

THE EVERLASTING DEAD: SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE HOLY SAINT
AND THE HORRIFYING DRAUGR

OS MORTOS ETERNOS: SEMELHANÇAS ENTRE O SANTO SAGRADO E O
HORRIFICANTE DRAUGR

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Abstract: The purpose of this article will be to examine the lives of different Icelandic and Continental Scandinavian saints in *biskupasögur* and compare them to the uniquely Icelandic revenant known as a *draugr* found mainly – but not limited to – the *Íslendingasögur* category. The morphology of the saint and the *draugr* will be analysed through the scope of the physical, behavioural, and supernatural motifs apparent in each literary figure. This approach will be useful to better understand a comparison between how each figure reconciles the concept of death and the afterlife, as well as their liminal grasp of corporeality which displays their similarity.

Keywords: Icelandic sagas; Supernatural; Medieval literature; Draugr.

Resumo: O objetivo deste artigo será examinar as vidas de diferentes santos escandinavos islandeses e continentais nas *biskupasögur* e compará-las ao morto-vivo exclusivamente islandês conhecido como *draugr* encontrado principalmente - mas não limitado na - categoria *Íslendingasögur*. A morfologia do santo e do *draugr* será analisada através do alcance dos motivos físicos, comportamentais e sobrenaturais aparentes em cada figura literária. Essa abordagem será útil para entender melhor uma comparação entre como cada figura concilia o conceito de morte e vida após a morte, bem como sua compreensão liminar da corporeidade que mostra sua semelhança.

Palavras-chave: Sagas islandesas; Sobrenatural; Literatura medieval; Draugr.

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Introduction: Classifying the Dead

"A monster is not such a terrible thing to be. From the Latin root monstrum, a divine messenger of catastrophe, then adapted by the Old French to mean an animal of myriad origins: centaur, griffin, satyr. To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once." – Ocean Vuong, On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous, 2019.

When one thinks of Iceland, images of vastly outstretched green hills dotted with grazing sheep and marvellously proud and ancient glaciers dominate the mind. A prolific medieval literary corpus perhaps is the next thought, with a moment of great appreciation for the sagas that have become the pride of a nation. For some, these ruminations of the natural must eventually give way to a far more dangerous and exciting quality associated with the remembrances of Old Norse thought and lingering anxieties—that of the dead and the sagas that commemorate them. While the topic of the restless undead is not necessarily new to Old Norse scholarship, when paired with the illustrious figure of the saint the analysis becomes richly deep, like a freshly churned grave awaiting a funeral.

With a narrowing of the undead corpus of paranormal figures and spectres, the *draugr* and the saint are both interned in the same native northern soil where monsters of grave mounds and roof riders preside. Both beings undeniably encompass death in extremely supernaturally charged ways, lending with equal measure to their respective strengths and abnormalities when faced with the realities and limits of mortal men. This unique way of navigating life and death makes such figures extremely valuable when they are placed side by side instead of negated as non-negotiable in a shared space of scholarship. Through an exploration of the Old Norse saints as holy interceding figures and the terrifying *draugar* as supernaturally charged miscreants, I believe a moment of commonality can be reached that better highlights the medieval Icelandic conception of the dead and what it means to functionally still have ties with the living in the afterlife, for better or for worse.



The veritable best of the Old Norse saintly pantheon under review include Saint Þorlákr, Guðmundr the Good, and the Norwegian Saint Óláfr. In competition with these holy men are the spectral and sometimes voraciously beastly *draugr* found in *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, and *Bárðr saga Snæfellsáss*.² Betwixt the hagiographical literature and ever popular *Íslendingasögur* lies a commonly stitched thread of supernatural abilities, miracles, and mysticism that tie these seemingly opposite beings together. Whether the commonality lies in how they confound death, tamper with fantastical abilities, or stubbornly hold onto remnants of their formal life, each subject paired together allows a far more salient picture of the medieval Icelandic concept of death and the afterlife than if they had been separated six feet under by scholarship and fabricated taxonomies forcing a lack of interaction.

With little apprehension and an exhilarating amount of suspense, the first topic to be tackled is an edification of taxonomy. As Ármann Jakobsson wisely states in his categorization of the Medieval Icelandic dead, “a saint can never be a ghost,” not by definition and not by deed.³ While clarification of terminology via differences is important, there is something to be gained by scoping out the salient similarities between creatures that we propose are explicitly dissimilar. Even though the saint is never in the vernacular referred to as a ghost, due to perhaps negative connotations as Ármann suggests, it nevertheless does not remove the recommendation that the saint is transparently similar to the quintessential Icelandic ghost, uncorrupted body and all.⁴

This becomes especially possible when reviewing another important observation by Ármann that it is better to “focus on the function of the actual mediaeval Icelandic undead in

²The fornaldarsögur *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* will also briefly be mentioned, due to the saga’s superb literary preservation of the *draugr* king Raknar.

³ Ármann Jakobsson. “Vampires and the Watchmen: Categorizing the Mediaeval Icelandic”. *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 2011, Vol. 110, No. 3, pp. 286.

⁴ Ármann Jakobsson (2011), pp. 294.

order to better understand the essence of their being.”⁵ In their most recent research, Kanerva and Koski detail the confusing differences and commonalities apparent in the undead within pop culture and folklore, taking special precaution to state that while comparisons of creatures can be made, one typifying quality common to all specimens cannot be succinctly sussed out.⁶ When faced with certain natural facts such as life and death, the saint and *draugr* confuse and blur these expected neat classifications.

In fact, while many famous undead saga characters are extolled as typifying the virtues of a *draugr*, most often these figures are not referred to as *draugar* in the original Icelandic, but instead as trolls, ghosts, or revenants.⁷ This mishap could prove exceedingly frustrating if the scholarly aim is to construct and quantify model monster types to compare them to an ideal concept of a saintly undead creature by scouring the literature with a fine-tooth comb. That is not the aim of this research inquiry. Definitions, etymology, and the use of the native vernacular are all extremely relevant—however, not every monster is just a troll and not every revenant is merely a ghost in the most simplistic sense.⁸ It is the monster whose name shifts and escapes easy categorization that gets caught in one’s throat without an easy explanation, only to become eerily memorable. One tentative commonality that can be said of the dead is their ability to remain porous and permeable when faced with strict categorization and demarcation.⁹

The *draugr* and the saint embody this uneasy categorization to the paradoxical extreme: known and unknown, real and unreal, corporeal and intangible, dead and animated. Instead of pitting *draugr* and saint against each other because their motivations are completely different, a more useful discussion is invoked with a relaxed understanding of taxonomy. Such

⁵ Ármann Jakobsson (2011), pp. 281.

⁶ Kanerva, Kirsi & Koski, Kaarina. “Beings of Many Kinds – Introduction for the Theme Issue ‘Undead’”. Thantos, 2019, Vol. 8, pp. 7, 14.

