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The dead in dreams: medieval Icelandic conceptions of the unquiet dead

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ABSTRACT

This article examines encounters with the dead in medieval Icelandic contemporary sagas (*samtiðarsögur*) and the changes in cultural conceptions of the power of the dead to return as reflected in these sources. Whereas the better known family sagas (*Íslendingasögur*) that were based on centuries-old oral stories portrayed the undead as tangible restless corpses, in contemporary sagas that described more recent historical events the dead appeared in dreams. A short tale called *Kumlbúa þátrr* provides a case study, to which the examples of the dead appearing in dreams in other sources are contrasted. It is argued that the dead in dreams still acted as moral judges like the tangible restless corpses in the family sagas, but the focus of their attention often shifted from collective to individual responsibility for moral transgressions, thus reflecting the gradual individualisation and interiorisation of medieval Icelandic religious experience.

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Many studies have offered an extensive view of the medieval Icelandic conceptions of the unquiet dead.¹ The beliefs represented in Old Icelandic saga literature emphasise the tangibility of the phenomenon: the restless dead were no ethereal phantoms or immaterial spirits, but posthumously restless corpses. They appeared to the living in their tangible, still recognisable bodies. Left to their own accord, the restless dead would return in the darkness of the night, but in the world of literature they were also sometimes deliberately awakened to gain information from the other world.² Yet earlier studies of the medieval Icelandic undead have mostly concentrated on the dead that were encountered in a state of wakefulness. In this article, I will discuss medieval Icelandic conceptions of the dead that appeared in dreams.

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¹ The following abbreviation is used in this article: CGV: Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957).

See, for example, John D. Martin, 'Law and the (Un)Dead: Medieval Models for Understanding the Hauntings in Eyrbyggja saga', *Saga-Book* 29 (2005): 67–82; Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Fearless Vampire Killers: A Note about the Icelandic Draugr and Demonic Contamination in Grettis Saga', *Folklore* 120 (2009): 307–16; and idem, 'Vampires and Watchmen: Categorizing the Mediaeval Icelandic Undead', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 110 (2011): 281–300.

² On the Old Icelandic words for 'ghosts', such as *draugr* and *aptrganga*, see Jakobsson, 'Vampires and Watchmen'.

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Although apparitions of the dead in dreams and visions had been an object of great theological concern in the medieval Christian context ever since St Augustine and St Gregory, the dead appearing in dreams in saga literature have received much less attention.³ The gap in research is partly related to the sources. Much of the research on the most notorious medieval Icelandic revenants has concentrated specifically on the so-called family sagas (*Íslendingasögur*). Based on oral tradition, these anonymous sagas were written down in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, but they recall Icelandic events that had taken place c.870–1030, that is, from the Settlement of Iceland to shortly after the Conversion in 999/1000. In contrast, many of the dead that appear in dreams are found in the so-called contemporary sagas (*samtíðarsögur*). These sagas concentrate on Icelandic events that took place in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, at a time when Christianity was already well established in Iceland. Many of them were originally composed shortly after the actual events they relate, by both laymen and the clergy. Unlike family sagas that depicted centuries-old stories, contemporary sagas talked about people who were still living when the texts were written.⁴ Their potential as sources for the understanding of the restless dead in Icelandic culture lies in their immediacy. Their representation of the appearance of the deceased in dreams had to conform to contemporary expectations of how such encounters would take place.

The representation of the restless dead in medieval Icelandic sagas in general was not consistent or unambiguous. In these sources, the dead would often return of their own free will, especially if they had issues unresolved in the realm of the living. Some of them are simply portrayed as malicious persons in life who wished to do harm to those who survived. Others returned to grant people help or support. The capacity to return was linked not only to the strong will of the deceased, but also to their material bodies. Undecayed bodies retained a kind of energy that was required for posthumous activity, sometimes fuelled by anger felt at the moment of death and preserved in the corpse.⁵ Unlike in medieval European contexts, the return of the dead had more to do with the character of the person in question than the manner of his or her death.⁶ The

³ For the Christian tradition, see Jesse Keskiäho, *Dreams and Visions in the Early Middle Ages: The Reception and Use of Patristic Ideas, 400–900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), especially 76–136. For the saga literature, see Wilhelm Henzen, *Über die Träume in der altnordische Saga-Litteratur* (Leipzig: G. Fock, 1890); Georgia Dunham Kelchner, *Dreams in Old Norse Literature and Their Affinities in Folklore* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935); and Robert James Glendinning, ‘The Dreams in Sturla Þórðarson’s *Íslendinga saga* and Literary Consciousness in Thirteenth-Century Iceland’, in *Alþjóðlegt fornsagnapening, Reykjavík 2.–8. ágúst: Fyrirlestrar I–II*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: University of Iceland, 1973).

⁴ Úlfar Bragason, ‘Sagas of Contemporary History (*Sturlunga saga*): Texts and Research’, in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 427–46; and Rudolf Simek and Hermann Pálsson, *Lexikon der altnordischen Literatur* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 2007), 330.

⁵ See Vésteinn Ólason, ‘The Un/Grateful Dead: From Baldr to Bægifótr’, in *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2003), 153–71; Ármann Jakobsson, ‘The Specter of Old Age: Nasty Old Men in the Sagas of Icelanders’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 104 (2005): 297–325; and Kirsi Kanerva, ‘Restless Dead or Peaceful Cadavers? Preparations for Death and Afterlife in Medieval Iceland’, in *Dying Prepared in Medieval and Early Modern Northern Europe*, eds. Anu Lahtinen and Mia Korpiola (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 18–43.

⁶ On medieval European beliefs, see Nancy Caciola, *Afterlives: The Return of the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), 207 and 232. On medieval Icelandic conceptions, see Kirsi Kanerva, ‘Having No Power to Return? Suicide and Posthumous Restlessness in Medieval Iceland’, *Thanatos* 4 (2015): 57–79.

power of the dead to come back of their own accord appears to have been occasionally challenged in sagas attributed to clerical authors. Instead of highlighting the energy that still resided in the dead body, these sagas implied that restless corpses were re-animated by the Devil or by unclean spirits, or that the dead were raised using necromantic magic.⁷ In many cases, the role of the dead was linked to moral issues, in that the dead could act as agents of order in communities where the social equilibrium had been disrupted.⁸

This study of the restless dead in medieval Icelandic culture examines the appearance of dead laymen in contemporary sagas. A short tale known as *Kumlbúa þátr* provides a case study, to which the examples of the dead appearing in dreams in other sources will be contrasted. I argue that the dead in dreams still acted as moral judges, but the focus of their attention often shifted from collective to individual responsibility for moral transgressions, thus reflecting the gradual individualisation of medieval Icelandic religious experience. The appearance of the dead whose bodies had already decayed challenged indigenous ideas of vitality that resided in the corpse and triggered restlessness, but the person still mattered: strong-willed people remained active in dreams, even if all that was left of them was mere bones.

