

**MONSTROUS AGENCY: THE SOCIAL LIFE OF THE ICELANDIC
RESTLESS DEAD**

**AGENCIA MONSTRUOSA: LA VIDA SOCIAL DE LOS MUERTOS INQUIETOS
ISLANDESES**

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Abstract: In Icelandic sagas, the actions and behaviours of the *aptrganga* (undead "after-goer") reveal complex relationships between identity, monstrosity, and society, challenging the simplistic notion that undead monsters exist entirely outside of humanity. I argue that while certain circumstances influence one's transformation into an undead being marked by aggression, this change is further complicated by factors such as kinship ties, aspirations to power, the preservation of honour or conversion. The revenant often emerges from a history of violating social norms, which fuels the monstrous return. However, the saga evidence suggests that monstrosity is also deeply rooted in the individual's societal interactions. In *Eyrbyggja* saga Arnkell's quick response to his father Thorolf's undead state temporarily halts the potential for destruction, highlighting the lingering influence of Thorolf's desires for status symbols he lacked in life. Similarly, in *Svarfdæla* saga, Klaufi's posthumous vengeance spree is driven by a need to restore his honour after being killed by his wife, suggesting that his monstrous behaviour is an extension of his human concerns. In the *Vínland* sagas, revenants domesticated by Christian faith serve to underline socio-religious rules. Such figures occupy a liminal space suggesting their monstrosity is rooted in their complex cultural perception and uncertain state after death, when they retain at least part of their identity and agency.

Keywords: undead, monstrosity, Christianity, kinship.

Resumen: En las sagas islandesas, las acciones y comportamientos del *aptrganga* (el "andador después" o no-muerto) revelan relaciones complejas entre identidad, monstruosidad y sociedad, desafiando la noción simplista de que los monstruos no-muertos existen enteramente fuera de lo humano. Sostengo que, si bien ciertas circunstancias influyen en la transformación de una persona en un ser no-muerto marcado por la agresión, este cambio se ve además complicado por factores como los lazos de parentesco, las aspiraciones de poder, la preservación del honor o la conversión. El revenant suele surgir de un historial de violaciones de las normas sociales, lo que alimenta su retorno monstruoso. Sin embargo, la evidencia de las sagas sugiere que la monstruosidad también está profundamente enraizada en las interacciones sociales del individuo. En la *Eyrbyggja* saga, la rápida reacción de Arnkell ante el estado espectral de su padre Þórólfr detiene temporalmente el potencial de destrucción, poniendo de relieve la influencia persistente de los deseos de Þórólfr por símbolos de estatus.

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que le faltaron en vida. De manera similar, en la *Svarfdæla* saga, la ola de venganza póstuma de Klaufi está impulsada por la necesidad de restaurar su honor tras ser asesinado por su esposa, lo que sugiere que su comportamiento monstruoso es una extensión de sus preocupaciones humanas. En las sagas de Vínland, los revenants domesticados por la fe cristiana sirven para subrayar las normas socio-religiosas. Tales figuras ocupan un espacio liminal que sugiere que su monstruosidad está enraizada en una percepción cultural compleja y en su incierto estado después de la muerte, cuando conservan al menos parte de su identidad y agencia.

Palabras clave: no-muertos, monstruosidad, cristianismo, parentesco

Introduction:

While the persistence of the Icelandic undead can be seen as transgressive, it is a transgression that broadly remains bound to the norms of the living: in their efforts to act within society, revenants reshape their violations to align with its moral expectations and social duties. In this study of revenants in several *íslendigasögur*², I aim to trace how revenants' active presence destabilises the notion of social death (Patterson 1982; 2018), while integrating them into monster theory. The monster's fluidity becomes visible especially when fragments of its human image and social status emerge through interaction with others, forcing continual renegotiations of identity. Variation will be explored within the *aptrganga* group, largely defined as the dead leaving their resting place, ranging from aggressive to peaceful characters, and focusing on the monsters' complex interactions and their capacity to maintain a social identity.

As powerful vehicles for exploring and problematising social anxieties, forcing communities to confront the underlying tensions, Icelandic revenants are figures that remain embedded in the social fabric after death, given their persistence in feud dynamics, kinship obligations, property disputes, and hospitality roles. I also argue that we can draw a distinction between different ways of interacting with the dead and evaluating their haunting activities, in accordance with their acceptability in the community especially involving beliefs and religious identity. Thus, Christianized characters complicate the manifestation of the

² *Svarfdæla saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Flóamanna saga*, the *Vínland sagas*, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, *Laxdæla*, *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, *Heiðarvíga saga*.

restless and appear more 'tamed', underscoring the difficulty of integrating the ancestors in a continuous history of Iceland in the 13th-14th century.

Theoretical considerations

Jeffrey J. Cohen's foundation framework *Monster Culture. Seven Theses* understands monsters as culturally specific constructs that can be read as displaced revelatory signs (Cohen, 2018, p. 44) that move within the generating literary-historical matrix. Reanimated corpses are transgressive hybrids that function as monsters of prohibition through their destructive actions, violating social, territorial and biological laws. They dwell at the gates of difference by remaining outside the normative Icelandic community, othered because of various factors like origin, beliefs or disruptive personality. Standing on the threshold of becoming, they are also cultural tools used to explore structures of human life and society, revealing concerns about family ties, marriage, property transmission, and the relationship between humans and the natural world, at the same time representing a problematic past that needs to be reinterpreted in order to make the continuation of life possible (Novotná 2020, p.16).

The typologically difficult examples from Icelandic sagas reflect that 'concepts of nature and its opposites and exceptions, whether the latter be construed as miracle, marvel, monster or magic, are not susceptible to quick and easy definition, indeed not only for the thinkers of the medieval period but also for us' (Bartlett, 2006, p. 26). In the saga world, the mix of distant pre-Christian memories and Christian worldviews creates a fertile ground for the uncertainties of the boundaries.³ In many instances, monstrosity is related to a sense of social identity expressed through the strangeness the monster designates, an incorporation of otherness – all those 'loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate within' (Cohen, 1996, p. 7). The ontological status refers especially to J. Cohen's third and fourth theses: the category crisis postulates the disturbing hybridity of the monster that

³ It is difficult to establish whether the idea of living corpse is pagan, most likely we are dealing with an amalgamation of pagan remnants and Christian concepts, especially the Gregorian tradition considering death partial and processual and attributing restlessness to an animating principle. Yet, as Vésteinn Ólason noticed, the idea's tenacity in folklore hints at its ancient character (2003, p. 167), furthermore, a few runestones such as the 9th-10th century Gørlev, aimed at keeping the dead in place, suggest a fear of the dead that reverberates in many other cultures.

challenges the organisation of human experience; moreover, the monster dwells at the threshold of cultural difference by a process of recombination of marginalized elements (Cohen, 1996, p. 11). The monster hence challenges the cultural apparatus that allowed for its existence but cannot be completely divorced from it.

