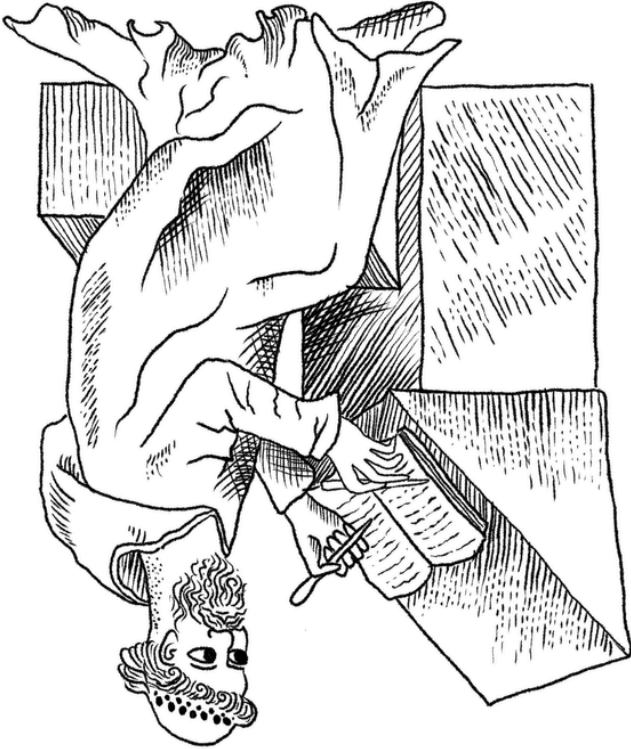


HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS STUDENT CONFERENCE
ON THE MEDIEVAL NORTH



Proceedings of the 14th Háskóli Íslands
Student Conference on the Medieval North

reykjavík, april 11th-12th 2025



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edited by

Brooklyn Arnot, Colin Fisher, Essi Nuutinen
Emilia Loidl, Julian Menjivar, and Pablo Barruezo-Vaquero

Proceedings of the 14th Háskóli Íslands Student Conference on the Medieval North
(Reykjavík, April 10th-12th, 2025)

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Proceedings of the 14th Háskóli Íslands Student Conference on the Medieval North (Reykjavík, April 10th-12th, 2025): Other Things

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Brooklyn Arnot
Reykjavík, August 2025

Preface

The Háskóli Íslands Conference for the Medieval North began in 2011 and has since then endeavoured to amplify the voices of upcoming scholars, primarily studying at a master's or doctoral level. This mission has facilitated the sharing of fresh and exciting scholarship over the past fourteen years, from voices which are new in Old Norse Scholarship, as well as from countries which are often underrepresented in the field. The mission of the conference has therefore always been focused on the peripheries of scholarship, a concept we decided to amplify with this year's theme, Other Things. The topics from this conference covered marginalised groups such as ethnic minorities, women, queer people, and the economically oppressed. Not only did it focus on other identities, but the subject of this year's conference invited its participants to consider other *things*. This could be taken in the broad sense of *anything* yet also pushed participants to consider the marginal nature of the material world. We, as humans, tend to consider the material world as secondary to the human, meaning the physical world and our environment is pushed aside as irrelevant. This conference has invited its participants to push against this tendency, by centralising the material and natural world.

The earth we inhabit is burning. Marginalised peoples are being targeted, populations are being destroyed, and access to medicine is continually under threat. We are on the brink of a climate catastrophe, and the very concept of truth is ignored and derided. An emphasis on marginalised identities as well as the often-forgotten material world is more important than ever in our current political milieu. During this conference, we strove for inclusivity, aiming to accommodate all peoples, especially embracing queer identities. We also recognise that economic difficulties are a barrier in attending academic conferences, a problem which has magnified in recent years with cuts to the humanities worldwide, meaning that academia runs the risk of becoming an echo chamber from a few rich universities. We endeavoured to break down these economic hurdles through fundraising, which was made possible through our wonderful community and sponsors, namely, to avoid charging a conference fee. Additionally, we were able to provide free excursions thanks to the generosity of the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies and the National Museum of Iceland. For those who could not afford the cost of travelling to Iceland, we opened the conference for online participants and attendees, making the conference more accessible to all countries.

In a world in which basic standards of truth no longer seem to matter, this conference has aimed to stand up for intellectual honesty and academic rigour. Symbols from the medieval north have been co-opted by far-right groups and used to celebrate white nationalism. We hope that through thoughtful and critical research, we can play a

role in dispelling dangerous myths about the medieval north. We have endeavoured to make this research accessible to the public, allowing it to be disseminated through the online accessibility of our conference and the open access format of these conference proceedings. The committee acknowledges that we are but a small conference on the edge of the world, which cannot make much difference in light of the atrocities our world is facing. Nevertheless, we see it as our duty to continue to do our part by presenting critical, honest, and empathetic research. I am delighted to introduce the fifteen scholars from across the world who have done just that.

We would also like to express our deep gratitude to all our sponsors who allowed us to achieve this mission. I would like to thank our sponsors, Háskóli Íslands, Hugvísindastofnun, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, Saga Museum, and Þjóðminjasafn Íslands, with a special thank you to Joanne Machin and Study Oraculi for their wonderfully generous contributions. I also want to thank the people who donated to the conference: Sheyda Shapouri, Adam Bierstedt, Alyson Wint, Daniel Farrand, Thomas Ireland-Delfs, Dr. Zachary Melton, Ralph Weedon. My thanks to the organising committee: Ariya, Emilia, Essi, Julian, Pablo and Victoria. My thanks to everyone who helped with baking and cooking for our breaks - namely, Marie, Molly, Essi, Emilia, Ariya and Pablo. A special thanks to Haraldur Bernharðsson, whose expertise and helpfulness ensured a smoothly ran conference. Finally, I would like to thank Colin Fisher, the president of our committee, for all the hard work and democratic leadership they showed in organising this conference.

We trust that the following extended abstracts challenge you to think about Other Things, and that they give voice to subjects which have been long pushed to the peripheries.



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Sarah Luise Schubarth
Sophie J. L. Abbott
Dr. T. Liam Waters
Yvonne Meixnir
Zarah Rosenbaum

Official Conference Program

THURSDAY, APRIL 10th (15:00-18:00)

15:05-16:35

Session 1: Other Things

Chair: Brooklyn Frances Arnot

Timothy Liam Waters (Charles University)

Tool Being(s): Object-Oriented Ontology and the Myth of Kvasir

Zarah Rosenbaum (University of Bonn)

Other Actors – The Agency of Things in Medieval Narratives

Natalia Danilova (University of Paris-Nanterre)

Trivial Things, Significant Transactions: Symbolic Payment in Early Icelandic Law

16:50-17:50

Session 2: Written Things

Chair: Essi Nuutinen

Gerrit Marius Manger (University of Heidelberg) *online*

Another Poetic Tradition in Iceland? On the Supposed Relation between Old Norse and Latin Alliterations

David Herting (Georg-August-University Göttingen)

Inculturation of the literary Other: European exempla, folktales and Old Norse *þættir*

FRIDAY, APRIL 11th (15:00-18:00)

15:05-16:35

Session 3: Other People

Chair: Julian Menjivar

Carolina Mariani (University of Milano, alumna)

Echoes from the Margins: *Kormáks saga* and the Construction of Otherness

Arwen Thyse 陳藕文 (University of Alberta)

The Otherness of Being: A Discussion of Scholarly Approaches to Mixed-Race Individuals in the Medieval Saga Corpus

J. D. Moore (University of St. Andrews)

The Adapted 'Other': An Examination of Saracens in the *Karlamagnús saga*

16:50-17:50

Session 4: New Things

Chair: Colin Fisher

Kimberly Povloski (University of Louisiana-Lafayette)

Reproductive Futurism, Asexuality, and Gendered Violence in Adaptations of *Beowulf*

Maggie Pavleszek (University of York)

“One of these sepulchral ships”: Olivia M. Stone and Receptions of the Gokstad Ship

SATURDAY, APRIL 12th (9:00-18:00)

9:00

Keynote speech

Chair: Brooklyn Arnot

Katelin Marit Parsons (Háskóli Íslands)

Twisting Words: The Vocabulary of Old Norse-Icelandic Translation

10:00-11:00

Session 5: Eastern Things

Chair: Victoria Vdovina

Piia Sandra Palm (University of Tallinn)

Pagans and their Pirate Republic – The Perception of Medieval Osilians as the Ultimate “Others” in the Context of the Livonian Crusade

Ben Gray (King’s College London)

Vod, Izhera and Korel: The three Finnic allies of Novgorod

11:10-12:10

Session 6: Buried Things

Chair: Pablo Barruezo Vaquero

Martinís Augusts Reineke (University of Latvia) online

Archaeological heritage of the Viking Age on the territory of the modern Baltic States

Maren von Mallinckrodt (Háskóli Íslands)

Selective Female Infanticide in the Viking Age: Common Practice or a Case of ‘Othering’?

13:00-13:50

Poster session

Sarah Luise Schubarth (University of Cologne)

Reading the Clouds: Liminal Space and Identity in *Bárðar saga*

Sophie J. L. Abbott (University of British Columbia)

Grettis Saga, Strange Heroism and the Supernatural Stare

Yvonne Meixner (University of Tübingen)

Fussum þeiri gorningavætti – the image of the old-aged witch in the Íslendingasögur

Molly Bovett (Háskóli Íslands)

Feeling Queer: *Hallfredar saga vandræðaskálds* as a Case Study in Queer Emotions

13:50-15:50

Session 7: Things Left Out

Chair: Emilia Loidl

Emilio Maldonado (Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina) online

Space and identity: The Other in *Egils saga*

Marie Sophie Besson (Háskóli Íslands, University of Strasbourg)

Women and Reality in Icelandic Literature: An Opening Towards Otherness

Emma Yeager (University of Chicago Divinity School)

Hell on Earth: The “Othering” of Iceland in the Religio-Political Dialogues of *Konungs skuggsjá*

Cecily Warrilow (Háskóli Íslands)

“The Literary Non-Being” – The portrayal of slaves in the Icelandic Kings’ sagas

16:00-18:00

Session 8: Poor Things

Chair: Colin Fisher

Laura Daligan (University of the Highlands and Islands, alumna)

online

Winged Otherness: Avian Shapeshifting in Old Norse Mythology

Hugo Small (University of Cambridge)

The Other Struggle: Peasant Unrest and Class Struggle in Medieval Scandinavian Civil Wars c.1150–1319

David Arevalo (Independent)

External Influence and Internal Identity: Knighthood as Otherness in Mann and the Isles

Caitlin Moon (Trinity College Dublin, alumna)

The Other Prince: Disability and Xenophobia as “Otherness” in Early Irish and Northern Sagas

The Otherness of Being: A Discussion of Scholarly Approaches to Mixed-Race Individuals in the Medieval Saga Corpus

Half-trolls, half-giants, and other mixed-race characters can be found scattered throughout the saga corpus and occasionally appear in discussions of otherness and alterity in the scholarship of medieval Scandinavia. This is not least because such mixed beings represent the output of a living breathing encounter—real or imagined—between Norse ‘selves’ and those they deemed ‘other’. As such, stories about mixed-race individuals have served as case studies for understanding Norse perceptions of their own compatibility with otherness and the limitations of the relationship between the two. This paper presents developing thoughts on scholarly approaches to mixed-race individuals and their experiences in the medieval saga corpus by examining the scholarship and saga material surrounding Bárðr Dumbsson, a protagonist of *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*.

In this discussion, “mixed race” can be understood as a descriptor for individuals, relationships, and social contexts in which a close connection or intermingling of two or more racialised groups can be found. This paper takes as a premise that racial dynamics can be discerned within the saga corpus, whether that be between different racialised cultures or—as can be found at the legendary and mythological end of the sagas—what might be called different species (gods, giants, trolls, humans, etc.). As such, “mixed race” can be effectively used to point to a certain kind of sociocultural and biopolitical existence or experience described within the saga corpus wherein two or more racially informed identities can be viewed as existing in one space or person. Taking the approach that sagas containing legendary material still reflect cultural realities of the time, *Bárðar saga* offers a window into the perception and experience of racial mixing in Old Norse society. While most scholars studying the saga material do not use the concept of “mixed race” as such, these studies still provide insight into current scholarly interpretations of historical racial mixing in this period.

