

“They Accuse Us of Being Descended from Slaves”

Settlement History,
Cultural Syncretism,
and the Foundation of
Medieval Icelandic Identity

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1. INTRODUCTION

On most modern maps of the world, Iceland appears as a skewed blob stowed away in the North Atlantic Ocean. It is easily overlooked or forgotten. Look at a globe, however, and the view changes: Iceland is revealed to be the northwest vertex of an invisible triangle cornered by southern Norway and western Ireland, encompassing Great Britain and its multitude of islands. This area was extremely active in the early medieval period, including the celebrated Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain, the Irish invasion of Pictland to form the cross-insular Kingdom of Dál Ríata, and the infamous Viking raids on Lindisfarne and other monasteries. This period and region has a dearth of surviving documents and archaeological evidence which can be intimidating to a modern historian, but by no means should the events be ignored or underestimated.

Iceland was settled around the year 870 CE by successive waves of settlers in a sixty-year period until all arable land had been claimed. No traceable migrations occurred before or after this colonization of the ninth and tenth century, right up to the present day. Modern Icelanders are genetically and ethnically the direct descendants of the original settlers. While Iceland is just as modern as any other country, its natives have a linear relationship with their ancestors and thus a sense of timelessness pervades the definition of Icelandic identity. From the creation of the Icelandic nation with the founding of the Alþing in 930 CE, until Iceland lost its independence to the Norwegian crown in 1262, and in many ways right through to the modern period, the nature of being an Icelander has changed little. The celebrated Icelandic author Magnus Magnusson wrote about the country, “However lonely the landscapes, they are peopled by the constant present of the past.”¹

¹ Magnus Magnusson, *Iceland Saga* (1987; repr., Stroud, Gloucester: Tempus Publishing Limited, 2005), 51.

This thesis deals with the foundation of Icelandic identity in the early medieval vernacular literature of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries. When faced with the loss of national autonomy, Icelanders sought to preserve and embellish their past by partly composing and partly recording historical texts and prose narratives collectively termed *sagas*. The medieval authors wrote of a predominantly Norwegian population, almost entirely heathen in character until the Conversion in 999/1000, with both men and women of high regard involved in the settlement. This identity survived unchallenged for centuries and served many generations of Icelanders well. Then modern genetic study became precise enough to destroy this identity of early medieval origin.

There have been suspicions for decades that Icelanders, ethnically speaking, were not just transplanted Norwegians. Preliminary studies of physical demarcations such as head shapes and blood type have suggested that Icelanders are not similar to Norwegians, but none of these have been convincing enough to go against the centuries of belief in a primarily Norwegian origin. The history of the study of Icelandic heredity is detailed in the following chapter on ethnicity.

Modern genetics has advanced to the point that ancestral homeland can be determined by a simple swab test. Two natural genetic markers exist in the human body: the Y-chromosome for male ancestors and mitochondrial DNA for female ancestors. These experience mutations in a predictable way, and painstaking research has identified genetic groups' homelands based on the type and number of mutations in these markers. The Y-chromosome is handed from father to son in an unbroken line, while mDNA is passed from mother to child intact. While men have both mDNA and Y-chromosomes, they do not pass on the mDNA, making it a sign of their mother's ancestry alone.²

² For more information, see any works by Bryan Sykes, particularly *Saxons, Vikings, and Celts: The Genetic Roots of Britain and Ireland* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).

In 2000 and 2001, Agnar Helgason and other geneticists analyzed the Y-chromosomes of 181 modern Icelandic men and the mDNA of 401 Icelandic women. The results were decisive and extraordinary. While 80 percent of Icelandic men studied bore a Y-chromosome of Norwegian origin, 20 percent had one of Irish or Scottish origin. Even more astounding, only 37 percent of the Icelandic women carried mDNA of Norwegian origin; the remaining 63 percent bore Irish or Scottish-origin mDNA.³ Not only was approximately forty percent of the settlement population from Ireland or Scotland, but a *majority* of Icelandic women came from outside of Norway!

To put this extraordinary discovery into perspective it is appropriate to include a brief history of the North Atlantic during the ninth century. This was the dreaded Viking Age, when Danes invaded northern England and Scandinavian pirates ransacked monasteries and other rich, vulnerable targets up and down the coasts of Ireland, the British Isles, and northern continental Europe. The Anglo-Saxons and other Germanic tribes had settled England and were to hold it for several centuries more; the ancestors of the Normans were just beginning to settle in northern France. The powerful Uí Néill clan of northern Ireland expanded across the sea to form a great cross-insular kingdom called the Dál Ríata. Confusingly, the medieval term for the Irish was *Scotti*, leading to the portion of Dál Ríata outside of Ireland being known as *Scotland*, Land of the Irish. The language spoken across Ireland and the Dál Ríata was Old Gaelic, and so to avoid confusion, within this thesis all people from Ireland or Scotland will be referred to as “Gaelic” or “Gaels”.

³ Agnar Helgason et al., “Estimating Scandinavian and Gaelic Ancestry in the Male Settlers of Iceland,” *American Journal of Human Genetics* 67, no. 3 (2000): 697–717, and Agnar Helgason et al., “mtDNA and the Islands of the North Atlantic: Estimating the Proportions of Norse and Gaelic Ancestry,” *American Journal of Human Genetics* 68, no. 3 (2001): 723–737.

It is not known who the very first person to sight Iceland was, but there is some evidence that Romans may have run into it, and all but factually accepted that Gaelic hermits were living there before the Scandinavian settlers arrived. Lands matching Iceland's description – its day length oddities, position in the north Atlantic, and proximity to the ice-locked sea most notable – have appeared in texts from before the Common Era to texts from Charlemagne's court.⁴ Iceland's identification and position as a definite island came in the ninth century. It was not long before many Norwegians from Norway and the British Isles chose Iceland as their refuge from the unification scheme of King Harald Finehair, who gained sole leadership over Norway and then expanded into the British Isles, creating many enemies and exiles as he went. King Harald was only partially responsible, however. "The settlement of Iceland was only one part of the vast Scandinavian expansion which lasted from the beginning of the Viking Age until the end of the colonization of Greenland."⁵

Iceland was considered the end of the known world at the time of its discovery, but this did not last for long. Explorers traveled from Iceland to Greenland and further into modern-day Canada. This was the fabled Vínland, the existence of which was proven by the modern archaeological discovery of Norse-style houses in L'Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland. At one point around the turn of the first millennium, the Norse language spoken by Icelanders was spoken across the known Western world, from modern-day Newfoundland to Istanbul, Turkey and further west into Russia. Iceland was no cultural backwater or dead-end colony for its first half-century of settlement, despite its ignominious position on a modern map.

⁴ Jón Jóhannesson, *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth: Íslendinga Saga*, trans. Haraldur Bessason, vol. 2 of *University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies* (1974; repr., Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2006), 1-5.

⁵ Jóhannesson, *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth*, 27.

The country of Iceland is more famous today for its geothermal energy and its financial turbulence than for its history. Yet its early history is fascinating and unique among the nations of Europe, for its written record reaches back to the land's very first inhabitants. Iceland has no pre-history; its settlers did not drive out an indigenous population and there are no Icelandic creation myths stretching back through the mists of time. With the settlement of Iceland, humans had colonized all major inhabitable landmasses on the planet.

This is not to say, however, that Iceland's history is unbiased and factually correct. The history of Iceland describes it as a Norwegian colony made up of exiles from King Haraldr Finehair's unification of Norway and his expansion into the British Isles. Until very recently this has been taken as literal fact, but new evidence has emerged that the settlement was not as straightforward as this. The oldest text on Icelandic history is the *Íslendingabók* ("Little Book of Icelanders"), a "severely concise summary of the important milestones in Iceland's history" composed in the early twelfth century by the historian Ari *froði* ("The Learned").⁶

Íslendingabók was composed just a few centuries after the Age of Settlement, and because of this temporal proximity it has been mostly assumed that the early medieval Icelandic literature was more historical fact than fictive historiographical propaganda. But Iceland was first settled around 874 CE, and its first national proto-government was formed in 930. Widespread literacy arrived with Christianity around 1000. If *Íslendingabók* was written in 1120, it is being trusted to accurately record events almost two hundred years distant, during which time most of the country was illiterate. This would be comparable to a book written in 1966 about the founding of the United States government, without the benefit of document analysis or any kind of national education system which supports modern historical fact.

⁶ Ibid., 201.

The tenacity of oral memory should not be underestimated. The study of artifacts in Iceland, and throughout the world, can often be found to correspond with oral traditions. However, it is not necessary to accept *Íslendingabók* literally. The progeny of *Íslendingabók* was *Landnámabók* (“Book of Settlements”, abbreviated *Landnám*), a thirteenth-century historical text of admirable length and quality that serves as a major primary source for this paper. *Landnám* presents another straightforward account of the Settlement and serves alongside *Íslendingabók* as the foundation of Icelandic history.

Icelanders had a very good reason to record a voluminous account of their history. Feuds and the breakdown of an already fragile national government in the thirteenth century led to Iceland’s loss of independence to the Norwegian crown in 1262. While *Landnám* was composed before this, possibly existing in a proto-form as early as the twelfth century, the nationalistic spirit demanded an honorable and trustworthy documentation of Icelandic history. Iceland became concerned about its identity in the face of losing it to Norway. The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were the time of the famous Icelandic saga, or long prose oral narrative in the vernacular. The sagas were believed to be true at the time of their recording, and while their historical worth for the period *depicted* is debatable, as a product of their period of *composition* they are invaluable.

The basic dilemma and simultaneous motivation of history is that documents reflect what the people who *wrote* them thought and believed. Whether factually true or wholly false, primary source documents preserve their authors’ contemporary worldviews, longstanding opinions, and fervent beliefs. Generally speaking, primary source documents that record believable events are accepted as mostly accurate until evidence from elsewhere upsets the status quo. This evidence can come from disciplines such as linguistics, archaeology, or in this case, modern genetics.

Four sagas and *Landnám* serve as the primary source documents for this thesis. The sagas are *Egil's Saga*, the *Vínland Sagas* (*Saga of the Greenlanders* and *Eirik the Red's Saga*), *Laxdæla Saga*, and *Njal's Saga*. They are all from the thirteenth century, roughly contemporary with *Landnám*, and are famous and beloved among the Icelandic sagas. As such, they are windows into the thirteenth-century mindset. Despite the genetic “fact” of a significant Gaelic presence in Iceland, this has been downplayed or negated in the literature of an Iceland motivated by external pressures to form, cherish, and sustain a national identity. As what did Icelanders remember their ancestors? The analysis of thirteenth-century authors' depiction of their ancestors reveals their prejudices, opinions, and approval or condemnation for the events and dialogue believed to have unfolded centuries earlier.

The character of figures in the thirteenth-century sagas and *Landnám* are a kind of code for the authors' opinion of them. If every Hebridean is boorish and violent, it is safe to assume that the author feels that way about all or most Hebrideans, whether historical or contemporary. If protagonists practice witchcraft, then the author and his audience condone the use of pre-Christian religious customs – maybe not in a literal, contemporary sense, but they are unapologetic for the action of their ancestors who have contributed to their own Icelandic medieval identity.

We now know from genetics that the early historians and saga scribe-cum-composers told inaccuracies, intentionally or inadvertently, about the composition of early Icelandic society. The number of Gaels was greatly reduced in the literature. This means that when a Gael *does* appear in the sagas or *Landnám*, great attention must be paid to his or her attributes, dialogue, and actions, as the character inherently becomes an avatar for Gaels in the authors' minds. What did

thirteenth-century Icelanders believe about the Gaels who made up a significant proportion of their country's settlement population, and why were they forgotten about in Icelandic history?

With a greater proportion of Gaels involved in the settlement than previously believed, three very important aspects of identity in early and medieval Iceland are affected. They are ethnicity, gender, and religion, which form the three main chapters of this thesis. The first two attributes, for the sake of argument, are unchanging from birth and integral to identity. If the ethnicity of a saga figure or historical person is not Norwegian, it is pointed out as a defining characteristic.

Gender and the roles associated with it – the division of labor, appropriate and inappropriate tasks for either gender, agency, and so on – is an extremely important issue for considering early Icelandic society. With a *majority* of Icelandic women of Gaelic descent, Norwegian women were in the minority and society must have been profoundly affected by this imbalance. It was not a case of Norwegian men and women packing up their gender roles and taking them whole to Iceland. Rather, Norwegian men and Gaelic women had to define their duties and responsibilities *ad hoc* as they embodied an intersection of two distinct cultures. It has been suggested that Icelanders were able to play with gender norms in a new, unregulated land, but it appears in the sagas that Icelandic men and women underwent the traditional division of labor found in cultures worldwide: the feminine, domestic, internal sphere and the masculine domain of externality.

Unlike gender and ethnicity, religion can be altered by the individual, and concerning this era of Icelandic history it happens frequently that a character converts from heathenism to Christianity, or takes Christian baptism and “reverts” or “lapses” into heathenism. At first glance religion may seem like a moot identity issue when dealing with the transmission of Gaels at

settlement to the memory in thirteenth-century literature. Ireland was Christian at the time of the Viking raids and because Iceland was heathen for its first 120 years it seems as if the Gaelic influence on the shape of Icelandic religion either before or after the Conversion would be minimal. However, in many ways the Gaelic impression on Icelandic mythology was profound.

As will be shown in the chapter on religion, Christian Gaels earned respect from their masters and neighbors long before the Conversion and Gaels also make up a considerable proportion of Icelandic sorcerers. Gísli Sigurðsson's *Gaelic Influence in Iceland* (2000) systematically studies how Irish pagan motifs entered and fused with Norse mythology as recorded in Icelandic mythological treatises. He and others before him found these motifs without benefit of proof that there were enough Gaels in Iceland to have such an effect on mythology. Of all the ways the Gaels influenced Icelandic society, the Gaelic religious contribution will be shown to be the most valuable and far-reaching.

II. ETHNICITY IN EARLY MEDIEVAL ICELANDIC LITERATURE

It is often said that writing about the settlements is irrelevant learning, but we think we can all the better meet the criticisms of foreigners when they accuse us of being descended from slaves or scoundrels, if we know for certain the truth about our ancestry. ...Anyway, all civilized nations want to know about the origins of their own society and the beginnings of their own race.

Epilogue from the Þórðarbók *Landnámabók*¹

In Copenhagen in 1939, Barði Guðmundsson presented a paper called “The Origin of the Icelanders” to the annual Congress of Scandinavists. He argued that the general belief of Iceland’s origins as a purely Norwegian colony were false, and colored by the modern interpretation of early Icelandic written history. Icelandic historians recalled that most Icelanders had come from Norway, but Guðmundsson reminded the audience of the Scandinavian political upheavals that had put Danes, Swedes, Sámi, and other northern Europeans into Norwegian lands.² The paper was as startling then as it is taken for granted now and began the modern discussion of the ethnic factors surrounding the settlement of Iceland.

Early anthropologists attempted to uncover Iceland’s ethnic origins by the use of funerary skull shapes and measurements, the forerunner of modern genetic studies. From the beginning, the results were unexpected, but not conclusive enough to dramatically alter Icelandic studies. “The Icelanders had an index for medium ‘long-heads’ (dolichocephalics); also, a low cranium seemed to be a common feature among them. The Scandinavians were also medium ‘long-heads’ but with high crania”.³ Jón Steffenson, Professor of Medicine at the University of Iceland,

¹ Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, trans., *Landnámabók*, vol. 1 of *University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1972), 6.

² Barði Guðmundsson, and Lee M. Hollander, trans., *The Origin of the Icelanders* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967).

³ Jón Jóhannesson, *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth: Íslendinga Saga*, trans. Haraldur Bessason, vol. 2 of *University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies* (1974; repr., Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2006), 21.

explained this discrepancy by a difference in funerary custom, causing a certain more common class of person to be cremated in Norway but buried in Iceland.⁴

The next development in genetic studies was the use of the blood-group as an ethnic marker. Unlike hair color, skin tone, skull shape, or a hundred other physical markers, blood-group type is distinctive, unchanging, and inherited directly from parent to child. The study of blood group in Iceland revealed the first hints that there were a lot more Irish involved in the settlement than previously thought. The proportions of A, B, and O blood-groups in modern Iceland are distinctive from Norway, most notably a greater proportion of O to A, while Icelandic and Irish blood-groups have almost precisely the same proportions. Arthur Mourant, in his enormous 1976 *The Distribution of the Human Blood Groups* rationalized this by suggesting that O blood-group has a sort of wanderlust that prompted O Norwegians to migrate while A Norwegians remained at home.⁵

Geneticists, and historians, waited anxiously for a more definitive method to determine ethnic origin. Scholars familiar with both Icelandic and Irish sagas had noticed many similarities between the medieval prose narratives and suggested a cultural relationship. This was denied by sneering scholars who took medieval Icelandic literature literally and believed Iceland to be a near-completely Norwegian settlement. “The Irish hypothesis has not been revived”, wrote Theodore M. Andersson in 1964.⁶ A landmark Icelandic history book published in 1974 wrote:

“...it is still important to determine how great a proportion of the settlers came from the Norse colonies in the British Isles. It is logical to assume that during the earliest period the influences of Celtic culture and the racial intermingling of Celtic and Norse elements was

⁴ Jón Steffenson, *Samtið og saga* (Reykjavík, 1941-1951), 5:28-59, 112-22, 3:271-293, quoted in Jóhannesson, 21.

⁵ Bryan Sykes, *Saxons, Vikings, and Celts: The Genetic Roots of Britain and Ireland* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2006), 85-9.

⁶ Theodore M. Andersson, *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1964) 60.

in direct proportion to the number of immigrants from those colonies.”⁷

Indeed, the “Irish hypothesis” lay dormant until 1988, when Gísli Sigurðsson, an Icelandic student at the National University of Ireland, wrote his master’s thesis on Irish and Scottish words, stories, and settlers who appeared in medieval Icelandic literature. This was published as *The Gaelic Influence in Iceland*.⁸ While not so remarkable upon its publication, *Gaelic Influence* has enjoyed increased popularity and weight after Agnar Helgason’s outstanding genetic studies discussed in the introductory chapter.

We know through these modern genetic studies that there were many more Irish, and thus many less Norwegians, involved in the settlement of Iceland than previously thought. The majority of figures in the sagas, and settlers and descendents in the *Landnám*, are of Norwegian descent or inferred to be so by their names and lack of further identification. But not a small number of figures and settlers are identified as coming from outside of Norway, or inferred to be from their names or attributes.

When reading the Sagas of Icelanders, the question of their historicity always arises. Some argue that the sagas are pure fiction composed by an inspired scribe or group of oral narrative authors, while others contend that they were handed down, immaculate, from the time of the events described to their written form. The truth is somewhere in between. This thesis paper need not enter the debate; this is not about what happened during the formation of Iceland, but rather what early medieval Icelanders *thought* had happened. The actions and character of saga figures – warriors, foreigners, slave-women, and so on – demonstrate not what historical

⁷ Jóhannesson, 16.

⁸ Gísli Sigurðsson, *Gaelic Influence in Iceland: Historical and Literary Contacts, a Survey of Research* (1988, repr. Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2000).

people said and did, but rather contemporary, thirteenth-century Icelandic views of the people described.

The majority of the Irish who appear in the sagas and *Landnám* are slaves or freed slaves. By the genetic evidence it appears that the reverse of that is also true; when a slave appears in a saga they are more likely than not of Gaelic descent. This distinction is not hard and fast, but where a slave or freedman has a name that is apparently of Gaelic origin, they are included in this discussion.

Other ethnicities and countries of origin appear among the figures portrayed in the sagas and to a lesser degree *Landnám*. These are mentioned in this discussion as indicators of an even more ethnically diverse Icelandic culture than preciously though. The early medieval Icelanders did not remember or see their country as a little Norway in the middle of nowhere. The inclusion of residents and merchants from faraway places in the literature indicates that Iceland was no backwater at the time of composition and/or the setting of the narrative.

What did early medieval Icelanders believe about their non-Norwegian forebears? In the sagas, were they villains, heroes, background characters, stock types? Did people of a certain type of origin always behave a certain way (according to the opinions and memory of the author)? What kind of claims did non-Norwegian settlers make in *Landnám*, and what else were they remembered for?

Landnámabók

Landnám records that the very first inhabitants of Iceland were actually Irish. Known as *papar* by Norwegians,⁹ these were Irish holy men who pursued the *potior peregrinatio* and

⁹ Pálsson and Edwards, 15.

departed their country in flimsy boats to live as solitary hermits or drown in the attempt¹⁰. Irish sources write frequently of wandering monks who disappear into the Atlantic, and sometimes record the adventures of those who return. The most celebrated of the clerical voyage tales is the *Navigatio sancti Brendani Abbatis*, which details the circular journey of St. Brendan and his followers in what is presumably the north Atlantic. While the “accuracy” and purpose of the *Navigatio* and other voyage tales is debated,¹¹ the point for this thesis is that *Landnám* is very likely correct about the Icelandic *papar*.

