

Between Nature and Culture:
Animals and Humans in Old Norse Literature

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Abstract

This thesis demonstrates how animals and humans are interconnected in Old Norse literature. The two categories are both constructed and challenged in a variety of ways, depending on the textual genre and animal species. It thus reveals medieval Norse-Icelandic ideas, values, and beliefs about animals. The thesis is theoretical, comparative, and interdisciplinary, yet firmly rooted in a close reading of the sagas and analysis of their cultural-historical context.

The first chapter explores relationships between people and domestic animals, namely horses and dogs, and to a lesser extent, cats and livestock. The second chapter evaluates the limitations to the human-animal relationship: prohibitions against bestiality and the consumption of certain animals as meat. The third chapter studies animals in dreams, which reflect human characters and share their fate and defining characteristics. The fourth chapter investigates human-animal transformations, whether physical, psychological, or both. The fifth chapter analyses human-animal communication, with a particular focus on human comprehension of the language of birds. The sixth chapter considers relations between animals and gods in Norse mythology; these parallel the connections between humans and animals in the sagas.

The thesis determines how the human/animal dichotomy might have been thought about differently before and after the conversion to Christianity, with boundaries between animal and human becoming more clearly delineated; it examines how medieval Icelandic authors wrote about animals in experiential terms, but also drew upon conventional symbolism from continental Europe; and it proves how these literary representations of animals reflect an environmental ideology that was actively engaged with the imaginative, the supernatural, and the animal.

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List of Abbreviations

ANF	Arkiv för nordisk filologi
FNS	Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda
ÍF	Íslensk fornrit
<i>JEGP</i>	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
<i>Saga-Book</i>	<i>Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research</i>
<i>SS</i>	<i>Scandinavian Studies</i>
<i>VMS</i>	<i>Viking and Medieval Scandinavia</i>
<i>VSNR</i>	<i>Viking Society for Northern Research</i>

A Note on References and Translations

References in the footnotes appear in full at a work's first appearance and subsequently by abbreviation or by author and date. Full details are provided in the bibliography.

All translations are my own unless indicated otherwise. Icelandic personal names and place names are rendered in the nominative case.

Introduction

‘An animal’s eyes have the power to speak a great language’ ~ Martin Buber¹

1. Purpose

This thesis is about animals and the connections between humans and animals in Old Norse literature. I am particularly interested in how humans and animals are interconnected in the sagas, how the boundary between these two categories is constructed and deconstructed, and how these literary representations reflect medieval Norse-Icelandic ideas, values, and beliefs about animals and the environment. I discover, categorise, and in an articulated theoretical framework, criticise the relatively unexplored relations between humans and various species of animals in a range of Old Norse texts.

It is striking how little research has been undertaken on animals in Old Norse, for they fulfil a wide variety of important narrative functions within the literature, and played extremely important roles in people’s lives in the Middle Ages.² Moreover, Icelandic

¹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith, first published as *Ich und Du*, 1923 (London and New York, 2004), p. 73.

² Important exceptions include Lena Rohrbach’s *Der tierische Blick: Mensch-Tier-Relationen in der Sagaliteratur* (Tübingen and Basel, 2009), which similarly examines human-animal relations and uses literary and anthropological methods, but is less theoretically-oriented. Her study focuses solely on the ‘historical’ sagas – *samtíðarsögur*, *Íslendingasögur*, *konungasögur*, and *biskupasögur* – while mine takes greater account of evidence from the legendary *fornaldarsögur* and mythological poetry and prose. In *Animals and Humans:*

manuscripts were prepared from the skins of calves, demonstrating how animals were at the very core of the production of Old Norse literature from the outset.³ My theoretically-informed study is in tune with extant studies of animals in other bodies of medieval literature, though the specific methods differ.⁴ Such approaches, however, have not previously been applied to the study of animals in Old Norse literature; thus this thesis will fill a critical gap and offer new knowledge to both medieval and animal studies.

Each chapter is designed to answer the central research question: how are humans and animals interconnected in Old Norse literature? Secondary questions explored throughout include: (i) how and why does the human-animal connection differ by animal

Recurrent Symbiosis in Archaeology and Old Norse Religion (Lund, 2011), Kristina Jennbert applies perspectives from archaeology and the history of religions to explore the place of animals in Old Norse religion and Scandinavian culture from the Roman Iron Age to the Viking period. In her just-submitted thesis, *Representations of Animal-Human Relations in Viking Age and Medieval Iceland* (PhD, University of York, forthcoming), Harriet Jean Evans combines literary, archaeological, and legal evidence to study relationships between humans and domestic animals in medieval Icelandic culture (c. 877-1400 AD).

³ For further discussion of the production of parchment manuscripts in medieval Iceland, see Jiří Vnouček, 'The manufacture of parchment for writing purposes and the observation of the signs of manufacture surviving in old manuscripts', in *Care and conservation of manuscripts* 8, ed. Gillian Fellows-Jensen and Peter Springborg (Copenhagen, 2005), pp. 74-92; Jiří Vnouček, 'Illustrations for Instruction, the Book as evidence. The story of the Production of a Medieval Codex as Recorded in the Hamburg Bible', in *From Nature to Script: Reykholt, Environment, Centre, and Manuscript Making*, ed. Helgi Þorláksson and Þóra Björg Sigurðardóttir (Reykholt, 2012), pp. 199-229; Soffía Guðný Guðmundsdóttir and Laufey Guðnadóttir (with Anne Mette Hansen), 'Book production in the Middle Ages', in *66 Manuscripts from the Arnarnaganean Collection*, ed. Matthew James Driscoll and Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir (Copenhagen, 2015), pp. 211-228.

⁴ See e.g. Joyce E. Salisbury's *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages* (London, 1994; repr. 2011); Karl Steel's *How to Make a Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages* (Columbus, 2011); and Susan Crane's *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain* (Philadelphia, 2013).

species? (ii) does the evidence suggest that the human/animal divide was thought about differently before and after the conversion to Christianity? and (iii) where do medieval Icelandic authors portray animals in experiential terms, and when do conventional symbolic associations from Germanic tradition and continental Europe take precedence over quotidian experience?

The connections and separations between people and animals – the extent to which we are similar and different – were clearly on the minds of Old Norse authors and these distinctions were also ideologically expressed in poetry and prose. Application of contemporary animal-centred and ecocritical thought provides insight into the environmental ethos of the medieval North. Supernatural qualities attributed to animals and human-animal relations tell of a cultural construction of reality that is creatively engaged and psychologically linked to animals and the natural environment.

2. Approach

My approach is broadly interdisciplinary, but in essence, it falls under the umbrella of animal studies, and is best defined as human-animal studies. As Garry Marvin and Susan McHugh write:

Who or what is human? Animal? And when these terms are coupled with a hyphen, how does that shift the grounds for studying? In human-animal studies the research and intellectual focus is on how animals figure and are configured in human worlds, but these worlds are formed through the relationships that humans share with animals.⁵

These are the types of questions that I ask about the world of the sagas. Marvin and McHugh further explain that human-animal studies is part of a larger field that examines ‘*why* animals are represented and configured in different ways in human cultures and societies around the world; *how* they are imagined, experienced, and given significance; [and] *what* these relationships might signify about being human’.⁶ Thus I read the sagas in a manner that is attuned to the animal presence: with an animal eye.

Animal studies is concomitant with ecocriticism, which has not been applied to the Old Norse literary context until recently. In its first explicit application to an Old Norse text (specifically *Eyrbyggja saga*), Carl Phelpstead writes that ecocriticism is ‘most helpfully thought of as a critical orientation, rather than a narrowly defined theoretical position; the

⁵ Garry Marvin and Susan McHugh, ‘In It Together: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies’, in *Routledge Handbook of Human-Animal Studies*, ed. Garry Marvin and Susan McHugh (London and New York, 2014), pp. 1-9, at p. 1. Margo DeMello usefully defines and describes the differences between human-animal studies and related fields, including animal studies, animal rights, critical animal studies, anthrozoology, and ethology. See *Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies* (New York, 2012), pp. 4-7. For historically-grounded discussion of animal studies and questions of human-animal connectivity as a political enterprise, see e.g. Erica Fudge, *Animal* (London, 2002) and Harriet Ritvo, ‘Border Trouble: Shifting the Line between People and Other Animals’, *Social Research* 62.3 (1995), pp. 481-500.

⁶ Marvin and McHugh (2014), p. 2.

most serviceable explanations of the term tend to be broadly conceived'.⁷ Cheryll Glotfelty provided a good starting definition in 1996 which became a standard in the field: 'Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment'.⁸ But what about animals? Do they constitute a part of the physical environment? Are they a part of an earth-centred approach to literary study? In its early years, ecocriticism was focused on the physical environment, not its non-human inhabitants.⁹ Recently, Greg Garrard defines ecocriticism more broadly as 'the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term "human" itself'.¹⁰ This approach marks an awareness of recent developments in ecocriticism that allows for the inclusion of areas that have

⁷ Carl Phepstead, 'Ecocriticism and *Eyrbyggja saga*', *Leeds Studies in English* 45 (2014), pp. 1-18.

⁸ Cheryll Glotfelty, 'Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis', *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens, 1996), p. xviii. This publication marked a substantial contribution to the field of green literary studies, and to an extent, its genesis in wider academic culture. The claim was effectively made that literary scholarship 'has apparently ignored the most pressing contemporary issue of all, namely, the global environmental crisis' (p. xv). Literature scholars have produced a significant amount of environmentally-aware writing since then, but little has been published about Old Norse.

⁹ Glotfelty provided a list of fourteen examples of important questions that ecocritics ask, but none of them involve animals (*ibid.*, pp. xviii-xix).

¹⁰ Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 2nd edn (London, 2012), p. 5. See further Greg Garrard (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (Oxford, 2014).

previously been marginalised.¹¹ Regarding animals specifically, Garrard argues that ‘The most startling and significant insight of ecocriticism and animal studies is that the supposedly distinct realms of culture and nature are naturalcultural throughout’.¹²

While Old Norse authors did not apply terms such as ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ as used by contemporary theorists, that does not mean that these authors and their audiences did not think critically and creatively about animals, the environment, and their relationship to the world around them.¹³ As Simon Gaunt argues, ‘each generation of medievalists must ask new questions, the point being not simply to find out about the past, but to dialogue with it’.¹⁴ Theoretical approaches to animals in Old Norse literature allow us to think about animals and the environment in new ways. I do not suggest that people in medieval

¹¹ Garrard (2012) notes that most ‘early works of ecocriticism were characterized by an exclusive interest in romantic poetry, wilderness narrative and nature writing’ (ibid., p. 5). This trend was seemingly anticipated in the field from the beginning: Glotfelty (1996) wrote that ‘In the future we can expect to see ecocritical scholarship becoming ever more interdisciplinary, multicultural, and international’ (p. xxxv). This thesis thus addresses three minorities within the history of ecocritical research: animals, the medieval, and literature that is not written in modern English.

¹² Garrard (2012), p. 205.

¹³ The words ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ remain problematic today. My understanding of the terms is informed by Raymond Williams, who suggests that ‘Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language’ and ‘Nature is perhaps the most complex word in the language’. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York, 1976; rev. ed. 1985), pp. 87 and 219.

¹⁴ Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 19. On ‘theoretic medievalism’, see further Bruce Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* (Chicago, 2005).

Scandinavia thought about animals in the same light as twentieth- and twentieth-century theorists, but that is precisely the point: I want to know how they did think and write about animals in ways which are both similar to and different from our own modern ideas.

Central to the correlation of animal studies and ecocriticism in this thesis is my reading of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of *devenir-animal* ('becoming-animal', see chapter 4 in particular, as well as chapters 1 and 5). Multiple dichotomies – animal/human, wild/domestic, savage/civilised, wilderness/habitation, nature/culture – can be mapped onto one another and become mutually destabilised when human and animal characters undergo physical and psychological transformations. Animals undergo such a process both when they are tamed or domesticated and when they re-enter the wild; humans undergo similar transformations through metamorphosis. Rather than inhabiting a stable and single location in the liminal space between animal and human, these characters often oscillate between the two categories. Such a process is labeled *devenir-animal* by Deleuze and Guattari in *Mille Plateaux* ('A Thousand Plateaus'): they 'believe in the

existence of a very special becomings–animal traversing human beings and sweeping them away, affecting the animal no less than the human’.¹⁵

Animal studies is an inherently interdisciplinary endeavour. I apply perspectives from zooanthropology and environmental anthropology to place the literature in its cultural context and incorporate historical, legal, and archaeological evidence. While this study is primarily literary, approaches from neighbouring disciplines provide important insight into the *histoire de mentalités*. An ecocritical reading of human–animal relations should not only examine the texts under study, but also, when possible, the social ideology that produced them. Margaret Clunies Ross, for example, suggests that historical and literary study are not mutually exclusive:

In recent scholarship on the Icelandic sagas, the emphasis has shifted from an older attitude that sought to classify sagas as either history or fiction, but not both, to an approach that allows the two creative impulses, historical and fictional, to coexist in any text in a variable relationship, both within a single text and between texts.¹⁶

¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, first published as *Mille Plateaux*, 1980 (London, 1987; repr. 2013), p. 277.

¹⁶ Margaret Clunies Ross, ‘Realism and the Fantastic in the Old Icelandic Sagas’, *SS* 74.4 (2002), pp. 443–454, at p. 444. The older attitudes here referenced are the ‘Freeprose theory’ and the ‘Bookprose theory’, an opposition which dominated twentieth-century saga scholarship. The former held that the sagas were passed from one generation to the next via oral tradition, emphasising their historical authenticity; the latter, championed by the so-called ‘Icelandic school’, argued that the sagas derive almost entirely from literary authorship. I view the sagas as *both* historiography and fictionalisation – and no clear distinction between the two is made by saga-authors. Lars Lönnroth suggests that scholars no longer consider either approach to be

Literature is imbued with ideas about the nature of the human condition and reflects the culture of the time and place of composition. The cultural memory of past beliefs was kept alive through oral tradition and creatively re-formed via literary fiction. The sagas can be described as ‘ethnographic documents’ and thus open themselves to anthropological inquiry.¹⁷ Following Gísli Pálsson, this approach ‘reverses the priority of text over life’.¹⁸ As Preben Meulengracht Sørensen notes, however, ‘The texts themselves are the object of the scrutiny, and the main purpose is ... to understand their own intrinsic truth, that is to say, the interpretation of history that their authors have given us’.¹⁹

‘completely valid, because the relationship between oral tradition and literary authorship varies considerably, not only between different sagas genres but also between individual sagas or even chapters within the same saga text’. Lars Lönnroth, ‘The Icelandic Sagas’, *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink in collaboration with Neil Price (London and New York, 2008/2012), pp. 304-310, at p. 306. See further e.g. Diana Whaley, ‘A Useful Past: Historical Writing in Medieval Iceland’, in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 161-202.

¹⁷ John Lindow, ‘The sagas as ethnographic documents’, in *Alþjóðlegt fornsagnaþing*, vol. I, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík, 1973) [without pagecount].

¹⁸ Gísli Pálsson, ‘Introduction: text, life and saga’, in *From Sagas to Society, Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. Gísli Pálsson (Enfield Lock, 1992), pp. 1-25, at p. 1. Gísli explains how the sagas can be effectively studied as ‘informative ethnographic accounts’ (p. 2), despite their limited historicity (see especially ‘Ethnographic Authenticity’, pp. 17-21).

¹⁹ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, ‘Some methodological considerations in connection with the study of the sagas’, in *From Sagas to Society, Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. Gísli Pálsson (Enfield Lock, 1992), pp. 27-41, at p. 34. For Meulengracht Sørensen, the sagas are ‘simultaneously descriptions and interpretations of reality’ (p. 28); ‘Methodologically speaking, it is not enough either to read the text solely as a historical source or as a work of fiction with its own world, quite independent of its historical references’ (p. 33). I therefore integrate literary, historical, and anthropological approaches in this thesis.

This thesis draws upon the anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss (especially regarding totemism and the *fylgja*-motif in chapter 3). His discussion of why and how different animal species were given specific associations in totemic thought can be applied cross-culturally, regardless of whether totemism as a cultural phenomenon is actually present:

The animals in totemism cease to be solely or principally creatures which are feared, admired or envied: their perceptible reality permits the embodiment of ideas and relations conceived by speculative thought on the basis of empirical observations. We can understand, too, that natural species are chosen not because they are 'good to eat' but because they are 'good to think'.²⁰

A comparative method emerges through which anthropology can formulate general, cross-cultural propositions regarding the human condition. Different animal species are consistently imbued with a specific meaning and ideology that reflects their specific position in nature. Furthermore, animals are 'good for' many things in Old Norse literature. As Marvin Harris, Stanley Tambiah, and Donna Haraway have

²⁰ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, trans. Rodney Needham (London, 1964; rev. ed. 1991), p. 89; for the French original, see *Le Totémisme Aujourd'hui* (Paris, 1962a), p. 128. Shepard Krech III argues for an alternate translation of 'bonnes à penser': instead of the standard 'good to think', he suggests 'good for thinking, that is, good to think about or reflect upon' or, rather, 'good to contemplate', a translation he considers 'more felicitous'. See Shepard Krech III, *Spirits of the Air: Birds & American Indians in the South* (Athens, 2009), pp. x, 26; Shepard Krech III, 'The Nature and Culture of Birds', *On the Human: a project of the National Humanities Center*, 21 March 2011. Web. Accessed 18 Jan. 2014. Thus it is the contemplation of different animal species and their unique behaviour that provides the raw material for their symbolism and metaphorical significance.

shown, animals are indeed ‘good to eat’ as well as ‘good to prohibit’ (chapter 2), they are ‘good to live with’ (chapter 1), and they will always be good to think about.²¹

While textual or literary anthropology constitutes a significant component of my methodology, I also apply the anthropological perspective of Philippe Descola’s groundbreaking *Par delà nature et culture* (‘Beyond Nature and Culture’). Once a student of Lévi-Strauss, Descola classifies human societies into four ontological systems, categorised by shared or disconnected physicality and interiority with non-human species. One of these categories, Animism, might resemble the types of human-animal relations found in the Old Norse context, in which humans view animals as having a different physicality but a similar interiority. It can be expressed ‘as a continuity of souls and a discontinuity of bodies’.²² In

²¹ Marvin Harris, *Good to Eat: Riddles of Food and Culture* (New York, 1985; repr. 1986); Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, ‘Animals Are Good to Think and Good to Prohibit’, *Ethnology* 8.4 (1969), pp. 423-459; Donna J. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago, 2003), p. 14 (paraphrased).

²² Features of Descola’s animistic ideology include personal relationships, metamorphosis, and communication via speech and prophetic dreams and visions. Philippe Descola, ‘Beyond Nature and Culture’, *Radcliffe-Brown Lecture in Social Anthropology*, 2005; *Proceedings of the British Academy* 139, 2006, pp. 137-155. Animism is said to be quite common in South and North America, Siberia, and parts of South-East Asia. The parallels with the material in this thesis are striking (see especially chapter 4). Intriguingly, Descola identifies Analogism – with both interiority and physicality disconnected – as the dominant cosmology of the Christian Middle Ages, suggesting that Old Norse literature offers a unique environmental worldview. Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd, first published as *Par-delà nature et culture*, 2005 (Chicago and London, 2013). On Animism, see pp. 129-143; on Analogism, see pp. 201-231.

addition to totemism and animism, I further suggest that some texts may contain traces of a phenomenon that can be broadly described as shamanistic (chapters 4 and 6).

My theoretical palette is diverse and I apply a wide range of approaches throughout this thesis. In addition to animal theory, ecocriticism, and anthropology, I draw upon ethology, post-structural philosophy, analytical psychology, history of religions, myth theory, and a close reading of metaphor and metonymy.²³

3. Scope

This thesis is organised thematically, allowing me to seek holistic and comprehensive answers to my questions. The goal is not to simply supply an overview of all the animals in the sagas, but to provide insight into how different animal species were lived with and thought about in the medieval North and how the human-animal dichotomy was navigated and expressed through literature. I emphasise texts which seem to offer the most fruitful and interesting ways of probing into distinctively Icelandic-Scandinavian ideas about animals.²⁴ The historical range of material is vast: from the earliest skaldic and eddic verse

²³ See e.g. René Dirven and Ralf Pörings (ed.), *Metaphor and Metonymy in Comparison and Contrast* (Berlin and New York, 2002).

²⁴ I draw most of my examples from the *Íslendingasögur*, *konungasögur*, *fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, and eddic poetry – texts which provide the greatest challenge to the human/animal dichotomy – and to a lesser extent, the contemporary *samtíðarsögur*. I examine romance on occasion – especially when it influences native

to the post-classical *Íslendingasögur* and late *fornaldarsögur*. The majority of texts under study were composed in Iceland during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. My focus is literary fiction which is based – to varying extents – upon earlier oral tradition; most of these texts concern the pre-Christian period, when the boundaries between human and animal appear to have been thought to be more fluid.²⁵ I do not structure the thesis according to generic classifications, allowing for the incorporation of various forms of evidence with a critical awareness of similarity and difference.²⁶

This thesis views different types of connections between humans and animals as ‘modes’. Following Clunies Ross, it proposes that ‘a large proportion of sagas from all sub-

literature – but considering limits of length and time, I focus on stories composed in Scandinavia. I pay minimal attention to the *beilagra manna sögur* and *biskupasögur*, which seem to represent animals in a less distinctive, universally Christian light. Genres which receive less consideration in this thesis offer opportunities for future study.

²⁵ At the Alþingi in 999 or 1000 AD, the pagan chieftain and lawspeaker Þorgeir Þorkelsson supposedly proclaimed that all people should be legally Christian and receive baptism to keep peace in the land (though pagan belief still surely continued to some extent, especially through religious syncretism and in folk belief). On the Christian conversion in Iceland, see e.g. Dag Strömbäck, *The Conversion of Iceland: A Survey*, trans. and annotated by Peter Foote (London, 1975); Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Under the Cloak: A Pagan Ritual Turning Point in the Conversion of Iceland* (Stockholm, 1978). Regarding the Christian conversion in mainland Scandinavia, see e.g. Anders Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia: Vikings, Merchants, and Missionaries in the Remaking of Northern Europe* (New Haven, 2012).

²⁶ Here I follow Carl Phelpstead: ‘the sole meaningful criterion for the adoption or retention of a generic label is its usefulness: does the term help us understand the text (or Old Norse literature as a whole) better? Does it “work” to enable new, more insightful readings of the individual text and/or of the group of texts? If not, we are free to discard it and substitute something more useful’. Carl Phelpstead et al., ‘Interrogating Genre in the *Fornaldarsögur*: Round-Table Discussion’, *VMS* 2 (2006), pp. 275-296, at p. 278.

classes are modally mixed to an extent that many scholars are unwilling to recognize fully, as this mixture often precludes their easy classification into the modern descriptive classes'.²⁷ In dividing my chapters thematically, I present different forms of human-animal connection as modes which appear in a number of different saga genres (though mythological texts are still studied separately in chapter 6).²⁸ A multi-modal approach to animals allows for a significant number of texts to be examined based on the criteria of animals and human-animal relations. This approach is biocentric and puts the animal at the centre, rather than the anthropocentric criteria that have defined the genre debate.²⁹

4. Chapters

²⁷ Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society*, vol. II: The Reception of Norse Myths in Medieval Iceland (Odense, 1994b), p. 51. Clunies Ross later usefully defines modalities as 'modes of writing that present different dimensions of represented experiences' – see *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 95.

²⁸ Certain animal modes will be more common to some genres than others; e.g. animal *fylgjur* and *bugir* are typically found in *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur* (see chapter 3).

²⁹ The generic categories used by modern scholars are not found in actual medieval texts. Clunies Ross does suggest that 'their absence does not necessarily mean that they were not differentiated at a sub-generic level by medieval Icelanders', but has also noted that 'fully agreed criteria based on sets of conventions representing the shared literary expectations of both writers and audiences did not exist during the formative period of the *fornaldarsaga* and other saga kinds'. Clunies Ross (1994b), p. 11; Margaret Clunies Ross et al., 'Interrogating Genre in the *Fornaldarsögur*: Round-Table Discussion', *VMS 2* (2006), pp. 275-296, at p. 277. For example, the term *fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* was not used until 1829, when it was coined by their first editor, Carl Christian Rafn – see e.g. Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*, trans. Randi C. Eldevik (Odense, 2002), p. 18.

My examination of modes of human-animal relations can be placed on a spectrum that moves from the realistic to the fantastic and from the historical to the mythological, determined by the nature of the sources I use to investigate each topic.

4.1 Chapter One: Human-Animal Relationships

I explore the types of emotionally significant relationships between people and certain domestic animals, which Donna Haraway terms ‘companion species’, with a focus on horses and dogs.³⁰ Select animals are referred to as *fóstri* (‘fosterling’), bringing them into the realm of family relations. Such intimate connections challenge the distinction between animals and humans. Special attention is also paid to the remarkable loyalty and intelligence of dogs; horse-fighting, in which the horses are metonymically emblematic of their human owners; and the surprising scarcity of cats in the sagas and their symbolism of deviance, subversion, and paganism in post-conversion Scandinavia. The final section examines representations of domesticated livestock more broadly in the sagas, their importance as objects of property and wealth, and the named animals which play a larger role in saga narratives: these are usually cult animals, recipients of sacrifice, and they are often depicted as wild, monstrous beasts that are disruptive to proper social order.

³⁰ Haraway (2003); Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis, 2008).

4.2 Chapter Two: Animals and Taboo

This chapter examines some of the limits of the human-animal connection in medieval Scandinavia through the concept of taboo: the boundaries which were held together through various legal proscriptions against bestiality and the consumption of certain animals as meat. I first examine the evidence for dietary prohibitions, then speculate upon the historical causes for these largely religious taboos, and the Christian aversion to eating horse meat is studied in detail. I thus not only question which animals were consumed for their meat, but why, and what this might signify. Taboo meat is depicted as disgusting, and the person who consumes this meat is rendered monstrous, especially when a taboo animal is consumed in the pre-Christian period. Finally, I explore the ultimate taboo in the human-animal relationship: bestiality, which was strictly prohibited by Christian law and was a common insult between men in literary sources.

4.3 Chapter Three: Animals in Dreams

The symbolic significance of animal *fylgjur* (and to a lesser extent, animal *bugir*) is studied: animals that appear in dreams and visions, acting as symbolic images that metaphorically point towards a person's defining qualities and reveal their fate. The link between different dream-animals and specific characters indicates the symbolic meaning attached to a variety

of animal species in medieval Iceland; authors drew upon both quotidian experience and continental influences, especially the bestiary tradition. I categorise different species of dream-animals: wild animals, domestic animals, birds, and animals of romance and fantasy, and argue that each contains a hierarchy. I also suggest that dream-animals were not limited to the world of literary fiction and may have originally been part of a cultural belief system; following Lévi-Strauss, I thus hypothesise that the Old Norse dream-animal is both a literary motif and a facet of pre-Christian totemic thought, retained through cultural memory.

4.4 Chapter Four: Human-Animal Transformation

Numerous dichotomies simultaneously deconstruct when both humans and animals undergo physical and psychological transformations. Drawing upon Deleuze and Guattari, I argue that movement is fundamental to these *devenir-animal* (“becoming-animal”) processes. Application of Descola’s anthropological perspectives suggest that the sagas under study may depict an animistic worldview. The first section focuses on animal transformations, dissecting the dichotomies of wild/domestic and wild/tame, which can be mapped onto human characters. Shapeshifting and the concept of *hamr* is explored next, laying the

framework for studying the three most common types of human-animal transformation in Old Norse literature: therianthropy into bears, wolves, and birds.

4.5 Chapter Five: Human-Animal Communication

This chapter first explores human-mammal communication, before turning to its focus on the language of birds. I examine why birds are nature's purveyors of knowledge through their ability to fly and communicate in an articulated language that resembles human speech. Birds repeatedly offer important information to individuals associated with royalty and wisdom, and a person is considered to be especially wise if they comprehend bird-speech. To acquire the ability to understand the language of birds, a character often has to undergo an initiation, such as Sigurðr Fáfnisbani's slaying of the dragon. Connections to sacral kingship and Óðinn – the god of birds – are also explored.

4.6 Chapter Six: Animals in Myths

How are the connections between humans and animals in saga literature paralleled by the relations between animals and the gods in Norse mythology? There are many continuities: personal relationships, transformation, and communication: thematics investigated in earlier chapters. Certain animals are linked with specific gods, in parallel with the *fylgja*-motif explored in chapter 3. Animals play various roles in Norse mythic cosmology; I

consider *jotnar*, which can be seen as closer to the animal domain than the *Æsir*; and the sustenance of the gods, which includes sacrificial animal meat and blood. Textual evidence suggests that animals were thought about differently before and after the conversion to Christianity in Scandinavia.

4.7 Conclusion

I return to my primary research questions and provide cohesive answers that bring together the various themes and motifs explored throughout the thesis. The results of this study challenge the existence of a human-animal dichotomy; it is destabilised in a variety of ways depending on the animal species involved. As ideology in narrative form, Old Norse prose and poetry depicts a worldview in which animals and humans – and, consequently, nature and culture – are fundamentally interconnected. If Jonathan Bate is correct in stating that ‘the relationship between nature and culture is the key intellectual problem of the twenty-first century’, then these conclusions are not only important for the study of Old Norse literature and society, but are also of great interest to the wider academic community.³¹

³¹ Jonathan Bate, ‘Foreword’, in *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. Laurence Coupe (London, 2000), p. xvii.

Chapter One: Human-Animal Relationships

When Norwegian settlers came to Iceland in about 870 AD, the only native land mammal was the arctic fox.¹ Walrus and seal colonies were also scattered across Iceland's coasts;² and while bears are not native to Iceland *per se*, polar bears have been drifting to Iceland from Greenland on icebergs for at least 13,000 years, since the end of the last glacial period.³ A variety of domestic mammals were also introduced to Iceland during the first centuries of Norse settlement, including horses, dogs, cats, cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs.⁴

¹ Kevin P. Smith, 'Landnám: the settlement of Iceland in archaeological and historical perspective', *World Archaeology* 26.3 (1995), pp. 319-347, at p. 323. See further Bjarni F. Einarsson, *The Settlement of Iceland, A Critical Approach: Granastaðir and the Ecological Heritage* (Reykjavík, 1995).

² Walruses no longer breed in Iceland; their colonies were probably exterminated by the colonists. Smith (1995), pp. 323, 329; Thomas H. McGovern et al., 'Landscapes of Settlement in Northern Iceland: Historical Ecology of Human Impact and Climate Fluctuation on the Millennial Scale', *American Anthropologist* 109.1 (2007), pp. 27-51, at p. 30.

³ Jóhannes Áskelsson, 'Um íslensk dýr og jurtir frá jökultíma', *Náttúrufræðingurinn* 8.1 (1938), pp. 1-16, at pp. 6-7. Ævar Petersen traces the frequency of polar bear arrivals from before the island's human settlement, throughout the medieval period, and up to the present, demonstrating that there are 289 documented observations of polar bears in Iceland throughout its history, with reference made to 611 bears in total. He does note, however, that these figures might be misleading, since some animals may have been counted more than once. Polar bear tracks (without one actually being seen) have been found eleven times and bones have been unearthed on four occasions. See Ævar Petersen, 'Hvítbjarnakomur á Íslandi, einkum á Norðurlandi, ásamt almennum upplýsingum', *Húnavetnsk náttúra 2010*. Málþing um náttúru Húnavatnssýslna á Gauksmýri, 10 April 2010, pp. 21-23.

⁴ According to zooarchaeological and palynological evidence, they also brought 'lice, fleas, dung beetles and a variety of other animal parasites'. See Jesse L. Byock et al., 'A Viking-Age Valley in Iceland: The Mosfell Archaeological Project', *Medieval Archaeology* 49.1 (2005), pp. 195-219, at p. 204; Jesse L. Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (London, 2001), p. 28. Norse colonists imported the same kinds of domestic animals to every island settled in the North Atlantic. See further Thomas H. McGovern et al., 'Economy of Landnám: The Evidence

Animals that are domesticated are brought into the human sphere: tamed for special purposes and kept in human spaces to serve practical functions. These are the species that medieval Icelanders regularly came into contact with, often in their own homes, and with whom complex relationships would have developed. Farm animals provided an important source of food, both meat and dairy, but people in the sagas do not habitually develop intimate connections with these species.⁵ Rather it is the domestic animals that were kept for reasons beyond eating – as work animals and as pets – namely horses and dogs, and to a much lesser extent, cats – that become ‘quasi-human’ through their emotionally significant relationships with people.

Domestic animals that are not eaten serve important utilitarian functions. In critical animal-theory terms, they can be regarded as ‘companion animals’. Donna Haraway explains that ‘Companion animals can be horses, dogs, cats, or a range of other beings

of Zooarchaeology’, in *Approaches to Vinland* (Reykjavík, 2001), pp. 154-165; Thomas Amorosi et al., ‘Raiding the Landscape: Human Impact in the Scandinavian North Atlantic’, *Human Ecology* 25.3 (1997), pp. 491-518.

⁵ One indicator of a close human-animal connection is when the animal is named (other signifiers include words such as *elska* (‘love’) and *fóstri* (‘fosterling’), discussed below in sections 1.1 and 2). The vast majority of named animals in the sagas are horses. Rohrbach (2009) provides a list of ‘Tiernamen im Untersuchungskorpus’ (‘names of animals in the examined corpus’), of which nineteen are horses, six are dogs, three are oxen, and two are boars (p. 315). Named animals that are not explored in this thesis offer promising opportunities for future research: e.g. dogs (Flóki, *Reykðæla*; Rósta, *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*); oxen (Harri, *Laxdæla*; Brandkrossi, *Brandkrossa*); boars (Fleygir, *Heiðarvíga*); and horses (Bandvettir, *Gísla*; Dött, *Hávarðar*; Eykjarðr, *Heiðarvíga*; Freysfaxi, *Vatnsdæla*; Söðulkolla, *Grettis*; Illilingr, *Flóamanna*; Sviðgrímr, *Þórðar* (p. 315).

willing to make the leap to the biosociality of service dogs, family members, or team members in cross-species sports. Generally speaking, one does not eat one's companion animals (nor get eaten by them).⁶ In the case of medieval Iceland, horses were used for transportation, fighting, entertainment, and acted as important status symbols; dogs were used for hunting, herding, guardianship, and more than any other animal, companionship; and cats were presumably kept to catch vermin. These animals will be the primary focus of this chapter and will constitute its first three sections. The final section explores the significance of livestock: animals that were domesticated as 'good to eat', yet when people sacrifice to them in cult, they become monstrous and eschew domesticity. Consequently, the seemingly clear dichotomy between domestic and wild demands critical scrutiny. As a general rule, this chapter is about 'actual animals', those who are represented as alive in the narrative reality of the sagas, and the way people related to them.

1. Horses

⁶ Haraway (2003), p. 14. 'Companion species' should not be considered a strictly binding term: as Haraway (2008) later writes, 'Companion species is a permanently undecidable category, a category-in-question that insists on the relation as the smallest unit of being and of analysis' (p. 165). On the distinction between 'companion species' and 'companion animals', see pp. 16-19.

Horses feature more prominently than any other animal in the medieval Icelandic sagas.⁷

Iceland is not unique in this respect. Susan Crane argues that ‘Across the medieval written record, the relation of knight and horse is the most densely represented of all cross-species interactions’.⁸ The same is true of the non-chivalric setting of medieval Iceland, where horses are depicted as having emotional relationships with their owners. The communion between horse and rider is an extremely intimate one: the animal becomes an extension of a person’s body, as horse and human literally move together, and also of the human mind, as the horse follows its rider’s instructions in a process that can be termed ‘distributed consciousness’.⁹ Horses served important utilitarian functions in medieval Iceland as a means of human transportation and as pack animals.¹⁰ The sagas also suggest that they

⁷ Consequently, while most animals have been neglected in Old Norse scholarship, horses have been the subject of a number of theses in recent years. See e.g. Sarah van der Hoek-Springer, *The Horse in the Viking Imagination*, PhD Dissertation, University of Nottingham, 2000; Andrea L. Miller, *Violent Vikings, Gentle Horsemen: The Horse Culture and Practice of Horsemanship in Viking Age Scandinavia*, PhD Dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 2010; Katrín Sif Einarsdóttir, *The Role of Horses in the Old Norse Sources: Transcending Worlds, Mortality, and Reality*, MA Thesis, Háskóli Íslands, 2013; Thomas Rowsell, *Riding to the Afterlife: The Role of Horses in Early Medieval North-Western Europe*, MA Thesis, University College London, 2012; Harriet Jean Evans, *The Horse and his Hero in Old Norse Literature*, MA Thesis, University of York, 2013; see also Harriet Jean Evans, ‘The Horse and his Hero: a Symbiotic Relationship in Old Norse Literature’, in *Illuminating the North: Proceedings from the Nordic Research Network Conference*, ed. Agnes Broomé et al. (London, 2014).

⁸ Crane (2013), p. 137.

⁹ Susan Crane, ‘Chivalry and the Pre/Postmodern’, *Postmedieval* 2.1 (2011), pp. 69–87, at p. 69.

¹⁰ Regarding horse-paths in medieval Iceland: ‘An extensive system of horse paths connected the whole island. These led to almost every part of the country, and formed a highly serviceable communications web’

were used for fighting and entertainment, functioned as symbols of prestige, and were worshipped and sacrificed prior to the Christian conversion.

1.1 Companionship

Of the many horses that inhabit the Icelandic sagas, the most discussed in critical literature is Freyfaxi of *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* – the domestic horse *par excellence*.¹¹ Freyfaxi belongs to Hrafnkell *Freysgoði* ('Freyr's chieftain') Hallfreðarson and is depicted as his favourite animal, a treasure *betri en annarr* ('better than any other').¹² Like many of the horses that play an important role in saga narratives, Freyfaxi's colouring and appearance is described – *brúnmóalóttr at lit* ('brown in colour with a dark stripe down his back') – which, along with naming, serves to characterise and individualise these equestrian companions (they are also often named after their colours). Hrafnkell dedicates half of his beloved horse to the god Freyr, *vin sínum* ('his friend'), after whom Freyfaxi ('Freyr-mane') is named.¹³ Hrafnkell's fondness for Freyfaxi suggests a relationship of emotional intimacy and affection; he has *svá*

(Byock 2001, p. 46). Horses were thus crucial to strategic mobility. Skaldic kennings often connect horses to ships and seafaring since both serve a transportation function, whether on land or on sea. See e.g. Judith Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age: The Vocabulary of Runic Inscriptions and Skaldic Verse* (Woodbridge, 2001), p. 34.

¹¹ Freyfaxi is the ideal domestic horse for Hrafnkell, but obviously not for Einarr.

¹² *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, in *Austfirðinga sögur*, ÍF XI, ed. Jón Jóhannesson (Reykjavík, 1950), p. 100.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 100. On the cult of Freyr in medieval Iceland, see Gabriel Turville-Petre, 'The Cult of Óðinn in Iceland', in *Nine Norse Studies*, VSNR (London, 1972), pp. 1-19, at pp. 7-8.

mikla elsku ('so great a love') for Freyfaxi that he vows to kill any man who rides him without permission.¹⁴

Hrafnkell is soon forced to act upon his promise. Whilst searching for missing sheep, the unfortunate Einarr discovers a group of horses and chases after them; although the horses never used to run from him, they all uncannily shy away except Freyfaxi. Einarr rides Freyfaxi all day, past glaciers and over hills, finds the sheep, and dismounts from Freyfaxi, who is soaked with sweat, mud-splattered, and extremely exhausted. Freyfaxi seems angered by this mistreatment: he rolls over twelve times – possibly to become even dirtier, as soil would cling to his sweat – then lets out a great neigh and swiftly gallops away. Einarr is unable to catch Freyfaxi, who returns to Hrafnkell in Aðalból; from an ecocritical perspective, he embarks upon a journey from nature (lost in the wild) to culture (the human home). This physical movement parallels the transition from wild-to-domestic demonstrated by Freyfaxi's loyalty to his human companion and consequent communication at Hrafnkell's doorstep.

Freyfaxi's actions are increasingly uncanny: 'er hestrinn kemr fyrir dyrr, hneggjaði hann þá hátt' ('when the horse came before the door, he then neighed loudly').¹⁵ Freyfaxi

¹⁴ *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, p. 100.

seemingly knows that he has been mistreated and wants Hrafnkell to know what has happened.¹⁶ Why else would he roll himself in the mud so many times, before returning home and neighing loudly at his master's doorstep? These events are strange and improbable, yet remain within the bounds of realistic possibility. Heather O'Donoghue similarly suggests that 'there is evidently nothing in this broad outline which could not have happened in an actual historical world. The saga author flirts with the supernatural'.¹⁷ Beyond normal, but not impossible, this episode is perhaps best described as preternatural.¹⁸ The location of Freyfaxi's neighing is also significant: in an episode filled

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 104.

¹⁶ William Ian Miller recognises this exchange in terms of contemporary human-pet relations: 'the recognition of the horse's distinctive voice, the attribution of deep intentionality to him, the term of endearment, the immediate mutual understanding—like us with our pets and they with us'. William Ian Miller, *Hrafnkel or the Ambiguities: Hard Cases, Hard Choices* (Oxford, 2017), p. 68.

¹⁷ Heather O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2004), p. 37.

¹⁸ Freyfaxi's behaviour is neither natural nor supernatural, but rather rests between the two categories, in the outermost limits of both. *Preternatural* has usefully been defined as 'a distinct ontological category ... suspended between the mundane and the miraculous'. Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150-1750* (New York, 1998), p. 14. The preternatural, of course, is a modern theoretical construct and medieval Icelanders did not possess a corresponding literary, psychological, or intellectual category. Concerning different medieval Icelandic constructs of the paranormal, see Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Taxonomy of the Non-existent: Some Medieval Icelandic Concepts of the Paranormal', *Fabula* 54.3 (2013), pp. 199-213. I further equate the preternatural with the Freudian *unheimlich* ('uncanny'); see Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. J. Strachey, vol. 17 (London, 1953), pp. 219-252; in application to Old Norse, see Carolyne Larrington, "'Undruðusk þá, sem fyrir var": wonder, Vinland and mediaeval travel narratives', *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 14 (2004), pp. 91-114, at p. 99.

with liminal potential, the doorstep takes on deeper meaning as a threshold between inside and outside – another problematic dichotomy that can be mapped onto culture and nature.

Hrafnkell's response to Freyfaxi's mistreatment indicates that they had a relationship of emotional significance and friendship. Hrafnkell recognises the neigh of his favourite horse and refers to him in human terms – as *garprinn* ('the heroic one') and *fóstri minn* ('my fosterling') – and declares 'heima hafðir þú vit þitt, er þú sagðir mér til, ok skal þessa hefnt verða' ('you had your wits with you, when you told me, and this shall be avenged').¹⁹ Hrafnkell then instructs Freyfaxi to return to his herd, which he does immediately. Freyfaxi thus demonstrates that he is *vitr* ('wise', 'intelligent'), both by informing Hrafnkell that Einarr rode him and by understanding Hrafnkell's instructions. Hrafnkell's reference to Freyfaxi as a fosterling brings the animal into the realm of human family relations, analogous to the foster-children found throughout the sagas. The same is said by Gunnarr of his pet dog Sámr (see section 2.1.1) and of Þorgils Oddason's steed Kinnskjóni ('horse with a piebald head') in the contemporary *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*.²⁰

¹⁹ *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, p. 104. Miller (2017) argues that Hrafnkell feels 'true love' and explains how *fóstri* 'is the term of endearment par excellence' (p. 47).

²⁰ *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, in *Sturlunga saga*, vol. I, ed. Jón Jóhannesson et al. (Reykjavík, 1946), p. 44.

Fóstri may be the closest equivalent to an Old Norse word for a pet – used for an animal with whom a person develops a relationship and who is consequently assimilated into a kin-relationship.²¹ This is significant from the perspective of taboo theory (see chapter 2): in his cross-cultural study, Meyer Fortes suggests that the prohibition against eating a certain animal removes it ‘from the animal-thing order and assimilates it to the human order as a moral being the primary connotation of which is “kinsman”’.²² Although this proposition does not apply universally, it still further suggests that these two species – horses and dogs – were animals with whom people in medieval Scandinavia had especially close relationships and feelings of familial and emotional intimacy. The special place accorded to horses and dogs is further emphasised by archaeological evidence: they are the only animals in medieval Iceland to be buried along with humans in graves.²³ Regarding the frequency of horse and dog burials in mainland Scandinavia, Kristina Jennbert suggests that these species ‘had a close relationship to their owners and that they meant a great deal

²¹ The modern Icelandic word for ‘pet’ – *gæludýr* – does not appear in Old Norse. *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog – A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, University of Copenhagen. Web. Accessed 30 September 2017.