The late-13th/14th century *Bárðar saga* is an important text to examine when discussing racial mixing in medieval Scandinavia because it is almost exclusively concerned with the activities of mixed-race characters. As a case in point, the titular character, Bárðr, is the son of a human woman and another mixed-race individual who is himself descended from giants (*risar*) and trolls (*tröll*). Additionally, Bárðr is described as being fostered by a *bergbúi* and/or *jötunn*. Bárðr can thus be thought of as part-human, part-troll, and part-*risi*, and might have also been considered part *bergbúi* or *jötunn* by close association.

Scholarly approaches to Bárðr Dumbsson have generally focused on the implications of two passages in the saga: The first establishes a dichotomy between the personality traits of *risí* and *tröll*, wherein *risar* are presented as being personable and amenable to human society, while *tröll* have volatile and ill-natured personalities. In the second passage, Bárðr attributes a negative change in disposition and an associated unsuitability for human society to his ancestry, presumably referring to his mixed background and more specifically his *tröll* lineage. These passages have generally been read together and interpreted as Bárðr succumbing to his trollish nature and becoming caught between the two aspects of his ancestry. As a result, scholars have focused on Bárðr as having a fragmented sense of identity and identification with community because of his background, in addition to having a precarious, or even incompatible, relationship with his ancestral communities.

While elements of Bárðr's story can support such a perception of fragmented identity and sociability, it is not altogether clear that such an interpretation is portrayed consistently or unambiguously throughout the saga. More specifically, this interpretation solidifies a correlation between Bárðr's mixed-race being and his behaviour in the text, taking what is fundamentally the character's own attribution of ancestry and making it into a conclusion that the text draws about Bárðr's nature. In addition, these readings tend not to discuss how Bárðr also attributes his change in behaviour to a recently experienced tragedy within his family: the loss of his daughter, and estrangement from his brother. This is further complicated by several instances following this crucial point in the saga in which Bárðr is portrayed as sociable and participating in the daily life of the people of Snæfellsnes. Bárðr's trollish-ness is also not clear throughout the saga. As such, his fracture with society and fragmentation of identity are not consistently portrayed as connected to his ancestry and instead seem to manifest on a case-by-case basis.

Thus, it appears that Bárðr's mixed-race being does not function as the sole reason for his social fracture or incompatibility, if it is a reason at all. Rather, the saga seems to portray an extreme emotional response to a traumatic event that causes social fracture – a response which is then understood through ancestry, or rather, race. However, by focusing so heavily on Bárðr's attribution of lineage—as has traditionally been the case – “otherness” becomes understood as the primary operator in this scenario while other factors fall away. As a result, scholarship seems to have made other the possibility that the sagas can show someone like Bárðr simply living and responding as a person of that cultural context, regardless of how otherness is attributed to him.

In light of recent scholarly work on otherness and modern mixed-race experiences, the prevalence of such interpretations in the scholarship on Bárðr may suggest that readings of his character have been coloured by an expectation that perceptions of otherness will be stable or absolute within a text, and an underlying assumption that mixed-race identities and experiences are fraught and under constant tension. This may explain why Bárðr is often presented as having an innate otherness

that, even when seemingly absent, is always waiting to emerge and will always define his lived experience. However, these readings seem to ascribe otherness where it does not seem to be at play, and Bárðr thus loses the chance to simply exist in the text without being constantly read as “other.”

The purpose of this paper is not to say that otherness is not involved in Bárðr's portrayal or other mixed-race characters in the sagas. Indeed, it is impossible to ignore how otherness and othering language remain important facets of the text. However, the shifting importance of Bárðr's mixed-race background and his multiplicitous portrayals suggest that Bárðr's character and life need to be analysed in a more episodic manner rather than according to a single premise. With this approach, it becomes clear that *Bárðar saga* portrays a wide range of experiences for mixed-race characters, including a variety of ways in which race and otherness become, or do not become, entangled in those experiences. Indeed, rather than seeing race or otherness as following the individuals in *Bárðar saga*, what may actually be portrayed here is a very real expression of race, mixed or not, wherein race moves in and out of the picture as it becomes inscribed into specific moments of Bárðr's existence. It is a reminder that individuals are not inherently other; they become it. And the potential for that becoming is determined contextually, moment to moment. Recognising this, we are less likely to generate an unintended other in our scholarship—that of existence, of being.

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***Vod'*, *Izhera* and *Korel'*: The Three Finnic Allies of Novgorod**

While Finno-Ugrian peoples are frequently described in medieval *Rus'* sources as strange sorcerers and objects of distrust, the city of Veliky Novgorod developed an alliance with three Baltic Finnic groups – The *Vod'* (Votians) and *Izhera* (Izhorians) of Ingria and the *Korel'* (Karelians) – which endured for several centuries. This paper aims to examine that alliance and highlight its importance within Novgorodian historiography.

Record of military cooperation

The Novgorod First Chronicle describes the *Vod'* fighting against Novgorod for Prince Vseslav of Polotsk at the battle of the princely hunting forest (*Zverinets*) in 1069. After this initial hostility, Birchbark letter No.590, dated 1075-1100, provides a note that 'the Lithuanians have attacked the Karelians'. This observation may suggest that the Karelians were allied to Novgorod at this time, but attaching such significance to the letter is speculative as it gives no further detail (Schaeken, 2018, 129-130). After that, military cooperation between Novgorod and the *Vod'*, *Izhera* and *Korel'* begins to be recorded in the mid-12th century, with the need to work together both defensively and offensively against the *Yem'* (people of the Finnish Lakeland) perhaps providing the catalyst. The recorded instances of military cooperation, which I have divided into four main type categories, are as follows:

Novgorod sends troops to protect the *Vod'*, *Izhera* or *Korel'*:

- 1149 (against the *Yem'*), 1348 (against Sweden), 1396 (against *Nemets*, likely either Swedes or Norwegians, with Sami (*Lop'*) allies)

Vod', *Izhera* or *Korel'* provide troops to defend Novgorod or a key subordinate town:

- 1228 (against the *Yem'*), 1270 (against the Golden Horde), 1316 (against Tver)

Vod', *Izhera* or *Korel'* take part in Novgorodian offensive campaigns:

- 1148 (against Vladimir-Suzdal), 1191 (against the *Yem'*), 1253 (against the Livonian Order), 1385, 1411, 1420, 1444 (against Norway)

Vod', *Izhera* or *Korel'* take part in Novgorodian counteroffensive campaigns:

- 1241, 1444 (against the Livonian Order), 1293, 1301 (against Sweden), 1471 (against Moscow)

Though not explicitly stated in Norse and Papal sources, a number of Karelian attacks on Norwegians operating in far northern Scandinavia between 1251 and 1323 also seem likely to have been carried out at Novgorod's direction. We can extrapolate this because Norway made a treaty with Novgorod in 1326 establishing spheres of influence in the Sami lands, in what seems to have been an attempt to stabilise the situation there following decades of warfare with the Karelians (Stagg, 1952, p.62). While our best sources for Novgorodian military cooperation with these three Baltic Finnic peoples are the two versions of the Novgorod First Chronicle, other sources indicate that cooperation may have been even more regular than this account suggests. While the Novgorod First Chronicle mentions the campaign into Suzdalian lands along the Volga in 1148 and the attack on the Swedish fort of Landskrona on the Karelian Isthmus in 1301, it does not mention the presence of Finnic allies. The Suzdalian and Swedish sources for these respective events do, however, state that Karelians fought alongside the Novgorodians. This raises the possibility that the Finnic allies were present, even though not mentioned, during campaigns for which the Novgorod First Chronicle is our only source.

Role in the Novgorodian Army

Living in heavily forested and marshy landscapes punctuated by large lakes and rivers, the *Vod'*, *Izhera* and *Korel'* seem to have been skilled in operating in such terrain. For example, the Novgorod First Chronicle describes Karelians hunting the remnants of a routed *Yem'* army 'whether by the forests, wherever they were found' in 1228. The Swedish Chronicle of Duke Erik gives the following account of Novgorodian-directed Karelian raids against Sweden: 'They went from the sea and up into Lake Mälaren, both in quiet weather and during storms, quite secretly inside the Svealand skerries and generally with a stealthily advancing host'. Such accounts indicate that Novgorod may have used its Finnic allies as shock troops, skirmishers and perhaps scouts.

Mechanics of the alliance

Chronicle and birchbark sources indicate that the *Vod'*, *Izhera* and *Korel'* were organised by Novgorod into *pogosts* – administrative units for the collection of fur tribute. Members of these three groups were also liable to be executed as 'traitors' (*perevetniki*) if they were deemed to have cooperated with the city's enemies, such as Sweden and the Livonian Order. Unlike other indigenous peoples of the boreal forest subject to Novgorodian rule, however, there is some evidence of personal relationships between the leaders of these three groups and the elites of Novgorod, as well as indications that they held a valued, protected status. For example, the Izhorian elder Pelugiy (or Pelgussi) is a key figure in the *Life of Alexander Nevsky*, entrusted with the 'night sea guard' and warning the Prince of Novgorod of an approaching Swedish fleet. The linked birchbark letters No.248 and No.249, an appeal from two Karelian *pogosts* for Novgorodian military aid, are addressed to the city as a whole ('Lord Novgorod') rather than to a particular boyar or official. These letters have been dated to between

1380 and 1400, but we can probably date them precisely to 1396, as the Novgorod First Chronicle entry for that year notes that the city dispatched a force under the service prince Konstantin Belozerskiy to defend the Karelians of the same two *pogosts*. This entry appears to be an account of Novgorod's response to the birchbark letters.

An enduring relationship

Guimon, one of the few historians to examine this relationship, argues that the two Karelian revolts against Novgorod in 1314 and 1337-8 and the establishment of the service prince system – the possessions granted to whom often included the Karelian fortress of Korela (the *Korel'skiy gorod*) - marked the end of bilateral relations between the three peoples and the city and a reduction of their status to subjects of the service prince (Guimon, 2017, p.54). Birchbark letters No.248 & 249, however, provide evidence that the Karelians were still communicating directly with Novgorod even after the service prince system began. The Novgorod First Chronicle entry for 1444 also describes direct communication between the city and the leaders of the Votians and Izhorians while a service prince, Ivan, was in situ. As the record outlined above shows, military cooperation still continued extensively after the Karelian revolts. The city's relationship with its three Finnic allies was likely deemed too essential to be entrusted to the service princes, who frequently abandoned their posts to travel to Lithuania, Moscow and the Golden Horde. It is therefore my conclusion that the alliance continued to be managed by the city government (headed by the *Posadnik*, *Tsyatskiy* and Archbishop).

The younger version of the Sofia First Chronicle's note that Karelian troops assisted an army from Novgorod's eastern territories (*Zavoloch'ye* – 'beyond the portage') against a Muscovite force in 1471 takes the record of cooperation up to the year of Novgorod's final defeat by Ivan III of Moscow (*PRSL T.39*, 1994, p.157). This means the alliance operated for at least 329 years, demonstrating remarkable durability.

Abbreviations

PRSL - *Polnoe Sobranie Russkikh Letopisei* (Complete Collection of Russian Chronicles)

Notes

Old Russian terms taken directly from chronicles and transliterated from Cyrillic have been italicised.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to Anna Fitiskina for her patience in training me to read Old Russian, my supervisor Alexandra Vukovich and mentor Jonathan Shepard for their ongoing support, and the Leverhulme Trust 'Knowledge Orders before Modernity' scholarship, which funds my research and enabled me to travel to Iceland. Finally, a huge thank you to everyone involved in organising this conference.

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The Other Prince: (Dis)ability & Xenophobia as “Otherness” in early Irish & Northern Sagas

In Celtic and English studies, there is a long-standing tradition, perpetuated by scholars such as Whitely Stokes and Kim McCone, that Irish saga and Irish medieval literature exist in a type of vacuum. This paper challenges that perspective by analyzing similar narratives of Ólafr Hǫskuldsson, also known as Olaf the Peacock (*pát*) in *Laxdæla saga*, and Niall of the Nine Hostages in *The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedon* (*Echtra mac nEchach Muigmedóin*). Both individuals are “othered” due to their mixed backgrounds: Niall, an illegitimate son born to an enslaved Viking princess, later becomes High King of Ireland. Likewise, Olaf the Peacock, an illegitimate son born to an enslaved Irish princess, speaks Old Irish with his mother, travels to Ireland, and is invited to succeed his grandfather as High King of Ireland. While their narratives bear a remarkable similarity, so too is the manner in which their physical bodies are described within their respective texts.