The dead as moral judges

Kumlbúa þátr is a short tale about a man who steals a sword from an old grave and is then reproached by the angry cairn-dweller in a dream. The surviving manuscripts of this story are fairly late. *Kumlbúa þátr* was part of the so-called Vatnshyrna manuscript that was compiled around 1391–5 for Jón Hákonarson (d. 1402).⁹ The manuscript was destroyed in the Copenhagen fire in 1728, but seventeenth-century copies of it survive. The tale itself must be older, however. According to *Kumlbúa þátr*, the events it describes are situated in western Iceland, and the main character of the tale, Þorsteinn Þorvarðsson, is referred to as the brother-in-law of a certain Abbot Þorfinnr. The abbot in question, Þorfinnr Þorgeirsson (d. 1216), is also known from other medieval sources. From 1188 to 1216, he served as the abbot of the Benedictine monastery of Helgafell in western Iceland, and he appears to have been related to an Icelandic family called the Sturlungs (*Sturlungar*), the members of which held significant positions in thirteenth-century Icelandic politics. The events in *Kumlbúa þátr* would have taken place in the decades around 1200. The origin of the written version of the tale has been linked to a monastic context, with Helgafell monastery as the likely candidate for the place of origin.¹⁰

⁷ Jakobsson, 'Fearless Vampire Killers', 311; and Kirsi Kanerva, 'From Powerful Agents to Subordinate Objects? The Restless Dead in Thirteenth- and Fourteenth-Century Iceland', in *Death in Medieval Europe: Death Scripted and Death Choreographed*, ed. Joëlle Rollo-Koster (New York: Routledge, 2017), 40–70.

⁸ See Kirsi Kanerva, 'The Role of the Dead in Medieval Iceland: A Case Study of Eyrbyggja Saga', *Collegium Mediaevale* 24 (2011): 23–49; and eadem, 'Messages from the Otherworld: The Roles of the Dead in Medieval Iceland', in *Deconstructing Death: Changing Cultures of Death, Dying, Bereavement and Care in the Nordic Countries*, ed. Michael Hviid Jacobsen (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2013), 111–30.

⁹ John McKinnell, 'Vatnshyrna', in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano (New York, NY: Garland, 1993), 689–90.

¹⁰ John Lindow, 'Meeting the Other: The Cases of Draumr Þorsteins Síðu-Hallssonar and Kumlbúa þátr', in *Myths, Legends, and Heroes: Essays on Old Norse and Old English Literature*, eds. Daniel Anlezark and John McKinnell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 77–90 (82–3).

According to the tale, Þorsteinn had seduced Steinvör, the wife of Höskuldr mágsefni, ‘and she had a child by him’ (*[h]ann átti við henni eitt barn*).¹¹ *Kumlbúa þáttr* then continues:

While Thorstein was in the middle of these difficulties, it happened once that he saw something strange while he was walking home late in the evening. He went into a small valley, and there he found a cairn containing a man’s grave. He felt down inside it underneath his feet and discovered a skeleton and a sword lying next to it. Thorstein took the sword with him, intending to come back in the morning. After night mass, Thorstein went to bed together with his wife [Helga Þorgeirdóttir], who slept next to him; he soon fell asleep. Then he dreamt that a big man came to him with a large, inlaid axe in his hand. The man was handsome. This man threatened Thorstein in no uncertain terms, warning him to return his sword, and said that such an act was unacceptable. Thorstein was rather frightened by the man’s threats, and he began to toss and turn in his sleep. His wife woke him and asked what the matter was, but he did not want to tell her, and he immediately went back to sleep.

The same apparition (in the shape of a handsome man, although according to the text, only his skeleton remained in the grave) then returns and speaks a verse, with which he expresses his wish to fight with Þorsteinn and calls him his ‘namesake’ (*namni*). Þorsteinn then answers the Dream-Þorsteinn with his own verse, where he claims that he is ready to pay back blow for blow, should the cadaver wish to fight. The dream then continues:

Then the cairn-dweller answered and said, ‘Thorstein, you have done just the right thing; nothing else would have been appropriate.’ Then Helga woke Thorstein and asked why he was tossing and turning, but he did not want to tell her. Soon afterwards it began to get light. Later Thorstein got out of bed and set out for the place where he thought the cairn was; but he never found it again, though he often looked for it. When he came home, he told his wife and other people what had happened.

The story is not explicit about the actual identity of the apparition in Þorsteinn’s dream. As John Lindow has suggested, the grave goods and the pole-axe that the cairn-dweller carries, used for cutting down trees, are a reference to pagan times and the period when Iceland was settled (c.870 onwards). Although the apparition refers to Þorsteinn as his namesake, it is not made explicit whether he is Þorsteinn’s ancestor or related to someone else in the district where his pagan grave is situated.¹² In the context of the tale, Dream-Þorsteinn is motivated to come back because he had to claim his stolen property. Similar to the physical revenants, he returned because he had some unfinished business, even if the state of affairs came about posthumously, as a consequence of Þorsteinn’s grave robbing. But the theft of grave goods that Þorsteinn performs during what in the text is called a ‘strange vision’ (*sýn kynliga*) is not the only deed in the tale he is associated with. At the beginning of the story, it is made clear that Þorsteinn Þorvarðsson had seduced another man’s wife and that they had a child together. Þorsteinn’s encounter with the cairn-dweller thus occurs at a time when he is still fooling around with another woman, even though he was married to the sister of the abbot.

¹¹ For the Old Icelandic text of *Kumlbúa þáttr*, see Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, eds., *Harðar saga*. Íslensk fornrit 13 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1991), 451–5; trans. Marvin Taylor, ‘The Tale of the Cairn-Dweller’, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders including 49 Tales*, eds. Viðar Hreinsson and others. 5 vols. (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), 2: 443–4.

¹² Lindow, ‘Meeting the Other’, 83 and 88.

In the presumably monastic context in which *Kumlbúa þáttr* was written down, Þorsteinn's adultery may indeed have been viewed as morally contemptible – the use of the word *órar*, 'fits of madness', to describe his condition suggests that the writer considered Þorsteinn's deed to be pure folly.¹³ It should be noted, however, that the Christian monogamous model of matrimony was adopted only gradually in Iceland in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.¹⁴ The new model was not immediately internalised by laymen. Out of wedlock relationships were undoubtedly practised after the adoption of this model, and, as the contemporary sagas attest, some thirteenth-century chieftains still had concubines.¹⁵ In the context of the events around 1200, however, especially when viewed from the laymen's perspective, the problems and conflicts to which Þorsteinn's adultery gave rise were predominantly social.

The social aspect of Þorsteinn's act is highlighted in the symbolism of the dream. Þorsteinn steals a sword, but he never actually uses it in the story; instead, he defends himself against Dream-Þorsteinn with poetry. The sword appears in the tale merely as a stolen object, which Þorsteinn may have only intended to 'borrow' (just like he 'borrowed' another man's wife), since he thinks about coming back and perhaps returning the weapon the next day.¹⁶ The sword could be a reference to a 'hairy sword' (*sverð í hári*), a poetic expression that the protagonist in the early fourteenth-century family saga *Grettis saga*, Grettir Ásmundarson, uses in his poetry to refer to his own penis.¹⁷ The sword could thus have been associated with reproduction, and it could have served as an indication of paternity and of the 'genetic' continuation of the family line.¹⁸ By conceiving a child with Höskuldr mágsefni's wife, Þorsteinn, had 'stolen' his family line. In medieval Icelandic culture, where networks were often based on blood relations and marriage arrangements, such a 'theft' could be the source of numerous social conflicts.¹⁹ In the light of the sword symbolism that points to Þorsteinn's promiscuous behaviour, like the restless corpses in family sagas Dream-Þorsteinn acts as a moral judge. He appears in Þorsteinn's dream because of his transgression of social norms to point out Þorsteinn's fault.²⁰

The role of Dream-Þorsteinn in *Kumlbúa þáttr* nevertheless challenges the view reflected in both family sagas and contemporary sagas, which emphasised the potential of dreams as sources of prognostic information.²¹ Unsurprisingly, then, the dead did not always appear in dreams dreamt by norm-breakers. Two cases in the contemporary

¹³ Lindow, 'Meeting the Other', 82.