The record does not state what happened to the *papar*, but it is generally assumed that they either departed voluntarily or were forcefully removed from Iceland when the newcomers arrived¹². Either way, it is extremely unlikely that the celibate men would contribute to the Icelandic genes, or that their austere way of life would leave much archaeological evidence. *Landnám* remarks that “people found Irish books, bells, croziers”¹³ but these items have not been found.¹⁴ There is no archaeological record of the *papar* anywhere in Iceland despite several islands bearing their name, for example Papey, Papós, and Papýli.¹⁵

The “first” settler of Iceland is an elusive title, though *Landnám* unambiguously designates one candidate named Ingólfur Arnarson. The first settlement took different people several attempts and it also depends on the reader’s definition of a settler. Various reports of classical, Irish, and Scandinavian sailors hinted at an uninhabited landmass to the northwest and by the mid-ninth century, adventurers actively sought the island. “A man called Gardar

¹⁰ John Carey, “The ethos of early Irish pilgrimage” (lecture, University College Cork, Ireland, January 10, 2008). See also J. Carney, “Review of *Navigatio sancti Brendani Abbatis*,” and Thrall, William Flint, “Clerical Sea Pilgrimages and the *Imrama*,” both in *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature*, ed. Jonathan M. Wooding, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000).

¹¹ Robert Powell, “St. Brendan” (lecture, University College Cork, Ireland, November 21, 2007).

¹² John Carey, “The Irish in the North Atlantic” (lecture, University College Cork, Ireland, February 21, 2008).

¹³ Pálsson and Edwards, 15.

¹⁴ Jóhansson, 7.

¹⁵ Magnus Magnusson, *Iceland Saga* (1987; repr., Stroud, Gloucester: Tempus Publishing Limited, 2005), 23.

Svafarsson, of Swedish stock” sailed around Iceland to ascertain that it was an island and then wintered there. “In the spring, after he’d put out to sea, a boat drifted away from his ship with a man called Nattfari aboard, and a slave and a bondswoman. Nattfari settled down there....Gardar sailed back to Norway”.¹⁶

[The modern city of] Reykjavík has always argued loftily that Nattfari does not count because he was left behind by accident and did not *intend* to settle. The people of Húsavík [Nattfari’s district] still resent this Reykjavík usurpation of the political honours from little brother up north. Indeed, in 1974, when the rest of the country held the official commemoration of the 1100th anniversary of Ingólfur Arnarson’s arrival, the good people of Húsavík had rather pointedly held their own commemorative celebrations four years earlier, in 1970.¹⁷

Nattfari is an unusual, but not immediately recognizable name, possibly Swedish in origin. The ethnicity of Nattfari, the slave, and the bondswoman is unknown but highly unlikely to be Norwegian. It is likely that there was an ethnic motive for the authors of *Landnám* to pass over the importance of these accidental settlers; Norway was considered the mother country of Iceland during the composition of *Landnám* and it just would not do to have foreigners receive the honor of being proclaimed the first settlers.

But this is not “whitewashed” history for two important reasons: the first is that the medieval authors do not explicitly invalidate Nattfari’s claim as modern Reykjavík residents do. The second is that, after all, Nattfari and his companions are recorded. Their memory survived for 200 years; people preserved their tale through oral tradition. Whether the historical Nattfari, slave and bondswoman actually existed, someone in eleventh-century Iceland believed that they did *and* that they preceded the celebrated Ingólf. Was it a descendant of Nattfari who kept his memory alive? An early Húsavík resident seeking political glory for his district?

¹⁶ Pálsson and Edwards, 17.

¹⁷ Magnusson, 53-4.

Keeping the motivations of *Landnám*'s authors in mind for later, let us now turn to the story of Ingólf Arnarson. Ingólf was the blood-brother of a man named Leif. When they decided to move permanently to Iceland,

“Leif went on a viking expedition to the west and plundered in Ireland. Once he found a large underground chamber there and went inside. It was dark until light started coming from a sword someone was holding. Leif killed the man and took the sword and a good deal of money besides. After this he was known as Hjorleif. He plundered all over Ireland and took a great deal of loot, including ten slaves called Dubthak, Geirraud, Skjaldborn, Halldor, Drafdit – the rest of them aren't mentioned by name.”¹⁸

Of the names listed, only one is recognizably Irish: Dufþak or Dubthach.¹⁹ The passage recalls how lucrative raiding in Ireland was for Vikings, as well as the ease in taking humans captive. The underground chamber described could be a Neolithic-era passage tomb, or the early medieval Irish architectural feature called a *southern*, both of which could have been and were used to hide from a Viking raid.²⁰ While the episode may have not happened to the historical Hjorleif exactly as presented, it is proof that eleventh century Icelanders remembered raids on Ireland with some accuracy.

The slaves feature prominently in the story of Hjorleif and his blood-brother Ingólf's settlement. They “knead together flour and butter, saying it was good for thirst” when drinking water runs out on the journey to Iceland. The *Landnám* authors record them calling the mixture *minthak*,²¹ the Norse approximation of the Early Irish *menadach*, meaning a penitential gruel of flour and water or butter. Dubthach acts as leader to the rest of the slaves and sets up a plan to lure Hjorleif and his men into the Icelandic wilderness and murder them. After the slaves kill

¹⁸ Pálsson and Edwards, 19.

¹⁹ The internal *b* of Early Irish is pronounced with a “v” sound. E. G. Quin, *Old-Irish Workbook* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1975; repr. Ireland: ColourBooks Ltd., 1992), 4.

²⁰ Tomás Ó Carragáin, “Ireland and the Romans” (lecture, University College Cork, Ireland, February 13, 2008).

²¹ Pálsson and Edwards, 20.

Hjorleif and his men, they “ran away with the dead men’s boat and their wives and goods”. They escape to the islands that are now known in their honor as “Westmanna Islands since the men came from the west [of Norway]”.²²

Ingólf catches up with the rebel slaves thanks to two “good” slaves’ discovery of Hjorleif’s body. The rebel slaves are killed, while the good slaves, Vifil and Karli, travel with Ingólf west to Reykjavík. Karli walks away from Ingólf with a slave girl, apparently without punishment, while Vifil is given his freedom and settles on his own farm. “Karli” is a fairly common name in early medieval Icelandic literature and this Karli is not necessarily Gaelic. However, the only Vifil in contemporary literature is a British slave who is also granted his freedom, this time by Auðr the Deep-minded in *Laxærdal Saga*, his story will be treated in more detail below.

Despite being preceded and accompanied by settled slaves, Ingólf is noted in *Landnám* as “most famous of all the settlers...the first man to settle here permanently”.²³ Why did the authors of *Landnám* include such an easily disproved statement? Was it intentionally ironic, or were they somehow unaware of their contradiction? Was this a aimed dart at those of Gaelic origin or those whose ancestors were enslaved? It is possible that the authors innocently amalgamated conflicting traditions about Iceland’s first settler. While some people remembered and supported the idea of slaves or freedmen being the first settlers, others preferred a man from Norway to hold the title. If every Icelander believed that Ingólf alone was the first settler, traditions about Nattfari and the others would not have been included in this important written history. Perhaps it was people of Gaelic ethnicity, the descendents of freedmen and –women, who maintained the belief that slaves were the first real settlers of Iceland.

²² Pálsson and Edwards, 21.

²³ Ibid.

Landnám is unambiguous about the next Irish settler mentioned: “There was a man called Avang, of Irish descent, the first settler at Botn”.²⁴ The medieval residents of Botn, at the landward end of Hvalfjord, had no qualms about recalling the “politically incorrect” ethnicity of their region’s first settler. “Avang”²⁵ is also remembered for building a wooden “ocean-going” ship. This casual comment is a bit surprising, as contemporary wooden ships, built without nails or hacksaws, required tremendous skill, great strength, and a lot of time to be constructed.²⁶ The leather-sided *currach* of Avang’s homeland was a less complicated vessel, but *Landnám* emphasizes that “a great wood” supplied the “timber”.²⁷ Did the historical Avang construct a *currach* that later Icelanders remembered as a more Scandinavian wooden ship? Was Avang a ship-builder by trade, running a workshop to construct a boat from Icelandic timber, or an isolated and diligent worker who managed to build a ship on his own?

“Thorgeir Meldun was granted land by Bjorn [the Gold-Bearer] above Grims River...”²⁸ “Meldun” is the Norse approximation of the common Gaelic name Maeldún.²⁹ The fact that he was “granted” land makes it likely that Thorgeir was a freed slave of Bjorn, particularly as his country of origin or reason for settlement is not included. Here is a prime example of an slave or man of Gaelic origin whose descendents are recorded³⁰ but whose ancestry is omitted. Did the authors know Meldun to be an Irish name and assumed their readers to know as well, or had they preserved the name without memory of the ethnicity?

The next Gaelic settler in *Landnám* is remembered as such, and also preserves his name. “Kalman, a Hebridean by origin” is likely the Norse approximation of Colman. Kalman has a

²⁴ Ibid., 25.

²⁵ Amlaib? Abann? No Irish name is immediately suggested.

²⁶ Nancy Marie Brown, *The Far Traveler: Voyages of a Viking Woman* (United States: Harcourt, Inc., 2007), 14-17.

²⁷ Pálsson and Edwards, 25.

²⁸ Ibid., 29.

²⁹ For example, the title character of *Immram curaig Maeíl Dúin*, *The Voyage of Mael Dún’s Boat*.

³⁰ “Thorgeir married Geirbjorg...their son was Veleif the Old.” Pálsson and Edwards, 29.

brother named Kylan (Cilian) whose son Kari “quarreled over an ox with Karli Konalsson of Karlastead, a freedman of Hrolf of Geitland...Kari egged his slave into killing Karli.”³¹ Kari may be Corre, while Konal is almost certainly Conall: this is a group of Gaels with distinctively ethnic names. Also fascinating is that the son of a Hebridean has a slave; to eleventh-century and perhaps even ninth-century Icelanders, the ability to own a bondsman did not depend on being ethnically Norwegian or even Scandinavian.

Were Kalman to have a Norse name, it would be suspected that he or his family had originated from Norway and lived in a Norse settlement in the Hebrides. However, his obviously Gaelic name, along with the names of his family, indicates strongly that he was a Gael. The next Hebridean in *Landnám* is one Alfgeir, who serves as a juryman at a “door court” and has a ship that is burnt in the chaos resulting from the trial.³² Nothing is said of his personality or descendents. This Hebridean with a Norwegian name, and prestige in Iceland, is likely to have originated from Norway. A third Hebridean named Sæmund is recorded as a partner in Viking raids³³ and is thus probably of Norwegian heritage, and a fourth, named Bard, has no further information apart from his land-claim and descendents.³⁴ The other Hebrideans in *Landnám* have further information about their heritage; they are covered more below.

Though *Landnám* is long on names and short on inconsequential side-stories, the garbled remnant of an Irish tale appears in the record of Audun the Stutterer. Audun’s wife was “Myrun [Muireann], daughter of King Maddad of Ireland”.

One autumn, Audun saw a dapple-grey horse come racing down from Hjardarwater, make straight for his herd of horses and floor the stallion. Audun went and caught the grey horse, hitched him to a two-ox sledge and hauled home all the hay from his home-meadow. The

³¹ Ibid., 32.

³² Ibid., 42-3.

³³ Ibid., 83, 88.

³⁴ Ibid., 95.

horse was quite manageable till noon, but later in the day he began stamping into the ground right up to the fetlocks. After sunset he tore the harness apart, galloped back to the lake, and that was the last anyone ever saw of him.³⁵

This recalls the Irish story of the *each-uisge* or water-horse. The *each-uisge* is a mythological creature which will appear as a fine, strong horse and be a great boon to the farmer or lord who bridles him – provided that the horse never catches sight of water. If it does, it will run to the bottom of the lake or ocean, with the rider still attached, and destroy him.³⁶ Audun is much luckier with this supernatural horse, but the characteristics of the horse – appearing from water, being a strong and capable animal, and then inexorably returning into water – evoke a strong resemblance to the Irish *each-uisge*. It is particularly remarkable that Audun’s wife is an Irish noblewoman. Not only is the ethnicity of Audun’s descendents remembered, but an Irish mythological beast is associated with him.

“Auð [the Deep-minded] had freed a slave called Erp, son of Earl Meldun [Maeldun] of Argyll [in Dál Riata].... Erp’s mother was Muirgeal, daughter of King Gljomal of Ireland”. In the midst of so many “Nordified” Gaelic-origin names butchered beyond recognition, “Muirgeal” is distinctly in the original spelling. Was Muirgeal, whose name means “sea-bright”, literate and thus able to spell her name? *Landnám* records that “[s]he was a clever woman” and that Auð “bought Muirgeal for a high price”,³⁷ which may indicate literacy. Why is she Muirgeal and not Mjurgal or Murgol? How did the proper spelling of her name survive centuries of near-illiteracy? Someone learned must have preserved her memory along with her spelling, or perhaps one of the authors of *Landnám* knew how to spell that particular name in Early Irish.

³⁵ Ibid., 44.

³⁶ “For these [the *each-uisge*], we are told, were common once, and used to come out of the water to gallop on the sands and in the fields, and people would often go between them and the marge and bridle them, and they would make the finest of horses if only you could keep them away from sight of the water; but if once they saw a glimpse of the water, they would plunge in with their rider, and tear him to pieces at the bottom.” W. B. Yeats, ed. *Irish Fairy and Folk Tales* (Barnes and Noble, 1993), 140.

³⁷ Pálsson and Edwards, 51.

While the great majority of non-Norwegian settlers are from Ireland, Scotland, or the Hebrides, there are several examples of different origins whose identities were preserved in *Landnám*. “A famous man in Norway called Skutad-Skeggi had a son, Bjorn, nick-named Fur-Bjorn because he used to go trading to Novgorod. When Bjorn got tired of trading voyages, he went to Iceland.... He was the father of Midfjord-Skeggi, a great fighting man and sea-going trader.”³⁸ Fur-Bjorn and son are considered Norwegian-Icelandic, yet both are remembered for making daring travels to the East. “There was a man called Fridleif, a Gotlander on his father’s side, but with a Flemish mother.”³⁹ Nothing more is said about Fridleif’s continental heritage. The use of the conjunction “but” is of interest; it hints that there may have been a social difference between people of “pure” Norwegian heritage and those who only had one parent from Norway.

The most interesting entry in *Landnám* in terms of ethnicity is the tantalizing “Hildir, Hallgeir, and their sister Ljot were of British stock. They went to Iceland and took possession of land....”⁴⁰ What does “British” mean? Did this refer to the Germanic Anglo-Saxons, or the Celtic Britons or Welsh? The names appear more Germanic than Celtic, but it has been shown that unfamiliar names for Icelandic memories have the tendency to become corrupted, or become more Icelandic in nature. The particularly exciting part of this entry is the memory that Hildir and his siblings actively settled in Iceland as landowners. This is not the story of foreigners brought to Iceland and granted land there; along with Avang above, this is the memory of non-Scandinavian landowners making independent settlement.

Most settlers had no ancestors listed but many had their parents and in some cases grandparents recorded. A particular entry stands out with a great and convoluted ancestry for an

³⁸ Ibid., 81.

³⁹ Ibid., 94.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 133.

otherwise unremarkable settler. If the genealogy provided in *Landnám* is correct, “Strife-Bjorn, the first man to settle between Grjot and Deildar Rivers”, had a king of Uppsala as a great-great-grandfather, a Swedish chieftain for a great-grandfather, a Russian king as another great-great-grandfather, and a great-great-grandmother who was “sister of Dagstygg, king of the giants.”⁴¹ Almost believable before the giants entered the picture, this illustrious family tree is an indication of the medieval Icelandic passion for genealogy as well as the *Landnám*’s authors’ intent to paint as noble a picture of the settlers as possible.

The story of one of the “noblest settlers”,⁴² Helgi the Lean, was intimately tied up in Ireland and the Hebrides. “Eyvind [Helgi’s father] went on viking expeditions to the British Isles and was particularly active off the coast of Ireland. He married Rafarta, daughter of King Kjarval [Ciarball] of Ireland, and settled there, and that’s why Eyvind was called the Easterner”. Eyvind lived in Ireland with Rafarta, whose name is unrecognizable, and they had a son named Helgi. Helgi was sent to the Hebrides for fosterage for two years and when he returned “he’d been so starved they didn’t recognize him. They took him away with them and called him Helgi the Lean; he was brought up in Ireland.”⁴³

While it is more likely that Helgi underwent a growth spurt than he was actually starved, his life indicates a thriving Norse community and period of cultural integration within the British Isles. He married a daughter of Ketil Flat-nose, the patriarch of the family described in *Laxærdal Saga*, and moved to Iceland with her to make one of the country’s largest land claims. Whether or not the historical Helgi the Lean was the child of a Norse man and an Irish woman, and grew up in Ireland and the Hebrides, the *Landnám* authors do not hesitate to include him among Iceland’s noblest settlers.

⁴¹ Ibid., 92.

⁴² Ibid., 109.

⁴³ Ibid., 96.

“Ketil [the Foolish] went from the Hebrides to Iceland. He was a Christian.... Ketil made his home at Kirkby, where the Papar had been living before and where no heathen was allowed to stay.”⁴⁴ Without evidence to the contrary, it appears that the Hebridean Christian Ketil earned his epithet “The Foolish” by his religion. The Christian authors of *Landnám* included a justification of Ketil’s foolish ways in the story of a settler several entries below Ketil. “Hildur wanted to move house to Kirkby after Ketil died, not seeing why a heathen shouldn’t farm there, but as he was coming up to the fence of the home meadow, he dropped down dead”⁴⁵. The impression is that, were Ketil still alive during this episode, he would have been renamed “The Really Rather Wise”, and it is fascinating that *Landnám* preserves his contemporary epithet. Either Ketil the Foolish was not redeemed when his country became Christian centuries later, or he was considered foolish for reasons apart from his religion not preserved in the history.

The next entry features “Vilbald, brother of Askel Hnokken”, two Irish settlers. Vilbald “...went from Ireland to Iceland in a ship he called the Kudi”⁴⁶ and settled land that he later lost when he turned down a challenge of single combat for it.⁴⁷ Vilbald re-settled and kept his new land, but his prudent and/or cowardly refusal is never explained. The name of his ship is also likely Gaelic, “kudi” is not an Old Icelandic word⁴⁸ and could be Early Irish. Vibald’s brother appears forty entries later, complete with patrilineal genealogy: “Askel Hnokkan, son of Dufthak [Dubthach], son of Dufniall [Dubniall], son of Kjarval [Ciarball], son of King Kjarval of Ireland, took possession of land...”.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Ibid., 123.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 124.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 124.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 125.

⁴⁸ Geir T. Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* (1910; repr. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2004).

⁴⁹ Pálsson and Edwards, 137.

Between Vilbald and Askel's entries is another Dufthak, the third appearance of the name in *Landnám*. This Dufthak is described in two places as "a great sorcerer"⁵⁰ who inhabits Dufthaksholt. However, in the earlier entry, Dufthak is granted his land by Ketil Trout, while in the later entry he is curiously introduced with "The brothers had a freedman called Dufthak, of Dufthaksholt".⁵¹ The previous entry was that of Hildir and Hallgeir, the British settlers, and this indicates that, by one method or another, the authors of *Landnám* remembered British settlers "having" an Irish freedman. Was he some kind of indentured servant or hired laborer for Hildir and Hallgeir?

It is recorded that Ketil Trout's son and "Dufthak quarrelled over grazing", indicating that Dufthak was involved in some kind of animal husbandry, but whether these were his livestock or the British brothers' is not mentioned. It is also possible, though unlikely, that this Dufthak is Askel's father. Askel's method of getting to Iceland is not recorded and his separation in the text from his ship-owning brother may indicate that they arrived separately. However, Dufthak is a common enough Gaelic name that it is no stretch of the imagination to have a Dufthak and a son of a Dufthak in the same area who are unrelated.

It appears that within *Landnám* there was little prejudice against non-Norwegian settlers and freedmen. As shown, Gaelic slaves, freedmen, and independent settlers are generally introduced without ethnic comments or opinions on their personality, it appears that having so many Gaels in *Landnám* did not bother the authors. In addition to the issue of the first settler covered above, another ironic moment is captured in the medieval Icelandic history:

Earl Rofnvald had three illegitimate sons: one was called Hrollaug, the second Einar, and the third Hallad who forfeited his earldom over Orkney. When Earl Rognvald heard about it, he summoned [all of] his sons asking which of them would like to go to the islands.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 130, 133.

⁵¹ Ibid., 133.

...Finally Einar came up and said, “Let me go to Orkney. I can promise you something you’ll like most of all and that’s never to let you see me again.”