As Ármann Jakobsson has argued (2008, 2013), medieval texts themselves rarely maintain neat categories: the same figure may be called *draugr*, troll, or sorcerer, demonstrating the category crisis described above. This instability of labels further underscores that the revenant's monstrosity is relational, depending on how the community negotiates its presence. The case of Ögmundr in *Örvar-Odds saga* illustrates this hybridity: described as troll, sorcerer, and revenant, he weaponizes his indeterminate status into social power and fear (Jakobsson 2017, p. 33). His terror remains inseparable from social embeddedness. Christian legal interpretation e.g. in West Scandinavia prohibits the conjuring of such creatures, e.g. in the *Borgarþing* law trolls are mentioned, while the *Gulapþing* version of king Magnus Lagabøte from the 1270s refers to *draugar and haugbúar* (Hagland, 2018, p. 181). The presence of these monsters in the laws may parallel their presence in saga narratives at the time of compilation, if we deem them relevant for documenting popular beliefs. However, in Icelandic law, namely the 12th-13th century *Grágás*, such apparitions are not mentioned despite the episodes happening in Iceland, suggesting that written tradition may have rather preserved revenants as vehicles of social memory.

Despite the diversity, one can still notice a functional difference based on their interactivity, whether they are rather passive 'watchmen', the ones haunted by the living, or the ones doing the haunting, *reimleikar*⁴ (Jakobsson, 2011, pp. 284-85). Jakobsson describes the latter as parasitic and infectious, directly seeking to harm and destabilise. Interesting research has been done on the role of the monster in the evolution of heroes with indeterminate social status, forcing them to improve their condition and engage in maintaining social order (Kanerva, 2013, pp. 111-130). Their extreme disruption of society has also been pinpointed, i.e. their economic impacts and symbolism as uncontrollable forces of nature (Merkelbach, 2019).

Nancy Caciola's work on the restless dead in medieval Europe further illuminates this dynamic. She shows that revenants were never imagined as mere intrusions from outside the

⁴ Aptrganga in this article.

community but as figures whose return reflected unresolved social bonds and anxieties (Caciola 2016, pp. 121–22). Often associated with ‘bad deaths’ – violent, untimely, or dishonourable – such figures embodied the community’s struggle to reintegrate the marginal or improperly separated dead. Crucially, Christian eschatology did not eliminate older revenant traditions but absorbed and reshaped them, producing hybrid forms in which corporeal, socially embedded revenants could coexist with more spiritualised, visionary ghosts. Stories such as the Thietmar of Merseburg’s Walsleben episode, where revenants offer gifts to a priest, illustrate how older corpse-capabilities⁵ were reinterpreted through a Christian lens (Caciola 2016, pp. 121, 218). This pan-European repertoire resonates with the Icelandic sagas: the violent undead sustain feud and kinship obligations beyond the grave, while their Christianized counterparts domesticate the same persistence, transforming it into more of a moral exemplum. In both cases, however, the revenants’ enduring social agency is revealed by their insistence on continued participation in the world of the living.

Robert Hertz’s classical insight that death is a social process is particularly relevant in this context: the corpse remains liminal and potentially dangerous until rituals of separation and incorporation are fulfilled. Icelandic revenants embody the failure of that process. Improper burials, violent or dishonourable deaths, and unresolved feuds prevent the transition from person to ancestor, leaving the dead suspended between two states. These figures become temporary liminaries, destabilising the community while simultaneously revealing its underlying structures.

This perspective intersects with Orlando Patterson’s theory of “social death.” For Patterson, a phenomenon like slavery⁶ erased kinship and honour, rendering individuals socially dead though biologically alive. Revenants invert this model: though biologically dead, they resist social death by clinging to their former territories and communities. Their monstrosity arises not only from their uncanny corporeality but from their refusal to relinquish their influence. Hans-Peter Hasenfratz conceptualizes both ‘social death’ caused by exclusion and ‘severe death’ occurring in abnormal circumstances (2003, pp. 223–229), for which there exist integrative means to redeem them e.g. by fulfilling a rite or a promise or

⁵ In this case Slavic folklore.

⁶ A concept thereafter applied in many other contexts, e.g. illnesses, imprisonment, displacement, mass violence etc.

destroying the corpse altogether. As shown by Baier and Schäfke when applying this model (2016, pp. 131–155), revenant episodes often demonstrate the necessity of Christianization and proper burials in the context of conversion to overcome severe death. While social death has also been identified as a determining factor in some of the cases, my analysis complicates the applicability of the concept because of the post-mortem entanglement with the community: they actively continue social roles, whether through feud, property, or kinship obligations. Moreover, the Christianized revenants are not simply harmless figures awaiting proper burial, but agents whose prophecies, reconciliations, and protective gestures extend interventions beyond the grave. Their persistence can be thought of as a materialized past self, if we consider that ‘a revenant represents memories of a person and his/her deeds and position in the society’ (Novotná, 2020, p. 15). That sustains identity and agency after death, which derive from the memory inscribed in their bodies e.g. a failed ambition or high social standing.

As reanimated corpses, revenants occupy an uncanny threshold, unsettling natural law and social expectation. The transgression of death – ‘the only certainty’ (Merkelbach 2019, p. 32) – mirrors their trespass upon social norms, as the *aptrganga* re-enters households, kin groups, and feuds that should have been concluded at the grave. Their corporeality, stronger and more terrifying than in life, is destructive but also insistently relational: they attack rivals, defend property, and roam beyond burial sites as if staking a claim to ongoing presence. As Sayers (1996, p. 244) observes, these stories reflect an ‘incomplete disengagement from life’s affairs,’ a refusal of the social death expected to accompany biological death.

The refusal to accept final exclusion mirrors broader European Christian discourses about the porous boundary between living and dead (Martin 2009, p. 81). Each of the following examples demonstrates that revenants exhibit specific forms of social agency, extending conflicts, obligations or desires beyond death. The sagas also include explicitly Christian revenants, whose presence is markedly less violent, shaped not by feud but by the logic of salvation and reconciliation. The tales of the dead returning and uttering prayers or prophecies may reflect a preoccupation with the state of the soul in purgatory, as the doctrine spread from the 12th century onward and with it the increase in commemoration practices (Hugener, 2020, p. 139). Whether violent or not, by insisting on their continued entanglement in communal structures, revenants resist the silence of the grave, disturbing not only to destroy, but also because they aspire to belong.