⁷ Ármann Jakobsson (2011), pp. 284.

⁸ Ármann Jakobsson. “The Trollish Acts of Þorgrímr the Witch: The Meanings of Troll and Ergi in Medieval Iceland”. Saga-Book, 2008, Vol. 32, pp. 46.

⁹ Kanerva, Kirsi and Koski, Kaarina, (2019).

an investigation leads to an exploration of how the medieval Icelandic concept of the undead extended in multi-faceted ways to two seemingly egregiously different supernatural figures.

Holy Men in Review: Þorlákr, Guðmundr, and Óláfr

Considering first the holy men under review, Bishop Þorlákr was the first of Iceland's clergymen to be venerated by sainthood, and subsequently paved the way for an entire trope and tradition of hagiographical writings in Iceland when his relics were translated in the year c. 1198.¹⁰ Accordingly, the elder *Þorlákr's saga* A-version was more than likely compiled by his nephew and named successor, Bishop Páll Jónsson, in c. 1211.¹¹ Born to the region of Fljótshlíð in c.1133, Þorlákr became Bishop in the year c.1178 and was described and remembered as what every potential saintly candidate should be: kind but stern, charitable but sensible, and especially exceptional.¹²

Þorlákr's contemporary, Guðmundr Arason, took residence at Hólar as Bishop-elect in 1201 before he eventually was confirmed to the position in Norway in the year 1203.¹³ Guðmundr was born at a farm called Grjótá in Horgardal, a birth that was especially auspicious as a wizened old man professed that he had "never heard such a child's voice before and he prophesied that, if it lived, that child would prove to be outstanding among other men."¹⁴ Already at his birth otherworldly mysticism surrounds and cradles him. Initially terrified of being elected to the position of Bishop, he eventually was elected and successfully admitted to his duties at Hólar in 1203. While technically not a canonized saint, in 1325 his

¹⁰ Ármann Jakobsson, and Clark, David. "The Saga of Bishop Thorlak: Þorláks Saga Byskups". London: College London, 2013, pp. vii.

¹¹ Ármann Jakobsson and Clark, David (2013), pp. vii. The A version of the saga from which is gleaned the life of Þorlákr and all his ensuing miracles is considered the elder of the B and C versions, found in *Stockh. Perg.* Fol. 5 and dated to c.1360.

¹² Ármann Jakobsson and Clark, David (2013), pp. vii, 11, 14 – 15.

¹³ G. Turville-Petre, and E.S. Olsewska. "The Life of Gudmund the Good". London, 1942. While there are three known lives of Guðmundr in Old Norse, this essay will predominantly cite from Julia H. McGrew's translation of *The Saga of Guðmundr Arson the Priest* and Turville-Peter's translated *The Life of Gudmund The Good, Bishop of Holar*.

¹⁴ McGrew, H. Julia. "The Saga of Guðmundr Arason the Priest". Sturlunga Saga, 1974, pp. 95.

relics were deemed suitable for translation and a shrine erected to properly house them for visitors seeking his intercession, suggesting he dutifully acted the part of a saint.

The last saint under consideration cannot claim to be of Icelandic descent, yet his fervour and zeal have made him extremely hard to ignore as an archetypal Northern European saint with an especially grounded reputation in medieval Iceland. Óláfr Haraldsson, reigning as a Christian King of Norway from c. 1015 till his death in c.1030, was martyred shortly after his demise at the battle of Stiklarstaðir in what could be described as a political and religious incident of momentous proportions. Written evidence for his sainthood was implored impressively quickly after his death and preserved first in skaldic verse and later in an array of hagiographies and sagas, including the *Passio et miracula beati Olvái*¹⁵ and Snorri Sturluson's *Óláfs saga ins Helga*, both within the scope of this paper.¹⁶

When defining characteristics of a saint, it should be noted that of the specifically Norse variety, many were officiated as saints “through episcopal powers alone,” with a bit of political clout thrown in.¹⁷ This could be achieved by having high standing men in attendance of burial or exhumation, as was the case with Saint Þorlákr. Nevertheless, papal powers only were not entirely needed to lift a Bishop up to the status of sainthood. Guðmundr himself was never recognized by the larger Catholic diocese as a verifiable saint, even though his status was strongly encouraged by Jón Arason of Hólar. However, he was popular enough to medieval Icelanders to become an unofficial saint, perhaps because of his financial fortitude or his greater opposition to greedy chieftains. Nevertheless, to undoubtably assure a holy person's position as a saint a little supernatural help is deemed essential. In essence, it is a heady heft

¹⁵ Kunin, Devra and Phelpstead. “Carl A History of Norway and The Passion of the Blessed Óláfr”. London, 2001. pp. xli. As noted by Kunin and Phelpstead's translation and introduction, the *Passio et miracula beati Olvái* is delivered in two parts; the *passio* which describes Olfar's life and martyrdom, and the *miracula* which attests to his many posthumous miracles.

¹⁶ Kunin, Devra, and Phelpstead, Carl (2001), pp. xxxii. Such early skaldic poems include Þórarinn Loftunga's c. 1032 *Glælognskviða*, Sigvatr Þórðarson's c.1040 *Erfidrápa Óláfs helga*, and *Óláfsdrápa*, influenced by Einarr Skúlason.

¹⁷ Ármann Jakobsson and Clark, David (2013), pp. ix.

of miracles and the severing of life by death with a bit of supernatural suspicion thrown into the mix that can assure one's status. As many of these holy men were aware, their life on earth was merely temporary and their true golden crown was to be had in heaven after death.

In seemingly opposition to the saint, the *draugr* is a creature so transfixed upon what happens on earth that they appear unable to fathom no longer being a part of the world of the living, even when the last stone has been placed over their burial mound. The creature itself is featured within many *Íslendingasögur* as a blight of literature. The terrorization of the *draugr* can be viewed as a manifestation of strife within nation building, wherein skirmishes and struggles between friends and neighbours lingers on the peripheral. Greed, too, is the manifestation of the *draugr*, as it clings tightly to its possessions and makes itself known to the household that what it had in life it keeps in death. The *draugr* has also been viewed by William Sayers as a symbolism of famine and halted agricultural progress, wherein the death of the farmer still grips the homestead and inhibits necessary work from taking place.¹⁸ They are catastrophic like all monsters with little if no redeeming qualities except that they pinpoint a juxtaposition between a healthily growing society and one beholden to waste, devastation, and unproductivity. Moreover, Sayers' suggestion that the *draugar* haunting motif signifies a form of anxiety over Icelandic society losing its balanced cohesion demonstrates a use for the monster as a literary tool. Likewise, Ármann's work seeks to shake off the prevalent, though enriching, question of what a *draugr* only is—to what salient characteristics it has to explain what it does.

