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Children of a One-Eyed God: Impairment in the Myth and Memory of Medieval Scandinavia

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Children of a One-Eyed God:
Impairment in the Myth and Memory of Medieval Scandinavia

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by

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ABSTRACT

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Using the lives of impaired individuals catalogued in the *Íslendingasögur* as a narrative framework, this study examines medieval Scandinavian social views regarding impairment from the ninth to the thirteenth century. Beginning with the myths and legends of the eddic poetry and prose of Iceland, it investigates impairment in Norse pre-Christian belief; demonstrating how myth and memory informed medieval conceptualizations of the body. This thesis counters scholarly assumptions that the impaired were universally marginalized across medieval Europe. It argues that bodily difference in the Norse world was only viewed as a limitation when it prevented an individual from fulfilling roles that contributed to their community. As Christianity's influence spread and northern European powers became more focused on state-building aims, Scandinavian societies also slowly began to transform. Less importance was placed on the community in favor of the individual and policies regarding bodily difference likewise changed; becoming less inclusive toward the impaired.

DEDICATION

To my incredible, loving, and patient wife, Ashley. Without her belief in me and her unwavering support of my dreams, none of my goals could have been realized. Thank you for inspiring me to always be the best version of myself. You are my everything.

"Þess sver ek við guðin,
at ek skal þik eiga eða enga konu ella;"
- Völsunga saga XXIV

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, scholars have understood the body as both a physical reality and an important conceptual space. The body is infused with meaning and these cultural reflections offer not only insights into the past but also an interpretive lens capable of elucidating the ways in which beauty and bodily norms shaped society. During the Middle Age, the body became an important locus of inquiry. Medieval thinkers acknowledged the relationship between the divine and the corporeal. While the metrics may change over time and place, physical beauty and moral harmony were, and remain, highly sought-after qualities.[1] Culturally defined notions of "physical perfection" could have an amplifying or limiting effect on a person's social mobility. Broadly speaking, in medieval Europe, people with impairments lived in a world where the condition of their bodies decided their place in – or outside of – the social order. Some societies, however, viewed impairment as an accepted aspect of life and were more accommodating than their contemporaries. This thesis will focus specifically on the pre-Christian Norse societies of Scandinavia from the ninth to thirteenth centuries. The overarching goal of this study will be to examine how and why pre-Christian Scandinavian beliefs may have projected different social norms regarding impairment than those present elsewhere in Europe.

Considerations of disability as a separate, culturally relevant, social stratum rather than an isolated medical pathology began appearing in academic literature in the latter half of the 1990s and continues to the present.[2] It has been argued that disability was rarely a principal theme

[1] See Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale, 1986).

[2] Though not an exhaustive list, see Leonard J. Davis, *Disability Studies: a Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1997); David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, eds., *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997); Herbert C. Covey, *Social Perceptions of People with*

studied in historical literature because it was not a universal concern.[3] Björn Johansson laments the effects of this oversight by explaining, "disability and variations related to bodily abilities is a marginalized field within archaeological research. [As a result], our understanding of prehistory is reduced and people with varied abilities are denied knowledge of a history that might give perspective and identity to their own situation."[4] Irina Metzler echoes this sentiment in regard to the practice of medieval historiography: "In part, this lacuna has been due to a lack of interest among both medical and social/cultural historian, but also due to the difficulties of uncovering narratives of [intellectual disabilities] in medieval sources."[5] Likewise, disability studies within the medieval period have been classically scant because prejudices regarding the intellectual obscurantism of the "Dark Ages" are oftentimes difficult to surmount.[6] Not everyone experiences disability or struggles with impairment in their daily lives. As such, disability stories in history were relegated to the sphere of what Michel Foucault has termed "subjugated knowledge;" historical content that was suppressed or concealed in functional consistency or

Disabilities in History (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1998); Gary L. Albrecht, Katherin Delores Seelman, and Michael Bury, eds., *Handbook of Disability Studies* (Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage Publications, 2001); Catherine J. Kudlick, "Disability History: Why We Need Another 'Other,'" *The American Historical Review 108*, no. 3 (2003): 763-793; Susan Burch and Michael Rembis, eds., *Disability Histories* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2014); Jay Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2014); Dan Goodley, *Dis/ability Studies: Theorising Disablism and Ableism* (London: Routledge, 2014); and most recently Anne Waldschmidt, Hanjo Berressem, and Moritz Ingwersen, eds., *Culture – Theory – Disability: Encounters Between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2017).

[3] Margaret A. Winzer. "Disability and Society before the Eighteenth Century," in *Disability Studies: A Reader,* edited by Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 1997), 78.

[4] Björn Johansson, "Speglingar av handikapp inom svensk arkeologi – en studie i arkeologin utmark." *Arkeologen* 13, no. 2 (2008): 4.

[5] Irina Metzler, *Fools and Idiots: Intellectual Disability in the Middle Ages*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016, 2.

[6] Aude de Saint-Loup. "Images of the Deaf in Medieval Western Europe," in *Looking Back: A Reader on the History of Deaf Communities and Their Sign Languages*, eds. Renate Fischer and Harlan Lane (Hamburg: Signum Press, 1993), 379-402.

formal systemizations.[7] Knowledge of how societies constructed disability can provide insight into their culture as well as their systems of power and politics. For example, disability studies as a field stresses the notion that disability is either a social or a cultural construct.[8] How a society chose to marginalize or accommodate individuals with impairment and how politics and power worked to erect barriers of disability for these individuals may expose previously undiscovered aspects of past cultures, especially preliterate ones. Some scholar speculate that this is because the disabled, those who were either impaired or chronically ill, were a part of societies that were understood as being naturally diversified.[9] As individuals of the medieval world were accustomed to seeing impairments and malformations, this would have been the norm, not the exception.

Despite the dearth of research into medieval impairment, many scholars have written exhaustively on the subject of disability in history. Paul K. Longmore was one of the first to advocate for disability studies as a field. *Why I Burned My Book: And Other Essays on Disability* maps Longmore's struggle of earning his PhD while enduring the physical effects of surviving polio and the pushback of individuals and government agencies because of his impairments. He opined that campaigning for the study of disability in history could empower impaired individuals and dismantle the systemic barriers encountered by many people within society. Others, such as Lennard J. Davis and Katherine J. Kudlick applied disability studies as an analytical tool for understanding power in past cultures, how governments employed categories

[7] Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures," in *Power/Knowledge - Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), 82.

[8] Jay Timothy Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric* (Syracuse: University of Syracuse Press, 2014), 8.

[9] Henri-Jacques Stiker, *A History of Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 65.

of bodily ability to maintain social order, develop hierarchies, and measure progress.[10] As the construction of disability is somewhat of a modern idea, for the most part, their work and others have examined disability within the context of the European Industrial Age as well as nineteenth and twentieth century United States history.

Since these scholars began examining the social aspects of disability in modern societies, a few likeminded historians have applied disability studies concepts to Antiquity and the Middle Ages.[11] They have sought to understand how impaired individuals were isolated from or accommodated within these past societies. There are problems endemic to many of these binary discussions. The studies have predominately focused on the negative aspects of disability in history. Irina Metzler argued that another common pitfall of past scholarship has been the notion that impaired individuals were treated approximately the same across all societies, most often poorly.[12] Further investigation has proven that this was not the case. Ancient Greeks, rather than being evaluated for their ability to function as individuals, as humans are in the modern world, were evaluated by their ability to function within their community. This allowed for a more fluid

[10] Catherine J. Kudlick, "Disability History, Why We Need Another 'Other,'" *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 3 (2003): 765.

[11] See Robert Garland *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Martha L. Rose *The Staff of Oedipus: Transforming Disability in Ancient Greece* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003); Irina Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment during the High Middle Ages, c. 1100-1400* (London: Routledge, 2006); Joshua Eyler, ed., *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010); Edward Wheatley *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010); Kristina L. Richardson, *Difference and Disability in the Medieval Islamic World: Blighted Bodies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012); Christian Laes, Chris Goodey, and Martha L. Rose, eds., *Disabilities in Roman Antiquity: Disparate Bodies – A Capite Ad Calcem* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); and Patricia Skinner, *Living with Disfigurement in Early Medieval* Europe (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2015).

[12] Irina Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe* (London: Routledge, 2006), 12.

concept of impairment, as the ancient Greek mind had no preconceived notions regarding the barring of individuals from fulfilling certain roles in their society.[13]

Despite the contributions of scholars examining the body in the medieval era, Lois Bragg has been the only author to publish on impairment in Old Norse society. In *Madness, Disability and Social Exclusion*, Bragg examines the lives of skaldic poets in the Icelandic sagas. She offers the explanation that physical impairments or disfigurements were not rationales for exclusion in medieval Icelandic society.[14] Although an important contribution to the ongoing scholarship, it does not satisfactorily answer why the Norse in Iceland held such views. Further, it does not examine how the Norse formed these ideas, and if these views changed with their conversion to Christianity.

My work synthesizes this prior scholarship with the study of pre-Christian medieval culture in northern Europe and seeks to answer the questions that Bragg's work did not. A thorough examination of the literature of the Old Norse, in the form of their poetics, mythology, and legal codes, will provide the framework for this study. Rather than operating under the assumption that the Scandinavians of northern Europe held unique views on disability, I have chosen instead to answer how and why their views may have differed from their neighbors in the Continent. To accomplish this task, my research will survey the mythographic and early historical literature of the Old Norse in Iceland. The resultant data will be paired with archaeological evidence from western Scandinavia and the north Atlantic in the hopes of finding

[13] Martha L. Rose, "Constructions of Physical Disability in the Ancient Greek World: The Community Concept," in *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability,* David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, eds., 35-51 (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 36.

[14] Lois Bragg, "Impaired and Inspired: The Makings of a Medieval Icelandic Poet," in *Madness, Disability and Social Exclusion: The Archaeology and Anthropology of 'Difference,'* ed. Jane Hubert (London: Routledge, 2000), 132.

commonalities in social or ritual practice regarding the impaired. This group cannot be classified as a unified society, however, as there is far too much evidence against the notion of one distinct pan-Scandinavian culture.[15] Instead, I will concentrate on the societies of medieval Iceland. These Icelandic societies originated from migrating Norwegian families, therefore, they shared many similarities and a common ethos. The Icelanders also authored an abundant corpus of literature in the vernacular. Much of what we know about the pre-Christian religion of the Norse, the settlement era of Iceland, and its relationship with Norway comes from this large body of work.

The nature of the source material presents its own set of unique problems. Scholars continue to debate over whether the medieval literature produced by the Icelanders can be regarded as transmitted oral history or an invented literary topos designed exclusively for the royal courts of the Middle Ages.[16] Most scholars tend to acknowledge the element of literary convention present in the works of the saga writers but also assume that these myths and legends did not manifest *ex nihilo*. My work employs this assumption, citing evidence of Norse myths appearing in sources other than the Icelandic ones, particularly in Tacitus's *Germania* and Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*. These myths, however, are far from being universal throughout the geography of northern Europe. Rather than treating the gods of the pagan Norse as representative of a universal religion, my approach considers the notion that these beliefs were

[15] See Przemyslaw Urbanczyk, "Deconstructing the 'Nordic Civilization'" *Gripla* 20 (2009): 139; Sverre Bagge, "On the Far Edge of Dry Land: Scandinavia and European Culture in the Middle Ages," in *Scandinavia and Europe 800-1350: Contact, Conflict, and Coexistence,* eds. Jonathan Adams and Katherine Holmen (Turnhout, Brepols, 2004); Sverre Bagge, "Nordic Uniqueness in the Middle Ages? Political and Literary Aspects," *Gripla* 20 (2009); and Stefan Brink "How Uniform was the Old Norse Religion?" in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World,* eds. Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop, and Tarrin Wills (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007).

[16] For a discussion on how Norse mythology may have been received and propagated in Iceland during the Middle Ages see the edited collection *Studies in the Transmission and Reception of Old Norse Literature,* eds. Judy Quinn and Adele Cipolla (Turnhout, Brepols, 2016) and Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Volume 2: The Reception of Norse Myths in Medieval Iceland (*Odense: University of Southern Denmark, 1998).

carefully preserved elements of a distant past that were carried over from Norway. These beliefs helped provide a foundation for the social structure of the Icelandic community from its founding until they were integrated into European society in 1264.[17]

Chapter two focuses on the representation of impairment within the texts of the Old Norse religion and heroic literature. These myths, as they were understood and later promulgated in written form by medieval Icelandic authors, mirrored some of the every-day difficulties the Norse encountered in their tumultuous world. The stories that were repeated orally in Norway and the other Scandinavian regions provided an ontological structure to their universe, plainly dividing existence into hierarchies and helping to make sense of the chaos of a world with only a rudimentary understanding of science. When these individuals settled Iceland and the myths were finally recorded in written form, it preserved a social system that was later lost in its parent societies due to the ravages of time, the influences of the Continent, and the ambitions of men. The written word provided future generations with more than just a mere record of deities; it preserved the intellectual and emotional proclivities of the manufacturers of Norse myth.

The pre-Christian religion of Scandinavia did not benefit from a set of well-maintained and curated texts. Indeed, the whole of Old Norse culture relied on the transmission of the myths and stories of the heroic past by means of oral storytelling. This has caused many scholars to question the feasibility that any cohesive set of stories could have survived long enough to be written down during the High Middle Ages. Margaret Clunies Ross summarized the nature of Norse myth by saying: "What we have is the tip of 'the narrative icebergs,'" and we must

[17] My work is not the first to consider this approach to pre-Christian belief in Iceland. For a thorough treatment of this topic, see Terry Gunnell, "How High was the High One? The Roles of Óðinn and Þórr in Pre-Christian Icelandic Society," and Pernille Hermann, "Cultural Memory and Old Norse Mythology in the High Middle Ages," both in Stefan Brink and Lisa Collinson, eds., *Theorizing Old Norse Myth* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), 105-130 and 151-174, respectively. See also Brink, "How Uniform Was the Old Norse Religion?" 105-136.

eventually, "assume the audience's knowledge of the main part of the story below the surface."[18] Societies, however, do not remember literally. Much like the way in which an individual recalls events, the past is reassembled with the knowledge and needs of the present. Further, social groups provide the framework within which individuals can build the schemata that allows the past to be recalled and new experiences encoded. This is where cultural memory as a phenomenon comes into play.

Cultural memory studies essentially subscribe to the idea that the past cannot be persevered exactly as it occurred. Rather the past is focused on a fixed point in history and condenses it into semiotic system of representations on which memories are attached. In the case of Norse mythology, for example, these representatives take the form of the gods, the Æsir/Vanir War, and Ragnarök. For aspects of the past to function within cultural memory, people need to invest meaning in them and "perform" them. These events were then disseminated to audiences, originally in oral form, by figures such as skalds who knew the tales by heart. They would use these tales to helps explain events in the natural world that had no discernable meaning. Myth became the learned prehistory of Norse society as the lines between them blurred with the passing of time. Scholars who have written extensively about cultural memory believe that the nature of cultural memory lends itself to an element of transformation; that the factual becomes remembered history which then becomes myth or truth depending on perspective.

This holds true when the change from oral to written history is considered. Concerning this Pernille Hermann contends that: "Writing added another medial dimension to the existing mythic heritage, and the transfer of myths and mythic phenomena to writing made the existing

[18] Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: The Reception of Norse Myths in Medieval Iceland,* Volume 1 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994), 25.

media landscape (containing pictorial and oral representations, for example) more complex."[19] This can be clearly seen when the story of Óðinn sacrificing his body on the world tree is considered. As the first examples of writing were most likely considered to hold an element of the supernatural, Óðinn's taking up of the runes of wisdom, provides a perfect narrative framework for looking back at the development of literacy in Scandinavian legend.

The advent of rune-carving must have changed communication methods in terms of how meaning was conveyed. Walter Ong states that: "Without writing, the literate minds would not and could not think as it does."[20] With the ability to record history, the action of remembering or the transferal of memory may have been affected. Such transformations can occur in a short period of time or, as with the case of the Scandinavian people, over a gradual period due to a concerted effort of the literati to preserve oral history of their forebears. Here, in a time where both oral culture and literary culture coexisted, the professional poets – or skalds – bridge the gap between the ancient world and the modern one.[21]

What textual record we have for the pre-Christian beliefs of Scandinavia is scant but was recorded by various authors in the tiny frontier community of Iceland beginning in the early thirteen-century. Interestingly, those who transferred the oral tales of the gods and heroes into written form did so during a time when Iceland's inhabitants had been Christian for two hundred years. The earliest of these manuscript sets is the *Poetic Edda*, which are a large collection of

[19] Pernille Hermann, "Cultural Memory and Old Norse Mythology in the High Middle Ages," in *Theorizing Old Norse Myth*, eds. Stefan Brink and Lisa Collinson, 151-173 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 158.

[20] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Routledge, 1982), 77.

[21] For more on this shift in mediums of recording history, see Judy Quinn, "From Orality to Literacy in Medieval Iceland," in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, edited by Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 30-60.

poems that made up the first section of a larger book called the *Codex Regius*. The *Poetic Edda* contains poems that deal with the creation of the world, the births and various adventures of the gods, and finally the cataclysmic destruction of the world and many of the gods during an event called Ragnarök. Also contained within the *Poetic Edda*'s pages are stories of Scandinavia's heroic age, most notably the story of the Völsunga family and their most storied hero Sigurd.

Another source of mythographic tales is the Younger or *Prose Edda* attributed to the thirteenth century historian, poet, and politician Snorri Sturluson. Also known as Snorri's *Edda*, the *Prose Edda* consists of three sections. The first section is called the *Gylfaginning* (the fooling of Gylfi), which recounts the creation of the world, the birth of the gods, and their destruction as a conversation between a human king Gylfi and the Æsir. The second section is known as the *Skáldskaparmál* (the language of poetry), which is a conversation between Ægir a Norse oceanic deity and Bragi the skaldic god of poetry. This book was used to educate future skaldic poets on the use of kennings – highly figurative terms from mythology that were used to describe mundane things – which would allow them to use alliterative verse more easily. The final section is called the *Háttatal* (list of verse-forms). In this portion of the Prose Edda, Snorri demonstrates the common verse forms used in Old Norse poems.

As well as authoring the *Prose Edda*, Snorri also lent his considerable skill toward the writing of the *Heimskringla*, which is a saga of the Old Norse kings. It begins with the genealogy of the legendary Swedish dynastic family of the Ynglings, a portion known as the *Ynglingasaga*. In this portion of the *Heimskringla*, Snorri offers up a euhemeristic beginning for the Norse gods by representing Óðinn as a legendary warrior-king from Troy who, with his gift of foreknowledge, leads his people to Scandinavia to avert the peril associated with an ever-encroaching Roman Empire at their borders.

Approaching the gods as analogous to their creators, their struggles against a chaotic world and one another, may be the key to understanding why they are represented differently from what modern minds conceive as godlike. The Norse gods, after all, were not all-powerful and suffered from many of the same physical and moral deficiencies as their devotees.[22] Deceit, unmanly behavior, and kin slaying were real social issues during the Viking Age, and some of their gods repeatedly exemplified these traits. In this respect, they are not unlike the gods worshipped by societies of Antiquity, especially those of the Ancient Greeks, whose gods were morally questionable.

The gods of the Norse pantheon are unique when compared to the gods of antiquity both in their physical features and in their motivations. They are powerful beings, of this world and yet apart from it, that reflect – much like the gods of the ancient Greeks – very human characteristics. They exemplify the traits that are paramount to the medieval Scandinavian peoples and epitomized a society, at least in terms of the written word, which conceptualized matters, both celestial and material, within the framework of the warrior ideal. The Norse gods participate in many of the same struggles that people of that age would have dealt with. They have impairments, they experience love and heartbreak, and they – some more than others – make poor choices that lead to disastrous consequences.

Their narrative is a teleological one, in that all paths lead to Ragnarök, and their final hour, but – outside of their impending doom – there is something reassuring about how human they are. They were developed by individuals who were searching for answers to problems in their daily lives and through that they came to represent the existential struggles of life. They

[22] See, Kevin J. Wanner, "Cunning Intelligence in Norse Myth: Loki, Óðinn, and the Limits of Sovereignty," *History of Religions* 48, no. 3 (2009): 211-246.

were the Norse people's way of dealing with their own complexities, the ambiguous and often conflicting emotions that came and went throughout their lives. As such, their stories can provide a conceptual framework within which the social norms of Viking Age society can be understood. Within the representations of the gods, their associations, their values, their victories, and their failures, modern audiences can also determine what aspects of Norse life each evoked.

Just as works of art from Antiquity portrayed the body in an idealized manner, suppressing any idiosyncrasies, so too followed classical religious thought. Cautionary tales, such as that of the Gorgon Medusa, exemplified how beauty was not only a vital asset to humanity, but to the gods as well. Instances of aberration, in these tales, almost always signifies a tragic figure; such as with the undesirable plight of the Greek god Hephaestus, whose disfigurement at the hands of Zeus earned him scorn from his fellow gods. The gods of Antiquity had to be "better" than mortals, or else they could not be considered as gods. Impairment, in this case, relegated a god to the sphere of the lowest member of classical society.

The surviving manuscripts that frame the Norse religion, however, are predicated upon ideals that depart from the classical idea of impairment. Within the stories of the *Younger Edda*, for example, even the strongest and bravest of the gods would be considered monstrous in comparison to the Greek or Roman pantheon. Norse mythology is awash with examples of missing eyes, hands, hearing, and speech. In each of these examples, the impairment is portrayed as a sacrifice made to gain something even greater. Examples such as Óðinn sacrificing his eye for wisdom and Týr sacrificing his hand for peace demonstrate a different set of theological norms than those of Antiquity, whose gods had to adhere to a standard of physical perfection; lest they be considered tragic figures. In this way, the gods of the Norse exude a positive

connection toward their perceived defects. The gods of the Norse pantheon, simply put, are augmented by their impairments rather than hindered by them.

Chapter three delves deeper into Old Norse cultural practices by scrutinizing the manuscripts that recorded their early history. These documents, known collectively as the *Íslendingasögur* or Icelandic Family sagas, relate a narrative that spans from the ninth to eleventh centuries and deal with genealogies and events that occurred geographically in Iceland, Norway, and to a lesser degree the rest of Scandinavia and the North Atlantic colonies.[23] In the original Old Norse, "saga" simply means a story or epic tale. Medieval Icelandic writers made a distinction between such prolonged narratives and more concise ones which they referred to as þættir (singular þáttr), meaning a strand of rope or yarn in the Old Norse. The latter were much shorter in length and smaller in scope than their saga counterparts and usually only dealt with one character's story set against the backdrop of larger happenings in the Icelandic Middle Ages. There are forty unique stories that make up the collective *Íslendingasögur* and more than a hundred þættir that were composed between 1220 and 1400 in Iceland. It is within these sagas that the nature of impairment can be seen practically rather than metaphorically as with Old Norse mythology.

The Family sagas are inundated with figures who have various impairments. Some of these individuals are given only a passing mention before the narrative moves forward, but others occupy important roles in the stories; some even as the main protagonist. Such is the case with the eponymous character of Egil Skallagrímssonar, whose saga relates the story of his family fleeing Norway and settling in Iceland. Egil is a complex, multifaceted individual who is

[23] The "Family Sagas" are recognized as such because they deal, predominately, with family groups; often spanning several generations.

described as having a large and unattractive head, is prone to bouts of murderous rage, and deals with blindness in his later years. The stories and characters in the Family sagas will serve to further prove that impairment was no barrier to normal life in the medieval Icelandic community.

The final chapter examines Norse attitudes toward impairment after their Conversion to Christianity. This chapter will trace the shift in popular opinion regarding impairment that occurred throughout medieval Europe and compare this experience with that of the Icelanders. Scholars have long addressed the cultural understandings of disfigurement and disability in medieval Europe as being relatively similar across societies.[24] Christianity has been assumed as operating as a civilizing force that gave rise to more modern value systems. This assumption, however, disregards the complex cultural underpinnings of the pre-Christian societies of Northern Europe. Possibly the most ubiquitously stated *fact* in Icelandic history is that the entire nation became Christian in 1000 A.D., ignoring the notion that both the Norse gods and the Christian one probably lived side by side from the beginning in Iceland, due to its first native inhabitants most likely being cloistered Irish monks.[25] Regardless, conversion is not an event, it is a process, and to say differently is to do so without regard to human agency. Iceland was not a hegemonic state and conversion was slow, and sometimes reflexively resisted.

In order to map the change in attitudes toward impairment from a pagan society to a Christian one, it would be easy to blame the new religion for superseding and supplanting the value systems of the old one. This supposition, though it may seem logical, is a categorically false one. The medieval Church is not entirely culpable for the change in perceptions. Early

[24] Irina Metzler, "Disability in the Middle Ages: Impairment at the Intersection of Historical Antiquity and Disability Studies," *History Compass* 9, no. 1 (January 2011): 48.

[25] Brink, Stefan, "Christianization and the Emergence of the Early Church in Scandinavia," in *the Viking World,* eds. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 625.

Church fathers, for example, did not hold disabled individuals in contempt. Describing Thomas Aquinas's opinions on the matter, Richard Cross has this to say: "It is very important to avoid thinking that Aquinas holds that an impairment might be a punishment for an individual's sin, that is, for the sin of the person with the impairment."[26] Though Aquinas may have possessed the theological temperance to rationalize his own views of disability and Original Sin, it is worth considering that other less insightful clerics or parishioners may not have echoed or understood these sentiments.

Despite the fact that no saga author possessed first-hand knowledge of the events they recorded, and that they may have added elements of the supernatural as artist flourishes, the conversion narratives are still important to the discussion of the individual. These narratives personalize the conversion experience from the outside, allowing modern scholars to get a glimpse at how conversion was perceived and reconstructed by individuals nearly three hundred years later.[27] The purpose for this comparison will be to ascertain whether there were changes within the social sphere of Iceland toward impaired individuals, whether their new religion had an enhancing or mitigating role in the negative perception of impairment, and to what degree these shifting perceptions were caused by influences from Continental European powers, such as those in Denmark.

Ultimately, this research will shed light on pre-Christian thought in northern Europe. In answering questions related to how the body was perceived in pagan societies, a more nuanced perspective of what informed and perpetuated their cultures can be attained. In a society where

[26] Richard Cross, "Aquinas on Physical Impairment: Human Nature and Original Sin," *Harvard Theological Review* 110, no. 3 (2017): 332.

[27] Christopher Abram, "Modeling Religious Experience in Old Norse Conversion Narratives: The Case of Óláfr Tryggvason and Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld," *Speculum* 90, no. 1 (2015): 115.

physical appearance or ability does not limit social mobility, what delineators are used to stratify the populace? How are hierarchies established? The perspectives uncovered from this study may further illuminate how power and politics initiate change within the societies and cultures of the past.