The earl said, “I’m very glad you’re going away, but I don’t expect much of a man whose mother’s descended from slaves on both sides”. Afterwards Einar went west and conquered the whole of Orkney, as is told in his saga.⁵²

Simple but effective: the Norwegian earl inexplicably dislikes his son by a slave-woman and doubts he will prosper because of his ancestry, but Einar succeeds with flying colors. This story could be the Icelandic response to the accusatory Norwegians in miniature: despite being the son of a slave, Einar is a success. Recall the epilogue to *Landnám* from the introduction, where twelfth-century Icelanders are accused of being descended from slaves. “The Icelanders were evidently concerned about defamatory remarks about their ancestors, even though they considered such statements un-founded.”⁵³

A final list of slaves and Gaels mentioned in *Landnám* is included to round out the treatment of this important text within this chapter. Auð the Deep-minded grants land to her freeman, “a Scot called Hundi”.⁵⁴ A slave named Kjaran (Ciaran) runs a farm under Geirmund Hell-skin, a former viking who *Landnám* acknowledges as “the noblest born of all the original settlers of Iceland”. A slave named Atli runs another of Geirmund’s farms with “fourteen slaves under him”.⁵⁵ Hallstein Thorolfsson is described as having taken slaves from Scotland and setting them to work making salt on an island.⁵⁶ Thorn Bjornsson marries “Thorgerd, daughter of Thorir Slouch and Fridgerd, daughter of King Kjarval of Ireland”.⁵⁷ It is interesting to note both

⁵² Ibid., 120.

⁵³ Jóhannesson, 22.

⁵⁴ Pálsson and Edwards, 53.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 58-9.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 62.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 93.

that Fridgerd is a Scandinavian name, and Ciarball seems to have fathered half the slaves of Iceland; this is surely a sign of false or inflated genealogies.

Ketilbjorn the Old buries a great fortune of silver with the help of two slaves, Haki and Bot, then kills them so they would not reveal its location.⁵⁸ A murderer named Einar the Shetlander is named in Hallkel Ketilsson's genealogy, and Thorgrim Bild is recorded as having "a freedman called Steinrod, son of Melpatrek [Maelpadraig] of Ireland...Steinrod was a remarkably fine man". The mother of Alf of Agder's nephew is "Kormlod, daughter of King Kjarval of Ireland",⁵⁹ and this finishes the mention of slaves and Gaels within *Landnám*.

Clearly the amount of Gaels mentioned in *Landnám* is not a small number. Take into consideration that the historical text "tells the story of some 430 of the principal settlers"⁶⁰ and that "[t]he population that colonized Iceland must have amounted to thousands; if we assume that it was around 50,000 in 1100 [the first census]...it is unlikely such a number could have grown from less than 10,000 in the early 10th century".⁶¹ Also consider that *Landnám* was written in response to "the criticism of foreigners" in an attempt to prove the nobility and Norwegian-ness of Icelanders, and thus the authors probably kept the number of Gaels artificially low to protect both ethnic and class concerns. All this taken into consideration, it is not hard to accept the genetic results that approximately forty percent of the population was of Gaelic ancestry.

Egil's Saga

Egil's Saga is the celebrated saga of the tenth-century warrior-poet Egil Skallagrimson who lived a very long life and died soon after Iceland's conversion in the year 1000. The saga

⁵⁸ Ibid., 144.

⁵⁹ Gormflaith and Kiarball. Ibid., 145.

⁶⁰ Magnusson, 203.

⁶¹ Gunnar Karlsson, *The History of Iceland* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 15.

was written between 1220 and 1240, and is one of the few sagas definitely written before the end of the Commonwealth in 1262.⁶² The story begins in Norway in the midst of political upheaval and details the stories of Egil's grandfather and father. Egil finally comes on to the scene in the thirty-first chapter and the next hundred and thirty pages detail an extraordinary life. Fortunately for the modern reader interested in ethnicities, Egil and his male forebears travel across the North Atlantic and allow many glimpses of the medieval Icelandic memory of the islands' inhabitants.

An inheritance issue arises early in *Egil's*. Two men, Thorolf and Bard, become very close while fighting for King Harald of Norway and when Bard suffers a fatal injury, he makes the king ensure that Thorolf will get his inheritance. The king complies and Thorolf takes Bard's lands and marries his widow. Thorolf is then approached by two brothers whose father's inheritance had gone to Bard, and are still seeking to claim it for themselves. Thorolf replies, "I heard you make this same claim with Bard, and he did not sound as if he thought there was any justification for it. He said you were bastards."⁶³ The brothers promise Thorolf that they could produce evidence that their father had paid a bride-price for their mother, the difference between a legitimate marriage and concubinage. Thorolf insists "...I am told your mother was taken by force and carried off to your father's house"⁶⁴ and refuses to take the brother's claim seriously. This scene in *Egil's* recalls the downside of taking a Gaelic slave as wife: any offspring would be considered illegitimate. Clearly, however, this was not a strong enough deterrent for many Icelandic settlers.

⁶² Bernard Scudder, trans., "Egil's Saga" in *The Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (1997; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 3-7.

⁶³ Scudder, 19.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

This episode foreshadows one of the main story arcs of *Egil's*. An Icelandic man named Onund who is close to the king of Norway⁶⁵ uses his privilege to steal his father-in-law's inheritance from Egil. As Egil is already outlawed by the king and thus has nothing to lose, he challenges the powerful Onund for his share of the inheritance. "...You can be sure that I have got the better of plenty of people like you, Egil, even when I have considered there to be much less reason than you with your claim on an inheritance for your wife, because everyone knows she's the daughter of a slave-woman."⁶⁶

Later, when arguing in a court, Onund adds that Egil's wife's "mother was captured and made a concubine without her kinsmen's approval, and taken from one country to another..." and also calls Egil's wife herself a "slave-woman".⁶⁷ The surprise is that the woman in question is actually Norwegian, but as she left Norway to elope with her future husband she is considered a slave! Clearly, the distinction between slave and free was extremely fuzzy for the author or authors of the saga.

"Ketil [Gufa] had sailed over from Ireland, and brought many Irish slaves with him."⁶⁸ A digression within the saga tells the story of Ketil and his Irish slaves, who run away, set fire to houses with people still inside them, steal their cattle and goods and continue running. They are individually captured and killed, and oddly, each place they are killed becomes named after them: "[The avengers of the victims] killed the slave named Kori at the place now known as Koranes.... They found Skorri on Skorrey Island, where they killed him, then rowed out to the

⁶⁵ Now Eirik Blood-axe, and his equally famous wife Gunnhild.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 95-6.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

skerry where they killed Thormod, which has been called Thormodssker (Thormod's skerry) ever since."⁶⁹

The slaves are clearly remembered as murderers and thieves, yet their names are preserved by landscape identification. It is possible that the landscape name came before the saga, and was used as a literary device by the author to add veracity to their story. The calm recollection of the slaves' barbarianism alongside their pursuers' ruthlessness indicates that the Iceland recalled in the sagas was wild and operated on a vigilante justice system. Yet the literary arrangement of Irish atrocities beside Norwegian ones indicates that the authors did not elevate the actions of either party; neither are sanctified or condemned. Both the Irish and Norwegian Icelanders were considered equal players in a brutal game by the thirteenth-century authors.

The Vínland Sagas

The Saga of Greenlanders and the *Saga of Eirik the Red* were composed between 1220 and 1280 and together are called *The Vinland Sagas*. They were written down separately in Iceland and present a fascinating study for the oral historian; they include many of the same people and events from between 970 and 1030, but the great differences between the two sagas demonstrate the ravages of time and oral memory. *The Vinland Sagas* together tell the story of the expeditions and limited settlement of "Vínland", an oft-debated but not definitively placed land somewhere on the eastern coast of North America. The Norse settlement at L'anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland provides archaeological evidence of *The Vinland Sagas'* veracity,⁷⁰ but the exact identity of the clustered houses is unknown.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 147.

⁷⁰ Keneva Kunz, trans., "The Vínland Sagas" in *The Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (1997; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 626-52.

Greenlanders is shorter and less fantastical than *Eirik the Red*, but both contain figures of non-Norwegian origin. They also both contain episodes concerning *skraelings*, or the natives of Vinland, but as they are presented as alien enemies and contribute in no way to the settlement of Iceland they are not considered. Despite not being about the settlement of Iceland per se, *The Saga of Vinlanders* are included as the Icelandic memory of its sister settlements and its inhabitants.

Greenlanders opens with a man named Herjolf deciding to join Eirik the Red on his trip to Greenland.

One of the men on Herjolf's ship was from the Hebrides, a Christian, who composed the drapa [type of poem] of the Sea Fences (Breakers). It has this refrain:

*I ask you, unblemished monks' tester [Christ]
to be the ward of my travels;
may the lord of the peaks' pane [heaven]
shade my path with his hawk's perch [hand].*⁷¹

A Hebridean Christian who is thus almost certainly a Gael is remembered as being a "man" on a ship headed for Greenland, not as a slave. He is also remembered for composing an elegant poem that was remembered in the 13th c., perhaps in its entirety. Herjolf, the Hebridean, and the rest reach Greenland. Herjolf's son Bjarni follows him but becomes lost and encounters many unknown lands before reaching Greenland; when Eirik the Red's son Leif hears this he is interested in the lands and sets off on a southern expedition.

One evening it happened that one man, the southerner Tyrkir, was missing from their company. Leif [Eiriksson] was very upset by this, as Tyrkir had spent many years with him and his father and had treated Leif as a child very affectionately.

...Tyrkir had a protruding forehead and darting eyes, with dark wrinkles in his face; he was short in stature and frail-looking but a master of all types of crafts.

Leif then asked him, 'Why were you so late returning, foster-father, and how did you become separated from the rest?'

⁷¹ Ibid., 636.

For a long time Tyrkir only spoke in German, with his eyes darting in all directions and his face contorted. The others understood nothing of what he was saying.

After a while he spoke in Norse: ‘I had gone only a bit farther than the rest of you. But I have news to tell you: I found grapevines and grapes.’

‘Are you really sure of this, foster-father?’ Leif said.

‘I’m absolutely sure,’ he replied, ‘because where I was born there was no lack of grapevines and grapes.’⁷²

Tyrkir is remembered as coming from “a more southerly country”⁷³ and speaking German, though the definition of both the country and the language were fairly fluid at the time of the saga’s events. Whatever form of Frank Tyrkir was, he is recorded as being kind, even a “foster-father” to Leif. He has an unusual appearance but is remembered for his skill at crafts and is at least bilingual. Finally, it is remembered that the discovery of this non-Norwegian is what named the new land: Vínland, land of grapevines.

Another “southerner” appears near the end of *Greenlanders*, this time “from Bremen in Saxony”. He attempts to purchase a wooden prow decoration from one of the men who had been to Vínland, Thorfinn Karlefsni, when they meet in Norway. Karlefsni does not want to sell the wood, which was made of a maple or burl wood from Vínland, but when the southerner offers the high sum of half a mark Karlefsni obliges.⁷⁴ The medieval Icelanders behind this saga recall the shrewd businessman from Saxony who found a price for the priceless souvenir from Vínland.

Eirik the Red begins with the story of Oleif [Amlaib], a king of various areas in Ireland and Scotland. He is Auð the Deep-minded’s husband and his story sets up the migration of many Icelanders in connection with Auð’s escape from the British Isles when their son, Thorstein, is killed.

⁷² Ibid., 640.

⁷³ Ibid., 638.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 651.

“Thorstein became king there [in Scotland] until the Scots betrayed him and he was killed in battle.”⁷⁵ In this and the *Saga of the People of Laxærdal* the treachery of the Scots is emphasized in Thorstein’s death. Interestingly, his father Oleif “was killed in battle in Ireland”⁷⁶ after becoming a king there yet there is no mention of deceit among the Irish; it appears that death in a “fair” battle is acceptable but death by betrayal is worth remembering. Despite Thorstein having conquered various regions of Scotland, the origin of his traitorous Scots is unmentioned. No motivation is provided, making it appear that *all* people in Scotland betrayed him simultaneously for no reason.

“Accompanying her on her journey to Iceland were many men of good family who had been taken prisoner by Vikings raiding around Britain and were called bondsmen.”⁷⁷ One of the most interesting dynamics of the North Atlantic slave trade was that the captors often recognized the nobility of their victims; this was not chattel slavery and contained no racism. Even though the British, including Gaels, Welsh, and Anglo-Saxons, were enslaved by Vikings and forced into a life of servitude in Iceland, they are remembered as “men of good family”.

“A man named Thorgeir farmed at Thorgeirsfell. He was very rich in livestock and was a freed slave. He had a son named Einar, a handsome and capable man, with a liking for fine dress.”⁷⁸ Often slaves were freed on the death of their owners or for commendable service; Thorgeir’s circumstances are not explained. Without racism, the abilities and opportunities for freed slaves was theoretically the same for free-born men. However, classism persisted: “Orm...told him of the recent visit by Einar of Thorgeirsfell, who was becoming a man of

⁷⁵ Ibid., 653.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 653.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 653.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 655.

promise. ...Thorbjorn answered, ‘I never expected to hear such words from you, telling me to marry my daughter to the son of a slave....’”⁷⁹

The son of a freed slave is remembered as “handsome and capable” and “a man of promise”; clearly there is no ethnic bias on the part of the saga author nor the people who had remembered Einar’s characteristics through the generations between his life and his record. However, Thorbjorn is recorded as being hesitant, even upset about marrying his daughter to the son of a freed slave. The medieval Icelandic saga authors may be recording a common issue in early Icelandic society: while some people did not consider heritage or ancestry when evaluating a person, others would, and this would create friction between people of different social opinions.

“Leif fell in love with a woman named Thorgunna [in the Hebrides]. ...When Leif was leaving Thorgunna asked to go with him.Leif said he was reluctant to abduct a woman of such high birth from a foreign country – ‘there are so few of us’ [*sic*].”⁸⁰ This enigmatic passage raises many questions: what ethnicity is Thorgunna? Why is she living in the Hebrides? How was she of high birth? And who is the “us” that Leif refers to? The author of *The Far-traveler* interprets this as Leif not having enough men to defend them in the ensuing fight that would surely follow if Leif took Thorgunna. Does this automatically mean that Thorgunna was a Gael, and thus her father would object to her marrying a Norwegian, requiring Leif to “abduct” her?

Leif leaves Thorgunna in the Hebrides and moves on to Greenland, and eventually goes forth on his celebrated Vínland voyage.

When Leif had served King Olaf Tryggvason and was told by him to convert Greenland to Christianity, the king had given him two Scots, a man named Haki and a woman called Hekja. The king told him to call upon them whenever he needed someone with speed, as they were

⁷⁹ Ibid., 656-7.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 660.

fleeter of foot than any deer. ...they put the two Scots ashore and told them to run southwards to explore the country and return before three day's time had elapsed....

After three days had passed the two returned to the shore, one of them with grapes in hand and the other with self-sown wheat.⁸¹

Haki and Hekja are remembered for their speed on foot and deployed as reconnaissance in the new land. The saga also records that Haki and Hekja wore a strange garment called a “*kjafal*” not resembling anything worn in Scotland or Iceland at the time, which could indicate that they had come from elsewhere or were wearing clothes especially for the act of running. It is noteworthy that a Scot found the grapes in *Eirik the Red's Saga* while Tyrkir the southerner discovered them in the *Saga of the Greenlanders*.

Laxdæla Saga

Laxdæla Saga opens with the story of two people mentioned previously in this chapter, Helgi the Lean⁸² and Unn or Auðr the Deep-minded.⁸³ Helgi is half-Irish, while the husband and son of Unn are both famous Viking chieftains in the British Isles. When both die in battle, Unn escapes from Caithness to Iceland via the Orkney and Faroe Islands, marrying off two granddaughters along the way.⁸⁴ *Laxærdal* begins with two figures with close ties to the British Isles, and Gaels play important roles throughout the saga.

Upon arriving in Iceland and establishing her land-claim, Unn frees her slaves and grants them land. Two of these distributions are recorded in *Landnám*, that of Hundi the Scot⁸⁵ and Vifil, who will be discussed at the conclusion of the chapter. She also frees Erp, son of Earl

⁸¹ Ibid., 667.

⁸² Keneva Kunz, trans., “The Saga of the People of Laxardal” in *The Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (1997; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 276.

⁸³ Both names are used and refer to the same woman; within *Landnám* and other sources she is Auðr while within *Laxærdal* she is Unn. For the discussion of *Laxærdal* she will be referred to as Unn.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 278-9.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 280. See footnote 54.

Meldoon⁸⁶ and demonstrates a curiously gracious attitude to her former slaves: ““For your services you will be rewarded; we have now no lack of means to repay you for your efforts and your loyalty. ...I have made a free man of Erp.... It was far from my intention that such a well-born man be called a slave.”⁸⁷ Unn values Erp’s aristocratic background and seems to apologize for having him serve as her slave, yet she does not explain how this curious situation arose.

The confusion over the status of enslaved foreign royalty plays an important role in *Laxærdal*. Hoskuld purchases a slave-woman in Norway as a concubine from a slave-trader named “Gilli the Russian”.⁸⁸ Despite her inability to speak, Hoskuld sleeps with the woman and she bears him a son. The slave-woman rears the son, named Olaf, and one day Hoskuld catches her speaking to the boy. She reveals that her name is Melkorka (Mael Corcra or -curcaigh) and that she is the daughter of a king in Ireland named Myrkjartan (Muirchertach). Hoskuld is overjoyed and chides her for “conceal[ing] such noble birth” while Hoskuld’s wife remarks dryly “that she had no use for people of dubious origin”.⁸⁹

As Olaf grows older, his connection to Irish royalty becomes a boon. He visits Ireland and meets his grandfather, who remarks that he is “of good family on his father’s side as well”,⁹⁰ indicating an Irish acknowledgement of Icelandic standing. This also works the other way when the famous Egil Skallagrimsson says ““He’s of even better family on his mother’s side than his father’s””.⁹¹ Finally, Olaf’s son Kjartan, named after his great-grandfather, is described as “No fairer or more handsome man has ever been born in Iceland”.⁹² Clearly, the authors of *Laxærdal*

⁸⁶ Maeldún, discussed above.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 280.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 287.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 290.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 310.

⁹¹ Ibid., 313.

⁹² Ibid., 321.

found nothing wrong with Olaf's heritage, as the only sign of displeasure with the Irish comes from the jealous Jorunn.

Not every Gael in *Laxærdal* is remembered fondly, however. A settler named Hrapp is "of Scottish descent on his father's side, but his mother's family had lived in the Hebrides, where he was born. A big, strong man, he was never willing to back down... Most people cared little for Hrapp. He pushed his neighbors around..."⁹³ A whole family of sinister Hebrideans is also found in the saga: "A man named Kotkel had only recently immigrated to Iceland, along with his wife, Grima and their sons...all of them skilled in witchcraft and accomplished magicians...their presence was anything but welcome".⁹⁴ Hrapp and Kotkel's family are remembered as nuisances who upset the social order with their powers, respectively physical strength and supernatural skills. While the Irish in *Laxærdal* are royal in some way or another, the Hebrideans are common folk. The difference between them may reflect an aristocratic prejudice, or perhaps even a long-standing racial prejudice.

Yet snobbery prevails on the part of the Norwegians. Kjartan Olafsson spends time in Norway and becomes close to Ingibjorg, the king's sister. When he readies to return to Iceland to marry a particular Icelandic woman, Ingibjorg gives him a fine head-dress for his bride. "You are to give it to her as a wedding present, as I want Icelandic women to know that the woman you have consorted with here in Norway is hardly the descendant of slaves".⁹⁵ Ingibjorg says this to the grandson of a slave whose very name reveals his heritage, no doubt an intentional irony by the medieval Icelandic author.

⁹³ Ibid., 285.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 333.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 357.

Njal's Saga

Njal's Saga is the last of the sagas considered within this thesis. It is considered to have been composed at the end of the thirteenth century, possibly at the beginning of the fourteenth, and thus is the last of the major sagas that can be termed “thirteenth-century”. A major saga it is, as *Njal's* is by far the longest of the so-called family sagas where the action revolves around an extended family rather than an individual. A modern paperback translation fills 310 pages, but the action and intrigue sustains the reader to the end. Most excitingly, the saga contains a lengthy depiction of the Irish Battle of Clontarf, which will be discussed below. While the title character has an Irish name (Niall), according to the saga's genealogy he is of standard Norwegian ancestry. The importance of ethnicity in *Njal's* is embodied in the character of Thjostolf and several other men of Gaelic origin.

“Thjostolf was her [Hallgerd Long-Legs's] foster-father, a Hebridean by ancestry.”⁹⁶ This sentence is intriguing. Thjostolf, who has a Norwegian name, is an Icelander by birth, possibly by several generations as Hallgerd was born in the early tenth century.⁹⁷ But the author or authors of *Njal's Saga* emphasizes that Thjostolf had Gaelic ancestry, which becomes important later in the saga. Thjostolf's introduction continues, “He was strong and a good fighter and had killed many men and paid no compensation for them. It was said that he did nothing to improve Hallgerd's character.”⁹⁸ Hallgerd Long-Legs is a forceful female character within the saga, and she utilizes Thjostolf as her “hit-man” when the need arises, a role Thjostolf does not seem to mind playing.

The issue of Thjostolf's ethnicity arises early in the saga when he is visiting Hallgerd and her husband Glum.