While the initial early Icelandic folklorist and taxonomist Jón Arnason's work is highly influential and important for the analysis of paranormal figures in Icelandic sagas, authors like Ármann Jakobsson and Kirsi Kanerva refreshingly establish a looser and more natural criteria

¹⁸ Sayers, William. "The Alien and the Alienated: The Unquiet Dead in the Sagas of the Icelanders". Minnieapolis, 1996, pp. 260.

for describing the restless corpse.¹⁹ The medieval Icelandic ghost belongs to a unique defining category that, while guarded by certain stipulations, can be described in a variety of malleable ways. They are big and brutish, with inhuman strength and a nasty taste for vengeance and disruption. While usually male, women have been known to come back as these corporeal ghosts, and animals are also easily possessed if the conditions are right.²⁰ While Ármann Jakobsson is keen to admonish that Old Norse concepts of monsters are rarely ever neatly clean cut and almost always include some variation of description that must be accounted for, the *draugr* has a few salient characteristics that separate it from other creatures such as dragons, giants, and trolls.²¹ There are a variety of *draugr* tropes broken down into categories of behaviour and haunting style—the infecting roamer, the mound dweller, and the rarer and more helpful undead figure which I will attempt to establish as a median between the saint and *draugr*.

Longing for Death: Methodology and Reward

The first commonality between these two figures is the fact that they are, to some extent, dead. To be a saint requires a physiological predicament that cannot be ignored. Specifically, the saint must die to have any chance of being revered as there can be no canonization of someone still living.²² How the saint expires is also considered extremely salient to their holy title, especially when martyrdom is sanctioned as an important and unnegotiable step; the more especially violent the suffering the better. While not all the Norse saints under consideration can claim a death plagued by torture, the hagiographies go to great lengths to suggest that each man under review felt quite a fair amount of pain before passing

¹⁹Ármann Jakobsson. “The Taxonomy of the Non-existent: Some Medieval Icelandic concepts of the Paranormal”. Berlin, 2013 pp. 199-213., Kanerva, Kirsi. “Restless Dead or Peaceful Cadavers? Preparations for Death and Afterlife in Medieval Iceland. Brill, 2018.

²⁰ Þórgunna in *Eyrbyggja's saga* and the Bull Glaesir in *Laxdaela saga*, for example.

²¹ Ármann Jakobsson. “The Troll Inside You: Paranormal Activity in the Medieval North”. Puncton Books, 2017, Ch. 31.

²² Sanders, Theresa. “Body and Belief: Why the Body of Jesus Cannot Heal”. Colorado, 2000, pp. 99.

on. Such examples can be found deliberating upon Þorlákr's extensive Christ-like illness to Guðmundr's lamentable sufferings.²³

The actual moment of death and subsequent burial of the saint is one of the most decisive moments of the persons considered sainthood according to Joanna Skórzewska. Ultimately, Skórzewska asserts that the transition to death is where the saint receives their "posthumous fame."²⁴ Jack Hartnell links this intense bodily punishment imposed upon the bodies of saints as a transformation of pain into propaganda to suit the martyrdom of the saint.²⁵ How the saint dies, much like how the mortal destined to be a *draugr* perishes, can detract or enhance their expected ability to be subsumed under the extremely desirable pattern of holiness. A reader can, possibly, receive clues as to how revered a potential saint is or will be, depending upon the nature of the death and if it precedes a classical martyrdom. It is for this exact reason that for a potential saint, how they die becomes vital.

Considering this, both figures experience a false death of sorts that is tied into mocking the idea of a final undisturbed demise sanctioned by the natural order—that which is a permanent death. The saint is extremely well-versed in this life-after-death phenomenon, as "rather than following the normal operations of Christian salvation and patiently awaiting the lengthy limbo of Purgatory or...Hell," they essentially skip the waiting line and receive a few V.I.P. perks along the way.²⁶ Once these beings pass through this false death, they have essentially skipped the expectant final death. However, it should be noted that *draugr* can reach this stage with the assistance of angry farmers wielding torches and raised axe-heads in retribution. The only two *draugr* under consideration that do not succumb to a final death are

²³ Ármann Jakobsson and Clark, David (2013), pp. 20.

²⁴ Skórzewska, Joanna A. "Constructing a Cult: The Life and Veneration of Guðmundr Arason in (1161-1237)". 2010, Turnhout: Brill, pp. 207.

²⁵ Hartnell, Jack. "Life and Death in the Middle Ages: Medieval Bodies". 2018, W.W. Norton & Company Inc., pp. 47.

²⁶ Hartnell, Jack (2018), pp. 47.

Víga-Hrappr in *Laxdæla saga* and Gunnar of Hlíðarendi from *Brennu-Njáls saga*, mainly because one is merely too powerful to fully eradicate and the other is neutralized as a threat.²⁷

The *draugr*, like the saint, becomes more powerful and infamous after death – a notable threat when before they were merely ornery and anti-social. The *draugr* must have a false death to maintain immortality – if only for a time until the community sagely decides to sharpen their axes and light their torches. It is through this false expiration that the *draugr* stops being a hostile individual and becomes an invasive threat, likened to a parasitic virus.²⁸ As exemplified by Víga-Hrappr, while “difficult as he had been to deal with during his life, he was now very much worse after death.”²⁹ It is this quasi-death that makes the mortal man that much more calamitous and perhaps lends him more supernatural power to wreak havoc.

The saint longs for this false demise because they know “...in Christianity death is not the end of the saint but in a very real way the saint’s beginning.”³⁰ This is corroborated by *Þorlákrs saga* in which “...the death of holy men would be glorious, because it seemed to all to be better to be beside him in death than by many living men,” a sentiment oddly aligned with the Old Norse concept of an analogous form of life after death.³¹ For instance, *Valhöll* was a consolation prize, if not a desired anticipation, after death wherein one would become the *Einherjar* in the hall of Óðinn.³² Though a spear to the gut or a sword’s strike to the head should extinguish the life of a warrior on the battlefield, there were detailed extraordinary circumstances involving a Valkyrie’s touch and Óðinn’s sanction to deliver the departed into

²⁷ Magnusson, Magnus and Pálsson, Hermann. “The Saga of the People of Laxardal”. London, 1975., Cook, Robert. “Njáls Saga”. London, 2001.

²⁸ Ármann Jakobsson. “The Fearless Vampire Killers: A Note About the Icelandic Draugr and Demonic Contamination in Grettis Saga”. Folklore, 2009.

²⁹ Magnusson, Magnus and Pálsson, Hermann (1975), pp. 78. Magnusson, Magnus and Pálsson, Hermann. “The Saga of the People of Laxardal”. London, 1975

³⁰ Sanders, Theresa (2000), pp. 99.

³¹ Ármann and Clark (2013), pp. 21,

³² Lindow, John. “Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs”. Oxford, 2001, pp. 104.