CHAPTER 2

IMPAIRMENT IN OLD NORSE MYTH AND LEGEND

The early beliefs and legends of Old Norse society influenced the ways in which medieval Scandinavians in the North Atlantic perceived physical and mental impairments. The stories of mythological beings in pre-Christian folk belief reflected both the environments and attitudes of their authors. Additionally, these stories provided a matrix for further dissemination of these ideals when they ultimately shifted from their classical oral form and took physical shape as text. In the most general sense, myth was reality. It not only formed a part of a shared, learned pre-history, it elucidated idealized behaviors and bodies. These myths, as they were understood and later promulgated in written form by medieval Icelandic authors, mirrored some of the every-day difficulties these individuals encountered in their world and likewise represented their own cultural transformations as immigrants.[28] This relationship was also reciprocal, in that the myths were in many ways influenced by the creative hands that made the decision to write them down for the first time. The authors of the Norse mythographic works fashioned a discursive hierarchy of gods with diverse identities and skills from across the whole of Northern European folk belief and each god and goddess became a divine reflection of a facet of existence in the mundane, physical world. Many of these gods are depicted in the written sources as having impairments, demonstrating a link between the earthly and the divine or giving the gods relatable, human qualities.

Though the audience of these myths had converted to Christianity hundreds of years before the stories were ultimately recorded by medieval Icelanders, they would have recognized

[28] Lesley Abrams, "Diaspora and Identity in the Viking Age," *Early Medieval Europe* 20 (2012): 19.

these tales as an integral component of their heritage. This was a particularly salient notion for men and women living on the margin of the Scandinavian world in Iceland, where they were so far removed from the various peoples who shaped these myths. These stories perpetuated a set of social norms that was later lost in their parent societies due to the passage of time, influences from the Continent, and the ambitions of men. Holding on to these tales and becoming their stewards appears to have been a central concern to the Icelandic community.[29] The written word provided future generations with more than just a mere recollection of deities, it preserved the intellectual and emotional proclivities of the manufacturers of these myths. Outside of their language, it was their only link to their relatives in Scandinavia proper and served as a basis for their unique national identity.

Just as the myth-makers formed hierarchies of sovereign beings, the Scandinavians and their neighbors likewise fashioned social systems where power was relegated to kings, chieftains, or warrior-elites. An examination of the ceaseless interplay between belief and the shaping of societal norms in Norse diaspora colonies such as those in Iceland provides a more nuanced understanding of these systems of power; specifically, the relationship between the recorded myths and social attitudes toward impairment. This notion assumes that the actions, words, and deeds of past peoples can give modern audiences an inlet for contextualizing their culture. Viewing the pre-Christian corpus of mythic beliefs as a cultural system, then, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz would suggest, enables these stories to transcend their supernatural environments and become a theoretical framework for the experiences of their practitioners.[30] When the myths

[29] John Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance Among the Gods* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1997), 17.

[30] This methodology pulls from the work of noted anthropologist Clifford Geertz who pioneered his notion of a "thick description" of history where actions considered commonplace or mundane could be used to reconstruct the cultures of long-dead or preliterate societies. For his approach of using religion as a vehicle toward

of the gods were retold over the hearth during the long nights in Northern Europe, the Norse gods lived their adherents' lives by proxy. The gods, in turn, took on the features of men and women in the real world. When the gods fought against the Giants of Jötunheimr, they were echoing pre-literate Scandinavians' struggles against the very real and chaotic forces of their environments.[31] These legends essentially had to serve a purpose, one that addressed the normality of existence, otherwise they would have lost their impact.[32] This notion gains a great deal of traction when examined through the lens of disability studies, as the impaired are equally represented among the gods they would have recognized, emulated, and revered.

What textual record exists for the pre-Christian beliefs of Scandinavia, however, is scant and largely regarded as not being entirely representative of any pure belief system recognized by any one Northern European group. It is much more likely that what was recorded by authors in the tiny frontier community of Iceland, is a carefully constructed amalgamation of various gods and stories from several different traditions and time periods.[33] This is due to an increasing

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understanding culture, see Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 87-125.

[31] From the story of the slaying of the giant Ymir to build the universe in chapters four through eight of Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning* to the cataclysmic final battle against the fire-giants of Múspellheimr, the Norse gods perpetually struggle against the older forces of the universe. For an overview of this relationship between gods and giants see Henning Kure, "In the Beginning Was the Scream: Conceptual Thought in the Old Norse Myth of Creation," in *Scandinavia and Christian Europe in the Middle Ages: Papers of the 12th International Saga Conference*, eds. Rudolf Simek and Judith Meurer (Bonn: Hausdrückerei der Universität Bonn, 2003), 311-319.

[32] Ármann Jakobsson, "Why Be Afraid? On the Practical Uses of Legends," in *Á Austrvega: Saga and East Scandinavia – Reprint papers of the 14th International Saga Conference, Uppsala, 9th-15th August 2009*, eds. Agneta Ney, Henrik Williams, and Fredrik Charpentier Ljungqvist (Gävle: Gävle University Press, 2009), 35.

[33] Scholars such as Anders Andrén have theorized that the pre-Christian traditions recorded by medieval Icelanders may have developed during the Scandinavian Iron Age (500 B.C. – 800 A.D.) but may have had their roots in Bronze Age (1700 – 500 B.C.) traditions. For a more thorough evaluation of the timeline the Old Norse religions' development see Anders Andrén, "Old Norse and Germanic Religion," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Ritual and Religion*, ed. Timothy Insoll (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 846–862.

scholarly understanding that there were no hard, cultural boundaries between the Scandinavian and Germanic, the Celtic, and the Sami and Baltic peoples.[34] For example, scholars such as Terry Gunnell and Stefan Brink have noticed little evidence of the worship of Óðinn, who is presented as the primary god in Norse literature, outside of Sweden and Denmark. The use of Óðinn's proper name, or his many by-names, is suspiciously absent in place names of Iceland and Norway. This is corroborated by accounts in the sagas, specifically *Eyrbyggjas saga* in which a central character Hrolfr (Þórólfr) Mostrarskegg flees his home in Norway for Iceland due to the actions of Harald Hárfagri (Finehair).[35] The saga writer makes it a point to mention that the cause of contention lies in Hárfagri's worship of Óðinn and Mostrarskegg's devotion to Þórr.

This chapter evaluates the major gods of Norse myth that were described in the source material as having impairments. These beings are examined to gauge their significance within Norse folk belief, medieval memory, and the overall social framework that encapsulates impairment and disability. The primary gods surveyed are Óðinn, the leader of the Æsir gods in Norse mythology, Týr, the one-handed Æsir, god of battle and justice, Heimdallr, the eternal watchman of the gods and possible father of all mankind, Þórr, the god of thunder and protector of the human race, and Hǫðr the Æsir who was born blind and who occupies the central narrative involving the demise of all of the major Norse deities at the final battle called Ragnarök. Each of these divinities illuminate some aspect of social assumptions concerning impairment. How these

[34] See Thomas DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1999) and Lindow "Cultures in Contact," in *Old Norse Myths, Literature, and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2003), 89-110.

[35] See also Terry Gunnell, "How High was the High One? The Roles of Oðinn and Þórr in Pre-Christian Icelandic Society," in *Theorizing Old Norse Myth*, eds. Stefan Brink and Lisa Collinson (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), 105-129.

attitudes came about and what they meant to the individuals of the medieval age who consumed these myths in written form is the primary focus of this study.

Óðinn

The extant mythographic works place the mysterious and alluring figure of Óðinn in a position of preeminence among his fellow Æsir gods.[36] These texts credit him as being the god of battle, the god of the slain, and the god of poetic inspiration and wisdom. He is known by many names, though he is most often identified with the auspicious title of "All-Father" which denotes his status as chief among the recognized gods in Norse mythology. His appearance inspired fear, admiration, and reverence in Norse myth, as oftentimes it was a prelude to a hero's blessing and other times their misfortune.[37] His unique physical features unquestionably make him among the most easily distinguishable of the Norse gods. Apart from his solitary eye, Óðinn is almost always represented in contemporary artistic depictions with his twin raven companions,

[36] This concept is one that is perpetrated by the writings of the 13th century author, poet, and statesman, Snorri Sturluson. In his recollections of the gods, both in the *Prose Edda* and *Heimskringla*, he situates Óðinn in a position of primacy, creating an implied hierarchy. Current scholarship, however, argues that such a hierarchical system may never have existed and, if it did, Óðinn was almost certainly not the most important of the gods across the entirety of Scandinavia. His name is suspiciously absent from place names in both Iceland and western Norway. It has been argued that this was a premeditated act by medieval Christian writers to erase Óðinn from history, but this seems unlikely due to Þorr's continued prominence in Scandinavia that continued well into the Christian era. See Terry Gunnell, "How High Was the High One?" in *Theorizing Old Norse Myth,* eds. Stefan Brink and Lisa Collinson (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017).

[37] As a mythological character, Óðinn is extremely intriguing due not to his physical depictions but more so for those relating to his personal goals and apparent duplicitous nature. He is completely consumed in his quest for more knowledge to the point that he is willing to sacrifice anything or anyone to achieve his goals. Óðinn is the eponymous All-Father whose blessing is highly sought after by kings and warriors, but he is also depicted as quickly turning on those whom he once showed his favor. In Óðinn's grand design, he needs all the greatest men he can find in the mortal realm to die in glorious combat so that he could have his Valkyries carry these worthy souls to his hall, Valhǫll. There, they would drink and fight from dawn until death, only to be resurrected the following morning to do it all again. It is important to note that this afterlife benefits only Óðinn and not the mortals he gathers. His impressed army of elite warriors, known collectively as the Einherjar, was predestined to fight by the Æsir's side against the fiery forces of Múspellheimr during the final battle of Ragnarök.

and his odd, eight-legged stallion Sleipnir.[38] Ironically, his interactions within the tales of Norse mythology Óðinn frequently wears disguises when dealing with mortals and his fellow Æsir alike, but his true nature is always revealed to the reader by one of the many names he uses or his lone eye.

It is his missing eye that makes Óðinn such a paradigmatic figure in conceptualizing the Old Norse view regarding impairment. Annette Lassen, in her seminal work on the eyes and blindness in northern literature and mythology, states that: "Some names refer to Óðinn as blind, some referring to blindfolded in battle, while a single title, 'Baleygr' or 'Den Båløjede,' refers to Óðinn's blazing look."[39] In the mindset of the myth-makers, it was perfectly acceptable for the chief being in their belief system – coincidentally the god of battle – to have only one eye. As difficult as this notion may be for modern minds to conceptualize, injuries from warfare were emphatically recognized in Viking Age societies. When combat is mentioned in the Icelandic sagas, for example, individuals who survive oftentimes do so without a limb, hand, or foot.[40] But Óðinn's impairment does not occur during a battle, at least not a physical one. The god sacrifices his eye for something he deems far greater than sight. The Icelandic historian and statesman Snorri Sturluson, in the *Gylfaginning* portion of his thirteenth century *Prose Edda*, recounts the story of the All-Father's missing eye. Here, in pursuit of greater, supernatural knowledge, Óðinn seeks out the Well of Mímir, a shadowy figure – possibly of chthonic origins – who presides

[38] Margaret Clunies Ross, in *Prolonged Echoes* volume 1, explains that Sleipnir's abnormal origins (born of Loki) and eight legs are not detrimental to the animal's importance as a tool. Rather than its eight legs being regarded as a deformity, it is understood to be a source of strength and added speed, so much so that it is accounted as the best horse among gods and men.

[39] Annette Lassen, *Øjet og blindheden i norrøn litteratur og mytologi* (Copenhagen: Danmarks Blindebibliotek, 2004), 85.

[40] These stories are numerous in the Icelandic sagas. Some examples can be found in the stories of Ónundr tréfótur, and Grettir Ásmundarsonar in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* as well as that of Auður of Mávahlíð in *Eyrbyggja saga.*

over a fount of immeasurable knowledge.[41] Here, according to Snorri, Óðinn wishes to have a drink from Mímir's Well to tap into the power of wisdom that resides within its waters but cannot do so without a pledge:

> En undir þeirri rót, er til Hrímþursa horfir, þar er Mímisbrunnr, er spekð ok mannvit er í fólgit, ok heitir sá Mímir, er á brunninn. Hann er fullr af vísendum, fyrir því at hann drekkr ór brunninum af horninu Gjallarhorni. Þar kom Allföðr ok beiddist eins drykkjar af brunninum, en hann fekk eigi, fyrr en hann lagði auga sitt at veði.[42]
>
> Under the root that goes to the Jötunar is the Well of Mímir. Wisdom and understanding are concealed there, and Mímir is the name of the well's owner. He is full of wisdom because he drinks of the well from the horn Gjallarhorn. There came All-Father and asked for one drink from the well, but he did not get this until he gave up one of his eyes as pledge.[43]

The *Gylfaginning* does not specify whether this choice was a difficult one that the god wrestled with or whether his actions were immediate. It is also impossible to know whether his sacrifice was one made for his fellow Æsir or for his own selfish reasons. All that is known is that Óðinn plucks out his own eye and is then allowed a drink from the waters of wisdom within Mímir's Well.

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[41] Mímir's origin story appears in the *Ynglinga Saga* portion of Snorri's *Heimskringla*. Here, the events of the Æsir/Vanir War are recounted. These events portray Mímir as one of two Æsir sent to the Vanir during a hostage exchange to allow a peaceful reconciliation between the warring factions. Hœnir is sent along with Mímir and the Vanir are told he is a wise man and perfect candidate to be made a leader. The Vanir quickly learn that he is unable to make any decisions without the presence of the wise Mímir. Seeing this as duplicity on the part of the Æsir, the Vanir decapitate Mímir, sending his head back to the Æsir at Asgard. Óðinn quickly preserves the head with herbs and then speaks incantations over it, allowing the head to speak and reveal unknown wisdom to Óðinn. He also appears in both the anonymously authored *Völuspá* of the *Poetic Edda* and in Snorri's *Gylfaginning* of the *Prose Edda*, where he accommodates Óðinn's quest for knowledge by exchanging a drink from his well for Óðinn's eye. His name translates as "memory." Scholars argue that his role in mythology may have been as the locus of cultural memory, allowing an exchange between superficial knowledge represented by the earthly mode of perception – the eye – for a deeper, more supernatural form of understanding that took the form of prophecy or foresight. See, Viktor Rydberg *Undersökningar: Germanisk mythologi* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 1886); and Jaan Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1989).

[42] *Prose Edda, Gylfaginning*, chapter 15.

[43] All translations in this work are my own unless otherwise noted.

Snorri's version does not stand alone. He references an older source from the *Poetic Edda* known as the *Völuspá*, or Prophecy of the Seeress. Herein, the Seeress of the *Völuspá* mentioned the connection between Mímir's well and Óðinn's wisdom:

Allt veit ek, Óðinn, hvar þú auga falt: í inum mæra Mímisbrunni. Drekkr mjǫð Mímir morgin hverjan af veði Valfǫðrs.[44]	I know well, Óðinn, where you hid your eye: in the famous well of Mímir. Mímir drinks mead each day From Valfǫdr's [Óðinn's] pledge.

This excerpt from the *Völuspá* illustrates that Óðinn indeed gave away a part of his vision by placing it in Mímir's well – specifically one of his eyes – so that he could receive enhanced vision. The author of this poem visualizes Óðinn's sacrificed eye as a drinking vessel from which mead, a drink known from mythographic sources to contain the catalyst for poetic inspiration, is consumed.[45] Of this, George Dumézil comments: "Thus Mímir, one way or another, is Óðinn's instructor, his professor of runes; and the loss of a bodily eye was the means by which the magician god acquired in exchange a spirit eye, the power of second sight, and all the supernatural powers that its possession brings."[46]

What may be observed by some as a deficiency, however, may not have been considered as such across the temporal and ethnic boundaries that exist when reconstructing the pre-

[44] *Völuspá*, stanza 28, in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, eds. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 2014), 298.

[45] John Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 231-232.

[46] Georges Dumézil, *Mitra-Varuna: An Essay on Two Indo-European Representations of Sovereignty*, trans. Derek Coltman (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 140.

Christian past of Scandinavia.[47] Far from the personal tragedies that impairment is associated with today, Norse literature suggests a different view. While blindness was not a desirable situation for an individual, it was not looked upon as a defect in the individual but rather as a potential danger to the community; a notion that is addressed in the story of Hǫðr and Balder which will be addressed later in this chapter.[48] Blindness, in other words, did not determine an individual's worth so much as it made them a liability in the grander scheme of the group in which they lived. In societies like Iceland – where one's role within the community was paramount to the success or failure of the unit as a whole – blindness could pose a significant obstacle to overcome. It was, however, not cause enough to exclude such individuals. It simply meant they would need to adapt. Myth, or at least the conceptualization of mythic stories, may have influenced this mindset within the Scandinavian communities. In the *Hávamál* of the *Poetic Edda*, a long series of poetic platitudes commonly described as the words of Óðinn himself, the Scandinavian mentality toward impairment is outlined succinctly:

Haltr ríðr hrossi,	The lame ride horses,
hjǫrð rekr handarvanr,	the handless herd cattle,
daufr vegr ok dugir,	the deaf fight and win fame,
blindr er betri	being blind is better
en brenndr sé;	than burning [on a pyre],
nýtr manngi nás.[49]	the dead are good for nothing.

[47] It is important to note here that when terms such as "defect" or "imperfect" are used throughout this chapter they are not a judgment against the nature of impairment or those with impairment but are used to highlight the very real perceptions of normality that exist in human ideals. Further, they are predicated upon mythographic representations of deities from classical antiquity in which gods had to be presented as physically idealized to qualify for their position. Through the development of this thesis, these glamorized expectations of the physical body will be examined in the context of the historical realities of different religious groups and will prove that such expectations of physical "perfection" disqualified almost every human being and not only those with impairments.

[48] See Lois Bragg's discussion of these "motifs of markedness" in, "From Mute God to the Lesser God: Disability in Medieval Celtic and Old Norse Literature," *Disability & Society* 12, no. 2 (2010): 174.

[49] *Hávamál* stanza 71, in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, eds. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 2014), 336.

This pragmatic approach toward individuals with mobility and sensory issues is unique in that it purportedly comes from the mouth of the highest of Norse deities.

By sacrificing such a critical faculty as his vision, Óðinn gains something of greater value. His conscious decision to limit his sight in the earthly world for divine knowledge and awareness explains the importance of sacrifice and that physical limitations rather than being viewed as abhorrent were often the result of sacrifice and bravery. Such a position on bodily impairment had long reaching implications in a warrior culture which produced its share of injured soldiers. As the eyes were often associated with masculinity, strength, and status, his trade of this symbolic element of his worth – as a man and as a leader – for a draught of the wisdom that flows from an older, chthonic source also signifies his position as a bridge between these two worlds, a location that is unique in Norse mythology and belongs only to him.[50] He has paid a heavy price in return for the opportunity to drink from the Well of Mímir, as his loss of an eye would have rendered him at a disadvantage in the arena of combat; a place in which the principal god in a warrior culture would have difficulty justifying his position.

More than just a description of his physical body, Óðinn's singular eye signifies his personality and thereby his unquenchable search for more wisdom. His sacrifice of an eye for this wisdom is second-place to his reputation of possessing the keenest sight of the gods. By willingly giving up a critical earthly faculty he has gained a divine ability to see all. Óðinn is never criticized because of his impairment. In fact, the stories related to him emphasize that he has traded a mundane faculty for an ability of far greater social importance. His ability to use poetic language allows him to employ his wisdom as a bridge to both the liminal memories of

[50] Else Mundal, "Forholdet mellom gudar og jotnar i norrøn mytologi i lys av det mytologiske namnematerialet," in *Studia Anthroponymica Scandinavica* 8, (1990): 5-18.

the past and the present age. It also aligns those individuals who possessed a keen mind for poetry, particularly the Icelandic poets known as skalds, closely with the preternatural abilities of Óðinn. Such abilities overshadowed impairment due to their social importance and they likewise solidified Óðinn's station as the All-Father, the chief of the Æsir gods.[51]

Additionally, Óðinn extolled the virtue of the warrior class and gave his adherents an example they could aspire to. For example, in the tenth-century elegiac poem *Hákonarmál,* Óðinn allows the great warrior Hákon inn góði (the Good) Haraldsson his army to die in battle at Fitjar on the island of Storð (c. 961). When asked by Haraldsson why Óðinn would allow him to fall in battle after he was deserving of victory is it implied that such a king of men is needed in Valhǫll.[52] This story would almost certainly have made sense to anyone hearing or reading it during the Middle Ages. After all, kings were only as strong as their armies. Knowing that the prophesized eschatological event Ragnarök looms over his future, when the wolf will devour him, Óðinn must work tirelessly to gather the finest champions for his personal army so that he may face his fate.[53] His fate, as it is explained in the myths, however, has been sealed and there is no escape for him, yet he accepts this as part of his existence and does what any proud warrior and father of the gods would do. Óðinn puts on the best display of valor he possibly can by meeting his destiny without reservation. He struggles against a fate he knows he will succumb to.

[51] Elisabeth Arwill-Nordbladh, "Ability and Disability, On Bodily Variations and Bodily Possibilities in Viking Age Myth and Image," in *To Tender Gender: The Pasts and Futures of Gender Research in Archaeology*, eds. Ing-Marie Back Danielsson and Susanne Thedeen (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2012), 35.

[52] *Hákonarmál*, stanzas 12-13, in *Snorri Sturluson Heimskringla Volume I*, trans. Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2011), 118.

[53] Hilda Roderick Ellis Davidson, *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1993), 76.

It does not stop him from gathering his army. He refuses to submit, though he knows the outcome has been decided long ago.

Impairment was a fact of life; therefore, individuals most likely found ways of adapting to their condition within the social environment of their community. Further, the recurring theme within both the mythic and saga literature suggests that impairment precluded the tragic connotations that many modern writers transfix with the Middle Ages but instead associated the individual with the divine. Having an impairment made an individual marked and all great individuals bore this mark whether they be god or hero.[54] For those with impairments, the link to the gods may have given them solace and a sense of importance within Norse societies. How true this may or may not have been to the everyday person in medieval Scandinavia is difficult to assess.

For medieval Scandinavians, falling in battle was nothing to call a tragedy, no more so than being wounded for the common good. If anything, this fate was much preferred if you were a male in Scandinavian society. Personal honor was paramount within the social order of the community. To not face one's responsibilities – to shirk a challenge – was considered níðingsverk: a cowardly act.[55] This could result in a loss of favor and ideologically a loss of masculinity akin to social castration. Óðinn instead functions as an example of what can be achieved at a cost. He illustrates that poetic wisdom is not the exclusive purview of the sighted. The blind or the poor of sight can still add to the strength of the group and are not to be pitied but

[54] Lois Bragg, *Oedipus Borealis: The Aberrant Body in Old Icelandic Myth and Saga* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004), 51.

[55] For more information on Norse social views toward cowardice see Folke Ström, *Nið, Ergi and Old Norse Moral Attitudes* (London: University College London, 1974).

rather admired for their sacrifice. Likewise, injured soldiers can still contribute to the wellbeing of their community despite their acquired impairments, as demonstrated in stories of other Norse gods.

Týr

The god Týr also sacrificed a part of his body for an ostensibly greater purpose than Óðinn. Though not as easily recognized by modern minds as Óðinn or Þórr, Týr at one time occupied a place of prominence in the divine hierarchy. It has been debated whether he once held the title of God of War within pre-Christian Norse belief.[56] Týr is known for his courage and mortals who show courage in battle are associated with his name. In the *Poetic Edda* poem *Sigrdrifumál*, for example, the Valkyrie Sigdrifa teaches the hero Sigurd to carve runes and invoke Týr's name to gain victory in battle:

Sigrúnar þú skalt rísta,	Winning-runes you shall carve,
ef þú vilt sigr hafa,	if thou will have victory,
ok rísta á hjalti hjǫrs,	and carve on thy sword-hilt;
sumar á véttrimum,	some on the furrow,
sumar á valbǫstum,	some on the flat,
ok nefna tysvar Týr.[57]	and name twice Tyr.

Týr may have also occupied the position of god of law in northern cosmology. This notion stems from the use of his name in relation to the Þing, the assembly where individuals would pursue legal matters ranging from marriages to compensation against those who had wronged them.

[56] See Georges Dumezil's argument against this notion in *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, ed. Einar Haugen, trans. Francis Charat, George Gopen, John Lindow, and Alan Toth (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 43-48.

[57] *Sigrdrífumál* stanza 7, in *Eddukvæði II Hetjukvæði*, eds. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 2014), 315.

Not much else is known about Týr apart from the role he plays in placating the wolf Fenrir, one of the aberrant offspring of Loki, the trickster god in Norse myth. Fenrir is an enormous and prodigiously strong wolf with the ability to speak.[58] In the story, the Æsir gods come to fear the wolf, who was born of normal size but quickly began to grow at a rapid pace. After linking him to a prophecy in which he would lead to their destruction along with the universe, the gods decide it would be in their best interests to keep him under lock and key. No chains, however, would hold him.

Fenrir had apparently begun to see the Æsir's attempts to restrain him as a form of sport, enjoying being able to destroy any fetters they placed upon him. Appealing to his vanity in the form of a challenge, the Æsir gain his consent to try out a new binding called Gleipner that was magically crafted by the dwarves at Óðinn's behest. According to the legend, this mythic bond was created from the noise of a cat, a woman's beard, the roots of a mountain, a bear's sinews, the breath of a fish, and the spittle of a bird. It was as soft as a silk band which raised the wolf's suspicion. Sensing the gods' duplicity, Fenrir informs them that he will only consent to being bound if he is offered some form of collateral. Týr, so the story goes, offers up his right hand to the wolf's mouth. When Fenrir realized that he has been tricked by the gods and could not break the enchanted binding, he clamps down his jaws on Týr's hand; taking it as payment for the gods' deception.

Týr's sacrifice can be read as an analog for sacrifices that are made for the greater good of the community. Individual importance factored less than what it does in modern times. An individual's value was assessed by the role they played within the larger group, in early pre-

[58] For the mythographic account of Týr's sacrifice, see Snorri's *Prose Edda, Gylfaginning*, chapter 34.

industrial societies.[59] A person's ability to serve the best interests of the group overshadowed what they could achieve for themselves. This, of course, relates more to everyday individuals and less so to the nobility – where personal gain seemed its most prevalent, if not aggrandized.