Disability studies focus on aspects of the human body that hinder or differentiate an individual from a “normative” experience. While this methodology of observing how the physical appearance of the body affects the social experience of the individual is traditionally focused on physical impairments, which negatively affect an individual’s ability to function within a given society, the point is that they are “othered” in some shape or form. This paper utilizes this methodology to observe the “otherness” of Olaf the Peacock and Niall of the Nine Hostages. The bodies of these two protagonists are “othered” by their mixed-class, foreign backgrounds which is accompanied by their illegitimacy but also by the hyper-perfectionism with which they are described. In their hyper-perfectionist physicality and morality, their claims to sovereignty are simultaneously understood as legitimate and justifiable.

The application of disability studies to early sagas makes apparent how medieval societies understand the relationships between physical bodies, social status, and moral authority, shifting from simplistic interpretations of disability to more coherent interpretations of bodily differences that shape cultural narratives, especially those surrounding kingship. In Irish and Norse traditions, central heroes who deviate from the idealized norm find their “Otherness” becoming a site of didactic challenge and divine favor or wisdom. They offer an alternative vision of heroism, one that embraces the complexities of power, identity, and human frailty.

One of the great challenges of my PhD thesis “The Legends of the Loathly Lady: Finding Truth Through Transformation” (Trinity College Dublin, 2024) is that disability studies is a developing field of study and has rarely been implemented when analyzing

the Irish saga. Limited amount of work with disability studies has been conducted, however, on the scope of analysis seems concerned with the Old Norse saga. Disability-oriented studies recently undertaken by Ármann Jakobsson and Lindy Brady have explored how disfigurement, physical impairment, and deformity challenge the dominant ideals of heroism and bodily perfection, particularly in the context of the Icelandic saga. Ármann's work on bodily difference emphasizes how physical disabilities are consistently tied to the construction of identity and sovereignty, especially for figures of power. Brady has likewise explored the ethical, symbolic roles played by disabled characters, especially disabled saga women, arguing that disability is frequently framed as a source of wisdom or moral authority rather than mere deficiency.

The application of disability studies to early Irish and Northern sagas opens up new avenues for understanding the complex relationship between "Otherness" and sovereignty, especially regarding the format used to describe the portrayal of non-normative individuals within both traditions. While traditional interpretations focus on ethnic or social differences as markers of "Otherness," disability studies encourage views of physical deviation (e.g. disfigurement, deformity, or disability) as crucial elements in the construction of identity and power. In Irish and Norse sagas, protagonists who deviate from the idealized norm navigate the challenges of kingship and sovereignty in part by confronting or embodying physical difference even if it is not their own. These recurring cultural motifs suggest a shared cross-cultural understanding of leadership, where "Otherness" is not solely a sign of weakness or exclusion; it additionally acts as a site of negotiation and, at times, legitimacy. Disability studies reveal how these characters' non-normative bodies – whether marked by foreign ancestry or physical affliction – are intricately linked to their struggles towards sovereignty, their bodies reflecting broader societal values concerning power, inheritance, and authority. By examining these figures through the lens of disability studies, insight becomes visible regarding the manner in which "otherness" in early sagas is conceived. "Otherness" is not only about social marginalization: it is also connected to the intersectionality of physical difference within leadership and governance, thereby complicating traditional notions of what makes a rightful ruler.

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Extended Abstract: Echoes from the Margins: Kormáks saga and the Construction of Otherness

This paper examines the character of Kormákr within *Kormáks saga* through the lens of textual, social, cultural, and symbolic marginality. The aim is to demonstrate how Kormákr emerges as a literary construct of alterity, intertwining philological analysis with narratological perspectives. Kormákr embodies a set of tensions between individual deviation and the normative frameworks of medieval Icelandic society, challenging the conventional heroic ideals preserved in the *Íslendingasögur*.

Otherization of the text

Kormáks saga survives in corrupted material, with the principal manuscript (*Möðruvallabók*) showing signs of a problematic textual tradition. The narrative is marked by repetition, abrupt transitions, and inconsistencies between prose and verse. As pointed out by Sveinsson (1939) and Cosimini (2021), the prose appears to misunderstand or poorly integrate the poetic material, likely derived from oral sources. These features, alongside culturally sensitive themes (e.g., offensive love poetry, accusations of *níð*), likely contributed to the saga's limited circulation prior to the 16th century. As such, the saga's textual marginality parallels the social and symbolic marginality of its protagonist, reinforcing his status as "other."

Kormákr's marginality

Kormákr is depicted as a misfit, alienated from the social and ethical norms that define other saga heroes. His character is not celebrated but framed through a series of rhetorical techniques that guide audience perception. According to Lönnroth's (1970) model, the saga uses indirect attribution (*marga manna mál*) and narrative focalization to mark Kormákr as inferior to other characters, such as Bersi, who is portrayed with a positive, extended digression. The contrast offers a reading key: Bersi is socially integrated and well-regarded, while Kormákr is impulsive, unreliable, and often inappropriate in his behavior. His impulsivity and lack of foresight are consistently punished in the narrative, emphasizing his deviation from the archetype of the rational, restrained Icelandic hero.

Kormákr's marginality is further reinforced through suggestions of ethnic otherness. His name, along with the mention of a Celtic mother and ancestral links to figures associated with Dublin (Þorgils and Fróði), suggest a Gaelic background, according to Durand (1979). Jochens (1997) emphasizes that descriptors such as *svartan ok ljótan* [=dark and ugly] not only mark physical appearance but echo deeper cultural stereotypes, evoking the figure of the slave. Brink (2008) identifies a recurring

slave archetype in saga literature as a failed outsider, dark, unattractive, and socially incompetent. Kormákr fits this mold precisely. His otherness is inscribed in both his genealogy and his personal traits.

In medieval thought, as Lönnroth (1963) and Clunies Ross (1989) explain, physical appearance often reflects inner qualities. Thus, Kormákr's "darkness" becomes a semiotic device: he is not only foreign in origin but symbolically set apart from the communal values of the saga world. Kormákr is also marginal in his role as a *skáld*, a figure that occupies an ambivalent position in medieval Icelandic culture. According to Koch (1984), *skáld* are often described with unconventional physical features (dark hair, crooked noses, et cetera) and volatile personalities. Clunies Ross (2001) draws parallels between poets and the Norse god Odin, the god of poetry, knowledge, and deception, arguing that poets inherit Odin's dangerous duality: they are both inspired and threatening, creative and subversive. Kormákr embodies this ambiguity. His poetry reflects both his inner turmoil and his inability to conform. Unlike idealized heroes who balance intellect with diplomacy, Kormákr lacks strategic thinking and emotional restraint. His traits align with medieval humoral theory, where darkness of complexion indicates melancholy, associated with genius, instability, and alienation.

Kormákr also embodies religious liminality. He expresses skepticism toward traditional Norse rituals, such as his refusal to participate in sacrificial rites, yet he is not depicted as a bearer of Christian virtues. His lack of spiritual depth, foresight, or ritual power excludes him from both pagan and Christian frameworks. Tulinus (2000) situates this condition within the broader transitional phase depicted in the *Íslendingasögur*, which often reflect a space "in-between" pagan and Christian ideologies. Lönnroth (1969) introduces the concept of the "noble heathen," a type of pre-Christian character who nonetheless exhibits Christian values. Kormákr fails to meet this standard: he is impulsive, often disrespectful, and incapable of reconciliation. He lacks a stable worldview or spiritual center, which further isolates him from the normative systems the saga both represents and reinforces.

Kormákr can be read as a deliberately marginal figure, socially, culturally, and structurally. His failure is not incidental but central to the saga's logic. Rather than presenting a heroic model, the saga may offer a negative *exemplum*: a cautionary tale about the dangers of unchecked emotion, outsider status, and non-conformity.

Philological Factors and Narrative Form

Finally, it is important to consider the role of philological history in shaping the character's representation. The fragmented nature of the text, its awkward integration of poetry and prose, and the possible loss of original material suggest that some aspects of Kormákr's incoherence may be accidental rather than entirely intentional. His contrast with Bersi, a more coherent and favorably portrayed figure, might partly result from the redactor's difficulty in adapting oral material to written narrative form or with the existence at the time of a better-preserved *Bersa saga* used as a source (O'Donoghue

1991). The dissonance between the saga's poetic core and its prose scaffolding reflects deeper tensions between oral tradition and literary codification, tradition and innovation, community and individuality.

Conclusion

Kormáks saga offers a singular case study of marginality in medieval Icelandic literature. Kormákr, as poet, lover, and outsider, defies the heroic conventions of the *Íslendingasögur*. His ethnic background, volatile temperament, poetic vocation, and religious skepticism converge to construct a profoundly liminal figure at once deviant and compelling.

The saga encodes broader cultural anxieties about identity, belonging, and the costs of exceptionalism. Whether seen as a figure to be rejected, pitied, or admired, Kormákr challenges the reader to confront the limits of conformity and the ambiguous legacy of Iceland's mythic past.

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The Literary Non-Being: The Portrayal of Slaves in the Icelandic *konungursögur*

The *konungursögur* are often considered as much “creators” of Norwegian history as they are records; they exist as political instruments for their own contextual present, as well as creating a communal heritage. Because of this, the corpus appears varied; although the main texts used in this study are Old Norse compendiums (*Heimskringla*, c. 1230, *Fagrskinna*, c. 1220, *Morkinskinna*, c. 1220 and *Ágrip af Noregskonungasögum*, c. 1190), there are also sagas concerning a single king (Oddr Snorrason’s *Saga of Óláfr Tryggvason*, c. 1200) and earlier Latin texts (Theodoricus’ *Historia Norwegiæ*, c. 1160-1188). Furthermore, beyond differences in dates, origins, and styles, ambiguity is found in the overarching themes of social morality (Miller, 2017, 12). Considerations of such ambiguity have cited that this was the result of the sagas representing different voices in the formation of Norwegian historicism, and so the texts existed in relation to each other as ‘an ideological debate with a consciousness of national identities’ (Andersson, 2016, 73). The corpus is understood as a “history in progress,” an attempt to incorporate group feeling to the centralising structures of kingship and administration, propagating the legitimacy of individual kings as well as the institutions themselves (Ármann Jakobsson, 2000, 2014), while likewise strengthening the group cohesion of the contextual audiences (Axel Kristinsson, 2003). Although the creation of this kingship ideology is well-studied, the figure of the slave has not often been thought as central to this process of development. Indeed, the slave has long been considered by Orlando Patterson’s definition as ‘naturally alienated,’ and so “othered” from any institutions of identity (Patterson, 1982, 5; Brink, 2020, 10). Yet, despite such “othering,” slaves appear frequently in the *konungursögur*, leading to question whether the inclusion of slaves in the corpus gives them a place in the group identity that created one common “heritage.”