Violent revenants

The episodes in the *Íslendigasögur* turn conceptions of death to narrative purposes which in their turn reflect societal and religious attitudes. The family sagas carry thematic concerns that problematize social impact, feuds, or individual status – ‘it is in realistic environments that the circumscribed and generally believable actions of the *draugar* occur’ (Sayers, 1996, p. 245). The monstrosity of the undead does not stand in an unsolvable contrast to the living – their corporeality and social behaviour imply a relativization, despite incompatibility with human life. Their return can be attributed to both strong will and heavy materiality, as it seems that ‘undecayed bodies retained a kind of energy that was required for posthumous activity’ (Kanerva, 2022, p. 219).

The exclusion of a man who endangers social stability can often be expressed by his monstrous change, as clearly exemplified by Þórólfr bægifótr. His descent into monstrosity reflects both external judgments and personal traits. Þórólfr's later arrival in Iceland, his aggressive ambitions, instigations, and deep-seated resentment towards his marginal position⁷ in society all point to a contestation of societal norms and early Icelandic compromise culture. His inability to integrate, marked by his preference for short-term gain over long-term social obligations, sets the stage for his transformation, as his machinations ultimately aggravate the already tense relationship between his son Arnkell and Snorri, the other contender for dominance in the Snæfellsnes peninsula, ultimately leading to Arnkell's death. His refusal to engage in the prestigious practice of gift-giving, choosing instead to sell land to freedmen and thus miscalculating the value of social capital, underscores his failure to understand the importance of building social ties.

Given his actions, the boundaries between human and non-human seem to be blurred before his transformation. After his ‘bad death’, he shares the same ambition and aspires to

⁷ By “marginalization” I refer to the positioning of individuals at the edge of the social fabric, which in saga literature can occur through various means: geographic otherness (foreign origin), religious alterity (pagan/Christian divide), social deviance (antisocial behaviour), legal subordination (slave status), physical abnormality. These processes are not identical, but in saga narratives they mark axes of distance from communal norms. On the other hand, revenants reveal the instability of such categories, since their return dramatizes how marginality and belonging coexist, since even the most disruptive ones retain kinship ties or property claims. Furthermore, Christian revenants demonstrate that not all outcast figures return violently yet still insist on some form of social participation. See Erving Goffman's classical study, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963); for labelling and spoiled identities in medieval context Carole Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England* (2006).

dominate a wide area around the burial site: a shepherd is killed, then animals, the hall is being 'ridden', his widow goes mad and dies, and eventually 'he emptied the farms in the whole valley.'⁸ His transformation ultimately derives from the inability to properly manage social relations.

However, the saga complicates monstrosity by showing that even in his undead state, Þórólfr remains connected to the social fabric through kinship ties – the uneasy 'intimate stranger' (Cohen, 1999). He first responds to the movement of the body initiated by his son. Then, his refusal to harm Arnkell's lands or those under his protection indicates that family bonds still hold some sway, even in death. This ambivalence adds to the liminality of his character. The final transformation of Þórólfr into the bull Glæsir, which continues the cycle of violence and vengeance – against his son's killer – further emphasizes that the monster remains deeply enmeshed in the saga's feuding dynamics. Preventive rituals are fulfilled, e.g. not walking in front of the corpse and dragging it through a hole in the wall (Kanerva, 2018, p. 30). However, they function only temporarily, hence the lack of separation from the living causes a form of pollution (Douglas, 1966, p. 176). The saga problematizes the dangers of self-inflicted isolation and the damaging consequences on the living when 'relations with the supernatural are mismanaged' (Sayers, 1996, p. 251). At the same time, the monster remains deeply entangled with the living through his failed but persistent quest for dominance.

Similarly, Víga-Hrappr's restlessness in *Laxdæla saga* is linked to the attempts to counteract the otherness linked to his Hebridean origin through an obsessive pursuit of property and prestige. This obsession not only alienates him further but also manifests in increasingly antisocial actions, reflecting a desperate attempt to assert his place in a society that views him as an outsider. Hrappr's unlawful behaviour, which originally forces him to flee to Iceland, continues unabated in his new environment, where he harasses his neighbours and refuses to integrate.

His alterity is emphasized by his demand to be buried under his kitchen floor, a request that underscores his desire to maintain control over his property even in death and his deep fear of losing status. Even after his death, Hrappr's refusal to rest in peace reflects his ongoing

⁸ '...at hann eyddi alla bæi í dalnum', *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, *Íslensk Fornrit* 4 (Reykjavík: Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1935), p.93.

struggle for power and control. Shapeshifting into a hybrid creature, a seal with human eyes serves as a signifier for his defiance of the boundaries between life and death, human and animal.

The fact that both Hrappr and Þórólfr from *Eyrbyggja Saga* are buried in *dysjar*—low-status graves - underscores the idea that their relentless pursuit of goods and status ultimately forces them into monstrosity. The term *dys*⁹ does not refer to a proper burial but to a makeshift resting place. Hrappr's extreme alterity is also evident in his lacking relationship with his kin. When the local *goði* reburied his body far from the community, this allowed Hrappr's son to move onto the farm. His subsequent madness and death indicate that Hrappr's influence extends beyond the grave, disrupting even familial bonds. Furthermore, the tragedy at sea involving Hrappr's brother-in-law and attributed to Hrappr's curse, illustrates that, in this case, family ties cannot mitigate monstrosity.

However, Hrappr's transformation does serve a functional purpose in the saga. Terrorizing of the community presents an opportunity for Óláfr pá to find his own place in society. Despite his problematic status as the son of a concubine—considered degrading in medieval Iceland—Óláfr's successful confrontation with Hrappr allows him to restore communal stability (Kanerva, 2013, pp. 115-116) and earn a reputation. In this way, Hrappr's power-hungry monstrosity paradoxically contributes to the social advancement of others. In both Þórólfr and Hrappr, what survives death is essentially the violent insistence on maintaining their worldly station.