Týr's role within Norse mythology and his complicity in his own mutilation thus agrees closely with the function of prophecy and the disfigurement of Óðinn. Georges Dumézil relates that: "It is the loss of his right hand, during an act of unfaithfulness under a pledge, which qualifies Týr as the god of law pejoratively to the view of the law, his aims are not directed toward resolution among the parties, but toward the abasement of some – Fenrir – by the others – the Æsir."[60] This explains the insult lobbed at him by Loki in the *Lokasenna* where he declares that Týr "is not called a peacemaker."[61] John Lindow offers up an alternative theory for this verbal jab. Loki – never missing an opportunity to deride his fellow deities with his silver tongue – may have added an undercurrent of subtlety to his words when he questioned Týr's ability as an arbitrator. Of this Lindow says: "To mediate something good between two people is the standard translation, but an attractive alternative would be to carry something well with two [hands]."[62] The other gods laugh boisterously when Týr loses his hand. Rather than celebrate him for his braveness, they enjoy the spectacle and go about their business as if the prophesied

[59] No more is this notion of "group above self" more prevalent than in the complex system of blood feuds that occur in the Icelandic sagas. Therein, individuals are beholden to a code of conduct to avenge their fallen kinsmen. Sometimes this dubious honor falls to individuals as distant as third cousins. For a more thorough examination of group dynamics within Norse culture see Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (London: Penguin, 2001).

[60] Georges Dumézil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen,* ed. Einar Haugen, trans. Francis Charat, George Gopen, John Lindow, and Alan Toth (Berkley: University of California Press, 1973), 45.

[61] *Lokasenna*, stanza 38, in *Eddukvæði I Goðakvæði*, eds. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 2014), 415; "Þegi þú, Týr! þú kunnir aldregi bera tilt með tveim; handar innar hœgri, mun ek hennar geta, er þér sleit Fenrir frá."

[62] John Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 297.

destruction of the gods, referred to as Ragnarök, has been averted. His bravery is not to be diminished, however, as Týr has – at least for a season – stayed the coming doom of his fellow Æsir. In this he had performed a great service to his community.

Heimdallr

Yet another of the Æsir deities whose status as a god is enhanced by their impairment is the enigmatic god Heimdallr.[63] Heimdallr guards the Bifrost, a mythical rainbow bridge that links Asgarð, the world of the Æsir, to Miðgarð, the mortal realm. As the eternal watchman of the gods, he exhibits all the qualities expected of an individual with such a magnanimous title. According to Snorri Sturluson in the *Prose Edda*, he needs less sleep than a bird, can see equally well by day or night, has vision that can pierce distances of a hundred leagues, can hear the grass growing on the human realm of Miðgarð as well as wool growing on the backs of sheep and anything else that makes noise, and owns a horn called Gjallarhorn that when blown can be heard throughout the nine realms.[64]

The nature of Heimdallr's impairment is as mysterious as the god himself. According to a passage in the poem of the *Völuspá*, Heimdallr gave up either one of his ears or a portion of his hearing in the same Well of Mímir that Óðinn left his eye, in the hopes of gaining a deeper, more divine sense of hearing. If his impairment is judged against the notion of group mentality within the warrior society of the medieval Norse – such as has been done with Óðinn's impairment – a

[63] For an exhaustive work in German on Heimdallr and the myths that he is seen in and related to, see Sebastian Cöllen, *Heimdallr – der rätselhafte Gott – Eine philologische und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015).

[64] Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning*, *Prose Edda*, chapter 27. "Hann þarf minna svefn en fugl. Hann sér jafnt nótt sem dag hundrað rasta frá sér. Hann heyrir ok þat, er gras vex á jörðu eða ull á sauðum, ok allt þat er hæra lætr. Hann hefir lúðr þann, er Gjallarhorn heitir, ok heyrir blástr hans í alla heima." See also, Ström, *Nordisk hedendom*, 106-7.

connection to honorable sacrifice can be made. John Lindow believes that an obscure verse within the *Völuspá* of the *Poetic Edda* elucidates the reasoning behind the god's trade of one of his most crucial faculties for an enhancement of his abilities.[65] His apparent sacrifice is retold by the Seeress as follows:

Veit hon Heimdalar	She knows Heimdallr's
hljóð um fólgit	hearing is hid
undir heiðvǫnum	under the holy tree
helgum baðmi;	accustomed to brightness;
á sér hon ausask	She sees a river washed with a
aurgum forsi	muddy waterfall
af veði Valfǫðrs.[66]	From Óðinn's pledge.

Perhaps Heimdallr saw the power that could be gained by such a sacrifice in Óðinn's example and wished to have the same benefit. Whatever the case may be, his reward is that of all the abilities that his role as eternal watchmen within the group of Æsir requires.

Though not leaving behind the same wealth of artistic representations within the material culture of Scandinavian archaeology, Heimdallr's significance should not be understated. Though his toponymic legacy is not as ubiquitous as some of the other more prominent Æsir, he certainly has left his mark on the mythographic works. For example, in the poem *Rígsþula* in the *Poetic Edda*, Heimdallr – taking the pseudonym of Rígr – is credited with being the father of the mortal races of mankind. Within the myth, Rígr visits three separate households each inhabited by two individuals, a husband and wife who are named in each instance. He fathers a child with each group and these children go on to represent the social classes that are assumed to have been

[65] John Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 170.

[66] *Völuspá*, stanza 27, *Völuspá*, stanza 28, in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, eds. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 2014), 297-298.

predominant in Scandinavia during the time the poem was written in the Middle Ages. The three groups represent the king, the freeman, and the slave. Each child is described in detail and their names denotes their status from Jarl to Karl to Þræll. The Jarl is tall, blond, handsome, and bears all the marks of an individual that modern minds would connect with being a "perfect" representative of Nordic stock. Karl is a bit less so, ruddy and with the stature of a farmhand. Finally, Þræll is dark, squat, and clumsy; suited only for menial labor in the community of the Norse.[67]

According to Stefan Brink, these physical characteristics, far from being delineators of normative bodily standards were merely representative of social classification.[68] Sarah Künzler, however, argues that *Rígsþula* explains that from the very beginning the different social strata are characterized and recognized by their distinctive appearance.[69] These lines of demarcation, whether intentional or not, are seen within the social sphere of the Icelandic community within the vehicle of saga literature. Frequently heroes, or heroic characters, are represented as tall, fair-skinned, and with fine golden hair. Elsewhere, those with ruddy complexions, and dark, curly hair are viewed pejoratively, likened to the trolls of legend. The only exception to this rule seems to be in the character of the skalds, the enigmatic poets of the saga age who almost always share one of these "dark" attributes.[70]

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[67] This story appears in the poem *Rígsþula* of the *Poetic Edda*.

[68] See Brink's assessment of the Þræll class in, "Slavery in the Viking Age," in *The Viking World*, eds. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2008).

[69] Sarah Künzler, *Flesh and Word: Reading Bodies in Old Norse-Icelandic and Early Irish Literature* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 45.

[70] This notion of the dark individual will be examined thoroughly in Chapter three of this thesis. How these features typified a marked or special individual will be used to understand how impairment, in certain episodes, were not a barrier to social life for the individual in medieval Iceland.

Þórr

Þórr, the mightiest of the gods, is perhaps the most widely recognized Æsir due to his continued popularity and representations in the artistic mediums of comic books and cinema. He is the resilient and resolute defender of the Norse gods as well as sovereign protector of the human race. He appears in several mythic accounts from both the *Poetic Edda* and *Prose Edda* and his representations in the material culture of Scandinavia vary from depictions on rune stones, to geographic place names, as well as amulets of his famous hammer, Mjǫllnir, being unearthed across the whole of Europe in grave sites. He was worshipped across the entirety of Scandinavia, even by the neighboring Lapps and Sami, though sometimes by a different name.[71] He is depicted as a large, bristling man with a mane of fiery red hair and eyes that match in their intensity. His mortal enemies are the giants that Óðinn routinely outsmarts in the myths. Þórr, however, is not known for his intellect or wisdom.[72] It is with his strength that he conquers the giants in bloody combat; fulfilling his role as guardian by smiting these representations of the old, chaotic elements of nature. He, much like Óðinn, derives his power from outside sources. The skaldic poem Þórsðrápa, written by Eilífr Goðrúnarson, retells the story of the forging of Mjǫllnir. Therein two other pieces of equipment, a belt called Megingjörð and a set of gloves known as Járngreipr are described as being tools Þórr uses to wield his mighty hammer.[73] The notion of a divine being needing the help of a belt and gloves for strength almost seems odd when examined outside of the context of a euhemeristic framework.

[71] For more on this see H. R. Ellis Davidson, "Thor's Hammer," *Folklore* 76, no. 1 (1965): 1-15.

[72] In the *Poetic Edda*'s *Alvíssmál*, however, Þórr uses his wits to outsmart a dwarf who is determined to take Þórr's daughter as his bride. Here, Þórr stalls the dwarf until sunrise, where the dwarf turns to stone; there ending his insulting and unreasonable request to have an Æsir woman as his bride.

[73] From the Old Norse "Power-belt" and "Iron-Grippers" respectively. See Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál* verse 74 and *Gylfaginning* verse 45 in the *Prose Edda*.

As is characterized in his many appearances throughout Norse myth, he is prone to outbursts of rage, which often pit him against his adversaries but always work out in his favor. As mentioned previously, he is portrayed as a being of action, rather than one of intellect – sometimes putting him at odds with his fellow Æsir to his detriment.[74] Whether this specific example was intended to portray him as dim-witted is not known for certain, though it seems highly unlikely. What is more likely is that Þórr represents an opposing force in Norse myth – one that counters Óðinn's use of wisdom and duplicity with brute force and action. This mindset and course of action seems more accessible to the average medieval individual, which is probably why so many identified with Þórr and came to worship him.

On the surface, it is difficult to conceptualize how Þórr fits into the schema of impairment. There are, however, several aspects of the god that warrant further scrutiny. One tale in particular comes to us about Þórr that situates the god firmly within the realm of acquired impairments. In Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál* in the *Prose Edda*, Óðinn challenges the giant Hrungnir to a horse race; believing that his eight-legged steed Sleipnir can best the giant's horse Gullfaxi. During the race, which Óðinn wins, the giant Hrungnir unwittingly enters Ásgarðr, the home of the Norse gods and is invited by Óðinn to his hall, Valhǫll. Here the giant overdrinks and becomes belligerent, denigrating the Æsir and lobbing various challenges and proclamations of violence toward them. Tiring of the giant guest, who has more than overstayed his welcome, the Æsir call upon Þórr to deal with him.[75]

[74] See *Hárbarðzlióð* in the *Poetic Edda* for the verbal joust between Þórr and Óðinn in disguise under the nom de guerre Harbard.

[75] The tale of Þórr and Hrungnir's duel occurs in the third chapter of the *Skáldskaparmál* in the *Prose Edda*.

The battle takes a peculiar turn as Þjálfi, Þórr's human servant, tricks Hrungnir into believing Þórr will attack him from beneath the ground. Hrungnir drops his shield and stands on it to counter this alleged attack but is then surprised by Þórr coming directly at him, throwing his mythical hammer Mjǫllnir. Hrungnir's weapon of choice, a giant whetstone, is the only thing the giant has to defend himself with, so he too launches an attack with his whetstone toward Þórr, targeting the incoming hammer. Mjǫllnir strikes true, shattering the whetstone and continuing until it has smashed into Hrungnir's head, killing him. Þórr, does not escape unharmed, as a large chunk of the shattered whetstone becomes imbedded in his head. The giant which Þórr killed has collapsed on top of him, pinning him to the ground with a massive leg across his throat. After being rescued from the ordeal by his young son Magni, Þórr calls upon the aid of a human sorceress to dislodge the whetstone from his head. In an uncharacteristically chipper conversation between Þórr and this woman, called Gróa, Þórr stuns her with the good news that her lost husband is actually alive and well and that Þórr had rescued him. Upon hearing this news, Gróa becomes so happy that she forgets the incantation she was using to remove the stone and it remains in Þórr's forehead. Rather than asking her to try again, Þórr simply goes along his way, apparently unbothered by his injury. This whetstone tale was recognized, in some form or another, outside of just the Icelandic texts as well. The equivalent god of thunder worshipped by the pre-Christian Lapps also had an object lodged in his head, a nail and a piece of flint, so that his image was used to kindle fire, alluding to his role in creating lightning.[76]

Þórr's significance to disability studies does not end with this solitary example. The story of his most precious asset, the prized hammer Mjǫllnir, echoes the sentiment that the gods prized function over form. Mjǫllnir's creation takes place at the hands of the artful dwarves. In a

[76] H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Viking and Norse Mythology* (Hong Kong: Barnes & Noble Books, 1996), 64.

competition against Loki, where the prize is the mischievous Æsir's head, the dwarves construct three treasures. The first was a golden boar called Gullinbursti, which went on to pull the god Freyr's chariot. The second was a ring that would drip eight identical version of itself every nine nights. This ring, Draupnir, became the prize of the god Óðinn.[77] The final prize, Mjǫllnir, which the Æsir agreed was the greatest of all became Þórr's. But Loki, fearing he would lose the wager that these dwarves could not create better treasures than their predecessors, and subsequently lose his head in exchange, transformed into a fly and bit the eyelid of one of the dwarves as he was crafting Mjǫllnir. As a result of this, the handle of the hammer was accidentally made so short that it could only be wielded by one hand.[78] Despite the weapon's implied defect, Mjǫllnir is prized above all the weapons of the Æsir. This element of the myth may symbolize that tools, just as the humans who wield them, were valued for the role they performed in society and not for what they looked like.

A final example concerning Þórr relates to his chosen method of transportation. Most often, Þórr is seen wading across rivers in the myths; traveling by foot between the realm of the gods and that of mankind. On several occasions, however, he is conveyed by chariot pulled by his twin goats Tanngrisnir and Tanngnjóstr.[79] These goats, apart from being exemplary chauffeurs, provide a great deal of utility to Þórr. The god can slay both of the animals for food and then resurrect them to full health the next morning. In an episode from the *Prose Edda*, Þórr comes across the home of a peasant farmer during his travels and is offer hospitality for the night. Þórr, a grateful guest, slaughters his trusted goats and agrees to share this bounty with the

[77] Its name translated from Old Norse means "Dripper."

[78] For the complete story, see Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál*.

[79] From the Old Norse, "Teeth-bearer" and "Teeth Grinder."

family of the farmer. After the meal the peasant's son Þjálfi, hungrily splits one the leftover bones of the goats and sucks the marrow out of it. The following morning, when Þórr resurrects the goats, one of them has become lame in its hind leg. Visibly angry, Þórr is placated by the farmer who gifts the god with his two children Þjálfi and Rǫskva.[80] Þórr's anger regarding the lameness of the goat again symbolizes the function over form element of Norse belief regarding impairment. The goat had, by acquiring this impairment, ceased to be of value because its primary function – conveyance – had been made an impossibility. No more mention is made of the goats. They are both seemingly left behind at this farm, as Þórr and his new entourage continue their journey on foot. Despite his many links to impairment, Þórr maintained his popularity as a god among Scandinavians well after their conversion to Christianity.

Hǫðr

The final Norse god to be considered in the mythographic aspect of this study is Hǫðr, the blind Æsir. Hǫðr is different from the other gods in this survey because he is apparently born with his impairment and does not acquire it through injury or sacrifice. He is regarded as a sympathetic character, in modern minds, not because of his impairment but because of the melancholic tale associated with him. John Lindow sums up the trajectory of the blind god's story by saying: "Hǫðr effectively dooms the gods – and the world – by inadvertently setting Ragnarök in motion." [81] The story of Hǫðr appears within the *Poetic Edda* and *Prose Edda*.[82] It begins with the bright deity Baldur, a son of Óðinn and possibly a personification of the day,

[80] The story of Þórr's goats appears in chapter 44 of the *Prose Edda*'s *Gylfaginning*.

[81] John Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 178.

[82] The main story is told in both the *Gylfaginning* and *Vegtamskviða* also known as *Baldrs draumar* (Baldr's dreams) with mentions appearing elsewhere in the *Völuspá*.

having terrible nightmares of his impending demise.[83] His death dreams were also shared by his mother Frigg which caused her to begin a quest to have every object on Earth make a promise to never harm Baldur. All things swore to this except for mistletoe because it was regarded as too unassuming to pose a threat. While the other gods had begun the practice of hurling objects at Baldur and then cheerfully laughing as nothing harmed him, Hǫðr sat with them, only able to enjoy the revelry vicariously. Loki – the maleficent mischief maker of the gods – jealous of Baldur's renown, saw this as a perfect opportunity to craft a projectile from the mistletoe plant and give it to Hǫðr, Baldur's own brother. Loki even helped guide Hǫðr's aim before he launched the weapon. It struck true and Baldur immediately fell to the ground dead. Of this Annette Lassen surmises: "Compounding the tragedy of Baldur's death is the understanding in pagan law that by killing his brother, even if by accident, he has committed *níðingsverk*, a treacherous act contemptable in the eyes of the gods. Hǫðr's blindness then has become a sign, not of his physical impairment, but of a moral kind, which is the qualification for his crime."[84] In other words, Hǫðr's blindness, perhaps, was perceived as a metaphorical blindness; a lack of vision concerning the importance of kinship within Norse society. Once again, the sources offer little insight into whether his blindness from birth was less desirable than blindness acquired through sacrifice or injury.

The appearance of a deity within the pantheon of gods bearing a congenital rather than acquired impairment could prove to be monumental toward understanding the true nature of social attitudes regarding impairments during the Viking Age and beyond. Frustratingly, there is

[83] See Rudolph Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007), 26.

[84] Annette Lassen, "Hǫðr's Blindness and the Pledging of Óðinn's Eye: A Study of the Symbolic Value of the Eyes of Hǫðr, Óðinn and Þorr," in *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society: Proceedings of the 11th International Saga Conference 2-7 July 2000, University of Sydney,* eds. Geraldine Barnes and Margaret Clunies Ross (Sydney: Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Sydney, 2000), 223.

very little information surrounding the character of Hǫðr. As George Dumézil has rightly pointed out, "…of the second [Hǫðr], a single action is known, the involuntary murder of Baldr, and a single trait: he is blind. He is not one-eyed and, as a paradoxical consequence, "better-seeing" like his father, but truly blind and incapable of managing himself."[85] At first look, these details would appear to relate a different attitude regarding congenital impairments than those which are acquired, self-inflicted. Upon closer inspection, however, Hǫðr's blindness cannot truly be considered a cause for shame or marginalization. Were this the case, why was Hǫðr represented in the gathering of the Æsir? He obviously retains his position among the gods despite his lack of sight. Though he is not an active participant, initially, in the revelry that leads to Baldur's demise, he is still present among those who have gathered in celebration. But the question remains if the Norse gods could trade a sensory ability for something greater, what has Hǫðr achieved for his blindness? With the lack of clarification within the extant sources, scholarship can only provide speculation.

Instead of interpreting Hǫðr's blindness as an impairment, however, several scholars have attempted to look deeper into the possible meaning behind a blind deity within the Norse pantheon. Returning to Annette Lassen commentary on Hǫðr, she maintains that his blindness is symbolic of an existential shame. Lassen contends that his condition is not an indicator of his physical weakness but of his moral failings. He is blind to the reality of the world in that he does not see Loki's deception for what it is and becomes something that is abhorrent in Germanic society, a kinslayer. She says of Hǫðr: "By killing his brother, he commits work of cowardice. His blindness is drawn to his weakness, his effeminacy, which, as we know from Snorri, is not of

[85] Georges Dumézil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen,* ed. Einar Haugen, trans. Francis Charat, George Gopen, John Lindow, and Alan Toth (Berkley: University of California Press, 1973), 58.

a physical nature, because Hǫðr is very strong. At the same time, it is a sign of insufficient insight that is the prerequisite for his crime. Hǫðr's blindness is the sign, not of his physical weakness, but of his moral blindness, which is the precondition for his crime."[86]

This argument holds a great deal of interest when considered alongside the thirteenth-century Danish clerical historian, Saxo Grammaticus's portrayal of the events in the *Gesta Danorum*, or Deeds of the Danes. Therein, Hǫðr is called Hotherus and is a mighty and capable warrior from a long line of mixed Danish and Swedish royalty. He also lacks any indication that he has any impairment to his vision. Baldur is represented as Balderus, son of Othinus, a demi-godlike character that is ostensibly impervious to injury. Both Hotherus and Balderus pine over the same maiden called Nanna who is the daughter of a King. Hotherus eventually slays Balderus in Saxo's story with the aid of a magical sword.[87]

The element of sacrifice looms large over the framework of Norse cosmology. Perhaps this was a feature that was endemic to the society of the Norse, especially in the remote frontier communities of the North Atlantic such as Iceland. There, sacrifice to gain something better was a fact of life for rural farmers. Too many mouths to feed in a particularly impoverished time led to infant exposure. Improper maintenance of your flocks during the Autumn season could result in a great loss of capital. Warfare – though mostly seen through the vehicle of feuds in the Icelandic sagas – was also a common element of daily life. Icelanders acquired impairments at

[86] Annette Lassen, *Øjet og blindheden: I norrøn litteratur og mytologi* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanums Forlag, Københavns Universitet, 2003): 79; "Høds blindhed kan på denne måde ses som symbolet på, at han er nidding. Ved at dræbe sin bror begår han niddingsværk. Høds blindhed er tegnet på hans svaghed, hans umandighed, der, som vi ved fra Snorri, ikke er af fysisk karakter, for Hød er nemlig meget stærk. Samtigid er det tegn på den manglende indsigt, der er forudsætningen for hans forbrydelse."

[87] The story of Hotherus and Balderus is found in book three of Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*.

the hands of one another as well as visiting Norwegian traders.[88] Here again, the parallels to the real world are easy to distinguish from the myths.

The myths of the Norse may have also held such a place of prominence for their people because they were rooted – at least to some degree – in truth. In *Birth of the Gods*, Gary Swanson says, "all living men are influenced by those who went before."[89] In pre-Christian Scandinavia, kinship was the indissoluble link that preserved the culture of the Norse people. It was the foundation for their culture and a model for the social systems. An individual's kinship ties affected who they associated themselves with, what side they represented during feuds, and whom they married.[90] In such a system the dead held a special status, oftentimes reaching such levels of veneration after their death that they were worshipped as gods. The worship of ancestors was one of the oldest and most ubiquitous forms of worship in the northern Europe.[91] This is due, in large part, to how close the ties of kinship were as opposed to other societies and cultic religions from antiquity.[92] The position of the elder within a group held a place of prominence in the familial framework of ancient times. They exercised a jural authority that

[88] For more on this and stories like it see chapter three of this thesis: "Living with Impairments in Medieval Iceland."

[89] Guy E. Swanson, *The Birth of the Gods: The Origins of Primitive Belief* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1960), 97.

[90] See Lars Hermanson, "Vertical Bonds and Social Power: Ideals of Lordship in Twelfth-Century Scandinavia," in *Settlement and Lordship in Viking and Early Medieval Scandinavia*, edited by Bjørn Poulsen and Søren Michael Sindbæk, 63-78. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011).

[91] Thomas A. DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 46.

[92] Lyle B. Steadman, Craig T. Palmer and Christopher F. Tilley, "The Universality of Ancestor Worship," *Ethnology* 53, no. 1 (1996): 74.

encompassed everything from the initiation of youths into adulthood and the construction of charters and legal frameworks which would govern the community.[93]

The Gods as Humans

Medieval Icelanders may have acknowledged the humanity of their gods in terms of their learned prehistory as well. Snorri Sturluson, the cataloger of myths, also penned another work which chronicles the lives of Norwegian kings called the *Heimskringla* or Circle of the World. He is not alone in compiling such elegiac-style recollections of Scandinavian rulers, but his work holds the distinction of beginning with an account of prehistory. It begins with the *Ynglinga saga*, which traces the genealogy of the Yngling dynasty of Swedish kings, beginning – as so many of the eponymous sagas do – before the events it takes its name from. Snorri's tale starts in Tyrkland – or what is Turkey on modern maps – within the city of Troy. Here, Sturluson relates a story of two tribes of people the Asir, who dwell in the east in a place called Asaheim whose capital – a place of great sacrificing – is Asgard, the others are known as the Vanir and live in Vanaheim on the other side of the river Tanais, west of Asaheim and its inhabitants. Óðinn is the chieftain of Asgard ruling over the Asir as a mighty warrior. His deeds are recounted by Sturluson as he recalls that mighty Óðinn was consistently victorious in all battles, so much so that it led his people to believe that he had the power to bless them before warfare and, in doing so, they would be victorious. This engendered the practice of calling upon his name for salvation during times of trouble. Sturluson's tone here is decidedly religious as he describes the Asir's

[93] Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 88.

'faith' in their trusted savior Óðinn.[94] From the pages of the *Ynglinga saga*, Snorri recounts the story of the gods as great heroes:

Óðinn var hermaðr mikill ok mjǫk víðfǫrull ok eignaðisk mǫrg ríki. Hann var svá sigrsæll, at í hverri orrostu fekk hann gagn, ok svá kom, at hanns men trúðu því, at hann ætti heimilan sigr í hverri orrostu. Þat var háttr hans, ef hann sendi men sína til orrostu eða aðrar sendifarar, at hann lagði áðr hendr í hǫfuð þeim ok gaf þeim bjannak. Trúðu þeir, at þá myndi vel farask. Svá var ok um hans men, hvar sem þeir urðu í nauðum staddir á sjá eða á landi, þá kǫlluðu þeir á nafn hans, ok þótti jafnan fá af því fró. Þar þóttusk þeir eiga allt traust, er hann var.[95]	Óðinn was a great warrior and fared greatly in all things and took for himself many kingdoms. He was so victorious that he gained the upper hand in every battle; and so, his men believed that it was destined for him to be victorious in every battle. It was his habit that, before sending his men to battle or on other errands, he would lay his hands on their heads and give them a blessing. Then they believed they would succeed. It was also told that wherever his men were sore bested, on sea or on land, they would call on his name, and they would get help from so doing. They put all their trust in him.

Perhaps this is the point in history at which time the character of Óðinn ceases being conceptualized as a man and rather becomes understood as a god. After all, Óðinn continues to operate as a human would within the framework of mythology. Nearly all his powers come from elsewhere and those he is most proficient at, involving the forbidden art of witchcraft known as seiðr, are actively practiced by human females in the Icelandic sagas.[96]

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[94] John Lindow. *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 23-4.

[95] Snorri Sturluson, *Ynglingasaga*, *Heimskringla* chapter 2, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson. *Íslenzk Fornrit Volume XXVI* (Reykjavík, Íslenzka Fornritfélag, 1979).

[96] See John Lindow, "Cultures in Contact," in *Old Norse Myths, Literature, and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Odense: The University of Southern Denmark Press, 2003).

Saxo Grammaticus in his *Gesta Danorum* also applies a euhemerism to his recollection of Óðinn. In Saxo's work, however, he is known as Othinus and his capital is not in Asgard of Troy but in Byzantium, situating him in the heart of the Roman world.[97] He – like Hǫðr's cognate, Hoderus – is not described as having any impairment to his sight. If these suggested genealogies are based on fact rather than Christian convention, it would go a long way toward explaining why the gods of the Norse cosmology are so different from the cultures around them that were pantheistic. If their gods were based on – or at least rooted in some historical tradition – they could have operated with these issues, especially if those impairments were acquired in battle. These sacrifices for something more – whether it be the safety or glory of the community – would have earned them a prestige that would have canceled any mitigating factors associated with their impairment.