Valhöll, or what John Lindow translates as the “Carriron-Hall” for the warrior to ‘live’ for another day of carnage.³³

Just like a romanticized image of a Viking raising his sword amidst the fray of battle, the author of Óláfr’s hagiography cries out in pity for the king: “Oh how grievous is life when death is longed for, how utterly wretched it is to live when death seems to hold sway over life!”³⁴ Death is longed for to reach a climatic potential of life, where one is certain in the knowledge that everything they’ve done has led to one glorious moment which will be repaid after the gory deed is done – whether in heaven or in *Valhöll*. Therefore, the possibility of living after death and finding glory in one’s violent demise was not such a foreign concept to the murky pagan past of Old Norse thought and culture in relation to the newly adopted ideas of sainthood and heavenly rewards for martyrs.

With death comes newly transcribed powers. An emphasis is placed upon the ability of the saint to perform an abundance of miracles, mainly for the twofold benefit of assisting the faithful and cementing proof of their own sanctity. The Old Norse holy men are no different. As a martyred warrior king, Saint Óláfr was canonized one year after his death. This swiftness is somewhat shocking as both *Heimskringla* and *Passio et miracula beati Olavi* attest to the cruelty and waning popularity of the Viking when he was a mortal man. Whether haste was given because of political pressure regarding the ascension of Óláfr’s son Magnús the Good as king of Norway or merely religious fervour, it was his death that absolved him of disfavour. As a living man Óláfr was cruel, ruthless, and bitterly cast aside by King Canute and Danish-loyal Norwegians and yet “Óláfr’s martyrdom transform[ed] his apparent failure into a glorious triumph.”³⁵ After his martyrdom this Christian warrior’s body became a focal

³³ Lindow, John (2001), pp. 308.

³⁴ Kunin, Devra and Phelpstead, Carl (2001), pp. 42.

³⁵ Kunin, Devra and Phelpstead, Carl (2001), pp. 157 and Hayward, John. “The Penguin Historical Atlas of the Vikings”. London, 1995, pp. 122.

point for miracles, as his uncorrupted body and blood displayed healing powers even before he was properly placed in his casket. Truly, his talents elevated him to a miracle prodigy.

Like Óláfr, after his death in c.1193 Þorlákur wasted no time in displaying his newly acquired supernatural powers to a higher and more prolific standard than he ever achieved when he was abbot at Ver.³⁶ Whereas before he was able to sufficiently abate fire, rid granaries of mice, and consecrate water, upon his death version A of his hagiography details up to sixty-one diverse miracles ranging from the mundane to the stupendous.³⁷ He could not have been particularly selective about how his grand gestured miracles manifested, as “a local saint, like a country doctor, cannot specialize too much.”³⁸ The power fuelling all these miracles only increased after his death when the connection to Þorlákur and God strengthened when he died and left his corporeal body to become a manifestation of the spiritual. Once dead, Þorlákur could access the power of the divine with little to no material or worldly obstructions as the saint’s conception relied upon the ability to be immaterial and thus unrestrained by natural law. This type of power actively secured by saints was controlled by heaven and manifested into miracles which were “seen as a particular kind of act by which God works directly in affairs.”³⁹ This sentiment was especially observed by the author of *Þorlákurs saga* version A, who’s narrative is full of conclusive scripture teachings and chastising reminders that miracles are a product of God working through a saint. Much like how the *draugr* seems to tap into a supernatural source upon their death that endows them with monstrous strength, the saint’s abilities only get stronger after their breast is pierced or their lips exhale their last breath. The readers of Þorlákur’s hagiography are assured of this point when the narration concludes that one “shall not praise a man in his lifetime. Praise him after his life and magnify him according

³⁶ Ármann and Clark (2013), pp. 7.

³⁷ For a varied list of Þorlákur’s many miracles see Ármann and Clark (2013), pp. 23-31, where each miracle is regulated by the scribe as an individual chapter. For miracles Þorlákur performs while alive, see pp. 8 of the aforementioned text.

³⁸ Ármann and Clark (2013), pp. xix.

³⁹ Ward, Benedicta. “Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record and Event 1000-1215”. University of Pennsylvania, 1982, pp. 5.

to the merit of his life,” as after he has passed one is privy to his true strength and power.⁴⁰ The goodness of his deeds carry on after he has departed and not only stay with his image and personification, but are amplified and continued after his death.

Supernatural Manifestation: Memories Here on Earth

Both *draugr* and saint are rendered under an idea of mysticism or supernatural phenomena, yet the saint’s powers are transferred to them upon their death from a holy power – God. A *draugr* is perhaps seen as the last remnants of a Pagan past, or as a metaphor for the deadly sin of greed for life and property under a Christian audience. Simply put, saints’ miracles are useful whereas a *draugar* supernatural abilities are hazardous. While this is the obvious case, they both rely on some form of higher ability even though it manifests itself in entirely different ways. Where does this power come from and is its source mutually exclusive for both beings? As established before, for the saint, this power is God. To name the supernatural force that inhabits the fleshy body of the *draugr*, however, is a bit trickier.

In his translation of *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, Ralph O’Connor includes a glossary of terms with varying descriptors for characters and creatures.⁴¹ O’Connor confidently aligns the Icelandic *draugr* with the concept of a demon. He offers a distinction that Icelandic demons are *draugr* and “not merely disembodied beings, but walking pagan corpses able to inflict serious physical damage on the living.”⁴² While a variety of revenants can be suspect to belonging to the pagan faith like the berserker Glámr in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* and the *draugr* King Raknar in *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* – there are some that do not heed the old customs.⁴³ Most famously, this list includes Þórgunna from *Eyrbyggja saga* who, while witchy by nature, is also proud of her Christian faith.

⁴⁰ Ármann and Clark (2013), pp. 8.

⁴¹ O’Connor, Ralph. “The Saga of Bard the Snowfell God”. Stroud Tempus, 2002.

⁴² O’Connor, Ralph (2002), pp. 176.

⁴³ O’Connor, Ralph (2002) and Scudder, Bernard. “The Saga of Grettir the Strong”. London, 2005.

All around Þórgunna is the concept of avarice and honour, as her fine clothes and bedding are coveted by Þuríður, Þóroddur's wife. As a result of Þuríður's greed and disrespect, the dead woman's wishes are dishonoured, and hauntings take hold of the farmstead. Once her funeral party disembarks, again Þórgunna's supernatural qualities are invoked in a most unsettling, if not socially significant, demonstration.

While on the road, Þórgunna's funeral party arrive at a farm in Stafholtstungum and ask for a meal and a place to sleep before they continue their journey. In dishonourable fashion, the farmer and his wife relegate the guests to an evening without supper or much hospitality at all. As such, Þórgunna rises from her coffin and sets to work preparing food, laying out the table, and completing the expected tasks deemed worthy of an excellent hostess. The farmer and his wife could not be bothered to uphold their duties as welcoming hosts for the funeral party, so a walking corpse must see to the task until the couple are thoroughly terrified into remedying their insult and callousness.