The appearance of slaves varies. On occasion, they act as mere unnamed tools, such as those who blind, mutilate, and castrate Magnús blinda in *Heimskringla* on the orders of their king Haraldr gille (*Heimskringla III*, 1872, 193). The slaves fulfill a structural *purpose*, in that the author conveys shame on the ex-king Magnús blinda, or separate Haraldr gille from actions that were considered unbecoming of a king. Beyond these unnamed figures, more meaningful slave figures arguably exist as static characters, rather than ones with their own textual agency. Two notable examples of this are the allegory of the rebellious thrall-king Álmosteinn in *Morkinskinna*, and Óláfr Tryggvason’s childhood in slavery. With Álmosteinn, his brief episode as king is highlighted as ill-fitting due to his slave heritage; the saga cites that when he is defeated, he *hverfa til naturu þinnar* (“returns to his nature”) as the basest member of society (*Morkinskinna*, 1932, 192). With Óláfr Tryggvason, his nature as king also shines through despite his enslavement, a seeming pre-destiny for ascension to the throne. In *Ágrip*, this connection is overtly conveyed in the phrase *‘En guð, er þetta barn hafði kosti til stórra hluta, stillti hónum til lausnar’* (“God, who had chosen this child

for great things, saw to his release') (*Ágrip af Noregskonungasögum*, 2008, 28-29). In both cases, one's role in society is pre-ordained and immutable, creating an image of society around every member's natural role within it. That is not to say that there was a lack of social mobility in thirteenth century Norway; the surviving law codes from this period outline in detail systems of "debt-bondage," where one chose to enter slavery to pay off debt, as well as the legal processes for freeing slaves (*The Earliest Norwegian Laws*, 2008). However, these textual episodes suggest that within the ideological history of the *konungursögur*, social stratification was recognized intrinsically, with a king's right to rule as the epitome of this. The slaves are not depicted as focal characters but used as examples that illustrate this point and outline the perils of upsetting this natural order. Another case where slaves appear as rhetorical characters is shown in the repetition of kings having enslaved mothers. This trope appears multiple times in the sagas, such as in *Fagrskinna* where Haraldr hárfagri had his son, Hákon góði, with the 'ambátt' ('female-slave') Þóra morstong, and in *Heimskringla* with Magnús góði's mother, Alhild, being given the same descriptor (*Fagrskinna*, 1902-1903, 87; *Heimskringla III*, 1873, 6). Additionally, there are women named Þóra who appear in positions that allude to slavery; Óláfr kyrre has his heir with the 'frillo' (usually translated as 'concubine') Þóra, Sigurðr slembir with the 'verkakona' ('work-woman') Þóra, and Haraldr gille as "taking" Þóra Gutthormsdóttir and having his son Sigurðr with her (*Morkinskinna*, 1932, 291; *Heimskringla III*, 1873, 223; *Morkinskinna*, 1932, 404). No further information is provided concerning these women. They appear in the narrative solely so the authors can convey how the kings begat their heirs to the throne, which presumably legitimized the claim to their inheritance. This lack of information, combined with the repetition of the name, suggests that "Þóra" is a writing device where the mother is a slave, or merely unknown and not of interest to the authors. Therefore, "Þóra" is not a character in the *konungursögur* herself, merely a literary "other."

Indeed, the "Þóras" indicate that slaves could appear in the sagas and interact with kingship in significant ways, despite that they were nonetheless separated from the Norwegian heritage. Isolated as they were from their contextual community, slaves could additionally find themselves unable to inherit or pass on feelings of community from their ancestors or to their descendants (Patterson, 1982, 5). This is observed in the *konungursögur*, where slaves appear merely as "slaves," without ancestors, family, or backstory; they are denied the heritage that other characters enjoy. Such isolation indicates that, as a "slave" foremost, they were not truly Norwegian, thus contextual and later readers would not consider them as figures from which to draw identity and community. Historiographically, such exclusion from group heritage endures. In the seventeenth-century *Þórðarþók* edition of the Icelandic *Landnámabók*, any assumption that Icelanders were descended from slaves is soundly rebuked, despite the vast presence of slavery in the *Íslandingasögur* (*Landnámabók*, 2006, 7). Indeed, slavery should be considered an accepted facet of the Nordic "past," but in the *konungursögur* and historiographically, slaves have been exempted from feelings of communal heritage; the "us" is separated from the "other."

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Hell on Earth: The “Othering” of Iceland in the Religio-Political Dialogues of *Konungs skuggsjá*

In the medieval imagination, the boundaries of geography and eschatology frequently overlapped. Visions of the underworld often included the intermingling of extreme heat and cold, appearing in Latin, Old English, and Old Norse literature alike. This phenomenon contributed to a theological and cosmological worldview in which the North was othered and framed as a cursed or demonic realm. At the edge of the medieval world, Iceland occupied a uniquely eschatological position. In the Old Norse didactic text *Konungs skuggsjá* (*The King’s Mirror*), Iceland’s geography is cast in hellish terms: its boiling springs, icy glaciers, and volcanic activity serve as signs not only of its geographical strangeness, but also of its potential as a moral and spiritual warning.

In my paper, I examine how *Konungs skuggsjá* integrates theological, literary, and political frameworks to position Iceland as “other” within the northern Christian world. Written in the mid-thirteenth century during the reign of Hákon Hákonarson and preceding the formal incorporation of Iceland under Norwegian rule, *Konungs skuggsjá* uses a dialogic format between a father and son to instruct its readers in theology, politics, ethics, geography, and royal conduct. Amidst its diverse pedagogical aims, it offers a striking discourse on Iceland’s natural wonders, portraying its landscape as physical analogues to the torments of hell. I argue that this depiction participates in a broader medieval discourse in which landscapes are interpreted as moral indicators, expressions of political ideology, and symbols of cosmological meaning—a hermeneutic that enables the othering of Iceland within the religio-political frameworks of Norwegian royal ideology.

The idea that hell is a place of both frost and fire is deeply rooted in the medieval literary and theological imagination. Old Norse texts such as *Duggals leiðsla* (a translation of *Visio Thugdali*) and *Sólarljóð* reflect a growing thirteenth-century tendency to portray purgatorial suffering as the violent alternation between burning heat and numbing cold. These depictions closely parallel earlier Anglo-Saxon and Latin sources, such as the vision of Drythelm in Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica*, the apocalyptic Old English poem *Christ and Satan*, and *Genesis A*, in which Satan describes hell as a place where “at times hot and cold mingle.” Additionally, biblical passages such as Jeremiah 1:14 (“Out of the North an evil shall break forth”) lent scriptural authority to the identification of the North with spiritual darkness and divine judgment. In the Old Icelandic *Homily Book*, deacons were instructed to face north when reading the Gospel, a gesture meant to symbolize God’s word confronting the devil. Taken together, these motifs establish a cosmological and moral geography in which certain physical regions of the world—especially the North—could be interpreted as visible reminders of divine wrath or demonic power.

Konungs skuggsjá was likely composed by a learned cleric or royal advisor in Norway during a time of political centralization. The text draws on biblical, patristic, and classical sources and is structured as a didactic dialogue. The son, puzzled by Iceland’s

unusual natural phenomena, asks whether they are merely natural or spiritually significant. The father responds in a manner that frames Iceland's geography as simultaneously mysterious, dangerous, and providentially ordered. The volcanic "dead" fires of Iceland are contrasted with the "living" fires of Sicily referenced in Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*, which consume wood and soil rather than stone. The father ultimately concludes that Iceland's natural wonders mirror "the tortures of hell... which one can see on the island called Iceland." The island is thus rendered not only geographically strange but a sampling of hell. Yet the father's theological framing does not culminate in pure condemnation. The father draws on the Book of Job to argue that even amid Iceland's calamity, God's providence remains operative. Satan, described here as the "kindler" of Iceland's fires, is not permitted to harm souls unless God allows it. Iceland's terrifying landscape is thus not a direct site of damnation, but a symbolic reminder of hell, designed to awaken a sense of urgency and moral awareness in the observer. This moral framing of natural features reflects a broader medieval principle that nature can serve as a source of knowledge of things beyond this world. The peculiar geography of Iceland becomes a kind of visual sermon where the island's portrayal as infernal is not a personal attack on the Icelanders but a pedagogical tool. Yet this very function marks it as "other" in the cosmological landscape: a liminal space closer to hell than to the civilized, Christianized center of Norway.

Furthermore, the depiction of Iceland as geologically unstable and "hell on earth" may have subtly legitimized Norwegian authority and superiority. By framing Iceland as an example of the "tortures of hell," this text supports a vision of Christian kingship as both protector and purifier. Moreover, Iceland's "othering" does not necessarily suggest hatred or conquest, but it does frame the land as a space of difference—and danger; interestingly occurring quite close to the establishment of the Old Covenant which brought Iceland under greater Norwegian rule. However, the reception of *Konungs skuggsjá* in Iceland complicates any simplistic narrative of cultural domination. The text was widely copied for pedagogical purposes in Icelandic households, especially in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Icelandic women appear to have played an important role in preserving and transmitting the text as a moral and educational resource. As Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir has noted, its domestic usage suggests a local recontextualization: the hellish portrayal of Iceland seems to have been interpreted not as an insult, but as an exhortation—an invitation to moral resilience in a land of natural extremes. Though *Konungs skuggsjá* was used for its many other lessons in geography, religion, and politics, in terms of the discourse on Iceland, the Icelanders were able to offer the greatest demonstration of moral living as they were daily surrounded by reminders of the urgency of the call to perseverance. This reading allows us to see how texts that seem to participate in "othering" can be received and reshaped in unexpectedly constructive ways.

Konungs skuggsjá offers one of the clearest examples in medieval Norse literature of the theologizing of landscape. The text thus occupies a liminal space: both a product of Norwegian royal ideology and a tool for Icelandic moral formation. In examining this layered portrayal, we see how landscapes can be moralized and nations othered through

theo-political commentary—a promising line of inquiry for constructive and historical work at the intersection of ecocriticism, politics, and religion.

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**The question of Latin *Stabreim* in the *Þorlákstíðir* and elsewhere
(alongside a new reading of Anon Eccl 1 *Ad te care ave mitto*)**

The Latinity of Iceland has often been neglected. In contrast to the island's vernacular treasures, regarding which in-depth research has been conducted for decades, Latin often appears as "another", foreign language. This bias is to be traced back to the genesis of Norse medieval studies themselves. Manuscript collectors like Árni Magnússon, driven by a certain nationalism, deemed monuments of the international, learned language of the Catholic church as less worthy of conservation than Old Norse-Icelandic *sögur* and poetry (Gunnlaugsson 2017, 165–169). Correspondingly, researchers since the 19th century have focussed on Iceland's vernacular literature. Aside from Paul Lehmann, Lilli Gjerløw, Áslaug Ommundsen and Gottskálf Jenson, few scholars have taken up the task of devotedly studying Iceland's Latinity. Particularly little attention has been paid to the transmission of continental Latin texts in this frontier region.

The shortage of extant manuscripts as well as research has invited scholars to assume hypotheses regarding the relation of Latin and Old Norse. It has recently been argued that alliterations in the work of Saxo Grammaticus stem from his Norse background – the idea being an imitation of *Stabreim* (Frans n.d.), the essential structural device of early Germanic poetry which was later artistically refined by Norse poets. A similar claim has previously been put forward regarding one of Iceland's most important Latin works: the *Þorlákstíðir*, the divine offices and proper parts of the mass for the days of St Þorlák's death and translation into Skálholt cathedral (Ottósson 1959, 60). There are indeed several alliterative constructions within the *Þorlákstíðir*, that may remind of *Stabreim*, e.g. (Ottósson 1959, 89):

Odore fragrancie florent tua ossa
Honore frequencie veneratur fossa.
Pereant a facie incensa et subfossa
Repara nos gracie libera a noxa.

The alliteration of the letter *f* appears to create a link across the caesura of the first three of these Goliardic verses (7pp + 6p) in the manner of *ljóðstafr*, the linking alliterative letters of *Stabreim*. However, such a hypothesis causes several problems. On one hand, an off-verse's first *ljóðstafr*, the *höfuðstafr*, is always placed relatively early in Norse poetry – in some skaldic metres it is even necessarily the first syllable of the off-verse. However, in the given example the words *fossa* and *subfossa* situate their supposed *höfuðstafr* in the penultimate syllable. Furthermore, *ljóðstafr* usually coincide with a lift, which is not the case for the words *fragrancia* and *frequencia*. The two first on-verses of the given example ought to be viewed in relation to each other, not to their respective off-verses: The word forms *odore* and *honore* rhyme with each other by two syllables just as *fragrancie* and

frequencie. These two words are by all likelihood inspired by their similar usage in a continental office for St Dominic (AH 25, 86), the influence of which upon the *Þorlákstíðir* is well-known (Ottósson 1959, 49f.).