²² Meyer Fortes, ‘Totem and Taboo’, *Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* (1966), pp. 5-22, at p. 17. Although Fortes is specifically discussing totemic cultures, the idea applies to a non-totemic, Christian context.

²³ Smith (1995), p. 329; McGovern et al. (2007), p. 35; Kristján Eldjárn, *Kuml og haugfé úr heiðnum sið á Íslandi* (Reykjavík, 1956).

emotionally to them'.²⁴ This is especially true when the whole animal was deposited in the same grave as a person or the animal received its own grave.

This emotionally significant relationship between horse and human appears in a number of saga narratives. When Björn Arngeirsson returns home to Iceland from Norway in *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa*, he receives a dog (named only V., see section 2 below) from his foster-father, a white horse named Hvítingr, and two foals – and ‘þat váru góðir gripir’ (‘those were valuable possessions’).²⁵ Despite their former quarrels, Björn travels to stay with Þórðr Kolbeinsson for a winter and brings his dog and two of his horses along with him. Þórðr becomes angry when Björn tricks his servants into feeding his prized horses all winter. When Björn acts against Þórðr’s wishes and insists his horses are fed at Þórðr’s home rather than pastured, the best hay is given to Björn’s horses and the rest is left in ruin (presumably by Þórðr’s servants).²⁶ While Björn may simply be asserting his dominance – in which case the horses are a metonymic extension of his ego – he can also

²⁴ Jennbert (2011), p. 69. Cats were not placed in individual graves in Scandinavia, but have been found buried with men and women in the Viking Age (p. 69).

²⁵ *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa*, in *Borgfirðinga sögur*, ÍF III, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík, 1938), p. 136.

²⁶ This acts in opposition to the wisdom of *Hávamál* (v. 83), which dictates that you should buy a lean horse and fatten it at one’s own home, but that a dog can be fed at someone else’s abode. *Hávamál*, in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ÍF, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík, 2014), pp. 338–339. Unlike horses, dogs can be given license to roam and find food for themselves.

be seen to privilege the horses as people, choosing the needs of his animals above human interests and prompting social unrest and contempt. For Þórðr, the horses belong at pasture, so this special treatment involves intimacy – bringing the horses closer to home, much to Þórðr’s annoyance. Björn is loyally determined to provide them with the best possible treatment, regardless of the consequences, demonstrating his affection for his beloved animal companions whom he treats on human terms.

The human-horse connection could be so close that the two characters share the same fate, in a parallel to the dream-animal motif explored in chapter 3. In *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, when Signý Valbrandsdóttir is betrothed against her will to Grímkell goði, she gives her brother Torfi Valbrandsson all of her property except for the two treasures that she values most: her valuable necklace and the horse Svartfaxi (‘black-mane’). Before the wedding, Svartfaxi is found slain, which Signý considers an evil omen. Consequently, the marriage is an unhappy one and Signý dies during childbirth – the lives of Signý and her treasured horse Svartfaxi are thus aligned and they share the same fate (like animal

fylgiur).²⁷

²⁷ *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, in *Harðar saga*, ÍF XIII, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (Reykjavík, 1991), p. 11.

Horses are often given as gifts in the sagas: in *Finnboga saga ramma*, for example, Finnbogi inn rammi ('the mighty') receives five yellow horses from his uncle. Finnbogi possesses few things which he considers more valuable than these *stóðhrossin* ('studhorses') and, significantly, 'gekk hann jafnan ok strauk hrossunum' ('he constantly went and stroked the horses').²⁸ This physical contact between human and animal is imbued with meaning; Finnbogi's continual petting denotes love and affection – emotional intimacy manifested physically through the sense of touch.

Most human-horse relationships in the sagas are positive, but this was not always the case, and horses could also be mistreated. In *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, Ásmundr hærulagr ('grey-locks') has a fawn-coloured mare with a pale stripe down her back named Kengála.²⁹ He believes her to be so perceptive about the weather that if she refuses to go outside, then without fail, a storm is always on its way. Ásmundr instructs his troublesome son Grettir to help look after the horses, but Grettir is skeptical of Kengála's perceived abilities. When it turns cold in the winter and snows, making the ground difficult to graze, Kengála demonstrates a lack of prescience: despite Ásmundr's claims, she always stands in

²⁸ *Finnboga saga*, in *Kjalnesinga saga*, ÍF XIV, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson (Reykjavík, 1959), p. 292.

²⁹ *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, in *Grettis saga*, ÍF VII, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík, 1936), p. 39. The name *Kengála* means something like 'Back-stripe' and she is also later called *Bleikála*, which roughly translates as 'Pale-stripe' (p. 41).

the most exposed place whenever there is bad weather and never returns to the stable before nightfall. Just as Ásmundr projects preternatural ability upon the horse, Grettir seems to assume that she is purposefully spiting him; cold, underdressed, and angry, he gets his revenge in a hostile act of animal cruelty.³⁰ While both presumptions challenge the bounds of the uncanny, Kengála is probably just an ordinary horse. It is also possible, however, that Grettir mistreated the horses – something that would come as no surprise given his impatient character – and with uncanny abilities, Kengála knew that by staying outside, she was causing Grettir great discomfort. The medieval Icelandic audience might have pondered the possible existence of preternatural abilities in Kengála and, consequently, the extent to which the uncanny might be at play in the behaviour of their own companion animals, as well as their intellectual potential.

1.2 Training and Fighting

³⁰ When Grettir discovers Kengála in the stable eating the other horses' fodder, he cuts her across the shoulders and down her back on both sides with a knife; Kengála kicks out her hind legs and breaks the walls with her hooves; following a fierce struggle, Grettir flays the entire hide from her back and drives the horses out to pasture (ibid., pp. 39-42). On violence against animals in the middle ages, see Steel (2011). Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that Grettir learns compassion for animals over the course of his life – see 'Introduction: All Things', in *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Washington, 2012), pp. 1-8.

Horses required special training from a young age, learning various gaits and how to fight.

The training of a horse was considered an important skill for accomplished men. The

legendary kings Alrekr and Eiríkr in *Ynglinga saga*, for example, are described as skilled and

powerful men and great warriors, and they are also preoccupied with the training of horses:

‘þat var siðvenja þeira at ríða hesta, temja bæði við gang ok við hlaup. Kunnu þeir þat allra

manna bezt’ (‘it was their custom to ride horses, teaching them to walk and to jump. They

knew this best of all men’).³¹ Such training involved a process of domestication: the

curtailing of instincts and the meeting of bodies and technologies, processes that bring the

animal away from wild nature towards human culture. The term ‘biotechnology’ – applied

by Donna Haraway in her discussion of herding dogs – is pertinent here.³² As defined by

Edmund Russell, biotechnologies are ‘biological artifacts shaped by humans to serve human

ends’.³³ Domesticated horses are selected for their working abilities, enhanced through

³¹ *Ynglinga saga*, in *Heimskringla I*, ÍF XXVI, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (Reykjavík, 1941), p. 39. They consequently compete with each other to see who is the better rider and who has the better mounts, apparently killing each other in the process.

³² Haraway (2008), p. 56.

³³ Edmund Russell, ‘The Garden in the Machine: Toward an Evolutionary History of Technology’, in *Industrializing Organisms: Introducing Evolutionary History*, ed. Susan R. Schrepfer and Philip Scranton (New York, 2004), pp. 1-16, at p. 1.

selective breeding, and carefully trained to obey human instructions and improve people's lives.³⁴

The sagas suggest that certain horses were considered better – and thus more valuable – than others. *Grágás* provides some indication of the value of different horses: while a healthy horse between four and ten winters is worth the same amount as a standard cow (see below, section 4.1), there are exceptions: ‘Stoð hestr oc se verðe betri fyrir sacir vigs. oc gelldr hestr oc se verðe betri fyrir reiðar sacir. oc fyl meR istóðe þat er met fe’ (‘a stud stallion is worth more because of its fighting abilities, and a gelded horse is worth more for its riding qualities, and also for a mare with foal in a stud’).³⁵ The value of fighting stallions is repeated elsewhere: the fine for docking another man’s horse is three marks; lesser outlawry if the docking touches bone, or if the horse is on a journey to a wedding or

³⁴ Icelandic settlers imported small and thick-coated Scandinavian horses, which adapted well to North Atlantic weather and Iceland’s rough terrain. Meanwhile thirteenth-century continental Europeans bred their horses with larger Arabian stock, which would have been ill-suited to Iceland’s unique conditions. See e.g. Byock (2001), p. 28.

³⁵ *Grágás, Konungsbók*, in *Grágás: Islændernes Lovbog i Fristatens Tid, udgivet efter det Kongelige Bibliotheks Haandskrift*, vol. II, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen (Copenhagen, 1852; repr. Odense, 1974), p. 194. The collection of laws known as *Grágás* are from the Icelandic Commonwealth (‘Free State’) period; they were presumably in use until Iceland became subject to the Norwegian crown (1262–1264). See e.g. Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote and Richard Perkins, ‘Introduction’, *Laws of Early Iceland, Grágás: The Codex Regius of Grágás with Material from Other Manuscripts*, vol. 1 (Winnipeg, 1980), pp. 1–19.

an assembly, and full outlawry if it is a stallion.³⁶ Stallions were presumably the most valuable horses because of their size, strength, and speed, and significantly, as a consequence, their ability to win in a fight. Docking (tail-removal) was symbolically important: this law is about masculinity and metonymy, just like horse-fighting. It is probably considered worse if the docking touches bone because of the risk of infection (possibly causing death); and a horse that is on its way to a public gathering is more likely to be seen by others. The law thus specifies the importance of display, and docking can be seen as shaming in a metaphorical parallel of castration (similar to a mare, see chapter 2, section 2.2). Docked horses would be used for work around the farm; a docked display horse suggests that someone only has one horse which has been docked for ploughing (and thus lacks wealth).

Besides being a means of transportation and a source of friendship, horses also feature prominently in the sagas as entertainment and symbols of prestige in horse-fights. Horse-fighting (*hestavíg, bestaat*) often took place as part of a larger gathering (*bestaping*), during which people also bought and sold horses and enjoyed other types of amusement. There are twenty instances of horse-fighting in Old Norse literature contained in twelve

³⁶ *Grágás, Konungsbók*, vol. II, p. 179.

sagas and two þættir; most literary examples occur within the *Íslendingasögur* corpus, though there are horse-fights in *Sturlunga saga* too.³⁷ Icelandic horse-fights were usually held at meetings in the autumn, though they also sometimes took place in the summer. They were clearly popular events and people came in great numbers: in *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa*, for example, *alþýða heraðsmanna* ('all the people of the district') were in attendance.³⁸ In the sport, horses were goaded to bite and fight each other by men holding sticks. The horse-fight ends when one of them runs away or is killed, or if violence breaks out between the human competitors.³⁹ The latter is so common that when Kálfr strikes Ingólfr with his stick at the end of a horse-fight in *Víga-Glúms saga*, Glúmr responds: 'Gefum engan gaum at slíku, svá lýkr hér hverju hestaþingi' ('Let us pay no attention to that, so ends every horse-fight here').⁴⁰

³⁷ Horse-fights are also mentioned in four different law-books (two Norwegian, two Icelandic), demonstrating that the sport had to be regulated in both countries. Remigiusz Gogosz, 'Horse-fights: the Brutal Entertainment of the Saga Age Icelanders', *Średniowiecze Polski i Powszechnie* 5.9 (2014), pp. 17-32, at p. 21, and further references therein.

³⁸ *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa*, p. 174.

³⁹ If the outcome was unclear, judges could determine the winner. In one of the horse-fights in *Víga-Glúms saga*, each of the two opposing districts chooses a judge to decide which horse was the winner; their verdict was considered final. Nowhere else are judges mentioned, however. *Víga-Glúms saga*, in *Eyfirðinga sögur*, ÍF IX, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík, 1956), p. 61.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

Horse-fighting was also well-known in mainland Scandinavia and was probably already an established tradition when Norwegian settlers came to Iceland.⁴¹ In his thorough study of horse-fighting and horse-racing, Svale Solheim demonstrates that the only significant difference between horse-fights in the two countries is that in Norway they were always part of bigger general assemblies that took place in the autumn, while Icelandic horse-fights could also be smaller events held at different times.⁴² As a form of sport and entertainment, horse-fighting can be linked with other games in medieval Iceland, including ball games, swimming contests, and table games. John Martin suggests that these ‘dramatic episodes centered on competitive activities ... provide both psychological insight into and a social context for the deeds of chief actors in the sagas as well as insight into the role that such competitive activities played in medieval Scandinavian society’.⁴³ Moreover, as

⁴¹ Svale Solheim, *Horse-Fight and Horse-Race in Norse Tradition*, *Studia Norvegica* 8-9 (Oslo, 1956), pp. 52-53.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 62. The Norwegian evidence is relatively late and comes from post-medieval accounts of *skeid* sporting events in Setesdal and Telemark, but Solheim writes: ‘Both in the Icelandic descriptions and the Norwegian accounts we find identical spectacles ... It seems unbelievable to discover almost identical methods of proceeding in both the overall picture, as well as in a number of details, in accounts which are so far apart both geographically and chronologically. Literary connections here is [sic] out of the question, so the similarity, then, is a conclusive proof of the historical connection, of the same origin of these customs’ (p. 62). See further e.g. Mary Atkin, ‘Viking Race-Courses? The Distribution of Skeið Place-Name Elements in Northern England’, *Journal of the English Place-Name Society* 10, 1977-78, pp. 26-39.

⁴³ John D. Martin, “‘Svá lýkr hér hverju hestaðingi’: Sports and Games in Icelandic Saga Literature”, *SS* 75.1 (2003), pp. 25-44, at p. 25.

symbols of wealth, masculinity, strength, and prestige, the fighting horses are emblematic of their owners.

The aforementioned animosity between Bjørn and Þórðr in *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa* only increases after they hold a horse-fight (a smaller *bestavíg*, following the larger *bestaping* noted above). While Bjørn aggressively attacks his unnamed opponent with his thick *bestastaf* ('horse-staff'), Þórðr rides around the circle of men watching the fight; then Þórðr stabs his spear into Bjørn's shoulder, provoking Bjørn to strike Þórðr with his staff, knocking him off his horse.⁴⁴ This horse-fight is clearly more about the human protagonists involved rather than the horses themselves; it is a proxy for human antagonism. Balinese cockfighting offers a useful cultural parallel regarding the relationship between animal metonymy and masculinity: as Clifford Geertz argues, 'it is only apparently cocks that are fighting there. Actually, it is men'.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa*, p. 175.

⁴⁵ Clifford Geertz, 'Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight', *Daedalus* 101.1: Myth, Symbol, and Culture (Winter, 1972), pp. 1-37, at p. 5. Geertz describes a deep psychological identification between Balinese men and their cocks (with a deliberate double entendre): 'they are masculine symbols *par excellence*' (p. 5). The parallel suggests ways in which men in medieval Iceland might have demonstrated their affection for their prized fighting-horses: the majority of Balinese men 'spend an enormous amount of time with their favorites, grooming them, feeding them, discussing them, trying them out against one another, or just gazing at them with a mixture of rapt admiration and dreamy self-absorption' (p. 6).

Violence could also be directed at horses by humans. In *Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu*, Eyjólfur Þormóðsson's horse grips Bjarni Þorsteinsson's horse's upper jaw until Bjarni strikes the horse to knock it loose.⁴⁶ When Ingólfur's horse is beating Kálfr's steed in *Víga-Glúms saga*, Kálfr strikes Ingólfur's horse with his stick so that it becomes dazed.⁴⁷ Even worse, at a *bestavíg* in *Njáls saga*, a fight breaks out between Gunnarr and his two opponents, Þorgeirr and Kolr, and perhaps realising that he is unable to beat Gunnarr in a fair fight, Þorgeirr takes out his anger against Gunnarr by hitting his horse so hard that its eye pops out.⁴⁸ The aggression in these episodes is directed from one person to another, but as a metonymic representative of a human competitor, the horse is the victim of the violence.

Horse-fights can also feature violent confrontation between competing families or entire districts. In *Grettis saga*, Grettir fights against Oddr with a horse from the same kin as Kengála – *best góðan* ('a fine horse'), greatly valued by both father and son.⁴⁹ The fight

⁴⁶ *Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu*, in *Ljósvetninga saga*, ÍF X, ed. Björn Sigfússon (Reykjavík, 1941), p. 222.

There is another horse-fight held earlier in the saga that also ends in violence (p. 183).

⁴⁷ *Víga-Glúms saga*, p. 44.

⁴⁸ Presumably out of compassion (but perhaps also for the purpose of display, through metonymy), Gunnarr tells Kolskegg to execute his horse so that it will not live maimed. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ÍF XII, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavík, 1954), p. 151.

⁴⁹ *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, p. 99.

was a successful one in the eyes of the audience: ‘Hestarnir bitusk allvel, ok var þat in mesta skemmtan’ (‘All the horses bit well, and that was the greatest entertainment’).⁵⁰ Oddr goads his horse with zeal, but Grettir keeps his horse back, holding its tail in one hand and his staff in the other, demonstrating differing strategies. Human conflict inevitably breaks out between Oddr and Grettir and their supporters; people from other districts have to intervene and separate them. On an even more epic scale, a *hestavíg* in *Njáls saga* features conflict between two districts, part of a sweeping feud between multiple families. With a great many people in attendance, the horses bite each other for so long that there is no need to provoke them, perhaps metonymically reflecting their owners’ sentiments – ‘ok var þat it mesta gaman’ (‘and that was the best sport’).⁵¹

The success or failure of the human contender in these conflicts is metonymically represented by the victory or defeat of the horse. The character of a fighting-horse is emblematic of its owner’s personality. In *Víga-Glúms saga*, when Glúmr is reluctant to set the stallion Snækoll (‘Snow-top’) against Kálfr’s elderly *bestklár* (‘nag’),⁵² Kálfr incites Glúmr with a proverb that explicitly links the character of horse and owner: ‘Því munu þér eigi

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 99.

⁵¹ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 150.

⁵² The word *bestklár* is obscure; it is translated as ‘horse of poor quality, nag’ by Gabriel Turville-Petre (ed.), *Víga-Glúms saga* (Oxford: 1940; rev. ed. 1960), p. 125.

vilja, at engi hugr mun í vera; kann vera, at sanni it fornkvæðna, at fé sé dróttni glíkt' ('The reason you will not fight is that there is no spirit in him; the old saying may be true, that the livestock is like the master').⁵³ The metonymical relationship between human and horse is especially clear in *Víglundar saga*. The unpopular brothers Jökull and Einarr are the biggest trouble-makers in the district. They own a brown horse that is *mjök ólmr* ('very savage'): all other horses run from him, and he has ten large *vígtenn* ('canines') which are unlike those of any other horse, demonstrating his abnormal and monstrous nature.⁵⁴ The morally and physically superior Víglundr, on the contrary, has a yellow horse that is 'hesta beztr ok fegrstr' ('the best and most beautiful of horses') upon which he places great value.⁵⁵ When the two horses fight, Bleikrinn ('The yellow one') beats Brúnninn ('The brown one'); the brothers run for their weapons and human conflict ensues. Horse-fights were cruel and violent affairs, but they were also imbued with symbolic significance, and the fighting horse is both a symbol and a surrogate for its human owner.

⁵³ *Víga-Glúms saga*, p. 43.

⁵⁴ *Víglundar saga*, in *Kjalnesinga saga*, ÍF XIV, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson (Reykjavík, 1959), p. 77. A normal horse has twelve incisors and between zero and four canines at the front of the mouth (a stallion usually has four). The ten big canines would obviously assist the horse in a fight, but they are also anti-domestic: the gap between the canines and the premolars is where the bit should go, which would be impossible with so many additional teeth.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

1.3 Sacrifice and Worship

Terry Gunnell suggests that ‘both horse-racing and horse-fighting must have had particular significance within the pagan religion of Scandinavia’.⁵⁶ Accordingly, in 1555, Olaus Magnus wrote that in the early Swedish horse-races, the horses that won were often sacrificed to the gods.⁵⁷ In 1592, Bishop Oddur Einarsson forbade priests to attend ‘horse-fights, vigils, gatherings of common people and shepherds, and *other* relics of pagan ceremony’.⁵⁸

Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða offers further literary evidence for the sacrifice and worship of horses in pre-Christian Scandinavia (horse-worship will be revisited in chapter 6). When Hrafnkell ‘Freysgoði’ settles Aðalból, he performs great sacrifices, builds a large temple, and dedicates half of his best livestock to his favoured deity, including Freyfaxi.⁵⁹ Later in the narrative, when the brothers Þorgeirr and Þorkell Þjóstarsson send for Freyfaxi and his herd, they decide that the mares will be useful for farming, but that the stallion is worse

⁵⁶ See Terry Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 31 (for references, see pp. 30–36). See further Gogosz (2014), p. 18. As Gunnell notes, however, there is no evidence that can link horse-fights to pagan festivals in the Icelandic calendar (p. 36).

⁵⁷ Gunnell (1995), p. 35. Olaus Magnus, *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*, book I (Rome, 1555); Facsimile of the First Edition (Copenhagen, 1972), pp. 40–41.

⁵⁸ Gunnell (1995), p. 35. Finnur Jónsson, *Historia ecclesiastica Islandiæ*, vol. III (Havniæ, 1772–1778), p. 337.

⁵⁹ *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, p. 99.

than other horses for causing so much trouble and that he should return to his owner (i.e. Freyr). They lead Freyfaxi to a cliff (later named *Freyfaxahamarr*, ‘Freyfaxi’s cliff’), where a waterfall stands over a deep pool, pull a leather sack over his head, place long poles against his sides, fasten a stone to his neck, and push him forward and over the cliff to his death.⁶⁰

As O’Donoghue notes, this episode is ‘clearly a reference to a form of sacrifice’, but it is not an act of devotion towards a deity.⁶¹ In a final act of desecration, the brothers plunder Hrafnkell’s temple and burn it to the ground.

When Hrafnkell learns of the death of Freyfaxi and the burning of the temple, he declares ‘Ek hygg þat hégóma at trúá á goð’ (‘I think it is false to have faith in gods’) and never sacrifices again.⁶² Rather than showing grief at his losses, Hrafnkell exhibits an appropriate response for a Christian author and audience by abandoning his pagan faith; what Miller terms ‘anachronistic proto-Christian piety’.⁶³ Just as the disgust assigned to the eating of horsemeat in various texts had a didactic purpose (see chapter 2, section 1.3), here the sacrifice of horses and worship of gods is deemed amoral (on sacrifice in pre-Christian

⁶⁰ *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, p. 124.

⁶¹ Heather O’Donoghue, *From Asgard to Valhalla: The Remarkable History of the Norse Myths* (London and New York, 2007), p. 61. See further Tommy Kuusela, “Den som rider på Freyfaxi ska dö”: Freyfaxis död och rituell nedstörtning av hästar för stup’, *Scripta Islandica* 66 (2015), pp. 77-99.

⁶² *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, p. 124.

⁶³ Miller (2017), p. 79.

Scandinavia, also see chapter 6, section 5.2).⁶⁴ While emotional relationships between horse and rider were socially acceptable in Christian Iceland, the eating and worship of horses was prohibited. Yet it is also significant that the precise moment at which Hrafnkell abandons his faith and forsakes his love of Freyr is when his beloved horse is killed, which firstly suggests that Hrafnkell refuses to believe in a god that would not save his own, but also establishes a metonymic connection between Freyfaxi and the god after whom he is named; both cease to be functional in the text.

2. Dogs

In critical animal-theory terms, dogs in the medieval Icelandic sagas are depicted as pets: they are domesticated for purposes beyond eating their meat and sincere relationships are developed with them. Erica Fudge astutely asks:

Is a pet an animal? This might sound like a rather odd question, but it is one that is worth asking. A pet, simply put, is an animal who enters our (human) domestic space. It is different from other – non-tame or wild – animals, because it lives with us in our homes. On this basis, it is possible to see pets as making up a different class of creature. They are both human and animal; they

⁶⁴ For further evidence, see e.g. *Völsa þáttr*, an edifying and comic tale found only in *Flateyjarbók* and dated to the 14th century, in which a pagan Norwegian family worships a horse penis (*völsi*) as their god, until Óláfr Haraldsson comes to their farm and converts them to Christianity. It is highly unlikely that the story contains genuine cultural memory of a pre-Christian fertility cult, but it does show how later Christian authors depicted the pagan past as grotesque (further explored in the following chapter, section 1.3). *Völsa þáttr*, in *Stories from Sagas of Kings*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (London, 1980; rev. ed. 2007).

live with us, but are not us; they have names like us, but cannot call us by our names.⁶⁵

By this definition, the dogs of the sagas are pets that challenge the human-animal dichotomy. Dogs appear frequently as human companions in saga literature and through their communication and remarkable intelligence, loyalty and emotional bonds of friendship with people, these pets are unique amongst all creatures in the saga corpus: they inhabit a liminal space between animal and human.⁶⁶

Dogs are the oldest domestic animals and have held a special place in human lives for millennia – since wolves were domesticated over 13,000 years ago.⁶⁷ Zooarchaeologist Christopher Tilley speculates that ‘the dog, as the only domesticated animal living and eating with humanity, would be a highly ambiguous and anomalous creature, a kind of potential mediator between the two worlds of humans and animals’.⁶⁸ Dogs embody some

⁶⁵ Fudge (2002), pp. 27-28. By this definition, horses are not pets proper since unlike dogs and cats, they do not inhabit the same domestic spaces as people.

⁶⁶ Pet dogs are often favoured above people. Despite being a guest of Þórðr Kolbeinsson, Björn Arngeirsson chooses to feed his dog (named only V. in the manuscript) under the table during meals, regardless of the distress this causes his host and the troublesome consequences of his actions (*Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*, pp. 136, 146).

⁶⁷ Jennbert (2011), p. 64.

⁶⁸ Christopher Tilley, *An Ethnography of the Neolithic: Early Prehistoric Societies in Southern Scandinavia* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 65. Zooanthropologist James Serpell similarly argues that ‘in symbolic terms, the domestic dog exists precariously in the no-man’s-land between the human and non-human worlds ... forever oscillating uncomfortably between the roles of high-status animal and low-status person ... and

of the qualities most valued in human society – and also those thought to most differentiate humans from other animals – such as loyalty and intelligence. Dogs also served a variety of utilitarian functions in medieval Scandinavia beyond companionship, including herding sheep and cattle, hunting (on the mainland), and guardianship of the home. An interesting parallel emerges with the nineteenth-century Comanche of the North American Great Plains, for whom ‘horses were of great practical value, but horses were treated in a utilitarian way, while dogs, kept as pets, merited fond stories and warriors mourned their deaths’.⁶⁹ In medieval Iceland, both horses and dogs served important practical purposes; people also developed intimate relationships with them, which is why they figure so prominently in the sagas, with their human companions left mourning once they are gone (or in the case of Vígi, the dog mourns the loss of its human companion, discussed below in section 2.1.3). As Donna Haraway writes, ‘Dogs, in their historical complexity, matter

simultaneously embodying or representing a strange mixture of admirable and despicable traits’ – see ‘From Paragon to Pariah: Some Reflections on Human Attitudes to Dogs’, in *The Domestic Dog: Its Evolution, Behaviour, and Interactions with People*, ed. James Serpell (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 245-256, at p. 254.

⁶⁹ Haraway (2003), p. 13; see further James Serpell, *In the Company of Animals: A Study of Human-Animal Relationships* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 70-71.

here ... Dogs are not surrogates for theory; they are not here just to think with. They are here to live with'.⁷⁰

Not all dogs were considered equal in medieval Scandinavia. The Norwegian *Frostubingslög* provides some insight into how different breeds of dogs were conceived and valued:

Ef maðr drepr cofanracka fyrir manni. gialldi .xij. aura. en þat er cofan ef maðr tecr hendi finni um hálsinn fva at faman taci fingrinn. En .vj. aurar fyrir mióhund. En fyrir veiðihund hálfa mörc. oc fva fyrir nautahund ef hann er inn hundinn at hinu öffta nauti oc út lenstr at hinu fyrfta nauti. oc fva fcal at grindum hit fömu. En fyrir húsvörð eyri ef drepinn verðr.⁷¹

(If a man kills another man's lap dog [he must] pay a fee of twelve aurar. And it is a lap dog if a man puts his hand around the neck such that the fingers meet. And six aurar for a greyhound. And for a hunting hound half a mark. And so for a cattle-dog if the dog remains inside when the last cattle [come in] and goes outside when the first cattle [leave]. And so shall it be the same at folds [for sheep]. And for house-dogs one aura if killed.)

This passage provides a monetary value for different dogs, mostly based upon utilitarian function rather than breed.⁷² A hierarchy can be formed: twelve aurar for the *kofanrakki* ('lap-dog'); six aurar for the *mjóhundr* ('grey-hound'); four aurar for the *veiðihundr*

⁷⁰ Haraway (2003), p. 5.

⁷¹ *Den ældre Frostathing-Lov*, in *Norges Gamle Love indtil 1387*, vol. I, ed. R. Keyser and P. A. Munch (Christiania, 1846), pp. 234-235.

⁷² This was the case throughout medieval Europe, when dog breeds were far less closely defined than they are now. Kathleen Walker-Meikle, *Medieval Pets* (Woodbridge, 2012), p. 6.

(‘hunting-hound’) and *nautabundr* (‘cattle-dog’); and one aura for the house-dog, which was presumably kept for guardianship.⁷³ Most startling is the high value placed on lap-dogs, which provided no important utilitarian function such as hunting, herding, or guardianship. Rather, these animals demonstrated social status and conveyed wealth and privilege – and thus power. No lap-dogs are mentioned in native medieval Icelandic literature, but they are found in translated continental romances. Most notable is the exceptional, greatly beloved, and highly fantastical canine in *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*. It was a gift from an elf-woman and portrays all of the ideal characteristics to be found in a small pet dog: in sum, ‘Aldri varð jafnmikit kvikendi, vildara né fegra ok svá vitugt, blítt ok svá þjónustumjúkt’ (‘There was never an equally great animal, neither as agreeable nor beautiful and so clever, gentle and so obedient’).⁷⁴ This dog might be optimal in the French context, but would not be useful in medieval Iceland, where the best hero-dogs are large, brave, and loyal; herding sheep, barking when enemies approach the home, and fiercely attacking their master’s opponents.

⁷³ One mark was the equivalent of eight aurar in west Norway – see e.g. Dagfinn Skre, ‘Money and trade in Viking-Age Scandinavia’, *Economies, Monetisation and Society in the West Slavic Lands 800-1200 AD*, Wolińskie Spotkania Mediewistyczne II, ed. Mateusz Boguck and Marian Rębkowski (Szczecin, 2013), pp. 75-87, at p. 77.

⁷⁴ *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar—The Tristan Legend*, in *Norse Romance*, vol. I, ed. and trans. Peter Jorgensen, gen. ed. Marianne E. Kalinke (Cambridge, 1999), p. 152.

2.1 *Intelligence, Loyalty, and Emotion*

2.1.1 *Sámr*

When Gunnarr Hámundarson departs from his brother-in-law Ólafr pái ('peacock') in Hjarðarholt, he is given three costly gifts: a gold ring, a cloak that had belonged to the Irish king Myrkjartan, and a dog that had been given to Ólafr in Ireland.⁷⁵ The dog's exceptional traits are described in detail by Ólafr:

...hann er mikill ok eigi verri til fylgðar en roskr maðr. Þat fylgir ok, at hann hefir manns vit; hann mun ok geyja at hverjum manni, þeim er hann veit, at óvinr þinn er, en aldri at vinum þínum; sér hann ok á hverjum manni, hvárt honum er til þín vel eða illa; hann mun ok lífit á leggja at vera þér trúr. Þessi hundr heitir Sámr.⁷⁶

(...he is large and no worse a companion than a valiant man. There is also this, that he has the wits of a man; he will bark at any man that he knows to be your enemy, but never at your friends; he also sees in every man whether he intends good or evil for you; he will also lay down his life to be true to you. This dog is named Sámr.)

⁷⁵ As a large dog from Ireland, Sámr was probably thought to be an Irish wolfhound: a long-established breed that was once imported to Rome for combat in the arenas against lions and bears and that 'all Rome viewed with wonder'. See e.g. Finbar McCormick, 'The Dog in Prehistoric and Early Christian Ireland', *Archaeology Ireland* 5.4 (Winter, 1991), pp. 7-9. William Sayers details the links between Sámr and Ireland and argues that the episode has 'a general Irish resonance'. William Sayers, 'Gunnarr, his Irish Wolfhound Sámr, and the Passing of the Old Heroic Order in *Njáls saga*', ANF 112 (1997), pp. 43-66.

⁷⁶ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 173.

Sámr is introduced like a human hero, given a common human name, and has preternatural, quasi-human intellect, communicating uncanny knowledge by barking.⁷⁷

Demonstrating his aforementioned intelligence and loyalty, Sámr follows Ólaf's instructions and immediately goes to Gunnarr and lies down by his feet.

Sámr's devotion to Gunnarr is proven later in the saga. Intending to kill Gunnarr, Mqrðr Valgarðsson warns a group of forty attackers that they must first eliminate Sámr. They force Gunnarr's neighbour Þorkell to lead the dog elsewhere; the events that follow are testament to the dog's intelligence, bravery, loyalty to Gunnarr, and the tragedy of the episode:

Þorkell bóndi gekk heim, ok lá rakkinn á húsum uppi, ok teygir hann hundinn braut með sér í geilur nokkurar. Í því sér hundrinn, at þar eru menn fyrir, ok hleypr á hann Þorkel upp ok grípr í nárann; Qnundr ór Tröllaskógi hjó með øxi í hqfuð hundinum, svá at allt kom í heilann; hundrinn kvað við hátt, svá at þat þótti með ódæmum, ok fell hann dauðr niðr.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ *Sámr* is also an adjective that means 'swarthy, blackish', which presumably refers to his colour. *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, Richard Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfusson, 2nd edn. with a supplement by Sir William A. Craigie (Oxford, 1874; rev. ed. 1957), pp. 693-694 (hereafter *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*). Although the precise meaning of *vit* is unclear, the word is clearly linked to intellectual capacities: i.e. 'consciousness, sense'; 'intelligence, cognisance'; 'wit, understanding, reason' (p. 711). Miller suggests that Sámr is given 'a full conventional introduction accorded a major saga character', including his lineage, a physical description, and his character traits. William Ian Miller, *'Why is your axe bloody?' A Reading of Njáls saga* (Oxford, 2014), p. 141.

⁷⁸ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, pp. 185-186.

(The farmer Þorkell went to the house, and the dog lay up on the roof, and he lured the dog away with him into some runnels. But when the dog sees that there are men nearby, he jumps up onto Þorkell and bit him in the groin; Qnundr from Tröllaskógi struck the dog in the head with his axe, so that it went right into the brain; the dog howled so loudly, so that they thought they had never heard the like, and he fell down dead.)

By attacking Þorkell, Sámr demonstrates the quasi-human intelligence and preternatural instinct described by Óláfr. In a process of anthropomorphism, Sámr detects the strangers' intentions and realises that they plan to harm Gunnarr; he draws an inference, knows that Þorkell has betrayed his master, and attacks him as a result, risking his own life.⁷⁹

Gunnarr's emotional response will be discussed at the end of this section.

2.1.2 *Snati*

Snati in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* is the most exceptional canine to be found in any of the indigenous Icelandic sagas. Even more than Sámr, this pet of Gestr Bárðarson is portrayed with preternatural, quasi-human characteristics. When leaving the cave of a *tröll*-woman named Hítr, Gestr is given a very large, gray dog named *Snati*; and 'In mesta fylgd var í rakkanum sakir afls ok speki ... hann væri betri til vígs en fjórir röskvir karlar' ('The dog was the best companion on account of his strength and wisdom ... he was better in a fight than

⁷⁹ As noted by Sayers (1997), however, 'Sámr does not give evidence of all the abilities ascribed to him by Óláfr: he recognises friend from foe but cannot read the intentions of a neighbour forced into betrayal' (p. 61).

four brave men’).⁸⁰ Snati first proves these attributes when the monstrous trolls Kolbjörn and his mother, Skrukka, come to a valley to kill Gestr and his companions. Snati demonstrates his wisdom when he understands Gestr’s instructions: ‘Snati, þú skalt móti kerlingu’ (‘Snati, you shall go against the crone’).⁸¹ Snati climbs up a crag and rolls large stones down on Skrukka; and when she throws them back, Snati kills the crone by rolling an immense boulder which lands on her back. Not only does Snati prove that he can understand complex human language, but he also establishes his cunning and ability in battle, helping his companion Gestr defeat the trolls. Normal dogs do not roll rocks down mountains and Snati demonstrates non-canine ingenuity. His intellect is preternatural: other saga-dogs are described in terms of their extraordinary *vit* (‘wits, sense, intelligence’), but for Snati, it is his *speki* (‘wisdom’) that is highlighted. By climbing the cliff and rolling stones onto his owner’s enemy, Snati demonstrates his cunning and ability to strategise; instead of simply following human orders, he uses his own initiative and shows foresight.

⁸⁰ *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, in *Harðar saga*, ÍF XIII, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (Reykjavík, 1991), p. 145. The dog’s name, *snati*, is presumably derived from the verb *snatta* meaning ‘to “snuffle about.” to roam idly from house to house, roam without aim or business’ (*An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 573).

⁸¹ *Bárðar saga*, p. 156.

Snati again proves his bravery and loyalty to Gestr on two separate occasions near the saga's end. On an island off the coast of Greenland, Gestr descends into the mound of King Raknarr on a rope that is held by a priest and many other men. He experiences strange and terrifying wonders within and all of the men holding the rope flee except for the priest – and Snati. On their return voyage, Gestr needs to know the location of a reef and requires Snati's aid: 'Vísaði hann Snata út á boðana, en rakkinn hljóp þegar út á boðana á kaf, þar sem rifsins var ván' ('He sent Snati out into the waves, and the dog immediately leapt out into the surf and dived underwater, there where the reef was expected').⁸² Snati uncannily realises that Gestr needs to know the location of the reef and sacrifices his life for his master; tragically, Raknarr's magical powers are still at play, and Snati drowns in the waves. Gestr greatly misses his favourite companion afterwards: 'Þat þótti Gestri inn mesti skaði' ('Gestr thought that the greatest loss').⁸³

An intimate relationship develops between Gestr and Snati and he figures as an influential character in the narrative. More than any other dog in the Icelandic sagas, Snati is depicted as a supernatural (rather than preternatural) animal, for he exceeds normal

⁸² Ibid., p. 169.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 169.

canine behaviour.⁸⁴ Even though Snati is linked with the supernatural from the outset (as a gift from a troll-woman who lives in a cave), it would be problematic to assume that his exceptional intelligence and wisdom was considered farcical or unbelievable by the saga's author and audience. It is impossible to know the limits of canine intelligence as perceived by medieval Icelanders, but Snati is indicative of literary engagement and intellectual curiosity about the nature of the canine mind.

2.1.3 *Vígi*

Sámr is not the only remarkable Irish saga-dog.⁸⁵ In a number of sources, Ólafr Tryggvason is given his pet dog *Vígi* as a gift while raiding in Ireland.⁸⁶ By all accounts (though Snorri's version is here used as exemplary), *Vígi* demonstrates two of the most important utilitarian functions served by dogs in medieval Scandinavia: herding and hunting. When some of Ólafr's men drive a large number of sheep and cattle towards the shore, a farmer asks Ólafr

⁸⁴ The fantastic *Bárðar saga* is a fitting *Íslendingasaga* for such an exceptional dog; Ármann Jakobsson has usefully discussed the saga's place on the 'periphery' of the *Íslendingasögur*. Ármann Jakobsson, 'History of the Trolls? Bárðar saga as an historical narrative', *Saga-Book XXV* (1998), pp. 53-71, at p. 53.

⁸⁵ Like Scotland and the Hebrides, Ireland is often associated with the uncanny in the *Íslendingasögur*.

⁸⁶ For references and comparison of the different versions, see Rohrbach (2009), pp. 131-136, and 'A Man and His Dog – Animal-Episodes in Different Versions of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*', in *Skáldamjödurinn: Selected Proceedings of the UCL Graduate Symposia in Old Norse Literature and Philology, 2005-2006*, ed. Anna Zanchi (London, 2008), pp. 147-180. See further Tommy Kuusela, "Ta hjorten Vige!" Nordbornas hundar', in *Hunden i kult och religion: på gränsen mellan beligt och profant*, ed. Jenny Berglund and Ingvar Svanberg (Göteborg, 2009), pp. 93-111.

to return his cattle; Ólafr agrees, but only if the farmer can recognise the animals that belong to him. The farmer points his large *hjarðbúndr* ('shepherd's dog') into the herd of cattle, where several hundred cows are being driven, and the dog proves his intellectual capacity by running around the whole herd but only driving those cattle that belong to the farmer.⁸⁷ Ólafr and his men are impressed by the dog's feat: 'Þóttusk þeir þá vita, at hundrinn myndi rétt kennt hafa. Þeim þótti hundr sá furðu vitr' ('They then believed that the dog had recognised them properly. They thought the dog had marvellous intelligence').⁸⁸ The farmer gives Ólafr the dog; it is named and its remarkable nature is summarised: 'Sá hundr hét Vígi ok var allra hunda beztr' ('That dog was named Vígi and was the best of all dogs').⁸⁹ The name 'Vīgi' is significant: *Vígr* translates as 'a fighter', derived from the substantive *víg* ('a fight, battle') and/or the adjective *vígr* ('in fighting state, serviceable'), foreshadowing his next appearance later in the saga.⁹⁰

Vīgi appears during Ólafr's victorious sea-battle against Rauðr inn rammi ('the strong') and Þórir hjörtr ('hart' – the story presumably generated the name); the dog's

⁸⁷ *Ólaf's saga Tryggvasonar*, ÍF XXVI, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (Reykjavík, 1941), p. 269.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 325. In Oddr Snorrason's version, Vígi is said to be more like wise shepherds than senseless beasts because he has *mannz man vit* ('a human's intelligence'). *Saga Ólaf's Tryggvasonar af Oddr Snorrason Monk*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen, 1932), p. 56.

⁸⁹ *Ólaf's saga Tryggvasonar*, p. 269.

⁹⁰ *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 715.

function is redefined as a hunter rather than a herder – to meet the needs of a king rather than a farmer. Þórir hjótrr flees on land and Ólafr takes up the chase, followed by Vígi, and the king delivers his well-known pun: ‘Vígi, tak hjórtinn’ (‘Vígi, get the hart’).⁹¹ As a further sign of his training, Vígi understands Ólafr’s language and runs after Þórir and jumps on him. While Þórir is described as the swiftest man of foot, Vígi is still able to catch him and Þórir is forced to stop, allowing Ólafr to kill him with a spear – and Vígi is borne wounded to the ship. Vígi proves himself to be capable at hunting as well as herding, evidenced by Þórir’s epithet: while Vígi is only shown to hunt people, the pun suggests that he is also a hunter of animals. Training a dog to hunt involves both harnessing and curtailng its natural instincts: the dog’s innate desire to hunt must be both encouraged and restrained to allow the human to claim the kill, which differentiates the domestic dog from the wild wolf.

Vígi demonstrates impressive intelligence when he herds specific cows and comprehends the instructions of both the farmer and Ólafr; these qualities are characteristic of herd-dogs, but are enhanced in Vígi – he is exceptional, but not preternatural. He is also notably loyal to his human companion when he chases and attacks

⁹¹ *Ólaf’s saga Tryggvasonar*, p. 325.

Þórir, putting his own life at risk – although Vígi may not have made that calculation, the audience could still interpret his chase as remarkable loyalty in the face of danger.

Furthermore, in Oddr Snorrason's *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar*, a retainer informs Vígi of the death of their lord.⁹² In a supernatural twist, Vígi clearly comprehends the import of human speech (rather than simply obeying instructions): he howls loudly, climbs upon the king's burial mound, and lies down. Vígi neither eats nor drinks and prevents dogs, birds, and other animals from carrying away the food that is brought to him. In a further show of sorrow, 'tarin flutu fram um trynit or augunum sua at allir mattu þat skilia at hann gret acafliga sinn lanardrottin' ('tears flowed from his eyes and over his muzzle so that everyone could understand that he mourned grievously for his lord').⁹³ He never moves from Ólaf's mound and dies with his master, like the companion animals who are buried with people for their journeys in the afterlife.⁹⁴ Vígi is thus anthropomorphised: the sorrow of Ólaf's followers is projected onto the dog through pathetic fallacy. Dogs grieve for absent people,

⁹² *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar af Oddr Snorrason Monk*, p. 239.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

⁹⁴ The dog that dies of starvation on the grave of his master is a common motif in medieval exemplary texts. See Frederic C. Tubach, *Index Exemplorum: A Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales*, Folktale Fellows Communications No. 204 (Helsinki, 1969), p. 139.

but they do not weep; Vígi is endowed with human signs of mourning to clearly show his interior state.

