces nor blood may cross into the tabooed space at Þórsness. When the Þórsnesingar intervene for fear that the ground may be desecrated, they actually commit the breach themselves.

Space as a Metaphor

Now, let's take this to a more abstract level. Douglas further applies her brand of structuralism to the Mosaic dietary rules in *Leviticus* and *Deuteronomy*:

You shall not eat any abhorrent thing...Any animal that divides the hoof and has the hoof cleft in two, and chews the cud, among the animals, you

²³ Transl. Hermann Pálsson & Edwards 1973, p. 41. *Þar sem Þórr hafði á land komit, á tanganum nessins, lét hann hafa dóma alla ok setti þar heraðsping; þar var ok svá mikill helgistaðr, at hann vildi með engu móti láta saurga völlinn, hvárki í heiptarblóði, ok eigi skyldi þar álfrek ganga, ok var haft til þes sker eitt, er Dritsker var kallat.* (Ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1935, 10 = c. 4)

²⁴ Transl. Hermann Pálsson & Edwards 1973, p. 49. *[V]öllinn kallar hann spilltan af heiptarblóði, er niðr hafði komit, ok kallar þá jörð nú eigi helgari en aðra ok kallar þá því valda, er fyrri gerðusk til áverka við aðra; kallaði hann þat eitt friðbrot verit hafa;...* (Ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1935, 17 = c. 10).

Taboos at the Boundary of Order and Chaos

may eat...Of all that live in water you may eat these: whatever has fins and scales you may eat. And whatever does not have fins and scales you shall not eat; it is unclean for you.²⁵

The example from *Deuteronomy* makes a good contrast with the shoes and cooking utensils earlier. The latter were clear spatial taboos, as we've seen, while the dietary rules, although incorporating some space-related vocabulary, are clear-cut category taboos. Ruminants are only okay to eat when they have hooves cleft in two. They make a fixed category that requires a combination of two features. Animals living in water are only okay to eat if they have fins and scales. They too make a fixed category that requires a combination of two features. And they don't suddenly become okay to eat, just because they temporarily leave the water space.

So here, space is actually a metaphor. The obvious example for this from our sources is the notion of human sex which comprises two categories, male and female, each of which has certain expectations of features associated with it. The term *ergi*, roughly glossed as 'sexual perversion', is applied whenever someone upsets these expectations. A man taking the passive role in sexual intercourse crosses the boundary between the male and female spheres, because the passive role is part of the expected features in the female sphere, not the male.²⁶

We can also say that conceptually category taboos are located outside of category boundaries (in the sense used by mathematical topology), thereby being a natural outcome of dichotomised thinking. And when this dichotomised thinking pits that which lies inside a category against that which lies outside of it or defies the category order entirely, the boundary will divide the world into order and chaos.

Summary

We've seen what roles space plays in the conceptual world of taboos, both in the strict sense, as was the case with spatial taboos, as well as in the wider or metaphorical sense, as was the case with category taboos. We've revisited some of the examples that have long been held as taboos and reanalysed them based on our modern typology.

²⁵ New Revised Standard Version, Dtn 14:3-10.

²⁶ Cf. Meulengracht Sørensen, Preben (1983). *The Unmanly Man*, transl. Joan Turville-Petre. The Viking Collection 1. Odense, p. 18. A woman exhibiting conceptually male lust, on the other hand, is not guilty to the same degree, because lust is but one manifestation of a graduated feature, whereas the active-passive split is a dichotomy.