Melding together the stalwartly traditions of Old Norse culture and this new religion from mainland Europe, Þórgunna honours her Christian piety by denouncing a farmer's greed and indifference while in turn upholding a valued Old Norse tenant of hospitality.⁴⁴ However, it is not necessarily only a tactic of Christian sin that motivates her actions. Þórgunna relies both upon her Christian faith which encourages feeding the hungry and weary, while also invoking the Old Norse concept of shame as a tool to goad the farmer into feeding and housing her funeral party. This tool is attested in many sagas and finds its place in both pagan and Christian contexts for rectifying deviant or socially unacceptable behaviour. As concisely put by Dr. Jackson Crawford, "the Norse are interested in accruing honour and avoiding shame," which is why Þórgunna's haunting becomes a double-edged sword.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Crawford, Jackson. "Honor and Shame in Old Norse Society". YouTube, uploaded by Jackson Crawford, January 18th 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AldfbLqTilU>.

⁴⁵ Crawford, Jackson. "Honor and Shame in Old Norse Society". YouTube, uploaded by Jackson Crawford, January 18th 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AldfbLqTilU>.

Armed by teachings of benevolence from her faith, she additionally weaponizes her *draugr*-state to terrify the household and redirect their dismissive actions through the use of a potent concoction of shame and fear of the undead monster in their living quarters. Using her ability to heap embarrassment upon the farmer, she thus goads him into his duty attending his guests, lest a corpse out-perform his obligations better than he. Þórgunna's rising from her coffin could be either seen as a Christian miracle akin to Lazarus, or the pull of her ancestor's traditions provoking her to right a cultural upset. Both are equally powerful when considering she is characterized not only as the monstrous undead but additionally as a self-professed Christian woman till her dying breath. However, her undead form still reeks of mystical paganism or of devilment, as the farmer recognizes her as an impure being and is quick to ward her presence away with holy water.⁴⁶ Though she identifies heavily with her Christian faith, her physical form upon reawakening betrays something still otherworldly and *draugr*-like, enough to make the reader question just exactly what supernatural loyalties she truly abides by.

Furthermore, a pagan positioning for the *draugr* should not entirely be discounted, as the dead coming back uncorroded is not a new thing in Old Norse cultural thought and literature—even on the cusp of conversion. Óðinn himself gives us a somewhat step by step ritual of how he accomplished this with Mímir's talkative head, courtesy of a later elaboration by Snorri's *Ynglingasaga*.⁴⁷ Additional work has been done by scholars in the past with regards to comparing the miracles of saints to that of supernatural feats which mirrors talents best suited to magic rooted in pagan practices. Specifically, McCreesh's detailed work addressing the miracles of Guðmundr the Good, which she suggests that "practically all the abilities ascribed to pagan witches are attributed to Guðmundr."⁴⁸ These include, but are not limited

⁴⁶ "Síðan gengu þeir undir borð og signdu mat sinn en bóndi lét stökkva vígðu vatni um öll hús," Chapter 51, *Eyrbyggja Saga*.

⁴⁷ Finlay, Alison and Faulkes, Anthony. "Heimskringla". London, 2011.

⁴⁸ McCreesh, Bernadine (2007).

to, prophecy, astral-projecting, and affecting the weather – abilities which demonstrate a close connection to magic revered in the past continuing forward into the saga present.

While it isn't possible to accurately determine exactly the pre-Christian Scandinavian religious beliefs with concern to burials and the dead, as practices and beliefs shifted locally, we know that these beliefs were not changed overnight.⁴⁹ If there exists the yearning to conceptualize the conversion of Iceland in 999 or 1000 C.E. as coherent and organized, such a wish cannot be fulfilled.⁵⁰ As many scholars have been quick to point out, the whole affair was messy and concessional, with *Íslendingabók* itself suggesting there was a period of time when the old customs were still prolific, yet in secret.⁵¹ Can the preconceived ideas about the walking corpses, undead seeresses, and mound dwellers that populate the *Íslendingasögur* corpus be transferred onto the understanding of saints in order to make sense of those that would continue to confound death? If the rioting *draugr* and *haugbuar* were known to the various authors of the most celebrated ghost stories in Old Norse literature, were they being used as the groundwork to understand the death-defying saint?

In some of his works Ármann Jakobsson aligns the *draugr* with the devil, as “behind the ghost, the evil one must be at work.”⁵² *Draugr* are often pitted against the predomination of Christianity, even to the extent that the bloated corpses resist being buried or taken anywhere near churches, as is the case in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*.⁵³ There is no doubt that the *draugr* is entrenched in a nefarious type of evil – whether that is understood to be from the devil, in association with a Pagan past, or just harmful magic, is context based. Perhaps what

⁴⁹ Jesch, Judith. “The Viking Diaspora”. Routledge, 2015.

⁵⁰ Grønlie, Siân, transl. “Íslendingabók – Kirstni Saga: The Book of the Icelanders – The Story of the Conversion”. London: The Viking Society for Northern Research, 2006, Vol. XVIII, pp. 9.

⁵¹ Clunies Ross, Margaret. “The Cambridge Introduction to Old Norse Mythology”. Cambridge University Press, Year, pp.10., Jesch, Judith (2015), pp. 139.

⁵² Ármann Jakobsson (2011), pp. 294.

⁵³ Scudder, Bernard. “The Saga of Grettir the Strong”. London, 2005. pp. 78.

is most important is that the height of the *draugr* power is transferred by severing the fetters of life so that the mortal man can become the undead monster unleashed.

Conclusively, for each creature their power is rooted in the supernatural and becomes its most potent with the assistance of death. How the subject acts after they have been given their second chance at 'life,' however, becomes especially divisive in categorization. Once the body is reanimated, the subject doesn't necessarily leave their previous memories, personalities, and mannerisms behind. Instead, the body is preserved along with the mind. The lines of connection are still active and swarming with thoughts and intentions, whether formed in malice or altruism.

Corpse Behaviour Morphology: The Good, the Bad, and the Bloated

With concern to the morphology of the *draugr*, Kirsti Kinerva's extensive work suggests that socially and physically weak corpses haven't a chance in hell of ever returning back to the land of the living.⁵⁴ The horror of corpses being animated by means of magic or through their own ghoulish intervention points towards the idea that "the life force preserved in dead bodies was used for bad deeds..." and that "...in normal circumstances, the life force residing in the corpse would gradually be drained, but it could be used – or it had to be avoided – by the living as well..."⁵⁵ While her research is specifically concerned with the concept of medieval Icelandic ghosts and suicides, there is something to be said about the behavioural strength of saints in relation to the aggressively stalwart *draugr*. According to Kinerva "people who were considered weak and powerless in life would not return after death, since posthumous restlessness required that the person had a strong will and motivation to come back," such people referring mainly to thralls, women, and children.⁵⁶ This is usually the case for those candidates who show a predication for becoming the restless undead by their intense and

⁵⁴ Kanerva, Kirsi. "Having No Power to Return? Suicide and Posthumous Restlessness in Medieval Iceland". Kevät, 2015.