2.2 Metonymy

The qualities of pet dogs are metonymically emblematic of the people that they follow; they are thematically similar to animal *fylgjur*, which metaphorically reflect a person's characteristics (see chapter 3). Thus Sámr, Snati, and Vígi are all valiant dogs who belong to characters that are noble and heroic. This is also true of dogs in the *fornaldarsögur*. In *Hrólfs saga kraka*, King Hrólfr has a large dog named Gramr; the adjective *gramr* means 'wrath', but the word is also used in poetry for 'a king, warrior', metonymically reflecting the dog's royal owner.⁹⁵ While staying with the treacherous King Aðils in Sweden, King Hrólfr and his men are awakened from their sleep by a loud noise; Aðils has sent his sacrificial *tröll*-boar to attack them (see below, section 4.2).⁹⁶ Whereas the boar is the companion of Aðils, who is associated with magic and evil, Hrólfr's animal is a heroic dog that is 'mjök frábærr at hreysti ok sterkleik' ('very prominent in valour and strength').⁹⁷

⁹⁵ *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 211.

⁹⁶ *Hrólfs saga kraka*, FNS I, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Akureyri, 1954), p. 84.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

Böðvarr bjarki sets the dog onto the boar by shouting;⁹⁸ Gramr understands the instructions and proves his bravery by attacking the fearsome beast without hesitation. Although Böðvarr is a mighty warrior, he is unable to pierce the boar's back, and it is Gramr who defeats the monster: 'Svá er hundrinn Gramr harðr, at hann rífr hlustirnar af galтанum ok þar með alla kinnfilluna' ('The dog Gramr is so fierce, that he tears the ears off the boar and all the cheek-flesh as well'). Gramr is a remarkable animal who metonymically demonstrates the bravery and strength of his human companion, King Hrólfr kraki, to whom he shows loyalty and courage in the face of monstrosity.

There is a very different type of dog – also named Gramr – in *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*. His loyalty is not to a noble king or hero, but to an evil man who is the enemy of one of the saga's protagonists. Víkingr warns his sons Þorsteinn and Þórir that they will encounter two robbers named Sámr and Fullaflí whilst travelling; and 'Gramr heitir hundr Fullafla ok er litlu betri viðreignar en skálabúi' ('Gramr is the name of Fullaflí's dog and he is little better to deal with than the robber').⁹⁹ Having killed Sámr, they arrive

⁹⁸ The verb used is *sigu*; according to Richard Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, this specifically entails exciting dogs by shouting *rrr!*, though no explanation is provided (*An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 527). Perhaps this is one of the ways that Icelanders communicated with dogs when the dictionary was compiled in the nineteenth century.

⁹⁹ *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, FNS III, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Akureyri, 1954), p. 38.

at a hut with a large bed on one side and a big round floor-bed on the other, where they assume Gramr must lie. When Fullafli arrives, they inform him of Sámr's demise; while Fullafli invites them to stay the night and shares his meal with them, Gramr growls whenever they go near him, metonymically reflecting Fullafli's true thoughts and intentions. Accordingly, the next morning Fullafli declares that Þorsteinn must fight against him and Þórir against Gramr, who proves his aggressive disposition and loyalty to Fullafli in a lengthy conflict.¹⁰⁰ The fight between Þorsteinn and Fullafli is told with far less elaboration; it is the duel involving the dog that proves the most exciting. Gramr fights with supernatural ability and Þórir is unable to wound the dog until he bites a chunk of Þórir's calf, after which Þórir is able to pin the dog against the ground and kill him. Ingestion of part of the human Gramr is fighting seems to nullify his magic, suggesting that consumption of something oppositional (e.g. the flesh of a heroic man) negates the nourishment provided by the dog's magical master. Gramr shares the fierceness of Hrólfr kraki's dog, but not his connection with kingship. This Gramr proves his loyalty to his companion and is fierce in battle, but accompanies a figure of evil rather than good.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 41.

The metonymic connection between dog and owner in saga literature is paralleled by the legal consequences faced by people for the deeds of their animals. According to *Grágás*, a dog's owner is legally responsible for the actions of his animal: 'Hundar eigo eigi hælgi aser' ('no dogs shall have immunity in themselves').¹⁰¹ Fierce dogs must be tied up so they cannot attack others; if a loose dog bites someone so as to leave a bruise or draw blood, then the penalty is a three-mark fine; if a dog bites into cartilage or bone or tendon, then the penalty is lesser outlawry for the dog's owner; and the penalty is full outlawry if the injuries are considered to be major wounds or if the result is death.¹⁰² People were thus legally liable for the behaviour of their dogs and proper training – or lack thereof – had significant consequences.

2.3 Guardianship

Another important utilitarian function served by dogs in medieval Scandinavia was guardianship of a person's home, possessions, and person. Though less valuable than herding and hunting dogs, a number of guard-dogs prove their importance by barking when enemies approach their owner's home. When Handir and his son Hrindir go fishing

¹⁰¹ *Grágás*, *Konungsbók*, vol. II, p. 187.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 187-188. Similar laws are in place for domestic/tame bulls and polar bears – animals that presumably could become quite aggressive and had to be carefully restrained or confined (pp. 188-189).

in *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, they catch a *marmennill* ('merman' – a liminal being between human and aquatic animal) and bring him back to their king, Hjörleifr inn kvensami ('the ladies' man'), who gives the merman to an unnamed woman of the court for safekeeping. One of Hjörleifr's wives, Hildr ina mjóvu ('the slender'), tears a piece out of the mantle of another of his wives, Æsa ina ljósu ('the light'); the king strikes Hildr with his hand, but she blames the dog on the floor, so the king strikes his pet Flóki. The merman laughs, signalling a supernatural portent, and the king wants to know why; he answers, 'Því, at þér varð heimskliga, því at þau munu þér líf gefa' ('Because you are foolish, since they will give you your life').¹⁰³

The merman's prophecy about the dog proves accurate: when King Hreiðarr comes at night with his army and encircles Hjörleifr's estate, 'Þá ina sömu nótt gó hundr hans Flóki, er aldri gó, nema hann vissi konungi ótta vánir' ('Then the same night barked his dog Flóki, who never barked, except when he was certain that the king was in danger').¹⁰⁴ Hjörleifr is thus warned by his dog about his enemy's arrival; intelligent Flóki detects

¹⁰³ It is unclear why the plural pronoun *þau* is used; Hildr might have some unknown role to play in saving the king's life, perhaps pointing to a different version of the story. *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, FNS II, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Akureyri, 1954), p. 101.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 104. Like 'Sámr', 'Flóki' is also used as a personal name for people in the sagas, and it roughly translates as 'flock' or 'felt, hair, wool' (*An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 162).

Hreiðarr's presence and demonstrates the preternatural cognisance to bark as a means of communication. In this regard, he also establishes his fidelity to Hjörleifr, despite being struck by him earlier in the saga. The text leaves open questions about where the king's retainers were at this time, and whether the dog demonstrates greater loyalty than any other member of the court by saving his king's life.¹⁰⁵

The contemporary and more naturalistic *Íslendinga saga* depicts a guard-dog that serves the same function: Hafr ráðamaðr ('steward') 'átti varðhund góðan, ok lá hann jafnan fyrir hvílu hans' ('had a good dog, and he always lay in front of the bed').¹⁰⁶ The dog disappears one night and is never found again; Hafr is killed the next night (presumably by Jón Birnuson). The event is seemingly planned and the dog purposefully disposed of first; the killer knows that if a dog's human companion is murdered, then out of loyalty, the dog will come to their aid or at least make some noise as a warning. The lives of dog and human are thus interlinked, as with Gunnarr and Sámr, suggestive of a metonymic link and

¹⁰⁵ The relative fidelity of dogs and people (usually women) is often contrasted in medieval romance, with dogs proving more faithful than people. In *Le Chevalier à l'épée*, for example, Gauvain concludes that 'Que nature et amor de chien / Valt miauz qu de feme ne fait' ('the nature and the love of a dog is worth more than a woman's'). *Le Chevalier à l'épée*, in *Two Old French Gauvain Romances*, ed. R. C. Johnston and D. D. R. Owen (Edinburgh and London, 1972), p. 57; *The Knight with the Sword*, in *Three Arthurian Romances: Poems from Medieval France*, trans. Ross G. Arthur (London and Vermont, 1996), p. 103.

¹⁰⁶ *Íslendinga saga*, in *Sturlunga saga*, vol. I, ed. Jón Jóhannesson et al. (Reykjavík, 1946), p. 289.

shared fate. Not long afterwards, Bergþórr Jónsson, along with his brothers and various companions, set out to Vatnsfjörðr to kill Þorvaldr Snorrason. When they arrive, they hear ‘hundr kvað við, ok kenndu þeir, at þat var Búski, er jafnan var vanr at fylgja Þorvaldi’ (‘a dog barking and they knew that it was Búski, who was always wont to accompany Þorvaldr’).¹⁰⁷ They are thus certain that Þorvaldr is at home. Búski fulfils the function of the guardian-dog who senses the presence of his master’s enemies and barks to warn him, yet, ironically, this encourages the attack rather than helps to defend his master.

2.4 Fylgjur

When Ólafr pái gives Sámr to Gunnarr, he says to the dog ‘Nú skaltú Gunnari fylgja ok vera honum slíkr sem þú mátt’ (‘Now you will accompany Gunnarr and serve him as well as you can’).¹⁰⁸ The *fylgja* (‘to follow, accompany’) motif is repeated later in the saga. The description of Sámr’s death (quoted above, section 2.1.1) ends one chapter, and when the next begins, Gunnarr awakens in his hall and powerfully expresses his affection and sorrow: ‘Sárt ertú leikinn, Sámr fóstri, ok búð svá sé til ætlat, at skammt skyli okkar í meðal’ (‘You have been treated cruelly, Sámr fosterling, and it may be so, that brief shall be the time

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 258.

¹⁰⁸ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 123.

between our deaths’).¹⁰⁹ Sámur’s death is not only plot-determined, but also has an important symbolic dimension. It is not coincidental that Gunnarr is sleeping when Sámur is killed, yet wakes at the same time and knows what happened. There is no textual signal that Gunnarr is dreaming, but this episode evokes a thematic parallel to the etymologically-related animal *fylgjur* (‘fetches’), which appear to individuals in dreams and are indicative of a person’s character and fate; the death of someone’s *fylgja* indicates the death of the person the animal follows (see chapter 3). Gunnarr presumably hears Sámur’s exceptionally loud howl from afar, which awakens him, and thus Sámur fulfills the important guard-dog function; but Gunnarr may have also dreamt of Sámur’s death and then anticipates his own – and indeed, following a valiant defence, he dies in the ensuing attack.

When Sámur is introduced to Gunnarr, he is said to be ‘eigi verri til fylgðar en roskr maðr’ (‘no worse to accompany than a valiant man’) and he is told to *Gunnari fylgja* (‘accompany Gunnarr’); the verb *fylgja* is used twice, thus explicitly linking the two concepts of human-animal companionship to the animal *fylgjur* of people’s dreams. The same is true of some of the other textual examples: in *Ólaf’s saga Tryggvasonar*, when Ólafur

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 186. Miller (2014) suggests that the ‘genuineness of his brief eulogy of Sam does more to humanize Gunnarr than any other portion of his biography’ (p. 142).

chases Þórir, *Vígi fylgði honum* ('followed him'); the noun form is used in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* when Snati is described as *in mesta fylgd* ('the best companion/follower'); and in *Íslendinga saga*, Búski 'jafnan var vanr at fylgja Þorvaldi' ('was always wont to follow Þorvaldr'). This suggests an association between an animal companion and an animal *fylgja* ('fetch'). Sámr is not only depicted with numerous quasi-human characteristics, but he is also an animal that shares the same fate as the person he follows.¹¹⁰ The link is metonymical rather than metaphorical (as with the dream-animals), yet the lives of pet and master are still coterminous. Dogs are the only animals in the sagas that are portrayed as literal *fylgiur* ('companions') in this sense of the word. Their unparalleled intelligence, loyalty, and companionship make for the most intimate human-animal relationship in the saga corpus.

3. Cats

3.1 *Vatnsdæla saga*

Although the archaeological evidence indicates that cats were also kept as pets in medieval Iceland, they appear far less often than horses and dogs in saga literature; and when they do

¹¹⁰ With few exceptions, companion animals – horses, dogs, and cats – do not appear as animal *fylgiur* (see chapter 3). In the medieval Icelandic worldview, they may have been considered too metonymically close to the human – inhabiting human spaces, developing relationships with people – to fulfill this metaphorical function.

occur, they play deviant roles and are the companions of subversive individuals. The most memorable cats in the corpus of saga literature belong to Þórólfr sleggja (‘sledgehammer’) in *Vatnsdæla saga*.¹¹¹ His negative qualities are described in some detail: he is unpeaceful, a thief, and people expect great evil to come with his settlement. His unique living situation is also described: ‘ok þótt hann hefði eigi fjölmenni hjá sér, þá átti hann þá hluti, er hann vænti trausts at, þat vǫru tuttugu kettir; þeir vǫru ákafliga stórir ok allir svartir ok mjök trylldir’ (‘and though he had no [human] companions with him, he then had those creatures, in whom he placed his trust, which were twenty cats; they were extremely large and all of them completely black and greatly enchanted’).¹¹²

What manner of beasts are these – *mjök trylldir*?¹¹³ This process has parallels in many other sagas, when characters *trylla* (‘enchant, entroll’) and/or *blóta* (‘worship, sacrifice to’) animals – typically livestock (see below, section 4.2). These beasts are often large, oddly behaved, and exceptionally malevolent – and thus monstrous – and can also be described as cult animals. Their monstrosity reflects negative Christian attitudes toward the pre-

¹¹¹ *Vatnsdæla saga*, ÍF VIII, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavík, 1939), pp. 72-73.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹¹³ *Trylla* means ‘to enchant, turn into a troll’; *mjök trylldir* means ‘to become mad, furious, demonic’ (*An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 643).

Christian past and may echo some type of ritual activity.¹¹⁴ Parallel evidence examined in the following section indicates that the *Vatnsdæla saga* cats can be seen as beasts of pagan import, linked to popular folk belief about cats and the supernatural, which have been enchanted with *tröll*-magic by the sorcerer Þórólfr. They might then be further connected to the worship of the goddess Freyja, though there is no real evidence to support this claim (see chapter 6, section 1.4).

The depiction of these cats may also be influenced by the notion that animals could embody supernatural forces sent by a person to accomplish some task. Parallels with later folkloric material indicate belief in the ‘sending’ of a cat, just as Þórólfr later sends his cats to do battle for him. In one post-medieval Icelandic folktale, when the reverend Eiríkur Magnússon of Vogsóssar (1638-1716) tricks the men of Síða, they plot revenge and find themselves a man from the West Fjords and ‘sendi hann Eiríki kött’ (‘he sent Eiríkur a

¹¹⁴ Evidence for the cat as a cult animal in pre-Christian Iceland can also be detected in the archaeological record. For example, a cat burial was discovered during recent excavations of a pagan grave field in Ingiríðarstaðir (located in Þegjandadalur in Northeast Iceland). The grave contains a partial cat skeleton along with human skull fragments and the fragmentary remains of various livestock, with probable links to ritual activity. See Brenda Prehal, *Freyja’s Cats: Perspectives on Recent Viking Age Finds in Þegjandadalur North Iceland*, MA Thesis, Hunter College of the City University of New York, 2011; Howell M. Roberts, Elín Hreiðarsdóttir and Unnsteinn Ingason, ‘Fornleifarannsóknir á vegum Hins Þingeyska fornleifafélags í Suður-Þingeyjarsýslu’, Report: Hið Þingeyska fornleifafélag, 2010.

cat’).¹¹⁵ The cat attempts to leap at his throat and kill him, but Eiríkur kills the cat first.¹¹⁶

In post-medieval folklore from mainland Scandinavia, there was a common belief that a witch had a special helper, or familiar spirit, who stole dairy produce from other people’s homes. It was often conceived as being in the shape of a grey or brown ball of yarn; sent by a witch, it would roll from one cow to the next and suck their milk, before returning home to spit the milk into the witch’s milk pails.¹¹⁷ In southern Norway, however, it could also take the shape of a cat and was called a ‘troll cat’.¹¹⁸ If the troll-cat in cat-form is injured, the witch will suffer the same injury, but if the troll-cat in the shape of a ball of yarn is destroyed, then nothing will happen to the witch – except she loses the ball.¹¹⁹ The troll-cat belief has a variant in the connections between witches and hares in the Nordic

¹¹⁵ Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Æfintýri*, vol. I (Leipzig, 1862-1864), p. 571. Eiríkur Magnússon has been described as ‘einn höfuðgaldrameistarinn í síðari tíma sögnum’ (‘one of the head masters of magic in later legends’) by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and as ‘the greatest and the last of the white wizards’ by Jacqueline Simpson. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Um íslenzkar þjóðsögur* (Reykjavík, 1940), p. 85; Jacqueline Simpson, *Legends of Icelandic Magicians* (Cambridge, 1975), p. 13. In contrast, the man from the West Fjords is ‘a powerful black magician; that district, the extreme north-west of Iceland, was reputed to be swarming with them’. Simpson 1975, p. 106.

¹¹⁶ Eiríkur then sends a *draugur* (‘ghost’) to the unnamed man from the West Fjords, which kills him. Jón Árnason, vol. I, p. 571.

¹¹⁷ Bente Gullveig Alver, ‘Conceptions of the Soul in Norwegian Tradition’, in *Nordic Folklore: Recent Studies*, ed. Reimund Kvideland, Henning K. Schmsdorf, and Elizabeth Simpson (Bloomington, 1989), pp. 110-128, at p. 120. [First published as ‘Conceptions of the living human soul in the Norwegian tradition’, *Temenos* 7 (1971), pp. 7-33.]

¹¹⁸ In Norwegian dialects it can also be called *truss*, *skratt*, *smørkat*, *trollnøste*, or *trollnøa* (ibid., p. 120).

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 120. See further Reimund Kvideland and Henning K. Schmsdorf, ‘39. Troll Cat’, in *Scandinavian Folk Belief and Legend* (Minneapolis, 1988), pp. 175-179.

countries (with links to folklore in the British Isles and continental Europe), where there was widespread belief in the ‘troll-hare’: a witch could transform herself into the shape of a hare to ‘perform various mischievous or malignant deeds’.¹²⁰ The scene in *Vatnsdæla saga* may present a merging of two traditions: the enchanted beast of cultic import, remembered or imagined from the pagan past, and the folkloric cat-spirit or familiar sent forth to cause trouble.

In the narrative reality of the medieval saga, these cats are depicted as living beasts rather than mental projections, albeit living beasts that have been enchanted. When Þorsteinn Ingimundarson and his men arrive to exact justice for Þórólfr’s wicked deeds, Þórólfr goes inside and puts his cats outside the doorway to defend the entrance. He then practises his witchcraft: ‘magnaði hann þá mjök, ok váru þeir þá stórum illiligir með emjun ok augnaskotum’ (‘he made them much stronger with magic, and then they were truly hideous with screeching and glaring’). Þórólfr next puts a kettle over the fire and places wool and other rubbish underneath so that the house fills with smoke (though in the end this brings about his demise when the house burns down and he is forced to flee). The

¹²⁰ Bodil Nildin-Wall and Jan Wall, ‘The Witch as Hare or the Witch’s Hare: Popular Legends and Beliefs in Nordic Tradition’, *Folklore* 104.1/2 (1993), pp. 67-76, at p. 67.

smoke serves a practical purpose and is not explicitly magical, but does offer a further indication of magical activity.

3.2 Deviance and Subversion

Þórólfr and his cats are linked to prevalent ideas about both cats and cat-owners held throughout medieval Europe. Irina Metzler usefully explores how cats acted ‘as symbols of suspect religious (and wider social) behaviour’.¹²¹ They were typically viewed as ‘deviant animals ... particularly connected with heretics and idolaters in the high Middle Ages’, and ‘in iconography, one finds representations of cats in the context of demonology and devil-worship’.¹²² In the Middle Ages, cats served an important utilitarian purpose: catching rodents, which accords with their usual depiction in medieval bestiaries (bestiary entries on the cat always precede those on *mus*).¹²³ Thus in *Heiðarviga saga*, when Snorri goði urges his son Þórðr kausa (‘cat’) to kill the nine-year-old Sveinn Þorsteinsson, he says ‘Sér

¹²¹ Irina Metzler, ‘Heretical Cats: Animal Symbolism in Religious Discourse’, *Medium Ævum Quotidianum* 59 (2009), pp. 16-32, at p. 16.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 16. There were exceptions, however, such as *Pangur Bán* (‘White Fuller’): an Old Irish lyric about a monastic scholar and his eponymous cat, Pangur Bán. Crane (2013) usefully explores how the lyric ‘meditates on the symbiosis of a scholar’s efforts and a housecat’s hunting, to discover within their analogous work a precisely observed equivalence between their minds’ (p. 12). See further pp. 12-23.

¹²³ Debra Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries: Text, Image, Ideology* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 175. Perhaps drawing upon this motif, mice are compared to cats in a pagan context in *Óláfs saga helga*: Kolbeinn sterki (‘the strong’) – a follower of King Óláfr – smashes a god-like idol worshipped by some local farmers, and ‘hljópu þar út mýss, svá stórar sem kettir væri, ok eðlur ok ormar’ (there leapt out mice that were as big as cats, and adders and snakes’) (p. 189).

köttrinn músina? Ungr skal at ungu vega' ('Does the cat see the mouse? The young shall attack the young').¹²⁴

From the thirteenth century onwards, the cat toying with a captured mouse is a common simile employed by preachers for the notion of the devil playing with the sinner prior to eternal damnation, and the cat hunting a mouse for a devil stalking a human soul.¹²⁵ Cats cannot be domesticated to the same extent as horses and dogs, and Metzler suggests that 'The semi-wild nature of cats was recognized and moralized on in medieval texts'.¹²⁶ She further links cats to heretics, who are also never domesticated since they challenge orthodox thought and roam freely in their religious interpretations.¹²⁷ Þórólfr is depicted similarly. Although not a heretic by definition, he is still deviant and subversive:

¹²⁴ *Heiðarvíga saga*, in *Borgfirðinga sögur*, ÍF III, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík, 1938), pp. 248-249. Animal nicknames are common in the sagas, but their implications are not always clear. The similarly named Þórðr köttr ('cat') Þórðarson is also a significant character in a number of saga and þáttir narratives. Why either Þórðr is referred to as a cat remains unknown, though Paul Peterson has recently made some tentative suggestions regarding Þórðr Þórðarson: 'it may refer to Þórðr having been fond of a pet cat, or perhaps he resembled a cat in appearance (small and slender?) or personality (strong hunting instinct, slyness?)'. Paul Peterson, *Old Norse Nicknames*, PhD Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2015, p. 189. On the metaphorical and pejorative significance of animal nicknames, see further Rohrbach (2009), pp. 218-219.

¹²⁵ Metzler (2009), p. 18. Metzler provides a fantastic list of similar examples from various medieval cultural and literary contexts. The motif is played with in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, when Hrólfr and Ásmundr encounter the English King Ella's lion in a forest: it shows its strength by twisting its tail around oak-trees, pulling them out with the roots, catching the trees with its claws and throwing them high up in the air, 'sem þá er köttr leikr at fuglum' ('like a cat plays with birds'). *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, FNS IV, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Akureyri, 1954), p. 137.

¹²⁶ Metzler (2009), p. 26.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

he causes trouble, practises magic, lives alone with his twenty monstrous cats, and ‘aldri mátti hann góða menn með sér hafa’ (‘never could he abide the company of good men’).¹²⁸

The cat was seen as a diabolical animal across medieval Europe; its depiction in *Vatnsdæla saga* thus accords with continental thinking about cats and may demonstrate influence from learned material. While cats are predominantly depicted as an allegory for the devil catching souls, they could also be seen as a direct manifestation of the devil – as an animal first worshipped by heretics and later by witches.¹²⁹ These cats are typically big and black. In Walter Map’s *De nugis curialium*, for example, the devil descends in the form of a *magnitudinis murelegus niger* (‘massive black cat’) before his devotees, offering itself for kisses on its feet, anus, and genitalia.¹³⁰ The *Vatnsdæla* cats are also black and large, and Þorsteinn Ingimundarson makes the devilish nature of Þórólfr and his cats explicit when he

¹²⁸ *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 74.

¹²⁹ See e.g. Beryl Rowland, *Animals with Human Faces: A Guide to Animal Symbolism* (London, 1974), p. 52. For example, for Edward, second Duke of York, ‘if any beast has the devil’s spirit in him, without doubt it is the cat, both the wild and the tame’. Edward of Norwich, Second Duke of York, *The Master of Game: The Oldest English Book on Hunting*, ed. William A. and F. Baillie-Grohman (New York, 1909), p. 71.

¹³⁰ Walter Map, *De nugis curialium*, *Anecdota Oxoniensia, Medieval and Modern Series, Part XIV*, ed. Montague Rhodes James (London, 1914), p. 57.

encounters them: ‘en eigi er allhöegt við heljarmanninn at eiga ok við kottu hans’ (‘it is not easy to deal with this man of hell and his cats’).¹³¹

Actual cats rarely appear in Old Norse literature; instead, they are usually referenced as a metaphorical pejorative. When Sigrún does not wish to marry Hǫðbroddr in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, she sarcastically rebukes him as an *óneisan* (‘unshameful, undisgraceful’) king, *sem kattar son* (‘as a cat’s kitten’).¹³² In *Orkneyinga saga*, Earl Þorfinnr incites Kálfr to join him in battle through simile, suggesting that he should not wish to ‘liggir hér sem kotttr í hreysi’ (‘lie here like a cat in a cave’).¹³³ To be compared to a cat was thus an accusation of cowardice. Cat characteristics can also be used as a general descriptor for human/animal hybrid monstrosity in some of the later *fornaldarsögur*. In *Sörla saga sterka*, a formidable and terrifying group of *blámenn* have ‘augun gul sem í ketti’ (‘gold eyes like a

¹³¹ *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 73.

¹³² *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, in *Eddukvæði II: Hetjukvæði*, ÍF, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík, 2014), p. 250. At this stage in *Völsunga saga*, Sigrún says that she would prefer to marry a young crow – an animal that presumably had similarly negative symbolic connotations in the medieval Norse worldview. *Völsunga saga*, ed. R. G. Finch (London, 1965), p. 15.

¹³³ *Orkneyinga saga*, ÍF XXXIV, ed. Finnbogi Guðmundsson (Reykjavík, 1965), p. 67.

cat’); in *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar*, the *draugr* Þráinn, who has claws and becomes *tryllast* like Þórólfr’s cats, is described as one of the *kattakyn* (‘kin of cats’).¹³⁴

3.3 *Orms þáttr Stórolfssonar*

Given far greater narrative embellishment is a monstrous feline in the highly fantastic *Orms þáttr Stórolfssonar*; its depiction generally accords with the symbolic deployment of cats in *Vatnsdæla saga*. The cannibalistic *tröll* Brúsi has a mother that is even more formidable than himself: ‘kolsvört ketta ok svá mikil sem þau blótnaut, at stærst verða’ (‘a coal-black cat and as large as the biggest of sacrificial cattle’).¹³⁵ Her comparison to *blót* animals does not suggest that she is intended for sacrifice, like cultic livestock, but that her huge size – an index of monstrosity – parallels these beasts of pagan significance. The companions of Ásbjörn þrúði (‘the elegant’) are viciously attacked by a *ketta ógurlig* (‘terrible cat’) at the door of their tent; she is further described as ‘kolsvört at lit ok heldr grimmlig’ (‘coal-black in colour and rather terrifying’), with frightening eyes and fire burning out of her nostrils and mouth.¹³⁶ The cat’s actions match her monstrous appearance: she leaps into the tent,

¹³⁴ *Sörla saga sterka*, FNS III, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Akureyri, 1954), p. 371; *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar*, FNS II, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Akureyri, 1954), p. 412.

¹³⁵ *Orms þáttr Stórolfssonar*, in *Harðar saga*, ÍF XIII, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (Reykjavík, 1991), p. 407. On Brúsi’s cannibalism, see chapter 2, section 1.3.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 409.

grabs one man after another, swallows some of them, and tears others apart with her claws and teeth. She swiftly kills twenty men; only three manage to escape. Significantly, the cat attacks at a doorway – a threshold between the human home and the outside world – a reflection of the cat’s semi-domestic, semi-wild character. Similarly, Þórólfr sets his cats outside his door to defend his home, and the post-medieval spirit-cat sent to kill Eiríkur Magnússon attacks him outside his doorstep.

Later in the tale, when the heroic Ormr Stórólffson enters the feline’s cave – her home – she jumps at him with gaping jaws. Ormr shoots three arrows at the cat, but she catches them all in her mouth and splits them in two; she then digs her claws into his chest, piercing his flesh to the bone, and tries to bite him in the face. Realising that he is losing the fight, Ormr calls upon the power of Christianity to defeat the evil beast: ‘heitr þá á sjálfan guð ok inn heilaga Petrum postula at ganga til Róms, ef hann ynni kettuna ok Brúsa, son hennar’ ([he] then vowed to himself and God and the holy apostle Peter that he would go to Rome if he could defeat the cat and her son Brúsi’).¹³⁷ Afterwards, Ormr finds that the cat’s strength is diminished; he then grips her with one hand on her throat and the other on her backbone, snaps her spine in two, and leaves her for dead. The

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 417.

intervention of God in this fight not only has narrative consequences but also plays an important symbolic function, providing a contrast to the monstrous cat and her pagan connotations.

3.4 Symbolism and Paganism

Cats are an interesting case study for questions about the origin of animal symbolism in medieval Iceland. In his study of animals in hagiography and romance, David Salter questions whether medieval authors ‘respond to the animals they wrote about in experiential terms, bringing their knowledge of the dogs, cats, and horses that they saw around them to bear upon their portrait of the animals’ imaginary counterparts, or did the conventional and symbolic associations of such beasts take precedence over quotidian experience?’¹³⁸ With cats in the sagas, conventional symbolic associations appear dominant – borrowed from learned sources rather than indigenous tradition. The depiction of cats closely follows that of continental Europe; their character and symbolism in the Icelandic context is not unique. In the medieval Norse context, the devilry of cats became retrospectively associated with paganism; this may be a response to the possible significance

¹³⁸ David Salter, *Holy and Noble Beasts: Encounters with Animals in Medieval Literature* (Woodbridge, 2001), p. 7.

of cats in pre-Christian Scandinavia, where they probably had a different symbolic function. Evidence from *Eiríks saga rauða* supports this claim. The *spákona* ('seeress') and *lítil-völva* ('little prophetess') Þorbjörg wore a hood of black lambskin lined with white catskin and on her hands she had *kattskinnsglófa* ('cat skin gloves'), white and lined with fur.¹³⁹ There is little evidence for a cult of Freyja in pre-Christian Scandinavia (see chapter 6, section 1.4), but the possibility should not be ruled out entirely.

Cats were 'bad to eat' and 'good to prohibit' in medieval Iceland, but considering their important utilitarian value as catchers of rodents in conjunction with their negative symbolism, were they considered 'good to live with'? While they must have lived in human domestic spaces like pets, there is no evidence in the sagas to support the idea that people and their cats had relationships of emotional significance. As far as the sagas go, cats were symbols of subversion and paganism in post-conversion Scandinavia, though this was surely different prior to the coming of Christianity.

4. Livestock

¹³⁹ *Eiríks saga rauða*, in *Eyrbyggja saga*, ÍF IV, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson (Reykjavík, 1935), pp. 206-207. Cat skins were especially valuable in medieval Iceland. According to *Grágás*, six polar fox skins were worth one ounce of silver; six lambskins were also worth one ounce, and the same for the skins from six shorn wethers; but the skins from only two fully-grown tomcats were worth one ounce (or three skins from tomcats one summer in age). *Grágás*, *Konungsbók*, vol. II, pp. 192-193.

Medieval Icelanders kept a variety of domestic animals for consumption as food, namely cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs. These ‘good to eat’ farm animals frequent the sagas, but typically inhabit the background and have little impact on the narrative, with the exception of cultic beasts that were worshipped and received sacrifices. People did not develop emotionally-significant relationships with the animals that they ate, but eating is still a physically intimate process, and livestock were absolutely essential to human survival in a harsh northern climate.¹⁴⁰

4.1 Property and the Home

To be an owner of livestock was a sign of wealth, prestige, and status. Farm animals were not only valuable sources of meat (and thus protein), but also for their skins and wool, to make clothing, and their milk to produce butter, cheese, and skýr.¹⁴¹ *Grágás* details the value of various livestock, all of which depend upon the age and health of the animal. A single cow is used as a standard unit of measurement, so long as it is between three and ten winters in age and is capable of bearing calves and producing milk, is horned and free of defects, fit for travel and no worse than an average cow – ‘sv er gíald geng’ (‘that is a valid

¹⁴⁰ Besides livestock, subsistence also depended on hunter-gathering, which included fishing, finding beached whales, hunting seals and birds, and gathering eggs. See e.g. Byock (2001), p. 29.

¹⁴¹ Milk and skýr production were the domain of women, whereas men were responsible for fishing, gathering natural foods and drift animals, and the care and herding of livestock (ibid., p. 48).

payment').¹⁴² According to the *Konungsbók* manuscript, cows were considered more valuable than most animals, including oxen, presumably because of their ability to reproduce and provide milk. The most expensive oxen were seven winters or older, and two of them were worth one healthy cow; six healthy and fully-grown ewes or goats with offspring were the equivalent of one cow; and a sow of two winters or older with nine piglets was worth one cow, as was a healthy horse between four and ten winters.¹⁴³

The *Staðarhólsbók* manuscript provides different values: a three-winter ox or older is the equivalent of a cow; a three-winter horse or older the equivalent of two cows, and a two-winter horse or younger the equivalent of one cow; twenty lambs the equivalent of one cow, or five goats, or ten old wethers; and pigs could not be used as currency to buy any land or pasture.¹⁴⁴ The rearing of pigs was probably discouraged because of their destructive effects on the grasslands (and unlike cows and sheep, they could not produce dairy products and wool); archaeological evidence indicates that the raising of pigs and goats was largely discontinued after the year 1000.¹⁴⁵ In any case, livestock were clearly used as currency, and

¹⁴² *Grágás*, *Konungsbók*, vol. II, p. 193.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 193-194.

¹⁴⁴ *Grágás eftir det Arnarnagnæanske haandskrift nr. 334 fol.*, *Staðarhólsbók*, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen (Copenhagen, 1879), pp. 448-449.

¹⁴⁵ See e.g. Byock (2001), p. 28, and further references on p. 374.

cattle were especially valuable and more expensive than sheep, probably because they provide far more meat and dairy produce.¹⁴⁶ Cattle raising was more prominent at first, following Norwegian practice, but sheep farming became prevalent a century after settlement – presumably because they were better suited to the harsh Icelandic climate.¹⁴⁷

In medieval Norway most farm animals lived with people in longhouses, but in Iceland livestock usually lived in sheds that were normally separate from the family home, though still within the farm enclosure.¹⁴⁸ In the sagas, these are usually termed *sauðhús* ('sheep house, pens') or *féhús/ffós* ('cattle house').¹⁴⁹ When people and their livestock do live under the same roof, Carl Phelpstead suggests that 'the apparently straightforward distinction between humans and animals is somewhat undermined ... Together humans and animals form humananimal communities, not purely human communities separated from non-human nature'.¹⁵⁰ For livestock, this was rarely the case, though there were exceptions,

¹⁴⁶ See further Bernadette McCooey, *Farming Practices in Pre-Modern Iceland*, PhD Dissertation, University of Birmingham, 2017 – especially 'Chapter Two: The value of livestock' (pp. 77-104).

¹⁴⁷ Thomas Amorosi, 'Contributions to the zooarchaeology of Iceland: some preliminary notes', in *The Anthropology of Iceland* (1989), pp. 203-227; 'Icelandic Archaeofauna: A Preliminary Review', *Acta Archaeologica* 61 (1991), pp. 272-284.

¹⁴⁸ William R. Short, *Icelanders in the Viking Age: The People of the Sagas* (Jefferson, 2010), p. 89. This subject is explored at great length by Harriet Jean Evans (forthcoming).

¹⁴⁹ On the archaeology of byres in medieval Iceland, see Bruno Berson, 'A Contribution to the Study of the Medieval Icelandic Farm: The Byres', *Archaeologica Islandica* 2 (2002), pp. 37-64.

¹⁵⁰ Phelpstead (2014), pp. 11-12.

such as the Viking-period house recently excavated at Aðalstræti 14-16 in Reykjavík, which had stalls for animals (specifically goats or sheep) inside the building.¹⁵¹ These spaces, however, were still partitioned off by walls and kept in the north end of the house.¹⁵² Icelanders rarely lived with their livestock in the same space and separate living arrangements do not disturb the human-animal dichotomy; this is only true of animals that were not eaten – pet dogs and cats – which inhabited the same spaces as their human companions. Dogs consequently may have been seen as quasi-human through their emotionally-significant connections with people – a relationship not extended to the animals of the farm.

Sheep often go missing or are stolen in the sagas: a consistent source of conflict related to territory infringement, instigating feud. *Hrafnkels saga* provides a useful example: during his fateful employment as a herdsman, Einarr is so successful that no sheep were lost before midsummer, but ‘þá var vant nær þremr tígum ásauðar eina nótt’ (‘then nearly thirty ewes were found to be missing one night’).¹⁵³ Einarr searches all the pastures but cannot find them; after a week, he eventually discovers the sheep, and somewhat uncannily,

¹⁵¹ Howell M. Roberts et al., *Excavations at Aðalstræti, 2003* (Reykjavík, 2004). Web. Accessed 25 Jan. 2015.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, see p. 97 for a map of the building.

¹⁵³ *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, p. 102.

they are found in a spot that he searched earlier.¹⁵⁴ In ecocritical terms, just as Freyfaxi's return to Hrafnkell in *Aðalból* is suggestive of a journey from nature (in the wild) to culture (the human house and communication with a human therein), the missing sheep embark on a temporary journey from domestic to wild, culture to a feral form of nature.

4.2 *Wildness, Sacrifice, and Monstrosity*

A large and monstrous bull named Glæsir in *Eyrbyggja saga* undergoes a process of enchantment and re-wilding. At age two, Glæsir always stays with the other cows near the farm, and whenever his master Þóroddr goes to the milking-pen, Glæsir would approach him and sniff him and lick his clothes, while Þóroddr petted him – ‘hógværr var hann bæði við men ok fé sem sauðr’ (‘he was as gentle as a lamb with both people and cattle’).¹⁵⁵ By age four, however, if people approached him, he would bridle up and act strangely.¹⁵⁶ Glæsir increasingly rejects domesticity as he ages: he later removes the wooden stocks attached to his horns and destroys all the haystacks. After killing Þóroddr he runs away

¹⁵⁴ Miller (2017) suggests that these sheep may be some of the livestock owned by Freyr, which would partially explain their strange behaviour (pp. 43, 67).

¹⁵⁵ *Eyrbyggja saga*, ÍF IV, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson (Reykjavík, 1935), p. 172.

¹⁵⁶ Phelpstead (2014) suggests that Glæsir understands Þóroddr's speech when he plans to kill the bull, prompting his violent behaviour (p. 16).

from the farm, pursued until he preternaturally sinks down into a bog; there he literally becomes reincorporated into nature.

Glæsir's uncanny movement counters the normal flow of animals from wild to tame to domestic – the action of culture against nature. Most domestic animals which undergo such a transformation are cult animals; in this case, there is a supernatural explanation: it is the malevolence of Þórólfr bægifótr's (lamefoot's) *aptrgangr* ('ghost, apparition'), for Glæsir's mother licked the stones onto which the ashes from Þórólfr's funeral fire had drifted.¹⁵⁷

When cattle and pigs escape in the *Íslendingasögur*, they often become monstrous. In *Vatnsdæla saga*, for example, a group of pigs go missing for a year and when they are found, 'þau váru stygg orðin' ('they had become wild').¹⁵⁸ They had also multiplied in number, are described as two-headed, and when people chase the leader, the large boar Beigaðr, it refuses to return to domesticity – to the point that he swims across a lake and his trotters somehow fall off from exhaustion.

This tendency of livestock – to move from domestic to wild, from culture to nature – is amplified in the animals that are venerated through cult in the *konungasögur* and

¹⁵⁷ *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 93-94. Other animals that come into contact with Þórólfr's body run wild, bellow, and die (pp. 93-95).

¹⁵⁸ *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 43. A shorter version of this episode is recounted in *Landnámabók*. *Landnámabók*, in *Íslendingabók—Landnámabók*, ÍF I (2), ed. Jakob Benediktsson (Reykjavík, 1968), p. 220.

fornaldarsögur. In *Ynglinga saga*, King Egill of Sweden has a bull intended for sacrifice, which is so very well nourished (with sacrifices) that he becomes vicious, and when men try to capture him, ‘þá hljóp hann á skóg ok varð galinn ok var lengi á viðum ok inn mesti spellvirki við menn’ (‘then he ran into the forest and became wild and spent a long time in the woods and worked the greatest mischief against men’).¹⁵⁹ It is thus not only possible for animals to transform from wild-to-domestic, as is the case when they are tamed, but also vice-versa: via movement from culture (the settlement) to nature (the forest). Accordingly, zooanthropologist Tim Ingold argues that ‘Behind these oppositions between the wild and the domestic ... there lies a much more fundamental metaphysical dualism ... the separation of two mutually exclusive domains of being to which we attach the labels “humanity” and “nature”’.¹⁶⁰

A number of sagas portray domestic animals which become feral after they are worshipped with sacrifices. Like Þórólfr sleggja’s twenty black cats in *Vatnsdæla saga* (see above, section 3.1), they are often depicted as enchanted, monstrous beasts, disruptive to proper social order. These fictional cult animals exhibit wild characteristics and behave

¹⁵⁹ *Ynglinga saga*, p. 52.

¹⁶⁰ Tim Ingold, ‘From Trust to Domination’, in *Animals and Human Society: Changing Perspectives*, ed. Aubrey Manning and James Serpell (London and New York, 1994), pp. 1-22, at p. 4.

violently; they flee domestic spaces and inhabit the wilds, whence they return to endanger human habitats. These beasts are always cows, oxen, or boars, but never sheep, which do not hold the same symbolic import. They sometimes appear in the *konungasögur* and are most frequently found in the *fornaldarsögur*, where they are usually associated with *tröll*-related magic. There is a large cow named Sibilja in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* that belongs to King Eysteinn of Uppsala, who was a *blotmadr mikill* ('a great sacrificer').¹⁶¹ Sibilja has a *traullskapnum* ('enchanted form') and is so excessively worshipped and strengthened by spells that all (opposing) warriors flee from her terrible bellowing.¹⁶² In *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*, a witch named Kolfrosta is magnified by sacrificial worship and lives in a temple in a forest; she is protected by an enchanted bull: 'Griðungr einn er í hofinu, trylldr ok blótaðr' ('There is a bull in the temple, troll-enchanted and worshipped').¹⁶³

The human characters associated with these cult animals are explicitly linked to paganism. At the end of *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts*, Þorsteinn slays a huge and evil-looking *blótnaut* ('sacrificial bull').¹⁶⁴ The animal is worshipped by Hárekr from Þrándheim, who

¹⁶¹ *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, in *Völsunga saga ok Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, ed. Magnus Olsen (København, 1906–08), p. 132.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 133, 144.

¹⁶³ *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*, FNS III, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Akureyri, 1954), pp. 299–300.

¹⁶⁴ *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts*, p. 368.

had accepted Christianity but was still somewhat pagan in his conduct, and for whom the beast is of great emotional value: ‘hefi ek því mætur á uxa þessum, at hann er mjök elskur at mér’ (‘I have so much esteem for this ox that he is greatly loved by me’).¹⁶⁵ Cult animals could also be boars, such as the sacrificial beast that belongs to the Swedish King Aðils in *Hrólfs saga kraka*. Aðils is described as ‘inn mest blótmaðr ok fullr af fjölkynngi’ (‘the greatest sacrificer and full of sorcery’);¹⁶⁶ meanwhile, his beast is so great a *tröll* that no one can stand against it, establishing a metonymic link between man and pig.¹⁶⁷

These animals reflect a negative Christian attitude towards the pre-Christian past: the worship of animals and gods is discouraged through problematic consequences. In some *konungasögur* and numerous *fornaldarsögur*, the depiction of these animals reflect a combination of genuine vestiges of pagan practice, antiquarian interest in the past, and fantasy. Memories of cult animals that received worship were attributed with monstrosity;

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 366-367.