⁹⁶ Robert Cook, trans., “*Njal's Saga*” (1997, repr. Penguin Classics: 2001), 18.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, xl.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

One autumn they had a bad time bringing in the sheep, and Glum was short many wethers. He spoke to Thostjolf, 'Go up to the mountain with my servants and see if you can find any of the sheep.'
'Searching for sheep does not suit me,' said Thjostolf, 'and besides, the simple fact is that I don't want to follow in the footsteps of your slaves.'⁹⁹

As Hallgerd's foster-father, Thjostolf was entitled to honorable conduct, but the request from Glum to assist him in farming duties was not an egregious breach of error. It seems that Thjostolf is very sensitive about his ancestry and refuses to agree to an appeal in case it is meant to be an order. When Glum and Thjostolf argue, Glum uses this against Thjostolf, a fatal mistake:

They went south from Thverfell and found some nervous sheep and pursued them as far as the mountain, but the sheep got away up the mountain. Each blamed the other for this...
'...Now I have to put up with insults from you, a fettered slave!'
Thjostolf said, 'You'll be saying whether I'm a slave or not, for I'm not about to yield to you.'¹⁰⁰

Thjostolf then kills Glum.

"He [Hallbjorn the White] brought a slave named Melkolf out to Iceland; Melkolf was Irish and quite unlikeable."¹⁰¹ This amusingly brief portrayal underlines the treatment of Thjostolf; just as Thjostolf is depicted as sensitive and violent, Melkolf is only known for being unlikeable. Melkolf may be Malcolm, and it is possible that King Malcolm I appears later in *Njal's*.

Grim and Helgi Njalsson are blown off-course and end up at an unrecognizable island. They anchor and then are approached by thirteen ships whose inhabitants are described as Vikings, and the two groups speak to each other: "One man gave his name as Grjotgard, and another as Snaekolf, sons of Moldan of Duncansby in Scotland and kinsmen of the Scottish king

⁹⁹ Ibid., 31.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 32.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 79.

Melkolf.”¹⁰² It is possible that these are Norse vikings who are only political kinsmen or kinsmen by marriage of King Melkolf (Malcolm?). Snaekolf and Grjotgard are unusual names that may be Gaelic in origin, and if this is so it is likely that these are seaborne warriors whom the thirteenth-century Icelandic author of *Njal's* felt worthy of the title “Viking”.

Towards the end of *Njal's* is the celebrated and oft-researched “Brian episode”, where the saga recounts events leading up to and including the famous Battle of Clontarf (Irish *Cluain Tarbh*) in 1014 CE. The battle, which took place in what is now a Dublin suburb, is generally portrayed as an Irish struggle led by the High King Brian Bóru against Norse interlopers in Ireland, and an Irish victory led to the expulsion of all Norse from Ireland. The historical truth is a lot grayer than this, as there were Viking and Irish mercenaries on either side, and the “expulsion” was neither immediate nor permanent.¹⁰³ The “Brian episode” of *Njal's* has been corroborated with Irish sources and agreed to be, in general, a fairly accurate depiction of the Battle of Clontarf. For the purposes of this thesis, the depiction of the Irish is sufficient for evidence of thirteenth-century ethnic beliefs. It should be mentioned at this point, however, that an extended account of an Irish battle that accords with contemporary foreign sources is a clear indication of Icelandic interaction with Irish politics and warfare in the eleventh century, and continued interest through the thirteenth century, the time of composition.

Conclusion of “Ethnicity”

The story of Vifil connects three of the five sources utilized in this chapter. In *Landnám* he is described as a freedman of Auðr who asks her in a roundabout way for a farm and receives

¹⁰² Ibid., 136.

¹⁰³ Tomás Ó Carragáin, “The Vikings” (lecture, University College Cork, Ireland, March 3, 2008).

Vifilsdale.¹⁰⁴ In *Laxærdal* he is only remembered as the fourth slave to receive a land grant from Unn.¹⁰⁵ Finally, in *Eirik*, he is recorded as “a man of very good family who had been taken prisoner in Britain and was called a bondsman until Aud gave him his freedom”.¹⁰⁶ It would be foolish to assume that the sagas and *Landnám* were composed in a vacuum, making Vifil’s triple presence authenticate his existence. However, his memory in three separate works of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Iceland indicates that he was well-liked as a character if not a historical persona.

In his article entitled *Ireland and the Irish in Icelandic Tradition*, Jónas Kristjánsson classified all Irish appearing within *Landnám* and the sagas into four groups. These are free Christian Irish who settle in Iceland on their own, Irish slaves who are loyal, slaves who rebel, and slave-women who become important through marriage or motherhood.¹⁰⁷ While many of the Gaels described above fall into these categories, Kristjánsson limits his work by distinguishing Scottish and Irish settlers and slaves. As explained in the introductory chapter, there was little to no difference between the inhabitants of western Scotland and Ireland at this time, hence the use of the term “Gael”. A cursory look at the Gaels collected in this chapter reveals the limitations of Kristjánsson’s groupings: there is Karl Kylansson who forces his own slave to murder, Dufthak of Dufthaksholt the great sorcerer, Haki and Hekja the brave explorers, and the Kotkel family of magicians, none of whom fit comfortably in a category.

Instead, the Gaels within *Landnám* and the earliest sagas present a varied picture: there are Christians and sorcerers, good freedmen and murderous slaves, free common settlers and royal slaves, all from the British Isles. There are also figures from outside Norway, presented as

¹⁰⁴ Pálsson and Edwards, 52.

¹⁰⁵ Kunz, 280.

¹⁰⁶ Kunz, 654.

¹⁰⁷ Jónas Kristjánsson, “Ireland and the Irish in Icelandic Tradition,” in *Ireland and Scandinavia in the Early Viking Age*, ed. Howard B. Clarke, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh and Ragnall Ó Floinn (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), 259-76.

shrewd merchants and intrepid explorers. While those of Norwegian descent make up the majority in medieval Icelandic literature, “foreigners”, particularly those of Gaelic ethnicity, are a sizeable component and portrayed as people rather than stereotypes.

III. GENDER IN EARLY MEDIEVAL ICELANDIC LITERATURE

Olaf told her his own name and his father's, and added, 'You must think it bold of a slave-girl's son to dare sit down beside you and strike up a conversation with you.'

Thorgerd replied, 'You must think you've done more dangerous things in your life than talk to women.'

Laxdæla Saga¹

One of the most striking features of the sagas of early medieval Iceland is the women within them. They play pivotal roles and while they are frequently described as beautiful, they are also admired for intelligence, piety, common sense, or other good qualities having nothing to do with appearance. While these saga women are not out raiding or fighting, these are not the silent statues of the stereotypical medieval woman. In certain situations they can even be terrifying in appearance and incite brutal violence from their husbands or sons, and the author commends rather than abhors their subtly active character. The raging question of settlement-era Icelandic gender studies is: how accurate are the sagas in their portrayal of women? Were settlement-era women so influential? Were thirteenth-century women, the contemporaries of the saga and *Landnám* authors, as strong-willed as the ancestors their husbands and sons wrote about? Or did a “Golden Age” treatment of the Icelandic settlement extend to the women and their remembered power?

While these questions are far beyond the scope of this paper, and indeed may prove impossible to answer, it is very important to remember the results of the Icelandic genetic study. A majority of women came from Ireland and the British Isles, meaning that there were more Gaels than Norwegians among the women in the initial settlement. This would deeply affect the proto-society of Iceland's first generations, and also cause repercussions for decades and perhaps even centuries afterwards. With a majority of Icelanders raised by a Gaelic woman or Gaelic woman's daughter, grand-daughter and so on, societal concepts of women must have been

¹ Keneva Kunz, trans., “The Saga of the People of Laxardal” in *The Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (1997; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 314.

adjusted from a Norwegian or Scandinavian opinion of the female sphere of influence to a more Gaelic one.

Extended vernacular prose narratives are shared by both early medieval Iceland and Ireland. They also share a respect for native pre-Christian traditions and reverence for land-spirits, as discussed in the chapter on religion below. Finally, the two cultures also contain great literary admiration for strong female women, but it is unknown whether this is a coincidence or caused by the great number of Gaelic women in Iceland. The famous women of Ireland are well-known for their influence and character, whether mortal (Emer, Medb), divine (An Mhor-rigáin, Étaín), or holy (St. Brigid, St. Gobnait).

It is believed that this respect was also found in common society, but should not be taken too far as an example of proto-feminism. In a University College Cork lecture, Professor John Carey commented that while women got closer to a fair deal in Ireland than they would have gotten elsewhere in Europe at the time, medieval Ireland was at least as patriarchal as any other contemporary society.² “For every law circumscribing [Irish] women there was another that allowed them considerable liberties...Women in early Ireland were no goddess-queens, but neither were most of them prisoners or slaves.”³ They may have not had the agency or standing of men, but they were not ignored or abused as a whole; they were second citizens but citizens nonetheless.

It is not known exactly why Irish women were so influential within their society, but it is certainly possible that they carried their prestige into Iceland to create the powerful Icelandic female figure found throughout the sagas and *Landnám*.

² John Carey, “*Echtra Connlae*” (lecture, University College Cork, Ireland, October 4, 2007).

³ Lisa M. Bitel, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex & Gender from Early Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996) 10-1.

“Women participated more fully and freely in both the settling of Iceland and in its written history than in any other migration of peoples within medieval Europe. ...Some Scandinavianists have argued that in Iceland Europeans had a chance to experiment with social and political organizations unencumbered by the customs of the homeland; other scholars believe, however, that the Icelanders brought with them to the new land the customs of the old, including gender relations.”⁴

We know that there were many Gaelic women in Iceland, far more than previously thought. But why were there so few Norwegian women? In the early medieval ages, despite images of men dying left and right in warfare, men had much longer life expectancies than women. Women were married and became mothers at very young ages, resulting in a great number of pregnancy-related deaths because their bodies were not fully mature for childbirth. This gender imbalance was true in Scandinavia as well as much of the world before the advent of early modern medicine. Women and girls were also involved in animal husbandry and taking care of the sick, exposing them to many illnesses that they were then susceptible to. Infanticide was also practiced as evidenced by repeated laws against it. While the exposure of newborns results in no archaeological evidence, it is likely that female infants, who required dowries and were not able to provide as much physical labor as their brothers, made up the great majority of victims.⁵ “[Norwegian] pagan society had exposed both deformed and healthy babies, among the latter females in greater numbers than in males.”⁶ In the land-starved Norse countries, particularly western Norway, the supermortality of women, whose numbers were reduced soon after childbirth anyway, resulted in a great number of landless and unmarried young men leaving their home in search of land, wealth, and women. Ireland and the British Isles should have foreseen the Viking invasions even before Harald Finehair!

⁴ Lisa M. Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe, 400-1100* (Cambridge: University Press, 2002), 240-1.

⁵ Ole Jørgen Benedictow, *The Medieval Demographic System of the Nordic Countries* (Oslo, Norway: Middelalderforlaget, 1993).

⁶ Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 90.

“The abduction of Irish women to be sold as slaves is confirmed by a contemporary source...the *Life of St. Findan*....‘Foreigners called Norsemen had captured Findan’s sister, along with other women during raids on that Scottish island called Ireland’.”⁷ Modern genetics indicates that there was apparently no shortage of Irish and Scottish women, as something like three thousand were brought to Iceland in the space of less than a century without an accompanying population crisis in their homeland. This may indicate that a smaller number of women of Gaelic descent in Iceland were freshly captured, as opposed to second-generation daughters of chieftain’s wives, or slaves brought back to Norway.

It is also very likely that women were carefully preserved in early Icelandic society, due to their relative scarcity. “The statistics suggest that the sex ratio – defined by modern demographers as the number of men available per one hundred women – must have been extremely high among the first few generations of Icelanders. In other words, in ancient Iceland as in all colonial societies, women were scarce and, as a consequence, highly valued....”⁸

Marriage in the sagas seems surprisingly familiar for a medieval institution. Women technically did not have agency with their first husband; they were married off by their fathers or brothers, but had the opportunity to argue against the choice. Within the sagas, the young woman’s caretaker almost always asks of her opinion before consenting to the man or the man’s petitioner, and usually the woman has already met and conversed with her potential husband. “First acquaintance may have occurred at drinking feasts, where women – always in the minority – were assigned by lot to men. Each couple shared a [drinking] horn in *trímennigr*, leaving some men to drink alone.”⁹ “In the case of the death of one of the spouses, rapid remarriage was

⁷ Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, England: The Boydell Press, 1991), 107.

⁸ Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 86.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

a practical necessity...[there is no] single old maid” in the Icelandic family sagas. All women were married, and at a young age.¹⁰

But the marriage decided by her father or brother was not until death, and rarely lasts a long time in the tragic sagas. Divorce is initiated by the husband or the wife, and while a good reason and witnesses are required, it occurs with enough frequency in the sagas to indicate that it was acceptable. If a woman becomes divorced from her first marriage, she enters under the care of her oldest close male relative, which sometimes was her own son. But when a wife becomes a widow, she achieves agency for the rest of her life.

In the analysis of the post-contemporary sources, the role of women of Gaelic descent can be found both in what is said and what is not said. In an exhaustive and influential volume on female Scandinavian studies published in 1995, Jenny Jochens writes,

“According to *Landnámabók*, the first generation of named settlers contained nearly six times as many men as women. Given this imbalance, it is remarkable that almost three-quarters of the men in this first cohort managed to establish families. Nearly two-thirds of these, however, were identified only by the name of the father and his children with no indication of whether he was a widower or of the children’s legal status [i.e. whether they were born in wedlock]. Who were these unknown women who produced the first generation of native Icelanders? One intriguing proposition is that they were Irish slaves whose names were suppressed because their ancestry was not worthy of comment and added little luster to the family.”¹¹

Jochens and others who hypothesized along with her appear to have been prescient.

¹⁰ Benedictow, *The Medieval Demographic System of the Nordic Countries*, 53.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 86-7.

Landnámabók

“...[I]n under a quarter of cases (around ninety settlers) we are told the name of the wife of a first settler.... In thirteen instances we are told of a first settler who was a woman.”¹² Recall that the number of people mentioned in *Landnám* is estimated to be a small fraction of the total number of Icelandic settlers. If we fill in the gaps of recorded settlers’ wives and mothers with unnamed Gaelic women, and the rest of the settlers with slaves and slave-women, we create an enormous number of Gaels involved in the settlement. It is far more than modern genetics implies and so far beyond what the literature suggests that it becomes impossible to entertain. It would be unfounded to assume that every untold story was that of a Gael; certainly there were many Norwegians and people of other ethnicities whose names were forgotten, and Gaels, as shown, are not hard to find within the literature.

Nevertheless, it is important to look at entries and passing mentions of notable women within *Landnám*. While slave-girls and women from Ireland and the Hebrides are mentioned, and have been covered in the preceding chapter, *all* women recorded in the thirteenth-century history who are *not* just wives or daughters should be analyzed. The authors may have conflated the actions of a Gaelic woman with a Norwegian one, or fabricated a story that gives honor to a woman – even more extraordinary for a thirteenth-century author than the oral preservation of a particularly bold woman’s story. With more Gaels than Norwegian women in Icelandic society from the start, the roles, actions, and influences of women were bound to affect the formation of the early medieval culture that preserved their memory in *Landnám*.

¹² Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 81.

Gardar Svafarsson, the Swedish explorer whose slaves were denied the title of first settlers, went to Iceland “guided by his mother, who had second sight.”¹³ Second sight will be discussed in the chapter on religion, but in brief it is the ability to “see” or sense things that are invisible, such as disembodied spirits or far-off lands. Second sight is taken seriously by the Icelanders and their Scandinavian ancestors, as evidenced by Gardar undertaking a dangerous and uncharted trip based on his mother’s extrasensory vision. *Landnám* records that Gardar sailed around Iceland to “prove” that it is an island. By use of the term *prove* rather than *discover* it can be inferred that Gardar’s mother had “seen” that Iceland was an island and her son made the physical journey to confirm her vision.

In many places in *Landnám* a settler is traced directly to a prominent Icelander by several generations. For example, “Thormod was the father of Bork, father of Thord, father of Audun of Brautarholt.”¹⁴ This is easy to understand because of Icelandic patronymics; unless they had earned a distinctive (or infamous) epithet, the formal names of the men listed would be Thormod Thjostarson, Bork Thormodsson, Thord Borksson, and Audun Thordsson. The patronymic system was used across Scandinavia, and in certain places and circumstances complimented by matronymics. In *Laxærdal*, one Thorgils is “identified with his mother and known as Halla’s son (Holluson) because she had outlived his father.”¹⁵ The underrated Icelandic scholar Barði Guðmundsson noted that a much higher fraction of Icelanders used their mother’s name,¹⁶ but this was still a very small amount and the vast majority used their father’s name. The use of the mother’s name indicates that the mother was more present and important in the child’s life than

¹³ Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, trans., *Landnámabók*, vol. 1 of *University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1972), 17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁵ Keneva Kunz, trans., “The Saga of the People of Laxardal” in *The Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (1997; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 383.

¹⁶ Barði Guthmundsson, and Lee M. Hollander, trans., “Skalds, Magic, Women’s Rights” in *The Origin of the Icelanders* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), 23-40.

the father, a clear sign of an active woman whose son or daughter honors her independence by choosing her name over the father's.

In light of this, *Landnám* proves very interesting, as there are multiple entries where female links between the settler and the prominent Icelander are preserved. “[Helgi Bjolan] was the father of Killer-Hrapp and Kollsvein, father of Eyvind Hjalti, father of Thorgerd, mother of Thora, mother of Ogmund, father of Bishop Jon the Holy.”¹⁷ “...Hrolf the Younger, who married Thurid...their children were ... Solvi of Geitland, father of Thord of Reykholt, father of Solvi, father of Thord, father of Magnus, father of Thord, father of Helga, mother of Helga, mother of Gudny, the mother of the Sturlusons.”¹⁸ The influential Sturlusons who were contemporary with *Landnám* lent their name to the Sturlung Period and included Snorri, a famous author whose *Prose Edda* will be discussed in the chapter on religion. These two sentences from *Landnám* remember five women, four separate from their husbands, and they are just two examples from throughout the text! The evidence demonstrates that the thirteenth-century authors of *Landnám* did not forget their female ancestors, or that they only existed as wives of more important men.

Women were believed to be able to hold land, as shown by *Landnám*'s memory of single or widowed women on property bearing their name. “Tongue-Odd had an aunt called Kjolvor, who lived at Kjolvararstead.”¹⁹ “A woman named Arinbjorg lived at Arinbjorg Brook. ...A woman called Thorunn lived at Thorunnarholt. She owned land down as far as Vidi Brook and up to the part belonging to Thurid the Prophetess... Thorunnar Pool in Thver River takes its name after her....”²⁰

¹⁷ Pálsson and Edwards, *Landnámabók*, 23.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

The appearance of women settlers, the record of mothers whose husbands time had forgot, and the supernatural power of women recorded in *Landnám* all indicate an Germanic and Icelandic appreciation for their female ancestors. “Icelandic sagas granted women fresh lands in imitation of men, but soon settled them down as wives and mothers.”²¹ While the great majority of settlers and figures in *Landnám* are male, there are enough women mentioned to demonstrate a belief in their importance in the settlement of the country. Icelandic historical identity is not purely a male domain as demonstrated by the appearance of women in *Landnám*.

Egil's Saga

Just as in *Landnám*, it is worth analyzing the appearance of all women in the sagas as an indication of thirteenth-century Icelandic concepts of gender, which likely bears the influence of the great number of Gaelic women involved in the Settlement. It is worth repeating that the sagas are not being read for historical accuracy in this thesis, but rather as a window into the contemporary worldview of their author or authors.

Long before the title character is born, *Egil's* details the struggle of Egil's ancestors against the tyrannical King Harald Finehair of Norway. Thorolf Kvedulfson, Egil's uncle, is singled out for punishment, and wakes up one morning to find the king's troops surrounding his house. “One of the king's men called out to the house and ordered the women, children, old people, slaves and bondsmen to leave. Sigrid, Thorolf's wife, went out with the women who had been inside and the others who had been allowed to go out. ... ‘Take me to the king,’ she said.”²²

Sigrid is granted audience with the king, who tells her that he will spare Thorolf if he surrenders unconditionally. Thorolf refuses and dies in the ensuing battle. Sigrid's meeting with

²¹ Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe*, 262.

²² Bernard Scudder, trans., “Egil's Saga” in *The Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (1997; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 34-5.

the king is a calm and rational appeal, rather than a teary-eyed petition for love. It is interestingly juxtaposed with the list of people ordered out of the house, the people who traditionally hold little to no agency in Icelandic society. While Sigrid is included among them, she meets with the king with no comment from the authors on her apparent audacity. The literary character of Sigrid is obviously Norwegian, but whether the historical Sigrid ever met the king so boldly, or if this is an episode invented by Icelanders, is unknown.

Kvedulf, Egil's father, decides to move to Iceland. He packs up two merchant vessels called *knörrs* and brings "thirty able men on each, not counting women and children."²³ Does the author mean that all men who went were physically fit and socially free, or just not infirm? Are there slaves on board who are not mentioned, or are they among the sixty "able men"? From *Landnám* we know that Skallagrim Kvedulfsson had at least two slaves that he freed in Iceland,²⁴ and as Kvedulf died on the passage to Iceland it is more than likely that he had brought the slaves from Norway and their ownership passed to his son. The interest is where these slaves fit in, because if they were not counted among the able men, then they must have been counted with the women or children.