⁵⁵ Kanerva, Kirsi & Koski, Kaarina, (2019), pp. 9.

⁵⁶ Kanerva, Kirsi (2015), pp. 59.



brutal natures. To put it mildly, Víga-Hrappr “did not endear himself to people,” and Glámr the berserker was “found [to be] obnoxious.”⁵⁷ Adding that this brutal nature is apparent to every ghost, it is “therefore...no wonder that ghosts tend to be people who were troublesome during their lifetime,” as apparently irritability is a tough habit to break dead or alive.”⁵⁸ As such, an individual’s ill-temper is cause for alarm and precaution by saga characters and usually results in some preparative measures being established such as blindfolding the corpse, dragging them out of a makeshift door, or piling rocks upon the buried body.

In light of Kinerva’s behavioural research about Icelandic spectres, I believe the same criteria can be extended to enlighten the parameters of the saint. It is an apparent immense difficulty to suggest that there is anything remotely similar between the holy saint and the horrendous *draugr* – at first glance. Immediately, it should be stated that these two beings do not have the same intentions and goals in mind when interacting with the living that they supposedly left behind. One aims to save those on earth through intercession and miracles while the other generally yearns to kill.

Well established as a pious figure, the medieval Icelandic saint is ceremoniously a person working purely for the profit of salvation and grace for themselves and others. Such was the case for Þorlákr, as exhibited by the words of Gizurr Hallsson astride the man’s deathbed when he pronounced “...what a useful man Bishop Þorlákr had been both to the see and to all the people of the land.”⁵⁹ Genuine to a fault, not many grains of ill will can be sift from the life of Þorlákr. This is mainly because any remarks of divisiveness in version A of the text is minor in narrative, as Þorlákr’s personal life was virtually infallible. While historically there was contention between Þorlákr, his magnates, and his sister’s married lover Jón Loptsson over church jurisdiction rights, nothing too slanderous can be found to tarnish the altruistic demeanour of Þorlákr. Personal scandles with regards to money or matters of the

⁵⁷ Magnusson, Magnus and Pálsson, Hermann, (1975), pp. 62 and Scudder, Bernard (2005), pp. 77.

⁵⁸ Ármann Jakobsson (2011), pp. 288.

⁵⁹ Ármann and Clark (2013), pp. 22.

heart and body did not mar his figure, and for all intents and purposes “his personal life was beyond reproach.”⁶⁰ This is not the case with Guðmundr and especially Óláfr the warrior king, whose bloody inclinations are flaunted and on full display.

Nevertheless, not all saints are tempered equally nor forged in the fires of brotherly love. For instance, the Norse saints and their coalition of priests are just as easily susceptible to ornery and dishonest behaviour when it comes to defending and protecting their titles and positions. Saint Óláfr is warlike, usually depicted brandishing an axe as a symbol of his battle prowess.⁶¹ Such an instrument of terror also invoked his less than merciful missionary and conversion exploits as wherever he went, “...idols were smashed, sacred groves felled, [and] temples overthrown.”⁶² While the hagiography extolls praise for Óláfr’s personal conversion from a paganism to Christianity, some contemporary scholars regard Óláfr’s mannerism to be exceedingly abrasive and unpopular – perhaps even arguably leading to his expulsion to Sweden and Russia.⁶³ Similar to a *draugr*, Óláfr was a highly vicious, motivated, and oppressive man that at times seemed more trouble than he was worth.⁶⁴ Arguably, the hagiographical descriptions of him as an extremely violent man would make any teeth gnashing *draugr* think twice about confronting him for a bite.

Less volatile but still noteworthy is the strong willed and stern countenance attested of Guðmundr the Good’s mannerisms. Born out of wedlock to Ari and Úlfheið and later fostered by the priest Ingimundr, Guðmundr “was very stubborn and soon showed that he resembled

⁶⁰ McCreesh, Bernadine. “Saint-Making in Early Iceland.” *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies/Études Scandinaves au Canada*, (2007), pp.13-14.

⁶¹ For examples of such images see the 12th century Halsingland Skog Church’s Viking Tapestry now housed in the Statens Historiska Museum, Stockholm and AM 135 quarto *Árnabælisbók* for illumination details of Saint Óláfr.

⁶² Kunin, Devra, and Phelpstead, Carl (2001), pp. 28.

⁶³ Haywood, John (1995), pp. 122 and Kunin, Devra, and Phelpstead, Carl (2001), pp. 29. The Saga author of Óláfr’s hagiography suggests the reasoning behind Óláfr’s expulsion to the East was necessary till the Lord found it “suitable for him to fulfil his desire and purpose,” and stop hiding pp. 29.

⁶⁴ Phelpstead, Carl. “Holy Vikings: Saints Lives in the Old Icelandic Kings’ Sagas”. University of Arizona, 2007, pp. 130.

his father in overbearing temperament and would seek to have his own way..."⁶⁵ Repeatedly Guðmundr showed himself to be strong willed and brave, enduring much humiliation and being "present at some of the most violent events of the period, including the battles at Víðines and Helgastaðir and the separate defence of Grímsey...[spending] half of his episcopacy exiled from Hólar, leading an itinerant life in the rest of Iceland and Norway."⁶⁶ During his time on earth he had seen the very best and worst of mankind, and presumably fortified himself with this born determinism to succeed.

When approaching a historical figure in the saga corpus, it is important to closely gather what little wisps of personality that can be gleaned from the milieu which claims to depict a candid life. Behaviour is contingent upon our emotions which fuel how we conduct ourselves, eliciting a response that "does not occur without a proximate cause, and it results in some action; it often appears in the text to explain motivation."⁶⁷ Our actions are a manifestation of our thoughts and goals, and give clues to our morals and beliefs. This motivation for the saint and *draugr* is manifested by the strong desire to return from the grave in some form or capacity. It has been established by the *Íslendingasögur* that most *draugr* are ill-tempered, wrathful, and undesirably dangerous which could prove advantageous in their ability to yank themselves out from their burial plots and cairns. Likewise, the hagiographies of the saints stress their strong faith and conviction as well as their willingness to embrace death without any doubt that they will go to heaven. While surely the saint is cloaked in altruism and the *draugr* in hatred, their ability to return could find a fixed similar point in their strong personalities even if one is motivated by good and the other destruction.

There exists for the *draugr* and saint certain marked behaviour and actions that speak to their destined roles as monster and spiritual leader. For the saint this can take the form of

⁶⁵ McGrew, H. Julia, (1974), pp. 100.

⁶⁶ Whaley, Diana. "Miracles in the Sagas of Bishops: Icelandic Variations on an International Theme". Collegium Medievale, 1994, pp. 160.