¹⁶⁶ *Hrólfs saga kraka*, p. 32. Later in the saga, the audience learns that Aðils is ‘inn mesti blótmaðr, svá at ekki finnst dæmi til’ (‘the greatest sacrificer, so that his equivalent cannot be found’) (p. 84).

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 84. Likewise, it is called a ‘tröll í galar líki’ (‘troll in a boar’s body’) and an *illa trölli* (‘evil troll’) (p. 85). Earlier in the saga, a dragon is described likewise: ‘Þat er ekki dýr, heldr er þat mesta tröll’ (‘That is not an animal, rather it is the greatest troll’) (p. 66). Similarly, in *Eyrbyggja saga*, Þóroddr’s foresighted fostermother hears Glæsir and proclaims ‘þetta eru trolls læti, en eigi annar kvikendis’ (‘that is a troll’s sound, and not that of any other [i.e. ‘proper’] animal’) (p. 171). Trollishness thus emerges as a marker of monstrosity in animals (other signifiers include large size and aggressive behaviour, especially when directed towards people).

as the following chapter will demonstrate, the same is true of human characters who consume horsemeat, which was taboo in post-conversion Scandinavia.

5. Conclusion

People developed emotionally-significant relationships with horses and dogs in the sagas.

These animals act as companions and as pets; they can be exceptionally intelligent, understand human speech, and demonstrate remarkable loyalty to their human owners.

The boundary between human and animal is thus breached emotionally and intellectually.

These animals expand the limits of animal cognitive potential, variously demonstrating natural, preternatural, and supernatural psychology and behaviour.¹⁶⁸ This was not the case with domestic livestock, however, which were mostly viewed as material possessions unless they were the objects of sacrifice. In such cases, like cats, they became associated with paganism and were thus depicted as monstrous – a motif that will be extended into the following chapter's discussion of meat and taboo.

¹⁶⁸ Human 'interiority' as described by Descola (see the Introduction and Chapter 4 in particular).

Chapter Two: Animals and Taboo

On June 15th, 1777, Captain James Cook invited a number of Tahitians on board his ship for dinner. To Cook's surprise, however, his guests were evidently not pleased with the meal:

When dinner came upon table, not one of them would sit down or eat a bit of any thing that was served up. On expressing my surprize at this, they were all *taboo*, as they said; which word has a very comprehensive meaning; but in general, signifies that a thing is forbidden. Why they were laid under such restraints at present was not explained.¹

The Polynesian word *taboo* thus entered the English language; coming from the Tongan *tapu* or Fijian *tabu*, it essentially means 'prohibited', 'disallowed', 'forbidden'.² As Cook later wrote: '*Taboo*, as I have before observed, is a word of an extensive signification ... when any thing is forbidden to be eaten, or made use of, they say that it is *taboo*'.³ The concept of

¹ James Cook et al., *The Three Voyages of Captain James Cook Round the World. Vol. V. Being the First of the Third Voyage* (London, 1821), p. 348.

² Robert M. W. Dixon, *A Grammar of Boumaa Fijian* (Chicago, 1988), p. 368. In Tongan, *tapu* means 'forbidden, prohibited, unlawful, -- opp. *ngofua*; sacred, holy, -- also *toputapu*. N., prohibiting, prohibition; sacredness, holiness'. In Fijian, *tabu* means 'forbidden, prohibited; implying a religious sanction, but now used also for a legal prohibition, such as "no admission"; sacred, holy, unapproachable'. See *Tongan Dictionary (Tongan—English and English—Tongan)*, Maxwell C. Churchward (London, 1959), p. 456; Arthur Capell, *A New Fijian Dictionary*, Arthur Capell (Glasgow, 1941; repr. 1957), p. 246.

³ Cook et al. (1821), p. 462. Gísli Pálsson suggests that 'Some of the closest ethnographic counterparts to the [Icelandic] Commonwealth are likely to be found in the richly documented pre-state social formations on Pacific Islands'. Gísli Pálsson, *The Textual Life of Savants: Ethnography, Iceland, and the Linguistic Turn* (New York and London, 1995; repr. 2013), p. 91.

taboo – which can be applied to any sort of prohibition – consequently became a staple in the scholarship of classical anthropology in the twentieth century; yet, despite its historical prominence, it has never been applied to Old Norse literature or medieval Scandinavia.⁴

Following anthropologist Stanley Tambiah’s assertion that ‘dietary prohibitions make sense in relation to a systematic ordering of ideas’, the first section of this chapter provides an overview of meat-eating taboos in medieval Scandinavia and their historical and symbolic significance.⁵ As Lévi-Strauss postulates, ‘Eating prohibitions and obligations ... seem to be theoretically equivalent means of “denoting significance” in a logical system some or all of whose elements are edible species’.⁶ Meat-eating taboos are an essential component of a larger cultural system that structures how various animal species are

⁴ James Frazer was the first to apply the concept of *taboo* cross-culturally (see James George Frazer, ‘Taboo’, in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 9th edition, vol. 23 (New York, 1888), pp. 15-18). In his words, it ‘is only one of a number of similar systems of superstition which among many, perhaps all the races of men have contributed in large measure, under many different names and with many variations of detail, to build up the complex fabric of society in all the various sides or elements of it which we describe as religious, social, political, moral and economic’ (*The Golden Bough*, third edition, vol. 3: *Taboo and the Perils of the Soul* (Cambridge, 1911; repr. 2012), pp. v-vi). Eminent contributions to the subject in twentieth-century anthropology, sociology, and psychology are numerous: see e.g. Émile Durkheim, ‘La prohibition de l’inceste et ses origines’, *Année sociologique* I (1896-1897), pp. 1-70; A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Taboo*, The Frazer Lecture 1939 (Cambridge, 1939); Hutton Webster, *Taboo: A Sociological Study* (Stanford and London, 1942); Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (London, 1950); Franz Steiner, *Taboo* (London, 1956); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée sauvage* (Paris, 1962b); etc.

⁵ Tambiah here explicitly builds on the work of Mary Douglas (1966); Tambiah (1969), p. 424.

⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. Rodney Needham (Chicago, 1966), p. 103. See further Fortes (1966): ‘prohibiting certain species is, in effect, only one of a number of means of affirming their “signification”’ (p. 8).

differentiated and, more importantly, evaluated. When examining ideological connections and disconnections between humans and other animals in a culture, consideration of meat is essential: one of the most intimate aspects of human-animal relationships is our consumption of them (or their consumption of us). The eating of meat is a process that kills another organism and literally incorporates it into the body – into the physical self. While the first chapter explored the connections between humans and animals as formed through relationships, this chapter examines limitations and demarcations to that connectedness, as well as the ways that people made distinctions between different kinds of animals.

The goals of the first section are threefold: to examine the evidence for meat-based dietary prohibitions in medieval Scandinavia, mostly in legal texts; to speculate upon the historical causes for these largely religious taboos; and to explore the depiction of taboo meat as disgusting, and characters who break meat-eating taboos as monstrous, in saga literature. The second section examines evidence for another intimate and physical human-animal encounter – bestiality – which was both strictly taboo in legal texts and used as an insult to confer exceptional shame in literary sources. Bestiality disturbs culturally-entrenched ideas about the separation between humans and animals because it involves

merging through sexual penetration; this physical incorporation entails a temporal merging of bodies that is disruptive to the value system of a society and the boundaries that keep it intact.

1. Meat

1.1 Evidence for Dietary Prohibitions

The medieval Icelandic *Grágás* law codes explicitly list which animals are meant for eating:

‘Þat er kiot er meN lata af navt eþa fær sauði. oc geitr. oc svín’ (‘That is meat which men

take from cattle or sheep or goats or pigs’).⁷ Of these permitted animals, pigs are the only

omnivores, and consequently there are specific rules about what pigs themselves may

consume:

Ef svín kemr a ros kiot oc scal hann ala .iij. manvþr oc fella holld af. eN feita aþra. iij. Ef svín kemr a manz hræ. oc scal ala .vi. manvþr. oc fella holld af. ef hylldz hefir á. eN feita aþra .vi. manvþr þa er rett at nýta svín.⁸

⁷ *Grágás*, *Konungsbók*, vol. I, pp. 33-34. While all references to *Grágás* are taken from the *Konungsbók* edition, every legal provision regarding meat is included verbatim in *Staðarbólsbók*, the other extant manuscript that contains this text (*Grágás eftir det Arnamagnæanske haandskrift nr. 334 fól.*, *Staðarbólsbók*, pp. 42-43).

⁸ *Grágás*, *Konungsbók*, vol. I, p. 34. Similarly, it is only lawful to eat livestock if a man kills it himself or if the cause of its death is known – whether from drowning, landslide, avalanche, storm or whatever else, but never if the cause is unknown (p. 32). Similar laws are described in the *Gulapingslög*. If the meat of an animal that has died from unknown causes is eaten, the penalty is a fine of three aurar which is to be paid to the bishop and the guilty party must go to confession and do penance. For an animal that has been killed by wolves, bears or dogs, or an animal that has drowned in running water, fallen off a cliff, or is choked by its halter, salt and water must be consecrated and sprinkled upon the carcass, which should then be hung up and dried. *Den*

(If a pig comes upon horse meat, then it must be kept alive for three months, and starved to lose its flesh, then fattened for another three months. If a pig comes upon dead human flesh, then it must be kept alive for six months, and it should be starved to lose its flesh, if it has gained weight, then fattened for another six and then it is lawful to eat the pig.)

The omnivore that eats another animal creates category anxiety. This law allowed this disturbing aspect to be calibrated in specific amounts of time. Pigs are the only animals domestically reared for human consumption that would actually eat humans or other animals; the idea of eating human flesh, even transmuted into pork, is still alarming, for the meat presents a proxy of the taboo flesh. The most serious meat-taboo is consumption of human flesh (six months), but it is half as bad for a pig to eat a horse (three months). There was an extreme taboo against the consumption of human flesh in medieval Scandinavia, and when cannibals do appear in the sagas, they are depicted as horrific and monstrous (discussed below, section 1.3).⁹ The strict prohibition against eating horseflesh

ældre Gulathing-Lov, in *Norges Gamle Love indtil 1387*, vol. I, ed. R. Keyser and P. A. Munch (Christiania, 1846), pp. 18-19.

⁹ In the so-called *Kong Sverrers Christenret* (1269-1273), it is said that a woman who is found guilty of being a *trolkona eða manæta* ('troll-woman or man-eater') should be taken out to sea and struck on the spine. *Kong Sverrers Christenret*, in *Norges Gamle Love indtil 1387*, vol. I, ed. R. Keyser and P. A. Munch (Christiania, 1846), p. 434. *Kong Sverrers Christenret* constitutes the Norwegian church laws that were composed by the scribe Þorgeir Hákonarson during the reign of King Eiríkr Magnússon, shortly after the revision of the Gulathing Christian laws (1269-1273). They have mistakenly been attributed to King Sverrir 'through a

in any form thus takes on new significance: there are no laws against eating a pig if it has consumed the flesh of any other animal, indicating that horses and their flesh held a special place in the medieval Icelandic worldview.

There are specific laws about which wild animals people may hunt and eat:

Biorn eigv mæn at veiða oc nýta hvart sem er viðbiorn eða hvitabiorn. oc ravð dýre. hiort oc hrein. þat scal eta þa er kiot ætt er. Rosm hval oc sel scal eta a þeim tíðum at eins er kiot ætt er.¹⁰

(Men may hunt and eat bears whether they are brown bears or polar bears, and red deer, harts or reindeer. These shall only be eaten when meat may be eaten. Walrus and seal can only be eaten at those times when meat is allowed.)

With the conversion to Christianity came the tradition of fasting, the breaking of which was considered a serious crime.¹¹ Fasting laws had to be strict and clear. In her discussion of fasting in post-conquest England, Bridget Ann Henisch argues that ‘The rule forbidding

misreading of the first item in the main manuscript’. See e.g. Stephen A. Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 2011), pp. 163-164.

¹⁰ *Grágás, Konungsbók*, vol. I, p. 34.

¹¹ If someone ate meat during the ‘langa fostv’ (‘Long-fast, i.e. Lent’), any of the ‘imbro daga’ (‘Ember Days’), or the ‘þvatt dag fyrir hvita daga’ (‘Saturday before the White Days, i.e. Whitsun week’), then the penalty was letter outlawry, and there was a fine of three marks for eating meat during other fasting periods. There were exceptions, however: if a man was alone on an offshore island during Lent and had no food except meat, then he should eat it rather than let himself starve, but still not during the Ember Days or Fridays; he is only to eat to keep himself alive, and not to put on weight; and within seven nights of returning from the island, he must see a priest for confession. *Grágás, Konungsbók*, vol. I, p. 33.

meat on a fast day was the one most strictly enforced and conscientiously obeyed'.¹² Fasting was well-established in post-conversion Iceland; it may have been quickly adopted before a dominant ecclesiastical institution was formed because of a general shortage of food – the custom saving on resources to the benefit of all. Regarding the prohibition against consuming walrus and seal during fasting periods, these marine mammals presumably could not be counted as fish even though they also live in the sea because they spend significant amounts of time on land.

Grágás provides further evidence to identify which animals of the sea could and could not be eaten during times of fast: 'þat a maþr oc at eta. ef hann fastar. fiska allz kyns. oc hvala. aþra eN rosmal oc sel. þat scal eta þa er kiot ætt er. Ros hval scal eigi eta. oc ná hval. oc ravþ kemming' ('This a man may also eat if he fasts: all kinds of fish and whales other than walrus and seal. These shall only be eaten when meat may be eaten. [He] shall

¹² However, 'some desperate ingenuity was applied to the definition of meat and fish' – Beavers (like walrus' and seals) eventually had to be considered mammals, even though they spend so much time in the water and have a scaly tail that 'looked distinctly fishy'. Bridget Ann Henisch, *Fast and Feast: Food in Medieval Society* (London, 1976), p. 47. Probably for this reason, beavers nearly became extinct in medieval England, just as walruses became extinct within a few centuries of settlement in Iceland. See Lee Raye, 'The early extinction date of the beaver (*Castor fiber*) in Britain', *Historical Biology* 27.8 (2014), pp. 1029-1041.

not eat horse-whale [i.e. walrus] and narwhal and red comb’).¹³ The probable rationale for avoiding the meat of these last-named whales can be found in *Konungs skuggsjá* and its discussion of Iceland and the wonders of the Icelandic seas. The *brosshvalr* (‘horse-whale’, ‘walrus’) and *rauðkemingr* (‘red comb’) are said to be savage and wrathful towards men; filled with avarice and wickedness, they never grow weary of killing people and travel the seas looking for ships to leap upon, sink, and destroy. Consequently, ‘Þessir fiskar eru mönnum eigi ætir, heldr gagnstaðligir, svá sem skipaðir úvinir mannligu kyni’ (‘Men are not to eat these fish, on the contrary, for they are the enemies of mankind’) – and they are also, presumably, thought to consume human flesh.¹⁴ The prohibition against eating the *nábhvalr* (‘narwhal’) is slightly less dramatic: it is to be avoided because men supposedly fall sick and

¹³ *Grágás, Konungsbók*, vol. I, p. 36. It is unclear what species *rauðkemingr* (‘red comb’) might have been; Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins suggest *Otaria stelleri* or *Otaria ursina*, but do not provide their rationale – see *Laws of Early Iceland, Grágás: The Codex Regius of Grágás with Material from Other Manuscripts*, vol. 1 (Winnipeg, 1980), p. 36, fn. 94. On whales and whaling in medieval Iceland, Greenland, and Norway, see Vicki Ellen Szabo, *Monstrous Fishes and the Mead-Dark Sea: Whaling in the Medieval North Atlantic* (Leiden, 2008), especially chapter seven, pp. 211–241. Most whales in the sagas are found washed up on shore, providing a massive amount of meat with limited effort and thus causing legal dispute – they ‘represent salvation of a sort, a prodigious bounty given up by the sea, yet almost never sought out upon the waters’ (p. 212). On whales in legal texts more broadly (dietary prohibitions are not discussed), see chapter eight, pp. 243–275.

¹⁴ *Speculum Regale. Konungs-Skuggsjá. Konge-Speilet, et philosophisk-didaktisk Skrift, forfattet i Norge mod Slutningen af det tolfte Aarhundrede*, ed. Rudolph Keyser, Peter Andreas Munch, and Carl Rikard Unger (Christiania, 1848), p. 30.

die if they eat it.¹⁵ The text names two other whales that are bad to eat: the *svínhvalr* ('swine-whale') and the *andhvalr* ('bottle-nosed whale'), which should be avoided because their fat cannot be digested by any person or living thing, for it will run through them and even percolate through wood, and supposedly, no cooking-vessel can contain it – not even one made of horn.¹⁶ These latter prohibitions are rooted in fantasy and superstition as well as practicality; they were too big to hunt safely, so despite the vast amount of meat on them, reasons to avoid them evolved.

There are also restrictions on eating certain species of birds, with some considered good for eating and others good to prohibit: 'Fogla eigv mēN at æta. þa er a vatni fliota. Klö fogla scolo mēN eigi nýta. þa er hræ klo er á. Örnv oc hrafna eþa vali. eþa smyrta. rett er at eta hōsn oc rivpur' ('Men may eat those birds that float on water. Men must not consume taloned birds, those that have carrion claws, eagles and ravens, hawks and falcons. It is

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 30. Obviously this was not the case, since the narwhal is non-toxic and safe for human consumption. An etymological explanation might be instructive. The first element is either *nár* ('corpse'), possibly referring to the colour of the animal's skin, or *nál* ('needle'), with reference to its straight tusk. If *náhvallr* was taken to mean 'corpse-whale', then it also might have been thought to eat human corpses, hence the taboo (alternately, perhaps its consumption was thought to turn people into corpses). See further 'narwhal, n.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2017. Web. Accessed 30 September 2017.

¹⁶ *Speculum Regale. Konungs-Skuggsjá*, pp. 29, 31.

lawful to eat poultry and ptarmigans’).¹⁷ The legal provision against eating an animal that has come into contact with human flesh is repeated: ‘þat fe er eigi ætt. er maþr veit at manz bani verþr’ (‘That animal is not to be eaten which has killed a person’).¹⁸ Laws about which mammals are good and bad to eat are then made explicit: ‘Ros eigv meN eigi at eta oc hvnda. oc melracca. oc kottv. oc en engi kló dýr. oc eigi hræ fogla’ (‘Men may not eat horses and dogs and arctic foxes and cats, and no animals with claws and not carrion birds’).¹⁹ *Grágás* finally describes the severe punishment for offending against these food taboos: ‘Ef maþr etr þav dýr. er fra erv skilð. oc varþar honvm þat fiorbavgs Garþ’ (‘If a person eats those living creatures that are prohibited, the penalty is lesser outlawry’).²⁰ In

¹⁷ The same rules applied to a bird’s eggs: ‘þar ero eG æt vndan þeim fvglvn er foglar ero ætir. A þeim tíþvm scal eG eta er meN eta hvitan mat’ (‘The eggs may be eaten of those birds that can be eaten. The eggs may be eaten at those times when men eat food made from milk’). *Grágás, Konungsbók*, vol. I, p. 34.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34. It is unclear which clawed animals are referenced here, besides wolves in Norway, since bears are discussed elsewhere and foxes and cats are already named. It might be a general expansion that explains why these listed animals are forbidden – all clawed beasts must be avoided since, like carrion birds, they can get their claws into the flesh of taboo animals or dead humans.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35. These and all preceding measures regarding meat and taboo are seemingly discontinued in medieval Icelandic law. After Iceland became subject to Norway in 1262-1264, two new law-books were introduced by the Norwegian crown: *Járnsíða* in 1271 and *Jónsbók* in 1281. Neither text includes any meat-eating prohibitions; by this time, Christian ideas about meat may have been so thoroughly ingrained in Icelandic culture that dietary restrictions were no longer needed on a legal level. *Járnsíða* was probably compiled by Sturla Þórðarson and was based on *Gulaþingslög* and *Frostuþingslög*; *Jónsbók* was named after *lögmaðr* (‘law-man’) Jón Einarsson, who brought the text to Iceland and was probably its chief compiler. On *Járnsíða* and *Jónsbók*, see further e.g. Gudmund Sandvik and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, ‘Laws’, in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford, 2005), pp. 223-244, at p. 227. For

Stanley Tambiah's terms, these animals are 'good to prohibit'.²¹ The penalty for eating these prohibited animals in medieval Iceland – *fforbaugsgarðr* (lesser outlawry) – entailed the confiscation of one's property and three years of exile from the country.²² The rationale for these provisions is not stated in the laws, leaving them ripe for inquiry and interpretation.

1.2 Reasons for Dietary Prohibitions

A number of theories have been proposed over the years for the origins of food taboos.

Mary Douglas argues that taboo protects 'the distinctive categories of the universe ... the local consensus on how the world is organized ... It shores up wavering uncertainty. It reduces intellectual and social disorder'.²³ Things which occupy an ambiguous place in people's cosmologies are seen as polluted; accordingly, they are to be avoided and certainly

editions, see the following: *Hin forna lögbók Íslendinga sem nefnist Járnsíða eðr Hákonarbók*, ed. Þórður Sveinbjörnsson (Copenhagen, 1847); *Lögbók Magnúsar konungs, Lagabætis, banda Íslendingum, eður Jónsbók hin forna; lögtekin á alþingi 1281*, ed. Sveinn Skúlason (Akureyri, 1858); and *The Laws of Later Iceland: Jónsbók: The Icelandic Text According to MS AM 351 fol. Skálholtsbók eldri*, ed. Jana K. Schulman (Saarbrücken, 2009).

²¹ Tambiah (1969), pp. 423–459.

²² The lesser outlaw was called a *fforbaugsmaðr* and if he did not leave the country after three summers had passed, he became a *skógarmaðr* ('full outlaw'). *Grágás* distinguishes between three types of outlawry: (i) *fforbaugsgarðr* ('lesser outlawry'), (ii) *fforbaugsgarðr* with the added condition that the *fforbaugsmaðr* may not return to Iceland, and (iii) *skóggangr* ('full outlawry'). In addition, there was *héraðssekt* (exile from a district). The *skógarmaðr* ('full outlaw') lost all legal rights and could never return to Iceland; nobody could legally assist him and there was a price on his head; and anyone could slay him with legal impunity, either in Iceland or abroad. See e.g. Byock (2001), pp. 231–232; and William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago, 1990; repr. 1997), especially Chapter 8: Peacemaking and Arbitration, and references therein.

²³ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York, 1966; rev. ed. 2002), p. xi.

should not be eaten.²⁴ Douglas further postulates that ‘a challenge to the established classification is brought under control by some theory of attendant harm’.²⁵ In medieval Iceland, the religious consequences for breaking food taboos involved confession and the paying of fines; penance can be seen as a supernatural effect – the theory of attendant harm as described by Douglas may not be as clear in this context, but it also cannot be excluded entirely. This indirectly points to a religious basis for the laws, and in extreme cases the consequence was legal expulsion from the country. While in pre-Christian Scandinavia the violation of food taboos may have once been attended by harmful effects, for post-conversion Icelanders, it was ecclesiastical law that kept societal boundaries intact.²⁶

Rob Meens builds on Douglas’s work and focuses on the proscription against hippophagy in post-conversion Ireland. He argues that the Christian aversion to eating horses was a consequence of the intimate relationship between horse and rider, which

²⁴ Douglas applied her pollution theory to the dietary prohibitions in Leviticus 11 and speculated that ‘the prohibitions could be explained as a form of taboo on anomalous creatures. Each species has its own particular environment. But some species do not fit neatly with their fellows’ (ibid., p. xiv). In the preface to a revised edition, however, Douglas changes her views and questions whether prohibited animals are abominable at all, suggesting instead ‘that it is abominable to harm them’ (p. xv). This latter notion applies itself well to certain prohibited animals in *Grágás* and the general Christian aversion to eating pets and companion animals – horses, dogs, cats – but fails to adequately address the full list of prohibited animals found in the medieval Icelandic context.

²⁵ Ibid., p. xi.

²⁶ In a sense, the effects are similar to those of Polynesia, where a man who is *tabu* ‘must observe a number of special restrictions on his behaviour’ (Radcliffe-Brown 1939, p. 6).

supposedly gave them an ambiguous or anomalous standing as quasi-human, and they were therefore to be strictly avoided as food.²⁷ The impurity attached to horse-consumption parallels animals such as dogs, cats, and mice, which live in and around human dwellings, inhabiting 'the marginal area between house and forest, culture and nature'.²⁸ While this perspective may be relevant to the Christian aversion to eating companion animals, it is hardly applicable cross-culturally, as a significant number of cultures around the world eat their pets.²⁹ Furthermore, it would not explain why horses and dogs were both consumed as meat in pre-Christian Scandinavia, as the archaeological evidence indicates, yet these are also the two animals with whom people probably had the most intimate relationships.³⁰ In mainland Scandinavia, they are the two most commonly found animals buried with both women and men in pre-Christian graves.³¹ In Iceland, many pagan graves also include horse

²⁷ Secular and ecclesiastical Irish aristocrats who used horses for riding never ate horsemeat, but it was common fare for the peasants who used horses as work animals on their farms. Rob Meens, 'Eating Animals in the Early Middle Ages: Classifying the Animal World and Building Group Identities', in *The Animal/Human Boundary: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Angela N. H. Creager and William Chester Jordan (Rochester, 2002), pp. 3-28.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁹ For examples and detailed discussion, see Harris (1985), chapter 9, pp. 175-198.

³⁰ The archaeological record clearly indicates that both horses and dogs were eaten in pre-Christian Scandinavia (at least on occasion). See e.g. Jennbert (2011), pp. 147-148.

³¹ Jennbert (2011), pp. 65, 67.

and dog skeletons, suggesting that these two animal species were held in especially high regard (or at least that they served an important function as status symbols).³²

Marvin Harris takes a cross-cultural anthropological approach to the study of dietary restrictions; he argues that food taboos are based upon pragmatic considerations, 'ecological restraints and opportunities which differ from one region to another'.³³ Preferred foods in any given culture thus 'have a more favorable balance of practical benefits over costs than foods that are avoided'.³⁴ Even highly nutritious foods may become taboo due to their negative effects on the environment or the time and effort required to produce them. For Harris, food choices are determined by cost-benefit analysis: effort expended finding protein and maximising caloric return. Many of the animals prohibited in *Grágás* would not be worth hunting, including birds of prey, foxes, and wolves. Some of these species would

³² See e.g. Philippa L. Ascough et al., 'Variability in North Atlantic Marine Radiocarbon Reservoir Effects at c. A.D. 1000', *The Holocene* 16.1 (2006), pp. 131-136; Kristján Eldjárn (1956).

³³ Harris (1985), p. 16. Harris does believe that foods convey cultural messages and have symbolic meanings, but questions whether these were preceded by dietary preferences and aversions; extending Lévi-Strauss's famous dictum, some foods are 'good to think' and others are 'bad to think', and 'whether they are good or bad to think depends on whether they are good or bad to eat. Food must nourish the collective stomach before it can feed the collective mind' (p. 15). This is not true in medieval Scandinavia – or perhaps anywhere else, for that matter – since some animals that were 'bad to eat' were also surely 'good to think with' (such as eagles and ravens) or 'good to live with' (such as dogs and cats).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5. Harris's methodology is inspired by the insight of ecologists who study animal diets and hunting habits – specifically optimal foraging theory, which 'predicts that hunters or collectors will pursue or harvest only those species which maximize the rate of caloric return for the time they spend foraging' (p. 165).

be a physical threat to the hunter, given the technology available and significant risk factors. Moreover, carnivores and carrion animals are quite literally ‘bad to eat’ since they are more susceptible to diseases.

Frederick Simoons acknowledges that flesh-food avoidances may initially come into existence due to the environmental factors discussed by Harris, but also notes that they obviously developed long before the earliest written records, and consequently ‘we will never know with certainty what factors led to their development’.³⁵ He argues that a wider variety of factors (often in combination) created meat-eating prohibitions, with religion being ‘a powerful determinant in its own right’.³⁶ Important factors include human perceptions of particular animals, their social and economic roles, avoidance of disease and health factors, relations with humans and gods, ritual purity or impurity, and, especially significant for medieval horse consumption, religious changes.

Anglo-Saxon England provides a useful historical analogue: Kristopher Poole argues that ‘Christian contempt of horse consumption seems to represent a combination of

³⁵ Frederick J. Simoons, *Eat Not This Flesh: Food Avoidances from Prehistory to the Present*, first published as *Eat Not This Flesh: Food Avoidances in the Old World*, 1961 (Madison, 1994), p. 320. Simoons suggests that Harris went wrong in two significant respects: his confidence that ‘general formulas, laws, or proscriptions can explain developments in human society’, and his monism – the notion of ‘one key to unlock all doors’ (p. 320).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

inherited Roman ideas and its perceived association with pagan practices'.³⁷ Archaeological and documentary evidence indicates that the Romans, disgusted by the idea of eating horse-flesh, would only consume horses when there was no alternative.³⁸ These attitudes were inherited by the Catholic church, and with the introduction of Christianity to northern Europe, pressure was exerted to eliminate horse-eating along with other pagan customs.³⁹ Pope Gregory III's letter to Saint Boniface, composed in 732, condemns the Germanic consumption of horseflesh, both wild and tame, which figured prominently in fertility cults. Boniface was instructed to 'suppress it in every possible way, with the help of Christ, and impose suitable penance upon the offenders', because the custom is 'filthy and abominable'.⁴⁰

³⁷ Kristopher Poole, 'Horses for courses? Religious change and dietary shifts in Anglo-Saxon England', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 32.3 (2013), pp. 319-333, at p. 322.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 321-322.

³⁹ I thus disagree with Jennbert's (2011) suggestion that 'The prejudice against horse meat ... can probably be linked to ecclesiastical principles and not to any opposition to horse rituals in Old Norse religion' (p. 149), since the two factors are connected. I counter Miller's (2017) note that 'Horsemeat was not generally taboo in Christianity', but agree that 'horses might often figure as central to certain pagan cults and so the eating of them involved suspicions of apostasy' (p. 27, fn. 13). I also challenge Brita Egardt's conclusion that it is not possible to ascertain the reason for the Christian prohibition on horse meat – see *Hästslakt och rackarskam: En etnologisk undersökning av folkliga fördomar*, Nordiska museets handlingar 57 (Stockholm, 1962), pp. 286-288.

⁴⁰ *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, trans. Ephraim Emerton (New York, 1940), p. 58.

With the introduction of Christianity to Scandinavia, the church made significant efforts to ban pagan customs, including those that revolved around food.⁴¹ In *Íslendingabók* (composed between 1122 and 1133),⁴² Ari Þorgilsson famously wrote that the following occurred after the conversion:

Þá vas þat mælt í lögum, at allir menn skyldi kristnir vesa ok skírn taka, þeir es áðr váru óskírðir á landi hér; en of barnaútburð skyldu standa en fornu lög ok of hrossakjötsát. Skyldu menn blóta á laun, ef vildu, en varða fjörbaugsgarðr, ef váttum of kvæmi við. En síðarr fám vetrum vas sú heiðni af numin sem ǫnnur.⁴³

(It was then said in the laws that all people should be Christian and receive baptism, those who were not baptised before here in this land; but the old laws should stand concerning the exposure of children and eating of horsemeat. People could sacrifice in private, if they wished, but that becomes lesser outlawry if witnesses came forward. But a few winters later these heathen provisions were abrogated like the others.)

⁴¹ In addition to proscriptions against the consumption of specific animals as meat, this is also made clear by the aforementioned fast days imposed by the Church.

⁴² *Íslendingabók* is thus the oldest written account of the conversion to Christianity in Iceland. See e.g. Siân Grønlie, 'Introduction: Ari's *Íslendingabók*', *Íslendingabók—Kristni saga: The Book of the Icelanders—The Story of the Conversion*, Viking Society for Northern Research Text Series 18 (London, 2006), pp. ix-xxx.

⁴³ *Íslendingabók*, in *Íslendingabók—Landnámabók*, ÍF I (1), ed. Jakob Benediktsson (Reykjavík, 1968), p. 17. Also see *Kristni saga*, in *Biskupa sögur I*, ÍF XV, ed. Sigurgeir Steingrímsson et al. (Reykjavík, 2003), p. 36; *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 272.

Miller asks: ‘How is it that horsemeat figures on a level of importance with infanticide, or with sacrificing to the old gods?’⁴⁴ This is especially strange if horsemeat was an essential source of protein. In *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* (composed around 1300), horsemeat is said to be an important staple in the diet of both the rich and the poor – though it is questionable whether people who lived in poverty actually ate horses on a regular basis, and the *konungasögur* indicate that the provision of meat was an event for feasting at special occasions.⁴⁵ According to the saga, the Norwegians who most strongly opposed Christianity said that they could not imagine raising their children with the prohibition against foods that used to be their chief sustenance. It is for this reason that the old laws stood regarding the exposure of children and the eating of horsemeat – for a time.

Horsemeat was the most strictly prohibited item of food in post-conversion Scandinavia and horses are the only species expressly forbidden to be consumed in the Norwegian *Gulapingslög*: ‘En ef maðr etr rosfakiot. þa borte hann firi þat morcom .iij. bifcope. aller menn a vara tungu. oc gange til fkripta oc borte við Crift’ (‘And if a man eats

⁴⁴ He does not provide a full answer to this question, but briefly suggests that Christians opposed eating horse-flesh because horses were prominent in Germanic fertility cults. William Ian Miller, ‘Of Outlaws, Christians, Horsemeat, and Writing: Uniform Laws and Saga Iceland’, *Michigan Law Review* 89.8 (Aug., 2001), pp. 2081-2095, at p. 2086.

⁴⁵ *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, Arnarnagænanæ Series A, vol. 2, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson (København, 1961), pp. 196-197.

horse meat, then he shall pay a fine of three marks to the bishop. [This applies to] all men of our tongue, and [he must] go to confession and do penance for Christ'.⁴⁶ Moreover, if a man eats animal flesh during Lent ('langa foftu'), he must pay a fine of three marks to the bishop; and if it is horse-flesh, then he must forfeit all his property and leave the king's dominions.⁴⁷ Dogs are also mentioned in the laws, though only in passing: if a man has no food to eat during Lent, then he should go to three of his neighbours and offer to trade provisions with them, but if he receives nothing, 'Þa fcal hann kiot eta oc biarga fva ondu finni. af því at helldr fcal hann hund eta. helldr en hundr ete hann' ('then he may eat meat and so preserve his life; rather he should eat a dog than a dog eat him').⁴⁸ Dogs were not kept for food in post-conversion Norway, but their consumption was not a crime, unlike the eating of horse-flesh.

1.3 Disgust and Monstrosity

The taboo against eating select animals in medieval Icelandic and Norwegian law-books is also expressed in literary sources. In *Hákonar saga góða*, when the tenth-century Christian

⁴⁶ *Den ældre Gulathings-Lov*, p. 11. *Gulathingslög* covered the west coast and interior of Norway; *Frostathingslög* covered the Trondheimsfjord region (modern Trøndelag). See e.g. Gudmund Sandvik and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (2005), p. 223.

⁴⁷ *Den ældre Gulathings-Lov*, p. 12.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

King Hákon góði ('the good') Haraldsson (920-960/961) attends a Yule feast in Þrándheim, his subjects surround him and ask him to perform a sacrifice – or else they will force him to do so. Jarl Sigurðr mediates between them and finally King Hákon 'át nokkura bita af hrosslifr' ('ate a few bits of horse liver').⁴⁹ Greatly upset, Hákon immediately left the district and determined to come another time with greater forces to seek revenge. Hákon góði had been raised a Christian and was known for his missionary activities, but his attempts to introduce Christianity into Norway were not successful.⁵⁰

The aversion that Hákon demonstrates towards horse-flesh can be seen as a response to something that is deemed disgusting. Emotion historians argue that the origins of disgust in individuals and cultures arise 'as a rejection response that protects the body from "bad" foods', which then extends to 'a rejection system that protects the soul'.⁵¹ A process of 'moralization' has taken place: an activity that was once common and considered harmless has been relegated to the realm of disgust. Carolyne Larrington demonstrates how

⁴⁹ *Hákonar saga góða*, in *Heimskringla I*, ÍF XXVI, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (Reykjavík, 1941), p. 172.

⁵⁰ See Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, 'A Piece of Horse Liver and the Ratification of Law', in *A Piece of Horse Liver: Myth, Ritual and Folklore in Old Icelandic Sources*, trans. Terry Gunnell and Joan Turville-Petre (Reykjavík, 1998), pp. 57-80, and references therein.

⁵¹ Paul Rozin, Jonathan Haidt and Clark R. McCauley, 'Disgust', in *Handbook of Emotions*, ed. Michael Lewis, Jeannette M. Haviland-Jones and Lisa Feldman Barrett, third edition (New York and London, 2008), pp. 757-776, at p. 757.

this type of moralization process can be depicted in the sagas and *þættir*: Christian authors render and re-envision the pagan past as first repulsive and then amoral, which has ‘a strongly didactic purpose, attempting to instil aversion to sinful behaviour by showing it as proximate to disgusting’.⁵² Food can be disgusting because it is literally incorporated into the physical body, it has the potential to kill, and it is multisensory: it can look, smell, and taste abhorrent (and texture and touch may also be considered).

Miller suggests that ‘disgust has other powerful communalizing capacities and is especially useful and necessary as a builder of moral and social community’.⁵³ Paul Rozin further argues that the origins of disgust lie in ‘the growth of a large or politically powerful collection of individuals who accept and promote such a moralization’.⁵⁴ In the medieval Scandinavian context, the people with this power were the clergy and the Church, who linked this practice with pagan beliefs and strove to establish greater religious orthodoxy.⁵⁵

Christian saga authors applied the concept of disgust to the pagan past to edify its audience

⁵² Carolyne Larrington, ‘Diet, Defecation and the Devil: Disgust and the Pagan Past’, in *Medieval Obscenities*, ed. Nicola McDonald (York, 2006a), p. 141.

⁵³ William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 194.

⁵⁴ Paul Rozin, ‘Moralization’, in *Morality and Health: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. A. Brandt and P. Rozin (New York, 1997), p. 383. See further Larrington (2006a): ‘The annexation of disgust to morality is a strategy frequently employed by the Church to create aversion to a range of behaviours’ (p. 140).

⁵⁵ Kristopher Poole (2013) argues for a similar process in Anglo-Saxon England: ‘the negative attitudes of Church leaders to hippophagy relate largely to the perceived links of this practice with pagan beliefs and were closely allied to attempts at establishing greater religious orthodoxy’ (p. 319).

about proper moral conduct and behaviour. As a good Christian king, Hákon accordingly regards the eating of horse-flesh with utter repulsion.

In another version of this story in *Ágrip af Nóregskonunga sögum*, composed by an unknown author in Norway between 1188 and 1200, it is said that Hákon ‘biti á hrosslifr, ok svá, at hann brá dúki umb ok beit eigi bera’ (‘bit into the horseliver, but that he wrapped it in a cloth and did not bite it directly’).⁵⁶ Similarly, at an earlier feast in Hlaðir in *Hákonar saga góða*, Hákon is first urged to eat horse meat, which he refuses to do, then to drink the broth (*soðit*) from the pot, which he again rejects, and finally to consume the drippings (*flotit*).⁵⁷ When the people are on the verge of attacking him, Jarl Sigurðr calms the situation, asking the king to compromise and ‘gína yfir ketilhødduna, er soðreykinn hafði lagt upp af hrossaslátrinu, ok var smjör haddan’ (‘to cover the handle of the kettle with his mouth, on which the steam from the horse meat had settled, and there was fat on the

⁵⁶ *Ágrip af Nóregskonunga sögum*, in *Ágrip af Nóregskonunga sögum, Fagrskinna—Nóregs Konunga Tal*, ÍF XXIX, ed. Bjarni Einarsson (Reykjavík, 1985), p. 8. On the dating of *Ágrip* to 1188-1200 – and generally c.1190 – see the Introduction to *Ágrip af Nóregskonunga sögum: A Twelfth-Century Synoptic History of the Kings of Norway*, ed. and trans. M. J. Driscoll, Viking Society for Northern Research Text Series, general editors Anthony Faulkes and Richard Perkins, Volume X (London, 1995), pp. ix-xxv, at pp. ix-xii. Regarding the different versions of this narrative, see Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson (1998), pp. 57-80. Comparing *Hákonarmál*, *Historia Norwegiæ*, *Ágrip*, *Fagrskinna/Nóregs konunga tal*, and *Heimskringla*, the author concludes that the episode provides evidence for a close relationship between law and *blót* (‘sacrifice’) in a system of sacral kingship (see references therein).

⁵⁷ *Hákonar saga góða*, p. 171.

handle’).⁵⁸ Significantly, Hákon ‘brá líndúk um hodduna ok gein yfir’ (‘wrapped a linen cloth around the handle and opened his mouth over it’) – a solution that satisfies neither side.⁵⁹ For Hákon, even inhaling the steam from the meat must be mitigated by the linen cloth to avoid touching the fat. Hákon thus avoids sensory contact with the sacrificial meat as much as possible, emphasising the meat’s abhorrent nature.

A similar practice is portrayed in Gerald of Wales’s *Topographica Hibernica*, composed around 1188 AD. In the northern part of Ulster in Ireland, kings were supposedly elected by means of ‘barbaro nimis et abominabili ritu’ (‘an excessively savage and abominable ritual’), which is elaborately and, according to scholarly consensus, quite imaginatively described.⁶⁰ The king has public sex with a white mare, which is then killed and boiled in water – and in the same water the king has a bath, drinks the bath water, and eats the horseflesh that is brought to him, sharing it with others. Like the saga characters

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 172.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 172.

⁶⁰ Giraldus Cambrensis, *Topographia Hiberniae*, Royal Irish Academy, Archive of Celtic-Latin Literature, Second (Developed and Expanded) On-Line Edition, compiled by Anthony Harvey and Angela Malthouse (Turnhout, 2011), p. 169. This translation from Jaan Puhvel, ‘Aspects of equine functionality’, in *Myth and law among the Indo-Europeans: studies in Indo-European comparative mythology*, ed. Jaan Puhvel (Berkeley and London, 1970), pp. 159-172, at p. 163. Alternately, see e.g. John J. O’Meara: ‘with a rite altogether outlandish and abominable’, in *The history and topography of Ireland (Topographia Hiberniae)* (Atlantic Highlands, 1951; rev. ed. 1982), p. 110.

who consume horse or human flesh (see below), this Irish king and his people are depicted in a shockingly grotesque light, suggesting that for a moral Christian author in medieval northern Europe, the pagan past was best remembered as disgusting and monstrous – for to be pagan was *taboo*.

The Christian taboo against consuming dog-flesh is attested in *Haraldssona saga*, after the Norwegian King Eysteinn II Haraldsson (1125-1157) is buried in a church and considered to be a saint. Many miracles come about at his grave until his enemies ‘steypði á leiðit hundssoði’ (‘poured upon the tomb a broth of dog’s flesh’).⁶¹ The implication is that the *hundssoð*, while not necessarily regarded as food, is subversive and has damaging effects. As a food consumed in the pagan past and associated with ritual sacrifice, dog-flesh is here given the power to disturb a holy Christian space and disrupt the power of its saint.⁶²

Unlike *brossakjöt*, the word *hundskjöt* does not appear in the Old Norse corpus and this is

⁶¹ *Haraldssona saga*, in *Heimskringla III*, ÍF XXVIII, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (Reykjavík, 1979), p. 345.

⁶² Re. dogs and sacrifice in pre-Christian Scandinavia, see e.g. Anne-Sofie Gräslund, ‘Dogs in graves – a question of symbolism?’, in *PECUS: Man and Animal in Antiquity*, Proceedings of the Conference at the Swedish Institute in Rome, September 9-12, 2002, ed. Barbro Santillo Frizell (Rome, 2004), pp. 167-176.

the sole appearance of *bundssöð*, demonstrating both the rarity and significance of this episode.⁶³

In the fourteenth-century *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, Árán is given a pagan burial by his friend Ásmundr.⁶⁴ The corpse is buried in a mound along with his companion animals: his horse (with saddle and bridle), hawk, and hound. Ásmundr is also entombed in the mound for three intriguing nights. On the first night, Árán kills and eats the hawk and hound; on the second night, he kills the horse, cuts it into pieces, and eats large chunks, so that blood streams onto his clothes; and on the third night, when Ásmundr became sleepy, Árán tries to eat him and tears off both his ears.⁶⁵

This episode highlights three meat-eating taboos in escalating order of sinfulness: consumption of a hawk and hound, followed by hippophagy, and then worst of all, anthropophagy. These were transgressions of exceptional import in Christian Iceland and it is no coincidence that provisions regarding meat taboos are included in the *Kristinna laga þáttur* ('Christian Laws Section') of *Grágás*; and similarly, that the provisions against horse

⁶³ It is difficult to generalise much about dog-meat from this single occurrence. *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog – A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, University of Copenhagen. Web. Accessed 30 September 2017.