In a side-plot, a Norwegian named Bjorn Brynjolfson falls in love a woman called Thora of the Embroidered Hand and asks her father Thorir for her hand in marriage. When Thorir refuses, Thora runs away with Bjorn and he takes her home to his father's house. Brynjolf diffuses the situation by adopting Thora as a foster-daughter, which indicates to Thorir that Brynjolf will take care of Thora and also prevent a marriage between foster-siblings. Bjorn is furious but Brynjolf provides him with gear for a trading expedition to get him out of the house. Just before he leaves, Bjorn visits his mother and asks to take Thora with him. Bjorn's mother

²³ Ibid., 43.

²⁴ Pálsson and Edwards, *Landnámabók*, 35.

helps the lovers escape from under her husband's nose.²⁵ Both Thora and Bjorn's mother demonstrate bravery and initiative and are not punished for it, either for acting "unwomanly" or betraying their male relations.

Thora and Bjorn end up in Iceland at the farm of Egil's father, Skallagrim, which is where they join the rest of the story and the years pass. Egil and his older brother Thorolf grow into maturity, and Thorolf falls in love with Bjorn's daughter Asgerd. Asgerd is described as a "fine and accomplished woman, wise and knowledgeable", demonstrating aspects that thirteenth-century Icelanders remembered as good feminine characteristics of tenth-century women. Compare the flattery offered to the queenly Emer in the Irish story "The Feast of Bricriu": "As the sun outshines the stars of the sky, so you outshine the women of the entire world, and that by reason of your shape and form and lineage, your youth and beauty and fame and your intelligence and discernment and eloquence."²⁶

At a community feast, the young Egil is assigned to "an attractive and nubile daughter" in *trímennigr*, the assigned-pair drinking mentioned above. The young woman flirts with everyone but Egil and when he finally tries to share her drinking horn, she gives him a snappy and rather raunchy retort:

"What do you want my seat for?
You have not often fed
wolves with warm flesh;
I'd rather stoke my own fire."²⁷

The naïve Egil misses the reference and regales the woman with tales of battle, and they "drank together that night and got on well together."²⁸ While the woman's name is unrecorded, her audacity is remembered well and written in the saga to be funny rather than condemned.

²⁵ Scudder, "Egil's Saga", 52-3.

²⁶ Jeffrey Gantz, trans., "Bricriu's Feast" in *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (Penguin Books, 1981), 227.

²⁷ Scudder, "Egil's Saga", 76.

Thorolf marries Asgerd and, after he dies, Asgerd marries Egil. They have a son Bodvar and a daughter Thorgerd, and when Bodvar dies in battle, Egil locks himself in a bed-closet and refuses to come out until he has died of thirst and starvation. When Thorgerd hears this, she has “a horse saddled at once and set off with two men.... Asgerd greeted her and asked whether they had eaten their evening meal. Thorgerd replied in a loud voice, ‘I have had no evening meal, nor will I until I go to join Freyja.’”²⁹ This is a direct reference to Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda*, and one of the reasons he is believed to be the author of *Egil’s*.

...Freyja is the most renowned of the goddesses. She owns that homestead in heaven known as Fólkvangar, and whenever she rides into battle she has half the slain[’s souls] and Óðin half, as it says here:

Fólkvangar’s where
Freyja decides
who shall sit where in the hall;
half the slain every day
she chooses
and Óðinn has half.³⁰

Note that Norse mythology described by Snorri involves a female deity making the *choice* of people to host in the afterlife, while a male deity gets the ones she does not select. This passage in the *Prose Edda* has often been interpreted to mean that only warriors slain in warfare have an enjoyable afterlife in Norse heathenism, but Thorgerd’s assurance that she will join Freyja after starving herself to death indicates that being a woman off the battlefield does not prevent a happy afterlife.

Thorgerd joins Egil in his bed-closet and claims that she will join him in his death. She starts chewing something and Egil asks what she is doing. “‘I’m chewing dulse,’ she replied,

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Scudder, “Egil’s Saga”, 151.

³⁰ Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda: Tales from Norse Mythology*, trans. Jean I. Young (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), 53.

‘because I think it will make me feel worse. Otherwise, I expect I will live too long.’³¹ Dulse, edible seaweed, was consumed in Ireland and the Faroes but not in Norway. Whether the Icelanders learned it from trading or the tradition was begun in Iceland by Gaels, this passage in *Egil’s* hints that survival tactics used by Gaels in impoverished areas were carried into Iceland.³²

Thorgerd and Egil eat the salty dulse and become uncomfortably thirsty, so Thorgerd calls for a drink of water. They are handed a drinking horn of milk, which is probably according to a secret plan which Asgerd and Thorgerd have coordinated. Thorgerd drinks and then passes the horn to Egil, who takes “a great draught...then threw the horn away [in anger]. Then Thorgerd said, ‘What will we do now? Our plan has failed. Now I want us to stay alive, father, long enough for you to compose a poem in Bodvar’s memory and I will carve it on a rune-stick.’³³ Thorgerd is literate in the early alphabet of northern Europe, the runes, whose magical powers will be explained in the next chapter. Most memorial stones in Scandinavia were carved by women as markers for fallen male relatives³⁴ and this passage indicates that the female role as the guardians of memory was remembered in tenth-century Iceland.

The Vínland Sagas

“She [Freydis] was a domineering woman, but Thorvard was a man of no consequence. She had been married to him mainly for his money.”³⁵ Freydis was the daughter of Eirik the Red and Leif Eiriksson’s half-sister. “Domineering” may be an understatement, as later quotes will attest. Though the sagas remember her for being forward to the point of bloodthirsty, she is just

³¹ Scudder, “Egil’s Saga”, 151.

³² Gísli Sigurðsson, *Gaelic Influence in Iceland: Historical and Literary Contacts, a Survey of Research* (1988, repr. Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2000), 98-99.

³³ Scudder, “Egil’s Saga”, 151.

³⁴ Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe*, 272.

³⁵ Keneva Kunz, trans., “The Vínland Sagas” in *The Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (1997; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 636.

recorded as “domineering” rather than atrocious or even unfeminine. In the sagas, women who take the role of men can suffer ridicule and even divorce, but in the right situations they are commended rather than abhorred. Mentioning that her husband was of “no consequence” indicates that in contrast, Freydis was.

“She [Grimhild] was a very large woman, with the strength of a man.”³⁶ Grimhild is only introduced as a plague victim in Greenland. The mention of her physique was used as evidence for the devastating power of the sickness. Where women who are “very large” and have the “strength of a man” are uncommon in medieval European literature and even today sometimes treated with scorn, Grimhild is used as an example of a powerful woman whose death of sickness was surprising.

“Once he had decided to make the journey he hired himself a crew of sixty men and five women.”³⁷ The aforementioned spindle-whorl is archaeological evidence that women came to Vínland. In the sagas, it is remembered that Thorfinn Karlefsni’s journey to Vínland specifically included both men and women. Of particular interest is that, according to this saga, women were a part of his *hired* crew.

“He sought a solution [to barter with the natives] by having the women bring out milk and milk products.”³⁸ As will be mentioned in the introduction, Icelandic (and thus Greenlandic) women were in charge of domestic functions and goods. It is remembered centuries later that it was up to the women to initiate peaceful trade with the natives of Vínland with their homemade products.

³⁶ Ibid., 644.

³⁷ Ibid., 646.

³⁸ Ibid., 647.

“According to the agreement between Freydis and the two brothers, each was to have thirty fighting men aboard his ship and women in addition.”³⁹ Again, a crew is recorded as including both men and women. Also of note is that Freydis and the two men all function as equals in their agreement with Freydis as her own free agent.

Freydis feels slighted in the agreements made with the two brothers and demands that Thorvard, her husband, exact vengeance. When he refuses, Freydis takes it upon herself to order her fighting men to kill the brothers and their men. Of note is that the men would not kill the women. Freydis finishes the massacre by killing the women for them. “Soon all the men had been killed and only the women were left, as no one would kill them. Freydis then spoke: ‘Hand me an axe’. This was done, and she then attacked the five women there and killed them all.”⁴⁰ While these actions are horrific today, in the age of the sagas, bloodshed over trivial affairs of honor was common. Sagas record this very matter-of-factly. Freydis participates in the slaughter and is not condoned or shunned any more than a man of her actions would be.

“She [Aud the Deep-minded] had a knorr [type of ship] built secretly in the forest and, when it was finished, set out for the Orkneys.”⁴¹ After her husband and son die, Aud prepares a graceful escape from the British Isles. Despite being outside her land of origin (Norway) and with no men to support or vouch for her, she has enough money and connections to commission a ship built just for her, as well as have it done in secret. The *Laxdæla Saga* details her departure from the British Isles, marrying off two of her granddaughters on the way, and her arrival in Iceland where she claims an entire valley as her homestead. Clearly, Aud does not face any difficulties or challenges from either her contemporaries or the author of the saga for being independent.

³⁹ Ibid., 648.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 650.

⁴¹ Ibid., 653.

“She [Gudrid Thorbjornsdottir] was the most attractive of women and one to be reckoned with in all her dealings.”⁴² “She [Thorgunna of the Hebrides] was of good family, and Leif realized that she knew a thing or two.”⁴³ Throughout the sagas, women are presented as beautiful and/or intelligent; both qualities being important. In contrast to many contemporary medieval stories (for example, *Parzival*) where the appearance of women is all that matters, Gudrid, Thorgunna and many other women in the sagas are remembered for, among other things, their skill at crafts, eloquence, capability in managing a farm, being “one to be reckoned with in all her dealings”, and knowing “a thing or two”. It is likely that in the wilderness of Iceland, women were valued more for their ability to conserve resources or produce a handicraft than to look pretty.

“As it turns out, she [Gudrid Thorbjornsdottir] is choosy about her husband, as is her father as well.”⁴⁴ This line is spoken by Orm to Einar of Thorgeirsfell, the son of the freed slave mentioned earlier (*Landnám*). Orm is trying to save Einar the embarrassment of being turned down by Gudrid’s father for being the son of a freed slave. Because Gudrid has never been married before, it is technically her father’s decision. But Orm mentioning that she is “choosy” indicates that she still had some say in the choice of her first husband. While not a widow, Gudrid still holds some agency over her marriage partner by her ability to complain or worse if she disagrees with the choice. As will be seen in *Njal’s* below, marrying a daughter off without ensuring her acceptance is technically legal but carries disastrous consequences.

Freydis came out of the camp as they were fleeing. She called, ‘Why do you flee such miserable opponents...? Had I a weapon I’m sure I would fight better than any of you.’
...His sword lay beside him, and this she snatched up and prepared to defend herself with it as the natives approached her. Freeing one

⁴² Ibid., 655.

⁴³ Ibid., 660.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 656.

of her breasts from her shift, she smacked the sword with it. This frightened the natives, who turned and ran back to their boats and rowed away.⁴⁵

A memorable passage of female courage, this reveals that in at least one case a woman could berate the strength of men and just be ignored rather than argued with or punished. It also includes the bizarre image of the pregnant Freydis using a sword and her breast (!) in a successful defensive maneuver. Were this a goddess in mythology, it may be possible to extrapolate some sort of symbolism from the encounter, but as the record of a real-life event it leaves many questions about the role of women in warfare. Obviously Freydis does not know how to wield a sword but she uses it anyway; “fearless” is an adequate description.

The women in the Vínland sagas are remembered for their intelligence, their ingenuity, and their courage. The appearance of women in two sagas about dangerous faraway exploration, nonetheless their importance in it, indicates that the thirteenth century author did not disagree with presence of women on long voyages, or as preliminary explorers alongside the men. This may further indicate a celebration of the women who colonized Iceland in the first place, a cherishment of the woman settler and an acknowledgment of the externality of the Icelandic woman as opposed to a forced domesticity.

Laxdæla Saga

“It is a drama of passion, of pride and jealousy and injured love, a drama dominated throughout by demanding women of iron wills and tempestuous desires. In their forceful presence the men of the saga, however heroically presented, pale almost into insignificance. They are not the prime mover of action and event; they are the moved.”⁴⁶ *Laxdæla* is always

⁴⁵ Ibid., 670-1.

⁴⁶ Magnus Magnusson, *Iceland Saga* (1987; repr., Stroud, Gloucester: Tempus Publishing Limited, 2005), 244.

distinctive among the Icelandic saga for its romance and female-centricity. Two of the main characters, the matriarchal Auð/Unn the Deep-minded and Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir, are forceful women who use men to accomplish their goals and, in their old age, function as their own agents without criticism or contempt. While it is likely that *Laxdæla* overemphasized female power and influence as a kind of golden age interpretation of the Settlement, the fact that such a story exists and enjoyed such popularity is a testament to thirteenth-century Icelander's appreciation for the feminine will.

Laxdæla opens with the celebrated story of Unn the Deep-minded and her settlement in Iceland. The author or authors comment, "...it is hard to find another example of a woman managing to escape from such a hostile situation with as much wealth and so many followers. It shows what an exceptional woman Unn was."⁴⁷ The saga also details her naming of the landscape based on her actions there. "...In the spring she crossed Breidafjord, arriving at a promontory where they had a morning meal and which has since been known as Dagverdarnes (Morning Meal Point)... She lost a comb [elsewhere] and the point has since been called Kambsnes (Comb Point)."⁴⁸

Compare this practice to the Irish *dinnsenchas* or landscape-naming, where local features' names become associated with myths and ancient heroes to aid memory. Often, the name would remain but not its significance, leading to confusion and creativity:

"Bracan, a warrior...had a virgin daughter, Alma by name. Cumall, son of Trénmór, wed her and she died bearing his son. This green-surfaced mound was raised over her, and from her the mound is named. ...Or Alma was the one who held it in the time of Nemeid. Or else Núadu Drúi built a fort and stronghold there, and

⁴⁷ Keneva Kunz, trans., "The Saga of the People of Laxardal" in *The Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (1997; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 278.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 279.

took a herd [*almu*] from the fort, so that it is called Alma from this.”⁴⁹

Unn’s naming abilities recreate in miniature her ability to claim land on her own; she has choice and agency over the very naming of the landscape itself.

One of Unn’s granddaughters becomes widowed and decides to move back to Norway. A man named Herjolf proposes marriage to her. “...[A]s a widow, Thorgerd was free to decide for herself, and on the advice of her kinsmen, she decided not to refuse his offer... [Herjolf] enjoyed even greater respect after having married a woman like Thorgerd.”⁵⁰ Thorgerd is old enough to be the mother of an adult but she is still considered attractive, marriageable, and even an improvement to her groom’s reputation; clearly thirteenth-century Icelanders did not see women as only worth their fertility, youthfulness, and appearance.

While Thorgerd’s freedom of choice was standard for widows, another woman in *Laxdæla* has the opportunity to reject a suitor despite still being under her parents’ control. The young Hoskuld asks Bjorn for his daughter Jorunn’s hand in marriage. “Bjorn consented for his part, and said in his opinion his daughter could not wish for a better marriage, but referred the question to her...she answered [favorably], ‘...In this, however, my father will have the deciding say, as I will abide by his wishes.’”⁵¹ Jorunn appears to politely decline agency, but there may be deeper things at work; Bjorn may have a temper or feel insecure, and Jorunn’s deferment to him is a kind of honor that only a woman can bestow. If she knew what was in store for herself and Hoskuld however, Jorunn may have protested, because Hoskuld soon goes to Norway and brings home the mysterious, dumb slave-woman who turns out to be the Irish princess Melkorka.

⁴⁹ Ann Dooley and Harry Roe, trans., *Tales of the Elders of Ireland: A new translation of Acallam na Senórach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 39.

⁵⁰ Kunz, “The Saga of People of Laxardal,” 283.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 284.

Melkorka is portrayed as an extraordinary woman both in her appearance as well for her accomplishments. The author writes, “Everyone noticed the obvious air of distinction about her and realized that she was no fool”⁵² and also hints that she seemed suited to fine clothes.⁵³ Melkorka is able to hide her speaking ability for years while teaching her son Olaf Old Irish, and appears to speak flawless Old Norse in her first conversation with Hoskuld. Most extraordinarily, she gives Olaf a knife, belt, and “heavy gold arm ring”⁵⁴ from her childhood that she had managed to keep hold of despite being the property of at least two different men. How can a slave possess her own knife, or an arm-ring made of gold, particularly when it is mentioned that Hoskuld and Gilli the slave-trader dressed her and thus she lost her clothes?⁵⁵ It is either a plot-hole on the part of the author, or else a subtle hint of Melkorka’s ingenuity.

Melkorka’s son quickly grows into an attractive and capable young man. He attempts to court Thorgerd, Egil’s daughter who tricked Egil into eating seaweed and milk, but Thorgerd feels above Olaf. “I have heard you say, Father, that of all your children I was your favorite. It seems to me that can hardly be true if you intend to marry me to some slave-girl’s son, however and handsome he may be.”⁵⁶ Egil feels that Olaf’s royal Irish ties make him more than worthy to marry his daughter, as explained in the preceding chapter. Olaf and Thorgerd’s first encounter is the quote at the beginning of this chapter.

Grima and Kotkel, the Hebridean sorcerers, appear on the scene to harass the residents of Skalmarfjord. Kotkel is the husband and Grima the wife, and they have two sons, Hallbjorn Slickstone-eye and Stigandi (High Stepper), all of whom are equally villainous magicians. “The

⁵² Ibid., 289.

⁵³ Ibid., 288.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 305.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 288.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 313.

sagas name seventy-eight witches, half of them male and half female.”⁵⁷ Being a sorcerer was by no means synonymous with being evil, as will be explained in the next chapter, but it was also no synonymous with being an old woman either. Thirteenth-century Icelanders were equal-opportunity witch-finders.

The treatment of evil magicians was also the same for both genders: “Before witnesses, Thord charged Kotkel and his wife and sons with theft and sorcery, an offence punishable by full outlawry.”⁵⁸ After committing various atrocities by magic in retaliation, the Hebrideans face much worse than outlawry. “Kotkel and Grima were taken on the ridge between Haukadal and Laxardal. They were stoned to death and their bodies placed in a shallow grave heaped with stones, the remains of which are still visible. It is called ‘Sorcerers’ Cairn’.”⁵⁹ Grima suffers precisely the same fate as her husband. Clearly, women witches received neither sympathy nor pardon in comparison to their male cohorts in the mind of the thirteenth-century Icelandic author.

Grima’s outcome is interesting when compared to many other saga women, who incite brothers, husbands, and sons to violence but never receive direct retaliation for their forceful suggestions. The indication is that women can be punished for active crimes – in this case witchcraft – but can never be charged as accessories, even when they are the guiding malefactor. What a difference would there be in the next saga if women could be held accountable:

Njal’s Saga

For all of its emphasis on law and blood-feud, the traditional domain of men in Icelandic and many other societies, *Njal’s* contains a number of forceful women who influence the course of actions through speech in the same way that men influence with weapons. Women initiate

⁵⁷ Nancy Marie Brown, *The Far Traveler: Voyages of a Viking Woman* (United States: Harcourt, Inc., 2007), 247.

⁵⁸ Kunz, “The Saga of the People of Laxardal”, 336.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 341.

divorce, settlement, and murder as will be shown below, all in the framework of early Icelandic law. Finally, two independent and sexually liberated queens, Gunnhild from Norway and Kormlod from Ireland, appear towards the beginning and end of *Njal's* respectively.

“Hoskuld said to Hrut, ‘I wish, brother, that you would improve your way of living and take a wife.’”⁶⁰ According to Hoskuld, and presumably the author who composed this, having a woman implies a better life for men. Hrut asks for the hand of Unn Mordsdottir and receives it conditionally; Unn will inherit everything of her father’s because she is an only child, so Mord tells Hrut “if you have heirs you are to share the property equally.”⁶¹ Elsewhere in the saga, *Njal's* concerns impeccable treatment of early Icelandic law as preserved in later law texts, so there is no reason to doubt that Mord’s assurance of his grandchildren’s inheritance through a female line is historically realistic.

Hrut and Unn are betrothed, but Hrut finds out about an inheritance to claim in Norway. He changes the wedding arrangements to three years in the future and goes to Norway. One of Hrut’s kinsmen remarks about the queen, “‘...I know Gunnhild: if we don’t go to her [immediately] she will drive us from the land and grab all our possessions. But if we go to her she will show us the honor she has promised.’”⁶² When they arrive at the king’s hall, Hrut boldly sits in Gunnhild’s throne and she allows him to remain in it. “That evening she said, ‘You shall lie with me tonight in the upper room, just the two of us.’ ‘That’s for you to decide,’ he said.”⁶³ They sleep together every night for two weeks, but Hrut’s motivation – lust, fear, curiosity, loyalty – is unexplored. Neither does the king seem to notice or mind his wife’s affair.

⁶⁰ Robert Cook, “*Njal's Saga*” (1997, repr. Penguin Classics: 2001), 4.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 9.