Glámr's case in *Grettir's Saga* highlights how religious and social alterity converge to drive an individual toward monstrosity. His pagan beliefs and Swedish origin mark him as an outsider in the Icelandic Christian community from the onset. The author deliberately emphasizes Glámr's unpleasant personality—'he was loathsome to everyone'—to underline his inherent alienation from society.¹⁰ Glámr's otherness is also suggested by his close association with nature rather than culture, given his role as a shepherd, a solitary occupation

⁹ See Richard Cleasby & Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* <old-norse.net> (accessed April 2024)

¹⁰ 'qllum var hann hvimleiðr'. *Grettis saga Ásmundarssonar*, ed. by Guðni Jonsson, *Íslenzk Fornrit 7* (Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1936), p. 111.

on the edge of wilderness. Similar patterns appear in accounts from Bohemia¹¹ also detailing the post-mortem activities of shepherds who terrorized their village, suggesting that the medieval dead were sometimes seen to walk and kill of their own volition (Gordon, 2020, p. 2). Even without a direct connection, ‘the dangers of social transgression were the themes that bound the revenant narratives to the wider historical project’ (Gordon 2020, p. 76). Glámr’s disdain for Christian customs, e.g. his mockery of fasting, thus the rejection of communal religious practices sets the stage for his monstrous transformation after death:

‘(...) people realised Glam did not lay still. This caused them so much trouble that many fainted when seeing him, and some lost their minds. Right after Christmas men thought they saw him at the farm. People became extremely terrified, many ran away. Next Glam started to ride the roofs at night so that they nearly fell apart (...).’¹²

Glámr’s transformation also has severe social and economic repercussions, causing the valley to become deserted. His resistance to Christian burial evidenced by his disappearance when a priest is sent to lay him to rest underscores the idea that his monstrosity stems from his iconoclastic attitude. The unnamed entity in the area which possessed him before he becomes undead underlines the social anxieties at the time of conversion.

Interestingly, he too retains some elements of his human identity, particularly his social status as a *þræll* (slave) on Þorkel’s farm, which he references after death. This self-identification indicates that Glámr remains tied to the initial social order. His speech - ‘there was more unheavenly power with Glámr than with other revenants, for he could speak’¹³ - a rare trait among violent *aptrgöngur*, further complicates his identity. Unlike other revenants typically characterized by animalistic noises, Glámr’s ability to speak aligns him more with the undead ancient heroes who can recite poetry.¹⁴ The speech highlights his hybrid nature –

¹¹ While direct textual influence cannot be established, these structural parallels suggest common medieval Christian responses to restless dead.

¹²(...) ‘urðu menn varir við þat, at Glámr lá eigi kyrr. Varð mönnum at því mikit mein, svá at margir fellu í óvit, ef sá hann, en sumir heldu eigi vitinu. Þegar eftir jólin þóttusk menn sjá hann heima þar á bænum. Urðu menn ákafliga hræddir; stukku þá margir menn í brott. Því næst tók Glámr at ríða húsum á nætr, svá at lá við brotum (...).’ *Grettis saga Ásmundarssonar*, p.113.

¹³ ‘Því var meiri ófagnaðarkraptr með Glámi en flestum öðrum aptrgöngumönnum, at hann mælti þá á þessa leið’. *Grettis saga Ásmundarssonar*, p. 121.

¹⁴ Mostly in the *fornaldarsögur*, rarely in the *Íslendigasögur* with the notable exception of Gunnar from *Njáls saga*.

paranormal monsters are 'interstitial and contradictory' (Carroll, 2018, p. 34) in being between life and death, nature and culture. Revenants in Gregory the Great's tales could also grasp, talk, and interact with the living in a fully material manner, often recounting their sins and former lives – examples pointing out that medieval death understood was seen as a process (Caciola, 1026, p. 49). Their ability to actively engage with their former locales and communities suggests a continued social presence.

Unlike other undead driven by unfinished business, his monstrosity is linked to both his difficult presence in the community and a contamination that needed to be eradicated to restore order. As monsters are rather perceived through their effect (Merkelbach, 2019, p.19), on a communal level the character emerges as a dangerous deviant. This supernatural death is necessary for the plot's development involving the downfall of the saga's hero. The curse on Grettir suggests that his monstrosity is inseparable from his persistence as a social agent. Moreover, Grettir's revenant encounters are also framed as a confrontation with his ambiguous identity. He too occupies a liminal space because of the lack of his father's full support, and subsequent outlaw status (Kanerva, 2013, pp. 116-117) even leading to him being mistaken for a *óvættir*. It has also been suggested that Glámr underscores Grettir's tendency 'to enter into negative relations with other men and his need to continually validate his claim to a dominant masculine subject' (Evans, 2019, p. 131). Revenants may thus reflect the social problems inflicted by the absence of the father and offered a chance to 'renegotiate one's social status' (Kanerva, 2012, p. 116).

Grettir's other opponent, the *haugbúi*¹⁵ Kárr inn Gamli reacts upon Grettir's robbery of his mound. This character from *Háramarsey*, who watches over his treasure, manifests harassingly on the whole island when physically active outside of his mound, despite his honourable burial in a high-status *haug* with a horse, weapons and treasure. Kárr's aggressive behaviour is socially motivated, as pinpointed by the situation on the island:

'they, father and son, first had a farmstead on the island, but after Kárr died, he has gone so far as to drive away all the farmers who owned land there, so

¹⁵ The passive mound-dweller reacting when disturbed dominates the *fornaldarsögur* but there are notable examples in the *Íslendigasögur* as well (*Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*).

that now Thorfinn alone owns the entire island, and no harm comes to those over whom Thorfinn holds sway.¹⁶

His presence ensures his son's dominance, moreover, his monstrousness is relativized since he seems capable of distinguishing between friend and foe, amplifying the strong bond Kárr still has with his environs. Kárr remains part of his son's stratagem to take possession of the whole territory, unlike Arnkell from *Eyrbyggja saga* who experiences a strained relationship to his father before and after his death. Kárr's ambiguity manifests through his direct intervention in the world of the living. Grettir chooses to battle the monster to increase his status, despite the dissatisfaction of the revenant's son, an ordeal hinting at an 'initiatory element' (Hume, 1980, p. 4). The revenant remains partially integrated in the competitive Icelandic society through his otherworldly support for his son, while the strategy used disrupts it. Both the monstrous and encounters with the monstrous prompt self-reflection and a re-evaluation of one's place in society (Cohen, 1996, p. 20).