Though this notion may seem puzzling to modern minds, this was a feature of medieval Christian writers when it came to dealing with pagan ideals. When they recorded such genealogies, Christian writers always portrayed the gods euhemeristically. Aligning mortals with the storied heroes and great warriors of old was indeed preferable than conceding to pagan beliefs. Likewise, descent from such figures could provide a boon to claims of nobility. In the simplest of terms, it may have allowed these authors to blur the lines between their orthodox beliefs and their fondness for the tales of their past. [98] These stories are not solely limited to Óðinn either. Snorri, in the *Ynglinga Saga*, applies a euhemeristic connotation to the story of the Vanir fertility god Freyr. According to Sturluson, upon his death, Freyr was buried secretly in a

[97] Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum Book I*, chapter 7.

[98] See Anthony Faulkes, "Descent from the Gods," *Mediæval Scandinavia* 11 (1978-1979): 92-125.

great howe, while the Swedes were told he lived; and they continued to pay tax money to him, pouring in gold, silver and copper through three openings in the howe.[99]

The final task, then, is to decide what Snorri Sturluson's intentions were when he wrote his prologue to the *Prose Edda*. If he simply attempting to reconcile his Christian belief system with the stories of his pagan past, it would explain his euhemeristic stance. As a Christian, short of painting his ancestors as devil worshippers, he would have to instead diminish his ancestral deities from gods to heroes in order to preserve the magnificent dynasty that had traditionally been accepted by the Norse as true.[100] This philosophy was a common medieval practice that helped to maintain a lineage that was subordinate but still related to the higher cultures of antiquity such as Greece and Rome. By putting Óðinn in Troy and having him trace a heroic path from there to Germania and onward into the Scandinavian countries, leaving heirs in his wake, he effectively made him analogues to Aenias. This notion would have been apparent to those of his time, as the classical cultures of Greece and Rome were known through medieval scholastic material and disseminated through Rome by the Christian religion itself.[101]

Snorri's implied euhemerism, then, could also have had distinct political motivations. As the continental powers in Europe began exerting their influence across the Scandinavian

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[99] Snorri Sturluson, *Ynglinga saga, Heimskringla* I, chapter 10, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson. Íslenzk Fornrit Volume XXVI. (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1979). See also, See Margaret Clunies Ross, "The Measure of Old Norse Religion in Long-term Perspective," in *Old Norse Religion in Long-term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions. An International Conference in Lund, Sweden, June 3-7, 2004*, eds. Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert, and Catharina Raudvere (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), 412.

[100] Stephan Grundy, *The Cult of Óðinn: God of Death?* (New Haven: Troth Publications, 2014), 100.

[101] See Margaret Clunies Ross, "The Measure of Old Norse Religion in Long-term Perspective," in *Old Norse Religion in Long-term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions. An International Conference in Lund, Sweden, June 3-7, 2004*, eds. Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert, and Catharina Raudvere, (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), 412.

countries, those in Iceland were the last remnant of the old pagan societies that once populated northern Europe. Sturluson was well away of the cultural capital that could be bought by placating the kings of Norway and Denmark. It is important to consider that his *Heimskringla* was more than likely written to do just that, as it deals with the lives of Norwegian kings and traces their dynasty euhemeristically to the Æsir tribe of Troy and their progenitor Óðinn.[102] The question remains, however, of why he chose to align Norse myth with the real past so closely and still portray the Æsir gods as impaired. If it were simply his choice, then the collected poems of the *Poetic Edda* would not have likewise portrayed the gods as missing eyes, giving up part of their hearing, or lacking hands. Perhaps Snorri's prologue to the *Heimskringla* was simply a way for him to further illustrate a concept that he, and his contemporaries, were familiar with; that the gods – whether mortal or otherwise – dealt with the normality of existence just as humans did. Within this conceptual framework, the world seemed to make more sense. An impaired individual was not cursed or lacking, at best they shared a mark with the divine and at worst they simply were experiencing a facet of life unknown to some.

Conclusion

Myth presented men and women of northern Europe with an opportunity to remember, celebrate, and transfer the tales of their learned prehistory. The ideals of these pre-Christian societies were reflected and reinforced by the tales of the gods and heroes of bygone days. This continued long after Christianity arrived, as the Norse in Iceland still regarded their pagan past. In the Norse world, impairment was interpreted not as a liability or weakness but as a normative element in human existence – one that even the gods themselves were beholden to. Therein,

[102] For a thorough discussion of Snorri's supposed motivations for recording the history of pre-Christian Scandinavia, see Kevin J. Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda: The Conversion of Cultural Capital in Medieval Scandinavia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

impairment was viewed as an aspect of the divine or a sacrifice that gained the affected something beyond the scope of human understanding, whether that be prophecy or another heightened sense. In other words, impaired individuals were made in their gods' image. Within this conceptual space, impairment was interpreted neither as a liability nor weakness but rather a sign of a marked individual; usually one with a gift for prophecy or eloquent speaking. How this affected men and women during the Viking Age, however, has yet to be thoroughly studied. The following chapter uses the Icelandic sagas as a vehicle for examining how the learned prehistory of the Norse gods helped to shape the framing, understanding, and construction of impairment in medieval Iceland.

CHAPTER 3

LIVING WITH IMPAIRMENTS IN MEDIEVAL ICELAND

Similar to the stories of the gods from Eddaic prose and poetry, medieval Scandinavian attitudes toward impairment can be discovered and analyzed through a careful reading of the Icelandic sagas. In contrast to the stories in Old Norse myth, which are retrogressive constructions of pre-Christian belief, these sagas are purported to relate actual events from the Settlement Period to the fall of the Icelandic Commonwealth.[103] Though these books were in many ways an early attempt at creating a national history for Icelanders, they also provide a cultural time capsule by which modern audiences can view the prevailing attitudes of the day. Like the Old Norse mythographic works, these sagas present conceptions of the pagan ideas of the Norse peoples – or at least those from the areas of Norway that settled Iceland – in a carefully curated form and set them against the backdrop of a newly emerging nation.

The sagas, as a literary genre, are *sui generis* when compared to their contemporaries. Some of this distinctiveness stems from medieval Icelanders' strict adherence to writing these tales in the vernacular Old Norse rather than Latin, which was the *lingua franca* of European literati during the Middle Ages.[104] The sagas are also unique in regard to how impaired individuals are universally represented in normative roles. Unlike many tales from the continent, the impaired occupy the same social status as their abled peers and are not marginalized by the

[103] Iceland was settled in 874 A.D., and some of the sagas – specifically the *Landnámabók, Íslendingabók*, and the collection of stories referred to as the 'Family Sagas' or Íslendingasögur – retell this settlement and focus on the first few generations of inhabitants in the nation's history. Iceland, from this time until the fall of the Commonwealth to Norway in 1262, remained free from foreign rule.

[104] This decision to write in Old-Icelandic instead of the continental parlance may have rested in medieval Icelanders' notion of preserving their history in an unadulterated form; as free as possible form the influence of outside influences.

narrator of the stories. Their impairments are significant only as physical descriptors of the individual or in how they create a personal drama for the character. The representations of impaired bodies in the Icelandic sagas are understood to be systemic portrayals of the human experience in medieval northern Europe.

The reliability of these tales is problematic due to the several hundreds of years that passed between their occurrences and when they were ultimately recorded. A good portion of the sagas were composed during the mid-to-late thirteenth century, long after Iceland had officially converted to Christianity and around the time that the balance of power would shift from Icelandic hands to Norwegian ones. This chapter will investigate these impaired bodies and show that they, like any surviving text from the past, can be read and examined for their cultural significance and meaning.[105] How congruent these stories are with the actual mindset of medieval individuals living in Scandinavia during the thirteenth and fourteenth century, however, has proven to be one of the greatest analytical challenge that scholars have been confronted with.[106] As Kolfinna Jónatansdóttir states: "Medieval literature, like any other literature, reflects its contemporary to some extent, but it is often difficult to know to what extent."[107] In other words, were these stories meant solely to entertain their audience with the

[105] For more about the process of 'reading medieval bodies' like text, see Gail Weiss, "The Body as a Narrative Horizon," in *Thinking the Limits of the Body*, eds. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Gail Weiss (Albany, State University of New York Press, 2003), 25-36.

[106] Some scholars argued that the Icelandic sagas were directly linked to oral stories that developed over the course of hundreds of years in Iceland and, therefore, must be taken as historical documents. For an argument from a key proponent of this theory see, Knut Liestøl, *Upphavet til den islendske ættesaga* (Oslo: Aschehoug forlag (Nygaard), 1929). Other scholars believe that examples from certain sagas conflict with known historical personalities and power structures that have been corroborated by multiple sources and, therefore, cannot be trusted for their historical veracity. For a thorough analysis of this idea as applied to *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, see Sigurður Nordal, *Hrafnkatla* (Reykjavík: Ísafoldarprentsmidja, 1940).

[107] Kolfinna Jónatansdóttir, "'Blindur er betri en brenndur sé:' Um norræna guði og skerðingar," in *Fötlun og Menning: Íslandssagan Í Öðru Ljósi*, eds. Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir, Ármann Jakobsson and Kristín Björnsdóttir (Reykjavik: Félagsvísindatsofnun Háskóla Íslands og Rannsóknarsetur í fötunarfræðum, 2013), 27; "Í

novelty of impaired heroes or were these impairments so endemic to medieval Icelandic society that the notion of an impaired individual enjoying the same success at their able-bodied contemporaries not an inimitable concept?

Through their vernacular literature, medieval Icelandic authors portrayed social attitudes toward individuals with impairments that would have been analogous with the views of Scandinavian society in the thirteenth century. The stories and experiences of these impaired individuals further clarify that, though Christianity was pervasive in Icelandic society during the thirteenth century, older, pagan sentiments regarding impairment had carried over and survived the social change that came with conversion. Icelandic literary culture, contrary to the experience of other nations that turned from heathenism to the Cross during the Middle Ages, was born with a foot in each world. As its art form developed in the world of pagan belief, it carefully interwove the values and vision of the Christian faith; with zealous pride in the former and humble reverence to the latter.

The sagas of the Icelanders are rife with a cast of historical characters and the tales of their deeds offer no shortage of adventure and excitement for any who read them. Equally, the sagas known collectively as "family sagas," are inundated with countless examples of impairment.[108] Some of these impairments provide the narrative framework for the stories of the

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öðru lagi endurspegla miðaldabókmenntir, líkt og aðrar bókmenntir, samtíma sinn að einhverju leyti, en oft er erfitt að vita hvernig best er að lesa úr slíku."

[108] The term "Family Sagas" is a modern invention used by scholars to segregate the many different themes conveyed in the Icelandic sagas. Family sagas are so called because their narratives encapsulate the lives of particular families, oftentimes through several generations, that inhabit various locations in Iceland during the Middle Ages. Other saga genres dealt with a variety of subject matter such as the legendary past (fornaldarsögur), the lives of kings (*konungasögur*), the recent past (samtíðarsögur), chivalric romance (*riddarasögur*), hagiographic compositions of the lives of particular saints (*heilagra manna sögur*), or the lives of Icelandic bishops (*biskupasögur*). For critical a guide , see Carol J. Clover, "Icelandic Family Sagas," in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, eds. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 239–315; Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age: Narration and Representation in the Sagas of the*

sagas' main characters. It has been argued that these impairments were an attempt by medieval Icelandic authors to solidify the saga heroes' relationship with the gods of northern European folk belief, thereby likening them to the heroes and powers of their learned prehistory.[109] Many examples of impairment within the sagas, however, garner a passing mention by the saga authors and are likewise ignored or overlooked by other individuals within each story. This treatment, or lack thereof, varies according to the author and the context of the impairments' effects upon the character. For example, if the impairment does little to enrich or debilitate the progress of the individual's story, it is likely mentioned as a physical characteristic and then paid no more heed by the narrator of the story.

While there is most certainly a correlation between the mythic bodies of the Norse gods and the idealized bodies in medieval Scandinavia, an equal degree of the *laissez faire* treatment surrounding what modern audiences would perceive as disability in the Icelandic sagas has to do with the early medieval medical attitude toward impairments.[110] Per practiced medieval science,

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Icelanders, trans. Andrew Wawn (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1998); Axel Kristinsson, "Lords and Literature: The Icelandic Sagas as Political and Social Instruments," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 28 (2003), 1–17; Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method*, trans. Nicholas Jones (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: Harvard University Press, 2004); and *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, eds. Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

[109] See Lois Bragg, "Impaired and Inspired: The Makings of a Medieval Icelandic Poet," in *Madness, Disability, and Social Exclusion: The Archaeology and Anthropology of 'Difference,'* ed. Jane Hubert (Oxon: Routledge, 2000), 128-143.

[110] Certain traits are insinuated as being more highly valued than others in medieval Norse literature. This trend, as well, can be traced back to Old Norse folk belief, particularly the Eddic *Rígsþula* where the social classes are presented. Male beauty, for example, was contingent on being tall, fair-skinned, equally proportioned, of fair or red hair, and having the ability to grow a beard. Characters that are portrayed as outsiders, such as the skalds for which several sagas take their names, are often dark-skinned, have dark, curly hair, and some physical feature that delineates their body from more idealized standards. Interestingly, however, these individuals manage to navigate their world with relative ease despite any less than ideal physical features they have or any impairments they may have been born with or attained. It is, instead, the substance of their characters that most often leads to their untimely demise. For more on idealized beauty in Nordic literature, see Claudia Bornholdt "'Everyone Thought It Very Strange How the Man Had Been Shaped': The Hero and His Physical Traits in the Riddarasögur," *Arthuriana* 22, No. 1 (2012): 18-38.

the impaired body occupied a liminal space in that it was perceived as neither sick nor healthy. This status of being "between two worlds" may have provided a social cache for impaired individuals, as such a person would be privy to special powers, like the medieval crones or seers, and therefore would have been regarded as such by their neighbors.[111] This view gains sympathy as a religious motif in *The Sacred and the Profane*, where Mircea Eliade argues that the sacred can only be conceptualized as "wholly other" and "wholly familiar" simultaneously.[112]

For the most part, impairment was a fact of life for most Europeans in the Middle Ages as with Antiquity.[113] Whether they themselves lived with an impairment, knew someone else who did, or would later experience an impairment in their later years of life made the notion of impairment seem less than an exceptional state for a human to occupy. The World Health Organization proposed that individuals with physical or mental impairments make up roughly ten percent of the world's population. Judging from the archaeological record, it may be assumed that proportions from the Middle Ages were, likewise, impaired.[114] Disabled individuals were less likely to be viewed as that drastically different from their abled-bodied contemporaries.

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[111] Irina Metzler, "Liminality and Disability: Spatial and Conceptual Aspects of Physical Impairment in Medieval Europe," in *Medicine and Space: Body, Surroundings, and Borders in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, eds. Patricia A. Baker, Han Nijdam, and Karine van 't Land (Leiden: Brill, 2012): 273. See also Lois Bragg, "Impaired and Inspired: The Makings of a Medieval Icelandic Poet," in *Madness, Disability, and Social Exclusion: The Archaeology and Anthropology of 'Difference'*, ed. Jane Hubert (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 128-143.

[112] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. William H. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1959).

[113] Apart from the vast array of disability stories present in the Icelandic sagas, there is also evidence for impairment in the material culture of societies contemporaneous to the Scandinavian peoples. For prosthetic devices found in Frankish grave sites from the seventh century see Catherine Hähn, "Mobility Limitations and Assistive Aids in the Merovingian Burial Record," in *New Approaches to Disease, Disability, and Medicine in Medieval Europe*, eds. Erin Connelly and Stefanie Künzel (Oxford, ArchaeoPress, 2018), 31-42.

[114] Irina Metzler, "Disability in the Middle Ages and Cultural History," *Werkstattgeschichte* 65 (2003): 57.

They most certainly were not considered 'freaks,' as cinematic tropes often tend to portray them.[115]

Though the impaired were not purposely maligned by their peers, medieval Scandinavian culture staunchly sought to prevent individuals from deliberately inflicting disfigurements on others. Intentionally attempting to disfigure another individual was considered an ignoble deed within both the social and legal spheres of Icelandic society.[116] Further, it was considered the highest shame to inflict an impairment upon the elderly or infirm. It was also judged reprehensible to prolong a death with such actions, as an opponent was supposed to live with the shame of their impairment rather than die a protracted death.[117] Those who did disfigure others, were forced to make some type of recompense for their deeds, most often through a settlement based on monetary compensation that was mediated by a third party or a higher court.

Perhaps the most articulate example of this process is presented in the pages of *Guðmundr saga dýri*. In this story, Norwegian merchants are responsible for impairing an Icelander, called Skæring, by cutting off his hand. Guðmundr, a man of sound wisdom and jurisprudence, arbitrates a settlement for Skæring's trauma with the Norwegians. Guðmundr sets the price of Skæring's suffering at an amount referred to as thirty hundreds, which was expected to be paid out immediately following the judgment. The Norwegians balked at this amount, saying it was far too much to pay for such a thing as a hand. They asked that it either be reduced or an oath be sworn. When Guðmundr was made aware of this, he returned to their ship, docked

[115] Jenni Kuuliala, "In Search of Medieval Disability," *J@rgonia* 21 (2013): 2.

[116] *Grágás*, ed. Vilhálmur Finsen. *Konungsbók* (Copenhagen, 1852), 184; "Þat er at manne varðar fiorbaugs garð aliótz rað öll þott eigi comi fram, en scog gang ef fram kemr." "It is prescribed that all plots to disfigure carry a penalty of lesser outlawry even if they do not succeed, but full outlawry if they do."

[117] See *Þorðar saga kakala* and *Þorgils saga skarða* in the *Sturlunga saga*.

off the Icelandic coast, and made them a counter offer, which they again refused. Finally, Guðmundr told them that he would pay Skæring the thirty hundreds he had judged the Norwegians to pay but then he would take one of their hands in recompense for his money and they could haggle with one another over the price for that man's compensation among them. The Norwegian promptly paid the originally set price. Guðmundr and Skæring then departed in peace with the matter settled.[118] Of this episode, legal scholar William Miller states that the Norwegians were not buying Skæring's hand but preserving their own. Giving up money rather than a hand was a price they were more than willing to pay.[119]

The laws regarding the impaired are addressed throughout the *Grágás* or "Grey Goose" law codes of Iceland.[120] These codes are a collection of laws comprised of two sets of legal codes, the *Konungsbók* and the *Staðarhólsbók*, both penned in the mid to late thirteenth century in Iceland but observed in their oral form prior. The *Járnsíða* laws eventually replaced these laws a few years after Norway took control of Iceland. The *Grágás* laws explicitly state the medieval Icelandic view toward impairment by making any action taken towards defaming an impaired individual punishable by law:

"Ef maðr bregðr manne brigzlom eða mælir honom aliót þott hann segi satt oc varðar fiorbaugs garð...Ef maðr gefr manne nafn anat en	"If a man reproaches someone with taunts or asserts some disfigurement in him, even if he speaks the truth then the penalty is lesser outlawry…If a man gives someone a name he did not have

[118] *Guðmundr saga dýri*, *Sturlunga saga* I, eds. Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason, Kristján Eldjárn (Reykjavik: Sturluguútgáfan, 1946), 212.

[119] William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 2.

[120] The name Grágás may have referred to the age of the laws as geese were understood to be more long-lived than other birds. Additionally, the name could have come from earlier iterations of the law code having been recorded on goose skin or with a goose quill. For more information on this see Jesse Byock, *Grágás: The 'Grey Goose' Law in Viking Age Iceland* (London: Penguin, 2001).

hann eigi aðr. oc varðar fiorbaugs garð ef hann vill reiðaz við…Ef maðr mælir við man háðung eða gørir ýki um oc varðar fiorbaugs garð."[121]	before, then the penalty is lesser outlawry…If a man speaks mockery of someone or makes an exaggeration about him, then the penalty is lesser outlawry."[122]

Though distinct from the harsher sentence of full outlawry, lesser outlawry was still a considerable punitive measure for an individual in an Icelandic community.[123] Lesser outlawry essentially banished the guilty party from Icelandic society for the space of three years. Though, on its surface, this punishment does not seem to be that severe, other hardships – both physical and psychological – came with the sentence of outlawry. For example, banishment isolated an individual from both the hearth and aid of their kin. Additionally, it put a metaphorical price on an individual's head that many, seeking fame and prestige, were more than happy to collect. Lesser outlaws had three places where they could seek refuge. They could not be harmed in these areas or on the roads that connected these spots.[124] An outlaw, however, could only keep this sanctuary status if they asked at least three ships for passage out of Iceland each summer for the

[121] *Grágás*, ed. Vilhálmur Finsen. *Konungbók* (Copenhagen, 1852), 183.

[122] Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins, eds. and trans., *Laws of Early Iceland, Grágás II* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2000), 196-197.

[123] In addition to the perils that a lesser outlaw (fjǫrbaugsgarðr) faced, those who were sentenced to full outlawry (skóggangur) could be killed on sight. Their property was also confiscated, and they had no way of being reintegrated into society. In such an honor-based society, the loss of allies was a fate akin to death and the loss of their wealth presaged the loss of reputation. They were fated to live, and eventually die, as an outlaw.

[124] According to the *Grágás* K52-K53: "When a confiscation court is held for a lesser outlaw, his homes are to be reported. He is to have three homes. It shall not be farther between them than may be traveled one way in one day. He shall be immune at those homes and within bowshot of them in all directions and on the road between them as long as he does not travel by it more than once a month and within bowshot of the road. If men come towards him, he is to go so far off the road that they cannot reach him with spear points. A lesser outlaw forfeits his immunity is his homes are not reported at the confiscation court." Richard Perkins, Peter Foote, and Andrew Dennis, *Laws of Early Iceland, Grágás I* (Winnepeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1980), 93, and *Víga-Glúms saga*, *Íslenzk Fornrit IX*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1956), 63-66.

space of three years. Those who failed to meet these requirements were transmuted to full outlaws. Those who adhered to the legal mandates could eventually return to normal life.

Treating impaired individuals with dignity was not only seen as a legal matter but also as a noble thing to do. In a wistful tale from the *Gísli saga Surssonar*, the titular outlaw Icelander has a recurring dream where two women visit him and deliver portends to him. One of the ethereal women counsels him evil and the other good. The good dream wife, as he refers to her, instructs him to be kind to those with impairments. In a poem, he recounts her telling him this:

"Vald eigi þú vígi, ves þú ótyrrinn, fyrri, morðs við mæti-Njörðu, mér heitið því, sleitu; baugskyndir, hjalp blindum, Baldr, hygg at því, skjaldar, illt kveða háð ok höltum, handlausum tý, granda."[125]	"Stay thy hand, be slow to kill others; Do not provoke men to seek thy life: Come! thy word to wisdom's daughter. Do not stir strife, noble one, always help the weak, the crippled, the blind; Bright and blessed is he of generous mind and hard is the hand that never opens."

It is unclear, due to the pagan aspects of this particular tale as well as the timeframe during which it was composed, whether this outlook was directly influenced by Christian teachings or if this was a remnant of pre-Christian ideology. Regardless of the impetus for this saga author to have included such a tenant, the way in which the command is uttered seems to reflect an empathetic notion towards the impaired, as though they are to be pitied. This outlook does not occur elsewhere in works that portray the pagan ideal of measuring an individual for their worth to society. Impairment is not treated as a sympathetic condition elsewhere in the sagas, but simply as a binary state between the ability to perform a function or the inability to do so. It is for that reason that the author is almost certainly echoing a Christian sentiment.

[125] *Gisla saga Surssonar*. *Íslenzk Fornrit* VI, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson (Reykjavik, Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1958), 73.

Physical Impairments

The vast majority of impairments that are referenced in the Icelandic sagas are those that are physical in nature. Of these impairments, nearly all of them deal with ambulatory impairments that are, in some instances, congenital, but are most often acquired; usually in some type of martial setting.[126] Impairments of this type can range from those that are barely significant enough to warrant mention by the saga narrator – such as the character of Þórir Goat-Thigh in *Vatnsdœla saga* – to those that permanent inhibit an individual's participation in the necessary responsibilities of daily life.[127] Interestingly, facial disfigurements are never mentioned as a feature of Icelandic saga characters. As common as facial injuries would have been among those individuals who participated in Viking raids, such physical demarcations are suspiciously absent from the literary record. This lacuna is likewise seen in contemporary medieval accounts. It has been argued that the reticence of medieval authors implies that facial disfigurement was either too sensitive a topic to broach in writing or that it was so commonplace that is merited no attention from the writers.[128]

Survival, at least in a remote frontier community such as that of Iceland and the Norse diaspora colonies of the North Atlantic, depended heavily on an individual's ability to adapt.[129]

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[126] In his doctoral dissertation *Outsiders on the Inside: Conception of Disability in Medieval Western Scandinavia*, Todd Michelson-Ambelang states that they are no fewer than 410 terms and descriptions used for impairments in the Icelandic sagas. Of those, 350 (85%) refer to physical impairments. Of this 350, 302 (74%) deal with ambulatory impairments whilst 48 (12%) deal with sensory impairments. The remaining 49 (12%) of the terms for impairments in the sagas refer to those that are cognitive in nature.

[127] *Vatnsdœla saga*. *Íslenzk Fornrit* VIII. Edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson. (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1939), 71-2; "þorir hafrsþjó hlaut goðorðit, en Jǫkull Ættartanga…; Þorir Goat-Thigh received the goðorð (chieftaincy), and Jokul was given the sword Aettartangi…"

[128] Patricia Skinner, "Visible Prowess? Reading Men's Head and Face Wounds in Early Medieval Europe to 1000 C.E.," in *Wounds and Wound Repair in Medieval Culture*, eds. Larissa Tracy and Kelly DeVries (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 101.

[129] Judith Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora* (Oxon: Routledge, 2015), 40-41.

Physical limitation could be perceived as a weakness and could potentially cause an individual to lose opportunities to navigate the social ladder of Icelandic society. Impaired individuals belonging to the higher rungs of society were oftentimes treated as heroic characters, while those at the bottom of the social order – such as beggars and slaves – were either objectified as pitiable creatures or accused of feigning their impairments.[130] The wealthy were, generally, more apt to raise a child with congenital impairments whereas the financially destitute might expose the child. A practice heavily condemned after Scandinavians converted to Christianity. The censure of exposing unwanted children was nearly impossible to enforce in decentralized states such as those of the diaspora communities in the North Atlantic.[131]

In the saga of *Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu*, the eponymous skald deals with the harsh realities of perceived limited physical mobility when visiting an earl in Norway.[132] Gunnlaug has been suffering from a painful boil on his foot that has been visibly oozing blood and pus as he walked. When questioned about his ailment by the earl, Gunnlaugr's pragmatic response reiterates the Icelandic conception regarding ability versus disability:

Jarl mælti: "Hvat er fæti þínum, Íslendingr?" "Sullr er á, herra," sagði hann. "Ok gekk þú þó ekki haltr?"	The earl asked, "What ails your foot, Icelander?" "A boil, lord," he replied. "And yet you do not limp?"