When Hrut prepares to return home, Gunnhild asks him if he plans to marry a woman in Iceland. Hrut lies and replies in the negative, and Gunnhild places a spell on him that he will be unable to have sexual pleasure with his pledged woman. This spell is further investigated in the following chapter. Hrut returns to Iceland, marries Unn, and Gunnhild's spell turns out to be true. Unn complains to her father at the Alþing about the marriage but after investigating Mord sides with Hrut against Unn, believing that she is complaining about her role as wife in Hrut's household. Mord found however that "Hrut [had] placed in her hands full authority over matters inside the house, and everyone was pleased at that."⁶⁴ Finally Unn reveals that "he is not able to have sexual intercourse in a way that gives me pleasure". She divorces him for this reason, indicating that divorce could not only be initiated by women, but that it could be for seemingly petty issues.⁶⁵

Not all women in *Njal's* end an unfavorable marriage so peacefully, however. When Thorvald takes an interest in the high-spirited Hallgerd, her father Hoskuld agrees immediately to Thorvald's marriage proposal.

Hoskuld did not consult his daughter, because he had his mind set on marrying her off...[Hallgerd replies] '...you do not love me as much as you have always said, since you didn't think it worth consulting me on this matter. Besides, this marriage is beneath what you promised me.'

Hoskuld replies forcefully that '...it's my word that counts when we disagree, not yours.'⁶⁶ Thorvald and Hallgerd are married against Hallgerd's will, and when he strikes her for wasting food, her foster-father, Thjostolf the Hebridean, murders Thorvald on Hallgerd's suggestion.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 15.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 15-6.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 19-20.

Now, as a widow (albeit an underhanded one), Hallgerd has consummate agency. She and a man named Glum find themselves mutually attracted and Glum proposes marriage. A witness says, “I propose...that Hallgerd betroth herself – if this seems correct to the law expert here.’ ‘It is correct,’ said Thorarin.”⁶⁷ Glum and Hallgerd get on well until Glum gets on the wrong side of Thjostolf and then Hallgerd is a widow once more. She marries Gunnar and their tribulations are even worse.

Hallgerd is unable to manage a household properly and runs out of food. She orders the Irish slave Melkolf to steal food on pain of death, which he does.⁶⁸ When Gunnar, Hallgerd’s husband, finds out that he has been served stolen food, he refuses to eat it and punishes Hallgerd. “‘It’s a bad thing if I’m partner to a thief” – and he slapped her on the face. Hallgerd said she would remember this slap and pay it back if she could.”⁶⁹

She indeed finds her revenge later in the saga when a band of men are attacking Gunnar within his home. When his bowstring is cut in battle, he asks Hallgerd for locks of her hair to twist into a new bowstring. She snidely remarks that she remembers his slap from before and that she does not care whether he lives or dies.⁷⁰ Gunnar’s mother witnesses this and blames Hallgerd for the inevitable death of her son: “[s]he was so fierce towards Hallgerd that she was on the verge of killing her”⁷¹

Other independent women appear in *Njal’s* but are not recorded as so violent in their dealings. “Asgerd, the daughter of the Norwegian hersir Askel the Silent; she had come out to Iceland and settled to the east of the Markarflot river.”⁷² Her son is mentioned, but not her

⁶⁷ Ibid., 29.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 81.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 82.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 128.

⁷¹ Ibid., 129.

⁷² Ibid., 35.

husband and his father, making Asgerd an independent settler whose name survived the years without the addition of her husband. Hildigunn is a subtly forceful woman in *Njal's*; described as “with a mind of her own...unusually tough and harsh-tempered”⁷³, she uses a bloodied cloak to incite her kinsman to seek revenge for her dead husband.⁷⁴ Bjorn's wife, who is unnamed throughout the saga, warns her husband that if he does not help a kinsman as he has promised, that “you'll never come into my bed again”, indicating that she will divorce him.⁷⁵ The women of *Njal's*, even when background characters, are shown as free-thinkers who not afraid to use their right to divorce to coerce husbands into action.

Just as Gunnhild the Norwegian queen was powerful and wealthy in her own right, so was Kormlod, the mother of the influential Norse king Sitric Silkenbeard and wife of Irish hero Brian Ború. “[Sigtrygg/Sitric's] mother's name was Kormlod [Gormflaith]. She was a very beautiful woman, but her best qualities were those over which she had no control, and it was commonly said that her character was evil insofar as she had control over it. Brian [Ború] was the name of the king to whom she had been married but they were divorced...Kormlod was not the mother of Brian's children.”⁷⁶ Despite no longer being married to Brian, Kormlod is still remembered and valued as an important figure in the Battle of Clontarf recorded in *Njal's*.

The saga includes an extraordinary scene known as the *Darraðarljóð* (The Song of Dorrod) or “The Fatal Sisters”,⁷⁷ which describes *valkyries* or semi-divine women warriors foretelling the carnage of the Battle of Clontarf.⁷⁸ The symbolism of this scene has been studied before, but for now it is sufficient to note that the image of the women weaving is a domestic,

⁷³ Ibid., 163.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 194-5.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 288.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 296.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 342-3.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 303-7.

feminine, common activity. The fact that they are weaving human entrails on a loom of body parts is a gruesome subversion of women's roles and further heightens the supernatural horror of the vision by its destruction of the tranquility of weaving women. It is an inversion of the natural order of things for the thirteenth-century Icelandic author to have women engaged in such a bloody task, intimately involved with battle carnage and destruction when they should be creating warm and protective cloth.

Njal's contains a kind of subversion built into the saga itself. Just as the saga runs on the correct application of the law and proper procedure for court cases, the women who utilize the law for their own benefit, setting their male kinsmen against others to exact revenge for themselves, may indicate an intention on the part of the author to warn against the wiles of women. A famous quote from the saga is "Cold are the counsels of women".⁷⁹ Lisa Bitel cautions, "Female [saga] characters seem to be sexually unrestricted but their actions conveyed messages about morality to medieval readers."⁸⁰

Conclusion of "Gender"

The evidence is such that whatever conclusions we wish to draw about the depiction of women in *Landnám* and the sagas will perpetually be insufficient. We do not know to what degree the literature depicts what life was really like for Icelandic women either at the settlement or in the thirteenth century. As there is no literary parallel in Scandinavia the Icelandic evidence exists in a vacuum. Not only can we not say for sure whether saga women were more historical or fictive, but we cannot even compare the literature to foreign sources to try and discern a

⁷⁹ Ibid., 195.

⁸⁰ Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe*, 244.

difference in the treatment and depiction of women. Instead, we must try to draw conclusions on a leap of faith until such time as better evidence and source comparison can be made.

As shown in the preceding sagas, Icelandic women in early medieval literature are individually characterized, more or less independent, and vital to the survival of the nation as a whole. Whether or not this reflects historical reality, these figures demonstrate the thirteenth-century Icelandic memory of female ancestors as important and influential. Early medieval Icelandic identity included an admiration for strong-willed women and awareness of their power in conflict and jurisprudence, as evidenced by this depiction in the sagas. Whether or not their contemporary women were as active, the Icelandic saga authors relished in recording the antics of settlement-era women as part of their national heritage as well as for posterity.

IV. Religion in Early Medieval Icelandic Literature

According to well-informed people some of the settlers of Iceland were baptized, mostly those who came from the British Isles. ...Some of them kept up their faith till they died, but in most families this didn't last, for the sons of some built temples and made sacrifices, and Iceland was completely pagan for about 120 years.

Chapter 399 of *Landnámabók*

Studies concerning religion and spiritual practices in Iceland generally treat pre-Christian beliefs as an unfathomable void. No holy texts, liturgies, or theological treatises were composed by the Scandinavians before the arrival of Christianity and thus the precise and detailed nature of the heathen spiritualities cannot be ascertained today. This, however, does not mean that their general form and function are irretrievable, nor that religious studies of Icelanders should not be considered before the national conversion in 999 or 1000 CE.

Two extraordinary documents called the Eddas were composed alongside the sagas we have already seen. The two Eddas contain pre-Christian mythology, cosmology, and moral codes – or so it is believed; the so-called accuracy of the documents is still debated but not relevant to this discussion. The author of the *Prose Edda*, Snorri Sturluson, was a famous poet and lawmaker who was aware of the decline in knowledge of heathen stories and sought to preserve them for artistic use by poets. In doing so he wrote a treatise on Norse mythology as consummate and explicit as any modern introductory book on mythology. Snorri died young in 1241, placing the *Prose Edda* firmly in the thirteenth century. The author or authors of the *Poetic Edda*, also erroneously known as the *Elder Edda*, compiled many poems into a loose assortment of heathen theology and heroic action stories. At least one of the poems originated in Norway and it is likely that others had very old roots,¹ but the *Poetic Edda* was compiled in Iceland at a date no earlier than 1270.”² Thus the Eddas preserve what the early medieval Icelanders thought their heathen

¹ Gabriel Turville-Petre, “The cult of Óðinn in Iceland” in *Nine Norse Studies*, Vol. 5 of *Viking Society for Northern Research* (Bristol: Western Printing Services Ltd., 1972), 3.

² Patricia Terry, trans., *Poems of the Elder Edda*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), xvi.

forebears believed, and provide a convenient handbook for the students of the sagas on the pre-Christian religion of the figures described.

Any reader of medieval Icelandic literature will immediately notice the great number of names beginning with the element Thor-/Þórr-. Thor is described in the Eddas as a mighty, compassionate, and yet rather dim-witted god. While Odin or Óðinn is given prominence in the Eddas the great number of Thor- names, among other factors, indicates his popularity among the common Icelanders.³ Other deities appear in common name elements, such as Frey- or Ing- (Freyr or Yngvi, a fertility god⁴), Ran- (a sea goddess), -dis (*dísir*, female ancestral deities), Hel- or Hal- (Hel, a death goddess), As- (*æsir*, the name of the main tribe of deities), and -grim (another name for Óðinn⁵). The use of heathen names does not immediately disappear after Christianization and even today many people across Scandinavia have the element Thor-/Þórr-/Tor- in their name.

In his influential book on Icelandic history, Jón Jóhannesson wrote, “Although the majority of the colonists of Iceland were pagan, their beliefs were of two different kinds. On the one hand there was the belief in *landvættir* (guardian spirits of the country); on the other, there was *goðatrú* or *ásatrú* (the faith in the gods).”⁶ Jóhannesson also declared that the belief in guardian spirits was much more primitive. The notable Oxford professor Gabriel Turville-Petre replied to this,

I would not wish to assert that this opinion is correct, but we can safely say that the belief in the lower beings was considerably more persistent than the belief in gods. Even today, many people both in

³ The discrepancy and unsympathetic treatment are very likely explained by Thor being a god of the common man while Odin is a god of poets – which is precisely what Snorri and the *Poetic Edda* author(s) were. Turville-Petre, “The cult of Óðinn in Iceland”.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵ Terry, *Poems of the Elder Edda*, 48.

⁶ Jón Jóhannesson, *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth: Íslendinga Saga*, trans. Haraldur Bessason, vol. 2 of *University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies* (1974; repr., Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2006), 118.

Iceland and other western lands believe in fairies or ‘hidden people’, even trolls and such-like elemental beings. Belief in these lower beings is not inconsistent with orthodox Christianity; it hardly concerns Christianity.⁷

A modern Icelandic highway was famously re-routed so as to avoid knocking down a troll-stone,⁸ paralleling the Irish concern with preserving *raths* or fairy-forts.⁹ As nature spirit beliefs have persisted to the twentieth century, clearly they were still a factor in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland.

The nature of heathen religion is not vital to this discussion on its own merit. Instead, it is a way to discern religious identity within *Landnám* and the early sagas. It is notable when someone offers a sacrifice,¹⁰ raises a temple, or has a son with the epithet *Priest*. The settlers were not just heathen and Christian. There were those who worshipped the *landvættir* and those who worshipped a specific god or gods, those who saw Christ as one of their gods, and even those who did not worship anything. There are also many figures who are described as sorcerers or shape-shifters, and amazingly, there are just as many men as women, and just as many “good” people as “bad” with these talents. The nature of Icelandic magical practices is also not essential to this discussion, but serves as a barometer for early medieval Icelanders’ opinion on the number, quality, and personality of magic-workers.

What is remarkable is that modern readers know this today from medieval documents, from the hand of Christian scribes. Unlike many other cultures who demonized their ancestors’ pre-Christian traditions, Iceland instead cherished their prehistoric customs by recording them for posterity in the Eddas. Snorri rationalized his composition of heathen beliefs by turning the

⁷ Gabriel Turville-Petre, “The cult of Óðinn in Iceland”, 4.

⁸ Sarah Lyall, “Building in Iceland? Better Clear It With the Elves First,” *New York Times*, July 13, 2005.

⁹ Eddie Lenihan and Carolyn Eve Green, *Meeting the Other Crowd* (Tarcher: 2003).

¹⁰ *Sacrifice*, from Latin *sacri fice*, ‘to make sacred’. While nowadays it has a connotation of wanton or evil destruction, sacrifice was an important part of heathen religion. Slaughtering animals for meat and skins, dedicating buildings to gods, and making offerings for a desired outcome are all examples of heathen sacrifice.

gods into Trojan heroes who came to Norway and became deified over the centuries.¹¹ A similar “sanitization” of heathen mythology is found in the twelfth-century Irish tale *Acallam na Senórach* (*Colloquy of the Sages*), where two ancient god-heroes meet St. Patrick, become baptized, and are then allowed to tell their tale – and indeed, St. Patrick is encouraged by angels to record their pagan antics¹².

The *Poetic Edda* does not have a central narrative and thus no voice to avert suspicion. It is distinctly subversive, particularly the poems *Völuspá* and *Hávamál*, the former an explicit and unapologetic description of heathen cosmology and the latter a collection of proverbs clearly pre-Christian in origin. The stories in the *Poetic Edda* evoke short prose stories from eighth-century Ireland which remember the gods without any Christian interruption, such as *Serglige Cón Chulainn* (*The Sickness of Cú Chulainn*) and *Tochmarc Étaín* (*The Wooing of Étaín*)¹³. These Irish stories and the *Eddas* were composed in the vernacular, a celebration both of pre-Christian traditions and of linguistic identity.

Christian figures are also not immediately given special treatment in the early medieval Icelandic literature, as will be seen below. Sometimes they are praised for their Christian virtue or luck, but in most cases their religion is mentioned without any emphasis. It is said that most of the Christians in the settlement of Iceland had come from the British Isles¹⁴ and scholars assume that this was true in the reverse; Ireland and Scotland had been Christian countries for centuries and thus all Gaels captured in the eighth and ninth centuries were Christian. This is not necessarily true, however. There is evidence of Irish pagan practices persisting into the eleventh

¹¹ Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda: Tales from Norse Mythology*, trans. Jean I. Young (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), 25-6.

¹² Ann Dooley and Harry Roe, trans., *Tales of the Elders of Ireland: A new translation of Acallam na Senórach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 5, 12.

¹³ Both stories can be found in Jeffrey Gantz, trans., *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (London: Penguin Books, 1981).

¹⁴ Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, trans., *Landnámabók*, vol. 1 of *University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1972), 147.

century¹⁵ and as demonstrated by the modern reverence for *raths* mentioned above, pre-Christian traditions have very long lives in Ireland. The number of Gaelic sorcerers is small but very notable in the early medieval Iceland sources.

If Iceland was pagan for 120 years, as *Landnám* states,¹⁶ what happened to the children of Irish Christian settlers? Some scholars have suggested that they maintained their religion and eased the conversion of Iceland to Christianity in the year 999 or 1000 CE. However, descriptions of the conversion of Iceland are remarkably cool and neutral, and it is emphasized that it was a prudent political conversion decided by logical debate rather than an impassioned religious frenzy. This will be expanded upon below. Is it not more likely that most of the Icelanders of Irish descent became heathen themselves? Would they worship their Norse contemporaries' gods and *landvættir* or those of their ancestors? It has been suggested that some stories in the *Prose Edda* and other early medieval Icelandic literature bears a remarkable similarity to Irish myths.¹⁷ "It seems that, when the settlement of Iceland began, people were very liberal about religious belief."¹⁸ Is it possible that Irish descendents revived their ancestors' beliefs in this liberal Icelandic religious climate of the first century?

Religious syncretism between Gaelic and Norse is not as surprising a concept as it may appear on the surface. Much research has been done in the past decade on proto-Indo-European linguistic and culture. This hinges on the concept that all speakers of an Indo-European language, including the Celtic Old Gaelic and Germanic Old Norse, are descendents of a singular culture

¹⁵ For example, Gilla Lugán's annual trip to Newgrange to commune with the gods, described in the present tense in the 1084 CE *Annals of Tigernach*. John Carey, "Sacred Places in Celtic Religion and Mythology" (lecture, University College Cork, Ireland, January 24, 2008).

¹⁶ Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, trans., *Landnámabók*, vol. 1 of *University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1972), 147.

¹⁷ Gísli Sigurðsson dedicates half of his *Gaelic Influence in Iceland* to this theory. John Carey, professor of Celtic Civilization at University College Cork in Ireland, believes that the old Irish tale "Cormac's Adventure in the Land of Promise" was the direct source of the *Prose Edda* story of Utgarð-Lóki, which has no parallel in Scandinavian literature.

¹⁸ Turville-Petre, "The cult of Óðinn in Iceland", 6.

with a political, social, and religious structure that has echoed in every subsequent society. Since Old Gaelic and Old Norse speakers have the same linguistic root, the theory suggests, there must be a shared religious root as well, which is why religious practices and mythology of Gaelic and Norse heathenism are capable of integration.

With this Indo-European link in mind, let us turn first to *Landnám* and analyze the religious labels of the settlers therein. What did the early medieval composers of *Landnám* record about the settlers? What is said about Christian practices, heathen practices, and sorcery? How many people described in *Landnám* warranted a religious label, and what did the twelfth-century authors term them?

Landnámabók

As mentioned in the previous chapter, *Landnám* acknowledges the Irish *pagar* but does not comment on their religion. The first recorded comment appears in the story about Hjørleif and Ingólfr Arnarson, Iceland's first settlers. Ingólfr offers a sacrifice but Hjørleif refuses to participate. Later, when Hjørleif is dishonorably slain by his slaves, Ingólfr comments "...in my experience, this is what always happens to people who won't hold sacrifices."¹⁹ While Hjørleif is disgraced in death, Ingólfr is celebrated as Iceland's first settler and also as a pious heathen.

This surprisingly un-Christian comment is followed several entries later by a subtle compliment towards the religion of the *Landnám* authors. "Thorkel Moon...gave himself to the god who created the sun. He had led a life as blameless as the best of Christians."²⁰ In the *Acallam na Senórach*, it is stressed that the characters who had died before Christianity arrived Ireland, were yet proto-Christians who had adhered to a Christian model of virtue without

¹⁹ Pálsson and Edwards, *Landnámabók*, 19-20.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

actually encountering Christianity. Just as the author of the *Acallam* stressed that native traditions were worth transmitting because of their inherent virtue²¹, the authors of *Landnám* retained a memory of heathens who were not Christian only because they had not heard of it yet.

Hrapp, Bjorn Buna's son, had a son called Orlyg whom he gave in fosterage to the Holy Bishop Patrick of the Hebrides. He had a great desire to go to Iceland, and asked the Bishop for guidance. The bishop provided him with church timber, an iron bell, a plenarium, and consecrated earth which Orlyg was to place beneath the corner posts of his church. ...[H]e was to build a house and a church dedicated to St. Columba.²²

This bishop Patrick is unknown and it seems likely that it refers to the famous St. Patrick of Ireland who died in 461CE.²³ While that part of Orlyg's story seems confused, the fact that he came out of the Hebrides and built a church to St. Columba is not at all surprising. On a small island in the western Hebrides is the monastery of Iona which St. Columba founded, and at one time it was the mother-house of monasteries and bishoprics across Scotland, Ireland, and northern England²⁴. Reading between the lines, it is possible that Orlyg was a monk at Iona who wished to follow the *papar*, though his penitential fervor is somewhat negated by Iceland's occupation at this time. Orlyg's provisions from the bishop are fascinating, but it is later in *Landnám* where the significance – and oddity – of the consecrated earth will become clear.

Thorhadd the Old was a temple priest at Moere in Trondheim [in Norway]. He had a great desire to go to Iceland, but before he set off, he dismantled the temple and took the pillars and some earth from under the temple with him. He put in at Stodvarfjord, and declared the whole fjord sacred, just as his place in Moere had been.²⁵

²¹ Kevin Murray, "The *Acallam na Senórach*" (lecture, University College Cork, Ireland, January 17, 2008).

²² Pálsson and Edwards, *Landnámabók*, 23.

²³ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁴ John Carey, "Colm Cille and Iona" (lecture, University College Cork, Ireland, January 17, 2008).

²⁵ Pálsson and Edwards, *Landnámabók*, 117.

An earth-based religion, such as that practiced in Norway and Iceland in the tenth century, values dirt from a sacred region as imbued with holiness. It is similar to the medieval Catholic concept of the saint's relic, except that natural objects rather than body parts serve as the focus for worship and conduit to the divine. The Christian concept of consecrated earth was a concern for early Icelanders who did not have churches to be buried in, resulting in some ingenious methods of holy burial.²⁶

But the difference between consecrated and unconsecrated earth was a priest's blessing; it was not a transitive property. Why would Orlyg's bishop send him to Iceland with consecrated earth to put under the corners of the church in much the same way as the heathen priest Thorhadd sanctified his temple? If a mistake was made, it seems much more likely that the Christian authors would confuse a heathen ritual for a Christian one, rather than the other way around. Was this how monks from Iona consecrated land, in a suspiciously heathen manner? Were the Christian authors making a subtle dig at the Gaels by implying that their Christian rituals were the same as heathen ones?