⁶⁴ On dating this saga, see e.g. Rudolf Simek, 'Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana', in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano et al. (New York, 1993a), pp. 154-155.

⁶⁵ *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, FNS III, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Akureyri, 1954), p. 338.

and dog meat in the *Gulapingslög* appear in the first section of the text, which explicitly addresses Christianity's pre-eminence in Norway. Furthermore, given their similarity in structure and content, the prohibitions presented in *Grágás* are surely based on Leviticus and Deuteronomy, in which the meat of animals that do not 'chew the cud' or have uncloven hooves are deemed unclean, including horses, dogs, cats, foxes, and birds such as eagles, ravens, falcons, and hawks.⁶⁶ These rules were then adopted to local circumstances and there are exceptions in the Icelandic context: pigs, bears, walruses, and seals were all safe to eat and the Old Testament proscriptions did not always apply. Medieval Iceland (and Greenland and to a lesser extent, Norway) was a society living in relative poverty at the edge of extreme food scarcity; some of these animals would have to be consumed for their protein content or people would risk starvation (unlike the more fertile Middle East). Moreover, some of these taboo animals were seemingly worse to eat than others; the Norse system presents gradations rather than a simple forbidden/permitted dichotomy.

While *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* is probably a relatively late and certainly a highly fantastic text, it still reflects medieval Icelandic ideas about which meat was the worst to consume. It is informed by an understanding of which animals were

⁶⁶ Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14:3-21, New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (available online).

interred in the pagan period and suggests that only monsters would break these meat-taboos, contrasted with good and living Christian people. The text thus serves a didactic purpose: by providing titillating entertainment about the deep-seated horrors that surround what one might choose to eat, it also reminds its post-conversion audience about dietary prohibitions and proper moral conduct. The flesh of horses, dogs, and hawks is best avoided, for the person who consumes their meat is monstrous (like the cult animals discussed in chapter 1, section 4.2).

Characters who consume human flesh are rendered in a similar light, such as the evil *jötunn* Surtr in *Ketils saga hængs* and the *tröll* Brúsi in *Orms þáttr Stórolfssonar*, both of whom are described in exceptionally negative terms.⁶⁷ Meat-eating taboos against both horses and humans are at play in the relatively late *Sörla saga sterka*, when Sörli discovers the *jötunn* Skrímnir and a terrifying old *tröll*-woman in a large cave; the latter ‘stóð við þverpall einn ok var at brytja þar niðr mannakjöt ok hrossa ok var harðla stórvirk at þessu’

⁶⁷ In the *illiligr* (‘evil’) Surtr’s hut, Ketill hængr finds a number of carcasses in a great pit, including whales, polar bears, seals, walruses, and all kinds of other animals; moreover, ‘á botninum í hverri gröf fann hann mannakjöt saltat’ (‘at the bottom of every pit he found salted man-flesh’). *Ketils saga hængs*, FNS II, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Akureyri, 1954), p. 156. Brúsi is described as a ‘mikit tröll ok mannæta’ (‘a great troll and cannibal’); he similarly expresses his monstrosity throughout the tale. *Orms þáttr Stórolfssonar*, p. 407. On cannibals and cannibalism as political metaphors in medieval England, see Heather Blurton, *Cannibalism in High Medieval English Literature* (New York, 2007).

(‘stood at a cross-dais and was there chopping up human and horse flesh and was very hard at work at this’).⁶⁸ The infraction of meat-eating taboos – whether consumption of human flesh or that of a prohibited animal – are markers of monstrosity within fantastic genres.

Neither osteological evidence nor post-conversion laws and literature allow us to identify food taboos in pre-Christian Scandinavia.⁶⁹ Some clues might be provided by parallel sources, which suggest that horses and dogs were avoided unless absolutely necessary, but there is no evidence that they were taboo. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, when King Alfred fought the Danish Viking armies in 894 AD, ‘þa wæron hi mid meteleaste gewægde, 7 hæfdon mycelne dæl þæra horsa freten, 7 þa oþra wæron hungre acwolen’ (‘then they were weighed down with famine, and had consumed the greater portion of their horses, and the others had died from hunger’).⁷⁰ In Saxo Grammaticus’s *Gesta Danorum* – a more dramatic account, but also more historically dubious – when the legendary Danish King Hadingus campaigns against Sweden for five years, his soldiers

⁶⁸ *Sörla saga sterka*, p. 373. Re. dating, see e.g. Niels Lukman, ‘An Irish Source and Some Icelandic Fornaldarsögur’, *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 10 (1977), pp. 41-57; Jonathan D. M. Evans, ‘Sörla saga sterka’, in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano et al. (New York, 1993), pp. 637-638.

⁶⁹ As a cross-cultural universal, meat-eating taboos surely did exist in pre-Christian Scandinavia; re. osteological evidence, see e.g. Jennbert (2011), p. 145.

⁷⁰ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition: MS D*, ed. G. P. Cubbin, gen. ed. David Dumville and Simon Keynes, vol. 6 (Cambridge, 1983), p. 32 (this episode is also recounted in MSS A (892/893), B, and C).

consumed their provisions, became emaciated, assuaged their hunger on mushrooms, and eventually, ‘Tandem per summam necessitatis indigentiam commanducatis | equis ad postremum canina cadauera corporibus indulserunt. Sed neque humanis artubus uesci nephas habitum’ (‘At length, under dire pressure, they ate their horses, and finally spared their bodies with the carcasses of dogs. Even feeding on human limbs was not regarded as shocking’).⁷¹ The Danish army was evidently reluctant to eat their own horses, but this could well have been due to their pragmatic use in battle; horses also make a better meal than dog-carcasses, and human flesh was the final straw.

There is no evidence that horses and dogs were prohibited as meat prior to the conversion – indeed, as previously noted, archaeological evidence indicates otherwise – but they were probably avoided because of their functional importance for transportation, warfare, hunting, and/or companionship. These texts suggest that decisions about meat-consumption were largely pragmatic: horses were only consumed in extreme circumstances, followed by dogs, if absolutely necessary (because they provided less meat). What the literary evidence does indicate, however, is that when paganism and Christianity met in

⁷¹ Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum: The History of the Danes*, ed. Karsten Friis-Jensen, trans. Peter Fisher, vol. I (Oxford, 2015), pp. 58-59.

medieval Scandinavia, the consumption or prohibition of meat was a source of disagreement between two conflicting mentalities and a marker of ideological difference.

2. Bestiality

The eating of certain animals was not the only taboo maintaining the boundary between human and animal in medieval Scandinavia; there were also legal prohibitions against physical contact of another kind: bestiality. Chapter 1 described the types of emotionally-significant relationships that people had with livestock in the sagas, but medieval Scandinavian law-codes also suggest that intimate relations of a sexual nature did happen and that they were strictly forbidden.

2.1 Legal Proscriptions

According to the *Gulabingslög*, ‘Udaða verc ero off oc oll firiboðen at várr kna engi blandazt við bufe’ (‘All evil deeds are forbidden to us and therefore we may not have intercourse with livestock’).⁷² If a man is convicted of having sex with livestock, then he shall be castrated and forced to leave the king’s dominions as an *udaðamaðr* (‘malefactor’), never to return.⁷³

The animal’s owner must drive the beast into the sea; and if he keeps the animal, then he

⁷² *Den ældre Gulabings-Lov*, p. 18.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

must pay a fine of three marks to the bishop.⁷⁴ As with the eating of certain animals, bestiality was explicitly considered a crime against Christianity: ‘Sva fcal eiða þa alla vinna er feftir ero firi kriftins doms brot várt’ (‘So shall all those take oaths who are arrested for breaches against Christian judgement’).⁷⁵ Similar laws are included in the *Frostuþingslög*: a man who ‘blandaz við búfé oc fpillir fvá kriftni finni’ (‘has intercourse with livestock and thus spoils his Christianity’) will be castrated and sent into outlawry.⁷⁶ The taboo of bestiality is worse than eating forbidden meat, for starvation is not an excuse.

While there is no mention of bestiality in *Grágás*, prohibitions were still clearly in place in Iceland. In the sermon on the Annunciation in the *Íslensk Hómilíubók* (c. roughly 1200 AD), bestiality is included among the other grave sins: ‘Þær enar leiþelego laúnþurfa synþer es sumer menn gera. Þeir es eige þyrma kǫrlom heldr en konom. eþa misþyrma

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 18. The provision for killing the animal occurs in all medieval Scandinavian laws that mention bestiality; Kari Ellen Gade suggests that it was modeled on the biblical passages in Leviticus, which state that any man or woman who has sex with an animal should be slain and the animal put to death. Kari Ellen Gade, ‘Homosexuality and Rape of Males in Old Norse Law and Literature’, *SS* 58.2 (1986), pp. 124-141, at p. 127. Leviticus 20:15-16, New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (available online).

⁷⁵ *Den ældre Gulathing-Lov*, p. 18.

⁷⁶ *Den ældre Frostathing-Lov*, p. 123. In her study, Anne Irene Riisøy found no regulations on bestiality in either the *Borgarþingslög* or *Eiðsifjþingslög*. Anne Irene Riisøy, *Sexuality, Law and Legal Practice and the Reformation in Norway* (Leiden, 2009), p. 46. Kari Ellen Gade (1986), however, suggests that marginalia in the *Borgarþingslög* manuscripts indicate that certain sexual crimes – which do not refer to animals specifically – were understood by later readers to refer specifically to bestiality (p. 128). Bestiality was also considered abominable in medieval Sweden: see Gade (1986), p. 128, and for a thorough study, see Jan E. Almquist, *Tidelagsbrottet: en straffrätts-historisk studie*, Uppsala universitets årsskrift (Uppsala, 1926).

kycqvendom ferfeóttom’ (‘Those are hideous and secret sins which some men do, they who disrespect men rather than women, or violate four-footed beasts’).⁷⁷ The penitentials are similar: in 1178 AD, Bishop Þorlákr declared relatively lenient penance for crimes against nature: ‘ix. vetr eda .x. firir hordom þann er karlmenn eigozst uith. eda þann er menn eigó vith ferfætt kuikendi’ (‘nine or ten winters for that carnal sin which men do together, or that which men do with four-footed beasts’).⁷⁸

The sins of homosexuality and bestiality were evidently linked in medieval Christian thought and eventually, in later Christian law-codes, classified as ‘contrary to nature’.⁷⁹ As Preben Meulengracht Sørensen explains, ‘Combined breaches of taboo are common practice in insults and abuse. The one breach calls forth the other, because the different taboos relate to a common norm, and thus assert a contrast to the same thing: what is normal and permitted’.⁸⁰ Thus in the *Gulapingslög*, it is considered *fullréttisorð* (‘an insult requiring full compensation’) to say that a man has borne a child, been *sannsorðinn* (‘truly sexually

⁷⁷ *Homiliu-bók: isländska homilier efter en handskrift från tolfte århundradet*, ed. Theodor Wisén (Lund, 1872), p. 137.

⁷⁸ *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, vol. I, no. 43, ed. Jón Sigurðsson (Copenhagen, 1857-76), pp. 240-241.

⁷⁹ Riisøy (2009), p. 50, and references therein. Bestiality was also a crime of increasing severity during the thirteenth century in continental Europe (Salisbury 1994; repr. 2011, p. 74).

⁸⁰ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, trans. Joan Turville-Petre (Odense, 1983), p. 26.

penetrated'), or to compare him with a mare, a bitch, a whore, or any breeding (i.e. female) animal.⁸¹ In the *Frostubingslög*, meanwhile, the penalty is full compensation if a man compares another to any female animal, but only half compensation if compared to a bull, stallion, or other male animal.⁸²

2.2 Accusations and Insults

The prohibited activities of bestiality and homosexuality also meet in many of the *níð* ('shame') insults used in Old Norse literature, which combine both sex with animals and, most frequently, the passive role in anal intercourse.⁸³ These verbal accusations between men are used to humiliate one another and can take a variety of guises.⁸⁴ In *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa*, Þórðr accuses Björn of animal midwifery: clutching a calf beneath a cow's dung-encrusted tail, for which he must pay a fine of one hundred silver coins.⁸⁵ Most of these animal-related sexual insults include horses, perhaps reflecting a social reality; as

⁸¹ *Den ældre Gulathings-Lov*, p. 70.

⁸² *Den ældre Frostathings-Lov*, p. 225.

⁸³ The man who plays the passive role is designated as *stroðinn* or *sorðit*; the other partner performs the action of *streða* or *serða*.

⁸⁴ See further Meulengracht Sørensen (1983).

⁸⁵ *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa*, p. 153. As demonstrated by Ursula Dronke, the mere suggestion of male midwifery to an animal here implies bestiality. Ursula Dronke, 'Sem jarlar forðum: The Influence of *Ríghula* on Two Saga-Episodes', in *Speculum Norrænum: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, ed. Ursula Dronke et al. (Odense, 1981), pp. 56-72, at p. 71. See further Alison Finlay, 'Monstrous allegations: an exchange of *yki* in *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa*', *Alvíssmál* 10 (2001), pp. 21-44.

Jenny Jochens suggests, references to sex acts between men and animals are ‘undoubtedly grounded in experience’.⁸⁶

In *Sneglu-Halla þátttr*, Halli composes a *níðvísa* (‘slandrous verse’) about his rival poet Þjóðólfr and the horse he is giving to king Haraldr Sigurðarson, which will supposedly penetrate Haraldr’s anus:

Sýr es ávallt
hefr saurugt allt
hestr Þjóðólfs erðr,
hann es dróttinserðr.⁸⁷

(Always a sow
Þjóðólfr’s horse has
an entirely filthy cock
he is a lordly fucker.)

The *hestreðr* (‘horse-penis’) insult is similarly used in a defamatory *lausavísa* stanza by King

Magnus góði to insult the masculinity of Haraldr Sigurðsson’s father:

gerði eigi sá
garð of hestreðr,
sem Sigurðr sýr;

⁸⁶ Jenny Jochens, ‘Old Norse Sexuality: Men, Women, and Beasts’, in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality* (New York and London, 1996a), pp. 369–400, at pp. 369–370. On medieval bestiality, see further Joyce E. Salisbury, ‘Bestiality in the Middle Ages’, in *Sex in the Middle Ages*, ed. Joyce E. Salisbury (New York and London, 1991), pp. 173–186. On the phenomenon of bestiality more broadly, see Midas Dekkers, *Dearest Pet: On Bestiality*, trans. Paul Vincent (London, 2000).

⁸⁷ *Sneglu-Halla þátttr*, in *Eyfirðinga sögur*, ÍF IX, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík, 1956), pp. 294–295.

sá vas þinn faðir!⁸⁸

(he [Magnus's father] never put
a fence around horse-phallos
like Sigurðr sýr ('sow');
he was your father!)

For a man to be nicknamed after a female pig is to simultaneously invite accusations of both passive homosexuality and bestiality; the male horse is the active partner in the implied sexual exchange.⁸⁹ Similar insults also occur in eddic heroic verse (on Loki's zoophilia, see chapter 6, section 3.1): in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, for example, when Sinfjötli accuses Guðmundr of siring nine wolves, he retorts that Sinfjötli was the bride of the famous horse Grani and that he himself has ridden Sinfjötli to exhaustion.⁹⁰ The shame of the second insult solely lies with the man who assumes the passive position of the mare, for Guðmundr seems to take pride in his alleged sexual dominance (like the stallion Grani).

⁸⁸ Magnús inn góði Ólafsson, Lausavísur 1', ed. Kari Ellen Gade, in *Skaldic Poetry from the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, Vol. II: Poetry from the Kings' Sagas, Part 2: From c. 1035 to c. 1300 (Brepols, 2009), pp. 5-6.

⁸⁹ Peterson (2015) suggests that the implication of a sow that encloses a penis is 'like a shrine (or perhaps a metaphor is meant which escapes me) ... an obvious insult against his father's masculinity, and it suggests that he treated phalli [sic] in a homosexual way' (p. 119). The fence is probably a metaphor for a bodily orifice: perhaps the mouth, though there is no parallel evidence for oral activity, so presumably the anal sphincter.

⁹⁰ *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, p. 254; see further e.g. *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, in *Eddukvæði II: Hetjukvæði*, ÍF, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík, 2014), p. 264.

Association with the active male animal could also be used as a shaming insult, although it is less common. In *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Skarpheðinn slanders Þorkell hákr ('bully') by suggesting that he fails to ride to the Althing or participate in lawsuits because he is better-suited to dairy work at his own farm *í fásinninu* ('in isolation'), already suggesting deviant activity with his livestock.⁹¹ Skarpheðinn's taunting then becomes increasingly explicit: 'Er þér ok skyldara at stanga ór tǫnnum þér razgarnarendann merarinnar, er þú ázt' ('You should also pick from your teeth the bits of mare's ass, which you ate').⁹² The insinuation, however, is not that Þorkell was the passive animal who was penetrated but rather that he performed anilingus on the mare's (i.e. the passive partner's) anus – a common precursor to active homosexual engagement.⁹³ The taboo of the insult is thus not a matter of positional submission, but rather interspecies sexual activity. Animals are used as metaphoric substitutions in accusations of *níð* because the bestial factor

⁹¹ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 305.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 305.

⁹³ An alternate interpretation is that Þorkell engages in sloppy coprophagy – see Miller (2014), p. 105.

increases the shame through insinuations of social exclusion and a lack of community integration, the lack of a wife and sexual desirability, and a preference for perversion.⁹⁴

3. Conclusion

Animals were ‘good for’ many things in medieval Scandinavia: some were ‘good to eat’ and prior to the Christian conversion, ‘good to sacrifice’; and following the conversion, those that were ‘good to live with’ became ‘good to prohibit’; and all animals have always been ‘good to think with’. But the sources clearly indicate that no animal was ‘good to have sex with’. Emotional intimacy with animals was socially acceptable, perhaps even encouraged, but sexual intimacy was strictly prohibited; and while medieval Scandinavians were only forbidden to eat certain animals, when it came to sex, all animals were taboo.

Yet there must have been fantasy – and on occasion, reality – of sex with animals, and this suppressed desire formed a rich tradition of insults. Women are not mentioned in the legislation and no insults of this kind are recorded with female targets, suggesting that zoophilia was male-specific. Both consumption of meat and sexual intercourse involve the merging of bodies (either through incorporation or penetration) and this physical bonding

⁹⁴ See further e.g. *Fóstbræðra saga*, in *Vestfirðinga sögur*, ÍF VI, ed. Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík, 1943), p. 259; *Olkofra þátr*, in *Austfirðinga sögur*, ÍF XI, ed. Jón Jóhannesson (Reykjavík, 1950), pp. 91-92, 94.

was strictly regulated by Christian laws and expressed in literature through disgust and insult, enforcing temporal demarcation between animal and human. Which animals were taboo to eat in pre-Christian Scandinavia – and the extent to which bestiality was regulated – remains invitingly unknown.

Chapter Three: Animals in Dreams

In *Þorsteins þáttur uxafóts*, a child of exceptional size and abilities named Þorsteinn often visits his uncle's home, Krossavík. One day he enters the main room and witnesses his grandfather, Geitir, sitting on a cross-bench murmuring into his cloak. Þorsteinn rushes into the room and falls onto the floor. Geitir bursts into laughter and Þorsteinn wants to know what is so amusing. Geitir responds:

Þat má ek segja þér. Þá er þú komt í stofuna, fylgdi þér einn hvítabjarnarhúnn ok rann fyrir innar á gólfít. En er hann sá mik, nam hann staðar, en þú fórt heldr geustr, ok fell þú um húninn, ok þat er ætlan mín, at þú sér eigi son Krumms né Þórgunnar, heldr mantu stærri ættar.¹

(That I can tell you. When you came into the sitting-room, a polar bear cub followed you and ran ahead into the room. But when he saw me, he stopped, and you were rushing rather hastily and you fell over the cub, and it is my belief, that you are not the son of Krummr and Þórgunna, rather you must be of a greater family.)

When Þorsteinn enters the room, Geitir is clearly in a trance-like state, his murmuring into his cloak is suggestive of soothsaying, and his vision of the polar bear indicates a certain level of engagement with the supernatural through which he is able to see what is hidden

¹ *Þorsteins þáttur uxafóts*, in *Harðar saga*, ÍF XIII, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (Reykjavík, 1991), p. 350.

to others and acquire secret information.² Although Geitir is not sleeping, his connection to the otherworld and consequent premonition is akin to a dream-like state. The polar bear cub is seen to *fylgja* ('follow') Þorsteinn; while not explicitly named as such, the *hvítabjarnarhúinn* ('polar bear cub') must represent Þorsteinn's *fylgja* (pl. *fylgjur*), a noun most commonly translated as 'fetch': the form that most dream-animals take in the medieval Icelandic sagas.

Dreams are common and important elements in Old Norse literature: they foretell future events, function as plot devices, and reveal supernatural ideas and beliefs held in medieval Iceland. According to Gabriel Turville-Petre, 'Among no people in Europe is the cult of dreams so deeply rooted. In no literature are dream-symbols more sophisticated, nor their interpretation more subtle and intricate'.³ In a Jungian sense, the symbols in these

² Geitir *þuldi í feld sinn* ('murmured or muttered or mumbled into his cloak') (ibid., p. 350). For similar textual examples, see fn. 1 on p. 350. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson (1978) demonstrates that 'There can be no doubt here about Geitir's clairvoyance', and drawing on comparative evidence with Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók* and *Geirmundar þáttr*, he shows that 'It was a common practice with Icelandic poets and prophets in heathen times to pull a cloak over their heads when they wanted peace to cultivate their skills, opening their minds to the source of poetry and supernatural knowledge' (p. 113 and references therein).

³ Gabriel Turville-Petre, 'Dreams in Icelandic Tradition', *Folklore* 69.2 (1958), p. 93. Dreams are ubiquitous in saga literature: in 1890, Wilhelm Henzen estimated that there are 250 dreams recorded in the Icelandic sagas; in 1935, Georgia D. Kelchner wrote that approximately 530 dream references can be found; and in 1962, Peter Hallberg suggested that, on average, there are three or four dreams per saga. Wilhelm Henzen, *Über die Träume in der altnordischen Sagalitteratur* (Leipzig, 1890), p. 75; Georgia D. Kelchner, *Dreams in Old Norse*

dreams ‘imply something more than [their] obvious and immediate meaning’.⁴ Various species of animals inhabit the dreams of Old Norse literature; their form, function, meaning, and symbolic significance will be the focus of this chapter. It will outline in detail the narrative functions of dream-animals as *fylgjur*, the types of texts they appear in, and which animal species appear in dreams. Analysis focuses on the following questions: which animal species are associated with different types of human characters? How do animal *fylgjur* reflect medieval Scandinavian attitudes towards and ideas about animals? And from an anthropological perspective, are they indicative of actual, historical, and possibly totemic, cultural belief? I will argue that animals inhabit the dreams of various saga characters in a complex manner that reveals a close psychological connection and metaphorical link between humans and their animal counterparts – as both a literary motif in the sagas and as a facet of folkloric belief in the culture that produced them. This chapter will also consider

Literature and their Affinities in Folklore (London, 1935), p. 3; Peter Hallberg, *The Icelandic Saga*, trans. Paul Schach (Lincoln, 1962), p. 81.

⁴ Carl G. Jung, ‘Approaching the Unconscious’, in *Man and His Symbols*, ed. Carl G. Jung (New York, 1968), pp. 3-94, at p. 4.

potential points of origin for this varied symbolism in both quotidian experience and learned material, especially continental bestiaries and Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*.⁵

Bestiaries – compendiums of beasts, both real and imagined, as well as plants and stones – provided an important natural history, and descriptions were accompanied by illustrations and moral lessons. The most direct influence on medieval bestiaries is the *Physiologus*, composed in Alexandria by an unknown Greek author in the second century AD. Also significant was the decidedly influential *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville.⁶ The bestiary tradition survived in Iceland via the Icelandic *Physiologus*, of which two fragments are extant; both date to approximately 1200 AD.⁷ Halldór Hermannsson condescendingly remarks that ‘The literary value of the *Physiologus* is nil, and its scientific importance minimal’, but also notes that ‘it played a great part in the Middle Ages and its effects may be found amongst us even to-day’.⁸ The Icelandic *Physiologus* is extremely fragmentary, and

⁵ For an alternative approach, see William Friesen, ‘Family Resemblances: Textual Sources of Animal *fylgjur* in Icelandic Saga’, *SS* 87.2 (2015), pp. 255-280.

⁶ According to Hassig (1995), this seventh-century text ‘is second in importance only to the *Physiologus* in its shaping of the overall character of the medieval bestiaries’ (p. 6).

⁷ While these manuscripts can be traced to the Westfjords, there is no evidence that this is where they originated, and it is impossible to localise them – though Halldór Hermannsson argues that the Latin text that formed the basis for the Icelandic version originated in England. Halldór Hermannsson, ‘Introduction’, in *The Icelandic Physiologus*, *Islandica* XXVII (Ithaca, 1938), pp. 1-15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6. Most of the animals in the Icelandic *Physiologus* do not appear in the sagas, but the text was definitely known in Iceland and its continental ideology is reflected in Icelandic animal symbolism.

Isidore's *Etymologies*, widely known across Europe, also offers useful background for the continental ideas about animals explored in this chapter.

1. Animal *fylgjur*

Fylgjur may appear in dreams as either animals or women. In her definitive study, Else Mundal demonstrates that the two motifs are mutually exclusive and completely different; this chapter will solely focus on theriomorphic *fylgjur* and other dream-animals.⁹ Animal *fylgjur* usually appear in two of the traditionally defined genres of Old Norse literature:

Íslendingasögur and *fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*; as a literary motif, they operate in a similar manner across genres (dream-animals of undefined form also frequent various eddic poems, *þættir*, and *konungasögur*).¹⁰ While they may be somewhat more imaginatively deployed in

⁹ Else Mundal, *Fylgjemotiva i Norrøn Litteratur* (Oslo, 1974), p. 11. Women *fylgjur* act as helpful guardian spirits that protect individuals and their families (pp. 63-106). Clive Tolley argues against Mundal's discussion of women *fylgjur*; he notes that this category 'rests on somewhat insecure foundations' because her discussion includes supernatural beings that are called by various other designations, e.g. *dísir*, and there are only two or three real examples of female *fylgjur*. Clive Tolley, *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic*, vol. 1 (Helsinki, 2009), pp. 226-229. Zuzana Stankovitsová similarly argues that 'there are comparably few indications for specifically female *fylgjur*, and none of them has proven unproblematic. When giving the examples a closer look, certain characteristics emerge that connect them to other paranormal or otherworldly female beings'. Zuzana Stankovitsová, "Eru þetta mannaþylgjur": A Re-Examination of *fylgjur* in Old Norse Literature, MA Thesis, Háskóli Íslands, 2015, p. 37.

¹⁰ On the differences between dreams in the *Íslendingasögur* and the *Eddafornaldarsögur* in general, see e.g. Lars Lönnroth, 'Dreams in the Sagas', *SS* 74.4 (2002), pp. 455-464, especially pp. 456-457. Regarding animals specifically, the 'threatening beast' motif is purportedly much more common in the *Eddafornaldarsögur*, though the evidence is insufficient: reference is only made to Georgia Kelchner's 'survey' (in truth the 'Texts

the more fantastic *fornaldarsögur* than the more realistic *Íslendingasögur*, they still seem to represent the same symbolic worldview and role in cultural memory and belief.¹¹

There is some scholarly disagreement as to how animal ‘fetches’ should be defined and described. Clive Tolley suggests that the animal *fylgja* ‘was a sort of “mirror” ... of the person it belonged to’; the concept of a ‘doppelgänger’ is applied by Rudolf Simek and Mundal; Catharina Raudvere writes that ‘the animal *fylgja* operates as a mirror image of its possessor’.¹² They are all correct to note a resemblance between the animal *fylgja* and its human counterpart, but the similarity is not physical. Rather, animal *fylgjur* act as symbolic images that point towards someone’s inner qualities and defining characteristics; as a metaphor, animal *fylgjur* thus reveal much about the people they follow. The identities of a person and their animal *fylgja* are interlinked: what animal *fylgjur* do in dreams, their human counterparts do in the saga’s reality – though this principle is not absolute – and the death of someone’s animal *fylgja* in a dream always implies that person’s impending

and Translations’ of the passages under discussion) in *Dreams in Old Norse Literature and Their Affinities in Folklore* (1935), which is far from complete (something it never claims to be).

¹¹ It is tempting to follow the conventions of genre and approach animal *fylgjur* in the *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur* separately, but I concur with Mundal’s (1974) position: ideas about animals and animal *fylgjur* do not follow generic distinctions so clearly (p. 31).

¹² Tolley (2009), p. 242; Rudolf Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology* (Cambridge, 1993b), p. 96; Mundal (1974), p. 11; Catharina Raudvere, ‘Popular Religion in the Viking Age’, in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink in collaboration with Neil Price (Oxford, 2008), pp. 235–243, at p. 239.

demise. Animal *fylgjur* thus foretell the future and figure an individual's fate.¹³ They consistently appear in dreams that are interpreted by people who are considered to be particularly wise. If an individual sees their own animal *fylgja* in a waking state, during a vision, it is considered an omen of death in the reality of the narrative.

Mundal accurately describes an animal *fylgja* as an individual's 'alter ego'.¹⁴ This is the correct sense of the concept: Latin *alter ego*, 'the other I'. Raudvere usefully terms an animal *fylgja* as 'a constant symbolic characterization' and Simek rightly points out that animal *fylgjur* are 'bound by a belief in destiny'.¹⁵ In addition to the verb *fylgja* ('to follow'), the word is also probably connected to *fulga* ('caul') and *fylgja* ('afterbirth').¹⁶ Analysing their potential significance in a pre-Christian context, Neil Price consequently suggests 'that these beings may have been seen as a sort of detached aspect of a human'.¹⁷ He further links *fylgjur* to 'the Viking Age Norse understanding of reality, [in which] human beings

¹³ The sagas indicate a strong belief in the prophetic power of dreams; what happens in a dream always unfolds in the saga's reality. Thus when a dream-woman in *Laxdæla saga* asks Óláfr pái if he is asleep, he says that he is awake, but then she responds 'Þér er svefn, en þó mun fyrir hitt ganga' ('You are asleep, but it will still go the same way'). *Laxdæla saga*, ÍF V, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavík, 1934), p. 84. Similarly, in Þormóður Kolbrúnaskáld's dream in *Fóstbræðra saga*, Þorbjörg kolbrún tells him that even though he is asleep, that which is conveyed to him will come to pass when he is awake. Like nature and culture, animal and human, the boundaries between dream and reality are challenged (p. 174).

¹⁴ Else Mundal, 'Fylgja', in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (New York, 1993), pp. 624-625, at p. 625.

¹⁵ Raudvere (2008), p. 239; Simek (1993b), p. 96.

¹⁶ Raudvere (2008), p. 239; Simek (1993b), p. 96.

¹⁷ Neil S. Price, *The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* (Uppsala, 2002), p. 59.

also possessed dimensions beyond the physical body'.¹⁸ However enticing the proposition, there is no real evidence for these latter claims in relation to the animal *fylgjur* that appear in literary dreams and visions in post-conversion sources, nor for Gabriel Turville-Petre's assertion that 'in origin, they were part of [a person]'.¹⁹ What is clear from the textual evidence is that saga characters and their animal *fylgjur* are interconnected in a complex manner with shared characteristics and destinies.

2. Animal *bugir*

Significantly, there are instances where dream-animals are referred to as *bugir* rather than *fylgjur*. When Atli dreams of a vixen and eighteen wolves in *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, he knows with certainty that they are *manna bugir*.²⁰ This is the plural form of *bugr*, which Richard Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon first define as '*mind*, with the notion of *thought*'.²¹ Price also tentatively suggests 'soul' and 'essence' as possible definitions; Tolley includes 'intention' as part of the word's basic meaning; and Judy Quinn has recently built on this suggestion and demonstrated that *bugr* is 'a human capacity', involving 'intense

¹⁸ Price (2002), p. 59.

¹⁹ Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (New York, 1964), p. 228.

²⁰ *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, in *Vestfirðinga sögur*, ÍF VI, ed. Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík, 1943), p. 350.

²¹ *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 179.

reactions’, and that the full range of the word involves ‘states of mind ... where cogitation can potentially turn into motivation, with action following’.²² Thus ‘attitude’ is a better general definition than ‘thought’.²³ Regarding its relationship to *fylgjur*, Turville-Petre writes that *bugr* ‘is occasionally used in a concrete sense, synonymous with *fylgja*. Wolves and other vicious beasts seen in dreams are said to be *manna bugir* (“minds” of men)’.²⁴ Yet in *Örvar-Odds saga*, Oddr is said to have a polar bear *fylgja*, but to be *úlfbugr* (‘wolfishly-minded’) towards Guðmundr and Sigurðr.²⁵ While it is possible that the two concepts were synonymous or similar in meaning, it is more likely that the use of *bugir* either represents a misinterpretation of the underlying mythical belief or a later literary invention.

Of the sagas with dream-animals that represent human characters, the three which refer to *bugir* were probably the last to be composed: *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* between 1300 and 1350, *Þórðar saga breðu* in 1350, and *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja* sometime during the

²² Price (2002), p. 60; Tolley (2009), p. 186; Judy Quinn, ‘The “Wind of the Giantess”: Snorri Sturluson, Rudolf Meissner, and the Interpretation of Mythological Kennings along Taxonomic Lines’, *VMS* 8 (2012), pp. 207-259, at pp. 230-231.

²³ Quinn (2012), p. 212.

²⁴ Turville-Petre (1964), p. 229.

²⁵ Similarly, King Atli is said to have an *úlfbugr* (‘wolf-mind’) in *Völsunga saga* (p. 65).

fourteenth century.²⁶ As Vésteinn Ólason argues about sagas composed around 1300 and afterwards, ‘elements of free invention are in all likelihood more extensively and more consciously deployed’.²⁷ Fourteenth-century saga authors were creative in their elaboration of these episodes; they do not necessarily reflect cultural memory of actual belief in animal *bugir* in dreams. Tolley’s research supports this claim. Regarding the episode in *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, he writes:

It seems clear that a basic concept of a wandering *bugr* ... underlies the account, but the author, writing in the Christian era, may have wished to ambiguate this reference in such a way that *bugr* – whose basic sense, after all, is “mind, thought” – can be interpreted as “intention”, realized in a physical form, *but only in a dream*, allowing for an interpretation by which the *bugir* (whether souls or minds) do not literally wander.²⁸

The concepts of *bugir* and *fylgjur* are related but separate: *bugir* in animal form represent the thoughts and intentions of people as suspected by the dreamer; animal *fylgjur* represent actual human beings. This difference is made evident in *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*, which

²⁶ Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson, ‘Formáli’, in *Vestfirðinga sögur*, ÍF VI (Reykjavík, 1943), p. XL; Jóhannes Halldórsson, ‘Formáli’, in *Kjalnesinga saga*, ÍF XIV (Reykjavík, 1959), p. XL; Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, ‘Formáli’, in *Harðar saga*, ÍF XIII (Reykjavík, 1991), pp. VIII-IX. ÍF dating can be problematic and unreliable, but general trends can still be deduced. For a complete list of ÍF dates for the *Íslendingasögur*, see Vésteinn Ólason, ‘Family Sagas’, in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford, 2005), pp. 101-118, at pp. 114-115.

²⁷ Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age: Narration and Representation in the Sagas of the Icelanders*, trans. Andrew Wawn (Reykjavík, 1998), p. 21.

²⁸ Tolley (2009), p. 191.

was probably composed a century earlier (1215-1230 AD).²⁹ When Björn Arngelsson visits Þorbjörg, he sleeps poorly and tells Þorbjörg about a dream in which six men attack him. Þorbjörg interprets the dream as follows: ‘manna fylgjur eru þat, er illan hug hafa á þér’ (‘those are men’s fetches, which have evil thoughts towards you’).³⁰ While they are not said to be animals that appear in the dream, the concepts of *fylgjur* and *hugir* are here differentiated: *fylgjur* are the beings that are real in the dream, whereas *hugir* are the thoughts and intentions that they bear towards the dreamer.

This distinction is similarly expressed in *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*. When the heroic outlaw Hörðr Grímkelsson departs from Hólm with eighty men to slay his brother-in-law, Indriði, Hörðr’s sister Þorbjörg dreams of eighty fire-breathing wolves running towards the farm, led by a polar bear. Indriði states ‘þat vera hugi Hólmverja til sín’ (‘that it was the minds of the people of Hólm directed against him’).³¹ Þorbjörg, however, believes ‘at þeir mundu vera sjálfir ok koma þar brátt’ (‘that they would be their [actual] selves and they would come there soon’).³² While the *hugir* of the people from Hólm are certainly wolfish in intent, Þorbjörg’s interpretation that these animals represent actual people

²⁹ Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, ‘Formáli’, in *Borgfirðinga sögur*, ÍF III (Reykjavík, 1938), p. XC.

³⁰ *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa*, p. 177.

³¹ *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, p. 77.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 77.

proves more accurate. Her perspective aligns the dream-animals with the narrative function of *fylgjur*, who are not only representative of people's thoughts and intentions, but also of people themselves. This division in fourteenth-century Icelandic writing, however, is not always clear. When Þórðr dreams that a number of wolves attack and try to kill him in *Þórðar saga breðu*, Eiðr interprets the dream and states that 'þetta eru mannahugir illir til þín' ('these are the evil minds of men [conspiring] against you').³³ In the ensuing events, a complicated dispute arises between Þórðr and two troublesome men named Jón and Auðólftr, which ends in a fight and both men die as portended in the dream. These *hugir* thus do not only represent people's thoughts, intentions, or attitudes; they are indicative of actual people, and are consequently better understood as having been assimilated to animal *fylgjur*. Similarly, later in the saga, before being attacked by Özurr and his allies, Þórðr dreams that eighteen wolves attack him and his companions and Kálfr predicts that they are *mannahugir*.³⁴ While the intentions of Þórðr's enemies are made manifest in the ensuing attack, they are also indicative of actual living people, problematising any distinction between animal *fylgjur* and *hugir* in fourteenth century saga literature.

³³ *Þórðar saga breðu*, in *Kjalnesinga saga*, ÍF XIV, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson (Reykjavík, 1959), p. 179.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 201-202.

3. Species Classification

Whether dream-animals are said to be *fylgjur*, *hugir*, or their category is unspecified (as is the case in eddic poetry), the connection between different animals and specific people is not random. Human characters that are linked with the same dream-animal species have common features, which reveal the symbolic and metaphorical ways in which a wide variety of animal species were viewed in the medieval North. This suggestion has been made before: in Turville-Petre's estimation, 'The form which a man's animal fetch takes is determined by his character, or rather by the estimate which those who see it make of his character'.³⁵ He further suggests that bear *fylgjur* are linked to brave and noble men, wolves with enemies plotting an attack, and that foxes represent those who are particularly sly and vicious.³⁶ Similarly, Raudvere posits that 'strength, evil-mindedness, or social status were visualized in the image of a bear, a wolf, or an eagle'.³⁷ Mundal connects strong and powerful men with bear or bull *fylgjur*, one who is sly with a fox, peacefulness with a goat, and the high social status of *fornaldarsögur* kings with a lion or leopard.³⁸ All of these

³⁵ Turville-Petre (1964), p. 229.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 229.

³⁷ Raudvere (2008), p. 239.

³⁸ Mundal (1993), pp. 624-625.

associations are generally valid; in what follows I focus on and elaborate the full range of animal species that appear in dreams in the Old Norse literary corpus.

The Aristotelean and Platonic notion of the *scala naturae* ('Great Chain of Being'), further developed in the Middle Ages, details a hierarchical structure of categories – and categories within categories – that can be applied to all life and matter.³⁹ While this idea might not be demonstrably present in medieval Iceland, it still provides a useful conceptual framework. Saga authors organised different species of dream-animals into groups, each of which contained a hierarchy: (i) wild animals, (ii) domestic animals, (iii) birds, and (iv) exotic animals (i.e. of romance and fantasy). In any given category, the animals that are the biggest and strongest and noblest signify the hero, as is the case with polar bears, oxen, eagles and hawks, and lions and leopards. However, smaller animals within each schema – or those that were thought to be the most predatory and meddlesome – became associated with characters of a lower social status. These signifying systems can be mapped onto one another, and there was a logic to which one was selected: while the classical, earlier, and more naturalistic *Íslendingasögur* draw upon domestic animal

³⁹ See e.g. Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, 1936), and references therein.

fylgjur, a far wider variety of sagas deploy wild animals and birds; and only the most fantastic and romantic sagas use animals that did not actually exist in medieval Scandinavia – or exist at all.

4. Wild Dream-Animals

4.1 Bears

Polar bears appear frequently in saga literature (see chapter 4, section 1.1), and it is *hvítabjarnar*, not *bjarnar* of indistinct species, which dominate the Ursidae family in the dreams of saga literature. Bear *fylgjur* repeatedly represent people who are particularly strong and powerful, brave and noble. When young Þorsteinn is born in *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts*, he is so big that people think they have never seen a larger new-born.⁴⁰ Geitir, Þorsteinn's grandfather, has a premonition that the boy will not grow to be small and weak; and when Krummr Vémundarson finds the infant exposed in the forest, Þorsteinn is described as large and promising. Krummr fosters the boy with his wife Þórgunna and the child's precocious qualities are further detailed.⁴¹ As the *þáttr* progresses, Geitir's predictions prove correct, and Þorsteinn demonstrates his bravery and courage through various feats of

⁴⁰ *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts*, p. 348.

⁴¹ 'Þorsteinn gerðist bæði mikill ok sterkr ok viðleitinn um allar íþróttir' ('Þorsteinn grew both big and strong and keen to accomplish all feats'); he is so strong that by age seven, he is supposedly the equal of grown men in strength (ibid., pp. 349-350).

strength.⁴² Joseph Harris categorises *Þorsteins þáttur úxafóts* as one of the *fornaldarþættir*, which he deems ‘full but short “biographies” comparable to *fornaldar sögur* such as *Örvar-Odds saga*’.⁴³ The two protagonists, Þorsteinn and Oddr, have much in common, including the same animal *fylgja* species.

When Oddr wishes to sail with his kinsmen Guðmundr and Sigurðr, he is denied passage. They lie at anchor for a fortnight, waiting for a fair wind, and one night Guðmundr dreams that a fierce and angry-looking polar bear lay in a ring around the island with its tail meeting its head. Sigurðr considers the dream to be easy to interpret: ‘þat er fylgja Odds, frænda okkar, ok mun hann vera okkr reiðr. Ok mun þat vera úlfhugr sá, sem þér þótti, at dýrit hefði á okkr’ (‘that is the fetch of Oddr, our kinsman, and he is angry with us. And that must be the wolfish mind, as you thought, that the animal has towards us’).⁴⁴ Sigurðr does not think the weather will change unless Oddr joins them, so they invite him on their voyage and offer him his own ship. Unlike other textual examples, the

⁴² At age ten, Oddr slays a group of twelve evil *jarðbúar* (‘earth-dwellers’); at age twelve, he travels to Norway and is a match for the strongest men in all the games; and by age seventeen, he fights and defeats a family of vicious trolls, including a mother who is ‘loðin öll utan sem grábjörn’ (‘as hairy all over as a grey bear’) (ibid., p. 359). At the tale’s end (before killing another related family of huge trolls), Þorsteinn slays a large and monstrous sacrificial bull by pulling off its hind leg, from which he is given the nickname *úxafot* (‘bull’s-leg’) (p. 368).

⁴³ Joseph Harris, ‘Þættir’, in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, vol. 12 (New York, 1989), p. 3.