[130] Jenni Kuuliala. "In Search of Medieval Disability," *J@rgonia* 21 (2013): 5.

[131] For this practice, as it related to Denmark, see Else Roesdahl, *Vikingernes Verden: Vikingerne Hjemme og Ude* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1987), 61. For examples of this practice in Classical society and Late Antiquity see Robert Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 11-13.

[132] Gunnlaugr is a quintessential anti-hero character. He is a skald, or poet specializing in a unique type of Old Norse poetry that was highly sought by European nobility. He makes his living traveling to the royal courts of the Scandinavian kings looking for work. He is – by nature – an outsider due, in large part, to how he conducts himself around others. He has difficulty reigning in his propensity to speak harshly to those around him; a quality that earns him his cognomen *ormstungu* or Worm/Snake-tongue.

Gunnlaugr svarar: "Eigi skal haltr ganga, meðan báðir fætr eru jafnlangir."[133]	Gunnlaugr answers, "One should not limp while both legs are the same length."

Gunnlaugr's answer corroborates the notion that some individuals feared a loss of personal freedom that came with needing assistance due to an impairment. The inability to walk, for example, though a physical limitation in modern minds may have had further-reaching social implications that maligned the power and status of an individual. Weakness, at least in Gunnlaugr's eyes, was a choice that the brave could not afford to make. To be unable to walk on your own, especially in the presence of your social superior, could relegate an individual to a position of social inferiority. It is this feeling of powerlessness, in this case over one's body, which essentially leads to the social construction of disability.[134] The concept of disability is very much a product of modernity. The attitudes of medieval Icelanders towards self-efficacy were so saliently rooted in heroic ideals and normative behaviors.[135]

Gunnlaugr's feelings of inferiority may have partially rested on the fact that he lived before the advent of adaptive devices that aided mobility, which often forced those with severe ambulatory impairments to crawl in order to get from place to place. Crawling, at least as applied to the behavior of adults, was looked down upon because of its historical connection to bestial behavior. Adding to this stigmatization was the fact that traditional stories of madness, such as that of the *Old Testament*'s King Nebuchadnezzar, included the individual crawling around like a

[133] *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*. Íslenzk fornrit III, eds. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jonsson (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1938), 69.

[134] Abby Wilkerson, "Disability, Sex Radicalism, and Political Agency," *National Women's Studies Association Journal* 14, no. 3, Feminist Disability Studies (2002): 33-57.

[135] As discussed in the introduction, disability – both as a term and as a condition – did not exist in the Middle Ages. The notion of an individual being disabled was not considered until well into the Early Modern era in Europe.

beast of the field.[136] As he wanted to make an impression on those around him and was at odds with the earl already, it is difficult to assess whether Gunnlaugr's words were spoken out of practicality or bravado.

In yet another example from *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, physical impairment is used as a type of punishment. After Gunnlaug, the saga hero, and his sworn enemy Hrafn kill one another in a duel, Gunnlaug's father, Illugi, seeks revenge on Hrafn's kin. He begins by trying to mediate some sort of settlement at the Alþing, the annual gathering of free men in Iceland, but the mediation does not satisfy Illugi's grief and, subsequently, his rage cannot be sated. Illugi takes thirty men with him and chases after Hrafn's father Ǫnundr. Hrafn's father desperately tries to flee by running into a nearby church, as it was forbidden to slay anyone on holy ground. Two of his other sons, however, are not so lucky:

Ǫnundr komsk í kirkju ok synir hans, en Illugi tók frændr hans tvá; hét annarr Bjǫrn, en annarr Þorgrímr. Hann lét drepa Bjǫrn, en fóthǫggva Þorgrím.[137]	Then Ǫnund got into the church with his sons, but Illugi caught two of his kin, one called Bjǫrn and the other Þorgrím. He had Bjǫrn slain, but had a foot smitten from Þorgrím.

Illugi's revenge is swift and merciless. He claims the life of one of Ǫnundr's sons and permanently disables the other. It is important to note that, rather than take the life of both of his sons, he takes only one of Þorgrím's feet, thereby rendering him incapable of moving without assistance. This will effectively disqualify him from any martial reprisal and severely limit his

[136] Herbert Covey outlines the possible origin of this stigma relating to crawling may have been attached to traditional stories of madness, such as that of the *Old Testament*'s King Nebuchadnezzar, included the individual crawling around like a beast of the field. See, Herbert C. Covey, *Social Perceptions of People with Disabilities in History* (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1998), 46.

[137] *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*. *Íslenzk Fornrit* III, eds. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1938), 105.

options for work within the medieval Icelandic community, thereby potentially forcing him into a life dependent on assistance.

The loss of a limb did not always place an individual at the mercy of those around him. Some saga characters learn to adapt their lives to living with their impairments. Perhaps the greatest example of a heroic character that acquires an impairment and continues to fulfil his role in society is Qnundr trefot (tree foot) Ófeigsson of *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*. Qnundr's story is one that navigates the complexities involved with becoming impaired rather than having been born with an impairment. His father, Ófeig burlufotar (Clubfoot), also had an impairment but it garners only a passing mention and the audience is left to wonder whether he was born with it or acquired it later in life.[138] In the pages of the saga, Qnundr is heralded as a mighty viking. He enjoys great success in this profession and terrorizes the coasts of Scotland and Ireland before making an enemy of the upstart king Harald lufa (Tanglehair). Qnundr meets Harald's forces in a harrowing battle at sea. Before long, his ship becomes tethered to one of Harald's vessels and he deals out a lethal dole to his enemies. His overzealousness in combat proves to be his undoing, however, as his gallantry in the fray does not go unnoticed by the king's men. The story of his impairment occurs in the second chapter of *Grettis saga*:

Þá mæltu konungsmenn: "Þessi gengr fast fram í sǫxin; látum hann hafa nǫkkurar várar minjar, at hann hafi komit í bardagann."	Then the king's men said: "This one at the ship's bow is attacking mightily; let him have some memento from us to show that he has faced some danger."
Qnundr stóð út á borðit ǫðrum fœti ok hjó til manns, ok í því var lagit til hans; ok er hann bar af sér lagit,	Qnundr put one foot out on the gunwale and struck a man, and even therewith a spear was aimed at him, and as he put the blow from him he bent backward

[138] Ibid., 3, "Qnundr hét maðr; hann var Ófeigs sonr burlufótar;" "There was a man called Qnundr, he was the son of Ofeig Clubfoot."

kiknaði hann við, Þá hjó einn af stafnbúum konungs til Ǫnundar, ok kom á fótinn fyrir neðan kné ok tók af fótinn; Ǫnundr varð þegar óvígr…[139]	withal, and one of the king's men struck at him, and the blow took his leg below the knee, and made him unable to fight…

Ǫnundr manages to save himself by quickly diving overboard and is rescued by his comrade. He eventually recovers but is left with a permanent impairment and a new nickname:

Ǫnundr varð græddr ok gekk við tréfót síðan alla ævi; var hann af því kallaðr Ǫnundr tréfótr, meðan hann lifði.[140]	Ǫnundr was healed, but went with a wooden leg all his life after; and so he was called Ǫnundr Treefoot as long as he lived.

Despite his perceived inability to continue his escapades as a viking, Ǫnundr is able to take work as an envoy or emissary going abroad to Ireland. He still, however, broods over the loss of his leg because it limits his ability to live his life to its fullest extent; that which involves plundering and raiding. In his melancholy, he composes a verse that he delivers in response to his friend Þrándr's question regarding why he has been so moody as of late:

"Glatt esat mér, siz mœttum, mart hremmir til snimma, oss stóð geigr af gýgi galdrs, eldþrimu skjaldar; hykk, at þegnum þykki, þat 's mest, koma flestum, oss til ynðis missu einhlitt, til min litit."[141]	"What joy is mine since that moment, When I last heard the clang of shields; The warriors did me a great injury; For that axe-edge grieves me still. In eyes of fighting man and thane, My strength comes to nothing, It is this that is my loss and

[139] *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar, Íslenzk Fornrit* VII, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1936), 5–6.

[140] Ibid., 7.

[141] Ibid., 9.

Makes me joyless."

Undaunted by this self-defeating rhyme, Ǫnundr's friend and traveling companion Þrándr Bjarnason offers his support. He insists that the best thing to take Ǫnundr's mind off of such things is to finally settle down and get married. Þrándr insists that he will do Ǫnundr the honor of negotiating a marriage on his behalf. Initially, the man that they approach is hesitant to match his daughter with Ǫnundr because his lands are worthless, and he is essentially "less than whole or lacking" due to his impairment. During the bargaining, this perception of Ǫnundr is quickly quelled by Þrándr who offers up a different perspective for his friend, the potential husband, by focusing on Ǫnundr's utility:

Þrándr kvað Ǫnund rǫskvara en marga þá, er heilfœttir væri; ok með liðveizlu Þrándar var þessu keypt…[142]	Þrándr said that Ǫnundr was a brisker man yet than many who had both legs, and so by Þrándr's help was this bargain struck…

Readers of *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* soon find that Þrándr's praise of his friend's abilities are anything but hyperbolic. Two vikings called Vígbjóðr and Vestmarr begin harrying the area in which Ǫnundr is staying giving Ǫnundr the perfect opportunity to prove himself as still being capable in a fight. When the vikings Vígbjóðr and Vestmarr learn that their opponent is the erstwhile warrior Ǫnundr trefot, the mockingly jibe his impairment by saying:

"…er oss þat fásét, at þeir menn fari til orrostu, er ekki megu sér."[143]	"we are not used to seeing men go into battle who cannot move themselves."

[142] Ibid., 10.

[143] Ibid., 10.

The ensuing battle share many similarities with the battle in which Ǫnundr lost his leg. It is likely that this battle potentially signifies Ǫnundr's resilience and determination to continue resisting Harald lufa's takeover of the region. Echoing this notion, John P. Sexton opines that, more than a simple reenactment of the events that caused his impairment, the on-board ship battle between Ǫnundr and the two Vikings serves to correct Ǫnundr's feelings of inadequacy.[144]

…þeir skutu tréstubba nǫkkurum undir kné Ǫnundi, ok stóð hann heldr fast. Víkingrinn sótti aptan eptir skipinu, allt þar til er hann kom at Ǫnundi, ok hjó til hans með sverði, ok kom í skjǫldinn ok tók af þat, er nam; síðan hljóp sverðit í stubbann, þan er Ǫnundr hafði undir knénu, ok varð fast sverðit. Vígbjóðr laut, er hann kippði at sér sverðinu; í því hjó Ǫnundr á ǫxlina, svá at af tók hǫndina; þá varð víkingrinn óvígr.[145]	…they wedged a log under Ǫnundr's knee so that he would stand firmly. The viking moved from the aft of the ship until he came to Ǫnundr, and struck at him with his sword, hacking his shield away where the blow struck. His sword rebounded into the log below Ǫnundr's knee and stuck fast. Vígbjóðr then leaned in to jerk the sword back, but Ǫnundr aimed a blow at his shoulder, cutting off his arm, making the viking unable to fight.

What follows this display of ingenious improvisation and brilliantly executed martial prowess is Ǫnundr's moving soliloquy. Here, the scarred and battle-hardened old warrior enjoys a great degree of vindication. He is not "half a man" as his detractors have labelled him. He is every bit as deadly and skilled as those who have the use of both their legs. Equally important to

[144] John P. Sexton, "Difference and Disability: On the Logic of Naming in the Icelandic Sagas," in *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations,* ed. Joshua Eyler (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 155.

[145] *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar, Íslenzk Fornrit* VII, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1936), 12.

this scenario, however, is the language that is used to describe the final fate of Ǫnundr's foe, Vígbjóðr:

"Séðu, hvárt sǫr þín blœða;	"See, your wounds bleed.
sǫttu nǫkkut mik hrøkkva;	You saw me never flinching;
auðsløngvir fekk enga	You dealt no scratch to me,
einfœttr af þér skeinu;	One-legged slinger of riches;
meir es mǫrgum, snerru,	Many breakers of battle-axes
málskalp lagit, Gjalpar	Brag more than use their brains.
brjótr esat þegn í þrautir	That man was selfish
þrekvanðr, en hyggjandi.[146]	With his strength when he was challenged."

Here, the Old Norse word *óvigr* is used to clearly delineate the status of ability versus disability. According to Sexton, *óvigr*, when contrasted with its root *vigr*, insinuates a binary understanding of an individual's ability in combat. In other words, in the view of the medieval Icelanders, one is either able to fight or one in unable to fight, there was no in between.[147] This tendency to deal in absolutes is rooted in the warrior ethos of the Middle Ages. Pride, in oneself and one's achievements, was an essential element in the construction of an individual's honor. Behaving honorably, with dignity, especially in front of those who occupied a station above you, forged an individual's reputation. Additionally, the character of a person was perceived to last beyond their death and into eternity.[148]

[146] Ibid., 12-13.

[147] John P. Sexton, "Difference and Disability: On the Logic of Naming in the Icelandic Sagas," in *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations*, ed. Joshua R. Eyler (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 155.

[148] This statement can be qualified by an often-quoted verses from the book attributed to the god Óðinn's own words, the *Hávamál*, in *Íslenzk Fornrit: Eddukvæði*, ed. Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 2014), 337; "Deyr fé, deyja frændr, deyr sjálfr it sama; en orðstirr deyr aldregi hveim er sér góðan getr. Deyr fé, deyja frændr, deyr sjálfr it sama; ek veit einn at aldri deyr, dómr um dauðan hvern;" "Cattle die, kinsmen die, and one day you will also die, but good deeds never die, if renown one gains. Cattle die, kinsmen die, and one day you will also die, but I know one thing never dies, the fame of a dead man."

The saga narrator heaps a great deal of praise on Qnundr for his dauntless bravery and perseverance through overwhelming odds. Qnundr is the very epitome of adaptation, however, and the praise he garners is well deserved because he not only stands out from the other characters of *Grettis saga*, but he encapsulates the struggle of an individual living in an honor-based, warlike society who refuses to give up despite his life-changing experience with impairment. Qnundr refused to recognize any barriers that were put between him and his goals. It is this sentiment that the saga author reiterates when he pays him final respects:

Qnundr var svá frækinn maðr, at fáir stóðusk honum, þott heilir væri…[149]	Qnundr was such a brave man that few matched him, even if they were able-bodied…
…hann hefir froeknastr verit ok fimastr einfoettr maðr á Íslandi. [150]	…he was the bravest and nimblest one-legged man in Iceland.

Contrasted with the examples above, there is an ambiguity in regard to the experience had by women with impairments in Iceland. To begin with, there is a distinct lack of examples of impaired female bodies in the saga literature; at least, those that affect a character outside the boundaries of old age. Their experiences are largely ignored save for a few rare instances where their impairment can be inferred as limiting their prospects as wives, which appears to be status *sine qua non* in medieval Icelandic society for those who wished to have wealth. In *Fóstbræðra saga*, for example, it is implied that the unmarried daughter of a sorceress may have been without a husband due to her impairment. One of the saga's main characters, Þormóðr Bersason, is somewhat of a lady's man, as he is involved in at least two major romances, one in which he

[149] Ibid., 23.

[150] Ibid., 25-6.

loses the ability to use his right arm forcing him to become left-handed. Over the course of the saga's story, Þormóðr happens upon the farm of a widow called Katla who dwells there with her daughter Þorbjǫrg *kolbrún*.

Katla hét kona, er bjó í Arnardal. Hon var ekkja; hana hafði átt maðr sá, er Glúmur hét. Dóttir hennar hét Þorbjǫrg; hon var heima með móður sinni. Þorbjǫrg var kurteis kona ok eigi einkar væn, svart hár ok brýnn, - því var hon kǫlluð Kolbrún, - viturlig í ásjánu ok vel litkuð, limuð vel ok grannvaxin ok útfœtt, en eigi alllág.[151]	There was a woman called Katla that lived in Arnardalir. She was the widow of a man called Glum. She had a daughter called Þorbjǫrg. She lived at home with her mother. Þorbjǫrg was a courteous woman, but hardly a beauty. She had black hair and dark eyebrows and was therefore nicknamed Kolbrún (Soot-brow). She had an intelligent look about her, a good complexion, and was of medium height with a slim and well-proportioned figure, but she was a little splay-footed.

Scholars have noticed that the saga author fails to dwell on kolbrún's physical attractiveness. Rather, the narrator lists her external traits as objectively as possible.[152] This perhaps has more to do with the fact that kolbrún's impairment serves as a complimentary reflection of Þormóðr's own impairment. Her impairment, apart from perhaps fating her to live at home with her mother despite being old enough to be married, does nothing to further the narrative. The saga author, however, does not dwell on her long enough to qualify this possibility. Her splayed-footedness is simply mentioned along with the other qualities that make up her physical appearance.

[151] *Fóstbrœðra saga*, *Íslenzk Fornrit* VI, eds. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1943), 170.

[152] Inna Matyushina, "Love Poetry in the 'Skald Sagas,'" *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 5, no. 10 (2015): 17.

Visual Impairments

Many of the extant representations of blind individuals in Medieval European literature portray them either as liars who feign their disabilities rather than work, as fumbling around for comedic effect, or as sympathetic individuals in need of pity and care.[153] Scholars assert that this portrayal reflected social assumptions regarding the disenfranchised poor and disabled that were built upon stereotypes of the drunken beggar who feigned their impairment to avoid work. Thus, the blind were equated with those who avoided work and categorized similarly. These individuals, who were suspected of brazen fakery, laziness, and moral vice were considered so contemptuous that they had become the opposition of all that was understood to be right.[154] Concerning this, anthropologists Elizabeth Keating and R. Neil Hadder state that the stigma attached to an individual would ultimately encompass far more elements of their self and personhood than their impairment would have affected.[155] This phenomenon has come to be known, in disability studies, as the spread effect.

The Icelandic understanding of blindness portrayed the afflicted in a much different light, opting rather to associate the inability to see with prophetic powers; similar to those seen in Scandinavian mythic literature.[156] According to Icelandic tradition, sight had a close affiliation with wisdom and knowledge. Heightened senses of touch, smell, or hearing would be a

[153] See the many references to the Medieval blind in both art and prose in Edward Wheatley, *Stumbling Block Before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan press, 2010).

[154] Zina Weygard, *The Blind in French Society from the Middle Ages to the Century of Louis Braille*, trans. Emily-Jane Cohen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 16.

[155] Elizabeth Keating and R. Neil Hadder, "Sensory Impairment," *The Annual Review of Anthropology* 39 (2010): 121.

[156] Examples in the eddic poems are plentiful and range from the nameless, prophetic seeress of the *Völuspá* to the Æsir god Óðinn whose bilaterally of sight imbued him with the power of fore-knowledge.

compensation for a reduction in visual capabilities, thereby giving the illusion or impression of enhanced wisdom and prophetic capabilities. This could be a boon to an individual's self-efficacy and ability to thrive within a society that valued physical strength and mental alacrity.[157]

The eye also held a central preoccupation in Norse myth, as demonstrated in chapter one of this study. The eyes, or the vision that was gained or lost in them, came to be associated with wisdom, power, and virility. This association continued well into the Middle Ages and can be witnessed in several episodes throughout the Icelandic sagas. Those men of high status and power are often referred to as have a "blazing look" in their eyes, similar to both the gods Óðinn and Þórr. This concept seems to be a universally understood component to divinity and those individuals who are marked by a deity.[158] Later, this association between the eye and wisdom began to coalesce into views that associated the power of sight with the power of masculine sexuality. Vision, then, became a symbol of virility and kingship – a typically male-dominated role.

Such an understanding of vision can be seen in an episode from *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* where the eponymous skald Egil Skallagrímsson has the masculinity of both he and his retinue of men tested. In the story, Egil and his men are guests of Ármóð skegg (beard) who continuously – and purposefully it is inferred – serves them extremely potent alcohol. When his men become sick from this relentless onslaught of drink, Egil is forced to

[157] Halli, the blind lawman so valued for his sound and wise judgments is a perfect example of this association between blindness and wisdom in the saga world. For his story, see *Víga-Glúms Saga*, *Íslenzk Fornrit* IX, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1956), 58.

[158] Blazing eyes transcend cultural exclusivity and appear across both the temporal and geographic ranges of history. For a general discussion on this see, Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Novato: New World Library, 2008). For a view specific to Norse myth and legend see, Riti Kroesen "Hvessir augu sem hildingar: The Awe-Inspiring Eyes of the King," *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 100 (1985): 41-58; and Eldar Heide, "Auga til Egil: Ei nytolking av ein teksted i Egilssoga," *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 115 (2000): 119-124.

consume the remaining draught. The following morning, Egil enters the quarters of his host and cuts off his beard and pokes out one of his eyes as he lies helpless in bed.[159] Egil took his host's intemperance as a challenge against his masculinity, as the ability to hold one's alcohol was a trait held by great men. By serving Egil and his entourage an overabundance of powerful drink, the host alienated Egil and his men. Egil, ever hot-tempered and quick to seek reprisal, sought a response that would equally impinge on his host's masculinity. He cuts off skegg's beard and pokes out one of his eyes. By cutting off the host's beard and poking out one of his eyes, he has forced him to look effeminate, as those without beards were seen as weak and ineffective individuals.[160]

This perception was not limited solely to Scandinavia. The blinding of individuals has long occupied a space of both dramatic and symbolic connotations in western culture. Blinding has been used as a punitive measure for legal and ecclesiastical matters for centuries. Cultures from those of the Greeks, Spanish, and Normans used blinding to dissuade the breaking of laws.[161] Moreover, blinding was used as an expression of power and control. Deposed kings in the Byzantine Empire were often blinded or had their faces permanently disfigured to disqualify them from further claims to control. Finally, the eye occupied a privileged place in the act of

[159] *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar, Íslenzk Fornrit* II, ed. Sigurður Nordal (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1933), 227–228.

[160] A reoccurring theme in the pages of *Brennu-Njáls saga*, beardlessness was the sole physical feature ascribed to Njál and it was used by his enemies to mock him as well as allude to a deviance regarding his sexuality.

[161] Herbert C. Covey, *Social Perceptions of People with Disabilities in History* (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1998), 169. See also, Kirsi Kanerva, "'Eigi er sá heill, er í augun verkir:' Eye Pain in Thirteenth- and Fourteenth-Century Íslendingasögur," *ARV Nordic Yearbook of Folklore* 69 (2013): 24.

meditative prayer and those that were blinded were considered to be cut off from both the physical world and the divine.[162]

As has been mentioned above, both the law codes and stories within the Icelandic sagas suggest that impaired individuals' lives were only slightly varied from their unimpaired neighbors. In terms of total blindness, this assumption also holds only some degree of truth. The difficulty of accurately interpreting authorial intention once again muddies the waters of analysis by presenting blindness as a plot device rather than focusing on any narrative that presents a fully blind individual navigating the social pathways of medieval Icelandic society. For example, in a fourteenth century work *Orkeninga saga* a blind farmer from the Shetland Islands called Bergfinn Skatason is introduced. Through the story, Skatason thrives in his role of property manager, head of his household, and employer of workers. In the story's most climactic scene, Skatason is able, through the blessing of the Christian god, to ferry both himself and two unnamed impaired men to the grave of the famous St. Magnus.[163]

A story of similarly divine intervention appears in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, an epic story revolving around the titular character of Njál Þorgeirsson. Njál, a venerable Icelandic lawyer, is thrust into the middle of an overarching feud that costs him, his friends, and nearly all his family their lives. In this story, related to central blood feud narrative, the reader is introduced to a blind

[162] Susan Wade, "Abbot Erluin's Blindness: The monastic Implications of Violent Loss of Sight," In *Negotiating Community and Difference in Medieval Europe: Gender, Power, Patronage and the Authority of Religion in Latin Christendom.* Edited by Katherine Allen Smith and Scott Wells (Leiden: Brill, 2009): 207.

[163] *Orkneyinga Saga*, trans. Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin, 1981), 103–105.

kinsman of Njál. Amundi is the son of Hǫskuld, foster-son of Njál and he is born blind, though the saga writer informs their audience that, "for all that he was tall and strong." [164]

Over the course of the saga, the hatred between two wives – coincidentally Njál's wife and the wife of his closest friend Gunnar – spills over onto the landscape of western Iceland. Individuals are killed on both sides of the struggle, including Amundi's father Hǫskuldr. Amundi has a chance to confront his father's murderer, Lýtingr, at the local assembly gathering and his blindness is treated as a limitation toward his pursuit of justice:

Sá atburðr varð þrim vetrum síðar á Þingskálaþingi at Ámundi inn blindi var á þingi, Hǫskuldsson, Njálssonar. Hann lét leiða sik búða í meðal. Hann kom í búð þá, er Lýtingr var inni af Sámsstǫðum; hann lætr leiða sik inn í búðina ok þar fyrir, sem Lýtingr sat. Hann mælti:	That event happened three winters after at the Thingskala-Thing that Amundi the blind, son of Hoskuldr Njalsson, was at the Thing. He had someone lead him around the booths, and so he came to the booth inside where Lýtingr of Samstede sat. He was lead into the booth till he came before Lýtingr. He asked:
"Er hér Lýtingr af Sámsstǫðum?"	"Is Lýtingr of Samstede here?"
”Hvat villtú mér?" segir Lýtingr.	“What do you want of me?” said Lýtingr.
"Ek vil vita," segir Ámundi, "hverju þú vill bœta mér fǫður minn. Ek em laungetinn, ok hefi ek við engum bótum tekit."	"I want to know," said Amundi, "what compensation you will pay me for my father. I am base-born, and I have received no compensation."
"Bœtt hefi ek víg fǫður þins fullum bótum," segir Lýtingr, "ok tók við fǫðurfaðir þinn ok fǫðurbrœður, en brœður mínir váru ógildir. Ok var bæði, at ek hafða illa til gǫrt, enda kom ek hart niðr."	"I have atoned for the slaying of your father," says Lýtingr, "and your father's father and brothers took the money; but my brothers fell without a price as outlaws; I
"Ekki spyr ek at því," segir Ámundi, "at þú hefir bœtt þeim;	

[164] *Brennu-Njal's saga, Íslenzk Fornrit* XII, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1954), 248; "Hǫskuldr átti son þann, er Ámundi hét; hann hafði blindr verit borinn; hann var þó mikill vexti ok ǫflugr." "Hǫskuldr had a son called Ámundi; he was blind from birth; he was, though, tall and mighty."

veit ek, at þér eruð sáttir. Ok spyr ek at því hverju þú vill mér bœta."	committed a dishonorable deed but I have paid for it."
"Alls engu," segir Lýtingr.	"I asked not," says Amundi, "if you had paid an atonement to them. I know that you are now friends, but I asked what atonement you will pay to me?"
"Eigi skil ek," segir Ámundi, "at þat muni rétt fyrir guði, svá nær hjarta sem þú hefir mér hǫggvit; enda kann ek at segja þér, ef ek væra heileygr báðum augum, at hafa skylda ek annathhvárt fyrir fǫður minn fébœtur eða mannhefndir, enda skipti guð með okkr."[165]	"None at all," says Lýtingr. "I cannot see," says Amundi, "it is not just before God, as you have stricken me so close to the heart; but I say this, if I were blessed with the sight of both my eyes, I would have compensation for my father, or blood; and so may God judge between us."