If so, it seems no real insult, as the description of heathen practices abound in *Landnám*, particularly that of landscape veneration. The surprising story of Sel-Þorir involves a merman, a prophecy concerning a mare, and a prevision of a volcanic eruption. His story ends with, "When they died Sel-Thorir and his pagan kinsmen went into Thoris Cliff."²⁷ The family of the Christian Auðr the Deep-Minded "lost their faith" and "believed they would go into the hills when they died".²⁸ "[Thorir Flap] made his home at Lund [Grove] and held the grove sacred."²⁹

²⁶ For example, the Christian Auðr the Deep-Minded was buried at the high tide mark. Pálsson and Edwards, *Landnámabók*, 55. The Greenlanders in *Eirík the Red's Saga* had an even more brilliant solution that will be discussed below.

²⁷ Pálsson and Edwards, *Landnámabók*, 38.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 55, 52.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

“There was a man called Lodin...His son Eyvind took possession of Flateyjardale up to Gunnsteinar, and held the boulders there sacred.”³⁰ “[Eyvind Thorsteinson] made his home at Helgastead, and that’s where he was buried, in a grave mound.”³¹ “[Thorolf Mostur-Beard] held the mountain on that headland so sacred that he called it Helgafell [Holy Mountain] and no one was allowed even to look at it unless he’d washed himself first...Thorolf and his kinsmen all believed that they would go into the mountain when they died.”³² Clearly, there was a strong belief in the inherent power of the earth, and the somewhat anticlimactic afterlife that so many early Icelanders believed in.

Belief in the *landvættir* was also strong, as *Landnám* can attest. “Olvir Eysteinsson took possession of land east of Grims River where no one had dared to settle for fear of land-spirits, since Hjorleif was killed there [by his Irish slaves early in the settlement].”³³ “There was a man called Thorir the Troll-Burster.”³⁴ “People with second sight could see that all the guardian spirits of the land accompanied Hafur-Bjorn when he attended the Althing, and Thorstein and Thord when they went out fishing.”³⁵

Landnám talks casually about “second sight” in several locations, usually referring to the sight of shape-shifters in their spiritual form. It is hard to describe what second sight is but it appears to be an ability to see or sense an otherwise invisible spirit or being. To a modern skeptic, there is no difference between the ability to see a visiting spirit and the ability to physically change into an animal, both being equally impossible; but to medieval Icelanders the former was an actual skill. “While literary scholars...tend to regard dreams, hauntings, and other

³⁰ Ibid., 104.

³¹ Ibid., 105.

³² Ibid., 45-6.

³³ Ibid., 126.

³⁴ Ibid., 99.

³⁵ Ibid., 126.

such ‘bizarre’ phenomena as literary devices rather than social realities...events that seem fantastic to us do not seem fantastic to other people...they may, in fact, be aspects of their culturally constituted realities.”³⁶

A fascinating story is relayed in *Landnám* about the son of the unusually named Thorir the Troll-Burster.

His son was Steinrod the Strong, who saved a good many people when they were attacked by monsters. There was a vile sorceress called Geirhild, and people with second sight saw Steinrod going for her, taking her by surprise; but she changed herself into a bull’s hide bag filled with water. Steinrod was a blacksmith and went after her with a huge iron pike in his hand.³⁷

Landnám reveals the outcome with a short poem, the last lines of which are “*The witch must have suffered/from sore ribs after*”³⁸. This entry illuminates an interesting link between blacksmithing and magic. An eighth century Irish prayer called *St. Patrick’s Breastplate* calls for protection against the spells of women, smiths, and druids, and as druids were the priestly class of pagan Ireland, it reveals that smiths were also spoken reverentially of in terms of their un-Christian powers.³⁹ This passage in *Landnám* demonstrates that this fear and/or respect of blacksmiths’ supernatural powers could be found in early medieval Iceland as well as in Ireland. Another blacksmith is mentioned in *Landnám*, and it appears that one of his sons has unusual ancestry: “His sons were Thorstein, Bjorn, and Hrafsi, who was descended from giants on his mother’s side.”⁴⁰ The word *was* rather than *were* implies that only Hrafsi was part-giant. Reading between the lines, it appears that the blacksmith had a concubine of foreign origin, and the blacksmith’s ancestors celebrated the story that this woman was descended from giants.

³⁶ E. Paul Durrenberger, “Anthropological Perspectives on the Commonwealth Period”, in E. Paul Durrenberger and Gísli Pálsson, ed. *The Anthropology of Iceland* (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1989), 230.

³⁷ Pálsson and Edwards, *Landnámabók*, 99.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ John Carey, “The Druids” (lecture, University College Cork, Ireland, January 16, 2008), and John Carey, “*Echtra Connlae*” (lecture, University College Cork, Ireland, October 4, 2007).

⁴⁰ Pálsson and Edwards, *Landnámabók*, 56.

Dufthak or Dubthach the Sorcerer of Dufthaksholt was mentioned in the previous chapter as an Irish freedman. Also included in *Landnám* is an account of a supernatural, shape-shifter fight he participated in.

Storolf [Ketilsson] lived at Hvoll, and he and Dufthak quarreled over grazing. One evening, about sunset, someone with second sight noticed a huge bear set out from Hvoll, and a bull from Dufthaksholt. They met at Storolfsboll and set upon one another in a fury, the bear getting the best of it. In the morning, people saw there was a hollow where they had met, and it was just as if the earth had been turned upside down. ...Both men were badly hurt.⁴¹

Shape-shifters dot the Icelandic literature landscape and are presented matter-of-factly throughout the medieval period. This passage hints at their “true” nature; not people actually altering their physical form, but spiritual animals that could only be seen by people with special skill who could move and interact with other spiritual animals. These forms were either the spiritual appearance of their mind separated from their body, or else their “fetch” (*fylgia*). The fetch is a complicated aspect of Icelandic folklore and, in brief, appears to be a guardian or attendant spirit attached to every person from birth and intimately linked with the physical afterbirth⁴². In short, when shape-shifters appear in the literature, do not discard them as pure fantasy or fiction, as they were as real as anything else to the medieval Icelanders who recorded them.

For the most part, the origin of shape-shifters’ powers are not provided. For example, one entry blandly begins, “There was a man called Vekell the Shape-Changer who took possession of land...”⁴³ without any expansion upon this epithet. But the source of one man’s change is

⁴¹ Ibid., 133.

⁴² Gabriel Turville-Petre, “*Liggja Fylgjur Þínar Til Íslands*” in *Nine Norse Studies*, Vol. 5 of *Viking Society for Northern Research* (Bristol: Western Printing Services Ltd., 1972), 52-8. See also Gabriel Turville-Petre, “Dreams in Icelandic Tradition” in *Nine Norse Studies*, Vol. 5 of *Viking Society for Northern Research* (Bristol: Western Printing Services Ltd., 1972), 48.

⁴³ Pálsson and Edwards, *Landnámabók*, 90-1.

recorded in an extraordinary story preserved by *Landnám*. A man named Odd loses his father and brother to a polar bear. He “avenged his father by killing it, and his brother by eating it.” After that Odd turned out to be “an evil man, very hard to deal with...a great shape-changer...” Odd is also recorded as being able to move across Iceland in a night, in order to save his sister “when the men of Thjoriverdale want to stone her to death.”⁴⁴ No explanation is given for this rather Old Testament treatment, but the implication is that both Odd and his sister survived.

As recorded in *Landnám*, the power of second sight provides great economic value to Thorstein Red-nose. Described as “a great sacrificer” who used a waterfall as his deposition site, he was capable of seeing which of his sheep would die over the winter and slaughter them in the autumn, meaning that he would never lose meat or wool from his livestock. His flock eventually was counted at 2,400. Thorstein’s predictive powers did not stop at his sheep. “The last autumn of his life, he said at the sheep-fold, ‘Now you can slaughter any of the sheep you like. Either I’m doomed to die or the sheep are doomed, or all of us are’. The night he died, all the sheep got swept into the waterfall by a gale.”⁴⁵ The Christian authors who recalled Thorstein’s supernatural prowess, and an end as pat as any modern short story, did not preach or moralize his abilities or death. They are simply remembered, and perhaps even respected by their inclusion.

Increasing livestock is not just Thorstein Red-nose’s domain in *Landnám*. Hafur-Bjorn, the Icelander whose guardian spirits attended him at the Althing as mentioned above, earned his name (Billy-goat Bjorn) by a “strange billy-goat” who “came to join his heard of goats, and his live-stock began to multiply so fast that soon he was a wealthy man.”⁴⁶ In three separate entries, pigs are recorded as multiplying significantly when left alone in the wilderness. Their numbers

⁴⁴ Ibid., 109.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 134.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 126.

rise from three to thirty,⁴⁷ from ten to one hundred and twenty,⁴⁸ and from two to seventy⁴⁹ in the space of two or three years. Pigs are a very magical animal in both Irish and Icelandic mythology. In Ireland and its neighbor Wales, pigs were believed to move back and forth between the world of man and the world of the gods⁵⁰, while in Iceland and other Germanic countries it was believed that Frey, a fertility god, rode in a chariot pulled by a boar.⁵¹ Also appearing in both Icelandic and Irish literature is a pig that is slaughtered for feasting every night and comes alive the next day.^{52, 53}

The most extraordinary memories in *Landnám* concerning religion and magic involve landscape features and fish, and there are just as many heathens involved as Christians.

[Asolf] was a devout Christian and would have nothing to do with the heathen. He wouldn't even accept food from them. He built himself a house...and kept out of people's way, so they tried to find out what he used for food, and saw there was a lot of fish in the house. When they came to the stream that flowed past the house it seemed to be teeming with fish....⁵⁴

When the other settlers see the stream, they make Asolf leave so they can fish in the stream. However, the stream empties of fish, and instead Asolf's new river becomes full with fish. He is chased over his district with repeated results until he seeks refuge at a relative's house and lives out his life there. *Landnám* remarks, "...people now think of him as the holiest of men."⁵⁵ While fish have an obvious Christian connection, this power is not limited to Christians. "Thurid the Sound-Filler went from Halogaland [in Norway] to Iceland.... The reason why she was called

⁴⁷ Ibid., 60.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 85.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 97.

⁵⁰ John Carey, "Math son of Mathonwy" (lecture, University College Cork, Ireland, November 29, 2007).

⁵¹ Snorri, *The Prose Edda*, 82.

⁵² John Carey, trans., "The Adventure of Cormac [son of Art and] Grandson of Conn", in *The Celtic Heroic Age*, ed. John Koch (4th ed., Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2005). The pig is only cooked by telling truths.

⁵³ Snorri, *The Prose Edda*, 63. The boar is in the hall of Óðinn and serves the warriors who live there in their afterlife.

⁵⁴ Pálsson and Edwards, *Landnámabók*, 26.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 26.

the Sound-Filler was that during a famine in Halogaland she filled every sound with fish by means of witchcraft.”⁵⁶

Kalman or Colman the Hebridean was mentioned in the previous chapter as a free Gaelic settler. His son was Sturla the Priest (the use of this term will be discussed later), and Sturla’s son was Bjarni. Bjarni had a property dispute with a neighbor over land beyond the Hvit River, where Bjarni’s land technically ended. When “Bjarni promised to become a Christian...Hvit River changed its course and made a new channel where it flows now, so Bjarni gained possession” of the disputed land.⁵⁷ Note how it is not prayer or saintly intercession that moves the river, but rather the *promise* of becoming Christian. This brings to mind the popular story of Emperor Constantine and the Battle of Milvian Bridge where he promised to become Christian if he won the battle – a sort of bribery to the Christian God. The authors of *Landnám* record that Bjarni did in fact become a Christian and built a church on the acquired land; is it implied that if Bjarni went back on his word, the river would change course again?

“When Lodmund was an old man, another sorcerer, Thrasi, was living at Skogar. It happened one morning that Thrasi saw a great flood of water, and by means of his witchcraft he directed the flood east to Solheimar [Lodmund’s farm].” The two sorcerers push the flood back and forth and then agree on a point “where the distance to the sea was shortest. This river is now called Jokuls River, and forms the Quarter boundary.”⁵⁸

The Quarters are important in Icelandic history, and it is very notable that magic created the boundary between two of them as recorded in *Landnám*. Iceland was partitioned into directional quarters early on in its history; there were quarterly law-courts in the tenth century and *Landnám* itself is divided by the four regions. Ireland also was divided into four directional

⁵⁶ Ibid., 70.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 32.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 116.

quarters from its earliest history and the divisions, now called provinces, are still important in modern government and culture.⁵⁹ Iceland and Ireland also contain a fifth “nether” region that is supposedly in the middle of the country but actually sandwiched into an accessible corner: Þingvellir in Iceland where the national law-court met, in the south-west, and Meath [“Middle”] in Ireland where the High Kingship of Tara was based, in the mid-east.

Much has been made of the connections between Irish druids and liminal places⁶⁰, and it is possible that Lodmund and Thrasi’s magical division echoes Irish stories of magical boundaries.

Landnám contains another story of supernatural landscaping. Lodmund, the sorcerer who had made Jokuls River with Thrasi, moved away from the place he had originally settled and then caused it to become inhabitable. “[W]hen they hoisted sail he lay down and gave everyone strict orders not to mention his name. After he’d been lying there for a short while there was a loud crash, and his men could see a landslide sweeping down the farmstead where he had lived.”⁶¹ The reason for Lodmund’s decisive departure is that his “high-seat pillars” were found in another area; this is a famous aspect of the Icelandic settlement that appears repeatedly within *Landnám* and the sagas.

High-seat pillars appear to be decorated staves that were part of, or flanked, the seat at the head of the table. These were vital to every household, carved with sacred images, and they floated – perfect navigation tools for religious people asking their gods to guide them to the best location. “Some scholars doubt whether this pious exercise ever took place at all, because the

⁵⁹ Munster, Leinster, Ulster, and Connacht. Each has their own sports teams, dioceses, and cultural divides, most notably Ulster which contains, but is not synonymous with, Northern Ireland.

⁶⁰ The driving concept is that Irish mythology and presumably heathen religion runs on contact between the world of humans and the world of the gods, and thus boundaries or edges are where the worlds meet. John Carey, “The Location of the Otherworld in Irish Tradition” in *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature*, ed. Jonathan M. Wooding (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 116-7.

⁶¹ Pálsson and Edwards, *Landnámabók*, 116.

odds against finding them again must have been astronomical.”⁶² Yet settlers are mentioned as throwing their pillars overboard in at least three entries⁶³, and variations on this theme often arise. Skallagrim Kvedulfsson uses his father’s coffin⁶⁴, Hastein Atlason uses his bench-boards⁶⁵, and Crow-Heidar announces that “he wasn’t going to throw his high-seat pillars overboard as he thought it a stupid way to make one’s decisions.”⁶⁶

Hallstein Thorolfsson appears to have gone to Iceland without pillars, a problem in the nearly treeless island. “He held sacrifices so that Thor would send him high-seat pillars. Then a tree was washed ashore on his land, sixty ells long and two fathoms thick, and this was used for making high-seat pillars for almost every farm there in the fjords.”⁶⁷ It should be noted that within *Landnám* and other medieval Icelandic literature that heathens along with their gods are almost always remembered respectfully. Successful petitions are recorded from both heathens and Christians throughout the sagas, as will be shown below.

The well-known scholar of Norse heathenism, Gabriel Turville-Petre, remarks that among the Icelanders, “Some thought that belief in Þórr was not inconsistent with the Christian faith.”⁶⁸ The epitome of this observation is Helgi the Lean, the honored settler whose mother was an Irish princess. “Helgi’s faith was very much mixed: he believed in Christ but invoked Thor when it came to voyages and difficult times. When Helgi sighted Iceland, he consulted Thor as to where he should put in.... Helgi believed in Christ and called his home after him.”⁶⁹ The polytheist pre-Christian religion of the Icelanders was not just the belief in a plurality of certain gods, but rather the *belief* in all gods everywhere, and individual *devotion* to one or a small

⁶² Magnus Magnusson, *Iceland Saga* (1987; repr., Stroud, Gloucester: Tempus Publishing Limited, 2005), 76.

⁶³ Pálsson and Edwards, *Landnámabók*, 21, 45, 116.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 27-8.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁶⁸ Turville-Petre, “The Cult of Óðinn in Iceland”, 6.

⁶⁹ Pálsson and Edwards, *Landnámabók*, 97.

number of them. The figure of Christ preceded Christian monotheism into northern Europe. Until Iceland converted en masse and got the full message, Christ was seen as one of countless deities throughout the world who could be worshipped at the choice of the devotee.

Helgi's mother Rafarta should have taught him better – or else she was not a monotheist Christian herself. It is not beyond the improbable that as an Irish royal woman, Rafarta and her family had retained Irish polytheist religious traits. Kingship in Ireland was intimately connected with the land and therefore all the ancient, pre-Christian nature-based traditions bound up in it. For example, in the seventh-century Irish text *Lives of St. Patrick*, a pagan king named Loegaire allows St. Patrick to proselytize in his kingdom but refuses to accept baptism himself. After his death, Loegaire is required to be buried upright in his armor, facing his people's enemies, so that he can serve as their guardian even in death.⁷⁰ This kingly burial is also reminiscent of previously covered stories in *Landnám* where Icelandic heathens believe in an underground afterlife.

The term *priest* occurs in many places throughout *Landnám*. The religion of the priest is only definitive in three entries. The first is Thorhadd the Old, the Norwegian temple priest described earlier in the chapter. The second is: "Thord Frey's-priest, from whom many people are descended."⁷¹ This indicates that being a heathen priest did not preclude marriage, or at least having children. The third priest is Christian: "Arngrim the Priest was asked by the twelve jurymen to give judgment in the case, and he dismissed the charge after Thorarin [the defendant's brother] had invalidated the case by taking an oath at the sacred ring."⁷² The oath-ring was apparently a feature of Germanic temples across northern Europe; it was a large ring

⁷⁰ John Carey, "Branwen Daughter of Llyr" (lecture, University College Cork, Ireland, November 8, 2007).

⁷¹ Pálsson and Edwards, *Landnámabók*, 122.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 42.

made of precious metal kept on an accessible altar for swearing oaths⁷³. In this story, it appears that Thorarin has invalidated Arngrim's Christian judgment by using heathen protocol.

Among the other priests in *Landnám* are Valgard the Priest and Ulf Aur-Priest,⁷⁴ the priests Thorbjorn and Hamund of Goddales,⁷⁵ a father named Ljotolf the Priest,⁷⁶ a husband named Thorgeir the Ljosawater-Priest,⁷⁷ and two married men named Askel the Priest and Thorstein the Priest⁷⁸. It is likely that the priests at Goddales (God-dales) were Christian, but the rest could easily be either. A priestess is also mentioned in *Landnám*⁷⁹, along with two bishops, one of whom is a father⁸⁰ while the other is married⁸¹. Clearly, there was no shortage of religious figures around, and most importantly, the authors of *Landnám* did not feel the need to clarify between the two wildly different kinds of priests. Icelandic heathen religion “is described as highly organized and, in the opinion of some scholars, suspiciously reminiscent of the Christian Church.”⁸² There were no bishops in heathen religion as far as we know, nor were there Christian priestesses, but in the isolated early medieval Iceland religious rules could have been bent.

The early medieval record of the settlement of Iceland is full of Christians, heathens, sorcerers, and people who were somewhere in between. There were also three entries of people whose epithet was “the Godless”, who “believed in their own strength and refused to hold

⁷³ Turville-Petre, “The cult of Óðinn in Iceland”, 4. An oath-ring sacred to Thor in Dublin was called in Irish *fail nó fáinne* or “ring of destiny”. This catchy title indicates that the Christian Irish respected the oath-ring, and may indicate that they had something similar in their pre-Christian traditions. For example, the *Lia Fail* or “Stone of Destiny” was used to grant high-kingship; clearly the adjective *fail* had divine and/or powerful connotations.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁸² Gunnar Karlsson, *The History of Iceland* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 19.

sacrifices”.⁸³ Recall the untimely, dishonorable demise of Hjorleif who also refused to honor the gods. Apparently, being a self-sure atheist was the only religious transgression to the authors of *Landnám*.

Egil's Saga

Egil's is a remarkable saga for its casual portrayal of heathen practices and beliefs. Figures throughout the saga have extraordinary talents and abilities, and are yet treated as normal people with mundane problems. The eponymous hero and many of his associates demonstrate a great aptitude for magic of various types. It is believed that the author of *Egil's* may be none other than Snorri Sturluson.⁸⁴ If this is true it is possible that he used the saga as a complement to the *Prose Edda* as a showcase for heathenism in action.