¹⁴ On medieval Icelandic marriage models, see Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 18, 20–2, 27–9, 31–42 and 94–7; Auður Magnúsdóttir, *Frillor och fruvar: Politik och samlevnad på Island 1120–1400* (Göteborg: Historiska institutionen, 2001), 47–97 and 162–71; and Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, *Property and Virginity: The Christianization of Marriage in Medieval Iceland 1200–1600* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2010), 113, 117–21, 405 and 427–41.

¹⁵ Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 38–9.

¹⁶ The word for 'to marry' was *eiga*, which also denoted 'to own': see CGV, 118. The word implies that the wife was the property of her husband and that Þorsteinn had stolen or illicitly borrowed another man's property when he seduced his wife.

¹⁷ Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*. Íslenzk fornrit 7 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1936), 240.

¹⁸ On a man that sends a sword to his son whom he has never acknowledged, but whom everyone knows to be his son, as a kind of token of their kinship, see Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, eds., *Eyrbyggja saga*. Íslenzk fornrit 4 (Reykjavík: hið íslenzka fornritafélag 1935), 76–81, 107–9 and 155; and Kanerva, 'Role of the Dead', 36.

¹⁹ See Ruth Mazo Karras, 'Marriage and the Creation of Kin in the Sagas', *Scandinavian Studies* 75 (2003): 473–90.

²⁰ Kanerva, 'Role of the Dead', 42–4.

²¹ See Paul Schach, 'Symbolic Dreams of Future Renown in Old Icelandic Literature', *Mosaic* 4 (1971): 51–73; William Ian Miller, 'Dreams, Prophecy and Sorcery: Blaming the Secret Offender in Medieval Iceland', *Scandinavian Studies* 58 (1986): 101–23; and Lars Lönnroth, 'Dreams in the Sagas', *Scandinavian Studies* 74 (2002): 455–64.

saga known as the *Íslendinga saga*, written by Sturla Þórðarson (1214–84), a member of the Sturlunga clan, serve to illustrate this point. *Íslendinga saga* survives as part of the so-called *Sturlunga saga* compiled around 1300 presumably by Þórðr Narfason (d. 1308), whose paternal aunt Helga was married to Sturla.²² It relates stories about a certain man named Egill Halldórsson and a young woman called Jóriðr Hermundardóttir, the wife of a local priest, both of whom encounter a dead person in a dream.

For his part, Egill Halldórsson encounters one of his tenth-century ancestors, Egill Skalla-Grímsson. The message that the dead man delivers is not addressed to Egill himself, but to his relative Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241), the paternal uncle of Sturla Þórðarson. As the original owner of the farm Borg that his descendant Snorri now owns but intends to leave to move to another farm, Dream-Egill expresses his displeasure with the matter, but, unlike in Dream-Þorsteinn's case, expresses no hostility towards the dreamer who receives his message.²³ For her part, Jóriðr Hermundardóttir encounters an ancient female hero, Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, in four different dreams.²⁴ During these dream experiences, Jóriðr is so intimidated by the imposing dream-woman that it is only during her third encounter that she dares to ask her name, although by then the dream-woman has already told her that she comes from the 'land of the corpses' (*násheimr*). Jóriðr receives from the dream-woman information about the ongoing quarrels between chieftains and about the outcomes of these fights that took place in the 1250s, at a time when Iceland was practically in the middle of a civil war. The dream-woman also announces to Jóriðr her moral judgement about these conflicts. Her verdicts do not concern Jóriðr, who is merely a witness to these events and has not participated in the feuds. The criticism is directed towards those participants in the civil war whom she considers her enemies – or more precisely, who are the enemies of a certain chieftain called Gizurr Þorvaldsson (1209–1268), who later became a significant political figure in Iceland. The corpse of one of these enemies of Gizurr receives harsh treatment from Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, when she drags the man's body tied to her horse's tail in Jóriðr's fourth dream.²⁵

Even though these visiting dead express their moral contempt, neither Egill Halldórsson nor Jóriðr had broken any norms, and the apparitions that appear in their dreams do not pose any threat to them. Unlike Þorsteinn, both Egill Halldórsson and Jóriðr are innocent bystanders who receive the messages that the dead wish to deliver. Neither of the cases practically challenges the role of the dead as moral judges, but they emphasise the general nature of the information conveyed to them in dreams, whereas the message that Þorsteinn obtains from the dead man concerns him alone.

The discovery of the sinful self?

None of the dead discussed thus far asks the living to care for the souls of the deceased, a theme that was common in medieval European ghost stories in general.²⁶ From the

²² Marlene Ciklamini, 'Sturla Þórðarson', in *Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. Pulsiano, 613–14; Bragason, 'Sagas of Contemporary History', 429–31; Guðrún Nordal, 'Sagnarit um innlend efni: Sturlunga saga', in *Íslensk bókmenntasaga, I* (Reykjavík: Mál og Menning, 1992), 312–13; and Simek and Pálsson, *Lexikon*, 365–6 and 368–9.

²³ *Íslendinga saga*, in Guðbrand Vigfusson, ed., *Sturlunga saga*. 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1878), 1: 211.

²⁴ Medieval Icelanders knew Guðrún Gjúkadóttir from Eddic heroic poetry and from the late thirteenth-century *Völunga saga* that recites stories about the ancient mytho-heroic past. They probably considered Guðrún Gjúkadóttir to be a real historical person, but according to modern research she is only a literary figure.

²⁵ Vigfusson, ed., *Sturlunga saga*, 2: 220–1.

²⁶ For the medieval European context, see Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages: The Living and the Dead in Medieval Society*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 41. In Iceland,

Christian perspective, the only one who needed to worry about the state of his soul and purgatorial punishments was Þorsteinn the sword-thief. Þorsteinn nevertheless differs from his male counterparts who encounter and banish the dead in family sagas in that he is not of indeterminate social status: he is not actually or symbolically fatherless (that is, on bad terms with either of his parents or step-parents, or a bastard son, even if he himself produces illegitimate offspring).²⁷ His position in the ‘liminal’ state or space where he encountered the dead is merely caused by his own promiscuous behaviour that became the source of social disequilibrium.²⁸ Þorsteinn does test his strength against the deceased by uttering a poem, but he does not gain the status of a hero like the ghost-banishers in family sagas, where the dead pose a serious threat – both physical and mental, and sometimes even lethal – to all the living.²⁹

In fact, there is no chance for Þorsteinn to become a hero recognised by all since Dream-Þorsteinn does not harass the living, but only appears to him in his own private dream experience. His wife who sleeps beside him has no knowledge of the contents of his dream, but must ask him what the matter was after noticing that her husband is moving restlessly in his sleep. Unlike most of the malevolent revenants in family sagas that return of their own free will, the return of the dead in *Kumlbúa þáttr* is not a social event per se. Even though Dream-Þorsteinn points to moral problems that may influence other members of the society as well (for example, Karlsefni and his wife, her child by Þorsteinn, Þorsteinn’s wife and family, including her brother the abbot, to mention but a few), he points with his finger (or rather his axe) only to Þorsteinn.