Amundi's blindness is reversed momentarily by the Christian god, just in time for him to exact revenge on his father's murderer. Here, the saga author is careful to stress that Amundi's blindness is only temporarily rendered null because it is God's will:

Eptir þat gekk hann út, en er hann kom í búðardyrrin, snýsk hann innar eptir búðinni; Þá lukusk upp augu hans. Þá mælti hann:	After that he went out; but when he came to the door of the booth, he turned around towards the inside. Then his eyes were opened, and he said:
"Lofaðr sé guð, drottinn minn! Sér nú hvat hann vill."	"Praised be God, my Lord! Now I see what His will is."
Eptir þat hleypr hann innar eptir búðinni, þar til er hann kemr fyrir Lýting ok høggr øxi í hǫfuð honum, svá at hon stóð á hamri, ok kippir at sér øxinni; Lýtingr fell áfram ok var þegar dauðr. Ámundi	After that he ran straight into the booth until he comes before Lýtingr and hit him in the head with his axe so that it sank in up to the back edge, and then he gave the axe a pull towards him.

[165] *Brennu-Njal's saga, Íslenzk Fornrit* XII, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1954), 272-273

gengr út í búðardyrrin, ok er hann kom í þau spor in sǫmu, sem upp hǫfðu lokizk augu hans, þá lukusk aptr, ok var hann alla ævi blindr síðan.[166]	Lýtingr fell forwards and was dead at once. Amundi went out to the door of the booth, and when he got to the very same spot on which he had stood when his eyes were opened, they were shut again, and he was blind all his life after.

Once the deed is finished, Ámundi's blindness returns and he is forced to live out the rest of his days with his impairment. Nothing more is written about Amundi after this, though the central feud in the saga is far from over. Amund's impairment served its narrative function by ramping up the dramatic element of his confrontation with Lýtingr and further glorifying god.

The sagas also refer to blindness that is acquired in old age. Occasionally this passage from virility into fragility is used as a plot device – similar to the story of Amundi – to further the dramatic element of the story; either placing characters in dire situations, both physically and mentally, due to their blindness or failing vision. At least two saga characters are killed as a result of their lack of vision. Whether this was understood to mean that these particular individuals lacked 'wisdom' to see the dangers in the future is uncertain, but an argument can be made that this is, most certainly, an intriguing possibility. [167]

[166] Ibid., 273.

[167] Both the characters Ingimund and Bjarn fall prey to their untimely demise due to the inability to see the dangers ahead of them. For their stories see, *Vatnsdoela saga, Íslenzk Fornrit* VIII, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1939), 60 and *Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa*, *Íslenzk Fornrit* III, eds. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1938), 197-198.

Auditory/Verbal Impairments

Very little has been written about the deaf experience in the Middle Ages. It has been argued that this is due to prejudices stemming from Medieval obscurantism.[168] The social view and treatment of medieval deaf individuals varied across communities as deafness is, at least in part, a social construction.[169] To some, the deaf were only slightly different than hearing peers and thus they should be able to engage in work and life. Others in the hearing world assumed that the deaf occupied a space of silence and assumed that silence to signify emptiness.[170]

The Icelandic sagas record very few instances of individuals with hearing disabilities. Much of this absence of written evidence of deaf characters can be inferred from how the Norse viewed hearing impairments as not necessarily detrimental to an individual's ability to work. Saga narratives tend to focus on characters who are well-spoken and display an aptitude for stringing together words in poetic verse. Lois Bragg contends that while scholars have made captivating claims regarding the pervasiveness of early medieval rudimentary sign languages, none of them can bear the brunt of academic scrutiny.[171] Formal attempts to create a language for

[168] Aude de Saint-Loup, "Images of the Deaf in Medieval Western Europe," in *Looking Back: A Reader on the History of Deaf Communities and Their Sign Languages*, eds. Renate Fischer and Harlan Lane (Hamburg: Signum Press, 1993), 379-402.

[169] Richard J. Senghas and Leila Monaghan, "Signs of Their Times: Deaf Communities and the Culture of Language," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (2002): 70.

[170] Herbert C. Covey, *Social Perceptions of People with Disabilities in History* (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1998), 201.

[171] Lois Bragg, "Visual-Kinetic Communication in Europe Before 1600: A Survey of Sign Lexicons and Finger Alphabets Prior to the Rise of Deaf Education," *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* 2, no. 1 (1997): 16.

the deaf in the Scandinavian countries did not take place until several hundred years later in the early to mid-nineteenth century.[172]

Similar to visual impairments, hearing impairments also had their share of narrative prostheses involved with their portrayals.[173] Following the same trajectory as the previous impairments discussed in this study, most instances of hearing impairments are those related to the decline of the senses due to old age. In other cases, individuals' deafness served more as an illustrative tale on how appearances are often not what they seem and how it is unwise to judge a person based on their silence alone.[174] As deafness and speechlessness were often seen as two effects of the same condition, these cautionary tales would have been particularly germane to medieval readers.

The value placed on deaf and/or mute individuals can be interpreted from an example found within the pages of the *Laxdœla saga*. In this episode, the Icelander Hǫskuldr purchases a beautiful slave girl from a Rus trader whilst on an expedition in Norway. He makes her his concubine and returns home with her to find a nonplussed wife. His wife, Jórunn, takes no pleasure in the sight of her husband's new mistress but nonetheless the slave is accepted into

[172] For more on the establishment of sign language in Scandinavia see, Odd-Inge Schroder, "Introduction to the History of Norwegian Sign Language" in *Looking Back: A Reader on the History of Deaf Communities and Their Sign Languages*, eds. Renate Fischer and Harlan Lane (Hamburg: Signum Press, 1993), 457-478; and Jonna Widell, "The Danish Deaf Culture in European and Western Society," in *Looking Back: A Reader on the History of Deaf Communities and Their Sign Languages*, eds. Renate Fischer and Harlan Lane (Hamburg: Signum Press, 1993), 231-248.

[173] See David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), here the authors argue that disability pervades literary narrative, but it is often used as either a stock feature of characterization or as an opportunistic metaphorical device.

[174] A perfect example of this can be seen in *Svarfdœla saga*, where Karl ómæli Karlsson does not speak from birth and is therefore considered both deaf and dumb. More so, he is judged by his silence and viewed as being mentally deficient. He is able to exact revenge on those who killed his father because they perceive him to not be a threat due to his disability.

Hǫskuldr's household. Jórunn, Hǫskuldr's wife summarizes her discontent by focusing on the newly assimilated thrall's lack of hearing and ability to speak:

Jórunn mælti: "Eigi mun ek deila við frillu þína, þá er þú hefir flutt af Nóregi, þótt hon kynni góðar návistir, en nú þykki mér þat allra sýnst, ef hon er bæði dauf ok málaus."[175]	Jórunn said, "I will not squabble with your mistress you have brought out of Norway as I think she should find living near me no pleasure; I think little of it at all as she is both deaf and mute."

This slave girl, however, turns out to be far more than what she appears. The following winter she gives birth to Hǫskuldr's child. This child is given the name Ólafr, in honor of Hǫskuldr's uncle, Ólaf Feilan who had only recently passed away. Hǫskuldr soon finds that the concubine that has birthed his son has been hiding a secret all the while:

Það var til tíðenda einn morgun, er Hǫskuldr var genginn út at sjá um bœ sinn; veðr var gott; skein sól ok var lítt á lopt komin; hann heyrði mannamál; hann gekk þangat til, sem lœkr féll fyrir túnbrekkunni; sá hann þar tvá menn ok kenndi; var þar Óláfr sonr hans, ok móðir hans; fær hann þá skilit, at hon var eigi málaus, því at hon talaði þá mart við sveininn. Síðan gekk Hǫskuldr at þeim ok spyrr hana at nafni ok kvað henni ekki mundu stoða at dyljast lengr. Hon kvað svá vera skyldu; setjask þau niðr í túnbrekkuna. Síðan mælti hon: "Ef þú vill nafn	"Early one morning, as Hǫskuldr had gone out to look about his farm, the weather being fine, and the sun, as yet little risen in the sky, shining brightly, it happened that he heard some voices of people talking; so he went down to where a little brook ran past the slope, and he saw two people there whom he recognized as his son Ólaf and his mother, and he discovered she was not speechless, for she was talking a great deal to the boy. Then Hǫskuldr went to her and asked her her name, and said it was useless for her to hide it any longer. She said so it should be, and they sat down on the edge of the field. Then she said, "If you want to know my name, I am called Melkorka"

[175] *Laxdœla saga, Íslenzk Fornrit* V, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1934), 26.

mitt vita, þá heiti ek
Melkorka."[176]

It is later revealed that Melkorka was an Irish princess, daughter of King Muirchertach, and that she had been captured and carried off during one of the many raids that dotted Ireland's coasts during the Viking Age. It is never revealed to the audience the cause for Melkorka's silence. The language spoken in Ireland during the Viking Age would have been wholly dissimilar to the mother tongue of the Scandinavians. Perhaps her silence was simply careful listening, so she could eventually gain the ability to speak with Hǫskuldr in his own tongue. Why she did not do so beforehand, though, is a riddle that the saga narrator never answers.

Melkorka's son, Ólafr, known by his nickname Ólafr the Peacock, becomes one of the wealthiest landowners in all of Iceland. As one of *Laxdœla saga*'s central characters, Ólafr plays a key role in both the political and social spheres of the late tenth century in Icelandic. He ultimately, upon the urging of his mother Melkorka, ranges out into the North Atlantic as a merchant where he enjoys a great deal of success and garners a sizeable amount of wealth. According to the saga, Olaf later becomes a chieftain in Iceland due to his royal pedigree.

Cognitive Impairments

Qualifying the representations of mental impairments within the Icelandic sagas presents a unique set of problems that scholars do not have to contend with when researching all other instances of impaired individuals. The problematic nature of historicizing mental impairments lies in how medieval minds diagnosed mental impairment and what, if any, implications the terms and notions they affixed to issues of the mind meant in their society. Mental illness, for

[176] Ibid., 27.

example, could take many forms, as will be seen below. Additionally, cognitive impairments occupy a spectrum that can cause the individual to exhibit debilitating symptoms, such as an inability to function without the assistance of others, while others may have largely gone unnoticed in the medieval world. As such, many examples of cognitive impairments were overlooked and, as a result, were never included in the sagas of the Icelanders. Likewise, such impairments could be easily observed by onlookers but may have not been considered as great enough a deviation to warrant concern in the Middle Ages. Wendy Turner contends that most individuals with mental impairments were looked after by their families and that most engaged actively in society, with a few even attaining unique legal accommodations and care in the thirteenth century.[177]

For medieval Scandinavians, there was no distinction between the mental and the physical. The mind, to their understanding, was a physical organ and resided in the center of the body within the heart. Any abnormality of the mind, therefore, could not have its impetus within the body but was wholly dependent on the influence of external forces within the environment of the individual.[178] This view, however, was not unique to the Norse. The Galenic model had, long before, mapped the processes of the brain that related to motor and sensory function, but rationality and matters affecting the mind continued to share an association with the heart. This pairing endured, in medical conception, well beyond the Middle Ages.[179]

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[177] Wendy J. Turner, "Introduction," in *Madness in Medieval Law and Custom*, ed. Wendy J. Turner (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 3.

[178] Kirsi Kanerva, "Disturbances of the Mind and Body: Effects of the Living Dead in Medieval Iceland" in *Mental (Dis)Order in Later Medieval Europe*, eds. Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Susanna Niiranen (Lediden: Brill, 2014), 242.

[179] Corinne Saunders, "Voices and Visions: Mind, Body, and Affect in Medieval Writing," in *The Edinburgh Companion to the Critical Medical Humanities* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 412-413.

The matter of social stigma further complicates the possibility of reaching a clear picture of how mental impairments were understood in the Middle Ages. Fear, for example, signified a lack of courage on the part of an individual. For a man in Scandinavian society, this was especially salient. Germanic ideals of proper male behavior permeated the societies of Scandinavia and the North Atlantic and fainting, cowering, or running away from an enemy was tantamount to social suicide.[180] Fear, was an emotion reserved only for the lowliest of the social hierarchy; such as slaves, people of low birth, or those with an excess of humoral phlegm.[181] This element of the stigmatization of mental instability is particularly problematic given the nature of episodic violence that the Middle Ages were known for. There is, consequently, no shortage of occurrences in medieval literature where extreme anxiety, horror, paralyzing grief, and powerlessness are traumas ascribed to combat or violence that has been inflicted on an individual that forever mars their mental state.[182]

Further, cognitive impairments have a complicated history where the individuals that lived with them were often accused of feigning their impairment and, likewise, are continually forced to prove their status as impaired. Having to relive such traumas and constantly be reminded of your status of having a mental impairment – and thereby being considered socially inferior – would only have exacerbated an individual's anxieties about communicating their

[180] This notion can be corroborated by an episode from *Brennu-Njals saga* in which his foster son Þorhall Asgrimsson passed out upon hearing the news of Njal's death. When he comes to, the first thing he does is to apologize for his behavior and state that his fainting had been 'less than manly' of him. For this story, in its entirety, see *Brennu-Njál's saga, Íslenzk Fornrit* XII, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavik, Hið Íslenzk Fornritafélag, 1954), 344.

[181] Kanerva, "Disturbances," 232.

[182] For more on this, see Sonja Kerth, "Trauma und Mittelalterliche Literatur: eine Mesalliance?" in *Dis/Ability History der Vormoderne: ein Handbuch*, eds. Cordula Nolte, Bianca Frohne, Uta Halle, and Sonja Kerth (Korb: Didymos-Verlag, 2017), 429–432.

situation.[183] Icelandic law had stipulations regarding claims of mental illness in regard to an individual's ability to be charged with murder.

Þat er mælt. ef or maðr viðr a manne oc scal þat þviat eins ora verc meta ef hann hefir unit aðr a sialfom ser þav averc er hætt voro við bana eða orkumblom oc verþr þo þviat eins óra vere ef buar vilia sva borit hafa. Þat er mæ. þar er ora verc bersc oc er sa maðr o Øll til doms en hann verðr þa iafn secr vm a verc sem o Ø maðr at öð, en þar eigo menn. at sætaz á fyrir lof fram.[184]	It is prescribed that if an insane man does injury to someone, it shall only be deemed a deed of insanity if he has previously done injury to himself with injuries that put him in peril of death or of lasting injury, and even so it only becomes a deed on insanity if neighbors are willing to give such a verdict. It is prescribed that where the panel verdict is of a deed of insanity the man in question may be sustained pending judgment, but in other respects he then falls under the same penalty for inflicting injury as if he were a sane man; but men have the right to settle in such a case without prior leave."[185]

Plentiful as they are, the examples of cognitive impairments represented within the Icelandic sagas and þáttr can be divided into three discrete categories. These categories are those that deal with congenital cognitive impairments, cognitive impairments brought on by trauma or injury, and cognitive impairments acquired through the natural processes of aging.

The common word associated with congenital cognitive impairment employed in the sagas is the term *óvitr*. Similar to the binary representation of fighting ability, the use of the

[183] For a modern study of the effects of violence on the human psyche, see Jonathan Shaw, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Scribner Press, 1994).

[184] *Grágás, Konungsbók*, ed. Vilhjalmur Finsen, 1852 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1974), 167.

[185] *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás I – The Codex Regius of Grágás with Material from Other Manuscripts*, trans. Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1980), 156.

prefix *ó-* provides negation to the root word *vitr*, which means wisdom. The contextual degree to which individuals lacked wisdom is usually supplied by the saga author. An individual is either simply foolish, or foolish enough that they cannot function without the aid of others. As an example, in *Vatnsdœla saga*, a character called Glæðir is introduced. He exists as merely a blip within the larger story and his status as *óvitr*, simply means he is lacking the ability to know when he has spoken too much.

Glæðir var áburðarmaðr mikill, málugr ok óvitr ok inn mesti gapuxi.[186]	Glæðir was a flamboyant individual, a chatterbox, a dimwit and a great blusterer.

Though he proves to be an interesting character in terms of his propensity for comic relief, Glaedir's unwise behavior puts him at odds with a dangerous man. After one too many verbal jabs thrown in the direction of this easily-agitated individual, Glaedir find himself on the losing end of an axe. He is killed by the one whom he consistently mocked and it is implied that his death was just reward for his actions, as it was in poor taste to continually offend without cause.

In *Fóstbrœðra saga*, the character known as Egil the Fool, not to be confused with the titular character of *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, is described as a physically imposing individual though he is lacking in wisdom.

Egill hét húskarl þeira Skúfs. Hann var mikill maðr vexti og sterkr, ljótr yfirlits, ófimr ok óvitur; hann átti kenningarnafn ok var kallaðr Fífl-Egill.[187]	Egil was the name of Skuf's farmhand. He was a great man mighty and strong, ugly in the face, he was not agile and not

[186] *Vatnsdœla saga, Íslenzk Fornrit* VII, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1939). 116.

[187] *Fóstbrœðra saga*, *Íslenzk Fornrit* VI, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1943), 229.

wise, and he was called Egil the Fool.

Egil the Fool's interactions with Þormod, one of the sworn brothers, are limited to him accidentally taking the blame for a killing because of Þormod and being chased across a fjord by an angry mob. To compound the indignity associated with his persona, it is said that Egil's nature is as it is because the daughters of Stupidity, Conceit, and False-reckoning trick him so often that he hardly knows who he is.[188]

Contrasting these stories, there are examples of individuals with severe cognitive impairments exhibiting the ability to engage in their social sphere, particular feuds, especially when confronted with calamitous circumstances. In *Bandamanna saga*, the reader is introduced to the brothers Már and Bjálfi. Már is the quintessential example of male Norse beauty as he is described with all the features befitting a hero. His younger brother Bjálfi, however, is described by one only line, suggesting that he may have had some type of cognitive impairment:

Bjálfi hét bróðir hans, hálfaglapi ok rammr at afli.[189]	Bjálfi was his brother's name, half-witted but a strong man.

The handsome and capable brother, Már, is unfortunately murdered by a nefarious character called Uspak. Bjálfi witnesses this event and composes himself long enough to smite the assailant with a carving knife. Uspak is later found to have died from the wound he received at the hands of Bjálfi. No one engages in litigation over this revenge killing, as justice – as far as it was concerned in Icelandic society – had been served. Bjálfi, though referred to as a halfwit, engages in the social performance of feud by avenging his brother. The saga does not relate any

[188] Ibid., 27.

[189] *Bandamanna saga, Íslenzk Fornrit* VII, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1936), 361.

further information regarding Bjálfi's fate as an individual with cognitive impairments who must now survive without the aid of his brother. Readers are left to speculate whether he was able to integrate himself fully into Icelandic society or if he became the ward of someone else.

Life in the world of the Middle Ages could be brutal and short. Some individuals experienced events so traumatic that it forever changed their lives. Indeed, the sagas recount episode of violence and horror that cause those who live through them to lose their ability to maintain control of their senses. Certain individuals even go so far as to exhibit what modern minds would perceived as post-traumatic stress disorder or depression. Such catastrophic damage to the psyche is presented in the story of Oddny from *Bjarnar saga hitdaelakappa.*

The central narrative of the saga focuses on the heroic character of Bjarn, whose good looks and storied exploits abroad earned him prestige and, consequently, the ire of the irascible villain Þórðr. Bjarn vies for the hand of the lovely and capable Oddny, whom he promises to marry upon his return from his quest to gain renown outside of Iceland. While he is away, Oddny is fooled into believing he has been killed. This façade has been perpetrated by Þórðr who desires Oddny for himself. Þórðr is successful in convincing Oddny and others that Bjarn has, indeed, perished abroad and that her betrothal is effectively null and void. Ever the opportunistic personality, Þórðr swoops in and claims Oddny as his wife.

After several seasons pass, Bjarn and Þórðr's rivalry finally comes to a head. Bjarn, who has now grown a bit older and dimmer in his vision, is ambushed by Þórðr and an immense retinue of men with the intent of killing the famed hero. Bjarn's defence is valiant, as he averts death several times, taking many of the attackers' lives. Ultimately, however, the superior force overwhelm the hero and he is slain. Þórðr takes his head as a trophy and rides home proudly, where he presents a ring belonging to Bjarn to his bride. Not understanding, or perhaps not

caring, about the intangible bond that Bjarn and Oddny had forged in their youth, Þórðr's ill-gained loot has an unexpected effect on his bride's mental health.

Ok er hon sá, hneig hon aptr ok vissi ekki til manna; ok er af henni hóf ǫngvit, þá hafði hon þá fengit mikla vanheilsu ok óyndi, ok leitaði Þórðr mjǫk margs í at hugga hana ok var vel til hennar. En svá gerisk með miklu móti, at hon var verkjum borin af þessu, ok var ákafast inn fyrsta vetr eptir. Henni þótti sé þat helzt ró, at hon sæti á hestsbaki, en Þórðr leiddi undir henni aptr ok fram…[190]	When she saw it, she sank down and lost all consciousness of those around her; and when the swoon lifted from her she had fallen into weakened health and great restlessness. Þórðr tried many things to comfort her and treated her well. But her state became so severe that she was overwhelmed with suffering, which was especially painful for the first year. She felt most relief if she sat on horseback while Þórðr led her to and fro.

Similar examples of such effects from emotional trauma can be witnessed within the tales of the supernatural that abound in the Icelandic sagas. Though there was never a shortage of bloodshed or violence in the world of the sagas, sometimes the supernatural was employed to illustrate the fragility of the human mind. In the prosaic world of the Icelandic sagas, the dead would sometimes return from their grave and instill terror in the hearts of their victims. In one such example, Glam, a malevolent man when he was still among the living, dies and returns as a revenant. His 'return' causes many of the locals to temporary lose control of their mental faculties.

Litlu síðar urðu menn varir við þat at Glámr lá eigi kyrr. Varð mǫnnum at því mikit mein svá at margir	A little while after men became aware that Glam did not lie quietly, they received great hurt from it, so that many fell into swoons when they saw him, but others lost their wits entirely.

[190] *Bjarnar saga hítdœlakappa*, *Íslenzk Fornrit* III, eds. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1938), 205.

fellu í óvit, ef sá hann, en
sumir heldu eigi vitinu.[191]

The intensity of warfare may also have contributed to certain battle-hardened individuals whose sense would be completely consumed in fits of rage that made anyone within their reach susceptible to their ire. These individuals were known collectively as the berserkers.[192] Referenced in both the art and literature of Scandinavia since the Bronze Age, these feral warriors, could go into trances that would make them impervious to blades and ferocious like wild beasts. Egil Skallagrímssonar, perhaps the most well-known character from the Icelandic family sagas, though never called a berserker outright, shares many of their violent qualities. Rather than play on the traditions of the hero, this well-known saga figure is presented as the antithesis of the heroic character, swarthy, troll-like in his physicality, and eschewing the fate of the beautiful, but tragic, hero.[193] Egil comes from a long line of individuals with questionable mental health. His grandfather, Ulfar, was prone to bouts of night-time rage so severe that he earned the moniker Kveldulfar or Nightwolf.[194]

Egil's father Grim is also prone to madness. Grim goes bald at an early age and is thereafter referred to as Skalla-Grim or Bald-Grim. Skalla-Grim turns out to be even more ill-

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[191] *Grettis saga,* 113.

[192] For more on Berserkers and Berserking see, H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Pagan Scandinavia* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1967), 100; Howard D. Fabing, "On Going Berserk: A Neurochemical Inquiry," *Scientific Monthly* 83, no. 5 (1956): 232-37; and Neil Price, *The Viking Way: Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, Second Edition (London: Oxbow, 2013).

[193] Jesse Byock, "Egill Skalla-Grimsson: The Dark Figure as Survivor in an Icelandic Saga," in *The Dark Figure in Medieval German and Germanic Literature*. Edited by E.R. Haynes and S.C. Van D'Elden. Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik 448. (Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag, 1986): 151.

[194] Egil saga Skallagrímssonar, *Íslenzk Fornrit* II, ed. Sigurður Nordal (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1933), 4; "En dag hvern, er at kveldi leid, tha gerdisk hann styggr, sva at fair menn mattu ordum vid hann koma; var hann kveldsvaefr. That var mal manna, at hann vaeri mjok hamrammr; hann car kalladr Kveld-Ulfr;" "Every day near evening he would grow so ill-tempered that few men dared address him. He went to sleep early in the evening." "It was said by men that he was shape-strong; (a shape changer) he was called Night-wolf."

tempered than his father and is prone to attacks of madness so fierce that he kills anyone within arm's reach of him. During a community sporting event, Skalla-Grim goes into a fit of such magnitude that he kills Egil's friend Þórð and then turns to do the same to Egil, his own son.

En um kveldit eptir sólarfall, þá tók þeim Agli verr at ganga; gerðisk Grímr þá svá sterkr, at hann greip Þórð upp ok keyrði niðr svá hart, at hann lamðisk allr, ok fekk hann þegar bana; síðan greip hann til Egils. Þorgerðr brák hét ambátt Skalla-Gríms; hon hafdi fóstrat Egil í barnœsku; hon var mikil fyrir sér, sterk sem karlar ok fjǫlkunnig mjǫk. Brák mælti: "Hamask þú nú, Skalla-Grímr, at syni þínum." Skalla-Grímr lét þá lausan Egil, en þreif til hennar. Hon brásk við ok rann undan, en Skalla-Grímr eptir; fóru þau svá í útanvert Digranes; þá hljóp hon út af bjarginu á sund. Skalla-Grímr kastaði eptir henni steini miklum ok setti milli herða henni, ok kom hvártki upp síðan; þar er nú kallat Brákarsund."[195]	But that night, after sunset, they were losing, Skallagrim was filled with such strength that he snatched up Þórð and dashed him on the ground so fiercely that he was killed. He then grabbed Egil. Þorgerðr Brak was the named of Skallagrim's servant-woman, who had fostered Egil since he was a child. She was mighty and strong as a man and well-versed in magic. Brak said, "You're attacking you own son like a mad beast, Skallagrim!" Skallagrim released Egil but went for her instead. She ran with Skallagrim chasing her. They came to the shore's end at Digranes, and she ran off the edge of the cliff and swam away. Skallagrim threw a huge stone after her which struck her between the shoulder blades. Neither the woman nor the stone ever came up. The spot is now called Brak's Sound.