⁴⁴ *Örvar-Odds saga*, FNS II, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Akureyri, 1954), p. 213.

fylgja-motif is here connected with supernatural power: the winds will not change unless Oddr is granted his request, suggesting further literary invention. The depiction of the bear encircling the island probably echoes the mythological world-serpent Jörmungandr that surrounds Miðgarðr, biting its own tail.⁴⁵ The fact that Oddr's *fylgja* is a polar bear is in keeping with the remarkable attributes of other characters with the same animal counterpart.⁴⁶

Human characters represented by polar bears in dreams are continually represented in the same light. In *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, the heroic outlaw Hörðr Grímkelsson is seen as a polar bear, separating him from the wolf pack of followers that accompany him.⁴⁷ In *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, Queen Ingigerðr first dreams of a red-cheeked polar bear that follows the lion, King Hrólfr Gautreksson, in front of a pack of wolves (on the red cheeks, see below). She knows that the bear is the *fylgja* of a champion or prince who accompanies

⁴⁵ See e.g. *Gylfaginning*, in *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, Snorri Sturluson, ed. Anthony Faulkes, 2nd edn (London, 2005; repr. 2011), p. 27.

⁴⁶ When Oddr is born, the women who cared for him thought they had never seen an equally fine baby. As a child, he is said to be more promising in appearance than most grown men, and none could match him at sports. Oddr lives a long and heroic life in which he fights all manner of vikings, berserks, trolls, giants, and other supernatural beings throughout his travels. *Örvar-Odds saga*, pp. 201-363.

⁴⁷ Harðar's development throughout his youth provides an apt example: after he is born, he quickly grows to be big and promising; at age twelve, he is said to be the equal of the strongest men in the region; and by age fifteen, he is a whole head higher than most other men and is exceptionally strong and endowed with every type of skill. *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, pp. 16, 32.

the king because ‘björninn er sterkr, ok merkir hann sterka fylgd’ (the bear is strong, and he marks a great companion’); she thus anticipates that a famous king will soon visit, and notes that the bear was bigger and stronger than any other.⁴⁸ She is correct: the polar bear represents Ingjaldr, Hrólfr’s heroic foster-brother; and in her next dream, she anticipates that the second polar bear symbolises another great man, either a king or a king’s son (this being the strong, handsome, and valiant Ásmundr, the son of King Óláfr of Scotland and Hrólfr’s other foster-brother).

Saga characters with bear *fylgjur* of undefined species, rather than polar bear *fylgjur* specifically, include the noble and heroic Gunnarr Hámundarsson in *Brennu-Njáls saga*. After Gunnarr departs from Høskuldsstaðir in disguise, Høskuldr dreams of a large bear leaving his home followed by two cubs. Høskuldr asks the members of his household what they noticed about the tall man who had been there previously, and one man answers that he had gold lace and red cloth protruding from under his sleeve and a gold ring on his right hand. From this information, and from the dream-bear’s size and the form it takes in the dream, Høskuldr is able to deduce that the *fylgja* could only represent Gunnarr from

⁴⁸ *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, p. 72.

Hlíðarendi.⁴⁹ Gunnarr's fetch is described as a *bjarndýr* ('bear-animal') rather than a *hvítabjörn* ('white-bear', i.e. a polar bear), but his characteristics parallel other human characters with polar bear *fylgjur*.⁵⁰ Perhaps the animal was understood to be a polar bear, since no other bears were seen in Iceland in the Middle Ages; or brown bears from mainland Scandinavia may have possessed the same symbolic meaning as powerful and courageous dream-animals in the medieval Icelandic worldview.

A dream-bear of undefined species also represents Þorsteinn in *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar* and he too is a strong and valiant chieftain and protagonist.⁵¹ In *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, king Njörfi's eight living sons are all symbolised by bears in a dream; the eighth is *mikill ok grimmligr* ('large and fierce') and *rauðkinni* ('red-cheeked' – presumably a reference to blood on its face from killing, a distinguishing feature that suggests ferocity,

⁴⁹ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, pp. 64-65.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 64. When Gunnarr is introduced in the saga, his exceptional qualities are described in great detail: a great man in size and strength, the best fighter amongst men, etc. (pp. 52-53). In sum: 'ok hefir svá verit sagt, at engi væri hans jafningi' ('and so it has been said, that none were his equal' (p. 53). Gunnarr's remarkable strength and abilities, as well as his courage and prowess in battle, are proved throughout the saga until he meets his tragic death. It is thus fitting that his *fylgja* takes the form of a bear.

⁵¹ *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, in *Austfirðinga sögur*, ÍF XI, ed. Jón Jóhannesson (Reykjavík, 1950), p. 300. Þorsteinn is described as 'maðr ráðugr ok vitr ok frœkn' ('a sagacious man, wise and valiant'); he is foremost among men in *framgöngu ok hugar* ('valour and courage'), 'ætt hans ok hraustleikr' ('his family background and prowess') (p. 300).

induces terror, and indicates that he is the leader).⁵² Þorsteinn anticipates that this last bear is the *fylgja* of Jökull, Njörfi's eldest son, and the other bears are the *fylgjur* of Jökull's seven brothers. All of Njörfi's sons are said to be promising, but Jökull surpassed them in all accomplishments; he is the foremost of his brothers, and thus the saga author singles him out as bloody-cheeked.⁵³ Wherever they appear, bears always represent large and strong characters who are mighty, powerful, and noble in deeds and accomplishments. This correlation not only reveals a close metaphorical association between animal and human, but also serves to highlight the strength, size, and prodigious qualities of both bear and hero.

There are some exceptions, however. In eddic tradition, Atli is represented by a ferocious attacking bear in *Atlamál in Grœnlenzku*. Kostbera dreams that a bear comes inside, tearing apart the house and eating people. Högni anticipates that the weather will worsen, for a polar bear means that a storm (perhaps a blizzard) will come from the east (his suggestion is mistaken, though he might be offering an alternative to reassure

⁵² *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, p. 29.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21. Both the other bears and Jökull's brothers do not receive any elaboration in their descriptions, either in the dream or in the rest of the saga narrative.

Kostbera).⁵⁴ Bears have a different resonance in *Sögubrot af Fornkonungum*. In addition to a number of other dream-animals (see below, section 7.1), king Hrórekr tells his wife Auðr that he saw a bear followed by her cub; she protected her child from a dragon that tried to capture him.⁵⁵ This bear mother represents Auðr, who later flees the kingdom. She takes her son Haraldr with her, who fittingly matches other boys with bear *fylgjur* in size and strength (by age three, for example, he was as big as a ten-year-old).

4.2 Wolves

Gísli Súrsson is described as a ‘vitr maðr ok draumamaðr mikill ok berdreymr’ (‘a wise man and a great dreamer with prophetic dreams’).⁵⁶ When someone sneaks into his house at Hól and kills Vésteinn, the brother of Gísli’s wife Auðr, Gísli is compelled to suspect his brother Þorkell and his sister Þórdís’s husband, Þorgrímr. Following Vésteinn’s burial, Gísli tells Þorkell that his dreams have revealed who committed the murder, though he does not provide further elucidation. Instead of human characters appearing in his dreams, however, it is animals who represent and reveal certain people: ‘Þat dreymsði mik ina fyrri nótt, at af

⁵⁴ Atli is also represented by an eagle in the same series of dreams (see below, section 6.1). He may be represented by a bear rather than a wolf because of his noble heritage. *Atlamál in Grœnlensku*, in *Eddukvæði II: Hetjukvæði*, ÍF, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík, 2014), p. 386.

⁵⁵ *Sögubrot af Fornkonungum*, in *Danakonunga sögur*, ÍF XXXV, ed. Bjarni Guðnason (Reykjavík, 1982), p. 50.

⁵⁶ *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, in *Vestfirðinga sögur*, ÍF VI, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík, 1943), p. 70.

einum bæ hrökkðisk hoggormr ok hjøggi Véstein til bana. En ina síðari nótt dreymði mik, at vargr rynni af sama bæ ok biti Véstein til bana' ('On the first night, I dreamt that a viper wriggled out from a certain farm and struck Vésteinn to death. And on the second night, I dreamt that a wolf ran from the same farm and bit Vésteinn to death').⁵⁷ Knowing the species of animal that appear in the dreams and the farm from which they emerge, Gísli claims to perceive who (Þorkell or Þorgrímr) killed his brother-in-law Vésteinn.⁵⁸ Unlike dream-bears, both the wolf and the serpent act without honour or courage and are depicted as slayers of men.⁵⁹ They follow human characters that behave unlawfully and have murderous intentions.

When a female *fylgja* that portends death appears to Heðinn in *Helgakviða*

Hjörvarðssonar, 'sú reið vargi ok hafði orma at taumum ok bauð fylgð sína Heðni' ('she rode

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 46.

⁵⁸ Mundal (1974) suggests that the serpent represents Þorkell and the wolf Þorgrímr based on their personalities (pp. 58-59). She also argues that they are equally guilty of Vésteinn's murder even if only one of them did the actual killing (pp. 57-61). Edel Porter has recently argued that this episode was composed and added to an earlier version of the text based on a separate poetic source. Whether this is true or not, it is still indicative of how these two animal species were given meaning as agents of evil. Edel Porter, 'Lost in Transmission: Reconstituting Forgotten Verses in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*', *VMS* 9 (2013), pp. 173-195. Also see the notes in the ÍF edition re. different versions of this episode (*Gísla saga Súrssonar*, p. 46).

⁵⁹ Similarly, near the end of the saga when Gísli is in hiding as an outlaw, he dreams that some men attacked him and one of them was howling loudly and had the head of a wolf (*Gísla saga Súrssonar*, p. 105). This episode thus offers an intriguing parallel between human-animal transformation and animal *fylgjur*.

a wolf and had serpents for reins and offered Heðinn her company').⁶⁰ This meeting does not occur in a dream, but is presented as a 'real' encounter, suggesting belief in both female and animal *fylgjur* as existing independent of literary dreams. When Heðinn relates this to Helgi, his brother suspects that he is doomed to die, for the woman that visits Heðinn – and the animals that accompany her – are his (Helgi's) *fylgjur* ('fetches', i.e. both female and animal, indicating a possible link between the two).⁶¹ There is a similar episode in Snorri Sturluson's *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar*, perhaps inspired by this poem. While sailing from Norway to conquer England, one of Haraldr Sigurðarson's men, named Þórðr, dreams of a large English army, and in front of them is a terrifying sight. There is a big *tröllkona* ('troll-woman') riding a wolf, which has a man's corpse in its mouth and blood streaming from its jaws; when the wolf finishes eating one person, she casts another into his mouth and he swallows them all. After portending the king's downfall, the second half of her spoken stanza is testimony to the savagery of the *tröllkona* and her wolf-steed:

Sviptir sveiflankjapta
 svanni holdi manna;
 ulfs munn litar innan
 óðlót kona blóði;

⁶⁰ *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, p. 266.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 266. Also see *Laxdæla saga*, in which a dream-woman says that an ox, named Harri, is her son (pp. 84-85).

ok óðlôt kona blóði.⁶²

(The woman tosses men's flesh to the grinding jaw; the raving female reddens the wolf's mouth within with blood; and the raving female with blood).

The *galdralag* repetition of the final line must have instilled great terror in Þórðr – and the saga's audience. Indeed, Haraldr Sigurðarson eventually dies in the ensuing campaign.

Wolves appear more often than any other animal in the dreams of the sagas. They usually appear in a pack, on the attack, and represent hostile enemies who have the intention of doing harm to the dreamer. This is a common literary motif in both the *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*.⁶³ Whether they are said to be *fylgjur*, *hugir*, or their form is unspecified, dream-wolves never augur peace, and the wolf group motif is reminiscent of the 'pack mentality' entailed by Deleuze and Guattari's *devenir-animal* (see chapter 4, section 4.1).

4.3 Foxes

Despite being the only native land mammal in Iceland, arctic foxes rarely appear in the sagas; they are occasionally mentioned off-handedly, usually in relation to hiding. Thus,

⁶² 'Anonymous Lausavísur, *Lausavísur from Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar* 8', ed. and trans. Kari Ellen Gade, in *Skaldic Poetry from the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, Vol. II: Poetry from the Kings' Sagas, Part 2: From c. 1035 to c. 1300 (Turnhout, 2009), pp. 821-822.

⁶³ For a list of all saga wolf-pack *fylgjur* in both the *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*, see Mundal (1974), p. 31.

while her father and his men are hiding in their hall, the Irish princess Ingibjörg in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* states that she can think of better things than starving to death ‘sem refr í skor eða melrakki í greni’ (‘like a fox in a hole or an arctic fox in its lair’).⁶⁴ Also, as Skarpheðinn famously utters to his father, Njáll: ‘Em ek ok ófúss þess at láta svæla mik inni sem melrakka í greni’ (‘I am not eager to let myself be suffocated with smoke like an arctic fox in its lair’).⁶⁵ These types of expressions are common, even proverbial, but provide little information as to how foxes were actually thought about in medieval Iceland, apart from their capacity to hide away and a probable association with dishonour.⁶⁶ Like cats (chapter 1, section 3), their connection to malevolence and magic probably derives from symbolic conventions from continental European learned texts rather than quotidian experience.

In his *Etymologies*, Isidore of Seville writes that ‘Vulpis dicta, quasi uolupis. Est enim uolubilis pedibus et numquam rectis itineribus, sed tortuosis anfractibus currit, fraudulentum animal insidiisque decipiens’ (‘Foxes (*vulpes*) are so named as if the word were

⁶⁴ *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, p. 167. The phrase *melrakki í greni* is later repeated by Hrólfur Gautreksson (p. 170).

⁶⁵ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 326. This example probably indicates an actual trapping practice used in medieval Iceland.

⁶⁶ In parallel, see e.g. Kjartan’s statement that only a cowardly man waits to be taken ‘Sem lamb ór stekki eða melrakki ór gildru’ (‘like a lamb from the fold or an arctic fox from a trap’). *Laxdæla saga*, p. 119. These examples are proverbial, numerous, and uninformative, though the extreme lack of any actual foxes appearing in the sagas could be explained by their general propensity to hide.

volupes, for they are “shifty on their feet” and never follow a straight path but hurry along tortuous twistings. It is a deceitful animal, tricking others with its guile’).⁶⁷ He further notes that when a fox has no food, it pretends to be dead, then catches and eats the birds that descend to consume its supposed corpse. Some bestiarists add that foxes first roll in red earth to appear covered with blood and that they hold their breath while lying on the ground, feigning death with their swollen and stained appearance and tongues hanging out.⁶⁸ The fox is thus an allegorical figure for the devil, ‘who pretends to be dead for those who live by the flesh until he has them in his jaws; the devil is in truth dead for those who are perfect in faith’.⁶⁹ One may also consider the proverbial cunning of the fox from biblical tradition: in Luke 13:32, for example, Jesus refers to Herod as ‘that fox’.⁷⁰

Bestiary animals usually model proper moral behaviour, but this was not the case with the fox; characterised by deceitfulness, the bestiary fox ‘embodies a number of unpleasant traits that figuratively defined him not only as an undesirable member of secular

⁶⁷ Isidore of Seville, *Étymologies. Livre XII, Des animaux*, ed. Jacques André (Paris, 1986), p. 113; *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge, 2006), p. 253.

⁶⁸ Florence McCulloch, *Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries* (Chapel Hill, 1960), pp. 119-120, and references therein.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 120. Such imagery is not limited to bestiaries; images of foxes deceiving birds are common in manuscript marginalia, and the motif also appears in contemporary fables and *exempla*. Hassig (1995), pp. 64-65.

⁷⁰ Luke 13:32, New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (available online).

society but also as an enemy of the Church'.⁷¹ It is fitting then that the characters who take fox form in dreams are often practitioners of magic, acting in opposition to proper Christian order. According to Debra Hassig, 'the fox also represented the devil's henchman on earth today, believed to be any person attempting to undermine the power of the Church, whether working alone or with others. On the contemporary social level, the fox represents the insincere flatterer, the false religious, and the common thief'.⁷² Yet the medieval fox was not always thought about in a negative light: the cunning trickster Reynard the Fox – the protagonist of French, English, German, and Dutch romances – is represented as a peasant-hero, as he deceives anthropomorphic animals in tales that satirised contemporary society and its popular literature.⁷³ Reynard may be reflected in Iceland in the fourteenth-century *Króka-Refs saga*.⁷⁴ As his nickname suggests, 'Króka-Refr' ('Ref the Sly', the 'Sly Fox') displays cunning and craftiness throughout the saga. Clever and blessed with many talents, the sagacious Refr is a master craftsman who sneaks out of all

⁷¹ Hassig (1995), p. 62.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁷³ Foxes are symbolic of trickery and cunning in myth and folklore around the world, often with associations of magic. For example, the folkloric Japanese *kitsune* ('fox'), which has Chinese origins, is a mischievous, cunning, and magical trickster with the ability to shapeshift into female form. See e.g. Greg Gubler, 'Kitsune: The Remarkable Japanese Fox', *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 38.2 (1974), pp. 121-134.

⁷⁴ *Króka-Refs saga*, in *Kjalnesinga saga*, ÍF XIV, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson (Reykjavík, 1959).

sorts of difficult situations, suggesting that this Icelandic tale may allude to the Reynard tradition from mainland Europe.⁷⁵ Aristotle noted in his *History of Animals* that the fox is ‘mischievous and wicked’; analogous to human behaviour, whether such traits could be used for good, rather than evil, was explored by medieval writers, including those in Iceland.⁷⁶

Dream-foxes are portrayed as killers like wolves, but they are further associated with magic and deception. In *Hávarðar saga Ísfrðings*, Þorgrímur leads eighteen men to kill Hávarður, along with his kinsmen and companions, and they hide in a nearby ravine. Þorgrímur falls asleep and spreads an animal skin over his head, sleeping poorly.⁷⁷

Meanwhile, Hávarður’s companion Atli has a precognitive dream in which eighteen wolves run towards them, led by a vixen – and ‘Þat var svá sløegligt kvikendi, at slíkt hefi ek aldri sét fyrri; þat var ógurligt mjök ok illiligt’ (‘It was so cunning an animal that I have never seen its like before; it was very terrible and evil in appearance’).⁷⁸ The dream-fox stands out

⁷⁵ Also see *Gísla saga Súrssonar*: the character Refr ‘var allra manna sløegastr’ (‘was the slyest of all men’) (p. 86)

⁷⁶ Aristotle, *History of Animals Books I-III*, vol. I, ed. and trans. A. L. Peck (Cambridge and London, 1965; repr. 2014), p. 19. For the original Greek, see p. 18.

⁷⁷ Þorgrímur’s animal skin is reminiscent of Geitir’s cloak in *Þorsteins þáttur uxafóts* and is suggestive of clairvoyance and engagement with the supernatural (see above, chapter introduction).

⁷⁸ *Hávarðar saga Ísfrðings*, pp. 349–350.

from the pack and clearly represents their leader, Þorgrímr, who is skilled in many types of magic and witchcraft.

Significantly, the dream-fox is gendered as female (*refkeila*), reflecting medieval Christian attitudes towards male practitioners of magic, who are consistently and pejoratively associated with effeminacy in Old Norse literature.⁷⁹ When Þorgrímr awakens from his dream, he states that he has been at the farmhouse (i.e. in his dreams, in his thoughts, in his mind), and that they should go and burn down the house along with those inside. When Atli sees the men coming, he describes Þorgrímr as the ‘verstr maðr er í ǫllum Dýrafirði ok fjölkunnugastr’ (‘worst man in all of Dýrafjörður and the greatest sorcerer’).⁸⁰ The characterisation of Þorgrímr reveals much about the perceived nature and symbolic significance of foxes in the medieval Icelandic worldview: they are crafty with evil intentions, but also associated with knowledge, cunning, and supernatural abilities.

⁷⁹ To conduct *seiðr* (a type of magic) was considered *ergi*, which entailed an unmanliness associated with passive homosexuality. The feminine connotations of male sorcery have been discussed by a number of scholars. See e.g. Dag Strömbäck, *Sejd. Textstudier i nordisk religionshistoria* (Stockholm and Copenhagen, 1935), p. 31; Folke Ström, *Níð, ergi and Old Norse moral attitudes* (London, 1974), p. 9; Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia, 1996b), pp. 74-75; David Clark, *Gender, Violence, and the Past in Edda and Saga* (Oxford, 2012), p. 54; and references therein.

⁸⁰ *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, p. 350.

In *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, the dream-fox becomes associated with both the wicked and a lower social status. The *draumamaðr mikill* ('great dreamer') Þórhaddr tells his rival, Þorsteinn, about a dream in which a large polar bear came out from the sea, leapt over the heads of Þórhaddr and his sons, and ran away into the hills, until he saw 'refr nokkurr skauzk ór urðum ok banaði birninum' ('a certain fox dart out from a pile of stones and kill the bear').⁸¹ Þórhaddr thinks that the bear probably represents Þorsteinn (discussed above, section 4.1), who will kill him and his sons, and considers it better to be killed by a man such as Þorsteinn than *af vændismanni* ('by a miscreant'), as will be the killer of Þorsteinn. The extant saga is incomplete and does not relate Þorsteinn's death, but the short tale *Draumr Þorsteins Síðu-Hallssonar* describes three dream-women who inform Þorsteinn that his *þræll* ('thrall, slave'), named Gilli, plans to betray Þorsteinn since he had him castrated.⁸² For three nights in succession the dream-women advise Þorsteinn to have Gilli killed, but afterwards the crafty Gilli could never be found, and on the fourth night he sneaks into the house through a secret door and kills Þorsteinn. Gilli is sly and clever: he effectively hides from Þorsteinn, biding his time and taking his master by surprise, using a hidden entrance

⁸¹ *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, p. 314.

⁸² *Draumr Þorsteins Síðu-Hallssonar*, in *Austfirðinga sögur*, ÍF XI, ed. Jón Jóhannesson (Reykjavík, 1950), p. 323.

in order to achieve vengeance. The saga also uses animals to explore and reveal ideas about class and birth; in contrast to Gilli's status as a slave, Þorsteinn is a chieftain with a distinguished background.

These associations are found in both the *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*. Two magical vixens also appear in *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*; these *refkeilur* travel in front of a pack of wolves and bears and are described as hideous and repellent.⁸³ They represent the brothers Gautan and Ógautan, whose negative features are described in great detail. When questioned about whether they have any skills, Ógautan answers that they have little to boast about, but that they know much more than what people tell them. Thus emerges their cunning, linking them to the symbolism of the fox. They demonstrate their capacity for magic when Ógautan crafts a *veðrbelgr* ('weather-bag') that emits storms and winds and cold.⁸⁴ This dream illustrates a taxonomy of predatory animals: the bears represent important characters of noble birth; the wolves are a pack of savage, predatory vikings; and the foxes symbolise characters who are nasty, sneaky, and magical. Two *melrakkur* ('arctic foxes') are similarly portrayed in *Hálfðanar saga Brönuþóstra*: they also lead a pack of wolves

⁸³ *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, p. 29.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

and are described as *ópokkalgir* ('repellent') and *kvikendi grimmlig* ('savage beasts'); without holding back, they tear at men, horses, and whatever else they can catch.⁸⁵ These represent the viking leaders Sóti and Snækollr; Sóti wishes to marry princess Ingibjörg, but her father, King Hringr, thinks it better to fight than to give his daughter to such a terrible man. Sóti is described as a *bölvæðr berserkr* ('a cursed berserk'), half blue and half red, naked and bald except for one hair that stands up on the middle of his scalp.⁸⁶ To be associated with an arctic fox clearly does not have the same grandeur as a polar bear.

Dream-foxes consistently follow characters that were thought to be devoid of honour: men of low birth and male practitioners of witchcraft in the *Íslendingasögur*, and viking leaders with no patronymic and those who accomplish their deeds through deception rather than strength in the *fornaldarsögur*.

4.4 Boars

The wild *göltr* ('boar') makes a unique appearance in Queen Ingigerðr's second dream in the late *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*. The small and hostile beast's troublesome behaviour is made manifest: it tries to overturn every mound, and with all his hairs sticking forward, it seems

⁸⁵ *Hálfdanar saga Brönuþóstra*, FNS IV, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Akureyri, 1954), p. 290.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 291. Sóti becomes king of Denmark, but is unpopular: 'þat væri illa fengit. Þjónuðu honum ok menn heldr af hræðslu en góðvilja' ('that was ill-gotten. Men served him more from fear than good-will') (p. 295).

as though he wants to leap at and bite everything in sight. Ingigerðr correctly anticipates that this new animal is the *fylgja* of Hrólfr's troublesome brother Ketill, whom she similarly describes as the smallest and swiftest of men, full of enthusiasm for violence, and the first to start a fight.⁸⁷ The depiction of the dream-boar parallels continental ideas about different kinds of Suidae species: according to Isidore, the sow searches for food by rooting up the earth, similar to the boar in Ingigerðr's dream.⁸⁸ Isidore also emphasises the savage and aggressive nature of the wild boar: 'Aper a feritate uocatus, ablata F littera et subrogata P. Vnde et apud Graecos *σῦαργος*, id est ferus, dicitur' ('The wild boar is so named from its ferocity, with the letter *f* removed and a *p* substituted. Whence he is also named *σῦαργος*, that is "wild" in Greek').⁸⁹ These descriptions reflect observed behaviour and realistic encounters when hunters try to kill wild boars, which were native to mainland Scandinavia; and with their propensity to break down fences and cause agricultural havoc, boars contrast with tamed domestic household swine. The fact that there is only one boar *fylgja* in the

⁸⁷ *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, p. 89. He is described in similar terms when introduced earlier in the saga: 'Ketill var manna minnstr ok inn skjótligastr, hávaðamaðr, framgjarn ok hvatviss ok fullr áraðis ok inn áleitnasti' ('Ketill was the smallest and most boisterous of men, a noisy man, eager and rash and full of daring and aggression') (p. 58).

⁸⁸ Isidore of Seville, ed. p. 57, trans. p. 248.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* Alternately, according to the bestiary tradition, 'the boar is a wild pig or hog so called because of its savageness, a letter being eliminated from the word *asper*, "wild", as Varro declares' (this from Pseudo-Hugo of St. Victor's *De bestiis et aliis rebus*). See McCulloch (1960), pp. 97-98, and references therein.

extant saga corpus suggests that they were not good for thinking about in this metaphorical way and do not map as easily onto standard saga character-types.

4.5 Harts

Guðrún Gjúkadóttir foresees her love of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and his fated death in two dreams in *Völsunga saga*. After first dreaming of Sigurðr as a golden-feathered hawk (see below, section 6.1), Guðrún then tells Brynhildr about a dream in which she sees ‘einn mikinn hjört. Hann bar langt af ǫðrum dýrum. Hár hans var af gulli’ (‘a great hart. He was far greater than other animals. His hair was of gold’).⁹⁰ The stag is a well-known symbol of nobility in Old English literature and the tradition of Sigurðr as a hart may have native Germanic roots, but it also appears to be influenced by learned tradition.

In particular, the dream-hart reflects continental ideas about the hart as the slayer of serpents, offering a thematic parallel to Sigurðr’s slaying of the dragon Fáfnir. Isidore writes about the antithetical relationship between harts and serpents: regarding deer in general, ‘Hi serpentium inimici, cum se grauatos infirmitate persenserint, spiritu narium eos extrahunt de cauernis, et superata pernicie ueneni eorum pabulo reparantur’ (‘They are

⁹⁰ *Völsunga saga*, p. 46. Sigurðr is also compared to a hart by Guðrún in *Guðrúnarkviða II*, in *Eddukvæði II: Hetjukvæði*, ÍF, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík, 2014), p. 361.

antagonistic to serpents; when they sense themselves burdened with infirmity, they draw the serpents from their caves with the breath from their nostrils, and having overcome the malignancy of the poison, the deer are restored to health by eating the serpents').⁹¹

According to bestiary tradition, in order to draw the snake from its hole the stag fills its mouth with water and spurts it into the serpent's hole; drawing the snake out with its breath, the stag tramples it to death underfoot.⁹² The noble stag is frequently mentioned in the Scriptures and in conversion experiences; as Debra Hassig writes, 'It is therefore consistent that the bestiaries should convey an admiration of the animal through extensive moralizations and positive, symbolic interpretations of the stag's natural habits'.⁹³

The stag symbolises the figure of Christ who vanquishes the dragon; as the largest of serpents, the dragon represents the devil himself – the 'bestiary devil par excellence'.⁹⁴ Sigurðr does not draw Fáfnir from a cave, but intriguingly, he similarly survives the dragon's poison and consumes the serpent's flesh, though the effects are different: rather than being restored to health, he learns the language of birds (see chapter 5, section 2).

⁹¹ Isidore of Seville, ed. p. 51, trans. p. 248.

⁹² McCulloch (1960), p. 172; Hassig (1995), p. 41.

⁹³ Hassig (1995), p. 40.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40. Re. the hart as a symbol for Christ, see e.g. *Sólarljóð* ('Song of the Sun'), ed. Carolyne Larrington and Peter Robinson, in *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, Vol. VII: Poetry on Christian Subjects, Part 1: The Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Turnhout, 2007), pp. 334-335.

Symbolising Christ and the devil, the antithetical stag-dragon pairing is a logical one, and their allegorical opposition is matched by their habits and physical characteristics: ‘the stag climbs the lofty mountains, while the dragon scurries on the ground and hides in caves and cracks in the earth’.⁹⁵ This accords with the oppositional pairing described in the penultimate chapter between the ascendant/transcendent symbolism of bird-language and the chthonic associations of the serpent. Similarly, high and low positionality are often symbolically deployed in the Scriptures and interpreted by Church fathers to represent good and evil.⁹⁶ Further parallels to the Sigurðr legend emerge, though the motif is inverted: the pits that Sigurðr digs for the dragon’s poisonous blood to run into are reminiscent of the water that is spat into the serpent’s hole by the stag. Moreover, medieval manuscript illustrations typically show the stag and the serpent in a double scene that also contains the stag drinking at a stream.⁹⁷ Sigurðr also digs his pits near water: ‘á þann farveg er Fáfni var vanr at skriða er hann fór til vatns’ (‘on that track which Fáfni was wont to crawl when he went for water’).⁹⁸ There is another dream-hart which appears in *Sögubrot af*

⁹⁵ Hassig (1995), pp. 50–51.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁹⁷ McCulloch, p. 174. See further *Sólarljóð*, pp. 334–335, and Psalm 42:1, New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (available online).

⁹⁸ *Völsunga saga*, p. 30.

Fornkonungum; by no coincidence, it is killed by a dragon (further discussed below, section 7.2).

5. Domestic Dream-Animals

Dogs do not appear as animal *fylgjur* in any of the extant sagas, but they fulfilled a significant and comparable function as companion animals.⁹⁹ As discussed in chapter 1 (section 2.4), a number of dogs are said to *fylgja* their human counterparts, embodying the relationship between the verb *fylgja*, used for the companion animals who accompany their masters, and the noun *fylgja* of saga dreams and visions. Dream-dogs are only seen in the eddic poem *Guðrúnarkviða II* in a series of prophetic dreams that Atli recounts to Guðrún about the fate of their children, Erpr and Eitill. They are seen as *hvelpa* ('whelps') that are loosed from Atli's hands – and he is made to eat their carrion flesh.¹⁰⁰ Cats are rarely mentioned in the sagas (see chapter 1, section 3) and never appear in human dreams. Among the domestic animals in medieval Iceland, bovines dominate the landscape of human dreams and visions.

5.1 Bovines

⁹⁹ There is an exception in certain manuscripts of *Njáls saga*: Hǫskuldr sees two *búnar* ('bear-cubs') following Gunnarr's bear-*fylgja*, which represent his two unnamed companions, but this is only in the R- and O-versions of the text; in the Z-version, it is *hundar* ('dogs') (*Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 64, fn. 5).

¹⁰⁰ *Guðrúnarkviða II*, p. 361.

There is clear differentiation between different species of domestic bovines in dreams: oxen act as the *fylgjur* of chieftains and great men, bulls behave like wild killers, and nondescript cattle function in the manner of wolves – as a pack on the attack. All three classifications are exemplified in a dream in *Ljósvetninga saga*: Eyjólfur sees a flock of cattle coming towards him, including a large red ox which intends to harm him; there is also a vicious bull and many smaller cattle. Eyjólfur's prescient foster-father tells him that 'Þat eru manna fylgjur, óvina þinna, ok oxí fylgir Þorvarði, en griðungr Halli' ('Those are the fetches of men, of your enemies, and the ox follows Þorvarðr, and the bull Hallr').¹⁰¹ Male and uncastrated, bulls are often depicted in the sagas as dangerous animals that are difficult to tame (see chapter 1, section 4.2); it is thus fitting that the bull is the *fylgja* of Hallr, who is characterised by violent and troublesome behaviour. In contrast, Þorvarðr, represented by the better-behaved ox, is a chieftain who is portrayed far more positively.¹⁰² When the events described in the dream play out, the men who are with the ox – represented by the cattle – are not described or named; such non-descript cattle are a lower rank of animal that represent the dreamer's undifferentiated enemies.

¹⁰¹ *Ljósvetninga saga*, ÍF X, ed. Björn Sigfússon (Reykjavík, 1941), p. 85.

¹⁰² 'Hann var fyrir þeim Ljósvetningum. Hann var vitr maðr og stilltr vel' ('He was foremost amongst the people of Ljósavatn. He was a wise man and well-composed') (ibid., p. 62).

The role of oxen as the *fylgjur* of strong and powerful chieftains is also illustrated earlier in the saga. Einarr, the brother of Guðmundr inn ríki ('the powerful'), dreams of a magnificent ox with large horns travelling through the district; it comes to each building in Møðruvellir until it falls down dead at the high seat. Einarr believes that the dream signifies great tidings, for these are *mannafylgjur* ('men's fetches').¹⁰³ The ox represents Guðmundr, who dies soon afterwards, and his nickname is testament to his strength as a chieftain.¹⁰⁴ In *Vápnfirðinga saga*, dream-oxen similarly represent two strong and powerful chieftains, the protagonists of the saga, Brodd-Helgi and Geitir. When Helgi finds his prophetic foster-mother weeping, she tells him about a dream:

'Mik dreymsði þat,' segir hon, 'at ek sá hér upp rísa at Hofi uxa bleikan, mikinn ok skrautligan, ok bar hann hátt hornin, ok gekk hann á sandinn fram hjá Sunnudalsmynni. Enn sá ek fara naut útan eptir heraðinu, stór ok eigi allfá, ok gekk þar fyrir uxi rauðfleckótt, ekki mikill né fagr, en allsterkligr var hann. Nautin stönguðu uxann til bana. Þá reis hér upp at Hofi rauðr uxi, ok var beinlitr á hornunum, ok var allra nauta skrautligastr. Sá stangaði rauðfleckóttu uxann til bana. Þá reis upp í Krossavík þjórr nokkurr, ok var sænautalitr á.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 60.

¹⁰⁴ According to *Sþrla þátr*, 'Guðmundr inn ríki var mjök fyrir øðrum mǫnnum um rausn sína. Hann hafði hundrað hjóna ok hundrað kúa' ('Guðmundr the powerful was beyond other men on account of his splendour. He had a hundred household members and a hundred cows'); and in *Ófeigs þátr*, 'Guðmundr var bæði ríkr ok fjölmennr' ('Guðmundr was both mighty and supported by many men'). *Sþrla þátr*, in *Ljósvetninga saga*, ÍF X, ed. Björn Sigfússon (Reykjavík, 1941), p. 109; *Ófeigs þátr*, in *Ljósvetninga saga*, ÍF X, ed. Björn Sigfússon (Reykjavík, 1941), p. 117.

Hann fór beljandi um allt heraðit ok allar heiðarnar ok leitaði ávallt ins rauða uxans, enda vaknaða ek þá.¹⁰⁵

(‘This I dreamt,’ she says, ‘that I saw a large and splendid white ox rise up here at Hof, and he had high horns, and he walked up to the sandbanks near the mouth of the Sunnudal valley. Then I saw cattle moving throughout the district, big and none too few, and before them went a red-flecked ox, neither large nor fair, but he appeared very strong. The cattle gored the [white] ox to death. Then a red ox rose up here at Hof, and its horns were the colour of bone, and it was the most magnificent of all cattle. He gored the red-flecked ox to death. Then a certain bull rose up in Krossavík, and it was the colour of sea-cattle. He went bellowing through the whole district and all the heaths and always sought the red ox, until I awoke.’)

Helgi accurately interprets that the white ox stands for himself and also knows that the red-flecked ox represents his rival, Geitir, but misinterprets the red ox: he thinks it stands for Lýtingr, his favourite son, but his foster-mother corrects him: it stands for his other son, Bjarni, who later kills Geitir. The unnamed cattle again represent enemies, and the bull signifies Þorkell Geitisson, a troublesome character who makes a number of attempts on Bjarni’s life until they are eventually reconciled at the end of the saga. The domestic animal schema may be chosen for these sagas because they are among the earliest, more

¹⁰⁵ *Vápnfirðinga saga*, in *Austfirðinga sögur*, ÍF XI, ed. Jón Jóhannesson (Reykjavík, 1950), pp. 48-49.

naturalistic *Íslendingasögur* which describe events in the settlement period. The chieftains would then be linked to oxen through their connections with property and land.¹⁰⁶

5.2 Horses

There is one only horse *fylgja* in the sagas.¹⁰⁷ In *Vatnsdæla saga*, Þorkell silfra (‘silver’) tells his wife Signý about a dream in which ‘hann þóttisk ríða ofan eptir Vatnsdal hesti rauðum, ok þótti honum trautt við jörðina koma’ (‘he thought he was riding down through Vatnsdal on a red horse, and it seemed to scarcely touch the ground’).¹⁰⁸ Þorkell believes this means that something red is burning ahead of him, which bodes well for his honour. Signý, however, has a different interpretation: “sýnisk mér þetta illr draumr,” – ok kvað hest mar heita, en marr er manns fylgja, ok kvað rauða sýnask, ef blóðug yrði’ (“this seems to me to be an evil dream,” – and [she] said that the horse was called nightmare, and a horse is a

¹⁰⁶ Dream-oxen also appear in *Jómsvíkinga saga*. King Gormr has three dreams, each with oxen coming from the sea, stripping the grass from the ground: first three white oxen; then three red oxen with large horns; and finally three black oxen, which were the biggest and had the largest horns. Queen Þyri interprets: three winters with heavy snow, killing the crops; three winters with little snow, but they are still harsh; and three severe winters, bringing famine. These dream-oxen are not indicative of people, but they are still significant, telling of the weather and its impact on human livelihood. They also symbolically link oxen with crops and farming (and thus property and land). *Jómsvíkinga saga*, ed. N. F. Blake (London, 1962), pp. 3-4.

¹⁰⁷ The horse Fölski appears to Sighvatr Sturluson in a dream in *Íslendinga saga*, but does not represent any particular person (see below, section 8).

¹⁰⁸ *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 111.

man's fetch, and [she] said that red appears if something bloody will come to pass').¹⁰⁹ The poetic word *marr* ('horse') is a pun that plays with the name of the horse, *mara* ('nightmare'); it denotes that the *fylgja* is a horse, but does not mean *merr* ('mare') in the gendered sense.¹¹⁰ Signý is correct: soon afterwards Þorkell krafla ('scratcher') buries an axe in Þorkell silfra's head. The *fylgja* must therefore belong to Þorkell krafla, though here the motif is atypically deployed: the horse does not attack and kill Þorkell silfra, as would be expected, but rather its red colour simply denotes the bloodshed to follow. The horse *fylgja* is thus linked with the animal *fylgjur* depicted as killers – wolves, serpents, and foxes – but it is also an animal that, like bears, follows someone who is depicted in positive terms. Þorkell krafla is said to be big and strong, and while his father will not acknowledge him as his own son, Þorkell is far braver than his father's legitimate sons.

5.3 Goats

A goat *fylgja* is seen in *Njáls saga* when Þórðr has a vision of a *hafir* lying on the ground, covered in blood; Njáll cannot see the goat and predicts that Þórðr is fated to die: 'þú sét

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 111.

¹¹⁰ *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, pp. 412-413, 424; *Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog*, Johan Fritzner (Kristiania, 1867), pp. 435, 437, 444-445.

hafa fylgju þína’ (‘you have seen your fylgja’).¹¹¹ As Mundal suggests, the relative passiveness of goats may be linked with Þórðr’s non-aggressive nature.¹¹² Thus when Bergþóra bids Þórðr to kill Brynjólfur, he replies ‘Ekki em ek vígamaðr’ (‘I am not a fighting man’); this phrase is later repeated by Hallgerðr, who declares *Engi ertú vígamaðr* (‘you are no fighting man’).¹¹³ Hallgerðr says that it will make no difference if the two men meet and Þórðr admits that he has never seen human blood and that he does not know how it will affect him. Nevertheless, Þórðr does kill Brynjólfur in the end, proving his untested capacity for violent action. Zuzana Stankovitsová has recently suggested that low social status may be the underlying reason for Þórðr having a goat *fylgja*.¹¹⁴ Unlike goats, he is said to be *mikill ok sterkr* (‘large and strong’), and his descriptive patronymic epithet – *leysingjason* (‘freedman’s son’) – serves to characterise him, for his father had been a slave.¹¹⁵ Regardless of which interpretation is correct – and indeed it may well be a combination of the two – the fate of the goat is indicative of Þórðr’s imminent death.

¹¹¹ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 107.

¹¹² Mundal (1993), p. 624.

¹¹³ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, pp. 103-104.

¹¹⁴ Stankovitsová (2015), p. 39.

¹¹⁵ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 103.

Variation between different livestock emerges in medieval Icelandic thinking: oxen are righteous and defend themselves; bulls have not been castrated, so they fail to control their masculine aggression; and the goat does not participate in power struggles, for it is too passive and/or low of status.

6. Dream-Birds

The class Aves – Birds – consists of species separate from all others examined thus far: they fly. For medieval Scandinavians, their separation from the human world through a distinct means of travel gave them a special role in cultural tradition and belief. Various bird species assume different meanings in the dream symbolism of Old Norse literature across its genres. They can be heroic and strong, beautiful and graceful, or fierce and menacing; likewise, their human counterparts can be kings and heroic figures, beautiful women, or cruel-minded enemies.

6.1 Raptors

Dream-birds of prey – specifically eagles and hawks – represent the noble and strong. In *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, the strength and courage of dream-eagles is contrasted with dream-birds of unknown species. One of twelve *berserkr* brothers, Angantýr describes the following dream to jarl Bjarnar:

...honum þótti þeir bræðr staddir í Sámsey, ok fundu þar fugla marga ok drápu alla; þá sneru þeir annan veg á eyrna, ok flugu í móti þeim ernir tveir, ok þóttisk hann ganga í móti ǫðrum, ok áttu þeir hart viðskipti, ok settusk niðr báðir, áðr létti. En annarr ǫrninn átti við bræðr hans ellifu, ok þótti honum ǫrninn efri verða.¹¹⁶

(...he thought he and his brothers stopped at Sámsey, and found there many birds and killed them all; then they took another path on the island, and two eagles flew towards them, and he thought he went against one of them, and they had a hard struggle, and they both sank down before it was over. And the second eagle fought with his eleven brothers, and it seemed to him that the eagle would come out on top.)

Following Angantýr's dream, the twelve brothers come to the island Sámsey prepared for a battle and see two ships there, which belong to Hjálmar and Qrvar-Oddr ('Arrow-Oddr'). While Hjálmar and Oddr explore the island to see if the *berserkir* had arrived, the twelve brothers, in a berserk-frenzy, board their ships and easily defeat the men on board: these represent the first birds from Angantýr's dream. The mighty warriors Hjálmar and Oddr are the human counterparts to the dream-eagles; as foreseen, when they return from the forest to their ships, Hjálmar and Angantýr fight and slay one another, and Oddr kills the other eleven brothers. Like characters with bear *fylgjur*, the dream-eagles represent those who are capable in battle, noble, valiant, and courageous. As previously discussed, Qrvar-

¹¹⁶ *Saga Heiðreks konungs ins vitra*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London, 1960), p. 4.

Oddr also has a polar bear *fylgja* in his eponymous saga, possibly suggesting that a person can have more than one animal *fylgja*, or, more likely, representing a separate literary invention by different saga authors and/or a separate oral tradition. Nor would it make sense either literally or structurally to depict a polar bear fighting a group of birds. Since bears and eagles are the biggest and strongest animals of land and sky, either can be used to signify the hero.

The protagonists of *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* are seen as birds in a precognitive dream early in the saga and ensuing events closely follow the portended narrative. Þorsteinn dreams that a swan stands on the roof of his house and he believes that he possesses her. Then a large eagle flies down from the mountains and perches beside the swan and chatters to her with kindness, which brings her pleasure, and ‘örninn var svarteygr ok járnkløer váru á honum; vaskligr sýndisk’ (‘the eagle was black-eyed and iron claws were on him; he appeared gallant’).¹¹⁷ When another large eagle flies from the south and tries to court the swan, the first eagle becomes ruffled and the two fight fiercely for a long time, both dying as a consequence. The swan remains sitting, downcast and sad, until a hawk flies from the

¹¹⁷ *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, in *Borgfirðinga sggur*, ÍF III, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík, 1938), p. 54.

west and is friendly towards her; they both fly away in the same direction. Þorsteinn considers the dream to be unimportant and thinks it has to do with winds meeting in the sky, blowing from the directions from which the birds fly. The prescient Bergfinnr disagrees and believes that ‘Fuglar þeir munu vera manna fylgjur’ (‘These birds must be people’s fetches’).¹¹⁸ Bergfinnr accurately predicts that Þorsteinn’s wife will soon give birth to a beautiful girl (the swan represents his daughter Helga, see below, section 6.2) and that noble men will come from the directions of the eagles to ask for her hand in marriage; they will fight over her and both will die as a result; and she will end up marrying the third man who will come from the direction of the hawk.