From Þorsteinn’s perspective, the threat of physical violence that the dead imposes on him seems real, so much so that it elicits a fearful response in him. In the medieval Icelandic imagination, his fears may not have been that far-fetched. Family sagas suggest that people (be they dead or alive) or supernatural agents that appeared in dreams were expected to be capable of inflicting physical harm on the dreamer, such as eye pain that could result in the eyes bursting out, and even death.³⁰ The eye pain received from a nocturnal apparition thus resembles a kind of ‘sting of guilt’ that was connected to the misdeeds, offences and transgression of norms performed by the dreamer, who was then punished by supernatural means.³¹

prayers for the dead were already recommended, for instance, by the bishop of Skálholt, St Þorlákr (1133–93). See Margaret Cormack, ‘Visions, Demons and Gender in the Sagas of Icelandic Saints’, *Collegium Medievale* 7 (1994): 185–210 (194).

²⁷ Kanerva, ‘Messages from the Otherworld’. See also Torfi H. Tulinius, ‘Framliðnir feður: Um forneskju og frásagnarlist í Eyrbyggju, Eglu og Grettlu’, in *Heiðin minni: Greinar um fornar bókmenntir*, eds. Haraldur Bessason and Baldur Hafstað (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1999), 283–316; and Russell Poole, ‘Myth, Psychology, and Society in Grettis saga’, *Alvísmál* 11 (2004): 3–16.

²⁸ On the concept of liminality, see Victor W. Turner, ‘Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage’, in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*, eds. Arthur C. Lehmann and James E. Myers (Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield, 1985), 46–55.

²⁹ On these traits of the individuals that encounter and banish revenants, which appear in many of the ghost stories in family sagas, see Kanerva, ‘Messages from the Otherworld’. On the effects of the restless dead on the living, see Kirsi Kanerva, ‘Disturbances of the Mind and Body: Effects of the Living Dead in Medieval Iceland’, in *Mental (Dis)Order in Later Medieval Europe*, eds. Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Susanna Niiranen (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 219–42 (220–1).

³⁰ See James Cochrane, ‘Saying Goodbye to the Old Religion: Dreaming of the Rejected Object of Worship’, in *Scandinavia and Christian Europe in the Middle Ages: Papers of the 12th International Saga Conference, Bonn/Germany, 28th July–2nd August 2003*, eds. Rudolf Simek and Judith Meurer (Bonn: Universität Bonn, 2003), 107–14 (109–10); and Kirsi Kanerva, ‘Eigi er sá heill, er í augun verkir: Eye Pain as a Literary Motif in Thirteenth- and Fourteenth-Century Íslendingasögur’, *ARV: Nordic Yearbook of Folklore* 69 (2013): 7–35 (22).

³¹ Kanerva, ‘Eigi er sá heill’, 10–13.

In *Kumlbúa þátr*, Þorsteinn's case is slightly different. He is threatened by Dream-Þorsteinn, but no eye pain is inflicted on him, and he manages to avoid any serious consequences to his bodily health by reciting a verse. In the poem, he emphasises his readiness to strike back (perhaps with the cadaver's own sword that he had stolen from him) should the mound-dweller try to attack him. His encounter with the dead nevertheless causes him some anxiety. Although he had been reluctant to let his spouse know about the reason for his restlessness at night, the tale makes it explicit that later in the day 'he told his wife and other people what had happened' ('sagði konu sinni frá ok öðrum mönnum'). Prior to his 'confession', he had tried to locate the cairn once more, 'but he never found it again' (*ok fann hvergi síðan*). The sword no longer features in the story and the cairn where he found it has disappeared. The tale appears to imply that Þorsteinn may have tried to mend at least in part what he had broken (by returning the sword) and that his 'fits of madness' (*órar*) were over, as the cairn from which he had stolen the sword and where there could still be some precious objects to be taken had permanently disappeared.

Fear is rarely associated with heroes and respectable men in sagas, which makes Þorsteinn's reaction – his being frightened by Dream-Þorsteinn's threats ([*hann*] *óttadist ... hót hans*) – even more intriguing. Considering the possibility that *Kumlbúa þátr* was originally sketched in a monastic context, the influence of medieval Christian thought on the description of Þorsteinn's reaction cannot be ruled out. Christian thinkers considered fear to be a gift of God, provided that it was not followed by despair but by hope, and relieved by love and joy. A tormenting fear could be a sign of God's love, an experience that awakened the sinner and turned him or her back to God. In the Christian context, then, fear could be good, the first step in the process of penance, the sacrament offered by the medieval Church to relieve spiritual distress.³²

The tale suggests that Þorsteinn 'confesses' his deed to members of his community, but the text does not state clearly that he would have confessed his sins to a cleric to gain absolution for his sins, even though he may well have discussed the case with his brother-in-law, the abbot. The text does not mention that Þorsteinn practised any penance, bearing in mind that in Christian thought, oral confession alone would not have sufficed because remission of sin also required repentance.³³ Although the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) decreed annual confession to be obligatory for every Christian, confession and formal repentance would undoubtedly have been an established part of the religious life of medieval Icelanders even prior to that date. The earliest Icelandic version of a penitential that gave instructions for the practice of penance, known as the *Penitential of St Þorlákr*, probably dates from the end of the twelfth century. Both family sagas and contemporary sagas suggest that the common forms of penitence, which were in line with the instructions in European penitentials, were already practised in thirteenth-century Iceland.³⁴

³² On medieval conceptions of fear, see, for example, Robert Miner, 'Thomas Aquinas's Hopeful Transformation of Peter Lombard's Four Fears', *Speculum* 92 (2017): 963–75.

³³ On medieval repentance, see, for example, Karen Wagner, 'Cum aliquis venerit ad sacerdotem: Penitential Experience in the Central Middle Ages', in *A New History of Penance*, ed. Abigail Firey (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 201–18.

³⁴ On European penitentials, see Wagner, 'Cum aliquis venerit ad sacerdotem', 207. On the *Penitential of St Þorlákr*, see Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, 'Skriftaboð Þorláks biskups', *Gripla* 5 (1982): 77–114. On the common forms of penitence, see Helena M. Gamer and John T. McNeill, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal "Libri poenitentiales" and Selections from Related Documents* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1990), 31–3.