Klaufi from *Svarfdæla saga* perhaps expresses best the lingering humanity through kinship entanglements. While of illustrious origin, Klaufi presents monstrous traits before turning restless, i.e. physical abnormality:

'Nearly 2.5 metres in height, he had long, thick arms, large cheek bones, and a strong grip. His legs were askew, he was broad-shouldered, with a very ugly mouth, a flat nose, a long and hunched neck, a high forehead, sharp traits and high cheek bones. He was the blackest of men both in brow and hair. His mouth was open, and two teeth jutted out of his head, and he looked completely shrivelled and knotted.'¹⁷

Klaufi consistently dismisses the socially acceptable rules of feud. His uncle offers double the usual amount for fostering him, anticipating the need to compensate for the various killings Klaufi will commit. This foresight highlights not only Klaufi's troublesome nature but

¹⁶ 'áttu þeir feðgar fyrst eitt bóndaból í eyjunni, en síðan Kárr dó, hefir hann svá aprt gengit, at hann hefir eytt á brott qllum bóndum þeim, er hér áttu jarðir, svá at nú á Þorfinnr [Kársson] einn alla eyna, ok engum verðr þeim mein at þessu, er Þorfinnr heldi hendi yfir', *Grettis saga Ásmundarssonar*, p. 57.

¹⁷ 'Hann var þverrar handar of fimm álna hár. Armleggi hafði hann bæði langa ok digra, kinnr miklar ok þrekligrar greipr. Hann var úteygr ok ennisbrattr, mjök munnljótr ok neflítill, hálslangr ok hökumikill, skolbrúnn ok skarpleitr, lágu hátt kinnarbeinin. Manna var hann svartastr bæði á brýnn ok hár. Hann var oppinmynntr, ok skögðu tvær tennr fram ór höfðinu, ok allt var hann at álitu sem hann væri krepptur ok knýtr.' *Svarfdæla saga*, ed. by Jónas Kristjánsson, *Íslensk Fornrit 9* (Reykjavík: Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1956), p. 162.

also the family's reluctant acceptance of his destructive tendencies. Klaufi's desire for local power in the valley manifests in his furious reactions to any challenge to his authority. For instance, when he is prevented from killing his enemy Ljótólfr by a kinsman who fears an escalation, Klaufi's anger reveals his deep-seated drive for dominance. These characteristics make him a prime candidate for becoming a revenant after his death. Even in death, Klaufi's violence persists: the immediate movement of the corpse after the stabbing prompts his killer to decapitate him. However, he rises again driven by vengeance, wielding his severed head as a weapon.

Klaufi's transformation seems a reflection of his enduring concern for honour and his strong connection to his kin that prevents his social death. His actions as a revenant – starting with the ethereal voice urging his kinsmen to avenge his death – highlight how his personality and values defy biological boundaries. When his kinsmen attack Klaufi's bride's family, he participates in the battle, thus preserving a strong connection to its former life, especially family ties. Klaufi's continued influence is further evidenced when he appears as a vision to Karl, prophesying his death. This prophetic ability indicates a reflection of Klaufi's past qualities, namely his capacity for verse. His presence at the saga's end, where he causes further destruction until cremation may be interpreted as a lingering 'communal memory' (Dendle, 2007, p. 54) of ancient heroic values like honour and kinship, which have survived conversion and remained relevant in the dynamics of Icelandic society.

The emotions displayed by his kin – Karl's son is affected by the need to destroy Klaufi, despite never having met him – again underscore the persistent relevance of kinship ties. Though complicated by Klaufi's monstrous nature, they remain a significant factor in how the living interact with the undead. The reluctance to decapitate Klaufi preemptively suggests that kinship and honour play a role in allowing the revenant to still possess a certain agency after death. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, Arnkell supports his followers but refuses to destroy his father's body, moving it instead, which causes long-term problems for the future generation.

In *Flóamanna saga*, a story found in two versions with considerable Christian hagiographical influence (Simek, Pálsson, 2007, p. 94), Þorgils' dealings with the undead serve as crucial opportunities for him to assert his status within the community and to navigate boundaries. In his first notable act, Þorgils confronts a restless dead at Björn's farm in Norway. By bravely decapitating this undead figure – Björn's father – Þorgils ends the haunting and

significantly boosts his prestige. This act of heroism underlines Þorgils' ability to restore order by enforcing the social boundaries.

Secondly, he assists his friend Auðun with burying the problematic body of his mother, wrapping it with strong ropes, yet the corpse still becomes restless. Ultimately, they decide to burn it¹⁸, a practice that marks her an outsider within the Christian framework of the saga – cremation in saga literature is hardly tackled as a past funerary practice, with the notable exception of characters such as the restless dead or sorcerers. In *Laxdæla saga*, the drowned sorcerer Hallbjörn tries to return and starts a wrestle but noticing his inferiority he simply vanishes into the ground.¹⁹ A sorcerer revenant would express an augmented social difference, with post-mortem endurance indicating an attempt to force the boundaries of inclusion. Using the sword he receives as a reward, Þorgils defeats a berserk and obtains the lost lands in Norway that caused his father's doom. Hence, confronting the revenants builds up his worthiness as a community member.

Tamed revenants

Monstrosity is further complicated by characters who seem to have converted. Whether demanding proper burial, prophesying the future, or safeguarding kin, the tamed revenants discussed below suggest that posthumous agency remained central, albeit filtered through Christian eschatology. In these cases, their bodies no longer materialize a memory of conflict but rather shift toward communicative or reconciliatory ends.

The Hebridean Þórgunna from *Eyrbyggja saga*, upon foretelling her own demise, requests the destruction of the linen coveted by her lady Þuriðr. She undergoes a Christian burial, a decisive aspect for the relativization of her otherness. Nevertheless, she experiences restlessness before the Christian burial, linked to her otherness due to origin²⁰ and demeanour: unsociable, but a church-goer and forms a bond with Kjartan, the farmer's son.²¹ Her liminal

¹⁸ *Flóamanna saga*, ed. by Þórhallur Vilmundarson & Bjarni Vilhjásson, *Íslensk Fornrit* 13 (Reykjavík: Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1991), p. 255.

¹⁹ *Laxdæla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Íslensk Fornrit* 5 (Reykjavík: Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1934), p. 109.

²⁰ Kanerva points out that the Celtic origin and imposing figure can also be noticed in the case of Unnr djúpuðga from *Laxdæla saga* but does not become restless.