Such behavior was not uncommon during the Viking Age but opinions regarding such berserker-like exploits began to radically shift after the introduction of Christianity to Scandinavia. As murder and bloodshed were radically opposed with Christian teachings,

[195] *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar, Íslenzk Fornrit* III, ed. Sigurður Nordal (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1933), 101-2.

attributes associated with the berserker began to take on a negative connotation and were slowly deemed socially unacceptable. Some went so far as to even classify it as a disease of the mind with the phrase, "Sumir kallaðr þat meinsemd," literally "some call it a mind disease."[196] Berserker characters within the sags, which were all written after the country's conversion to Christianity, usually fulfil the role of antagonists or untrustworthy outsiders, remnants of a bygone age.

Intellectual capacity could also be lost due to a decline brought about by the natural progression of age. Within the broader saga literature are stories of individuals suffering the ravages of time. Scandinavians of the Middle Ages cherished memory as an important aspect of their cultural identity and further recognized the role of remembering for the abstract concept that it was.[197] This conception of the primacy of memory in the Scandinavian worldview can be inferred from a text attributed to the Norse god Óðinn. In this text, Óðinn refers to his twin raven companion, called Huginn (thought) and Muninn (memory). A general sense of dread encompasses his speech and the reader can only surmise that the loss of memory, at least for Óðinn, was a fate that all individuals dreaded.[198]

"Huginn ok Muninn	"Huginn and Muninn
flúga hverjan dag	Fly every day
jǫrmungrund yfir;	Out into the world;
óumk ek of Hugin	I fear of Huginn

[196] Jessica L. Mou, "'Sumir Kallaðr þat Meinsemd': Going Berserk in the Shadow of State Centralization in Old Norse Society," in *The Treatment of Disabled Persons in Medieval Europe: Examining Disability in the Historical, Legal, Literary, Medical, and Religious Discourses of the Middle Ages,* eds. Wendy Turner and Tory Vandeventer Pearman (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2010), 96.

[197] Stephen A. Mitchell, "Memory, Mediality, and the 'Performative Turn': Recontextualizing Remembering in Medieval Scandinavia." *Scandinavian Studies* 85, No. 3 (2013): 284.

[198] For more on the role of memory in as it applies to this study, see *Minni and Muninn: Memory in Medieval Nordic Culture*, eds. Pernille Hermann, Stephen A. Mitchell, and Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014).

at hann aptr né komit, þó sjámk meirr um Munin."[199]	that he will not return, though for Munin I worry more."

This fear of living long enough to forget is particularly salient when judged against the importance of oral storytelling and the remembrance of history in Icelandic society before the advent of writing. Age, as well, can be an incredibly difficult concept to quantify when looking at the medieval literature of Scandinavia. There was, for example, no intermediary youth group classification. Only children, adults, and the elderly comprised Icelandic society.[200] As such, age was defined by function and those who passed over the invisible barrier between adulthood and old age, did so because they could no longer serve a purpose to the society at large. At one moment, a saga character is presented as an adult still capable in every single way and then, within the space of a few pages, they have joined that subaltern group of the elderly and are presented as nothing more than a burden and frustration to wider society.[201]

Conclusion

The copious and varied examples of impaired individuals presented in the Icelandic sagas and þáttr suggest that medieval Icelanders were no stranger to impairment. While the presentation of these impairments depended largely on the author's intention and biases, impaired individuals – for the most part – were judged largely by their utility within society. Those men and women who navigated the harsh and sometimes chaotic wilds of the medieval Icelandic landscape lived lives much like their able-bodies counterparts in Scandinavia. Their

[199] *Grímnismál, Íslenzk Fornrit – Eddukvæði*, ed. (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzk Fornritafélag, 2014): stanza 20.

[200] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "Becoming 'Old,' Ageism and Taking Care of the Elderly in Iceland c. 900-1300," in *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*, ed. Shannon Lewis-Simpson (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 231.

[201] Thomas Morcom, "After Adulthood: The Metamorphosis of the Elderly in the Íslendingasögur," *Saga Book* XLII (2018): 45. See also, Gillian Overing, "A Body in Question: Aging, Community, and Gender in Medieval Iceland" *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 29, no. 1 (1999): 216.

stories often focused upon the daily banalities of existence during the Middle Ages. While some impairments limited the range of what an individual could accomplish in the communal space of the farm and the political assemblies, each character serves as an archetype for modern understanding of disability during the Viking Age. Everyone, whether they were a hero or only an onomastic flourish by the narrator, was a representation of a larger story that has yet to be fully explored. In the fourth chapter of this study, the events of Icelandic conversion to Christianity circa 1000 A.D. will be analyzed. Alongside this gradual, but significant, change in the lives of those living on the fringes of the Norse world, this study will show that the shifting perspectives in theological, scientific, and political understanding decisively played a role in creating a separate sphere for the impaired in medieval Scandinavia.

CHAPTER 4

THE ARRIVAL OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE NORTH

Christianity brought boundless advantages to Scandinavia. The assumption of the new faith linked Scandinavians with a practice that had its roots in the oldest and most powerful empire of history, that of the Roman Empire. It also brought with it a new form of literacy. Latin learning and the pedagogic instruction that could be received at pontifical schools exposed the Norse to new ideas that had been within their grasp but in a tongue that they could not decipher. Christianity did indeed change the lives of individuals in northern Europe.[202] This is certainly true for the rich and royal elite, but for the everyday citizen – the overwhelming majority during the Middle Ages – the benefits are less clear. Uncertainty concerning the rituals and practices of the pre-Christian belief system in Scandinavia produces an inability to construct a clear image of how Christianity impacted the region. As much of the historical events recorded in the sagas were done so well after the advent of Christianity, assessing the status of the impaired in the Scandinavian world before its arrival has proven to be difficult.

This chapter will investigate the role of conversion and state formation in changing Scandinavian society, focusing on how these events affected the lives of impaired individuals in Iceland. Further, it will establish how these individuals remained tethered to the Church enticed by the prospect of divine healing and financial support. Potential healing was furthermore contingent on total submission and obedience to its teachings. This relationship with the Church

[202] See, Brad S. Gregory, "Disembedding Christianity: The Reformation Era and the Secularization of Western Society," in *Reformation und Säkularisierung: Zur Kontroverse um die Genese der Moderne aus dem Geist der Reformation*, edited by Ingolf U. Dalferth, 25-55 (Berlin: Mohr Siebeck GmbH and Co. KG., 2017).

kept the impaired dependent, through either the prospect of work or charity, upon the charity of the Church as a means of financial support.

Before the arrival of Christianity, religious practices conducted in Scandinavia could be classified as heterogeneous. Some gods were more prominent than others in certain regions or absent altogether from popular ritual.[203] Such an atmosphere was welcoming of diversity and to new, foreign gods, and Christ represented a story that was familiar to Scandinavians. He was a god with a distinct and royal lineage; born with magical abilities, a leader and protector of men, and – upon his resurrection – a divine being with visible impairments.[204] Contrasted with paganism, Christianity was not so welcoming of other belief systems. In the eyes of the Church, there was room for only one god – their god – and those who did not adhere to this principle were consigned to the status of pagan, effectively cut off from the economic and political benefits thereof. The common view of the church was that of an independent and imported representative which had come to the northern reaches with an agenda of its own.[205] Conversion to this religion did not consist solely in assuming the practices of the belief system but also initiated the reevaluation of a society's previous beliefs.[206] As was discussed in chapter three, to

[203] See Stefan Brink, "How Uniform was the Old Norse Religion?" in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World*, eds. Margaret Clunies Ross, Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop, and Tarrin Wills (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 105-36.

[204] In the *Gospel of John* 20:27, the resurrected Christ meets his disciples in his new 'heavenly' body. To assuage their doubts, he instructs his disciple Thomas to feel the holes in his hands and thrust his hand into his side which was pierced by a spear at the crucifixion.

[205] Orri Vésteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland: Priest, Power, and Social Change 1000-1300* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.

[206] Anne Holtsmark, *Studier i Snorres mytologi. Skrifter utgitt av Det norske videnskapsnakademi i Oslo II.* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1964), 9; "Bestod omvendelsen til kristendom ikke alene i antagelsen af den nye tro, men ogsi i en revurdering af de gamle guder."

what degree these evaluations sought to demonize or historicize the pre-Christian myths varied by author and agenda.

Christianity brought both literacy and a new sense of order to Scandinavian communities. In the kingdoms of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, the Church worked hand-in-hand with the kings, asserting its influence and broadening the scope of its power. It was integral for the ruling powers to appease the Church because, without their support – both theological and financial – their hold over their armies and crown could be challenged. Historical accounts demonstrate that fidelity to the correct power structures was a matter of the utmost importance. For example, according to one source, when Sveinn Haraldsson tjúguskegg (Forkbeard) lead a revolt against his father Haraldr *blåtand* (Bluetooth) Gormsson, it was said that he changed the Christian God into a devil.[207] According to another, he turned from Christianity and back to the idols of paganism.[208] None of these accounts were true, Forkbeard had simply strayed too far outside the permissible range of obedience to the order that had been established by the Church.[209] To be obedient symbolized the sacrificing of the ego to god, whereas disobedience was seen as a sacrifice to the gods of heathenism.[210]

[207] Thietmar of Merseburg. *Chronicon*, https://archive.org/details/chronicon00thieuoft/page/n4

[208] Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, https://web.archive.org/web/20050207105412/http://hbar.phys.msu.su/gorm/chrons/bremen.htm

[209] Evidence that contradicts Forkbeard's "relapse" into paganism rests in his decision to build several churches during the time when he had allegedly rejected the Christian faith. The most notable of these churches were the ones at Lund and Roskilde.

[210] Henrik Janson. "What Made the Pagans Pagans?" In *Medieval Christianitas. Different Regions 'Faces', Approaches*. Edited by Tsvetelin Stepanov and Georgi Kazakov. (Sofia: Voenno Izdaelstovo Publishing House Ltd, 2010): 11 -30. (17 and 27)

For many impaired Scandinavians, they saw the arrival of this new religion as an opportunity to take on a more meaningful role in society. Christianity, like the Old Norse belief system, offered a god whose body was arguably impaired; his appearance still broken and scarred from his sacrifice on the cross. Adding to this divinely impaired representative was the undercurrent in early Christian belief that disability denoted an unusual relationship with divinity – an individual's body was either divinely blessed or divinely cursed.[211] The Christian faith departed from paganism, however, in the message it projected about impairment. As Christianity evolved through the process of institutionalization, so did its approach to the impaired body. It became less about adaptation of the body to the environment or social situation and more about overcoming the impairment entirely.[212] Though an individual may have been given their impairment by god and told it was a blessing, they still held on to the hope that god would heal them of their impairment; if not for their sake, for the purpose of glorifying god's power.

Christ's ministry, likewise, approached disability as it was something that could be cured by his power. To be included in this emerging social structure, an impaired individual must be healed of their infirmities. The Gospel stories related Christ's healing of both the diseased and downtrodden of society. From the curing of blind Bartimaeus, the healing of the woman cursed with a flow of blood, and the healing of the leper who begged for his help, the stories of divine healing exemplified the power of this new diety.[213] These stories further amplified the growing

[211] Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 70-71.

[212] Creamer, *Disability, Christian, Theology*, 49.

[213] These stories can be found in Mark 10:49, Matthew 9:22, and Mark 1:4 1 respectively. For more on Christ and healing, see Bruce G. Epperly, *God's Touch: Faith, Wholeness, and the Healing Miracles of Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), and Amanda Porterfield, *Healing in the History of Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

resolve of medieval individuals who received them. For the first time, the impaired were in control of their own cure. They were instructed to seek the power of Christ's healing just as those impaired individuals did in the Biblical stories.[214] They also found representation in both the Christian god and the litany of saints that came later, many of which became the patron saints of specific ailments and bodily afflictions.[215]

The image of the Christian god as a champion of the impaired was a powerful one for individuals living with physical limitations, yet the overarching Christian etiology regarding impairment was somewhat ambiguous in its message regarding impairment.[216] Interpretations of disability have ranged in their portrayal. They vary from physical manifestations of sin to occasions for charitable aid. While a case can be made that the Christian Church had a positive impact on the care of severely impaired individuals, three overarching themes that manifested in the practice of this care belie its utility. These themes – the notion of virtuous suffering, the equation of sin and disability, and the practice of segregationist charity – illustrate the hurdles encountered by impaired individuals who sought inclusion within the community of Christendom.[217]

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[214] David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, "'Jesus Thrown Everything Off Balance:' Disability and Redemption in Biblical Literature," in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, eds. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 180.

[215] See, Emil F. Frey, "Saints in Medical History", *Clio Medica*, 14 (1979): 35–70.

[216] See Deborah Creamer, "Finding God in Our Bodies: Theology from the Perspective of People with Disabilities," *Journal of Religion in Disability and Rehabilitation* 2 (1995): 27-42, 67-87; Eiesland, *Disabled God*; and Brett Webb-Mitchell, *Dancing with Disabilities: Opening the Church to All God's Children* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1996).

[217] Nancy Eisland, *The Disabled God*: *Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 99-100.

As impairment was understood to be God's will, sometimes individuals were believed to have not been entirely responsible for their infirmities. In rare instances, Christian thought dictated that God would choose certain individuals to have these impairments as a means of glorifying his works. Like the Apostle Paul, who suffered from some unknown but often-mentioned 'thorn in his flesh,' the impaired likewise were reminded that their physical bodies were to be considered as living symbols of God's grace. They were fated to suffer virtuously despite their impairment as it was the decision of a holy power and not something to be wrestled with. Paul was not the only Christian to make mention of the blessing of impairment. The laudatory praise heaped upon bodily difference can even be seen in Icelandic works, such as *Geisli*, the poem written by twelfth-century priest Einarr Skúlason. Here, impairments are given a special, sacred place in the grand scheme of God's will. Individuals are told that they should be happy for them ever praising God for their usage:

Leyfðr er sá, er lét gram njóta lamins fótar, sem ítran þegn of-stýfðrar tungu ok útstunginna augna. Hǫnd hreins Óláfs vann Guðs þræl heilan gjǫrvallra meina; gǫr munu gjǫld þeim, er byrjar ofugmæli.[218]	Praised is he who lets one use his lame leg, the excellent thane likewise of his cut-off tongue and stung out eyes. The pure hand of Óláfr for God's slave won healing for all my injuries; payment will come from those who slander.

Despite the numerous efforts of Christian writers, such as the thirteenth-century theologian Thomas Aquinas, impairment was frequently conceptualized as an observable stain of transgression; an imperceptible moral flaw.[219] A perfect example of this can be found in the

[218] Einarr Skúlason, "Geisli," in *Einarr Skúlason's Geisli: A Critical Edition*, ed. Martin Chase (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), stanza 61, page 111.

[219] Zina Weygand, *The Blind in French Society from the Middle Ages to the Century of Louis Braille*, trans. Emily-Jane Cohen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 16.

thirteenth century perspective of the Swiss cantor of the church of Zurich, Conrad. Concerning the impaired he states: "The lame and the blind…are too lowly to be mentioned in front of good and honorable persons; if nature has reduced them to this point and stigmatized them, it is because they have a sin to expiate."[220] This view of impairment was all too common in the empires of the continent during the late medieval era.

Considering this message, an individual with an impairment could be responsible for their state or it could be the fault of some deeply-hidden sin of their parents. Deborah Beth Creamer opines that: "When people with disabilities have been considered at all, they have historically been looked at as symbols of sin (to be avoided), images of saintliness (to be admired), signs of God's limited power or capriciousness (to be pondered), or personifications of suffering (to be pitied)—very rarely are people with disabilities considered first as people."[221] Equally, their impairment could be a vehicle by which the Almighty God tests and enhanced their faith. Impairment could be instructive, especially in the scope of mental impairments. The mentally disabled were often used as tropes, serving as a cautionary tale of the dire consequences caused by sins of the mind.[222] Such a construction encouraged parishioners to seek spiritual healing alongside physical renumeration. The principal message was that God's will shall be done on earth despite the limitations of humans.

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[220] Pierre Villey, *L'Aveugle dans le monde des voyants. Essai de sociologie* (Paris: Flammarion, 1927), 89.

[221] Creamer, *Disability, Christian, Theology*, 36.

[222] Wendy Turner, "Conceptualizations of Intellectual Disability in Medieval English Law," in *Intellectual Disability: A Conceptual History 1200-1900*, eds. Patrick McDonagh, C. F. Goodey, and Tim Stainton (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2018), 28.

Many impaired individuals were happy to pledge themselves to the service of the Church and profit from its guidance and support. The church also benefitted from their presence as laborers and exemplars of what could be achieved by committing oneself to the service of the Church. Those who did well managing their impairments became displays of care and cure. Likewise, remission was incentivized as a repayment for prayer. In this respect, the church retained control over impaired individuals through charity-based almsgiving.[223] This new feature of religious belief, one the Old Norse customs did not observe in the same way the Christians did, was crucial for any soul that wished to go to Heaven and not spend their eternity in the abysmal void of purgatory.[224] They had already traded the heathen notion of Hel for the eternal reward of Heaven, after all, and there was no going back from such a broad jump in theological understanding. Christian charity and almsgiving were not always a hinderance to the development of impaired individuals. In many cases, they brought about many positive, perhaps even sympathetic views regarding impaired individuals. These attitudes manifested in the various town-funded pilgrimages that were sponsored specifically for individuals with epilepsy and various other mental impairments to seek out cures at distant religious sights.[225]

The impaired of northern Europe did not immediately gain access to these systems of charity. The various kingdoms of Scandinavia converted to the new religion at different times during the Middle Ages. For these territories, the adoption of Christianity was – for the most part

[223] Wheatley, Stumbling Blocks, 13.

[224] Christina Lee, "Abled, Disabled, Enabled: An Attempt to Define *Disability* in Anglo-Saxon England," *WerkstattGeschichte* 65 (2013): 43

[225] David L. Braddock and Susan L. Parish. "An Institutional History of Disability," in *Handbook of Disability Studies.* 11 – 69, edited by Gary L. Albrecht, Katherine D. Seelman, and Michael Bury (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001): 18.

– politically motivated. Each of these principalities received the Christian faith at the hands of a conquering power. As such, the conversions were recorded panegyrically. There was no 'process' of conversion but a swift, instantaneous, and a top-down hierarchical domino-effect that started with the coronation of the new king and ended with the baptism of the humblest farmer. For the majority of Scandinavians, becoming Christian meant the construction of new identities through cultural means. This included submission to the authority of the Church, adhering to its guidelines for a theologically sound daily life, and yet simultaneously recognizing and remembering the customs of their forefathers.[226]

Denmark was converted first in 965, due to the efforts of Harald blaton (Bluetooth) and his campaign to unite the north under the banner of the cross. The Saxon chronicler Widukind remarked that the tenth-century Danes converted to Christianity but nevertheless worshipped idols.[227] This account could most likely have been universally applied to describe the process of Scandinavia conversion.[228]

Efforts to convert Norway began in the tenth century with Haakon the Good but were met with heavy resistance from the pagan chieftaincies. Norwegian raids in Ireland, Britain, and Frankia had introduced the Norse to Christianity and by the year 1000, under the auspices of King Olaf Tryggvason of Norway, the process of conversion began. Some heathen men chose to take up arms and fight against the perceived encroachment of this new religion while others

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[226] Jenny Jochens, "Late and Peaceful: Iceland's Conversion Through Arbitration in 1000," *Speculum 74, no. 3 (1999): 6*42.

[227] See Raymond F. Woods, trans., "The Three Books of the Deeds of the Saxons, by Widukind of Corvey, Translated with Introduction, Notes, and Bibliography" (PhD Dissertation: University of California-Berkeley, 1949).

[228] Peter Sawyer, "The Christianization of Scandinavia," *Beretning fra femte tværfaglige vikingesymposium: Udgivet af forlaget og Afdelig for middelader-arkeologi* (Moesgard: Aarhus Universitet, 1986), 30.

made the decision to flee from Norway; making their new homes in Iceland and the various islands of the North Atlantic. Armed resistance proved futile, however, and the process of conversion was finally completed in 1015 when Christianity was formally accepted under Tryggvason's successor Olafr Haraldsson.[229]

Sweden proved to be the last pagan holdout. Though campaigns to Christianize the Swedes began in the ninth century with the monk Ansgar's mission to the trading hub of Birka, the religion did not gain a foothold until the ascension of King Stenkil in 1060. Some remote parts of the kingdom remained pagan until 1100. The story of their conversion was recorded in the *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* by Adam of Bremen.

Each of the three main Scandinavian kingdoms, Norway, Denmark, and Sweden, were effectively conquered by Christianity, since they were coerced into adopting the faith by outside powers. Because of Iceland's close fraternal and economic ties to Norway, the conversion of the frontier community began around the same time as it did there. Iceland's conversion, however, was notably different because it was voted upon. This process of arbitration provides valuable insights into the thought processes of tenth-century Icelanders. Iceland, in contrast with the other Scandinavian kingdoms, voted to convert to the new religion. Icelanders termed this unanimous vote the *kristnitaka*; the taking of Christianity. Additionally, this sweeping cultural transformation is similarly astonishing due to its lasting effects. Unlike the numerous examples from Scandinavia, there were virtually no relapses to the old faith. Ever still, more and more Icelanders were exposed to the teachings of Christianity at the hands of missionary efforts from the already converted kingdoms. Within a half century, the first Icelandic native was ordained as

[229] Margaret Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* (London: Boydell & Brewer, 2005), 117.

bishop at his estate in Skálholt. His name was Ísleifur and he was succeeded by Gizurr his son who initiated the formal organization of the Icelandic bishopric. Those who would record these events would refer to the languid process of Icelandic conversion as the *siðaskipti* – or change of customs – because the Old faith had been less a religion than it was an integral component and practice of their culture.

As this thesis has primarily concerned itself with the experiences of impaired individuals as told through the Icelandic record, it is important to briefly look at the accounts that retell the story of the *kristnitaka*, or the taking of Christianity. The purpose is to illustrate the unique approach that Icelanders took in arbitrating this massive theological and political change. For them, their conversion was not a matter of faith or the imposition of force by a foreign agent, it was a matter of legal compromise. This arbitrational approach to problem-solving was indicative of the Icelandic mindset during the Middle Ages. Their choice, to mediate this cultural transformation from within, further illuminates principles that were singular to their distinctly Norse community. Their vision of themselves is key to conceptualizing how they continued to view impairment as they did in heathen times.

The story of Icelandic conversion takes narrative focus in three major works: The *Íslendingabók*, *Kristni saga* and *Olafs saga Trygvasonar en mesta.* Scholarly consensus holds that *Íslendingabók* relates the event with as little embellishment as possible, whereas the latter two works are looked upon as less credible due to their obvious Christian bias and incorporation

of events not seen elsewhere in other sources.[230] It is said that they, "seem rather to display wonders and miracles than real events."[231]

The author of *Íslendingabók*, Ari hinn fróði (the wise) Þorgilsson, made no attempt to eulogize the Icelandic conversion as effortless, as was done in some accounts of his fellow countrymen.[232] Instead, Þorgilsson's presents the long chain of events that led up to the change in beliefs. He documents the earlier, fruitless missions of the Saxon priest Þangbrandr, as well as how hotly contested the new faith was. One such example demonstrates that the rivalry between paganism and Christianity very nearly led to bloodshed:

En enir heiðnu menn hurfu saman með alvæpni, ok hafði svá nær, ar þeir myndi berjask, at <eigi> of sá á miðli.[233]	And the heathens gathered together fully armed, and it came so near to them fighting that none could foresee which way it would go.

The fragile peace ultimately held, however, and arbitration began. Initially, the men gathered at the Alþing Assembly of 1000 – both heathen and Christian – and agreed that they would have separate laws governing each faction in Icelandic society. The old laws would remain in effect for the heathen and the laws of the Church would govern those who had chosen to adopt the new faith. A man called Hallr was implored to represent the Christians as their lawspeaker, but he

[230] The authorship of *Íslendingabók* has been accredited to Ari hinn fróði (the wise) Þorgilsson. Þorgilsson reported that he used word of mouth to reconstruct the events leading up to and after the Icelandic conversion.

[231] Sigurdur Lindal, "Upphaf kristni og kirkju," in *Saga Íslands I*, 227-288 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka bókmenntafélag, Sögufélagið, 1974), 248; "Virðist fremur verið að lýsa undri og stórmerkjum en raunverulegum atburðum."

[232] The majority of scholar view Ari's account as relatively trustworthy. He begins *Íslendingabók* with these words: "hvatki es missagt es í fræðum þessum, þá es skylt at hafa þat heldr, es sannara reynisk;" "whatever is wrongly stated in this work, it is a duty to have instead what proves to be truer." *Íslendingabók* ed. Jakob Benediktsson, *Íslenzk Fornrit I* (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1968), 3.

[233] *Íslendingabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, *Íslenzk Fornrit I* (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1968), 16.

referred another named Þorgeirr, who was a heathen. What followed was an enigmatic pagan ritual involving divination of the will of the gods:

> Þá báðu enir kristnu menn Hall á Síðu, at hann, skyldi lǫg þeira upp segja, þau es kristninni skyldi fylgja. Enn hann leystisk því undan við þá, at hann keypti at Þorgeiri lǫgsǫgumanni, at hann skyldi upp segja, en hann vas enn þá heiðinn. En síðan es menn kvómu í búðir, þá lagðisk hann niðr Þorgeirr ok breiddi feld sinn á sik ok hvíldi þann dag allan ok nóttina eptir ok kvað ekki orð. En of morguninn eptir settisk hann up ok gørði orð, at menn skyldi ganga til lǫgbergis.[234]
>
> Then the Christians asked Hallr of Síða to speak the law, the one that was to go with Christianity. But he freed himself from this responsibility. He admonished the lawspeaker, Þorgeirr, that he should speak it, although he was still heathen at the time. And later, when everyone had returned to their booths, Þorgeirr lay down and spread his cloak over himself, and rested all that day and the night after, and did not speak a word. And the next morning, after he got up, he sent word for men to go to the Law-Rock.[235]

The act of speaking or mumbling into one's cloak was particularly significant in the old customs of Scandinavia. There are multiple accounts of this practice being used as a method of soothsaying.[236] Whether this was Þorgeirr's intention, to pantomime a pagan ritual while he remained under his cloak, is unknown. No examples of him muttering exist but the allusion of

[234] *Íslendingabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, *Íslenzk Fornrit I* (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1968), 17.

[235] Law-Rock, or lǫgberg was the spot where all free men would gather for the Alþing meeting. Here, the elected Law Speaker would recite out loud, from memory, one third of the laws of Iceland every year during his three-year term. He was chosen by a special legislative assembly of native Icelanders and was the most powerful individual in the country while the Alþing was in session.