The fright that the dead man elicits in Þorsteinn thus makes his dream a kind of dream of conscience that evokes contrition. Fear awakens the sinner and turns Þorsteinn back to God. It cannot be excluded that Þorsteinn practised penance, even if the text does not make explicit mention of any penitential behaviour. Describing the outward signs of repentance may have been unnecessary, if such a portrayal served no political aims or was not needed to emphasise the piousness of the person.³⁵ From the perspective of the clerics in Helgafell monastery, Þorsteinn had not led a Christian life by following the models of proper moral conduct. He should now abandon his follies and adopt those models that would shape both his behaviour (his ‘outer man’) and his soul (his ‘inner man’), if he wished to remain a member of the community of Christians, to which his wife and his brother-in-law obviously belonged.³⁶ Responsibility for norm transgressions was not collective anymore: the dead did not return to harass the society as a whole. Even if dreams were perhaps the most common medium through which communication with the dead could occur in the context where the tale was written down, during this subjective nocturnal experience the dead could impose their judgement on the perpetrator alone without bothering the rest of the community.

Jóreiðr and Egill Halldórsson had not transgressed any norms (or at least we are not made aware of any such offences in *Íslendinga saga*), nor were they persons of indeterminate status in the strict sense. Their receptivity to messages from the other-world may nevertheless have been linked to their status in the community they inhabited. As Carol J. Clover has suggested, in medieval Iceland people were not categorised strictly by the binary opposition male-female, but by the opposition between *hvatr*, that is ‘powerful, vigorous and bold’, and *blauðr*, ‘soft, weak and powerless’. The latter referred to those who were part of the so-called *úmagi* group – in other words, to those who did not possess authority and were considered helpless and thus incapable of maintaining themselves. The *hvatr* group consisted of aristocratic men and some exceptional women, whereas the category of *blauðr* included, in Clover’s words, ‘most women, children, slaves and old, disabled, or otherwise disenfranchised men’.³⁷

Jóreiðr would undoubtedly have been counted among the *úmagi* who belonged to the *blauðr* group since she was maintained by her husband. Regardless of his sex, Egill Halldórsson may have been counted among the *úmagi*. Information about him is scant. *Íslendinga saga* refers to him as Snorri’s *heimamaðr*, literally a ‘home-man’, which indicated that he was one of the household, a dweller on Snorri’s farm, possibly but not necessarily a servant.³⁸ Dream-Egill speaks about Snorri as ‘our kinsman’ (*frændi várr*), suggesting that not only he but also Egill Halldórsson was related to Snorri.³⁹ The fact that he lived at Borg could indicate that his ancestors had lived at the farm ever since Dream-Egill’s father Skalla-Grímr Kveldúlfsson established it, but that he was not the head of the

On the practice of penitence in medieval Iceland, see Margaret Cormack, ‘Saints and Sinners’, *Gripla* 8 (1993): 187–218; and Kirsi Kanerva, ‘The Practice of Repentance in Medieval Iceland: Indigenous Ideas and Christian Influences’, *Suomen Kirkkohistoriallisen Seuran Vuosikirja* 108 (2019): 41–72.

³⁵ For these motives, see Cormack, ‘Saints and Sinners’.

³⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), 85–90.

³⁷ On this model, see Carol J. Clover, ‘Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe’, *Speculum* 68 (1993): 363–87 (380).

³⁸ CGV, 249.

³⁹ See also Gabriel Turville-Petre, ‘Old Norse Studies’, *The Year’s Work in Modern Language Studies* 8 (1937): 233–42 (237).

house since Snorri Sturluson was running the farm. Egill Halldórsson may have been a man who never inherited the farm, but nevertheless continued to live at Borg, which may have been owned and run by his relatives. Like all members of medieval Icelandic households (which were usually of the extended type), be they blood-relatives or servants who were employed by the master of the house, Egill Halldórsson would have participated in farming work (if he was not too old to do so), which may have granted him the name *heimamaðr*. He might have been an old or otherwise disenfranchised man maintained by Snorri and thus, like Jóreiðr, belonged to the group of *úmagi*.

In European Christian contexts, vulnerability to demonic possession or ecstatic visions as a consequence of the ‘openness’ of the body was generally ascribed especially to women as the weaker sex.⁴⁰ In medieval Icelandic thought, the mind was a bodily entity situated in the chest, and the body (and thus also the mind) was construed as open and porous, so that supernatural agents and projectiles as well as winds could penetrate the body’s boundaries through bodily orifices (like ears and eyes) and cause physical harm.⁴¹ Thus, the vulnerability ascribed to ‘soft, weak and powerless’ women could also explain Jóreiðr’s receptivity, if not to ecstatic visions, then at least to other-worldly dreams. As a member of the *blauðr/úmagi* group, Egill Halldórsson would have been considered equally open to other-worldly influences.

It should be noted, however, that in sagas the dead also appear in dreams to some prominent men who belonged to the *hvatr* group, who had *not* transgressed any norms and who experienced no anxiety over the encounter. One such dreamer is the chieftain Gizurr Þorvaldsson, who was the great-uncle of the compiler of *Sturlunga saga*, Þórðr Narfason. He was appointed the earl of Iceland by the Norwegian King Hákon IV in 1258, which made him the highest royal official in Iceland prior to 1262–4, when all Icelanders submitted to royal control. Prior to the battle of Örlygstaðir on 21 August 1238, Gizurr is said to have seen in his dream his dead uncle, Bishop Magnús Gizurason of Skálholt (d. 14 August 1237). In the dream, the bishop promised Gizurr support in the impending battle. Robert J. Glendinning has characterised the dream as a combination of ‘ancestor and kin-guardian dreams’ and ‘the appearance of a religious figure’.⁴² Accordingly, the communication between the dead and the living is represented in Gizurr’s case as a blessing and as a source of support for the dreamer, in line with the role of the benevolent mound-dwellers in family sagas.

Gizurr’s distinguished position in thirteenth-century politics presumably influenced the favourable image of him presented in *Íslendinga saga*.⁴³ His case, like Þorsteinn’s, nevertheless appears to illustrate a change in conceptions: the restless dead as upholders of social order had emphasised moral transgression as a collective concern, but now they conveyed messages in dreams, which made them more individualised in nature. These messages could still concern moral norms, or serve as advice, support or a blessing. Even if the dead did continue to keep an eye on morals, they gradually started to be harnessed in the service of the Christian monopoly and its individualistic, salvific aims.

⁴⁰ See Nancy Caciola, ‘Breath, Heart, Guts: The Body and Spirits in the Middle Ages’, in *Communicating with the Spirits*, eds. Gábor Klaniczay and Éva Pócs (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2005), 21–39 (22–6).

⁴¹ Kanerva, ‘Disturbances of the Mind and Body’, 231–3; and eadem, ‘*Eigi er sá heill*’, 17–19.

⁴² Vigfusson, ed., *Sturlunga saga*, 1: 372; and Glendinning, ‘Dreams in Sturla Þórðarson’s *Íslendinga saga*’, 4–5.

⁴³ See Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, ‘Guðrún Gjúkadóttir in Miðjumdalr: zur Aktualität nordischer Heldensage im Island des 13. Jahrhunderts’, in *Heldensage und Heldendichtung im Germanischen*, ed. Heinrich Beck (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), 183–96 (183–7).