²¹ Albeit a problematic one with sexual overtones, which might also be interpreted in terms of social unacceptability.

character manifests through her soothsaying ability: heavy rain resembling blood on the hay, but ‘that which Þórgunna spread did not dry, nor did her rake’, explained as an omen of death.²² Her foresight manifests further in the wish to be buried at Skálholt, the seat of the first Icelandic bishop. Several revenants like her are just described as having risen on their feet, e.g. Sigríðr from *Eiríks saga rauða* is said to ‘want to carry herself’²³, reinforcing the idea of an incomplete separation from the living. When Þóroddr’s men, who carry the coffin, are refused hospitality, this triggers her return:

‘When the corpse-bearers learnt about it, they went to see for themselves what was happening. The woman was Þórgunna, and everyone thought it was best to let her be. When she had finished what she wanted, she brought food in the stove-room. Then she set the table and carried the food’.²⁴

Her nakedness suggests a state closer to the elements, yet it can also be interpreted as the body prepared for Christian burial, either case suggesting a liminal state. Þórgunna shares some elements present in other *aptrgangr* stories - social awkwardness, noticeable physical characteristics, a certain selfishness about her goods. ‘Though you may find little remarkable about me, I believe it will be of no use if you betray what I tell you’²⁵ - these clothes would later partially be linked to the hauntings of Froða, when a company of drowned men refuse to leave the household in the context of a vampiric epidemic affecting the whole farm. The episode acts as an enabler for Kjartan’s character pointing out his ability to deal with ghosts, moreover his integration in society. Kjartan originates from a forbidden relationship that the relatives of his mother reject, thus giving him an undetermined status that he overcomes when he banishes the undead with the help of his kinsmen, Christian rituals and law (Kanerva, 2013, p. 114). Similarly, in 12th–14th century France and England, the use of absolution scrolls, while

²² ‘þornnaði blóðit skjótt á heyvinu öllu öðru en því, er þórgunna þurrkaði; þat þornnaði eigi, ok aldri þornnaði hrífan, er hon hafði haldit á’. *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 140.

²³ ‘húsfreyja vildi færask á foetr’. *Eiríks saga Rauða*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, *Íslensk Fornrit* 4 (Reykjavík: Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1935), p. 215.

²⁴ ‘En er líkmenn vissu þetta, fóru þeir til ok sá, hversu háttat var; þar var þórgunna komin, ok sýndisk þat ráð qllum, at fara eigi til með henni. Ok er hon hafði þar unnit slíkt er hon vildi, þa bar hon mat í stofu. Eptir þat setti hon borð ok bar þar á mat’. *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 142.

²⁵ ‘þó at yðr þykki fátt merkiligt um mik, at ek get lítt duga munu af því at bregða, sem ek segi fyrir’ *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 141.

not formal trials, represent interventions by religious authorities to manage and dispel unwanted supernatural presences (Caciola, 2016, p. 218).

Þórgunna's humanity and social agency become visible when her uneasy presence terrifies but her main purpose is to feed her bearers. The positive values carried by meal-sharing and hospitality place her within normality and turn her into a mediator between the human and the paranormal (Maraschi, 2020, pp.55-56). The seal-headed creature responsible for drowning Þóroddr and his men may not be Þórgunna due to her burial on consecrated ground, yet an interpretation linked to the realm of the dead fits the picture. The seal trying to seize the bedclothes may indeed be her 'will that is expressed towards the living' (Kanerva, 2011, p. 32), even a potentially materialised *fylgja* dwelling on after death. The undead carries a moral message and triggers the restoration of social order in this episode, with the farmer eventually offering hospitality. A deeper concern involves the threat of her Christian burial being disturbed. Þórgunna's monstrosity boils down to a cipher on how to behave properly, also suggested by her insistence on burning her belongings – a breach with the pagan past when they could have functioned as grave goods. Her story illustrates the notion of social death inverted: though biologically dead, she insists on the continuity of her dignity, burial wishes, and social authority.

The other revenants show passive demeanour, but disregarding Þórgunna's instructions leads to social and economic upheaval: killings and the loss of wealth. After shepherd buried in Christian fashion still causes a contamination and the leader of the household drowns, the undead sit around the fire, trying to occupy the space of the living, *Nachholen* in Hasenfratz's terms. The fear of the physical corpse parallels the fear of social pestilence (Gordon, 2020, p. 14). Thus, the boundaries between worlds have become too fluid and the consequential action shows that law, society and religion are interwoven, with Christianity providing the final layer. Their eviction occurs due to the undead's acknowledgement of their otherworldliness and their commitment to Icelandic law even in death (although we do not know the exact legal procedure). The undead draw attention to the perceived social order and they remain a useful motif in Christian context as 'epistemic proof' (Caciola, 2016, p. 131) for the physical resurrection. Moreover, communal ties still operate after death, and the undead still perform daily activities.

As Lisa Bennett notices, Icelanders ‘were concerned with remembering their early Christian ancestors as following Christian rituals’ (2014, p. 42), so the stories dealing with the transition present a tension in the way the characters’ social and religious identity is framed. A further example of less violent undead can be found with Þorsteinn svartr’s wife, under two different names, Sigríðr and Grímhildr, in *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grænlandinga saga* respectively. In *Grænlandinga saga* the pair likely identified as non-Christian, as stated by Þorstein himself²⁶, and similarly to Þórgunna, the woman is described as ‘extraordinarily powerful and strong like men’²⁷, aspects which signal a potential transgression. After dying of an unnamed contamination, she starts moving, ‘propped herself up on her elbow kicking her feet off the bedside and reaching for her shoes.’²⁸ The cessation of the haunting after being put in a coffin suggests a Christian domestication of the revenant showing an unresolved but harmless otherness expressed through a potentially pagan vestige. In *Gísla saga Súrssonar* ‘hell-shoes’ are mentioned at Vésteinn’s funeral, which need to be tied up to enable the dead to reach Valhöll²⁹. Such a detail potentially fits into the broader spectrum of heathen representations in Icelandic literature: Grímhildr briefly returns for grave-goods with which she was not provided.

Eiríks saga rauða’s version mentions her as Sigríðr in the context of a collective death due to illness, which she foresees through a vision. As an undead character she is after companionship, according to a dying Þorstein Eiríksson: ‘...the lady of the house wanted to walk and under the sheets next to him, and when he came in, she was up on the bedstead.’³⁰ A violent strike with the axe in her chest prevents her haunting. The erotic undertone may express a paganesque motif: consider the romantic episode between the Völsung hero Helgi and the valkyrja Sváfa in the Eddic poem *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*. However, such events can occur within the broader context of revenant episodes from medieval Europe that take place within a Christian context too. According to William of Newburgh, the corpse of the priest

²⁶ *Grænlandinga saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson & Matthías Þórðarson, *Íslensk Fornrit* 4 (Reykjavík: Íslenska Fornritafélag 1935), pp. 257-258.

²⁷ *Grænlandinga saga*, p. 258.

²⁸ ‘Því at nú örglask hon upp við ölnboga ok þokkar fótum sínum frá stokki ok þreifar til skúa sinna’. *Grænlandinga saga*, p. 259.

²⁹ See Gísli Sursson’s *saga*, transl. by Martin Regal, *Sagas of the Icelanders. A selection* (London: Penguin Books, 2005).