[236] See *Geirmundar þáttr heljarskinns, Sturlunga saga* 1906, 2; *Landnámabók*, *Íslenzk Fornrit I*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1968), 150.; Flateyjarbók, 1860, 252.; *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, *Íslenzk Fornrit II*, ed. Sigurður Nordal (Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1933), 148.

this physical gesture would not have been lost on his twelfth-century audience. It is most likely that he laid under his cloak in order to appear as more an oracle rather than a thinker.[237]

When Þorgeirr emerged from his communion with the gods, he delivered an impassioned speech to those who gathered to hear him. His news was probably unexpected, given the fact that he himself was a follower of the old ways. The result of his long stay under the cloak was that the gods had revealed to him that Christianity should be accepted peacefully:

"En nú þykkir mér þat ráð," kvað hann, "at vér látim ok eigi þá ráða, es mest vilja í gegn gangask, ok miðlum svá mál á miðli þeira, at hvárirtveggju hafi nakkvat síns máls, ok hǫfum allir ein lǫg ok einn sið. Þat mon verða satt, es vér slítum í sundr lǫgin, at vér monum slíta ok friðinn."	"And it now seems sensible to me," he said, "that we too do not let those who most wish to oppose each other prevail, and let us mediate between them, so that each side has its own way in something and let us all have the same law and the same religion. It will prove true that if we tear apart the law, we will also tear apart the peace."
En hann lauk svá máli sínu, at hvárirtveggju játtu því, at allir skyldi ein lǫg hafa, þau sem hann réði upp at segja. Þá vas þat mælt í lǫgum, at allir menn sklydi kristnir vesa ok skírn taka, þeir es áðr váru óskírðir á landi hér; en of barnaútburð skyldu standa en fornu lǫg ok hrossakjǫtsát. Skyldu menn blóta á laun, ef vildu, en varða fjǫrbaugsgarðr, ef váttum of kvæmi við.[238]	And he brought his speech to a close in such a way that both sides agreed that everyone should have the same law, the one he proclaimed. It was then declared in the laws that all people should be Christian and should receive baptism; but the old laws should stand regarding the exposure of infants and the eating of horse-flesh. People had the right to sacrifice in secret, if they wished, but it would be punishable by the lesser outlawry if witnesses were produced.

[237] Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Under the Cloak: A Pagan Ritual Turning Point in the Conversion of Iceland*, ed. Jakob S. Jonsson (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan Félagsvísindastofnun, 1999), 122.

[238] *Íslendingabók*, *Íslenzk Fornrit I*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1968), 17.

For most Icelanders, the conversion changed very little in its early stages. The marriage of old and new beliefs during the ritual at Law-Rock did, however, open the possibility for a peaceful coexistence of paganism and Christianity on the island. Further, Christian individuals gained access to influential positions at the Alþing. These changes may seem subtle on the surface but would prove to have lasting implications.[239]

There was an unevenness in the manner with which Christian customs replaced pagan ones.[240] For example, in Icelandic communities, monogamy was enforced by agents of the Church Icelandic even though chieftains – those who had historically taken many wives – continued to practice polygamy. Similarly, the Icelandic clergy continued to sire children with concubines, a practice known as clerical companionship. It was vehemently opposed by the Church but is well documented through the Christian age in Iceland and abroad.[241] Some individuals with impairments enjoyed the benefits of an organizational power that was willing to employ and educate them. Others were judged to have been lacking moral values and the marks of their sin were meted out on their physical bodies. As the church began to court the growing art of medical science, perceptions regarding the cause of impairments would shift from a theological explanation to a scientific one.

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[239] Terry Gunnell, "Ansgar's Conversion of Iceland," *Scripta Islandica* 60 (2009), 115-116.

[240] Steinunn Kristjansdottir, "Becoming Christian: A Matter of Everyday Resistance and Neogtiation," *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 48, no 1: 33.

[241] Kristjansdottir, "Becoming Christian" 32; See also, Torstein Jørgensen and Gastone Saletnich, *Synder og pavemakt: botsbrev fra Den Norske Kirkeprovins og Suderøyene til Pavestolen, 1438-1531* (Stavanger: Misjonshøgskolens forlag, 2004); and Ruth Mazo Karras, *Unmarriages: Women, Men, and Sexual Unions in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

The Twelfth-Century Renaissance and the Rise of the Individual

Christianity's influence on Scandinavian culture broadened as time passed. Icelanders began to wrestle with concepts such as lust, personal accountability, and penitence under a new belief system and their approach to how they viewed the self and space also began to change. In Iceland, the farm remained the center of social activity. The home, however, underwent radical changes that only a few scholars have studied.[242] Personal space became more important to Icelanders. The quintessential 'long house' which had long since been the *de facto* design of living quarters in Scandinavia shifted from its one massive room flanking a hearth to several rooms. For the first time, perhaps, Icelanders began to conceptualize their own individuality, separate from that of their kinfolk. They would undergo a change in roles from that of subjects to citizens.[243] Rather than remaining a like-minded collective, the Norse on the edge of the Scandinavian world began to experience the emergence of the individual. Of this Colin Morris claimed that, "the Church of the twelfth century saw a revival of personal piety…but it failed to recover a sense of community for the faithful as a whole."[244]

The extent to which Christianity directed the rise of individualism is still debated. This development was not caused by Christianity's influence alone, though it was most certainly the

[242] For discussions about how houses and space changed after the conversion, see Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Kristnitakan á Íslandi* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1999); Hörður Ágústsson 1982. 'Den islandske bondegårds udvikling fra landnamstidenindtil det 20. Århundrede,' in *Vestnordisk byggeskikk gjennom to tusen år: Tradisjon og forandring fraromertid til det 19. århundre*, eds. Bjørn Myhre, Bjarne Stoklund and Per Gjærder (Stavanger: Archaeological Museum in Stavanger, 1982): 255–68; and Orri Vesteinsson, "Patterns of Settlement in Iceland: A Study in Prehistory," *Saga Book 25* (1998-2001): 1-29.

[243] Walter Ullmann, *The Individual and Society in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966).

[244] Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual: 1050-1200* (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1987), 11-13.

catalyst that began a sequence of events that led to such a break from traditional modes of thought. Certainly, the Gregorian reform of the eleventh century emphasized a distinct movement towards spiritualization. Notions of penance and Hell focused solely on individual merit during the Middle Ages.[245] While communities could be punished for misdeeds, it was understood that sin rested with the individual. Confession, especially, placed a great deal of power in the hands of the Catholic Church. Information shared with the clergy could easily have been used to guide and direct the trajectory of medieval power.

The Gregorian Reform also stressed the importance of penintent acts as necessary features of spiritual life. This heightened emphasis on atonement naturally led to the increasing importance of confession among the newly converted. The Church benefitted greatly from this movement toward reparation. Without knowing the inner workings of people's minds, the Church could not impose its will. In order to harness power over the individual, their souls – or at least their hopes and fears – had to be explored. Confession did just that, subtly forcing parishioners to reveal their innermost secrets in the hope of attaining forgiveness from god. A knowledge of the conscious and the ability and willingness to direct it are prerequisites for such manipulation.[246] The Church had ambitious individuals of its own who were willing to tap in to the deepest trappings of the human mind and use the information that was gained to guide their political aims in Europe. The Church made use of such individuals throughout the European

[245] Creamer, *Disability, Christian, Theology*, 49. (For a more detailed description of this complex period in history, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991)*;* Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1136* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995)*;* Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)*;* and Peter Biller and A.J. Minnis, *Medieval Theology and the Natural Body* (Rochester: York Medieval Press, 1997).

[246] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *The Essential Foucault: Selections form Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, eds. Paul Rainbow and Nikolas Rose (New York: New Press, 2003), 132.

political landscape, quietly exerting its influence on the various kingdoms on the Continent. Its impact was felt throughout Scandinavian and the North Atlantic, apart from Iceland, which was resistant to such body politics.[247]

The birth of individualism and the rise of state formation are inextricably linked.[248] As the Christian polities of Scandinavia rapidly gave way to centralized kingdoms, the Norse became citizens of a vast and ever-widening empire of Christendom. In this role, Scandinavians began to look inward, appraising their position within a new world as individuals. While individualism was at the forefront of thought in the High Middle Ages, its effects were slow to reach Iceland in the North Atlantic. From its founding until roughly the thirteenth century, Iceland existed outside the politics of Scandinavian and the European mainland. Foreign warlords never breached its shores and, apart from a few attempts by Saxon missionaries to convert the Icelanders, very little strides toward changing the island were made from outside its geographic boundaries. It was not until the chieftaincies began losing their control on the political sphere of Icelandic society to the ambitions of the *nouveau riche* powers in the twelfth century that consciousness began to shift. Early on in its history, Icelanders had gone to great lengths to limit the power of individuals. They had seen the folly of overly ambitious men as these warlords cut a bloody path through their Scandinavian homeland. Icelanders wanted no

[247] The term *body politics* refers to the policies through which societies control the human body, as well as the struggle over the measure of individual control over the body.

[248] See, Suzanne Verderber, *The Medieval Fold: Power, Repression, and the Emergence of the Individual* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); John F. Benton, "Consciousness of Self and Perceptions of Individuality," in *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth-Century*, eds. Robert L. Benson and Giles Constable (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 263-295; Carolyn Walker Bynum, "Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?" in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 82-109; Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050-1200* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995); Walter Ullmann, *The Individual and Society in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966).

part of this. It was well understood that the *goðorð*, the role of the chieftain, was to serve his community, not himself. Because of this, social attitudes regarding the body changed only as customs did in Iceland. The twelfth century, however, brought with it a new awareness of taxonomy. Individuals were suddenly driven by an urgent need to define and categorize one another into "orders," "lives," or "callings."[249]

It would be natural to assume that when religious thought concerned itself with the internal working of society's social and political sphere, it would lead to the development of more systems of aid for the impaired. In practice, this was not the case. Instead, in favor of a society where everyone lived their lives by a unifying moral code, those outside the norm began to be ignored or judged according to what they could achieve for themselves in the broader scheme of life. Within this construct, impaired individuals became subject to laws that were created to subjugate them, deny them the same privileges afforded to their neighbors, and rob them of their political agency.[250] Elsewhere in Europe during the fourteenth century, wards were created for the express purpose of containing the sick, the lame, the blind, and the deaf. They were confined with the intent of concentrating their numbers rather than providing them with any long-term care or medical treatment.[251]

Unlike the continental powers, the location of Icelandic society effectively cut it off from the rapid changes that took hold across Europe. The ideas and influence of the Continent were a long way from the scattered dioceses on the boundary of the Norse world. Therefore, the

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[249] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1982), 89.

[250] Margaret A. Winzer. "Disability and Society Before the Eighteenth Century," in *Disability Studies: A Reader,* edited by Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 1997), 92.

[251] Stiker, *History of Disability*, 99.

religious constraints that were being placed upon individuals in Europe may have been slow in reaching the Icelanders. This might explain why, even though the sagas were written during Christian times, authors such as Snorri Sturluson still recount the stories of disabled individuals from Iceland's heroic past as well as the gods that they worshipped in pagan times as being special rather than debilitated.

Conclusion

The final question that must be answered relates to why Iceland's treatment of its impaired differed from the other kingdoms of Europe. Much of this has to do with the phenomenon surrounding societies that are unified by a common culture but exist within a politically fragmented landscape. Such groups tend to become more progressive and innovative in how the solve their problems.[252] For example, the conditions of Iceland's conversion to Christianity were slightly less bloody than that of their kinsmen in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. This is noteworthy since conversion occurred at roughly the same time, at the bridge between the tenth and eleventh centuries. Without a king, or central ruling authority, Icelanders had grown accustomed to solving their own problems by arbitration. As the sagas can attest, though arbitration could lead to bloodshed, those gathered together for the Althing in 1000 A.D. understood the advantages offered by Christianity and being part of the Christian world. They had the opportunity to become players on a larger stage and thereby enjoy the benefits of membership under the auspices of the new faith.

In most other parts of Northern and Eastern Europe, state-building and the acceptance of Christianity roughly coincided, both spreading rapidly around the turn of the millennium. But in

[252] Kristinsson, "Lords," 17.

Iceland there was a gap of nearly two and a half centuries from the reception of Christianity until some sort of government authority gained control over the island.[253] The explanation for this has much to do with the composition of power in Iceland. The chieftain, or *goði,* was the central figure in the Icelandic legal system; the link that attached ordinary individuals to this system.[254] These chieftains essentially drew their power from the horizontal bonds of kinship and community that they shared as legal custodians in Iceland. It was an honorable station to hold and a great responsibility to ensure that the needs of your community were adequately represented and met.

The first few decades of the thirteenth century saw this delicate balance of power shift from these chieftaincies to newer principalities. Ambitious men sought to consolidate their grip on the Icelandic quarters and it meant the doom of those who stood in their way. By the dawn of the thirteenth-century very little remained of the old-style chieftaincies, though they still held some representative power in legal assemblies. The struggle for control further escalated until it reached its apex in 1235, where it boiled over into an outright civil war. As those in the aristocracy implored the Norwegian king Haakon IV to lend his support, Norway became progressively involved in this prolonged dispute. By 1262, Icelanders had decided it was more sensible to accept foreign rule, allowing the Norwegian king to step in and handle the situation. Again, this process was slow, but it allowed Christian clergy to accumulate wealth and gradually

[253] In this case, the Norwegian government. See Kristinsson, "Lords" 16.

[254] See, David Friedman, *The Machinery of Freedom*, (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing, 1973), 201-208. For an argument relating Icelandic law to that of a parliamentary democracy see, Jesse Byock, "The Icelandic Althing: Dawn of Parliamentary Democracy," in *Heritage and Identity: Shaping the Nations of the North*, ed. J.M. Fladmark, 1-18 (Donhead St. Mary, Shaftesbury: The Heyerdahl Institute and Robert Gordon University, 2002).

consolidate both land and power from the old chieftaincies. New codified laws, known as the *Járnsiða*, were put into effect in 1271; they were highly unpopular.[255]

Another mitigating factor in Iceland's slow move from impairment to disability hinges on the notion that the form of Christianity that emerged in Iceland was markedly different from its counterparts in the rest of Europe. It was a great deal less restrictive in its early stages than that of the continent. Some have even proclaimed that, "…a certain tepidity has marked the Christianity of the nation…"[256] The reason for this lax approach had more to do with the logistics of enforcement than anything else. Initially, the institutional framework of Christianity developed with the chieftains and farmers building the first small churches. For several hundred years, control of these churches rested in the hands of those families who built them and whose descendants were the first priests of these churches. Within this operational structure, Icelandic perceptions regarding the body changed very little.

Adding to these previously explored factors, the geography of Iceland helped to impede the construction of disability. Rather than large, sprawling trade hubs or bustling cities, the social arena of medieval Iceland was the farm.[257] The bonds of kinship tied individuals together and community was a key component in Icelandic society. In such a pastoral setting, every individual had a job to fulfil to ensure the survival of their community as well as their kin group. Those with impairments would have contributed in ways that were befitting their abilities. The severely

[255] See, Tara Carter, *Iceland's Networked Society: Revealing How the Global Affairs of the Viking Age Created New Forms of Social Complexity* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

[256] John Charles Fulton Hood, *Icelandic Church Saga* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1946) 32-33.

[257] See, Liv Helga Dommasnes, Doris Gutsmiedl-Schümann, and Alf Tore Hommedal, eds., *The Farm as a Social Arena* (Münster and New York: Waxmann, 2016).

impaired, if they had been fortunate enough to survive childbirth were taken care of by their family and did not have to worry about being excluded from the community.

As Iceland traded their ancient customs for those of modernity, its communities underwent a slow series of progressive changes. Individuals were born, had children, grew old, and died; some having never noticed that the world around them was in flux. In the early years of the Icelandic church, those who were born with impairments were no better or worse off than they would have been in heathen times. Eventually they would have a larger network of support systems available to choose from and their roles and place in society would vary according to what services their local church could provide. Echoes of the pre-Christian belief system endured in the stories of gods and heroes of Icelandic literature. These reflections of by-gone days ensured that, despite attitudes that prevailed elsewhere in the Norse world, the impaired would always have representation within their communities, even though they had traded the wild-eyed guardian called Þórr for the immortal savior called Christ.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The Middle Ages were a period of radical transition for Europeans and even more so for the Norse. In addition to the comprehensive changes in theological belief that Scandinavian societies underwent, their culture had also disseminated abroad, spreading from its nucleus in the north throughout the islands in the North Atlantic and even – albeit briefly – across to North America.[258] This expansion exposed the northern Europeans to new ideas from outside their world. The religious conversions of the tenth and eleventh centuries likewise brought about a significant transformation in how the Norse viewed themselves and how they remembered their history. The shift from Old Germanic/Norse folk belief to Christianity gave birth to a different culture. This nascent civilization struggled with its new identity, clinging tenaciously to an idealized version of its heroic past. Simultaneously, they were enticed by the glittering promise of spiritual salvation and the economic capital that came with acquiescence to the new ways of the continental powers. Scandinavians of the High Middle Ages were, in their most basic sense, beings in flux; individuals who looked upon their heathen ancestors with proud nostalgic appreciation while concurrently endeavoring to live their lives by the tenets of the Christian faith.

The reason for the hesitancy of Icelanders to move in the direction of disabling those with impairments in their community came from their pragmatic outlook regarding community. There was no need to deny individuals access to certain jobs or roles within early medieval society simply because everyone worked toward a common goal. Regarding this notion, Irina Metzler

[258] Christina Lee, "Abled, Disabled, Enabled: An Attempt to Define *Disability* in Anglo-Saxon England," *Werkstattgeschichte* 65 (2013), 42.

cautions: "What twenty-first century Europe considers disability is not invariably what our medieval ancestors considered disability."[259] Scholars who study the body and its meaning during this period must therefore use specific terminology when referring to impaired individuals. The difference of physiological or psychological function of the body is termed 'impairment' whereas the social construct that is thrust upon impaired individuals that prevents them from taking part in society on an equal level as others is referred to as 'disability.' As has been stated, however, disability is more of a problem of modernity as applied to the study of medieval cultures. These socially-constructed barriers, what the modern mind terms disability, were absent until well after Scandinavians converted to Christianity.

The inclusion of disability studies as a mode of historical inquiry has been a slow and gradual process. Modern scholarship has wrestled with accurately portraying the historically impaired and their stories have been largely generalized. This lacuna in the historical record is noticeably true when considering the Middle Ages – a period in which the stories of impaired individuals have been classically underrepresented. Questions regarding the body – how its form and function were conceptualized and how individuals understood it within the broader context of existence – have puzzled human minds since Antiquity. The answers that these individuals developed can illuminate cultural norms that have either been lost to time or never fully understood by scholars.

Pre-literate societies, such as the Norse peoples of Scandinavia, have likewise suffered from the practices of Medieval obscurantism. As many of these societies were considered heathen by the cultural literati of their day, their stories have either been conspicuously altered to

[259] Irina Metzler, "Liminality and Disability: Spatial and Conceptual Aspects of Physical Impairments in Medieval Europe," in *Medicine and Space: Body, Surrounding and Borders in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, eds. Patricia A. Baker, Han Nijdam, and Karine van 't Land, 273-296 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 275

fit a Christian worldview or purposely ignored altogether. Many modern historians used these same assumptions as they further investigated the Medieval period. It was questioned whether heathen barbarians would have anything worthwhile to add to the overall discussion of history. As these attitudes perpetuated, the Norse, along with many, many others, were misrepresented within the boundaries of a larger Europe. The heathen tribes of Europe dwindled within the eclipsing shadow of Charlemagne and the Roman Empire, effectively losing their voices as the history of the world was conceived.

The second chapter of this thesis argued that the pre-Christian beliefs of Scandinavia reflected the attitudes and assumptions of the Norse people regarding impairment. Both the Poetic and Prose Eddas provide a litany of examples of heroic and divine characters whose bodies bore the characteristics of physical difference. The principal god of the Norse pantheon, Óðinn, derives his otherworldly wisdom and prescience from the sacrifice of one of his eyes. Likewise, the god of war and justice, Týr, gives up one of his hands to forge an uneasy peace between the gods and the ravenous wolf Fenrir. The Norse mythographic corpus details other aspects of the gods that contemporary audiences would have understood as impairments. These impairments are closely linked with realities that the medieval Scandinavians would have been intimately familiar with, particularly that of sacrifice to preserve the kin group and community.

Chapter three of this thesis approached the topic of bodily impairment from a social model of disability, demonstrating that the medieval authors of Icelandic history had a binary understanding of impairment. An individual was either impaired or unimpaired according to their ability to function in their social role. As the examples proved, most individuals with impairments lived normal and relatively uninhibited lives in medieval Scandinavia. A large

range of occupations would have been available in medieval Scandinavia. Many of the impaired could have performed these jobs with minimal difficulty.[260]

The evidence found within the mythology of pre-Christian Scandinavia strongly advocates that impairment or disfigurement offered no hurdle to social status. Such instances of physical difference may have afforded some level of social prestige. They were understood as the gods' way of marking great men, making them easily identifiable over their peers. Just as the most powerful of the gods were marked by physical difference, so were great men. Modern scholars are now left with the task of how to contextualize impairment in medieval Scandinavia and abroad.

Similarly, the learned prehistory of the Scandinavian people reflected cultural views toward the impaired that suggest a more nuanced understanding of bodily difference than was previously thought. Chapter three investigated how these stories of the men and women of Scandinavia's past mirrored medieval conceptualizations of impairment. Characters of renown that are portrayed in the tales of the Icelandic sagas (*Íslendingasögur*) often have some type of impairment that affects their physical or mental state and yet lived arguably uninhibited lives. Likewise, historically insignificant individuals that warrant nothing further than an onomastic reference are presented as fully-functioning personalities within the social framework of medieval Iceland. In Scandinavian societies of the Middle Ages, men and women were born, lived, and died with impairments. Those who catalogued their stories did so, arguably, believed in an approach to impairment representative of the wider community.

[260] This is especially true of domestic jobs such as weaving and knitting, which required only that the individual be able to use their hands.

Just as some of the mythological tales of the *Prose Edda* are products of the pre-Christian era of Scandinavia, both they and the *Íslendingasögur* are inextricably linked to the worldview of medieval Icelanders. For these Christian writers, some recording their tales many centuries after the worship of these gods ceased, their mythic past was an integral part of their present. The past forged the identities of the present in Icelandic society. As these individuals considered themselves the curators of their heathen customs and history, they preserved these stories with profound reverence and a strict attention to authenticity. Though they had taken new customs and a new god by the turn of the first century A.D., they were fiercely proud of their heritage in Iceland. Writers from other Scandinavian principalities – such as the Danish clerical historian Saxo Grammaticus – relegated the stories of the gods to heathen nonsense; perpetrated by ignorance at best and devilish influence at worst.

The overall message behind this literary treatment of impairment has been a point of contention in scholarship. Some have argued – quite effectively – that the medieval Icelandic sagas cannot be used to gain a clear understanding of what life was truly like during the Viking Age. The vast span of time between when the events were purported to have taken place and the time during which the stories were written down has made some discount their veracity completely. Others have blamed the presence of the Christian faith as a central component in medieval Norse society as a factor that should lead modern readers to question the events that are recorded in the sagas. Christianity, it is assumed, altered the worldview of Icelanders after the eleventh century to such a degree that any sources recorded thereafter would certainly carry a bias.

While these are valid concerns, this thesis has argued that they cannot be used to discount the historical and cultural significance of the *Íslendingasögur*. Impairment was an ever-present

fact of life in the Middle Ages. In Old Norse culture, impairment was viewed simply as a fact of life and something that even the greatest of men and the gods themselves were beholden to. From factors such as poor nutrition to disease and warfare, medieval men and women experienced impairment as either a congenital or acquired reality. Further, those individuals who were fortunate enough to become elderly may experience impairment as their critical faculties declined with age. The notions of impairment as a mundane feature of everyday life prevailed in Scandinavia until several centuries after Christianity arrived.

Chapter four of this thesis investigated the changes that the new religion of Christianity brought to northern Europe. In many ways, very little changed. For those living in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, this shift in cultural practices was prompted by outside influence and was highly political. For those in Iceland, the decision to convert to Christianity was more of a democratic choice. Icelanders saw the benefits that came with membership to the ever-growing church and sought to be on equal footing with their kin abroad in the Scandinavian mainland.

As Christianity's influence grew and the kingdoms that it converted became more centralized in their state-building objectives, Scandinavian society also began to transform into something new. Less importance was placed on the community in favor of the individual. Christianity was a personal religion. Church writers began to look for the reasons behind individuals' impairments. Were those who were physically different from their peers cursed by god or blessed by Him? Had someone in their familial line committed a grave sin and therefore consigned the impaired individual to a life that could be markedly different than those around them? These theological questions became a central preoccupation of Christian theologians.

The renaissance of the twelfth century acted as a catalyst for the rise of individualism in northern Europe, yet despite both the adoption of Christianity and changing attitudes concerning

individualism, Scandinavians – or at least those in Iceland – were slow to marginalize their peers with impairments. The sweeping changes that occurred in response to the Gregorian reform, likewise altered the way in which penance was understood. In light of these changes, more stress was placed upon the role of individuals in the changing landscape of the Middle Ages. Churches became the caretakers of the aged, the infirm, and the impaired. While there were many benefits that came with the systems of Christian charity, there were also disadvantages to becoming wholly dependent upon an institution whose aims were becoming increasingly political. Christianity became an all-encompassing force. Impairment became a flaw in the human body; something that required a cure. These attitudes toward the impaired would eventually lead to the modern understanding of disability.

It is an anachronism to say that medieval Icelanders held a progressive view of impairment. In truth, they only saw impairment as limiting to an individual on a case-by-case basis. Individuals were expected to contribute to the betterment of the community they lived in. For some, this contribution engaged the use of all their limbs, their sight, their hearing, and their minds. For others, they found ways to contribute that mitigated any impairment that they lived with. The blind could still engage in activities that called upon their memory. The deaf could function in much the same way as their hearing peers. Physically demanding jobs could, at times, be completed by the abled-bodied, whether they had mental impairments or were of sound mind. In other words, in medieval Icelandic society, your identity was largely tied to that of the community that you lived in. Individuals had to adapt themselves to function with impairments and those who could not were the responsibility of their kin and social group.

The historical and archaeological record proves that the impaired dwelled among the warriors and heroes of the Middle Ages. Medieval and modern scholarship has effectively

silenced their voices by concentrating their efforts on understanding the motivations of kings and warlords. Impaired individuals made up a decisively large portion of medieval societies and their stories have yet to be told. By investigating the glimpses of impaired individuals within the history and folklore of the past, scholars can gain a fully understanding of what life was like for those who were not among the leaders of society – the silenced majority.

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