The power to return

The dead bishop may have thanked his friends and networks in the heavenly realm and his own ‘saintliness’ for his capability to visit his kinsman in his dream, that is, if the person who experienced it (Gizurr) and the writer and the audience of the saga had been inspired by a medieval Christian view of dreams.⁴⁴ According to the tripartite view of dreams that was elaborated, among others, in an excerpt from the Old Icelandic translation of Honorius of Autun’s *Elucidarium* in the early fourteenth-century Hauksbók manuscript, dreams originated either from God, or the Devil, or from man himself.⁴⁵ Although perhaps sent by God to appear in Gizurr’s dream, the body of the bishop had rested in the grave for only about a year, and was presumably still undecayed.⁴⁶ Unlike the revenants in family sagas, however, Dream-Þorsteinn lacked a physical body – only his bones remained.

The absence of the body is noteworthy bearing in mind that posthumous restlessness usually required that there was some ‘life power’ or ‘energy’ left in the dead body to enable the activity. This conception survived in northern contexts up until the pre-industrial era. The corpse was a potential source of power that could be used for magical and medicinal purposes as long as there was *flesh on the bones*.⁴⁷ The fleshy bodies of the recently deceased in family sagas could serve as the source of energy required for their return, and, since the mind was construed as a bodily entity, the body was also central for the ‘mental functions’ of the dead, who could remain conscious of the events occurring in the world of the living in the vicinity of their burial places. The corpses could even preserve the anger that the person had felt at the moment of his or her death, which could also contribute to the cadaver’s posthumous activity.⁴⁸

Even though Dream-Þorsteinn lacked a physical body, he (or his skeleton) is, like some mound-dwelling corpses in family sagas, ‘awakened’ by Þorsteinn during the grave-robbing. Dream-Þorsteinn also appears in Þorsteinn’s dream as a person with a *body*, but the ‘resurrection’ is not rationalised or explained in *Kumlbúa þátr* in any way. Although his bones no longer have flesh on them, he can express posthumous activity – he is even capable of using language and desiring the return of his sword, suggesting that, in modern terms, he had not lost his mental functions completely

⁴⁴ The relationship with the Virgin Mary and saints in Heaven is construed as friendship, for example, in sagas about the bishop of Hólar, Guðmundr Arason. See Joanna A. Skórzewska, *Constructing a Cult: The Life and Veneration of Guðmundr Arason (1161–1237) in the Icelandic Written Sources* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 139 and 147–8.

⁴⁵ Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Hauksbók efter de Arnamagnæanske håndskrifter no. 371, 544 og 675, 4^o, samt forskellige papirshåndskrifter av det kongelige nordiske oldskrift-selskab* (Copenhagen: [s.n.], 1892–6), 170. On Hauksbók, see Gunnar Harðarson and Stefan Karlsson, ‘Hauksbók’, in *Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. Pulsiano, 271–2. On the Old Icelandic translation of the twelfth-century *Elucidarium*, see Simek and Pálsson, *Lexikon*, 80.

⁴⁶ The benevolent dead whose return is made possible by God also appear in such early thirteenth-century secular texts as *Færeyinga saga* and *Eiríks saga rauða*. See *Færeyinga saga*, in *Flateyjarbók: en samling af Norske Konge-sagaer med indskudte mindre fortællinger om begivenheder i og udenfor Norge samt annaler*, eds. Carl Rikard Unger and Guðbrandur Vigfússon. 3 vols. (Christiania: P.T. Mallings, 1860–8), 2: 398; and *Eiríks saga*, in *Eyrbyggja saga*, eds. Sveinsson and Þórðarson, 214–17.

⁴⁷ See Ólason, ‘Un/Grateful Dead’, 167; Nancy Caciola, ‘Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in Medieval Culture’, *Past and Present* 152 (1996): 3–45 (31–7); and Kaarina Koski, ‘Churchyard Beings as Representatives of the Body, Soul and Death: Belief Tradition from Early Twentieth-Century Lutheran Finland’, in *Body, Soul, Spirits and Supernatural Communication*, ed. Éva Pócs (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2019), 175–90 (180). On the magical and medicinal use of this ‘energy’ in medieval and pre-modern contexts, see P. Kenneth Himmelman, ‘The Medicinal Body: An Analysis of Medicinal Cannibalism in Europe, 1300–1700’, *Dialectical Anthropology* 22 (1997): 183–203 (185, 192 and 195–7).

⁴⁸ Kanerva, ‘Restless Dead or Peaceful Cadavers?’, 31–7.

even though his body had decayed, and thus his (posthumous) consciousness was at least partially intact. As reflected in family sagas, the bones, even the ashes, of some dangerous revenants or ritual specialists who were expected to possess special skills, continued to be dangerous to the living or harmful in some way.⁴⁹ However, bones alone or ashes are not represented in family sagas as possessing any power that would enable the re-animation of the dead and their wandering in the physical environment.

In fact, although corpses as such could be perilous (that is, not only the corpses of revenants), especially if they were in a process of rotting like the corpses mentioned in the late twelfth-century *Graenlendinga þátttr*, the bones of ordinary people did not cause any harm. *Graenlendinga þátttr* recounts events in Greenland around 1124–37: it survives in the so-called Flateyjarbók manuscript commissioned by Jón Hákonarson, noted above, and written by two priests around 1387–90.⁵⁰ In this tale, men come to a desolate hut on the Greenland coast, where they find the corpses of some Norwegians. ‘The smell and stench of the bodies’ (*daun af líkum ... ok ýldu*) that must have lain in the hut for a while turns out to be dangerous to the living, as the putrefying smell drives one man mad. Handling dead bodies is not perilous, however, and the corpses are boiled to remove the flesh from the bones to make it easier to transport the bones to church.⁵¹ Therefore, according to the author of the story, who apparently was familiar with the customs of *mos teutonicus* that began to be practised in Europe in the twelfth century, the bodies of the dead were not dangerous to the living, and the bones as well appear as completely harmless.⁵² Likewise in *Kumlbúa þátttr*, the bones that Þorsteinn handles when he grasps the sword have no effect on him, even though they are clearly the bones of a pagan person buried in unconsecrated ground.

It has been suggested that the Christian cult of relics may have reinforced the notions of corpses as a source of energy in medieval Europe.⁵³ In the light of *Graenlendinga þátttr*, the belief in the power of saints as being preserved in their bones may not have established in Iceland a view of bones as sources of life power per se, even if the appearance of Egill Skalla-Grímsson in Egill Halldórsson’s dream suggests a more explicit connection with the concept of Christian relics. A connection between relics and powerful pagan ancestors is drawn in the early thirteenth-century *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* written by Snorri Sturluson. Interestingly, the treatment of the earthly remains of Egill Skalla-Grímsson, a respected ancestor, resembles somewhat the handling of saints’ bodies. According to the saga, Egill Skalla-Grímsson was first buried in line with pagan burial customs, but his foster daughter Þórdís was later baptised and had Egill’s remains transferred to a church built by her husband Grímr on their farm. This church was later removed, but what is interesting in the translation performed by Þórdís is that, as

⁴⁹ See, for example, the ashes of the revenant known as Glámr in *Grettis saga*, which are buried in a skin bag, in a place where people and cattle would not walk; Jónsson, ed., *Grettis saga*, 122.

⁵⁰ On the *þátttr* and the manuscript (GkS 1005 fol., originally in ‘Gammel kongelig Samling’, i.e. in the ‘Old Royal collection’ at the Royal Library in Copenhagen, today in Safn Árna Magnússonar at Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, Reykjavík), see Kolbrún Haraldsdóttir, ‘Flateyjarbók’, in *Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. Pulsiano, 197–8; and Simek and Pálsson, *Lexikon*, 121–2.