“Skallagrim [Egil's father] ...chose the strongest and boldest of his men and neighbors to go with him...[including] the brothers Thorbjorn Hunchback and Thord Hobbler. They were known as Thoranna's sons – she lived near Skallagrim and was a sorceress.”⁸⁵ Note that the brothers are both named for their debilitating deformities, and yet Skallagrim considers them of the “strongest and boldest”. It is very likely that they inherited or learned sorcery from their mother to make up for their physical disabilities. If they are known as Thoranna's sons then they value her name over the name of their father and term themselves such, an important note to make while considering identity. “In all there were twelve in the party, all outstandingly

⁸³ Pálsson and Edwards, *Landnámabók*, 22, 35.

⁸⁴ Magnusson, *Iceland Saga*, 236.

⁸⁵ Bernard Scudder, trans., “Egil's Saga” in *The Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (1997; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 40.

powerful men, and many of them were shape-shifters. ‘...[T]hey are more like giants than human beings in size and appearance.’”⁸⁶

The unusual abilities and appearance of these men may indicate a relationship between physical appearance and spiritual or psychic power. The hero of the tale, who has not been born yet, is known for his ugliness as well as his intelligence. It is a common association in traditional cultures, including Ireland. Deformity is associated with sinister magic in stories of the *Fomori* (“Under-horrors”) and other Irish tales,⁸⁷ while ancient pagan heroes of Ireland are described as gigantic in comparison to modern or contemporary people.⁸⁸ It seems to be that people who appear strange are considered to think or act strangely as well, a common literary motif of the outside appearance echoing the inner self. But not only people with deformities or unnatural height possess the ability to do witchcraft in *Egil’s*.

“Gunnhild was outstandingly attractive and wise, and well versed in the magic arts...Thorgeir was very wealthy, made many sacrifices to the gods and was well versed in the magic arts.... Skallagrim had a servant woman named Thorgerd Brak.... She was an imposing woman, as strong as a man and well versed in the magic arts.”⁸⁹ The repetition of the phrase “well versed in the magic arts” three times in the space of five modern printed pages is surely intentional. Gunnhild, Thorgeir and Thorgerd are all upstanding characters within *Egil’s* and the author must have been making the point that knowing sorcery was common in Skallagrim’s time.

Of great interest is Thorgerd Brak the servant woman. Brak is likely Old Irish *brecc* (“freckled”) meaning Thorgerd is an Irish sorceress. The deformity-magical skill relationship

⁸⁶ Ibid., 41.

⁸⁷ John Carey, “*The Adventure of Loegaire son of Crimthann*” (lecture, University College Cork, Ireland, November 2, 2007).

⁸⁸ For example, the warriors in *Acallam na Senórach*: when St. Patrick’s men saw them they “were seized with fear and horror at the sight of these enormous men, warriors of an earlier age.” Dooley and Roe, *Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, 5.

⁸⁹ Scudder, “Egil’s Saga”, 59-63.

arises again with the term *brecc*. While seen as quintessentially Irish today, freckles were unattractive in early medieval Ireland⁹⁰, and *brecc* has the connotation of “spotted” or “marked”. Thorgerd Brak is thus a symbol of the crossroads between Gaelic Christianity and Norse heathenism, as a heathen woman from a nominally Christian land.

“Bard had prepared a feast for [King Eirik Blood-axe] because a sacrifice was being made to the *dísir*...Many toasts were drunk, each involving a whole ale-horn.”⁹¹ This passage from *Egil’s* describes a heathen ritual known as the *sumbel* (Old English *cymbol* and many other spellings) where a horn of alcohol, usually ale or mead, is passed around while toasts are made. Egil proves to have a strong stomach and the queen feels embarrassed by her inability to quench his thirst, so she slips poison into his drinking horn. “Egil took out his knife and stabbed the palm of his hand with it, then took the drinking-horn, carved runes⁹² on it and smeared them with blood.... The horn shattered and the drink spilled on to the straw.”⁹³

By using mystical carvings imbued with his blood, Egil is able to avert his death, a very delicate magical art. Runes appear again within *Egil’s* when Egil diagnoses a sick girl’s illness as an improper use of runes. A besotted farmer’s son carved what he thought were runes for love on whalebone and hid it under her pillow, but he actually carved runes for sickness and no one thought to look for the offending item before Egil.⁹⁴ Clearly Egil has great power in a heathen sense and the thirteenth-century author has no qualms about preserving this talent of his.

⁹⁰ Kevin Murray, “*The Wooing of Ailbe*” (lecture, University College Cork, Ireland, February 29, 2008).

⁹¹ Scudder, “*Egil’s Saga*”, 67.

⁹² *Runes* are one of the most intriguing and misunderstood aspects of pre-Christian Scandinavian religion. They were an alphabet that could be used for writing messages, but more often they were used for magical purposes, where each letter had a certain meaning and the combination and placement of them signified different meanings and desired outcomes. Runes show up everywhere from Nazi Germany insignia to decorated gemstones in modern New Age shops, and intense debate rages over their use and design. For an excellent introduction to historical and modern usage of the runes, see Diana L. Paxon, *Taking Up the Runes* (York Beach, ME: Red Wheel/Weiser LLC, 2005).

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 141, 147.

The first signs of Christianity in the Scandinavian world appear in relation to merchants in *Egil's*. If heathens wanted to trade with Christians, they would need to receive the *primo signatio*, a kind of pre-baptism which was treated reverentially by the Christians and indifferently by the heathen merchants. "Anyone who had taken the sign of the cross could mix freely with both Christians and heathens, while keeping the faith that they pleased."⁹⁵ This compromise favoring the Christians is a preview, perhaps intentional, of the Icelandic Conversion in 999 or 1000 CE, covered in the following saga:

Laxærdal Saga

The Conversion of Iceland is covered in many different sources, and they more or less agree: it was a decision made at the national law-court called the Alþing, it was made based on political rather than moral or religious motivation, and it allowed heathen practices to persist in private for at least several years⁹⁶. The date shifts between 1000 and 999 CE because the early medieval Icelandic calendar began on September 1, confusing contemporary historians' concept of events occurring in the "same" year.⁹⁷ By far the most personable and revealing coverage of the Conversion is found in *Laxærdal*, which includes the story of Bolli Bollarson and Kjartan Olafsson's trip to Norway and their personal conversion.

"King Olaf [Tryggvason] decreed that the Norwegians should adopt a new religion, and far from all of his subjects were prepared to agree to this... The Icelanders held counsel and agreed among themselves to refuse to adopt the new religion which the king had decreed."⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Ibid., 81.

⁹⁶ The text that deals with this topic most directly is, of course, *Kristni Saga*. Siân Grønlie, trans., *Íslendingabók, Kristni Saga: The Book of the Icelanders, The Story of the Conversion*, vol. XVIII of Viking Society for Northern Research Text Series, ed. Anthony Faulkes and Alison Finlay (University College London, 2006), 35-56.

⁹⁷ Magnusson, *Iceland Saga*, 163.

⁹⁸ Scudder, "Egil's Saga", 347.

Within Kjartan and Bolli's trip to Norway, *Laxærdal* recalls the dissent as well as the support of Christianity in Norway under King Olaf. Unlike many Irish tales where a saint walks into a kingdom and everyone lines up to receive baptism⁹⁹, early medieval Icelandic literature preserves the conflict that surrounded the official adoption of Christianity. The Icelanders had to maintain a polite disinterest in the Norwegian political issue, but before long it would become an Icelandic issue as well. Their displeasure is hilariously and subtly summed up in two lines: "[King Olaf] ordered the Icelanders to come before him and asked whether they wish to be baptized. Not really, they replied."¹⁰⁰

Before long, though, Kjartan realizes the political advantage he and other Icelanders would have if they became Christian. "It seems to be that our welfare depends on our believing this God whom the king supports to be the one true God. I doubt that the king is any more eager to have me convert than I am to be baptized."¹⁰¹ Kjartan, Bolli, and the rest of the Icelanders become baptized, and Kjartan becomes a model Christian. "Kjartan fasted on dry foods alone during Lent, the first man known to have done so in Iceland."¹⁰² What about all the supposedly Christian Gaelic slaves in Iceland? Did they all forget about Lent in their new country? Either way, the author of *Laxdæla* did not consider the Gaelic Christians' Lent, if they held one, to count. Note his use of the term "known to have done so": this could be a hint that he was aware of, or envisioned, enslaved Christians secretly holding Lent.

Kjartan's acceptance and support of Christianity in *Laxdæla* may be connected to his Irish grandmother and Gaelic name. If this were the case though, why would the author write that Kjartan felt no attraction to the religion, and converted for political reasons after personal

⁹⁹ Stories of this nature concerning St. Patrick are ubiquitous.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 348.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 351.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 361.

deliberation? It seems instead that Kjartan is Iceland in miniature in terms of his conversion: reluctance at first, then acceptance for political advantage, and finally a genuine expression of piety. By using the figure with the Gaelic name, who is one-eighth Irish, the author may be making a subtle statement of the Gaelic connection with Christianity before the Conversion, and promoting Icelandic identity as a pious nation by associating piety with people of Gaelic descent.

The Vínland Sagas

“Heathen were the people of Greenland at that time.”¹⁰³ “Greenland had been converted to Christianity by that time, although Eirik the Red had died before the conversion.”¹⁰⁴ “In those days Christianity was still in its infancy in Greenland.”¹⁰⁵ During the course of the Saga of Greenlanders and Eirik the Red’s Saga, a mass conversion occurs in Greenland in a bloodless and logical movement similar to that of Iceland. It was politically motivated, as the king of Norway, Olaf Tryggvason, was a devout Christian and anyone who wanted to gain power in the North Sea had to be his ally and thus Christian. This saga speaks about Greenlanders as a unit without examining the individual, and uses the conversion as a conventional chronological marker.

Early in the saga is a remarkable passage about a woman named Thorbjorg the “Little Prophetess” and her visit to Herjolfsnes in Greenland. She is a fortune-teller and spends “the winter visiting, one after another, farms to which she had been invited, mostly by people curious to learn their own future or what was in store for the upcoming year.” A detailed description of her costly and unusual wardrobe is written, continuing the theme of unusual appearance

¹⁰³ Keneva Kunz, trans., “The Vínland Sagas” in *The Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (1997; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 636.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 643.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 644.

connected with witchcraft. She is clearly well-paid for her services, which are depicted as true and useful rather than the work of a charlatan.

She asked for women who knew the chants required for carrying out magic rites, which are called ward songs [*varðlokkur*]....
Gudrid answered, 'I have neither magical powers nor the gift of prophecy, but in Iceland my foster-mother, Halldis, taught me chants she called ward songs.'¹⁰⁶

At first Gudrid is hesitant to help Thorbjorg, as she is a Christian. However, she is persuaded by her husband to assist Thorbjorg and “spoke the chant so well and so beautifully that people there said they had never heard anyone recite in a fairer voice.”¹⁰⁷ The ritual is a success and Thorbjorg receives prophetic messages from disembodied “spirits”. This passage demonstrates that heathenism was practiced in Greenland, likely the mysterious and feminine magic termed *seið* as all participants are female. Gudrid had learned the songs from her foster-mother who was presumably heathen (Halldis was deceased at this time) and remembers them despite having become a Christian. She also performs the songs and receives a prophecy despite her conversion. This passage indicates both that the conversion was not as sharply defined as previously claimed, as well as women playing an important role in magical rites.

Women were also important in the Christian conversion of Greenland.

[Olaf Tryggvason said] ‘...you will go as my envoy and convert Greenland to Christianity.’
[Leif] soon began to advocate Christianity...
Eirik was reluctant to give up his faith, but Thjodhild [his wife] was quick to convert and had a church built.... After her conversion, Thjodhild refused to sleep with Eirik, much to his displeasure.¹⁰⁸

When Eirik’s son becomes Christian, Thjodhild follows him despite Eirik’s reluctance, and essentially divorces him after her conversion. It is not stated whether she is withholding sexual

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 659.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 661.

pleasure from him as punishment for not converting, or whether she has become a nun; either way Thjodhild felt confident enough both in her own agency as well as the new faith to stand up to her husband.

Karlefsni and his men sail south of Leif Eiriksson's settlement in Vínland and run out of food during the winter. Karlefsni tells his men to pray to God but nothing happens, then one Thorhall disappears for several days. They find him "staring skywards, with his mouth, nostrils and eyes wide open...mumbling something."¹⁰⁹ Thorhall is elsewhere introduced as paying "scant heed to the faith since it had come to Greenland" and his strange behavior is explained when a whale beaches itself nearby.

"'Didn't Old Redbeard [Thor] prove to be more help than your Christ? This was my payment for the poem I composed about Thor, my guardian, who's seldom disappointed me.'"¹¹⁰ When the other men realize that the whale was procured through heathen prayer, they refuse to eat it. This saga, while recorded by Christians about a time after the conversion, recalls that at least one member of Karlefsni's crew is still heathen, and that his petition to his guardian deity worked.

The author or author of the Vínland sagas was very comfortable with the presentation of pre-Christian beliefs and dissidents of the Conversion, despite the composition of the saga dating to more than two hundred years afterwards. Built into Icelandic identity was a reverence for native superstition and the heathen faith – not necessarily an approval, but definitely not an outright condemnation, as evidenced by its ample appearance in the Vínland and other sagas. Just as pre-Christian beliefs remained in the Gaelic mindset beyond the conversion to

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 667.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 668.

Christianity, Iceland preserved elements of the native Norse faith long after it became outlawed. Respect for the past and ancestors extended to their faith.

Njal's Saga

Njal's, running on law and blood-feud issues, contains a smaller proportion of religion and witchcraft than *Landnám* and most other sagas. However, superstition and religious identity – whether someone was Christian or heathen – still played an important role in the progression of the plot. Personal spirits in the form of animals abound and a spell sets up one of the first conflicts of the tale. Recall Gunnhild the Norwegian queen and Hrut, her Icelandic lover. “She put her arms around his neck and kissed him and spoke: ‘If I have as much power over you as I think I have, then I cast this spell: you will not have sexual pleasure with the woman you plan to marry in Iceland...because you did not tell me the truth.’”¹¹¹

Gunnhild is elsewhere described as skilled in magic¹¹² and could be by her use of the phrase “power over you” that the efficacy of her spell is related to her sexual intimacy and/or her higher social rank towards Hrut. As described in the preceding chapter, Gunnhild’s spell works perfectly. This is an interesting glimpse into thirteenth-century Icelandic concepts of witchcraft: Gunnhild appears to use no props or incantations and the authors did not make the point of providing the source of her magical powers. Is it possible that because she and Hrut were already in bed together and vulnerable that her spell could work without any kind of physical props?

Early in the saga, a particular wizard and his magical prowess prove important to the plot. “Svan was skilled in magic...he was overbearing and vicious to deal with.” He is Hallgerd’s uncle and meets her Hebridean foster-father Thjostolf at her first wedding, “and there was

¹¹¹ Robert Cook, trans., “*Njal's Saga*” (1997, repr. Penguin Classics: 2001), 13.

¹¹² Scudder, “*Egil's Saga*”, 59.

friendship between them at once.”¹¹³ When Thjostolf slaughters Thorvald, he goes to Svan’s farm for protection and receives it in a supernatural way. “Just then Svan had a yawning attack and declared, ‘Osvif’s personal spirits are coming this way.’” Svan waves a goatskin over his head and recites an incantation, and Osvif and his men are unable to reach the farm through the blinding fog of Svan’s creation.¹¹⁴ Thjostolf escapes unharmed, but Svan meets his death soon after, and he is seen to enter a mountain after his death.¹¹⁵

It is unclear how Svan knew that his yawns were caused by Osvif’s personal spirits, but they play an important role elsewhere in *Njal’s*. Hoskuld dreams of a big bear and two bear cubs, and concludes, “‘This bear was the personal spirit of none other than Gunnar of Hlidarendi,’” who had entered Hoskuld’s household in disguise.¹¹⁶ The dream alerted Hoskuld to Gunnar’s presence. In another chapter, the wise Njal and Thord are outside when Thord sees a bloody goat that Njal cannot. “‘You must be a doomed man,’ said Njal, ‘and you have seen your personal spirit, and now you must be on your guard.’ ‘That won’t do me any good,’ said Thord, ‘if my fate is sealed.’”¹¹⁷

Two important Irish superstitions appear in *Njal’s* that are explicitly stated to come from Ireland, indicating that the thirteenth-century author was aware of their source. The first is a dog from Ireland who “has the intelligence of a man – he will bark at anyone he knows to be your enemy, but never at your friends”.¹¹⁸ This recalls the Breton lay of *Bisclavret*, a werewolf who has become stuck in the shape of a dog and becomes an ally of the king. The second is the appearance of blood on a weapon, which is explained “that when such a thing happened in other

¹¹³ Cook, “Njal’s Saga”, 20.

¹¹⁴ 24.

¹¹⁵ 30.

¹¹⁶ 40.

¹¹⁷ 69.

¹¹⁸ 117.

lands it was called ‘wound rain’”.¹¹⁹ Wound or blood rain appears in other chapters of *Njal’s* and “occurs frequently as an omen of death in Old Icelandic literature, very likely under Irish influence.”¹²⁰

Njal’s also contains a surprisingly violent figure named Thangbrand who helps bring Christianity to Iceland. While the saga describes him as travelling to each district and converting them in sequence, he kills five people who disagree with him in three short chapters¹²¹ – not exactly embodying the Christian virtues of mercy. The author of *Njal’s* remembered Thangbrand not as a sweet-tempered missionary but instead a rather brutish agent of the Christian King Olaf Tryggvason. It is possible that the thirteenth-century author cast the historical King Olaf as a cruel king to emphasize his contemporary displeasure at loss of independence to the Norwegian king.

Conclusion of “Religion”

The very survival of the sagas is indebted to the spread of literacy in the wake of Christianity in Iceland. It is likely that the authors who could read and write well enough to record the epically long prose narratives had clerical training or perhaps were even monks writing in a cloister. Yet pre-Christian religious beliefs and practices are presented matter-of-factly, preserved wholesale alongside the attributes, dialogue, and actions of the figures in the sagas. Also, Christians and stories of the Conversion are not treated with blessed reverence but rather a stark realism that indicates a conscious connection with native beliefs that were gently left behind instead of ripped out from society. Thirteenth-century Christian Iceland did not see itself as a progressive or revolutionary culture but rather the evolutionary successor of the

¹¹⁹ 119.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 321.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 174-7.

original heathen settlers. This was a cornerstone of their national identity: the restrained but indelible fondness for all things practiced by their settler ancestors.

How else would Snorri Sturluson have the motivation, time, and audience to compose a thorough treatise on Norse mythology long after the Conversion? Why was the Poetic Edda compiled and preserved despite its explicitly non-Christian and in some ways subversive themes? What are all the benevolent witches and sorcerers doing in *Landnám* and the sagas when, according to Christianity, they are practicing demonology? Clearly the medieval Icelanders were not squeamish about their ancestors' actions nor in most cases felt the need to legitimize their inappropriate pre-Christian beliefs and rituals.

Instead, the Icelanders kept their ancestors' heathenism wholesale. While Snorri humanized the deities in his *Prose Edda* as well as his *Heimskringla*, characters like Egil and Thorbjorg continue to use magical practices to their benefit without any narrative harm or condemnation. The early medieval Icelandic identification with the settlers and ancestors extended to the religious and superstitious realm. Interestingly but probably not coincidentally, the only other western European country to also legitimize and preserve pre-Christian beliefs and practices was Ireland.

There are literally dozens of stories in early Irish literature which include gods, goddesses, druids, talking animals, and other inappropriate figures as characters, whose stories are preserved unapologetically by the very Christian monks who were supposed to be eradicating them.¹²² It is not a great leap to conclude that the very preservation of Norse mythology, surviving as it does almost exclusively in Icelandic texts, is owed to the great numbers of Gaels in Iceland who naturally approved the transmission of pre-Christian stories. Add to that the

¹²² John Carey, "Introduction to Celtic Religion and Mythology" (lecture, University College Cork, Ireland, January 9, 2008).

Gaelic motifs in Icelandic literature such as talking severed heads, resuscitating pigs, and deceptive enchantments on whole landscapes, and the Gaelic influence on native Icelandic religious identity is profound.

V. Concluding Remarks

Modern Icelanders, being the direct descendents of their settler forebears, are socially imbued with centuries of national history and ethnically encoded with the settlement of Iceland in their very genes. Without immigrations, revolutions, or indeed any kind of noteworthy break with tradition, in Iceland the long slow march of history becomes compacted into a simple matter of successive generations. The identity which medieval Icelanders constructed for themselves in the thirteenth century survives in many ways to the present day without alteration. However, the genetic revelation of a surfeit of Gaels involved in the settlement dramatically challenges the long-held assumption of a mostly Norwegian and almost purely heathen set of ancestors for the Icelanders. Whether this discovery will become carefully assimilated into the current belief or whether it will definitively replace it, is still to be seen.

In this thesis I have attempted to use the sagas and historical text of the *Landnámabók* as a window into the mind of the thirteenth-century Icelander, faced with the loss of national autonomy to Norway and desperately seeking a cultural identity of his or her own. Coupled with this task is the attempt to understand how Gaels were integrated into the medieval Icelandic society in some ways and discarded in others. Nothing is certain. The study of medieval Iceland seems to raise three questions for every one that is answered. I look forward to pulling out isolated arguments and unanswered questions as inspiration for theses, dissertations, and other graduate work to come.

Thank you for reading my work.

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