⁶⁷ Larrington, Carolyn. "The Psychology of Emotion and Study of the Medieval Period Oxford". 2001, pp. 254.

prophetic words spoken into reality, their incorruptible body, dreams, and the possibility of religious overtones hovering over their death beds. When Guðmundr was a young boy he indulged in playing with bishop robes, a childhood fancy that became “construed as significant prophecies” of his holy appointment in life.⁶⁸ Equally so, we have behavioural markers that suggest someone is to become a *draugr* – whether that person is extremely anti-social, harsh, violent, ethnically foreign, or just plain mean. A *draugr* shows patterns in life that mark them for considered monstrosity same as a saint is marked in preparation for their holy mission upon death.

For instance, seated positions and an unmovable body forebode a *draugr* likely to rise. Upon his death, Skallagrímr’s body is immovable and poised upright on a chair to imply his continuity at overseeing his affairs and household even in death.⁶⁹ This behaviour is eerily similar to the *draugr* king Raknar in *Egil and Asmund’s saga* who was found “sitting on a throne...utterly horrible to behold.”⁷⁰ Not dissimilar is Víga-Hrappr’s insistence at being an active part of his farm after his death, even if he becomes a hindering nuisance to its operation rather than an asset.⁷¹ Þórólfr, from *Eyrbyggja saga*, additionally displays this type of behaviour and it proves to be foreshadowing that he will soon become a notoriously persistent ghost. This saga motif is not lacking within Icelandic saints’ lives either, as “Gizurr Hallsson dreamed a little after the death of Bishop Þorlákr that he seemed to see him sitting on the church at Skálholtin his bishops’ robes and he was blessing the people from there. And he interpreted his dream as meaning that he would still be an overseer over his Church.”⁷² This image of an upright Þorlákr is peaceful and hopeful, but the indicated message is still similar to other

⁶⁸ McGrew, H. Julia, (1974), pp. 101.

⁶⁹ Scudder, Bernard. “Egils Saga”. London, 2002. Though Skallagrímr does not become a *draugr*, his son Egill is concerned enough about the possibility that he takes special measures to ensure his father stays dead, including the tearing down of a wall to dispose of the corpse and burying him on an island far away from possible contamination pp. 120.

⁷⁰ Pálsson, Hermann, and Edwards, Paul. “Egil and Asmund”. London, 1985, pp. 135.

⁷¹ Magnusson and Pálsson, 1975, pp. 101.

⁷² Ármann and Clark (2013), pp. 23.

draugar premonitions. Though dead, Þorlákr will remain a dominant figure even after his expiration and will continue to actively fulfil his responsibilities and duties as he had in life.

Unquestionably the most distinct commonality between the saint and the *draugr* is the state of their undecayed body. The curiousness of a supposed ghost is how it came to have a physical body, essentially rendering it a category of “physically active dead beings,” capable of wreaking physical havoc that would make a poltergeist envious.⁷³ While sometimes described as slightly bloated with flesh black and blue, the tissues and sinew of the corpse are usually remarkably preserved, and they are able to ramble about quite freely. The cadaver also emits a stench akin to rotting, with an odour so foul it can strangle anyone in the room as was the case in king Raknar’s hall.⁷⁴ In comparison, the saint’s body also releases a miasma, though it is sweet smelling and pleasant to the nostrils. The reanimated holy man is likewise capable of appearing physically apparent instead of purely as an apparition. This manifestation technique was the typical healing practice of Saint Óláfr, who assisted the non-verbal and people with disabilities to speak and walk by tugging at the root of their stubbed tongue or wrenching their legs back till the patient was rendered a sobbing mess begging for a kinder touch.⁷⁵

Having something of the body after death’s departure is also a great boon, as reliquaries have sustained cults and sainthoods eagerly for pious pilgrims and worshippers alike. The very presence of a fragment of bone or a knocked-out tooth is especially imperative for the successful canonisation of a saint as body parts can be displayed, gilded, and used as physical proof of holiness, markers for shrines, and thus seats of power. In fact, it is for this reason that Bernadine McCreesh suggests that Óláfr Tryggvason was at a disadvantage to be recognized as the patron saint of Iceland, as his body was never recovered at the Battle of Svold.⁷⁶ As such, his bones could not be interred, translated, and relics could not be honoured

⁷³ Sayers, William (1996), pp. 242.

⁷⁴ Pálsson, Herman, and Edwards, Paul, (1985), pp. 135.

⁷⁵ Kunin, Devra and Phelpstead, Carl (2001), pp. 40-41, 60.

⁷⁶ McCreesh, Bernadine, (2007), pp. 13-14.

nor have any chance of producing miracles necessary to build his cult. As she states due to the difficulties of having no physical remainder of the saint, “it is not altogether surprising that the cult of Óláfr Tryggvason failed to produce any miracles.”⁷⁷

The fact that the saint’s body remains perfectly embalmed as a sign of divine favour is not such a difficult concept to grasp, as humankind has predominantly feared their own demise and dissolution. The breaking of our bodies into mulch, ash, and bone highlights “the vulnerability of our bodies, but even more so their divisibility,” which “is both fascinating and deeply disturbing.”⁷⁸ When saints do appear, their visage is recognized in dreams and visions as mostly intangible – though physical visitations are claimed by faithful worshippers. These visits from the saint are not meant to haunt or frighten, even though one is being exposed to the attentions of a former dead person. This is because they are trusted to heal and interfere with worshippers’ lives for their congregations’ benefit after their passing. Óláfr himself is described as a handsome man of middle height, not a rotting corpse dragging its body about lingering where it isn’t wanted.⁷⁹ Interacting with a saint’s corpse is zealously encouraged and is arguably an important part of delineating holiness. Þorlákr instructs in a dream to uncover his body if there is a mark of holiness belonging to it – meaning, if it is uncorroded. Why is it that the saints embalmed body grants comfort to a community while the *draugar* only disgust when both allude to a life after death? Perhaps it is due to the obvious fact that while both are corporeal, only one is shedding maggots whereas the other smells of burning frankincense.

Regarding the physical, with a preserved body comes a recognizable face capable of comfort or terror to a community. As such, Víga-Hrapp is immediately made known to his wife, much like how the band of drowned *draugar* in *Eyrbyggja* saga are accepted as past members of the community, human enough to be served by the law, yet ghost-like enough to

⁷⁷ McCreesh, Bernadine, (2007), pp. 13-14.

⁷⁸ Sanders, Theresa, (2000), pp. 103.