The court poets Gunnlaugr and Hrafn compete for Helga’s love; these are the two eagles from Þorsteinn’s dream. The description of the first eagle closely matches Gunnlaugr, including his physical description: he is *mikill ok sterkr* (‘big and strong’) with *svarteygr* (‘dark eyes’).¹¹⁹ The second eagle, representing Hrafn Qnundarsson, is similarly described in extremely positive terms, establishing equivalency between the two characters;

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 55.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 59. Gunnlaugr’s fine traits are repeated throughout the saga: e.g. ‘þótti hann þá mikit afbragð annarra manna fyrir margs sakar, bæði afls ok vænleiks ok vaxtar’ (‘he was thought to surpass other men for many reasons, both in strength and bodily beauty and size’) (p. 89); while raiding in the Orkney Islands, he is said to be the strongest and most valiant and manly fellow wherever they went (p. 99).

while Hrafn and his brothers are all promising, Hrafn is said to be ahead of them in every respect.¹²⁰ After Gunnlaugr and Hrafn kill one another in a duel in Sweden, Þorkell Hallkelsson marries Helga; he is the hawk from Þorsteinn's dream. While Þorkell is described as valiant and wealthy, as well as a good poet, he plays a far less significant role in the saga's narrative and little description is given of his character.¹²¹ Perhaps for this saga author, the eagle was deemed a greater bird than the hawk, since men with eagle *fylgjur* are given more elaborate and positive descriptions. Indeed, despite her new marriage, Helga does not love Þorkell and Gunnlaugr remains in her thoughts until her tragic death. The author of *Gunnlaugs saga* may have chosen birds to represent characters because of the relationship between eagles and poetry (see discussion of the mead of poetry myth in chapter 6, section 2.3), since the saga's protagonists are two court poets (on birds and communication more generally, see chapter 5, section 2). It is probably coincidental that one of these characters is named after a bird (*Hrafn*, 'Raven') since it is not a raven that

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 61. Hrafn's positive attributes are further described: 'Hann var mikill maðr ok sterkr, manna sjáligastr ok skáld gott' ('He was a big man and strong, the most handsome of men and a good poet') (p. 61); when he is almost an adult, he travels abroad and is always highly esteemed; and similar to Gunnlaugr, he is described as handsome, strong, and gallant (pp. 79-80).

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 106.

appears in the dream. Alternately, birds might have been chosen since the swan was the most fitting animal to represent the beautiful Helga.

In eddic tradition, Atli is seen as a dream-eagle by Kostbera in *Atlamáal in Grænlenzku*. The eagle flies through the whole house, causes great damage, covers them with blood, and seems to be Atli's *hamr* ('shape, form').¹²² Hǫgni suggests that the dream foretells upcoming sacrifices, when they will see blood: 'opt er þat fyr øxnum / er ǫrnu dreymir' ('it usually signifies oxen / when dreaming of eagles'); and even more naively, 'heill er hugr Atla, / hvatka er þik dreymir' ('Atli's intentions are hale / whatsoever you dream').¹²³ As previously noted (see above, section 4.1), Atli is seen as a bear in Kostbera's first dream: in the sagas, bears and eagles depict kings and heroes, and it is logical that they should both represent Atli (like Ǫrvar-Oddr), a chieftain of considerable power. He is here seen as an enemy, however, and thus the animals that represent him demonstrate their more vicious qualities (perhaps a consequence of courtly influence).

There is some differentiation between eagles and hawks in dreams in eddic poetry.

In *Guðrúnarkviða II*, Atli recounts a series of prophetic dreams to Guðrún about the fate of

¹²² *Atlamáal in Grænlenzku*, p. 386. On *hamr*, see chapter 4.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 386.

their children, Erpr and Eitill – whom she later kills and feeds to her husband in *Atlakviða* and *Atlamál in Grœnlenzku*. Before they are seen in the aforementioned form of whelps, they are first dreamed as hawks that fly from Atli's hand (and whose hearts he later chews with honey).¹²⁴ These dream-hawks are younger and weaker than the dream-eagle, as well as lower in status; they are victims of violence, rather than enablers. Such differentiation between dream-eagles and dream-hawks, however, would not have been universal. In *Völsunga saga*, Guðrún first dreams of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani as a beautiful gold-feathered hawk (as well as a gold-haired hart, see above, section 4.5).¹²⁵ Akin to the hart, the hawk is a fitting animal to represent Sigurðr, a character whose exceptional qualities are described in great detail throughout the saga.¹²⁶ Significantly, the hawk is on her hand and not flying through the air; it is closely associated with nobility and courtly life. It is appropriate that the bird is a raptor to match Sigurðr's size and strength, but an eagle surely could not rest on Guðrún's hand, so a hawk better matches the imagery of the dream and represents

¹²⁴ *Guðrúnarkviða II*, p. 361.

¹²⁵ Their gold colour matches Sigurðr's description earlier in the saga: his shield was plated with red gold and emblazoned with a dragon, as well as his helmet, saddle, surcoat, coat of mail, and weapons (*Völsunga saga*, p. 40).

¹²⁶ In sum, the saga claims that when all the great heroes and famous chieftains are considered, Sigurðr will always be reckoned foremost (*ibid.*, p. 41).

Sigurðr's idealised husband-like qualities. A bird is also a suitable metaphor for a man who understands bird-language.

6.2 Swans

The swan in Þorsteinn's dream represents his extraordinary daughter, Helga. Þorsteinn describes the swan as *væna ok fagra* ('beautiful and fair').¹²⁷ Helga is repeatedly described in similar terms: when Þorsteinn's wife Jófríðr gives birth to Helga, she is said to be *ákafa fagrt* ('exceptionally beautiful') and is later given the nickname *in fagra* ('the fair').¹²⁸ Her beauty is a recurrent theme throughout the saga and she is at the heart of its narrative.¹²⁹

Swans are often associated with beautiful women in Old Norse literature; it is the default bird for a character who is physically enticing. The swan-maiden valkyries in *Völundarkviða* have *álptarhamir* (swan *hamir*, i.e. feather garments) with them and are figures of desire for the Finnish king's three sons (see chapter 4, section 5).¹³⁰ In *Völsunga saga*, Brynhildr solemnly speaks 'af sínu sæti sem álpt af báru' (from her seat like a swan on a wave); the

¹²⁷ *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, p. 54.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 56, 58.

¹²⁹ In sum, 'Helga var svá fōgr, at þat er sōgn frōðra manna, at hon hafi fegrst kona verit á Íslandi ... ok engi kostur þótti þá þvilíkr sem Helga in fagra í ǫllum Borgarfirði ok víðara annars staðar' ('Helga was so fair that it is said by wise men that she was the most beautiful woman that has ever been in Iceland ... and it was then thought that there was no match for Helga the fair in all of Borgarfjörðr or in other places further away') (*ibid.*, p. 60).

¹³⁰ *Völundarkviða*, in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ÍF, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík, 2014), p. 428.

swan is thus a simile for grace, nobility, and beauty.¹³¹ Swans only represent women in saga-dreams, presumably for their unique appearance and physical beauty. The polar bear is the only other animal to represent women in dreams, but it is the maternal aspect that signifies them (see above, section 4.1). It is surely significant that both animal species are white – a marker of physical beauty in the medieval Icelandic worldview.¹³²

Another exceptionally beautiful woman named Helga is likewise represented by a swan in a prophetic dream in *Flóamanna saga*. Following the death of his wife, Þorgils dreams of a swan that is friendlier towards others than to him, though that changes after he shakes her.¹³³ His daughter interprets the dream: he will find a new wife, and while she will not love him on the first night, matters will improve. When Þorgils proposes to marry Helga, she does not take well to the idea, but they are married nonetheless. Akin to the swan in the dream, Helga is silent and cold with Þorgils, paying him little attention. One day she leaves him to join her family, but Þorgils comes fully armed, takes her by the hand, and leads her away. When the two later sit outside observing their domestic birds, ‘hrein

¹³¹ *Völsunga saga*, p. 49.

¹³² Whiteness is a common descriptor for female beauty in Old Norse literature: see e.g. Jenny Jochens, ‘Race and Ethnicity in the Old Norse World’, *Viator* 30 (1999), pp. 79-104.

¹³³ *Flóamanna saga*, in *Harðar saga*, ÍF XIII, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (Reykjavík, 1991), pp. 293-294.

hænan við hananum, en haninn leggur at henni ok berr hana, þar til er hon mæðist' ('the hen squawked at the rooster, and the rooster set at her and beat her, until she was exhausted').¹³⁴ These real animals are metonymically emblematic of Þorgils and Helga; like dream-animals, they are figurative, and explore the relationship between human and animal behaviour. Þorgils asks if Helga sees the fight and suggests that others might be fighting in a similar fashion, after which their marriage supposedly improves. Thus Þorgils woos Helga: in the dream the swan is shaken, but in the reality of the saga she is threatened with domestic abuse.

6.3 *Læmingar*

The large flock of unnamed and unspecified birds slain by Hjálmar and Angantýr in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* is suggestive of the wolves that come in a pack. A similar flock of dream-birds also appears in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*: while in hiding as an outlaw at his wife Auðr's farm, Gísli dreams 'at fuglar kœmi í húsit, er læmingar heita, þeir eru meiri en rjúpkerar ok létu illiliga ok hófðu válkazk í roðru ok blóði' ('that birds came into the house, which are named *læmingar*, they are larger than cock-ptarmigans and squawked horribly

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 317.

and had been wallowing in blood and gore’).¹³⁵ Soon afterwards, Eyjólfur inn grá (‘the grey’), Njósna-Helgi (‘Helgi the spy’), and thirteen other men arrive to slay the outlaw, and so ensues Gísli’s famous last stand. These birds are clearly of a different sort than the noble and strong eagles and the beautiful swans: like the wolf-pack, they are enemies on the attack.

7. Exotic Dream-Animals

In some of the more fantastic *fornaldarsögur*, there are species of animals that appear in people’s dreams which did not exist in medieval Iceland nor continental Europe – namely lions and leopards – and others that do not exist entirely, such as dragons. The literary function of these exotic dream-animals remains the same, but their imaginative deployment reflects symbolic import and foreign and folkloric influences.

7.1 Lions and Leopards

¹³⁵ *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, p. 110. It remains unknown which species of bird the Old Norse word *lemingar* might refer to (common translations include ‘loom-birds’ and ‘loons’). Peter Foote argues that ‘Although no one perfectly understands what the word means in this verse, all are agreed that it cannot possibly mean any sort of bird, and a different interpretation offered in another manuscript of the saga is no more successful ... The original author must have misunderstood the verse transmitted to him’. Peter Foote, ‘An Essay on the *Saga of Gísli* and its Icelandic Background’, in *The Saga of Gísli*, trans. George Johnson (Toronto, 1963), pp. 93-134, at p. 115. Also see Porter (2013) re. the relationship between these birds in the prose and the following stanza (pp. 186-188).

Lions were associated with kings and kingship throughout medieval Europe. According to Isidore, the Latin word *leo* is of Greek origin (λέων): ‘Leo autem graece, latine rex interpretatur eo quod princeps sit omnium bestiarum’ (‘The Greek word for *leo* is translated as “king” in Latin, because he is the ruler of all the beasts’).¹³⁶ Every Latin and Old French bestiary begins by describing the lion, as the king of the beasts (until Richard de Fournival’s unorthodox *Bestiaire d’Amour* in the mid-thirteenth century, which starts with the cock).¹³⁷ The Norman poet Guillaume le Clerc wrote in his bestiary that ‘Dreiz est que primes vos diom / De la nature del lion. / Lions est une beste fere / E hardie de grant manere’ (‘It is proper that we should first speak of the nature of the lion, which is a fierce and proud beast and very bold’).¹³⁸ Lions entered late medieval Icelandic writing via continental romances, starting with *Ívens saga* (the Norse translation of Chrétien de Troyes’ *Yvain*), and these were translated into Old Norwegian and Old Icelandic beginning in the thirteenth century (the

¹³⁶ Isidore of Seville, ed. p. 89, trans. p. 251.

¹³⁷ The lion chapter also became one of the longest and most complex, complemented by an increased number of illustrations. McCulloch (1960), p. 137; Richard de Fournival, *Le Bestiaire d’Amour par Richard de Fournival suivi de la Reponse de la Dame*, ed. C. Hippeau (Paris, 1860).

¹³⁸ *Le Bestiaire. Das Thierbuch des Normannischen Dichters Guillaume le Clerc, Zum ersten male vollständig nach den Handschriften von London, Paris und Berlin*, ed. Robert Reinsch (Leipzig, 1892), p. 225.

translated *riddarasögur*, ‘tales of knights’).¹³⁹ Romance themes consequently played an increasingly important role in native Icelandic literature, giving rise to the indigenous romances, or *lygisögur* (‘lying sagas’), which take place in distant lands and contain chivalric, foreign, fabulous motifs.¹⁴⁰

Lions inhabit many of these sagas and follow the same general plotline: grateful lions are freed from a dragon or another predator by a knight, and subsequently devote themselves to their new human companion.¹⁴¹ These episodes are directly or indirectly based on similar scenes in *Ívens saga* or *Þiðriks saga af Bern*.¹⁴² While the lion is the companion of knights in these romances, the bestiary lion-king is absent, and thus it is more likely that the *Physiologus* and other learned literature represents the origins of the saga author’s choice of animal *fylgja*. According to Margaret Haist, the relationship between

¹³⁹ See e.g. Jürg Glauser, ‘Romance (Translated *riddarasögur*)’, in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford, 2005), pp. 372-387.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 375; Matthew Driscoll, ‘Late Prose Fiction (*lygisögur*)’, in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford, 2005), pp. 190-204.

¹⁴¹ The knight decides which beast to kill first, choosing the dragon for its poison and wicked nature; he then expects to have to fight the lion, but is surprised when the latter becomes a loyal companion animal, serving and protecting him henceforth. It is an important stage in the knight’s personal development and the lion becomes an external symbol for his character. See e.g. *Konráðs saga keisarasonar*, *Vilbjálms saga sjóðs*, *Sigurðar saga þögla*, *Ectors saga*, and *Kára saga Kárasonar*. See further Richard L. Harris, ‘The Lion-Knight Legend in Iceland and the Valþjófsstaðir Door’, *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 1 (1970), pp. 125-145, and references therein.

¹⁴² Harris (1970) and Driscoll (2005), p. 200.

the bestiary lion and contemporary views of kingship began with Old Testament ideas about lions found in the *Physiologus*, which ‘later provided a useful model for contemporary notions of pure bloodline, kingly virtues, and just rule’.¹⁴³ While lions are not present in the extant fragments of the Icelandic *Physiologus*, they were surely originally included, indicating that this text and its lion symbolism was known and read in medieval Iceland.¹⁴⁴

In *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* – a *fornaldarsaga* that contains numerous *riddarasaga* motifs – Queen Ingigerðr twice dreams of packs of various animal *fylgjur* coming to Sweden from Gotland, first in peace and later in enmity. She knows that the large lion in front represents a royal figure – ‘óarga dýr fór fyrir, þat er konungs fylgja, ok mun hann vera formaðr hinna’ (‘a brave beast [i.e. lion] went before them, that is a king’s fetch, and he will be their leader’) – and predicts that it follows Hrólfr Gautreksson.¹⁴⁵ In both dreams, the lion is accompanied by a pack of wolves which follow their leader, as well as polar bears that come after the lion. Bears are usually associated with the largest and strongest characters in the sagas, indicating that this lion should be seen as an animal above all others. The lion – strong and noble and associated with kingship – is a fitting animal to match the famous

¹⁴³ Margaret Haist, ‘The Lion, Bloodline, and Kingship’, in *The Mark of the Beast: The Medieval Bestiary in Art, Life, and Literature*, ed. Debra Hassig (New York and London, 1999), pp. 3-22, at p. 3.

¹⁴⁴ Halldór Hermannsson (1938), p. 4.

¹⁴⁵ *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, p. 72.

King Hrólfr Gautreksson. His phenomenal qualities are described in great detail throughout the saga of his name.¹⁴⁶ This is especially true with regard to his kingship capacities: in sum, he is described as *fyrirkonungr allra konunga* ('the foremost of all kings') on account of his accomplishments and generosity.¹⁴⁷ The emphasis on his exceptional qualities clearly demonstrates his right to rule as a just and heroic leader – how royalty *should* behave.

Regarding leopards, Isidore writes that the leopard (*leopardus*) is born when a lioness mates with a pard – the pard (*pardus*) being another one of the big spotted cats, one which is extremely fast and blood-thirsty, leaping upon its prey.¹⁴⁸ A leopard appears in a dream in *Sögubrot af Fornkonungum* (see below, section 7.2) and represents King Helgi. The leopard, related to a lion, seemingly bears the same royal symbolism and matches Helgi's kingly status.

7.2 Dragons

¹⁴⁶ For example, Hrólfr is described as exceptionally strong and flawlessly built; wise, sagacious, and foresighted; the strongest and most handsome and courteous of men; better than any at fighting and sports; and beloved by all (ibid., p. 69).

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 175.

¹⁴⁸ Isidore references Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, which states that a pard can come from the mating of either a lion and a female pard or a male pard with a lioness. Isidore of Seville, ed. pp. 95 and 97, trans. pp. 251-252, and references therein.

As well as the leopard, a number of other dream-animals appear in *Sögubrot af*

Fornkonungum when king Hróerekr tells his wife Auðr about his dream, including a

dragon:

‘Mik dreymsði,’ segir hann, ‘at ek væra staddr nær skógi nokkurum ok hjá völlum sléttum ok fagrum, ok þar sá ek einn hjört standa á vellinum. Þá rann ór skóginum einn hlébarðr, ok þótti mér fax hans sem gull, ok hjörtrinn stakki hornunum undir bóg dýrinu, en þat fell dautt niðr. Þar næst sá ek, hvar flaug flugdreki mikill ok kom þar, sem hjörtrinn var, ok greip þegar í klær sér ok sleit allan í sundr...’¹⁴⁹

(‘I dreamt,’ he says, ‘that I stood near a certain forest and next to a meadow, flat and fair, and there I saw a hart stand in the meadow. Then a leopard ran out of the forest, and it seemed to me that his fur was like gold, and the hart stuck its horns under the animal’s shoulder, and it fell down dead. There I next saw a great dragon and it came to where the hart was and seized it with its claws and tore it all to pieces...’)

Auðr warns Hróerekr that he should be wary of King Ívarr, her treacherous father who is coming to visit, for he has seen *konunga fylgjur* (‘the fetches of kings’).¹⁵⁰ She knows that there will be conflict, and that while it would be better if the hart does not represent him, this is probably the case. Suitably represented by a dragon, Ívarr often shows his propensity for lies and deceit. He craftily manipulates Hróerekr into believing that that his child,

¹⁴⁹ These are in addition to a bear and her cub, which represent Auðr and her young son Haraldr, discussed above (section 4.1). *Sögubrot af Fornkonungum*, p. 50.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

Haraldr, is actually the son of his brother Helgi. Ívarr further convinces Hroerekr that fratricide is the only solution, which he then commits during a horse-riding tournament, stabbing Helgi under his arm with his lance, just as the stag kills the leopard with its horns. To avenge this deed, Ívarr the dragon then slays Hroerekr the hart, reflecting the bestiary tradition of enmity between the hart and the serpent (see above, section 4.5). This dream thus demonstrates how the fabulous, the exotic, and the native can all appear together in the dream-animal symbolism of the *fornaldarsögur*.

A dragon and serpents are included amongst an extremely strange and eclectic mix of fantastic dream-animals in *Hrómundar saga Grípssonar* – these are probably a much later addition, though they are obviously influenced by the aforementioned dreams from eddic poetry. The extant version of the text dates from the seventeenth century and is likely based on *Griplur* (late medieval *rímur*), but a saga of Hrómundr Grípsson, now lost, did exist in the Middle Ages.¹⁵¹ *Blindr inn illi* (‘the evil’) recounts a series of dreams to King Haldingr, which prophesy his death at the hands of Hrómundr: a wolf that bites and wounds the king; a group of hawks sitting in a house, with the king’s falcon amongst them,

¹⁵¹ This is known from evidence in *Þorgils saga Haflíða*, composed in the first half of the thirteenth century; thus ‘the lost *Hrómundar saga* remains one of the oldest written *fornaldarsögur*’. Judith Jesch, ‘Hrómundar saga Grípssonar’, in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (New York, 1993), p. 305.

featherless and stripped of his *hamr* (on *hamr*, see chapter 4, section 2); many swine running south of the king's hall, rooting up the earth with their snouts; a huge monster who bites the king; a fierce serpent that surrounds Sweden; a black cloud with claws and wings that flies away with the king; a serpent that eats Blindr, the king, and all his men; and a dragon *hamr* that is drawn around the king's hall. Blindr recounts many more dreams, which Haldingr misinterprets, somehow anticipating his own success, until Blindr tells of an iron ring around his neck, after which Haldingr knows that they are both doomed.¹⁵² This account is clearly a virtuoso variation and elaboration upon the underlying *fylgjur* motif, but it demonstrates that the literary tradition of dream-animals in Icelandic literature lasted well beyond the late Middle Ages.

8. Literary Motif and Cultural Belief

The roles that animals play in dreams in Old Norse literature reflect a worldview in which humans and animals are fundamentally interconnected. Humans are metaphorically linked to animal counterparts; the actions of one reflect the actions of the other; the death of one implies the death of the other; and the qualities of the animal resemble the character of the person whom it follows. Does this literary motif reflect actual pre-Christian cultural belief?

¹⁵² *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar*, pp. 420-421.

Scholars have previously suggested that people believed in animal *fylgjur*, but rarely provide any evidence or analysis to support their claim.¹⁵³ Mundal argues that the use of *fylgjur* as a literary motif is based on folk belief: ‘Fylgjetruer er igjen ein trusrest frå eit eldre kultursteget enn det norrøne, men det er ein trusrest som har tilpassa seg endra samfunnstilhøve og framleis har ein funksjon. Fylgjetrua er ein levande trusrest’ (‘Beliefs in the fylgje are, again, a remnant of an older culture than that of the Old Norse, but the beliefs have adapted and changed according to social conditions and still have a function. Beliefs in the fylgje are [therefore] a living remnant of culture’).¹⁵⁴ The thematic importance of dream-animals in eddic poetry, which share the same qualities and symbolic discourse as animal *fylgjur*, lends credence to the suggestion that the motif in the saga tradition has older roots, at least as a conceptual metaphorical system if not as a spiritual credo. It is probable that the belief did exist in pre-Christian Norse thought and survived in Iceland via oral tradition, but we cannot know whether Christian Icelanders of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries believed in the veracity of animal *fylgjur*. The idea that

¹⁵³ See e.g. Price (2002), p. 59.

¹⁵⁴ Mundal (1974), p. 11.

belief still existed on a folk level, however, is supported by their continued existence in post-medieval folklore, suggesting some degree of post-conversion synchronicity.¹⁵⁵

Animal *fylgjur* solely appear in dreams that supposedly take place before, or within the years immediately following, the Christian conversion of Iceland in 999 or 1000 AD. As Margaret Clunies Ross explains, ‘there is always a contrast in Icelandic writing about indigenous subjects between pagan and Christian times, between life before and life after the conversion to Christianity’.¹⁵⁶ She notes that this is not always ‘overt’ and does not necessarily ‘shout its message from the rooftops’, but ‘the evidence for its presence is ubiquitous’.¹⁵⁷ Although the transition from paganism to Christianity was surely not a clean break, medieval Icelanders probably knew which ideas were pagan and which were Christian in the oral traditions from which saga literature originated. It is significant that animal *fylgjur* appear nearly exclusively in settings prior to Iceland’s Christian conversion. The only exceptions are *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, *Flóamanna saga*, and *Ljósvetninga saga*; and in these instances, *fylgjur* (or *bugir*) appear in the ten years immediately following the conversion. Moreover, in the many texts that feature an account of the conversion, it is

¹⁵⁵ See e.g. Eric Shane Bryan, ‘Icelandic *Fylgjur* Tales and a Possible Old Norse Context’, *The Heroic Age: A Journal of Early Medieval Northwestern Europe* 13 (2000), and further references therein.

¹⁵⁶ Clunies Ross (1994b), p. 17.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

remarkable that animal *fylgjur* only appear prior to the advent of Christianity, as is the case in, for example, *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts*, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, and *Örvar-Odds saga*.

Theriomorphic *fylgjur* are noticeably absent from the contemporary *samtíðarsögur* ('Contemporary Sagas') and *byskupasögur* ('Sagas of Bishops'), which are set in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. When *fylgjur* do appear in *Sturlunga saga*, they take a decidedly ambiguous form as non-descript supernatural forces, neither appearing as women nor as animals.¹⁵⁸ And when animals are seen in dreams in *Sturlunga saga*, they are not represented as *fylgjur*: these include the horse Fölski, who appears to Sighvatr Sturluson and demands food and drink from him, and the two ravens that present themselves to Sigurður Styrbjarnarson, questioning the outcome of the forthcoming battle of Örlygsstaðir.¹⁵⁹ In both cases, the animals do not represent specific human characters, but rather speak to the dreamer. When and where animal *fylgjur* appear in sagas is not random;

¹⁵⁸ When his enemies are en route to Leiðólfsstaðir to kill him, Hallr Hallsson's mother-in-law urges him to leave the farm because 'þar fara óvina fylgjur' ('the fetches of enemies were coming there'). These *fylgjur* seem to have a physical effect on Hallr, for he suddenly becomes very tired, and when he tries to stand up, he falls down, asleep. *Smákaflar og brot*, in *Sturlunga saga*, vol. II, ed. Jón Jóhannesson et al. (Reykjavík, 1946), p. 287. In *Íslendinga saga*, a woman warns Sturla Sighvatsson to leave home, since 'ófríðarfylgjur váru komnar í heraðit' ('the fetches of enemies were coming into the district') (p. 325).

¹⁵⁹ *Íslendinga saga*, pp. 418-419, 428.

along with references to other pre-Christian spirits, they were deliberately used by authors to signal the pagan past.¹⁶⁰

Belief in the existence of animal *fylgjur* may well have existed in Scandinavia during the Viking Age, prior to the conversion to Christianity, and the motif in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century texts has a historical basis. At the same time, the act of its inclusion in a Christian context must also be regarded as a literary creation.

8.1 Totemism

In the sagas, animal *fylgjur* and their human counterparts represent a single connected subject with shared actions and destinies. They become a united entity that is not entirely animal or human, thus transcending the nature-culture binary. The literary tradition of animal *fylgjur* may have its roots in a pre-Christian belief system from the Viking Age, which can be hypothetically described as totemic.¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ On the pagan past in the *Íslendingasögur* and the different ways that the supernatural is depicted before and after the conversion, see e.g. Bernadine McCreesh, 'How Pagan are the Icelandic Family Sagas', *JEGP* 79.1 (1980), pp. 58-66; and in *Njáls saga* specifically, see Rory McTurk, 'The Supernatural in *Njáls saga*: a narratological approach', *Introductory Essays on Egils saga and Njáls saga* (London, 1992), pp. 102-124.

¹⁶¹ The word *totemism* is derived from the North American Ojibwa tribe; the late-eighteenth century English traveler John Long first used the word to describe Ojibwa relations with *totem* animals, but misunderstood the concept. For the Ojibwa, totems were 'patrilinear family marks which promoted exogamy' and not the type of familiar animal spirits later used by theorists to describe a plethora of cultural situations around the world. Nonetheless, the term – especially as theoretically deployed by Lévi-Strauss – proves helpful for

In his pioneering work *Le Totémisme Aujourd'hui* ('Totemism'), Lévi-Strauss writes that 'The supposed totemism eludes all effort at absolute definition'.¹⁶² There are no strict guidelines in determining whether or not a culture can be described as totemic, but totemism can perhaps be initially understood as any one of a variety of belief systems in which each person has a metaphysical connection with another physical being – an animal or plant (the 'totem') – that interacts with a select individual or kin group. Lévi-Strauss classifies totemic thinking into four distinct categories. Totemism covers ideological relationship between two series: Nature and Culture, and two modes of existence: Collective and Individual. The natural series comprises *categories* and *particulars*; the cultural series comprises *groups* and *persons*.¹⁶³ Consequently, there are four ways of associating the terms and Lévi-Strauss indicates cultures whose practices and beliefs correspond to each combination. The *fylgjur* motif is most indicative of the 'third type',

understanding animal *fylgjur* in Old Norse tradition. See e.g. Christopher Vecsey, *Traditional Ojibwa Religion and its Historical Changes*, *Memoirs Series*, vol. 152 (Philadelphia, 1983; repr. 1993), pp. 78-9.

¹⁶² Lévi-Strauss (1962; 1991), p. 5.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

Particular-Person, in which a specific animal is metaphysically connected to a select individual.¹⁶⁴

Lévi-Strauss suggests that these four types of totemism are equivalent, since they result from the same operation, and regardless of what type of totemism animal *fylgjur* might indicate, such a belief system is incompatible with Christian theology and its separation of nature and culture. As Lévi-Strauss argues: ‘Totemism is firstly the projection outside our own universe, as though by a kind of exorcism, of mental attitudes incompatible with the exigency of a discontinuity between man and nature which Christian thought has held to be essential’.¹⁶⁵ This statement closely matches the Old Norse context, in which most animal *fylgjur* appear in texts prior to the conversion of Iceland, not afterwards.

¹⁶⁴ This represents the more rare (and less studied) individual totemism, rather than group totemism. Other examples of the third combination include the Mota from the Banks Islands and certain Algonquin tribes from North America (see Lévi-Strauss 1962, p. 24). If it existed, pre-Christian Scandinavian totemism may have also involved an element of kinship, whereby the same kin groups, or at least families, were linked with the same animal species. In the sagas, family members consistently have the same animal *fylgjur*: in *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, both the brothers Gautan and Ógautan have fox *fylgjur*, and Jökull and all his brothers have bear *fylgjur*; and in *Sögubrot af Fornkonungum*, a bear with a young cub are the *fylgjur* of Auðr and her young son Haraldr (see above, sections 4.1 and 4.3). The animal is still specific, but the species may be linked to an entire family, rather than just an individual; and the *fylgja*, or totem, could be passed on through descent. This evidence is very insecure: the only relevant examples are from later *fornaldarsögur* and shared social rank is just as likely a cause for family members sharing the same species of animal *fylgjur*, leaving any answer to the question of kinship ambiguous.

¹⁶⁵ Lévi-Strauss (1962; 1991), p. 3.

9. Conclusion

Animals are not only good to eat, live with, and think about – they are also good to imagine with (and in Old Norse, they are imagined within the imaginary of the fiction).

Ideas about animals inherent to medieval Icelandic literature move beyond realistic interactions (such as eating) to encompass greater symbolism and meaning. Animal *fylgjur* are an important example of this argument: an individual's *fylgja* operates as a second self that appears in dreams and visions in animal form, sharing the same fate and inner qualities as its human counterpart and thus acting as a symbol and metaphor whose cultural meaning is drawn from nature. Animal *fylgjur* are consequently indicative of how Scandinavians of the Viking Age – or perhaps earlier, though the original provenance of belief in animal *fylgjur* will surely never be known – related to and thought about their natural environment and its animal inhabitants, whether domestic, wild, avian, or fantastic.

Animals were chosen for specific characters via empirical observation, but in later, more fantastic literature, the motif was inflected by continental influences from the bestiary and romance traditions. The literary motif is systematic and tempered by generic conventions, with multiple categorisations that can be mapped onto one another. Symbolic choice is consistently conditioned by status, gender, physicality, and an individual's

personality traits. The defining characteristics of different animal species parallel different human characteristics: specific animals were seen as fundamentally interconnected with certain people whom they resemble, revealing a close metaphorical and psychological connection between humans and their animal counterparts.

Chapter Four: Human-Animal Transformation

Central to this chapter is therianthropy: the human ability to metamorphose into animals by means of shapeshifting. It will also examine other types of human-animal transformation: not only physical metamorphosis, but psychological changes, and the animal-becoming-human processes of taming and domestication, which contrast with the human-becoming-animal process enabled by wildness. Exploration of the dichotomies of wild/domestic and wild/tame – which can be mapped onto culture-nature, animal-human – will thus constitute the first section of this chapter, followed by sections on Shapeshifting, Bears and *Berserkir*, Wolves and Werewolves, and Feathers and Flight.

In the sagas, people acquire the ability to change into an animal either through magic, consumption of an animal's flesh or blood, or by wearing an animal's skin, fur, or feathers as clothing, often described as a *hamr*.¹⁶⁶ This chapter draws on the concept of *devenir-animal* ('becoming-animal') as described by Deleuze and Guattari in *Mille Plateaux* ('A Thousand Plateaus'). As discussed in the Introduction, multiple dichotomies – animal/human, wild/domestic, savage/civilised, wilderness/habitation, nature/culture –

¹⁶⁶ This is true across various saga sub-genres – especially *fornaldarsögur*, but also *konungasögur* and some *Íslendingasögur*, as well as eddic poetry.

simultaneously deconstruct when human and animal characters undergo physical and psychological transformations. In *Kafka: Pour une Littérature Mineure* ('Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature'), Deleuze and Guattari emphasise the importance of movement; this applies itself particularly well to the Old Norse context:

To become animal is to participate in movement, to stake out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves, to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, as do all the significations, signifiers, and signifieds, to the benefit of an unformed matter of deterritorialized flux, of nonsignifying signs.¹⁶⁷

In his commentary on *devenir-animal*, Gerald Bruns helpfully defines an intensity as 'something like a moving line without boundaries or points along the way, a pure difference without structure or definition, whence *all forms come undone*'.¹⁶⁸ In a transition from major (the constant) to minor (the variable), all classifications simultaneously deconstruct; when the categories of 'human' and 'animal' are interrupted, multiple movements are always at work.

¹⁶⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan, *Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 30, first published as *Kafka: Pour une Littérature Mineure*, 1975 (Minneapolis, 1986), p. 13.

¹⁶⁸ Gerald Bruns, 'Becoming-Animal (Some Simple Ways)', *New Literary History* 38.4 (2007), pp. 703-720, at p. 705.

I also apply anthropological perspectives from Descola's *Par delà nature et culture* ('Beyond Nature and Culture'), an approach explored further in the following chapters. I suggest that the Old Norse sources under study reveal a worldview that can be described as animistic, in which humans view animals as having similar interiorities but different physicalities (see the Introduction). The extent to which humans and animals can be said to have a shared interiority in the sagas was explored in chapter 1 (in the case of Freyfaxi and Snati) and is further analysed in the following chapter.

In this chapter, the focus lies on the separate physicality that differentiates humans and animals, but which can also be donned or discarded as a *hamr* to enable transformations. I thus argue that the oral tradition from which Christian saga authors drew inspiration may contain traces of an animistic worldview ('animistic' as defined by Descola). Finally, this chapter explores the relationship between metaphor and metamorphosis, studied through a close reading of the behaviour of different types of human-animal species.

1. Domestic, Tame, and Wild

What is animal domestication? Zooarchaeologist Nerissa Russell explains that animal domestication 'is surely the most important transformation in human-animal relations,

with far-reaching consequences for both partners'.¹⁶⁹ Domestication encompasses a wide range of human-animal relationships, but the best definitions combine biological and social aspects, for it entails 'both an alteration in human-animal relations and behavioral and morphological changes in the domesticated animal'.¹⁷⁰ But these seemingly clear-cut categories of wild and domestic – which ecocritic Barney Nelson terms 'another troublesome dichotomy' – do not hold up to critical scrutiny.¹⁷¹ Moreover, their porous boundaries can be used as a basis for studying the transition that both animals and humans undertake between various other spectrums, including human-animal and culture-nature, and the destabilisation of these dichotomies is often enacted through physical movement.

¹⁶⁹ Nerissa Russell, *Social Archaeology: Humans and Animals in Prehistory* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 207. Richard Lee and Irven Devore suggest that it is the most important and influential process in human history. See *Man the Hunter* (Chicago, 1968), pp. 9-12.

¹⁷⁰ Russell (2012), pp. 208-209. See pp. 208-215 for discussion of various biological and social definitions for the term 'domestic'. See further 'Chapter 6: Domestication as a Human-Animal Relationship' (pp. 207-258) and 'Chapter 7: Pets and Other Human-Animal Relationships' (pp. 259-298).

¹⁷¹ This is evidenced by cultic animals that go wild (see chapter 1, section 4.2). Barney Nelson, *The Wild and the Domestic: Animal Representation, Ecocriticism, and Western American Literature* (Reno and Las Vegas, 2000). See especially the 'Introduction: Another Troublesome Dichotomy' (pp. 1-25) and the 'Conclusion: Collapsing the Wild/Domestic Dichotomy' (pp. 130-141). Ecocritics, animal theorists, zooanthropologists, and zooarchaeologists have all challenged the wild-domestic dichotomy from a variety of perspectives. See further e.g. Kerry Harris and Yannis Hamilakis, 'Beyond the wild, the feral, and the domestic: lessons from prehistoric Crete', in *Routledge Handbook of Human-Animal Studies*, ed. Garry Marvin and Susan McHugh (London and New York, 2014), pp. 97-113; James Serpell, *In the Company of Animals: A Study of Human-Animal Relationships* (Oxford, 1986; Cambridge, 1996); Ingold (1994), pp. 1-22 and extensive references therein.

Gerald Bruns argues that ‘becoming-animal ... is a deterritorialization in which a subject no longer occupies a realm of stability and identity but is instead folded imperceptibly into a movement’.¹⁷² The same is true of animals who undertake the becoming-human process of becoming-domestic: there is always physical movement when wild animals are domesticated or turn feral (also see chapter 1, section 4.2), as well as when wild animals are tamed. It is important to note the difference between taming and domestication, although they are related. Russell explains that ‘taming is seen as an alteration in the human-animal relationship with a particular animal that does not have lasting effects, through succeeding generations, whereas domestication involves a long-term change in relations beyond the lifetime of a single animal’.¹⁷³ This section thus establishes a spectrum which is navigated by person and beast alike: wild animal – tame animal – domestic animal – quasi-human animal – animalistic human – human (and back again).

Tim Ingold provides a useful modern definition for wild animals:

The precise meaning of domestication has remained a topic of scholarly debate for well over a century ... [but] every one of the competing definitions

¹⁷² Bruns (2007), p. 703.

¹⁷³ Domestication thus results in morphological and behavioural changes for an entire species. Russell (2012), p. 209.

introduces some notion of human *control* over the growth and reproduction of animals and plants. Wild animals, therefore, are *animals out of control*.¹⁷⁴

In medieval terms, a helpful definition for wild animals is given in Isidore of Seville's highly influential *Etymologies*:

The term 'beast,' properly speaking, includes lions, panthers, tigers, wolves, foxes, dogs, apes, and other animals that attack either with their mouth or their claws, excepting serpents. They are called beasts (*bestia*) from the force (*vis*) with which they attack. They are termed wild (*ferus*) because they enjoy a natural freedom and are driven (*ferre*) by their own desires—for their wills are free and they wander here and there, and wherever their spirit leads, there they go.¹⁷⁵

While knowledge of this text in medieval Iceland cannot be demonstrated – beyond the fact that Isidore influenced later bestiary tradition, which did make its way to Iceland (see the introduction to chapter 3) – it is still indicative of how wild animals were thought about in the Middle Ages. There is a certain instinctiveness and savageness to wildness; it is separate from the civilised human world. In the sagas, then, the wild animals are those species that were never tamed for human purposes: the arctic fox, Iceland's only native land mammal; the walrus and seals which inhabited Iceland's coasts; the polar bears that drift to Iceland on icebergs from

¹⁷⁴ Ingold (1994), p. 3.

¹⁷⁵ Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge, 2006), p. 251.

Greenland; fish, whales, and birds of all species; and animals native to continental Europe and beyond: wolves, snakes, deer, brown bears, lions, tigers, dragons, et cetera.¹⁷⁶

1.1 Polar Bears

Just as domestic animals can undertake a process of re-wilding, these wild animals can also undertake journeys toward the domestic. In his *History of Animals*, Aristotle writes that ‘some [animals] are tame, others wild; some are always [tame, e.g., man and the mule; some always] wild, as the leopard and the wolf; some can also be quickly tamed, e.g., the elephant’.¹⁷⁷ A surprisingly close Icelandic equivalent to Aristotle’s elephant (which can be rapidly tamed) might be the polar bear.

Hvítabjarnar (‘white bears’ – ‘polar bears’) appear frequently in saga literature; this reflects a social reality, since polar bears have been drifting to Iceland from Greenland on icebergs for millenia (see the introduction to chapter 1). According to textual evidence, they were encountered during the settlement period: in *Landnámabók*, Ingimundr Þorsteinsson ‘fann beru ok húna tvá hvíta á Húnavatni’ (‘found a she-bear

¹⁷⁶ A possible exception is falconry in the case of certain birds, though there is no evidence that this was practiced in medieval Iceland (only continental Scandinavia, see below, section 1.2). On wild animals in medieval Iceland, see e.g. Smith (1995); Bjarni F. Einarsson (1995); Thomas H. McGovern et al. (2007).

¹⁷⁷ Aristotle, *History of Animals Books I-III*, p. 17 (for the original Greek, see p. 16).

and two polar bear cubs in Húnavatn').¹⁷⁸ This episode receives greater elaboration in

Vatnsdæla saga, in which Ingimundr and his descendants are the protagonists, and the

place-name *Húnavatn* ('Cubs' Lake') is determined by their discovery of the bears.¹⁷⁹

The Norwegian *Konungs skuggsjá* details the distinction between polar bears and

brown bears in continental Scandinavia in its account of Greenland as follows:

Björn er þar ok á því landi, ok er hvít, ok ætla menn at hann fœðisk á því landi, þvíat hann hefir alt aðra náttúru en svartir birnir, er í skógum ganga; þeir veiða at sér hross ok naut ok annat bú, ok fœðask við þat, en hinn hvíti björninn, er á Grœnalandi er, þá ferr hann mest í hafi út á ísum, ok veiðir þar at sér bæði sela ok hvala, ok lifir við þat; svá er hann ok vel fœrr til sunds alls sem selar eða hvalar.¹⁸⁰

(There is also a bear in that land, which is white, and people think that he is native to that land, because he has an entirely different nature from black bears, which travel the forests; they hunt horses and cattle and other livestock for themselves, and survive on that, but the other, the white bear, which is in Greenland, usually goes out to sea on the ice, and there catches both seals and whales for itself, and lives on that; so he is entirely well adapted to the sea just like seals or whales.)

¹⁷⁸ *Landnámabók* (2), p. 219.

¹⁷⁹ *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 42. Numerous places are named after wild animals, but domestic animals were also used. Ingimundr's settlement in *Vatnsdæla saga* is exemplary: the fjord in which two rams are seen running down a mountain is named *Hrútafjörðr* ('Rams' fjord'); the valley where some missing sheep are eventually found is named *Sauðadalr* ('Sheep valley'); and when a group of feral pigs are chased to a lake, it is named *Svínavatn* ('Swine lake') (pp. 39, 42-43; on these pigs, also see chapter 1, section 4.2).

¹⁸⁰ *Speculum Regale. Konungs-Skuggsjá*, p. 43.

This account details a close observation of the natural behaviour of polar bears. Depictions of brown bears in Norway will be further discussed below (section 3.2); their killing of livestock is a significant source of trouble for human communities in a number of sagas. Inhabiting the geographical outskirts of the medieval Norse world, and thus far removed from civilisation, polar bears are portrayed in a different light.¹⁸¹ While initially wild, polar bears could also be tamed to an extent. *Landnámabók* also details the fate of one of the *Húnavatn* bears: ‘Eptir þat fór hann útan ok gaf Haraldi konungi dýrin; ekki höfðu menn í Nóregi áðr sét hvítabjörnu’ (‘After that he journeyed abroad and gave King Haraldr the animal; men had never before seen a polar bear in Norway’).¹⁸² It is unclear which of the three bears Ingimundr presents as a gift, but the Icelandic bear is well-received in *Vatnsdæla saga* and the king thanks Ingimundr for his gift.¹⁸³

The capturing and presentation of a Greenlandic polar bear is a repeated motif in medieval Icelandic literature.¹⁸⁴ When Auðunn from the Westfjords travels to Greenland in

¹⁸¹ Although both species are symbolically deployed in the same way as animal *fylgjur* (see chapter 3, section 4.1).