³⁰ *Eiríks saga rauða*, p. 215

from Melrose was said to have hovered nightly around the bedchambers of his former mistress, emitting loud groans (Gordon, 2020, p. 202). Monstrosity would then be expressed through questionable behaviour and corporeal attachment. These examples from the *Vinland sagas*, however, point towards a domestication of undead who engage less conflictually with the living than the previous cases. Not only does their appearance remain human, but they still partake in the human world and are very capable of interacting with it.

Christianity does not prevent one from becoming a revenant, yet the disruptive undead discussed above contrast significantly with characters like Þorsteinn, dead shortly after the disposal of Grímhild's body in *Grænlandinga saga*. His return also contrasts to that of Grímhildr/Sigríðr, characterized by calm demeanour and prophetic speech. Þorsteinn's return serves a clear purpose: to offer comfort to his widow, Guðriðr, and to convey a prophecy that solidifies her future status. This narrative choice suggests that Christian figures, even in death, are afforded a level of dignity and purpose denied to their pre-Christian counterparts: he is 'eager to tell Guðriðr his farewell, so that she can better understand my passing, for I have arrived in a good place.'³¹ The contrast between these revenants underscores the narrative's broader ideological agenda. The peaceful, prophetic return of Christian undead like Þorstein, described as a marvel, often serves to enforce Christian values, positioning them as superior to the chaotic returns of their pagan predecessors who functioned as 'temporal markers' (Bildhauer, Mills, 2003, p. 11). Þorsteinn's concern with his proper burial and his prophecy for Guðriðr highlight the Christian emphasis on salvation and the proper observance of religious rites, setting him apart from figures like Glámr, whose monstrosity is rooted in their rejection of such norms.

In *Eiríks saga rauða*, 'God wants that this moment be given to me for permission and amendment of my council'³², as Þorsteinn holds a slightly longer speech where he decries the improper burial customs in Greenland 'is no proper custom that men are buried in unconsecrated earth with few funeral services'³³. He wants that he and his people be taken to church but excludes Garðarr who caused the contamination, insisting on his cremation.

³¹ 'Mér er annt til þess, at segja Guðriði forlög sín, til þess at hon kunni þá betr andláti mínu því at ek em kominn til góðra hvíldastað'. *Grænlandinga saga*, p. 259

³² 'Guð vill, at þesi stund sé mér gefin til leyfis ok umbótar míns ráðs'. *Eiríks saga rauða*, p. 215.

³³ 'Í óvígða mold við litla yfirsöngva'. *Eiríks saga rauða*, p. 216

Porstein's social role thus refers to the enforcement of the appropriate norms. The Augustinian John Mirk, in his sermons, similarly stressed the spiritual importance of proper deathbed rituals but also the potential for demonic influence on the unsanctified corpse (Gordon, 2020, p. 138), a motif generally avoided in saga literature. Porsteinn's second purpose refers to the vision for his widow about her great destiny, providing assurance by expressing his will and blessing. In addition, the advice that she should financially support the church, and the poor serves as a tool for proper religious behaviour.

Unlike the heathen *aptrgangi*³⁴ inspiring fear and distress, the 'domesticated' revenant seems to belong to a conversion narrative where Christian revenants occupy a space much lower on the alterity scale. The revenant functions as an enforcer of the new identity when he states 'blessed are those who keep their faith, help and mercy to those who follow'³⁵, yet people generally follow it poorly. Porsteinn's return can relate to the salvation of his soul, and we can imagine him in purgatory. Contradictory attitudes endured in the 13th century: the increasing consensus about demons inhabiting dead bodies did not dispel the belief that souls could re-enter the body (Gordon, 2020, p. 123). Spiritual elevation can be achieved through Christianity, meaning the question of monstrosity is complicated by the dead's renegotiation of his social and religious status.

That Porsteinn awakens the moment his wife receives attention from another man suggests an erotic attachment. It indicates that in both versions Guðrið's dead husband 'is exercising his authority over his wife' (Kanerva, 2013, p. 123). However, the jealous undead does not cause any harm: instead, it serves as a final assertion of his authority and an opportunity to guide Guðrið towards her future, underlining the idea that the revenant, even when expressing human emotions, ultimately act in service of a higher moral order. These episodes suggest the transformation of societal values, where the monstrous is not eradicated but reconfigured to serve the needs of a Christianized society e.g. as a divine messenger (Bildhauer, Mills, 2008, p. 14). These harmless and helpful revenants are evolving towards the more ethereal presence from the *samtíðarsögur*, where the dead in dreams still acted as moral judges, 'but the focus of their attention often shifted from collective to individual responsibility

³⁴ Njáls saga's Gunnar seems to play the part of the noble heathen here.

³⁵ 'þeir menn væri sælir, er trúna heldu, ok henni fylgði qll hjálp ok miskunn'. *Eiríks saga rauða*, p. 216

for moral transgressions' (Kanerva, 2022, p. 218). In other words, the experience of interacting with the dead becomes more personal.

Interrupted revenants

One further example of a domesticated revenant – barely becoming one – is that of Styrr from *Heiðarvíga saga*, *Víga-Styrr*. His troublesome nature and severe death make his son-in-law suspicious from the start. The day he slays him, Gestr receives an omen, a few droplets of blood on his axe when he is sharpening it, which his sister interprets as falling into a 'suitable place.'³⁶ The spot would turn out to be Styrr's head. During Snorri's journey with the corpse, it seems to have been dragged down and 'woken up towards the head'³⁷. When one of the farmer's daughters sees Styrr sitting up and 'reciting a verse'³⁸, she displays erratic behaviour: 'she reacts so violently that she opens her mouth wide and leaps into Snorri's embrace, men come on foot to hold her, she is so exhausted that four manage to hold her, she never ceases to scream and struggle until dawn, then she dies.'³⁹

When the horse starts acting erratically as well, they stop and improvise a grave, yet in spring Snorri returns to collect it and bury Styrr in the church he had built. Despite the troublesome effects, Styrr does not actively haunt, and no confrontations take place. The Christian element seems to neutralise the violent behaviour of the character during his lifetime, significantly, this occurs before his proper burial. His revenant activity is confined to speaking in verse, which can be considered a method of clinging to the human sphere. We can thus notice how such themes are Christianized and employed for moral content –the tale is cautionary about proper behaviour and the dangers of disobeying, as the girl disregards the warnings and considers the corpse a sheer object of curiosity. Madness befalls only the disobedient daughter, with the revenant functioning as a social instrument penalizing questionable deeds.

³⁶ 'kœmi niðr í makligum stað', *Heiðarvíga saga*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal & Guðni Jónsson, *Íslensk Fornrit 3* (Reykjavík: Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1938), p. 232.