Similarly to how these two words can be traced back to the poem's Latin tradition, it appears as though the alliterations in the *Þorlákstíðir* altogether can be explained as a Latin phenomenon far more plausibly than as stemming from vernacular influence. Alliteration was used as a stylistic device by the ancient Romans, but since the Roman poetic nomenclature was borrowed from the non-alliterating Greeks, a term for this ornament was missing in the classical era. The usage of alliteration rose sharply by the 4th century. It was during this time that Aelius Donatus introduced the term *paramoion*, which was carried into the Middle Ages by authors such as Isidor of Seville and the Venerable Bede (Wölfflin 1881, 25f.). By the Carolingian era, *paramoion* had become a thoroughly established stylistic device (see e.g. Winterfeld 1899, 267–271, although it must be noted that the medieval pronunciation attributes two sounds to the letter c). The latter Middle Ages knew alliterating texts like the sequence *Veni virgo virginum* (AH 54, 250; Bartsch 1968, 240), which also heavily uses other figures of speech, and the *Carmen Buranum* 5 (Hilka/Schumann 1930, 5–7). It was customary for medieval works on versification to recommend utilizing alliteration in Latin works – albeit demurely (e.g. Faral 1958, 169–171).

Against this backdrop, only alliterations with specifically Germanic characteristics would allow to classify them as vernacularly influenced. These characteristics are: (1.) the alliterative syllables usually coinciding with a lift, (2.) the linking of two verse parts while positioning only a single *ljóðstafr* in the off-verse, namely close to its beginning and (3.) intervocalic alliteration. In the entirety of the *Þorlákstíðir*, only up to four verses fulfil these requirements. Such a small number is not significant. There are by mere coincidence more instances of such alliteration in one of the *Þorlákstíðir*'s models (AH 25, 85). We may come to a similar conclusion regarding the idea of *hendingar* (internal rhymes of every hemistich's penultimate syllable with a previous, in this case strictly the first syllable – half rhymes in on-verses, full rhymes in off-verses) in the *Þorlákstíðir* (cf. Robert Ottósson 1959, 60).

The fact that the *Þorlákstíðir* are best seen within the frame of the Latin poetic tradition must, however, not distract from the Icelandic-Latin poems which in fact adhere to *Stabreim* and its aforementioned criteria. Four of these notable monuments of language and poetic interaction are known to exist, two of them being macaronic, i.e. multilingual (Lehmann 1937, 5f., 80). Those two entirely in Latin are even deeper entrenched in the vernacular tradition: They appear to mimic the Germanic initial accent through the almost exclusive usage of two or four-syllable-words and are composed in skaldic metres: *hrynhent* and *dróttkvætt*.

Regarding the *hrynhent* poem, there has been an ongoing editorial problem. It's most recent edition (Grove 2007, 472) reads as follows:

*Ad te, care ave, mitto; audi nostrum carmen laudis;
factus esto fratrum recte flore decus seniorum.*

*Presta, summe Pater, castam plene fidem Audoeno,
 † aminavi † ut tu, Numen, isto uiro prebuisti.*

As indicated by the cruces desperationis, the word form *aminavi* has been perceived as thoroughly corrupted. In response, editors have either emended the phrasing with no regard to the manuscript's extant letters nor the poem's rhythmic structure (Kålund 1917–1918, 64) or interpreted it as the dative case of an unrecognizable name (Grove 2007, 472). It appears more likely, however, to read the word as a form of *animare* and understand the entire verse's meaning as *animavi, ut tu, numen, isto viro praebuisti*, "I have induced that you, God, have granted this to that man". Due to the poem's strict use of *hendingar*, we'd expect the first syllable to end on the same consonant as the on-verse's penultimate syllable *num-*, just as the manuscript's word form *aminavi* suggests. There are two explanations for this aberration: Firstly, the acute marking the *i* could be erroneously placed, since distinguishing the six minims composing *-nim-* is not easy in Gothic Minuscule. In this case, we'd need to accept the half rhyme of *an-* and *num-* as the poet's intention, later fogged through a scribal error. A perception of such a consonance – a *Gleichklang* – of nasal sounds is attested in Sigvatr Þórðarson's *Knútsdrápa*, which combines *en* with *-óm-* (Townend 2012, st. 8). The other possibility is that the poet did not accept such a consonance of nasals and thus turned *animare* into *aminare* as a metaplasm due to strict *hending*. We can observe such metaplasm in a macaronic poem, which e. g. writes *proconsul* as *procussul*, in order to fulfil the *hending* with *püssa* (Lehmann 1937, 5). Much is yet to be analysed regarding Icelandic Latinity, a task which requires knowledge of the Norse as well as Latin traditions of the Middle Ages.

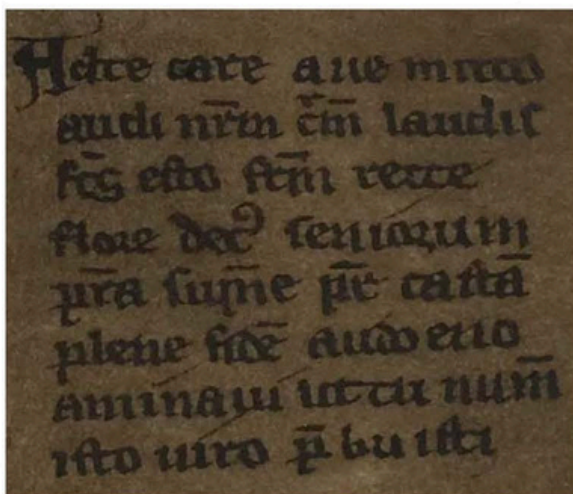


Image description: The Latin *hrynhent* poem *Ad te care ave mitto* written as a marginal gloss in: Copenhagen, Arnamagnæanske Samling, AM 732 b 4to, fol. 5r. The first word in line seven should be understood as the conjugated verb form *animavi* – either reshaped as a metaplasm or distorted through a scribal error regarding the acute.

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The Adapted 'Other': An Examination of Saracens in the *Karlamagnús saga*

The Old Norse-Icelandic chivalric sagas, or *riddarasögur*, comprise a corpus of relatively understudied sagas which began as adaptations of continental romances and epics before flourishing into their own genre of indigenous Icelandic literature. One of these earlier, thirteenth century adaptations is the *Karlamagnús saga*, a compilation consisting of translations of ten *chansons de geste* arranged to follow the exploits of Charlemagne and his paladins. Karlamagnús' battles against the non-Christian 'Other' reach a dramatic peak at the battle of Runzival (Old French: *Rencesvals*) and the death of his prized champion Rollant. This villainous Other is most often the Saracen, the literary pseudo-Muslim antagonist perennial within continental epic literature. However, despite the loan-word *Saracinar* existing in Old Norse-Icelandic, the saga writers instead elected to almost exclusively employ the word *heiðinjar* to describe Karlamagnús' foes (Kalinke, 2024, 51).

Through an examination of two individual sagas in the *Karlamagnús saga* compilation, *Af Runzivals bardaga* and *Af Guitalin saxa*, I seek to investigate the portrayal of the antagonistic forces that Karlamagnús and his champions face over the course of their adventures. This paper builds upon the works of Marianne E. Kalinke, Geraldine Heng, Suzanne Conklin Akbari, and Sverrir Jakobsson to examine the ways in which race and religious difference may have been viewed in the Old Norse-Icelandic reading community. Despite Kalinke's recent claim that the 'non-Christian Other (no matter the persuasion) is always a Saracen', (Kalinke, 2024, 51), I argue that in the context of the *Karlamagnús saga*, the concept of the 'Saracen' was specifically and simultaneously tied to both religion and geographic location, with each of these carrying their own separate connotations. The Norse adaptor's insistence on using the word *heiðinjar* as opposed to *Saracinar* implies that simply being a being a pagan did not necessarily make one a Saracen. However, by adding a character's geographic background of these pagans, the saga author completes the necessary requirement to be considered a Saracen, who then in turn can be portrayed as possessing more explicitly negative qualities.

By using a process of systematic categorization of specific references to the pagan pantheon as presented in both the *riddarasögur* and the *chansons de geste*, as well as instances of idol worship in each narrative, it becomes possible to make certain inferences concerning the attitude towards Saracens in the Medieval North. This attitude reflects both a changing way in which Western Christendom was coming to understand Islam, as well as an enduring tendency in Northern Europe to view paganism through a lens of Classical discourse. (Akbari, 2009; Sverrir Jakobsson, 2016). The two parts of the compilation were selected for examination on the basis of one being an adaptation of the most well-known *chanson de geste* in the case of *Af Runzivals bardaga* and the other being the only saga in the compilation where Karlamagnús' enemies are Germanic Saxons that do not hail from Africa or the Middle East.

There are twelve direct mentions of the pagan religion in the thirty-seven chapters of *Af Runzivals bardaga*. Much like the continental *chansons de geste* tradition, the Muslim characters in this saga worship a pagan anti-trinity consisting of Maumet (OF *Mahum*), Apollin (*Apolin*, Apollo) and Tervagant (*Tervagan*). In a departure from the Oxford *Chanson de Roland*, the closest extant version of the Roland narrative to *Af Runzivals bardaga* (although likely not the direct source), the introductory chapters of the saga expand the pagan pantheon to include Jubiter (*Jupiter*) and removes a sequence following Rollant's death in which Karlamagnús and his knights ride into the heathen camp and destroy the idol (*skurgoð*) of their god Maumet. However, destroying idols is a necessary step in the process of dominating the Saracens in the *chansons de geste* (Akbari, 2009). The absence of this sequence in this *þáttur* of the *Karlamagnús saga* compilation suggests a different relationship to pagan idolatry, or perhaps more accurately, the relationship to domination and victory. In this specific context, the Norse adaptor is perhaps suggesting a more secular view of cultural domination. The idols do not matter: Karlamagnús and his warriors have already completed their destruction of the Other on the battlefield.

The higher number of direct references to paganism occurs in *Af Guitalin saxa*, with twenty instances across the saga's fifty-three chapters. Similar to the Saracens that slay Rollant at Runzival, the heathen Saxons invoke Maumet in times of need and to threaten their enemies. Notably, there is only mention of idol worship in the saga, in an expository statement from Karlamagnús himself in reference to events that occurred in the past. Karlamagnús, in an exchange with the Saxon king Guitalin, demonstrates an awareness of the Saxons' lapse in their Christian faith, but it notably does not specify the kinds of paganism they participate in both at the time of the story and in the past. Whether the idols prior to their conversion were of pre-Christian Germanic gods or to a literary pseudo-Islamic Muhammad does not matter. In the context of this saga a pagan is a pagan, suggesting an overarching concept of universality in an 'us 'vs. 'them 'narrative (Sverrir Jakobsson, 2016).

Direct references to paganism occur in 37.7% of the chapters of *Guitalins þáttur*, at a higher rate than the 32.2% of the chapters of *Runzivals þáttur*. So why then, if the paganism in the *Karlamagnús saga* is given a quality of universality, does there seem to be a stronger sense of vehement antagonism (or negative representation) from the Saracens of *Runzivals þáttur*, even more so than Guitalin's Saxons? There is an observable difference in the language used to describe the physical attributes and origins of the antagonists in each part of the compilation. When describing adversarial armies from European territories, the saga writer depicted the heathens in a matter-of-fact tone, simply stating that Guitalin's forces included the likes of Rūs, Frisians, Danes, etc. In contrast, the language used to denote the ethno-geographic makeup of military forces hailing from Africa or the Middle East in *Af Runzivals bardaga* is more explicitly negative, keeping in line with the language used in the *chansons de geste*. The enemies of Karlamagnús are said to have hailed from cursed lands, and their physical attributes are described in detail as exaggerated and monstrous.

While there may have been a reluctance on the part of the Norse redactors to use the word *Saracinar* in their texts for specific reasons still unknown, we can see a difference in attitude towards antagonists which hail from farther afield in the Muslim world. The pagan

forces in the *Karlamagnús saga*, the Saxon and the Saracen, may have followed the same 'false' religious pantheon, but they were not necessarily perceived as the same people. The Saracen Other, as presented in this literary context, represents a danger to safety and the status quo, perhaps more so than the Saxon Other. The hesitancy to use the word *Saracinar* possibly provides some insight into how the Norse scribes, and by extension, the northern reading community, may have conceptualized antagonist forces abroad.