⁵¹ *Grænlendinga þátttr*, in *Flateyjarbók*, eds. Unger and Vigfússon, 3: 447; trans. John Porter, ‘The Tale of the Greenlanders’, in *Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, eds. Hreinsson and others, 5: 375.

⁵² On *mos teutonicus*, see Sean B. Lawing, ‘The Burial of Body Parts in Old Icelandic Grágás’, in *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150–1400*, eds. Ármann Jakobsson and Miriam Mayburd (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 131–49 (136 and 144, n. 48).

⁵³ Caciola, *Afterlives*, 253.

people dug ‘under the altar’ (*vnder alltarisstaðnum*) of the old church they found a man’s bones. Based on their large size, these bones are identified in the saga as the bones of Egill Skalla-Grímsson.⁵⁴ Bearing in mind that in Christian practice the remains of the saints and their shrines were placed under the altar or in its vicinity, in the newly Christianised eleventh-century context Egill Skalla-Grímsson’s disinterred body was thus removed to a place that was usually reserved for saints as the objects of memory and veneration.

In the twelfth century, Egill would have lost this position, as the priest of the Mosfell church is said to have had the bones disinterred and buried ‘by the edge of the churchyard at Mosfell’ (*i vtanverðum kirkjugarði at Mosfelli*).⁵⁵ Once again Egill was not entirely detached from the space reserved for Christians, even if he may have been transferred to a kind of ‘limbo’. The excerpt suggests that Egill was treated similarly to unbaptised but ‘prime signed’ children who had been baptised ‘provisionally’, that is, who were cleansed of the evil spirit by making the sign of the cross over them. Egill himself is said to have undergone the procedure in the service of the English King Athelstan (895–933).⁵⁶ According to the Old Church Law that was compiled in the twelfth century and applied until 1274 when the New Church Law was introduced, such prime signed children were buried ‘out by the churchyard wall, where hallowed and unhallowed ground meet’ (*við kirkju garð út. þar er mætisk vigð mold oc óvigð*).⁵⁷

Although situated in this spatial limbo, Egill Skalla-Grímsson is not mentioned to have shown any posthumous activity after his death prior to his appearance in his namesake’s dream. It cannot be discounted that his state at the juncture of consecrated and unconsecrated land was expected to facilitate his return, but Dream-Egill, Dream-Þorsteinn and Guðrún Gjúkadóttir may share some other characteristics that allow us to speculate on the ultimate source of their posthumous power. Egill would not have been considered a saint proper but, as a distinguished ancestor who was ascribed various special skills in *Egils saga*, his role was similar to the saints in that his continuous presence in the vicinity of the farm was perhaps expected to benefit the descendants. Guðrún Gjúkadóttir is portrayed inconsistently in Eddic heroic poetry and the *Völsunga saga*.⁵⁸ In both of these sources, however, her attempt to commit suicide by drowning fails because the waves do not let her sink, but instead carry her to the shore. As Thomas D. Hill has pointed out, the description resembles the so-called Cold Water Ordeal that could be used to prove either the guilt or the innocence of an accused person, who was suspected, for example, of practising witchcraft.⁵⁹ Guðrún was guilty of killing her two sons, but in the medieval Icelandic imagination she may also have been considered, if not a witch per se, then perhaps

⁵⁴ Bjarni Einarsson, ed., *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar: Bd 1, A-Redaktionen* (Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel, 2001), 184–5.

⁵⁵ Einarsson, ed., *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, 185; trans. Bernard Scudder, ‘Egill’s Saga’, in *Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, eds. Hreinsson and others, 1: 177.

⁵⁶ Jesse Byock, ‘Skull and Bones in Egils saga: A Viking, A Grave, and Paget’s Disease’, *Viator* 24 (1993): 23–50 (30).

⁵⁷ Vilhjálmur Finsen, ed., *Grágás: Islændernes lovbog i fristatens tid, I* (Copenhagen: Det nordiske Literatur-Såmfund, 1852), 7; trans. Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote and Richard Perkins, *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás I* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2012), 26.

⁵⁸ Guðrún is depicted as both weak and strong, depending on the phase of her life story. See John McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 229; and Kirsi Kanerva, ‘Female Suicide in Thirteenth-Century Iceland: The Case of Brynhildr in *Völsunga saga*’, *Viator* 49 (2018): 129–54 (146–8 and 151–2).

⁵⁹ Thomas D. Hill, ‘The Weight of Love and the Anglo-Saxon Cold Water Ordeals’, *Reading Medieval Studies* 40 (2014): 34–53 (34–5).

a person who possessed some uncanny skills that prevented her from drowning, even though she tried to guarantee sinking by carrying stones.⁶⁰

In his interpretation of *Kumlbúa þátr*, John Lindow has suggested that Dream-Þorsteinn would also have been regarded as an ancestor who was held in esteem by his contemporaries, which explained why he could exert his influence posthumously. Lindow's argument is based on his analysis of a saga about King St Óláfr (c.995–1030) in the *Flateyjarbók*. The audience of *Kumlbúa þátr* preserved in Jón Hákonarson's other manuscript, *Vatnshyrna*, was presumably familiar with *Flateyjarbók* in the late fourteenth-century context when *Kumlbúa þátr* was copied.⁶¹ In the saga about King St Óláfr (*Óláfs saga helga*), a pagan chieftain called Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr ('spirit of Geirstaðir') appears to refer to ancestor worship that was practised in pre-Christian Scandinavia.⁶² He explains how pagan people sacrificed 'to dead men whom they relied upon while they were living' (*þá menn andaða, er þeim þótti sér traust at, meðan lifði*). Such worship would cause these dead pagans to become 'trolls' (*vera trylldir*). In the realm of the living, these 'evil beings' (*illar vættir*) could both cause harm and offer help, but Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr himself thought that the dead would be of no use to people.⁶³

In Old Icelandic *troll* could indicate, among others, giants, people skilled in magic, evil spirits and also ghosts.⁶⁴ In light of the excerpt in *Flateyjarbók*, Dream-Þorsteinn may have been regarded as an important person to whom people in the pagan past had sacrificed, which then caused him to become a *troll* that was capable of returning posthumously.⁶⁵ The expression used in *Flateyjarbók*, 'become a troll', *vera trylldir*, suggests that those of the dead who turned into trolls as a consequence of pagan sacrifices were thought to be enchanted, *trylldir*, in some sense. As Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr states in the text, the dead themselves were not the cause of their becoming trolls. Or, as the use of the verb *valda* suggests in this context, referring to lack of responsibility concerning the sacrificing and the process of becoming a troll, they had no power or authority over the matter.⁶⁶

The context of the story may well have Christianised the message that was put into the mouth of this pagan chieftain. The story represents the dead as passive and subordinate, dependent on the actions of the living, as in pagan worship or magic. This view is in line with conceptions emphasised in some fourteenth-century sagas that have been linked to clerical authorship, according to which the dead possessed no power of their own, but their corpses could be re-animated by the Devil or by practising necromantic magic.⁶⁷ Whether or not people in the late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century context of *Kumlbúa þátr* assumed that Dream-Þorsteinn had been sacrificed to in the past, the cases in the *Íslendinga saga* nevertheless suggest that the view of the *powerless* dead

⁶⁰ Ronald George Finch, ed. and trans., *Völsunga saga: The Saga of the Volsungs* (London: Nelson, 1965), 74.