⁷⁹ (Kunin, Devra and Phelpstead, Carl (2001), pp. 56, 58.



be distressing and unwanted.⁸⁰ The ability to continually engage with the community is a privilege enjoyed by these spectres, and yet it is one where complete integration is not entirely possible or secured. As Giorgio Agamben highlights in his taxonomical treatise of posthuman ontologies, “man has no specific identity other than the ability to recognize himself. Yet to define a human through any *nota characteristic*, but rather through his self-knowledge, means that man is the being which recognizes itself as such.”⁸¹ This is where bones and sinew break down for the communities of Eyri and Laxárdalr, as their self-knowledge is dependent upon the crumbling reality that they have buried their family members and yet they still rise up from the soil. Thus, the monster exists within the boundaries of a communities understanding and cannot be forced outwards to some shadowy land, able to be forgotten or avoided by pure chance of never wandering outward too far from settled land.⁸² Instead, there is a disjointedness when faced with the *draugr*, as by death they “... are estranged from us even as they mirror us.”⁸³

Ideally, a corpse is supposed to stay in the ground, as is the natural order. Yet “...the reappearance from obscurity of a dead body inevitably leads to a sense of instability.”⁸⁴ The *draugr* is like—or was like—us. We can recognize the monster’s face and hail them as our neighbour, stepfather, or farmhand whom we used to work alongside. Víga-Hrappur, Þórólfr, and even Þórgunna use their presence along the land of the living to enforce their lasting memories. One is not merely frightened because they see a corpse or a zombie—it is the very fact that they recognize the body as a friend or enemy that rattles us to our core, as through haunting the ghost we are “pull[ed]...into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to

⁸⁰ Magnusson and Pálsson, 1975, pp. 101 and Herman, Pálsson and Edwards, Paul. “Eyrbyggja saga”. London, 1989.

⁸¹ Agamben, Giorgio. “The Open: Man and Animal”. Stanford, 2004, pp. 26.

⁸² Van Duzer, Chet. “Hic sunt dracones: The Geography and Cartography of Monsters”. Routledge, 2013, pp. 65.

⁸³ Sanders, Karin. “Bodies in the Bog and the Archaeological Imagination”. University of Chicago, 2009, pp. 11.

⁸⁴ Sanders, Karin, (2009), pp. xv.

experience as recognition.”⁸⁵ Likewise, the saint is so powerful because we have come to know their iconography and face from memorizations of hagiography, alabaster stone renditions, and painted reliquaries. Because we are not so far removed from the dead, we can still mourn them as our loss. Yet, it is when they return from the afterlife that we must reevaluate how we interpret them as either friend or foe, abomination or miracle.

Taxonomical Decomposition: Casper the Friendly Icelandic Ghost?

For the purpose of bridging the gap between the *draugr* and the saint, it is relevant to discuss the intermediary figures that skew the taxonomical boxed coffins and make room for saintly monsters. As Kinerva’s work demonstrates, the undead is a monster that can appear on the scene as a manifestation of a hidden taboo, enemy, or cultural breach. The use of a howling ghost or a bloodthirsty vampire told to an enthralled audience is not just a form of entertainment or escapism, but at times can hold moral or cultural cues that reinforce norms and societal rigors. The ghost, vampire, zombie are feared and “impure because they violate and transgress” established natural boundaries and modems of behaviours.⁸⁶ They are monstrous because they do exactly what human beings shouldn’t be capable of – and they do it with little to no remorse.

However, these fiends have their friendly counterparts in ghosts that are meant to be terrifying as a way of corralling unhealthy or intolerable behaviours for the benefit of society at large. Taking a look at anthropological and folklore studies, “the returning dead can be either good or bad, depending on the context of the encounter or its intention. Some may be benevolent, in that their main reason for returning is to help the living – or, from the point of view of the living, their appearance leads to a favourable result.”⁸⁷ For instance, Þórgunna from *Eyrbyggja saga* and Gunnar Hlíðarendi from *Brennu-Njáls saga* are not bad people. In fact,

⁸⁵ Avery, F. Gordon. “Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination”. University of Minnesota Press, 2008, pp 63.

⁸⁶ Kanerva, Kirsi & Koski, Kaarina (2019), p. 14.

⁸⁷ Kanerva, Kirsi & Koski, Kaarina (2019), p. 14.

they emphasize desirable qualities— Þórgunna is a professed Christian, albeit a slightly witchy one, who donates funds to her church upon her demise. Her ultimate vendetta for rising from the dead is to right a cultural wrong, which she accomplishes by weaponizing her terrorizing manifestation to shame a farmer for his stinginess when he refuses to feed her travelling funeral party.

In view on what makes one susceptible to becoming a *draugr*, what is less explained is perhaps the overwhelming depiction of male *draugar* over female *draugar* and what that could mean, especially with regard to Kanerva's view of passivity-activity that the medieval timeframe was observing. Interestingly enough, wonderful scholarship has been completed with regards to female saints and their tolerance for pain, humiliation, and torture all in the hopes for salvation after martyrdom. If anyone should have enough grit and guts to arise from the dead, it would be these piously devote women. With regards to masculine and overbearing men, the Icelandic sagas are rife with such heroes that chase after death as avidly as a saint. For example, enough can be espoused about the heroism of Gunnar, who is seen as one of the most favoured and well-known warriors in Icelandic memory. His only vice as a mound dweller is to sing a bit of poetry and goad his best friends' sons into avenging wrongful murders, including his own.

However, as far as female *draugr* go, Þórgunna is truly an exceptional character. She is the only one to compound all the other elements that seem to predetermine someone becoming a revenant, as her origin in the Hebrides and her previous magical inclinations would suggest. Behaviourally, she is kinder and more honest than the other victims of afterlife resurrection and is faithfully and insistently described through the author's voice as Christian. This digresses from the traditional pattern of becoming a *draugr* is further enhanced when she actually appears as a corporeal ghost and chooses not necessarily to wreak havoc, but as Sayers posits, to amend for a lack of generosity on the part of the farmers at Snæfellsnes.⁸⁸ Instead of

⁸⁸ Sayers, William (1996).

being a chaotic force that further attempts to destroy demarcated boundaries like other *draugr* do, Þórgunna, perhaps owing to her less subjectively tainted nature as a Christian, serves an important purpose that manifests itself as a deed that preserves a social tenant of hospitality. She is, instead of a *draugr* that directly causes ill will, seeks to amend a broken thread in society, righting something amiss for the benefit of the living, not for the misery of it. While both the actions of Gunnar and Þórgunna lead to eventual bloodshed with the mishap of Þórgunna's cursed bed curtains and the *Njálssynir* starting another feud, initially the spectres were in the cultural right. As such, hospitality was an important attested Old Norse custom, and a death left unavenged is a blight upon a man's family and cannot be tolerated within saga culture.⁸⁹

Essentially then, the Old Norse saint and the terrifying *draugr*, while sharing drastically different intentions and motivations in life, are still curiously moulded from the same soil of Iceland and other Northern European traditions. Perhaps there is some self-preservation locked within the ground that has sprung forth the literary interaction between the dead and the living with such different outcomes of violence and sanctity. While the Icelandic saint cannot be entirely neatly transposed upon the subject of the *draugr* and vice-versa, there is something to be said about the similarities between the two that can further illicit useful common ground towards the medieval conception of the dead.

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