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Othering Women to Reconstruct the Past: Rethinking Narratives of Female Infanticide in Viking Age Scholarship

Introduction

Both academic and popular discourses typically portray the Viking Age as a period of endemic violence and rigid patriarchy (as evidenced, for instance, in Roesdahl, 2016; Raffield et al., 2017). Within this framework, the theory of selective female infanticide, i.e., the deliberate killing of female offspring, is particularly influential. The idea that female infanticide was widespread and socially accepted in the Viking Age was prominently proposed by Clover (1988) and has been reiterated in scholarly discourse to the present day (see below). It has even been argued that this practice triggered the emergence of the Viking Age by creating a demographic imbalance with a surplus of men and a scarcity of women, which would have fueled intense male aggression, as well as competition for wealth, status, and brides (Barrett, 2008). This narrative renders men the sole agents of sociocultural change, while women and children are reduced to passive objects, political tools, and incentives for male action (Moen, 2019b).

The Arguments

It is striking that despite the widespread acceptance of this theory, no systematic attempt has been made to critically evaluate its arguments. Old Norse Sagas and the *Íslendingabók* have frequently been used to argue for female infanticide (Clover, 1988; Pentikäinen, 1990; Wicker, 1998, 2012; Friðriksdóttir, 2021). However, these texts rarely state an infant's sex as the decisive factor for exposure, and, in fact, appear to describe male infanticide just as frequently as female. Furthermore, they were written centuries after the Viking Age, composed by Christian men whose ideological and cultural biases undoubtedly shaped their narratives (Vésteinsson & Friðriksson, 2003; Boulhosa, 2005; Callow, 2006). Christian laws prohibiting infanticide have likewise been seen as evidence that it was once widespread and considered a significant threat by Christian authorities (Clover, 1988; Pentikäinen, 1990; Wicker, 1998, 2012; Mundal, 2005; Mejsholm, 2009; Lawing, 2013). However, it is difficult to disentangle ideological positions and prescriptive ideals from actual social practices. Additionally, these laws, written centuries after the Viking Age, never specify the sex of the exposed infant. Another recurring argument involves *Landnámabók's* disproportionate references to male settlers, which some claim mirror Viking Age demographics (Clover, 1988; Wicker, 1998). However, scholars have convincingly argued against the historical veracity of this source, noting that its primary aim was to create a coherent settlement narrative rather than record demographic realities (Vésteinsson & Friðriksson, 2003; Wellendorf, 2010; Callow, 2011). Many settlers likely represent imaginary figures, and the source is better

understood as a reflection of how medieval Icelanders conceptualized their past and identity.

From an archaeological perspective, the perceived predominance of adult males in Viking Age burials has often been regarded as material evidence for female infanticide. The scarcity of non-adults is attributed to infanticide, with female underrepresentation explained by the assumption that girls were its primary victims (Clover, 1988; Wicker, 1998, 2012). Importantly, however, this pattern is a local phenomenon, which cannot be generalized to all of Scandinavia and Iceland (Svanberg, 2003; Stylegar, 2010; Moen, 2019a). Furthermore, sex determination has frequently relied on grave goods rather than osteological analysis, particularly in Norway, where skeletal preservation is poor (Stylegar, 2010). Female graves with gender-specific objects represent a very narrow category that cannot be equated with either the total number of buried females or the proportion of females in the once-living population. Excavation quality also impacts data, with more thoroughly excavated sites typically yielding more balanced sex ratios (Stylegar, 2010; Wicker, 2012). Comparative studies are also used to argue for female infanticide in Norse societies (Clover, 1988; Pentikäinen, 1990; Wicker, 1998; Mejsholm, 2009), citing examples such as Roman Britain, where infant remains are frequently recovered (Mays, 1993). However, the demographic profiles used in these comparisons are based on age estimation methods known to produce statistical biases. Specifically, they create an artificial peak around birth, giving the misleading impression that most infant deaths occurred at or shortly after birth, when in fact this does not reflect actual mortality patterns (Gowland & Chamberlain, 2002; Lewis & Gowland, 2007). Finally, isolated finds of non-adult skeletal remains in special depositions have been interpreted as evidence of infanticide (Lillehammer, 2011; Eriksen, 2017; Friðriksdóttir, 2021), but these cases are extremely rare, the sex of the deceased is unknown, and their circumstances remain ambiguous, leaving open the possibility of natural deaths (Eriksen, 2017).

Othering Women to Reconstruct the Past

As demonstrated, neither textual nor archaeological evidence substantiates the idea that large-scale female infanticide happened in the Viking Age. While isolated cases of both male and female infanticide certainly occurred, there is no indication that the practice was widespread enough to significantly affect demographic patterns. The enduring popularity of this theory can be understood through the concept of Othering. Being a key figure in second-wave feminism, Simone de Beauvoir argued that women are always rendered secondary and marginal, while (heterosexual) men are positioned as the universal norm. This Othering naturalizes patriarchal dominance by confining women to subordinate sociocultural and economic roles (de Beauvoir, 1949).

This framework is highly relevant to the infanticide theory, as it reflects the automatism of regarding men as the only social agents in the Viking Age, while women appear only as passive victims of male action. This deeply embedded androcentrism has

produced notable inconsistencies in the interpretation of textual and archaeological evidence, with data being evaluated differently depending on the gender it concerns. For instance, only two saga passages discussed by Clover (1988) specify that female infants were killed, while two mention male infanticide, yet she concludes that “in reality, it was (...) all above the female who were selected for elimination” (156). That two references to female infanticide are taken as sound evidence of a systemic practice, while those concerning males are dismissed as anomalies, reveals the selective reasoning underpinning this claim. As Moen (2019a) notes, it is striking that no discussion is offered on how the reliability of different passages is determined, or why evidence of male infanticide is considered exceptional. A similar inconsistency characterizes Wicker’s discussion of the Birka cemetery, where numerous female and non-adult burials have been excavated. Rather than treating this site as evidence warranting a reassessment of earlier assumptions about male overrepresentation, Wicker maintains that “it is possible that there really were fewer women than men here as at other sites” (2012, 253). While a cautious approach to archaeological interpretation is essential, it becomes problematic when applied selectively. In this case, it is invoked to downplay evidence of women’s presence, but not to question theories about their systemic murder.

Ultimately, the theory of female infanticide appears less an evidence-based conclusion than a scholarly construct, perpetuated through uncritical repetition and shaped by modern androcentric perspectives. It forms part of a self-reinforcing academic discourse that marginalizes women and children as passive, vulnerable, and disposable. This narrative persists not because of compelling historical and archaeological evidence, but because it aligns with familiar, patriarchal ways of conceptualizing both the past and present.

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Women and Reality in Icelandic Literature: An Opening Towards Otherness



Fig. 1: Artistic view on witches and landscapes in the *Íslendingasögur* – Marie Sophie Besson 2024 (URL-source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/DIYZuteqh9L/>)

Many scenes of the *Íslendingasögur*, construct a worldview where female bodies are symbolic of the landscape, especially in contexts that today would be deemed “unrealistic”. These women are perceived as extra-human, but they gain power, autonomy, and agency in

this liminal ontological position.¹ In *Vatnsdæla saga*, the witch Ljót appears walking backward, with her head between her legs, staring at her enemies. She intended “að snúa þar um landslagi öllu”, to turn upside-down the whole landscape, and says she failed only because she was seen by her enemies before she got sight of them (Aðalsteinn Eyþórsson et.al. 2018, 4: 32). Although unsuccessful, her action is representative of the connection between women’s magic and landscape – and of its ontological implication.

Ljót’s physical action corresponds to the effect she intended to have on the landscape: like she would reverse the landscape to cause fear, she leaves me terrified as she twists her body to appear upside-down. She uses her own body as a symbol, that is, a gateway connecting a magical reality inhabited by forces that can invert the perceived landscape, and the material, physical one, where she attempts to control the men’s perception. Vision plays a central role here: it transforms the physical environment into a mental image and a semantic construction (i.e. the landscape) through subjective physical perception. The woman’s magic then stems from her being the invisible one who sees, and this is representative of the women’s liminal role in the *Íslendingasögur*’s worldview.

This paper asks whether such worldview prevailed in contemporary Icelandic literature, after the “disenchantmentg of the world” (cf. Weber 1963). I argue that feminist writing escapes the rules of a male-dominated rationality to re-establish women in their powerful liminal position, through specific links with the landscape. Svava Jakobsdóttir does this through revisionist mythmaking. Her *Gunnlaðar Saga* (1987) rewrites the theft of the mead of poetry around Gunnlöð, the giantess who gave the mead to Óðinn, by blending her identity with Dís, a young contemporary Icelandic girl detained for stealing a Bronze Age beaker.

Svava articulates Christian and Icelandic myths in a dialogue on women’s ontological status by making the goblet originally containing the mead as sacred as the mead itself, like the chalice used for the Eucharist. This metonymy allows for an axiological inversion: Óðinn becomes guilty for the theft of the goblet, when it was Gunnlöð’s duty as priestess to drink the mead with him, in a consecration rite where she gives him power over the land.

Óðinn then takes the beaker by force: he enters the temple with iron—a cursed metal in which men have discovered their power to extract the potential for violence from the earth. This is a mythicized, ecofeminist reflection of Chernobyl’s accident, also recounted in modern times. By exhibiting a link between the coercion and ontological dismissing of women, the disenchantment of the world, and the destruction of nature, the novel places Chernobyl in a history of male violence originating in Old Norse mythology. *Gunnlaðar saga* then retakes from skaldic poetry the association between women, land(scape), and gold (Osborne 2014); here, this association becomes an ontological truth, opposed to a male deviation towards violence and artificiality (associated with iron).

The woman’s guilt for the man’s sacrilege is expressed through geographical metaphors around the “land of guilt” (“land sektar”) where silenced women are separated from the common reality (Svava Jakobsdóttir 2013, 111). I identify here a dysphoric

¹ See Besson 2024 for a full exploration of this topic within the research framework of the Kvennaspor Project (Árnastofnun).

reinterpretation of medieval poetry, where mythicised female elements appear in the landscape. The guilt transferred from men to women also reflects Christian culture. The mead of poetry corresponds to the fruit of knowledge, but, prepared by Gunnlöð for ritual drinking, it was never forbidden, and her land echoes Eden—freed from Eve's guilt.

Dis's mother finally decides to follow her daughter and reestablish the feminine truth, breaking the cultural legacy of transmitted guilt. In her final words, two trees emerge on a shore: the recreation of Askr and Embla proposes a new gender ontology based on a community of essence, once again making man and woman part of the natural landscape, as they were in skaldic poetry.

In a parallel way, Vigdís Grímsdóttir's novels present female outcasts, victims of social violence, who find power and freedom in their inner landscapes – a forest for *Stúlkan í skóginum* (1992) and a shore in *Ég heiti Ísbjörg, ég er ljón* (1989). The borders between these worlds and the common, physical one, are blurred as various elements pass from one to the other. These inner worlds are linked to conflicts of power, and finally cover the whole narrative space, as the characters leave the common world.

The striking difference of agency exhibited by the female protagonists in what other characters call “reality” and in these inner landscapes highly recalls the sagas. In these mental realities, like in saga-landscapes (e.g. dreamscapes), unafraid women interact with natural elements that often have agency and meaning. Here, these other levels of reality convey a mental, individual construction, in contrast to the sagas, where they seem to exist independently, although they do need female characters and specific circumstances to be accessed. Medieval materials are also thematically convoked, blended with psychoanalytic imagery and popular tales.

Contemporary novels reinvent the strength, autonomy, and creative power that women have gained from their link to what is “other”. In contemporary novels, the distance between the common reality and these paranormal worlds that women access through connections with the landscape has increased. However, this does not make women weaker. On the contrary, female narrators have replaced the sagas' male gaze and commandeered the whole diegetic world(s), shaping the text to express their truth, refusing to be othered by the narration.

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Trivial Things, Significant Transactions: Symbolic Payment in Early Icelandic Law

Grágás offers a detailed enumeration of items accepted as legal tender (*lögaurar*; K§221). Such a comprehensive listing and carefully established equivalences imply that, within medieval Icelandic legal culture, the nature and value of the object tendered in payment could directly affect the validity of a transaction. This paper addresses whether a transaction could be legally contested due to a significant disparity between the agreed-upon price and the actual value of the item sold, and what legal weight non-standard or symbolic forms of payment could carry.