³⁷ 'vöknat til höfuðsins', *Heiðarvíga saga*, p. 233.

³⁸ 'kveða vísu', *Heiðarvíga saga*, p. 234.

³⁹ 'En þegar hon heyrir vísuna, bregðr henni svá við, at hon æpir hástöfum ok hleypr í fang Snorra; koma menn a fœtr ok halda henni; er hon þá svá ær, at fjórir hafa fullt í fangi at halda henni; linnti hon aldri af ópi ok umbrotum alla nóttina, þar til undir dag, þá deyr hon'. *Heiðarvíga saga*, p. 234.

Potential transformation can also be prevented: if we look at the case of Skarpheðinn Njálsson, he is sometimes excluded from activities for fear of disruption e.g. when goading Gunnar's horse in a fight⁴⁰. His taunts may also have decisively provoked Flósi during proceedings to bring about the burning of Njáll's homestead. Skarpheðinn gradually becomes more violent and has difficulties controlling his temper, problematic traits in a community sanctioning compromise and arbitration. When Ásgrímur and Kári look for support over the slaying of Höskuldr, the chieftains enquire about his personality and notice his lucklessness and almost troll-like features.⁴¹ Furthermore, confusion arises about his identity, with the chieftains also noticing the contradiction between his reputation and odd appearance. His constant use of insults points out a reluctance toward societal conventions, culminating in the encounter with Þorkell hákr, whom he violently threatens despite Þorkell being a monster-slayer. His reactions suggest a link to monstrosity – Skarpheðinn shows signs of breaking the boundaries of acceptability and becomes a good candidate for the haunting dead. Long after the burning of the farm, he is heard uttering a verse directed at his killers⁴², however, tensions fade away unexpectedly upon noticing his corpse – despite the ominous wide-open eyes, he had arranged his arms into a cross and burnt two crosses on his chest and between his shoulders.

Taking note of his conversion, the men concluded they had no reason to fear a dead Skarpheðinn⁴³. The story implies the Skarpheðinn's revenant potential, but the painful act of making the Christian cross visible on his body redeems him. The example highlights the significance of the new religion's place in the fabric of social interaction including how monsters are perceived. In a way, the character's transformation reflects on a personal level the conversion narrative from the Alþingi for the sake of peace-making. Violent retaliations do continue after his death, carried out in his name, but so do the interventions to achieve social balance.

The diversity of revenants and their occasional contradictory behaviours presented here pinpoints the elusive nature of the monster, although some patterns do emerge. Highly

⁴⁰ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Sveinsson, *Íslensk Fornrit* 12 (Reykjavík: Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1936), p. 59.

⁴¹ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, pp. 107-158.

⁴² *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 130.

⁴³ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 343.

significant remains the cultural gaze which ‘demands a system allowing mixed response’ (Cohen, 1996, p. 7). They fall outside of human boundaries, yet they maintain a certain social agency after dying, as they attempt to participate in the world of the living, and in some cases even act as if they are not aware they are deceased, such as Sigríðr/Grímhildr and Þórgunna. The influence of Christian spirituality on identity seems decisive as a prerequisite for the more benevolent behaviour of the undead.

Conclusion: monster mash

To conclude, the materiality of the *aptrgöngur* provides a resource for their vitality, an essential aspect of their transgressive nature that directly challenges both natural and social laws. Their interactions with the living – whether through violent acts, material desires, or lingering attachments – demonstrate their capacity to disrupt the physical, psychological, and economic stability of communities. Yet, the undead complicate the boundaries between life and death, or human and non-human, because they persist as hybrids and refuse to fully sever their ties with the human world. These characters remain entangled in the lives of the community or certain individuals in various ways, forcing a renegotiation of status and agency for both themselves and those involved. Hrappr’s burial in the kitchen doorway, asserting his will to dwell in that social structure and be remembered as a powerful presence starkly illustrates his liminality and ability to ‘police’ a territory he should have left. The dead’s post-mortem social agency is reflected in the reciprocal relationship between the living and the dead – the case of Þórólfr and Arnkell, Kárr and Þórfinnr, Þórgunna and her corpse bearers, Þorstein and Guðrið.

The monster can be tamed if integrated into a more Christian framework. In this sense they are part of a larger medieval preoccupation with death and its forms, as the dead also partake in delivering otherworldly messages like prophecies or imparting advice. This domestication, however, does not exclude general unease and common traits with the criminal undead. Each appearance has its uniqueness, linked by the common thread of hybridity. The range of *aptrgöngur* is broad, from the vile Glámr to the harmless Þorsteinn, and dealt with in different ways according to their level of disruptiveness. The violent characters are constructed as alien elements before their death, while the more peaceful revenants tend to adhere to social and religious codes, yet the different degrees of otherness manifest in their

performance and interactions. Regardless, they defy expectation, not giving up their lives or properties and refusing to let others take their place. Their existence is ‘a kind of selfishness’ (Jakobsson, 2011, p. 87) irreverent to natural limitations and socio-economic laws, yet a parallel can be drawn to the living in the reluctance to allow survivors to assume control.

The revenants of the *Íslendingasögur* signify monstrosity as disruption, but they also manifest their efficacy after death. Like the figures analysed by Caciola (2016), they emerge from ‘bad deaths’ that fracture the communal fabric, and their return can be read as an attempt—violent or otherwise—to reinsert themselves into that fabric. The sagas reveal a particularly Icelandic adaptation of this pan-European repertoire: revenants are embedded in feud, kinship, and property disputes, refusing the ‘social death’ expected of the biologically dead or problematic members of society. Christianized revenants complicate this picture with their prophetic, reconciliatory, or even protective allure, showing a reconfiguration of the undead’s role in society. The different modes of dealing with and remembering the dead range from characters framed as socially questionable or dying the severe death, whose return poses existential threats, to characters framed more like a moral commentary. This can be explained through the contextual framework: when family sagas approach the period of religious transformation, deviant characters labelled heathen express the challenge of integrating the ancient past over the 13th-14th century present and the power of its memory, unlike the ‘tamed’ characters whose actions rather maintained social order. While this article offered an overview of undead encounters, future studies could concentrate on a more detailed reading of particular cases while integrating the framework of cultural memory. The relationship between Icelandic and continental revenant traditions also requires further investigation. By highlighting the persistence of social agency and the Christian transformation of its expression, these narratives provoke us to reconsider medieval monstrosity as a spectrum of continued and vivid entanglement within the living community.

This enduring connection to humanity compels us to reconsider monsters as reflections of our negotiated individual and collective identities.

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