⁶¹ Lindow, 'Meeting the Other', 86–8; trans. John Lindow (88).

⁶² On ancestor ideology in Viking Age and early medieval Scandinavia, see Triin Laidoner, *Ancestor Worship and the Elite in Late Iron Age Scandinavia: A Grave Matter* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

⁶³ Lindow, 'Meeting the Other', 88.

⁶⁴ On the various meanings of the word *troll* (including a ghost), see Ármann Jakobsson, 'Vad är ett troll? Betydelsen av ett isländsk medeltidsbegrepp', *Saga och sed* (2008): 101–17.

⁶⁵ Lindow, 'Meeting the Other', 88.

⁶⁶ Unger and Vigfússon, eds., *Flateyjarbók*, 2: 7; and CGV, 675.

⁶⁷ Kanerva, 'From Powerful Agents to Subordinate Objects?'

was not yet thoroughly internalised. Both Guðrún Gjúkadóttir – whose exceptionality is suggested by her imposing appearance that frightens Jóreiðr in *Íslendinga saga*, and her participation in a battle where she defends her brothers and kills men with her sword in *Völsunga saga* – and Egill Skalla-Grímsson would have been regarded as powerful, vigorous and bold persons, that is, they would have been held as members of the *hvatr* group.⁶⁸ Good or bad, before the view of the dead as passive and subordinate objects of magic and demonic influence was adopted, such outstanding members of society would have been considered more likely to return posthumously than people who were weak and powerless.⁶⁹

Bearing in mind that only a skeleton remained of Dream-Þorsteinn, which contemporary people must have presumed was the case with the earthly remains of Egill and Guðrún as well, it is worth considering whether medieval Icelanders thought that bones could still contain some diminished quantity of life power that only allowed the dead to appear in dreams. The ‘resurrection’ of a material body from bare bones is represented once in Old Icelandic mythological sources. *Gylfaginning*, written presumably by Snorri Sturluson in 1220s, recounts a story about the pagan god Þórr and his goats. Þórr’s goats are cooked and eaten, but Þórr saves their bones in goat skins and uses his hammer to revive the animals. Without considering further the sources of this Old Icelandic myth, which have been comprehensively studied by Clive Tolley, it should be noted that the motif of animal resurrection may not be indigenous. Calves, cows and geese are eaten and revived after gathering their bones not only in several Eurasian myths, but also in hagiographical literature that predates the Christianisation of Iceland.⁷⁰ Moreover, the *Gylfaginning* account does not suggest that the bones of a domestic animal that was cooked and eaten would contain vestigial life power or energy that would contribute to the revival. The resurrection is accomplished by the pagan god who practises magic by reviving the animals with his hammer. The source of re-animating energy is not in the bones, but in the act of an external agent who uses a magical tool to accomplish the re-animation.

What is more relevant for this study is that the bones of a goat in a goat’s hide make a revived *goat*. Even if the bones do not preserve life power, they do preserve the *identity* of the bones’ owner. It is not possible to attest whether the idea of bones as preservers of identity would have been native to medieval Icelandic culture or whether it was based on the idea enhanced by Christian writers who emphasised that a part stood for the whole. Hence the bones of saints or dead people to be resurrected at the sound of the last trumpet stood for the whole body.⁷¹ Resembling these beliefs, the bones of powerful people stood for the whole and thus preserved the identity of the bones’ original owner. Moreover, it could even be speculated that the indigenous idea of strong-willed and *hvatir* men and *hvatar* women as potential ghost candidates gradually merged with medieval conceptions of Christian relics, in that the bones of these exceptional people were thought to preserve (some of) the power of the bones’ original owner. As strong-willed persons who

⁶⁸ On Guðrún’s participation in the battle, see Finch, ed. and trans., *Völsunga saga*, 69.

⁶⁹ Kanerva, ‘Having No Power to Return?’, 66–8.

⁷⁰ See Clive Tolley, ‘On the Trail of Þórr’s Goats’, in *Mythic Discourse: Studies in Uralic Traditions*, eds. Frog, Anna-Leena Siikala and Eila Stepanova (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2012), 82–119.

⁷¹ On the adoption of this idea in medieval Iceland, see Lawing, ‘Burial of Body Parts’.

may have possessed special skills in life, the bones of Guðrún, Dream-Egill and Dream-Porsteinn were perhaps expected to preserve some of their personal power. The original owner of the bones was no longer expected to possess the capacity to constitute a tangible ('resurrected') body, but had to content themselves with appearance in dreams.

Conclusion

Despite the general efforts of the Church to bridle the power of the dead apart from saints, medieval Icelanders continued to hold their own beliefs about the posthumous activity of the dead. The Christian cult of saints and relics could well have reinforced these ideas, and stories about the revenants in family sagas, which also circulated in oral form, offered fuel for the thirteenth-century Icelandic imagination. These narratives affected cultural conceptions of what it was possible for people to see and experience at times when their vision was in some way impaired during the dark times of the day or year. The contemporary sagas nevertheless tended to remove encounters with the dead from the physical environment to dreams. Thus, they recorded a different kind of voice from the past, which took its place alongside the family saga revenants, the Christian saints and the saint-like Icelandic bishops.

The sources scrutinised here suggest that the role of the dead as upholders of social order, as judges of manners and as guardians of morals remained little changed in medieval Iceland. The dead returned as a consequence of transgressions of norms or morally problematic issues. They could be encountered by innocent people who were not harmed by them, presumably because they could not be held responsible for the actions and deeds that the dead criticised. Sometimes the norm-breakers themselves would meet the dead in their dreams, in which case they had to face the threat of physical injury that could be inflicted on them in this nocturnal state. I have argued that encountering the dead in dreams emphasised individual rather than collective responsibility. As the dead moved from the physical environment to people's dreams, they pointed out a change of mentality: individuals themselves were responsible for their own sins. They had to repent their sins, and thus the dead perhaps did not need to harass the others in the community to restore social equilibrium.

It is possible that the power and partial vitality ascribed to the bones of certain exceptional persons was related to medieval European ideas about relics. Conceptions of such power in the sources remain vague, however, and it is likely that the indigenous idea of flesh as the source of vitality and re-animating energy did not lose its importance so quickly. Presumably because of the merging of indigenous ideas and external influences, the power of the bones was linked to the nature of bones as preservers of identity. Accordingly, the bones of powerful people still continued to hold some power, like bone relics, which allowed their original owners to appear in dreams, but could not recreate their physical bodies. Partial continuity in conceptions of the dead is suggested in the notion that posthumous power was associated with certain individuals, whether their corpses still existed or whether their bones alone remained. The potential for posthumous activity still depended on the identity of the person in question and not on his or her manner of death. The sources examined here

nevertheless suggest that the dead were not as powerful as they had been previously, but could be conquered, for instance, with poetry rather than tangible weapons.

Note on contributor

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