Along with *Grágás* and *Landnámabók*, the *Íslendingasögur* are invaluable for tracing the evolution of legal thought through the period of Icelandic settlement and the Commonwealth era (c. 874-1262). These texts frequently reference transactions involving ships (or fractional ownership thereof), provisions, livestock, and, of course, land. They do, however, present a distinct methodological challenge. As they are narrative in nature rather than legal texts, they offer limited detail regarding the formal legal framework of such transactions and its evolution. Moreover, due to their nature, they generally omit routine, everyday exchanges, instead privileging transactions of broader societal consequence, such as land acquisitions or dealings important to a settler's journey, social status, or inter-societal conflicts.

Nevertheless, even these rather scarce instances provide important insight into the functional flexibility of customary law. While *Grágás* retrospectively describes relatively rigid equivalences for valid forms of payment, the sagas demonstrate that value equivalences were not always applied in practice. Even the most ordinary or seemingly insignificant objects could acquire legal salience, serving both as mediums of acquisition and as a basis for legal precedent. Particularly interesting are cases where an item of negligible material and monetary value, clearly failing to meet formal criteria for being legal tender, could nonetheless be accepted as payment.

A particularly interesting example can be found in the account of Steinuðr (Steinunn) the Old's acquisition of land. A relative of Ingólfr Arnarson, she arrived in Iceland among the first settlers. According to *Landnámabók*, Steinuðr offered Ingólfr a stained cloak as payment for lands he offered her, thus explicitly asserting her will to pay, even if only symbolically, for those lands. Although the cloak, old and stained, obviously did not meet the established quality standards for legal tender, the mutual consent of the parties made the transaction legally valid. The symbolic nature of the payment, underscored by the narrative emphasis on the cloak's stains, did not hinder the formal transfer of property.

It is worth noting that woolen cloaks of trade quality, as specified in *Grágás*, were indeed recognized as legal tender, alongside fox pelts, cows, or sheep. Trade-cloaks effectively served as currency in Iceland's largely exchange-based economy. Still, the discrepancy between the real value of land and the price Steinuðr the Old offered remains striking. What made the transaction possible was the particular context in which it occurred. The Age of Settlement was marked by a profound evolution in property law across the Nordic world. The *óðal* system, based on ancestral land rights, was at the center of these transformations, reflecting shifts in both social structure and legal practices. The topos of the appropriation of *óðal* lands by Haraldr hárfagri became an important element of Icelandic history, although *óðal* system ended up never re-emerging in Iceland. Scholars such as Aron Gurevich (1957) suggest that *óðal* system was already in decline, even before the Settlement period, giving way to more individualized forms of land ownership. Land transactions during the settlement era, therefore, provide the best example of how acquisitions often carried not only economic significance but also social weight: the choice of future neighbors, the strengthening or creation of a social network of influence.

The early Icelandic legal system was mixed in nature, based both on legal precedent and statutory norms. As a result, it was significantly influenced by the practices of the Settlement period, during which many foundational precedents were established. For instance, the precedent of the stained cloak, that is, of a symbolic payment that did not involve the actual market value of the item acquired, reappears later in *Grettis saga*. To determine ownership of a stretch of shoreline where a whale had stranded, the *lögsögumaðr* Þorkell máni invokes Steinuðr's cloak as an example of what could constitute an acceptable and legally binding form of payment.

The misunderstanding of the actual value of an item by one of the parties was not considered sufficient grounds for declaring a sale invalid. In *Grænlendinga saga*, for example, it is suggested that Karlsefni sold an ornament made of maple wood brought from Vínland without understanding its true value. The key factor was reaching an agreement on the price; a refusal to name the price, on the other hand, indicated an unwillingness to conclude the transaction. However, even if a price agreement had been reached, the deal could still be voided in the absence of witnesses to the arrangement. It is important to note that one of the parties could agree to a price that did not reflect the actual value of the item being sold (as in the case of Steinuðr), but could also reject a fair legal tender offer, even if its value and quality fully met the requirements, because of some social or symbolic implications. Thus, in *Hrafn's þáttur Guðrúnarsonar*, Þorgrímr refuses to accept Guðrún's golden bracelet as payment for livestock. He wants to buy Sighvatr's land and justifies it by claiming that selling one's wife's possessions is unmanly, a statement that Sighvatr appears unable to refute.

In sum, while Icelandic legal texts like *Grágás* sought to formalize retrospective equivalences in payment, actual practice as reflected in saga literature and early legal precedents reveals a more nuanced and flexible approach. Symbolic payments, such as

Steinuðr's stained cloak, demonstrate that legal validity could rest not on material value, but on the consensus between the parties and larger social context.

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Reading the Clouds: Liminal Space and Identity in *Bárðar saga snæfellsáss*

This paper examines the narration of “otherness” in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, in relation to the protagonist Bárðr Dumbsson. The relationship between the paranormal and the natural world and the implications for a hybrid protagonist such as Bárðr are central to this examination. By looking at three different scenes, the significance of weather descriptions in relation to Bárðr’s more-than-human identity becomes established. In bringing these topics together, the analysis combines an ecocritical outlook with monster studies. *Bárðar saga snæfellsáss* belongs to the post-classical family sagas, focusing on topics of alterity and conflicts between the human and the non-human. My analysis is interested in the first half of the saga, in which Bárðr is the protagonist, while the second half follows the life of his son, Gestr.

Bárðar saga revolves around the life of Bárðr Dumbsson, whose father descends from trolls and giants. Bárðr moves to Snæfellsnes with his second wife, Herþrúðr, and their children. One day, Bárðr’s daughter, Helga, is lost at sea while playing with the sons of Bárðr’s half-brother, Þorkell. Bárðr then kills his nephews in a rage. Afterwards, he leaves society and becomes a *bjargvættir*, a guardian spirit of the Snæfellsnes region. Bárðr is othered from the very beginning of the saga, when he is established as a hybrid and not quite human figure, being part human, part giant, and part troll due to his parents, and having grown up with a *bergbúi* in Norway. He therefore occupies a liminal space between human civilisation and the more-than-human natural world, thus acting as a mediator between the two. In crucial scenes where his otherness is particularly salient, descriptions of the appearance of extreme weather phenomena accompany the events. There are three key scenes in which Bárðr’s paranormal identity plays a crucial role. These scenes are accompanied by descriptions of extreme weather phenomena. Such descriptions appear relatively infrequently throughout the saga, making the connection to Bárðr’s otherness significant.

The first scene concerns Bárðr’s daughter Helga and her drifting journey to Greenland. When Helga is playing near the ocean with Þorkell’s sons, there is mention of thick fog. One of the boys pushes Helga on an ice floe out onto the sea, where strong winds move her away from Iceland towards Greenland. When Bárðr learns of Helga’s disappearance, he becomes furious, killing Þorkell’s sons. After this, he realizes, “I do not have anything in common with normal people anymore” (1991, 19). He leaves human civilisation behind to live alone in the mountains. The next scene details Bárðr’s rescue of Ingjaldr from a storm at sea. Ingjaldr’s sheep are killed by a troll woman. To apologise, she promises good fishing grounds. The next morning, when Ingjaldr rows out to fish, the weather remains pleasant. But then, strong winds and heavy snowfall occur, the weather conditions worsening, until one can hardly see. When Ingjaldr

realises that the troll woman is behind this, he calls for Bárðr, who eventually saves him. The final scene depicts Bárðr's rescue attempt of Oddr from a snowstorm in the mountains. Oddr gets lost in a snowstorm in the mountains. The snow is heavy, difficult to see, and he does not know where he is. However, without having been summoned, Bárðr suddenly appears before Oddr and leads him out of the snowstorm to safety.

Bárðr's "otherness" does not seem to play a big role in his life up until the first key scene. The disappearance of his daughter – aided by sudden strong wind – and his subsequent bout of violence bring Bárðr's paranormal nature to the front. The severe weather functions as a catalyst for an event which makes Bárðr's otherness visible, relevant to himself and other people, and even frightening. In the other two scenes, storms are threatening the lives of others. There, however, Bárðr does not appear violent, monstrous, or frightening. Instead, he appears as a benevolent guardian spirit, compassionately helping those in need. Thus, the paranormal can be both origin and escape from danger. Ingjaldr, for instance, was lured into a storm by a non-human figure, yet Bárðr, an embodiment of the paranormal, becomes Ingjaldr's saviour. The storms follow a narrative pattern first described by Bernardine McCreesh, who uses the pattern to analyse depictions of storms in the mountains and their connection to paranormal activity. Although only one of the scenes is set in the mountains, one can nonetheless trace this pattern in them as well. Since weather descriptions are rare in *Bárðar saga*, these instances function as narrative signposts to announce that something paranormal is about to happen – that is, the appearance of Bárðr in his now pronounced paranormal identity.

Bárðr is a liminal figure between two words. He fluctuates between the dichotomies of the human and the monstrous, civilisation and wilderness, the mundane and the paranormal. This liminality resonates with Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's framework of monster theory, where one of his seven theses is that the monster escapes all classification as a hybrid body. The monstrous does not seem to fit neatly into the dichotomy of Good and Evil: it, like Bárðr, is both foe and friend. Parallel to this, the depictions of extreme weather are as both mundane or paranormal, and both the weather itself and Bárðr can be understood as liminal figures fluctuating between categories.

Depictions of extreme weather phenomena in *Bárðar saga* are linked to the paranormal, functioning as harbingers of the paranormal and monstrous and as a liminal meeting place for Bárðr to connect with humans and his humanity, even as he is visibly embodied in his more-than-human identity. Storms appear threatening and otherworldly and may even have paranormal causes, yet the paranormal may also be an escape out of them. The weather links both the mundane, natural world and the paranormal world, mirroring Bárðr's hybridity. The description and the experience of nature in the Old Norse literary world thus includes not only "conventional" natural phenomena, but also phenomena that can be described as paranormal. Nature itself functions as a liminal space between the worldly and the otherworldly, connecting to

both the world of nature and to the world of the paranormal. The extreme weather phenomena mirror the character of Bárðr, and, by adhering to a particular narrative pattern, also function as narrative signposts for the audience. When an extreme weather phenomenon is described in the saga, the audience expects a paranormal occurrence. This paranormal activity might be jarring, but it does not necessarily have to be negative or frightening.

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Tool-Being(s): Object-Oriented Ontology and the Myth of Kvasir

This paper explores the myth of Kvasir and the Mead of Poetry through the lens of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO).² It emphasizes Graham Harman's concept of "tool-being"—the term he uses to describe the withdrawn, irreducible essence of all objects which cannot be exhausted by their appearance, use, or function. Harman, building upon the work of Martin Heidegger (1971), refers to the "unearthly, otherworldly" character of tool-being: an ontological condition in which all things—real or imagined, human or nonhuman—exist independently of the ways they are perceived, handled, or deployed (Harman 2002). In contrast to other scholars of New Materialism, Harman argues that the true gap in philosophical understanding lies not between subjects and objects, but between objects themselves and the relational networks that only ever partially reveal them. To address this gap, he evokes a flat ontology in which all entities in the universe are rendered "things," including physically bounded, living beings, imaginary things (e.g., dragons and Sherlock Holmes), and abstractions such as poetry (Harman 2017). Within this system, no object is ontologically privileged, and no entity is ever fully knowable. Moreover, not only do objects establish and maintain relationships with humans—they also relate to other objects. Each encounter with an object is necessarily partial because every object exceeds the sum of its appearances and actions.

What happens when this concept of withdrawn being is extended to mythological figures who are not only personified but disassembled, transformed, and reconstituted as literal tools? The Norse myth of Kvasir stages just such an ontological drama. Kvasir is not only a biological entity endowed with divine knowledge – he is also dismantled, reprocessed, and repurposed into equipment: the Mead of Poetry (ed. Faulkes 1998). In his transformation, he becomes a "tool-being" in two senses: he possesses "tool-being" in Harman's philosophical sense of withdrawal, and he becomes a prosthetic of poetic transmission, storage, and memory. This double valence—mythological figures who are at once agents and instruments, persons, and poetic technologies—forms the heart of this analysis. Through Kvasir, myth stages a speculative meditation on the ontology of poetry itself (Harman 2018). The concept of "poetry" is not reducible to any singular poem, to the aggregate of all poems, nor even to its sociocultural functions or aesthetic effects. It is more than the sum of its appearances or uses, existing independently of any one encounter or act of interpretation. Its "tool-being," like Kvasir's, is partially hidden, always withdrawn, and resistant to full articulation. Yet, this myth grants partial access to this withdrawn being—not through definition or direct representation, but through metaphor, narrative disassembly, and abstraction (Brown 2001; Abram 2019; Harman 2020). Kvasir's bodily

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metamorphosis into a fluid medium—brewed, consumed, then recited—dramatizes the inaccessibility of poetry's essence even as it renders its effects tangible.

As Bruce Holsinger (2013) observes, mythography is a fertile ground for object-oriented thinking precisely because it traffics in flat ontologies and embraces defamiliarization. Myth treats human and nonhuman actors, gods and tools, fluids and speech, as part of the same ontological field. Through fragmentation, recombination, and speculative reassembly, myth discloses hidden structures of being—not by explaining them, but by dramatizing their instability, their permeability, and their irreducible strangeness. In the case of Kvasir, this includes the strange intimacy between flesh, fluid, form, and function—between a god's blood and a poet's voice.

Applying this framework to the myth of Kvasir reveals how poetic knowledge itself is constructed and communicated through states of material transformation. Kvasir's creation from divine spittle enacts a metaphor for the materiality of speech and oath-making, casting spittle not as marginal biological waste but as the very substance of sociopolitical and epistemic binding. Kvasir becomes not just an allegory for wisdom, but an embodied extension of collective divine voice—a *gríðamark* (peace-symbol), whose existence literalizes the social and semiotic body (ed. Faulkes 1993, 3). The myth of Kvasir unfolds along a series of state-changes and transformation. Kvasir's murder by dwarves, following by his exsanguination and the fermentation of his blood into mead, introduces blood as the locus of poetic potential. This biological material—poured into the vessels Óðrerir, Són, and Boðn—implies a symbolic conflation between container and contained, further emphasizing the non-bounded, distributive nature of the poetic body. The Mead of Poetry emerges not simply as a magical beverage, but as a complex assemblage of epistemological and biological materials—spittle, blood, and honey—each representing a different vector of poetic production, memory, and distribution. As the mythological embodiment of poetic skill, Kvasir is both source and medium: the poetic act is at once a consumption of his body and a repetition of divine, originary acts. In this sense, the Mead functions as what Harman might call a “real object”—withdrawn from full articulation, yet speculatively grasped through its effects, transmission, and mnemonic affordances (Harman 2002).

Skaldic ekphrasis and praise poetry, particularly *Vellekla* (in this analysis), where the invocation of Kvasir's blood directly establishes a kinship-like bond between patron and poet constructs a semiotic link which mimics biological inheritance (ed. Marold 2012). Oral verse is transformed into a technology of memory and affiliation. As such, the Mead is not merely an origin myth for skaldic craft, but a deeply theorized ontological statement about the nature of knowledge, memory, and language in medieval Scandinavian thought.

The object-oriented reading of Kvasir's myth not only offers a new framework for understanding poetic transmission in the Norse corpus but also demonstrates the broader affordances of speculative realism and flat ontology for medieval studies. While the exhaustive philological and structuralist analyses of the past century have laid a formidable foundation, the application of New Materialist and OOO methodologies can illuminate previously overlooked dimensions of mythological texts. By centering the irreducible status of objects—be they poetic, biological, or conceptual—this paper argues for a more expansive and speculative approach to medieval ontology, one in which the boundaries of the body,

the nature of speech, and the architecture of knowledge are reassembled through mythic abstraction.

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Fussum þeiri gǫrningavætti* — the image of the old-aged witch in the *Íslendingasögur

Witches in the *Íslendingasögur* are never the protagonist: they are always the “Other.” Thus, they stand in contrast to the ideal member of saga society, who is male, young, physically strong, and well-integrated into both his (upper-class) kin group and wider societal structures. Nonetheless, their depiction does not follow a unified approach, as the specific portrayal and narrative use of those characters is highly dependent on the individual text in which they appear. In this paper, I have tried to systematise the similarities and differences of aspects contributing to the image of a particularly common intersectional version of the magic-user: the old witch.

An inspiration for this was the concept of kaleidoscopic narration that Rebecca Merkelbach and Stefanie Gropper are currently exploring regarding the *Íslendingasögur* and *Sturlunga saga*. Especially the idea that while certain elements might, in one way or another, appear in different narratives, the specific composition, adjustment and modification of those elements in the context of a particular saga is a unique key component of its understanding, is of relevance for this paper. I have decided to differentiate between the diegetic role (so the elements relevant within the storyworld such as factors determining the character and their perception) and the narrative function (referring to the structure of the witch-related episode and its narrative purpose) for the sake of an easier visualization upon first approach. Yet all the four groups of elements are ultimately interrelated when coming together to form the image of the witch.

While not all magic-users in saga literature are explicitly described as old, and not every elderly person possesses magical knowledge, there is an identifiable correlation between old age and witchcraft (Miller 1988, 760). This correlation manifests itself in the perception of these figures by both the other characters and the narrative voice. Probably the most prominent example of an old witch can be found in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*'s Þuríður, whose age and witchcraft are not only introduced at the same time but also intrinsically connected and recurrently mentioned by the narrative voice as well as characters within the saga. This is often accompanied by derogatory undertones or even outright aversion, such as Grettir's exclamation “fussum þeiri gǫrningavætti” (“curse the old witch”). The negative perception of this character and her actions is furthermore extended onto her foster son, who is repeatedly blamed and ultimately outlawed for employing her paranormal services. Nevertheless, she occupies an important position as Grettir's main adversary and final defeater, rendering her narrative function essential for the overall plot-development.

Eyrbyggja saga, on the other hand, features two witches who, albeit not being described as eminently old as Þuríðr, are at least both said to have adult children. Their age is likewise used as a slanderous accusation when Katla suggests Gunnlaugr visits Geirríðr for sexual reasons, only to be requited by his observation that both women are of a similar age. The combination of age, witchcraft and pursuing relations with a young man is problematic in itself (see Roby 2020), yet the factors being in place for each of the witches still result in a vastly different perception. They are contrasted from the beginning as ‘a good woman who knows ancient lore’, and ‘a widow who is unpopular and with a troublesome son’ (Ármann Jakobsson 2007, 52, 45). Geirríðr is the sister of a *góði*, and she is furthermore frequently shown as willing to help the male members of her family, who are not only benefitting from her magical abilities, but also her knowledge and wisdom. She uses her words rather than her witchcraft, thus mostly operating within the framework of proper female behaviour as a facilitator of one’s male kin (see Johanna Katrín 2013, 29 and 51). Katla is also presented as supportive, yet her support is more obviously of a magical kind, and she furthermore has the problem that her only male relative is her troublesome son. While their narrative function is similar structure-wise, they both occupy different ends of the helper/adversary spectrum.

Grettis saga and *Eyrbyggja saga* are just two examples functioning as a potential entrance point into the frequent, complex and multifaceted portrayal of witches in saga literature. While the specific circumstances these witches are presented in within their respective sagas can vary greatly, they are all deviating from the norms of their societies to a certain degree. Concerning magic-users, Rebecca Merkelbach notes that ‘the mere fact that they possess knowledge that ordinary people lack renders them “Other” and moves them closer to the monstrous’ (2019, 130). Combined with the fact that old people are generally othered as well, the old witch is doubly marginalised, and this influences how saga society perceives such figures. When it comes to evaluating the image of the old witch and the othering, they encounter both diegetically and narratively, it is important to consider different categories, potential similarities and individual aspects at the same time. Furthermore, a character’s assessment might differ throughout the narrative, as factors, perception, or purpose may change. Thus, just as monstrosity in general, witchcraft should be seen as ‘operating on a spectrum of fluid continuity’ (Merkelbach 2019, 15), making it necessary to examine the witches in their specific interactions with society over the course of time. There are various witches to be found in the *Íslendingasögur*, and although some aspects, such as age and the connection of witchcraft to the past, are recurring themes, others can be rather diverse, just as is the purpose of these characters in the narrative structure of their respective texts. ‘Magic is a versatile literary motif in the *Íslendingasögur*, which authors had at their disposal to use in a wide range of settings’ (Jóhanna Katrín 2013, 47), and depending on those settings as well as the narrative purpose, those who wield it are portrayed differently. Thereby, the *Íslendingasögur* create unique yet also similar images of witches, each of them embedded in their own story but united by the notion of

otherness stemming from a deep fear of their disproportionate agency—within the storyworlds of these narratives and beyond.

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Other Actors – The Agency of Things in Medieval Narratives

Things, or physical objects, have always been relegated to a secondary status in the analysis of medieval narratives compared to the more obvious actors of the narrative, the characters. This paper aims to show that this restricted viewpoint ignores the plot-influencing potential of things, mainly expressed through their agency. Although 20th-century scholars did develop systems that apply the concept of agency to things, only recently have several theories made these ideas productive for medieval Material Culture Studies – some complementing, some contradicting each other. Therefore, I developed a theoretical matrix that tries to fuse three main agency theories – Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory, Matthias Jung’s theory of affordance, and Albrecht Koschorke’s concept of anthropomorphization – in one system that allows a structured analysis of object-oriented agency and, by providing a structural base, especially encourages a comparative analysis. The benefit of a comparative approach to medieval narratives, as will be executed at the example of the swords of the *Nibelungenlied* and the *Völsunga saga*, goes far beyond the determination of the similarities and differences of two things: it can reveal traces of textual history that connect texts even across language and culture borders.

Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory is a common method for describing actions and breaking them down into their individual elements. According to Latour, actions are not done by an isolated actor but instead imbedded into a network consisting of several actors and intermediaries: an intermediary leads the input to the intended output, whereas an actor, or mediator, transforms the input that is given to them, resulting in a different output. Latour’s definition explicitly includes inanimate objects as possible intermediaries and actors – he even created the term ‘actant’ for acting things (Latour 2014, 81–95). In the action “slaying an enemy” consisting of Sigurðr, his sword and the enemy, the sword is an intermediary if it allows him to slay the enemy as intended, but it becomes an actant if it breaks and prevents Sigurðr from slaying the enemy – the output is different from the input, the action is transformed. This ability to have influence on an action and change its outcome is called agency.

Albrecht Koschorke agrees with Latour about things being possible actants, but unlike Latour’s symmetrical approach to assign agency to both humans and things in the same actor-network, he states that the syntactical structures of a language support asymmetrical agency: only the grammatical subject of a sentence – be it a character or a thing – has agency, for example in the sentence “Sigurðr slays an enemy,” he has agency and his sword does not, but in “His sword slays an enemy,” the agency shifts to the thing. According to Koschorke, occupying the subject status then leads to the anthropomorphization of a thing (Koschorke 2012, 79). Anna Mühlherr adds that

To analyze the agency of a thing, one has to ask the following questions: What is the thing's affordance and is it accepted? Is the thing an intermediary or an actant in the actor-network? And: Is it anthropomorphized? After evaluating every scene in which the thing appears based on this structure, the sum of the individual assessments will determine the thing's precise degree of agency that now can range on a wide spectrum.

In a case study, the analysis of the agency of the swords Balmung and Gramr in the closely related Middle High German *Nibelungenlied* (around 1200) and the Old Norse *Völsunga saga* (around 1250) reveals that both Balmung and Gramr are often included into the narrative as intermediaries and are similarly often anthropomorphized by name and by their grammatical subject status. Differences emerge once their agency is elevated by something other than anthropomorphization: Balmung has the agency to evoke emotions and is an independent actant in the fight against Iring. Gramr on the other hand has a special position regarding Fáfnir's death, which increases its agency in a different way to Balmung's actant status and its agency to evoke emotions. All in all, the swords' agency is rather similar, with Balmung having a slightly higher degree of agency.

Moreover, the comparative analysis discovered that the respective realizations and negations of agency in both texts refer diametrically to each other: the shattering of a sword is reflected upon in the *Nibelungenlied* and realized in the *Völsunga saga*, the removal of a sword from the actor-network surrounding a significant murder is reflected upon in the *Völsunga saga* and realized in the *Nibelungenlied*. These tendencies of an intertextual deep structure of object-oriented agency connect and interweave both narratives. This observation would have been missed without the comparative approach to the structured analysis of agency that is made possible by the fusion of agency theories into the nuanced complex of gradual agency.

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