¹⁸² *Landnámabók* (2), p. 219.

¹⁸³ *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 44.

¹⁸⁴ In addition to the examples analysed, the motif also appears in *Grænlandinga þáttr*, when Kolbeinn brings a polar bear from Greenland for king Haraldr gilli. *Grænlandinga þáttr*, in *Eyrbyggja saga*, ÍF IV, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson (Reykjavík, 1935), p. 291.

Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka, he gives every penny he owns for a polar bear and takes it on his travels, first to Norway and then to Denmark, where he gives the animal to king Sveinn.¹⁸⁵

This process entails a movement from the furthest reaches of the known world – the wilderness of Greenland – towards the centre of culture: the court of the king. According to the *Morkinskinna* version, Auðunn ‘kaupir þar bjarndýri eitt, görsimi mikla’ (‘purchased a polar bear there, a great treasure’); and in *Flateyjarbók*, the bear is described as ‘akafa fagrtt og raudkinna’ (‘exceptionally beautiful and red-cheeked’).¹⁸⁶ It is in *Hulda-Hrokkinskinna*, however, that the tameness of the animal is made explicit: ‘þar keypti Auðunn bjarndýri vel vanit’ (‘there Auðunn purchased a well-trained polar bear’).¹⁸⁷ Similarly, in *Króka-Refs saga*, Bárðr sails from Greenland to Norway and Gunnarr sends three valuable gifts with him for King Haraldr: the first is ‘hvítabjörn fulltíði ok vandr ágæta vel’ (‘a fully grown and very

¹⁸⁵ For more discussion of this fascinating tale, see William Ian Miller, *Audun and the Polar Bear: Luck, Law, and Largesse in a Medieval Tale of Risky Business* (Leiden, 2008) and further references therein.

¹⁸⁶ Red-cheeked animals are usually associated with strength and leadership (see chapter 3, section 4.1); here it might be a traditional epithet for health and beauty. *Morkinskinna I*, ÍF XXIII, ed. Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson (Reykjavík, 2011), p. 217; *Flateyjarbók. En samling af norske konge-sagaer med indskudte mindre fortællinger om begivenheder i og udenfor Norge samt annaler*, vol. III, ed. Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Carl Rikard Unger (Christiania, 1868), p. 411.

¹⁸⁷ The ÍF VI edition mistakenly attributes the words *vel vanit* to *Flateyjarbók* (p. 361, fn. 3), but the past participle of the verb *venja* is only used to describe the polar bear in *Hulda-Hrokkinskinna. Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka*, in *Vestfirðinga sögur*, ÍF VI, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík, 1943), p. 361; *Hulda: De norske konger sagaer 1030-1155, efter AM 66 fol. med varianter fra Gl. kgl. saml. 1010 fol. 1-2*, ed. Jonna Louis-Jensen, Editiones Arnarnagænanæ: Series A 11-12, p. 1 [not published; accessed via *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog – A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, University of Copenhagen. Web. Accessed 30 September 2017.]

well-trained polar bear’).¹⁸⁸ Both here and in *Hulda-Hrokkinskinna*, the past participle of the verb *venja* is used (*vanit* and *vandr*), which means ‘to accustom’, ‘to train, tame’.¹⁸⁹

Moreover, in *Króka-Refs saga*, the bear is seemingly well-received by the king’s court, so its behaviour must have been thought to be non-violent and accommodating: ‘Bárðr lét leiða inn í höllina hvítabjörn fyrir konung. Hirðinni fannst mikit um dýrit’ (‘Bárðr had the polar bear led inside into the hall and before the king. The king’s followers were greatly pleased with the animal’).¹⁹⁰

The language of these texts explicitly shows that these polar bears undertake a movement from the wild towards the tame, and there is some evidence that this actually happened in medieval Greenland and Iceland. In *Hungrvaka* (an early thirteenth-century account of the history of the episcopal see at Skálholt and the first five bishops who lived there), Ísleifr journeys abroad to Saxony, seeking emperor Heinrekr Konráðsson, and gives

¹⁸⁸ *Króka-Refs saga*, p. 142.

¹⁸⁹ *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, pp. 693–694. Furthermore, when Auðunn arrives in Norway, ‘gengr hann upp af skipi ok leiðir eptir sér dýrit’ (‘he walked off the ship and led the animal behind him’): the use of the verb *leiða* (‘to lead’) suggests that the bear follows Auðunn willingly, or at least without causing any trouble. *Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka*, p. 362.

¹⁹⁰ *Króka-Refs saga*, p. 143. There are two other appearances of Greenlandic polar bears in *Króka-Refs saga*. Earlier in the saga, Refr sees a polar bear in the distance, which quickens its pace upon being spotted; eventually two brothers kill the bear and bring it home to eat (pp. 133–134). Later in the saga, when Refr and his sons leave Greenland for Denmark, they supposedly travel with five polar bears and fifty falcons (fifteen of which are white), though presumably this is literary hyperbole (p. 157).

him a polar bear from Greenland – ‘ok var þat dýr en mesta gersemi’ (‘and that animal was the greatest treasure’).¹⁹¹ As a primarily historical text, this passage raises interesting questions about the likely historicity of the events described, as well as their possible influence on later saga texts with which *Hungrvaka* has striking parallels. The idea that polar bears were actually tamed in medieval Iceland is also supported by legal evidence: according to *Grágás*, if a man sets an ‘olmom hundr’ (‘savage dog’) or ‘alebirne’ (‘tame bear’) on someone, the penalty is lesser outlawry if there is no injury, but full outlawry if there is a visible mark or if he falls down.¹⁹² Additionally, if a man receives major wounds, lasting injury, or death from beasts – ‘hvarz hross eða návt hundr eða biorn’ (‘whether horse or cattle, dog or bear’) – then the penalty for the man is the same as if he had done the deed himself, establishing a legal metonymy between human and animal.¹⁹³

1.2 Falconry

A similar process (of movement along a spectrum) is at work in examples of falconry.

Despite a significant amount of archaeological evidence for the practice of falconry in

¹⁹¹ *Hungrvaka*, in *Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek 11: Kristnisaga, Þáttur Þorvalds ens víðfjóra, Þáttur Ísleifs biskups Gizurarsonar, Hungrvaka*, ed. Bernard Kahle (Halle, 1905), p. 91.

¹⁹² *Grágás, Konungsbók*, vol. II, p. 156.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 156. There are also laws about hunting and eating polar bears, as discussed in chapter 2 (section 1.1), which suggest that the keeping of tame bears was not solely a royal prerogative.

medieval Scandinavia, only a limited number of kings in the *fornaldarsögur* and *konungasögur* are described as hunting with their falcons or hawks.¹⁹⁴ Initially wild, these raptors have been tamed and trained for human purposes.

In *Ólaf's saga helga*, for example, Óláfr Eiríksson, the king of Sweden, rides out ‘með hauka sína ok hunda’ (‘with his hawks and hounds’) and in an act of triple biotechnology, lets loose his *hawk*, which in two flights kills five heathcocks, and then his *dogs* retrieve and bring back every bird that comes down, and the king spurs his *horse* after them to collect the game.¹⁹⁵ *Hrólfs saga kraka* provides a more detailed account of the human-hawk relationship: when Hrólfr and his men visit King Aðils in Sweden, they all have hawks on their shoulders, which was considered ‘mikil prýði í þær mundir’ (‘a great gallantry in those times’).¹⁹⁶ Hrólfr’s hawk is named, Hábrókr, and later proves its loyalty to its human companion and thus the effectiveness of its training. During the battle, Hábrókr flies out of Aðils’ fortress and triumphantly settles on Hrólfr’s shoulder; he killed all of Aðils’ hawks in

¹⁹⁴ Falconry was probably introduced to Scandinavia in the 6th century during the migration era; it was brought by the Huns, Alans, Sarmatians, or Vandals. See e.g. Claus Dobiát, ‘Early falconry in central Europe on the basis of grave finds, with a discussion of the origin of falconry’, in *Hunting in northern Europe until 1500 AD: Old traditions and regional developments, continental sources and continental influences*, ed. Oliver Grimm and Ulrich Schmölcke (Neümünster, 2013), pp. 343–356. In comparison, see Robin S. Oggins, *Kings and Their Hawks: Falconry in Medieval England* (New Haven, 2004); Thomas T. Allsen, *The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History* (Philadelphia, 2006).

¹⁹⁵ *Ólaf's saga helga*, in *Heimskringla II*, ÍF XXVII, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (Reykjavík, 1979), p. 131.

¹⁹⁶ *Hrólfs saga kraka*, p. 78.

the loft where they were kept, demonstrating a metonymic extension of Hrólfr and a magnification of the ideal hawk-companion.

1.3 *The Dog-King*

What process is in operation when the animal transforms towards the human? Such moments are rare in the sagas, but one such transformation is associated with the dog Saurr in Snorri's *Hákonar saga góða*. King Eysteinn Upplendingakonungr conquers Þrándheim and places it under his son's command, but the people kill their new ruler. When Eysteinn subdues Þrándheim again, he offers the people a choice: they can either have his thrall as their king, Þórir faxi, or his dog, named Saurr – and they choose the dog because they think they will have more autonomy. Using *seiðr*, the people of Þrándheim endow Saurr with great intelligence and the capacity of human speech: 'Þeir létu síða í hundinn þriggja manna vit, ok gó hann til tveggja orða, en mælti it þriðja' ('They magicked into the dog the intelligence of three men, and he barked two words, but spoke the third').¹⁹⁷ Magic here

¹⁹⁷ *Hákonar saga góða*, p. 164. *Seiðr* can enable a process of becoming-animal as well as becoming-human. In *Þáttur af Hertnið ok Ostasiu*, part of the chivalric translation *Þiðreks saga af Bern*, Ostasia is able to transform herself into a dragon through her magic. She is also able to conjure many kinds of beasts, including lions, bears, and dragons, which she is able to tame: 'Hún tamdi þá alla, þar til at þeir hlýddu henna' ('She then tamed all of them, until they obeyed her'), again demonstrating how the wild/domestic dichotomy also disintegrates when the boundaries between human and animal are challenged. *Þáttur af Hertnið ok Ostasiu*, in *Þiðreks saga af Bern*, vol. II, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík, 1951), p. 477.

enables a becoming-human process. Along with *Sámr*, *Vígi* and other famous saga-dogs (as discussed in chapter 1, section 2), *Saurr* thus demonstrates quasi-human *vit* ('intelligence').

The people of Þrándheim seemingly embrace their new king: they construct a collar and chain of silver and gold for *Saurr*; and when paths were *saurugt* ('dirty, filthy, muddy'), his followers carry him on their shoulders. In all ways he is treated royally: 'Hásæti var honum búit' ('a high-seat was prepared for him'), reminiscent of a throne, and 'hann sat á haugi sem konungar' ('he sat on a hill as kings do'), furthering his metaphorical movement towards humanity.¹⁹⁸ Although regarded as successful in the human realm, *Saurr* lacks the strength and ferocity of wild animals. When wolves attack his flock, *Saurr*'s followers urge him to defend his sheep; but when he comes down from his hill to fight the wolves, they immediately rip him to pieces. The sheep are symbolic of the people that *Saurr*, as king, is meant to protect; the wolves represent the king's enemies. *Saurr* undergoes a transformation; he moves away from the 'animal' end of the spectrum towards the 'human', echoing the movement from wild to tame and domestic. Eysteinn's intention in giving the people of Þrándheim this extraordinary creature, however, is far from benign. Rather he mocks them and their pagan ways by insulting them: the word *saurr* literally means 'mud',

¹⁹⁸ This hill is then named after him: 'Saurshaugr' (*Hákonar saga góða*, p. 164).

‘dirt’, or indeed, ‘excrements’.¹⁹⁹ The tale is surely meant to be satirical, but it also adumbrates what constitutes an ideal king: contrasting with Saurr is Hákon góði, a good Christian king who converts the people to Christianity (see chapter 2, section 1.3). Saurr also appears in *Hversu Noregr byggðist*, which follows Snorri’s version of events; here Eysteinn explicitly makes Saurr the king of Þrándheim as an act of revenge because they killed his son, Öundur.²⁰⁰

The dog-king motif appears in a number of texts from continental Scandinavia, which provide further insight into Eysteinn’s actions and intentions. Following his victory against king Regnvald in *Gesta Danorum*, Gunnar of Sweden humiliates the Norwegian people further by appointing a dog as their ruler, which surely entails an extremely shameful insult: as Saxo questions, ‘Quo facto quid aliud eum assequi uoluisse putemus quam, ut plenus superbie populus insolentiam suam manifestius puniri cognosceret, dum obnixos latranti uertices inclinaret?’ (‘What else are we to imagine his aim was here other than to make the populace, bursting with pride, clearly understand that he was punishing

¹⁹⁹ *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 515.

²⁰⁰ *Hversu Noregr byggðist, Frá Fornjóti ok hans ættmönnum*, FNS II, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Akureyri, 1954), p. 79. Saurr is also mentioned in *Skáldatal*, not as a king but as a king’s dog: when Erpr lútandi is sentenced to death, he composes a *drápa* about Saurr and thus saves his life. *Skáldatal*, in *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar: Nafnapulur og Skáldatal*, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík, 1949), p. 339.

their haughtiness, when they had to bow their heads in deference to a yapping animal?').²⁰¹

The motif is also found in Swedish sources. According to the *Chronicon Lethrense* and *Annales Ryenses*, when the sixth-century Danish King Halga died, the Swedish King Eadgils sent a small dog named Rakke (Old Danish for 'dog', c.f. ON *rakki*) to become king of Denmark.²⁰² As in Saxo's account, anyone who reports Rakke's death will lose his life; and like Saurr, Rakke dies when he tries to conduct his kingly duties, this time by intervening in a fight between larger dogs, which then tear him to pieces. Each of these legendary canine rulers was put on the throne by a conqueror as an insult; thus the motif in *Hákonar saga góða* has deep roots in Scandinavian tradition. They also establish cultural anxieties about breaking the boundaries between human and animal, wild and domestic. To transgress these dichotomies by not only making a dog quasi-human, but also a king, has disastrous consequences: dogs are meant to be companion animals, but not rulers with dominion over human lives.

²⁰¹ Gunnar then appoints governors to supervise the dog's public and private affairs, with a separate rank of nobility to keep watch over the canine ruler; moreover, any courtier that did not display reverential obeisance would pay with the loss of his limbs. Consequently, the swelling arrogance of the Norwegians was punctured; they plainly recognised that their pride was humbled when forced to pay homage to a dog. Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum: The History of the Danes*, ed. Karsten Friis-Jensen, trans. Peter Fisher, vol. I (Oxford, 2015), pp. 498-499.

²⁰² *Chronicon Lethrense*, in *Scriptores minores historiae Danicae. medii ævi. ex codicibus denuo recensvit*, ed. M. CL. Gertz, vol. I (Copenhagen, 1917-1918; repr. 1970), p. 48; *Annales Ryenses*, in *Annales danici medii ævi*, ed. Ellen Jørgensen (Copenhagen, 1920), p. 63; *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 481.

1.4 Outlaws

The same spectrum can be productively mapped onto human characters, who undertake similar physical movements which destabilise multiple dichotomies simultaneously. When the aforementioned Egill of Sweden – the one with the sacrificial bull (see chapter 1, section 4.2) – becomes king in *Ynglinga saga*, he demotes a man named Tunni from treasurer to thrall. Together with many other slaves and evil-doers, Tunni absconds and they ‘lágu úti á mörkum, stundum hljópu þeir í heruð ok ræntu menn eða drápu’ (‘laid out in the woods, occasionally they raided in the district and robbed or killed people’).²⁰³ Tunni can thus be seen to undergo a transformation from *culture* (as a favourite of the former king and a treasurer) towards *nature* (living in the forest, raiding farmsteads like a wild animal, i.e. a wolf or bear).

These characters choose to live outside law voluntarily, but the same process applies to outlaws, who are legally removed from society and thus forced to inhabit the wilds.

Some of the terms for outlaws denote their wildness, e.g. *skóggangr* (‘going-by-the-forest’), *skógarmaðr* (‘man-of-the-forest’), and *urðarmaðr* (‘man-of-the-wilds’). The word *vargr*, which means either ‘wolf’ or ‘outlaw’, metonymically suggests that such wildness aligns the

²⁰³ *Ynglinga saga*, p. 51.

individual with a wild animal.²⁰⁴ As Eleanor Barraclough suggests, these terms ‘connect social outcasts with the physicality of wilderness or with the creatures that live in it’.²⁰⁵ In the outlaw sagas, such characters occupy spaces on the margins of the civilised world: in periphery locations away from settlements – terrain such as islands and caves and underground hideouts.²⁰⁶ They also prey on people’s livestock like wild animal predators.²⁰⁷ Recent archaeological excavations at Surtshellir, a place where a gang of outlaws go to hide in *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, reveals that these movements were historical fact.²⁰⁸ As the following sections will demonstrate, these metaphorical transformations entail the same

²⁰⁴ On outlawry and its terminology, see further e.g. Gabriel Turville-Petre, ‘Outlawry’, in *Sjöttu ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni 20 júlí 1977*, ed. Einar G. Pétursson and Jónas Kristjánsson, vol. 2 (Reykjavík, 1977), pp. 769-778, and references therein.

²⁰⁵ Eleanor Barraclough, ‘Inside Outlawry in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* and *Gísla saga Súrssonar*: Landscape in the Outlaw Sagas’, *SS* 82 (2010), pp. 365-388, at p. 367.

²⁰⁶ See e.g. Gísli Súrsson’s outlawry in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*. This figurative movement of outlaws into the wilderness might be further linked with the popular medieval ‘wild man of the woods’ motif. See e.g. Richard Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1952); Timothy Husband, with the assistance of Gloria Gilmore-House, *The Wild Man: Medieval Myth and Symbolism* (New York, 1980). The association with forests is problematic when applied to Iceland, but remains relevant to medieval Norway.

²⁰⁷ See e.g. *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* (p. 190) and the translated *Ívens saga*, ed. Foster W. Blaisdell (Copenhagen, 1979), pp. 86-87.

²⁰⁸ Guðmundur Ólafsson, Kevin P. Smith and Thomas McGovern, ‘Surtshellir: a fortified outlaw cave in West Iceland’, in *The Viking Age: Ireland and the West (Proceedings of the Fifteenth Viking Congress, Cork, 2005)* (Dublin, 2010), pp. 283-297; *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, pp. 81-82. In the nineteenth-century *Hellismanna saga*, Surtshellir is said to be fortified by an outlaw band in the late tenth century and it is used as a base to prey on the surrounding countryside. Jón Árnason, vol. II, pp. 300-304.

physical relocations that are undertaken by characters who physically transform into wild animals.

2. Shapeshifting

The concept of *hamr* is central to human-animal transformation in Old Norse literature.

The word is difficult to translate since it is a complex concept with some variation between texts, but it essentially means ‘shape’ or ‘form’, and ‘skin’, ‘pelt’, or ‘shell’.²⁰⁹ When *hamr* implies an animal pelt or physical shape, there is the suggestion that the nature of the animal from whom the pelt came is contained within it (e.g. in *Vǫlsunga saga*, discussed below, section 4.2). As Tolley explains, however, ‘*hamr* need not imply the existence of a physical pelt at all, but may exhibit a sense of the outward form assumed by a being’, which certain people were able to change, thus assuming animal forms.²¹⁰ The verb *hamask* is sometimes used in the literal sense of ‘change outward appearance’ (e.g. *Helgakviða*

²⁰⁹ See e.g. Tolley (2009), pp. 193-198; Hilda R. Ellis-Davidson, ‘Shape-changing in the Old Norse Sagas’, in *Animals in Folklore*, ed. J. R. Porter and W. H. S. Russell (Ipswich, 1978), pp. 126-142. As this chapter will show (and this section in particular), the word *hamr* has multiple meanings and was used to signify a variety of transformations. The other word commonly used to signify transformation is *líki*, which also essentially means ‘shape’ or ‘form’ – e.g. Reginn’s transformation *í orms líki* (‘into the shape of a serpent/dragon’) in *Reginismál*, in *Eddukvæði II: Hetjukvæði*, ÍF, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavik, 2014), p. 300. Re. this episode (and various interpretations of the word *ormr*) as well as dragons in Old Norse literature more widely, see Paul Acker, ‘Dragons in the Eddas and Early Nordic Art’, in *Revisiting the Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Heroic Legend*, ed. Paul Acker and Carlyne Larrington (New York and London, 2013), pp. 53-75.

²¹⁰ Tolley (2009), p. 194.

Hjörvarðssonar, when earl Fránmarr ‘hamaz í arnar líki’ (‘changes into an eagle’s form’), as discussed below, section 5). In some instances, the change into animal shape does not make the use of a *hamr* as a pelt explicit: this is the case in *Þorskfirðinga saga*, when Askmaðr escapes a burning house as a boar and is subsequently found as a human, and in *Eyrbyggja saga*, when Katla magically transforms her son Oddr into a rock, a goat, and then a boar.²¹¹

While *hamr* is mostly used in the sense of physical transformation, sometimes it implies mental change instead: the terms *hamslauss* and *hamstolinn*, for example, refer to being ‘deprived of *hamr*’, resulting in mental unrest.²¹²

Hamir can also be understood as mental projections that could be sent long distances in animal form – called a *hamför*.²¹³ According to *Landnámabók*, at King Haraldr’s urging, Ingimundr sent two Finns *í hamförum* (‘on shape-journeys’) to Iceland.²¹⁴ This

²¹¹ *Þorskfirðinga saga*, in *Harðar saga*, ÍF XIII, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (Reykjavík, 1991), pp. 200-201 (another man, Katla, also transforms into a sow); *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 51-53.

²¹² See e.g. *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ÍF II, ed. Sigurður Nordal (Reykjavík, 1933), p. 229; further references in Tolley (2009) and Ellis-Davidson (1978).

²¹³ These journeys may be connected to Sámi folkloric ideas about theriomorphic assistant spirits; when in animal form, these spirits served as escorts for shamanistic journeys, guiding the free-soul to the other world. If travelling the sea, the shaman would ride a fish (*saiva guelie*, ‘supernatural fish’) and sometimes the shaman was thought to transform into his accompanying spirit. See Louise Bäckman and Åke Hultkrantz, *Studies in Lapp Shamanism*, *Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis* 16 (Stockholm, 1978), pp. 17-18, 42, 67, 100.

²¹⁴ *Landnámabók* (2), p. 218. Their journey is explicitly linked with the pre-Christian past since they attempt to find Ingimundr’s silver image of Freyr. They locate the lost object, but are unable to obtain it, and they return to tell Ingimundr of its location in a certain valley, the lay of all the land, and where he should settle.

episode is elaborated in *Vatnsdæla saga*, but without the *hamr* element made explicit. Three Finns come to Ingimundr from the north; in exchange for butter and tin, they go to Iceland on a *sendiferð* ('journey') and *forsending* ('dangerous mission') in search of Haraldr's Freyr-amulet and to report back about the region (this appears to be a physical transformation rather than a *bugr*-like sending).²¹⁵ In *Ólaf's saga Tryggvasonar*, Haraldr requests *kunngum manni* ('a man versed in magic') to go *í hamförum* ('on a shape-journey') to Iceland; here the *hamfö* explicitly involves animal form and links *hamr* and *líki*, for he travels *í hvalslíki* ('in whale's-form'), providing an obviously supernatural explanation for the ability to travel such a long distance across the ocean.²¹⁶

In *Landnámabók*, *Dufþakr* and *Stórólfr*, both described as *hamramir* ('shapeshifters'), fight in the form of a bear and bull one night. In the morning a hollow can be seen in the place where they had met, as if the earth had been turned over, and both men were injured as a result. Uniquely, whilst fighting, they are only visible to those with second sight. The animals are more than mental projections (which would align them with *bugir*, see chapter 3, section 2): they are supernatural, psychological forces with clear

²¹⁵ *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 34.

²¹⁶ *Ólaf's saga Tryggvasonar*, p. 271. Similarly, in *Ketils saga hængs*, a *tröll*-woman *brást í hvalslíki* ('turned herself into the form of a whale') and dives into the sea; Ketill hits her under the fin with an arrow, rendering her bed undesirable in an act of symbolic significance (p. 172).

physical existences whose battle has consequences, both for the natural environment and the sender of the *hamr*. They are perhaps best described as psychophysical forces. In *Friðþjófs saga hins frækna*, two female *hambleypur* perform *seiðr* and then appear out to sea riding on whales; they attack Friðþjófr, and when he strikes them, the two women performing *seiðr* fall from their dais with their backs broken.²¹⁷ Whatever occurs during the journey of the theriomorphic *hamr* will also happen to the body of the human sender.

Egill Skalla-Grímsson's grandfather, Úlfr ('Wolf') always rises early in the morning and helps others; when evening approaches, however, he becomes ill-tempered, people are afraid to speak with him, and he always goes to sleep early. Consequently, people believe that 'hann væri mjök hamrammr; hann var kallaðr Kveld-Úlfr' ('he was a great shape-shifter; he was called Evening-Wolf').²¹⁸ Úlfr does not seem to undergo physical transformation, but as his name suggests, there is something wolfish in his nature, and as nighttime approaches, his animalistic interiority emerges. He also demonstrates the connection between this section and the following two: he is described in terms of *hamr*, as

²¹⁷ *Friðþjófs saga hins frækna*, in FNS III, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Akureyri, 1954), p. 88.

²¹⁸ *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, p. 2.

a *hamrammr* ('shapeshifter') – he is a very close companion of the *berserkr* Berðlu-Kári and is later described as *berserksgangr* himself – and he is named 'Wolf'.²¹⁹

The concept of *hamr* can explicitly be linked with medieval Icelandic ideas about paganism. It is consistently linked with various pre-Christian deities and beings, and in the sagas, with characters who perform magic, especially prior to the conversion to Christianity. Thus in *Eyrbyggja saga*, it is said of Þrándr stígandi ('strider') Ingjaldsson that he 'var kallaðr eigi einhamr, meðan hann var heiðinn, en þá tók af flestum trollskap, er skírðir váru' ('was said to not be of one *hamr* [i.e. shape], while he was heathen, but most people stopped practising troll-nature [i.e. witchcraft], when they were baptised').²²⁰ Connections between shapeshifting and paganism will be discussed throughout this chapter, as will the concept of *hamr*. I start by considering the dual sense of *hamask*: both to change outward appearance and also to change temperament and enter a wild frenzy, like a *berserkr*.

3. *Berserkir* and Bears

3.1 *Berserkir*

²¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 1, 70.

²²⁰ *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 165.

Regarding Óðinn's warriors, Snorri Sturluson wrote in *Ynglinga saga* that 'hans menn fóru brynjulausir ok váru galnir sem hundar eða vargar, bitu í skjöldu sína, váru sterkir sem birnir eða griðungar. Þeir drápu mannfólkit, en hvártki eldr né járn orti á þá. Þat er kallaðr berserksgangr' ('his men went [to battle] armourless and were as mad as dogs or wolves, [they] bit their shields, [they] were as strong as bears or bulls. They killed people, but neither fire nor iron could harm them. That is called berserker's rage/fury/going').²²¹ While the probable 'bear-shirt' etymology suggests a connection to bears in particular – the wearing of bear furs and the emulation of ferocious bear-like behaviour – the textual evidence suggests that *berserkir* in fact enacted the characteristics of a variety of wild animal species – and as in *Ynglinga saga*, their depiction could also be an amalgamation of the characteristics of a number of different animals.²²²

The advance of *berserkir* into battle implies a psychological transition from (domestic) human to (wild) animal. In *Ynglinga saga*, they are explicitly linked with

²²¹ The term *berserksgangr* is difficult to translate and will henceforth be left in the Old Norse. *Ynglinga saga*, p. 17. On Óðinn's own shapeshifting abilities, see chapter 6 (section 2.3).

²²² The etymology for the word *berserkr* is contested (it could also mean 'bare-shirt'). For extensive discussion and further references, see e.g. Roderick Dale, *Berserker: A Re-Examination of the Phenomenon in Literature and Life*, PhD Thesis, University of Nottingham, 2014, pp. 55-58; Vincent Samson, *Les berserkir: Les guerriers-fauves dans la Scandinavie ancienne, de l'Âge de Vendel aux Vikings (VI^e-XI^e siècle)* (Villeneuve d'Ascq, 2011), pp. 61-91.

madness and with a pre-Christian deity and his followers, associations echoed elsewhere in saga literature. *Berserkir* appear in over ninety sagas and *þættir*, as well as a multitude of other texts.²²³ They are usually portrayed as barbaric, rapacious men who plunder and kill indiscriminately – ‘stock villains’ who are murderous, stupid, and brutish. While this is their most common depiction, some texts (especially in the *fornaldarsögur*, though not exclusively) also show them to be great warriors who fight as small units of men (usually twelve) in the bodyguards of kings – in the vanguards of their armies and the prows of their ships. Regardless, they fall into an ecstatic and animalistic battle fury whenever they enter combat. This depiction might be a consequence of Christian authors purposely portraying an important figure from the pagan past in a negative light. How *berserkir* were perceived in pre-Christian Scandinavia is unknown, as well as how far they had a continuing historical reality, but it is clear that their behaviour was not compatible with Christianity and thus attracted legal sanctions. According to *Grágás*, the penalty for *berserksgangr* is lesser outlawry.²²⁴

²²³ See e.g. Benjamin Blaney, ‘The Berserk Suitor: The Literary Application of a Stereotyped Theme’, *SS* 54 (1982), pp. 279-294, and further references therein.

²²⁴ *Grágás*, *Konungsbók*, vol. I, p. 19. The same penalty also applies to the men who are present unless they restrain him – if they are successful in restraining him, then there is no penalty, but if it happens again then

In *Eyrbyggja saga*, two Swedish brothers named Halli and Leiknir are of greater size and strength than all other men, and ‘þeir gengu berserksgang ok váru þá eigi í mannligu eðli, er þeir váru reiðir, ok fóru galnir sem hundar ok óttuðusk hvárki eld né járn’ (‘they both went *berserksgangr* and were then not of human nature, when they were angry, and they went mad like dogs and feared neither fire nor iron’).²²⁵ Halli is also explicitly linked with wolves: when he realises that Vermundr is delaying in finding a wife for him, he turns *úlfúð* (i.e. *úlf-bugð*, *úlfabugr*, ‘wolf-minded’).²²⁶ The relationship between going *berserkr* and *hamr* is made evident soon afterwards: after a hard day’s work, the two brothers went home in the evening, very exhausted, as is customary with those men that *eigi eru einbama* (‘are not of one *hamr* [shape]’) – they completely lose their strength when the *berserksgangr* leaves them.²²⁷ Accordingly, Carl Phelpstead suggests that this episode blurs multiple boundaries, for ‘berserks inhabit a liminal space on the porous borders between human and

the penalty is lesser outlawry. Moreover, according to *Grettis saga*, in 1015 Jarl Eiríkr Hákonarson of Norway outlawed all *berserkir* who were unpeaceful (as well as robbers and duels) (p. 61).

²²⁵ *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 61.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 63. On wolves and *bugir*, see chapter 3 (sections 2 and 4.2).

²²⁷ *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 74. Significantly, the *berserkir* are clearing a path across a lava field, with a field-wall between pastures; as Phelpstead (2014) notes, ‘The situation here is a paradoxical one in which the wild landscape is to be mastered and brought under human control by ambiguously human beings, wild or animal-men, one might say’ (p. 14).

animal, but they also inhabit the border between natural and supernatural'.²²⁸ These *berserkir* can thus be seen as wild people who eschew domestic spaces and proper social conduct. Such characteristics can be reflected by the physical location in the landscape that some *berserkir* inhabit and their proximity to people. In *Flóamanna saga*, the *berserkr* Surtr jarnhauss ('iron-skull') inhabits the wilds of the British Isles – a doubly marginal location – where he is said to commit evil deeds, kidnap women, and challenge men to duels.²²⁹

Berserkir are depicted with various animal attributes in a number of sagas of different genres. In *Vatnsdæla saga*, two *berserkir*, both named Haukr, 'grenjuðu sem hundar ok bitu í skjaldarrendr ok óðu eld brennanda berum fótum' ('howled like dogs and bit into their shield-rims and walked on burning coals with bare feet').²³⁰ *Berserkir* are often impervious to pain; perhaps like a ferocious wild animal that is hard to kill, weapons are frequently unable to harm them. After a battle in *Egils saga*, of King Haraldr's troops that fought in the fore of a ship, only the twelve *berserkir* survive unscathed – those whom iron

²²⁸ Phelpstead (2014), p. 14. Phelpstead further suggests that the *berserkir* are passed as possessions like livestock or slaves, placing them in 'a further category of living being that blurs the simple human/animal distinction' (p. 14).

²²⁹ *Flóamanna saga*, p. 259.

²³⁰ *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 124.

could not bite.²³¹ Howling and shield-biting are especially common animalistic motifs; thus in *Grettis saga*, the *berserk* leader Snækollr *grenja hátt* ('howls loudly'), biting the rim of his shield and *lét allólmliga* ('behaving wholly savagely').²³²

These characteristics cross generic boundaries between the *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*. In *Örvar-Odds saga*, a group of twelve *berserkir* brothers *berserksgangr* and go up on shore *grenjandi* ('howling'); upon hearing them, Oddr remarks that it sometimes sounds like 'griðungar gelli eða hundar ýli' ('bulls roaring or dogs howling') – and at other times like people screaming.²³³ When the same episode is described in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, the *berserkir* also bite their shield-rims, once again *grenjandi* ('howling').²³⁴ Soon afterwards, however, 'genginn af þeim berserksgangrinn' ('the *berserksgangr* left them') and they become weaker than usual, as after some sorts of sickness; Oddr remarks in verse that he became afraid, but only for one moment, when the *berserkir* were *grenjandi* ('howling,

²³¹ *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, p. 23. The idea that iron is unable to pierce a *berserkr*'s skin is a common motif. This might be related to *tröll*-magic: in *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls*, the *berserkr* Svarttr *hamast sem tröll* ('turned himself into a troll'), made a terrible noise, and nothing could cut him. It may also have pagan significance: in *Ketils saga hængs*, Framarr, the supposed king of the vikings, 'var blótmaðr, ok bitu eigi járn' ('was a man of sacrifices, and iron could not bite him'). *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls*, in *Kjalnesinga saga*, ÍF XIV, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson (Reykjavík, 1959), p. 371; *Ketils saga hængs*, p. 173. In relation, see Grímr loðinkinna, whose hairy (and thus beast-like) cheek cannot be cut by metal. *Ketils saga hængs*, p. 165; *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, FNS II, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Akureyri, 1954), p. 185.

²³² *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, p. 136.

²³³ *Örvar-Odds saga*, pp. 251-252.

²³⁴ *Saga Heiðreks konungs ins vitra*, p. 5.

bellowing’) and *emjandi* (‘howling, shrieking’).²³⁵ These wild animal sounds are indicative of a psychological transition: the emulation of a ferocity and savagery that separates the *berserkir* from their human consciousness and allows them to kill their enemies without qualms or restraint.

3.2 *Hrólfs saga kraka*

The notion that a human can inhabit a bear-psychology is augmented when human characters undergo physical transformations into bears in the legendary *Hrólfs saga kraka*. Björn (‘bear’) and Bera (‘she-bear’) love each other deeply, but Queen Hvít is jealous, and after Björn rejects his stepmother’s sexual advances, she strikes him with her wolfskin gloves and says, ‘at hann skyldi verða at einum hiðbirni ólmum ok grimmum’ (‘that he shall become a cave-bear savage and grim’).²³⁶ The *úlfbanzka* (‘wolfskin gloves’) parallel Þorbjörg’s *kattskinnglófa* (‘catskin gloves’) in *Eiríks saga rauða* (see chapter 1, section 3.4); in both cases, animal clothing enables magic and supernatural experience. Hvít curses him further: he will only eat his own father’s livestock, will kill more than has ever before been observed, and will never be released from the spell. Björn then disappears and cannot be

²³⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

²³⁶ *Hrólfs saga kraka*, p. 47.

found. Meanwhile, Hvít's curse unfolds, and a large and fierce *grábjörn* ('gray bear') is seen killing the king's livestock in great numbers.²³⁷

When Bera sees the bear, it approaches her unthreateningly, and 'Í þessum birni þykkist hún kenna augu Björns konungssonar, ok forðast hún þat lítt' ('She thought she recognised in this bear the eyes of Björn, the king's son, and she did not try to escape').²³⁸

The fact that Bera is able to recognise Björn suggests that a person's eyes were not thought to change form when the rest of the human body transforms into an animal. The eyes emerge as a portal to the inner essence which remains human, despite the animal exterior.

Thus in *Kormáks saga*, when a *brosshvalr* ('horse-whale', 'walrus') surfaces beside Kormákr's ship, he hits the animal with a heavy pole and it sinks; and 'Þóttusk menn þar kenna augu Þórveigar' ('People thought they recognised [in the animal] the eyes of Þórveig').²³⁹

Similarly, in *Laxdæla saga*, a large seal appears near Þorsteinn's ship; and 'svá sýndisk þeim ǫllum, sem mannsaugu væri í honum' ('it seemed to all of them that it had the eyes of a

²³⁷ Ibid., p. 48.

²³⁸ Ibid., p. 48.

²³⁹ The walrus does not surface again; the witch Þórveig, meanwhile, becomes extremely ill and dies as a result. *Kormáks saga*, in *Vatnsdæla saga*, ÍF VIII, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavík, 1939), p. 265. The concept of an animal's *hamr* is probably implicit; as Tolley (2009) argues, 'the clear implication is that Þórveig [sic] has assumed a *brosshvalr*'s *hamr*' (p. 196). Also see *Ketils saga hængs*, p. 158.

man’).²⁴⁰ These instances match the type of animistic metamorphosis described by Descola, in which ‘each species has a basic physical body that constitutes at the same time a body politic and a corpus of precepts; and although a change of form is always possible, such an operation does not affect the intrinsic identity of individuals’.²⁴¹

Björn’s transformation thus involves his exteriority rather than his interiority: it is physical, but not mental, for he recognises and is not aggressive towards his beloved Bera, and he has not lost his human essence. In bear-shape, Björn knows that killing his father’s livestock is wrong, but he is unable to stop himself; nevertheless, he mostly retains his human conscience and consciousness.²⁴² The annoyance of a bear killing livestock must have been frequent in medieval Norway. In both *Grettis saga* and *Finnboga saga*, for example, large and dangerous bears kill humans and animals until the hero slays the beast.²⁴³

²⁴⁰ Unlike in *Kormáks saga*, Þorsteinn tells his men to spear the seal, but they are unsuccessful (*Laxdæla saga*, p. 41). An uncanny seal also appears in a fireplace in *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 147.

²⁴¹ Descola (2005; 2013), p. 137.

²⁴² This is part of the curse: Hvít specifies that ‘skal þér þessi minning verri en engi’ (‘this knowledge shall be worse for you than none’) (*Hrólfs saga kraka*, p. 47).

²⁴³ These episodes will be revisited in the following chapter (section 1.1), when the bear in *Finnboga saga* appears to possess a degree of human intellect by understanding Finnbogi’s speech and communicates in turn using body language. *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, pp. 74-75; *Finnboga saga*, pp. 273-274. These texts have also been linked to religious initiation. See Mary Danielli, ‘Initiation Ceremonial in Old Norse Literature’, *Folk-Lore* 61 (1945), pp. 229-245. On the significance of initiation throughout *Hrólfs saga kraka*, see further e.g.

Bera follows Björn until he arrives at his cave hideout; here he transforms back into human shape. This is a movement from culture to nature; the cave, then, is a demarcated place: separate from human society and from the rest of the forest where the animal can safely transform back into the human. Björn advises Bera not to remain with him in the cave, however, ‘því at hann sé dýr um daga, en maðr um nætr’ (‘because he was a beast by day, but a man by night’).²⁴⁴ Björn’s constant oscillation between human and animal accords with Deleuze and Guattari’s *devenir-animal*:

...there is no possibility of distinguishing those cases where the animal is treated as an animal and those where it is part of a metamorphosis; everything in the animal is a metamorphosis, and the metamorphosis is part of a single circuit of the becoming-human of the animal and the becoming-animal of the human.²⁴⁵

Björn predicts his forthcoming demise and advises Bera against eating the bear-flesh (i.e. his own) that Hvít will feed her. If she consumes the meat, the effects will show on the three boys with whom she is pregnant, in which case she should bring them to the cave. In natural spaces, removed from civilisation, people transform into and out of their animal

Jens Peter Schjødt, *Initiation Between Two Worlds: Structure and Symbolism in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion*, trans. Victor Hansen (Odense, 2008), pp. 312-326. See too Eyjólfur’s act of animal cruelty against a baby brown bear in *Víga-Glúms saga* (p. 9).

²⁴⁴ *Hrólfs saga kraka*, p. 48.

²⁴⁵ Deleuze and Guattari (1975; 1986), p. 35.

forms; here characters that challenge the human-animal dichotomy find safety. The cave is a separated space within the wilderness and it is in these boundary locations that the natural moves towards the supernatural. Björn foretells many things to Bera and then ‘steyðist síðan bjarnarhamrinn yfir hann’ (‘the bear-shape came over him’): he has the *hamr*, the exterior shape, of a bear, but he has retained his human interiority.²⁴⁶ Björn is eventually killed by his own father’s men, but not before maiming many people and killing all the hunting dogs. In parallel with the *berserkr* coming out of his frenzy in a state of exhaustion, the bear is only killed after he throws himself flat on the ground, worn out.

Queen Hvít forces Bera to eat a piece of bear-meat against her will. Thus Bera not only breaks the taboo against eating what may be a totem animal, but also consumes the meat of a human being (on cannibalism, see chapter 2, section 1).²⁴⁷ When Bera gives birth to triplets, all three are human-animal hybrids of some kind, but the third, Böðvarr, has no visible blemish on him.²⁴⁸ This becoming-animal process is enabled by the consumption of

²⁴⁶ *Hrólfs saga kraka*, p. 49.

²⁴⁷ Totemism is examined in chapter 3 (section 8.1): it is possible that bears and wolves were thought of as animal totems for the warriors who donned their clothing and behaved like these wild animals. This has been suggested by Peter Foote and David M. Wilson: ‘the fighters called *berserkir*, “bear-shirts” ... probably looked on the bear as a kind of totem animal’ – see *The Viking Achievement* (London, 1970; repr. 1984), p. 285.

²⁴⁸ The first, Elg-Fróði, is a man above the navel, but an elk below; and the second, Þórir hundsfótr, has the feet of a dog. Triplethood is ‘always allied to supernatural elements’ in medieval European literature; ‘as

animal meat. There are a number of examples of human-animal psychological transformation that occur when people eat a specific animal's flesh or drink its blood under certain circumstances; they consequently take on the behavioural characteristics of that animal.²⁴⁹ When Elg-Fróði draws blood from his calf and tells Böðvarr to drink it, Böðvarr becomes much stronger.²⁵⁰ Later, when Böðvarr slays a huge, monstrous creature with wings (perhaps a dragon), he then carries Hötttr – a weak and pathetic character who screams out in fear as soon as he sees the monster – to where the creature lies dead and tells Hötttr to drink the beast's blood. Hötttr has two large mouthfuls and also eats some of the beast's heart. A transformation occurs: the two then fight together for a long time and Hötttr demonstrates that he has become remarkably strong.²⁵¹

Eating or drinking animal meat or blood can render different results depending on the species of animal consumed. In *Völsunga saga*, Gunnarr and Högni urge their brother

distinct from twinship, [it] is clearly envisaged as supernatural in causation and outcome'. Carolyne Larrington, *Brothers and Sisters in Medieval European Literature* (York, 2015), pp. 61, 64.

²⁴⁹ In contrast, the vicious dog Gramr in *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* loses his supernatural fighting ability after ingesting the flesh of his heroic human opponent – the consumption nullifies his magical properties (see chapter 1, section 2.2); see further Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, who acquires the ability to understand bird-speech after tasting dragon-blood (chapter 5, section 2.2.1).

²⁵⁰ Böðvarr is said to now be ahead of most men in strength, prowess, courage, and nobility (*Hrólfs saga kraka*, p. 59).

²⁵¹ Hötttr becomes one of King Hrólf's finest champions and displays great strength and bravery throughout the rest of the saga (ibid., pp. 65-67).

Guttormr to slay Sigurðr Fáfnisbani; they combine snake and wolf-flesh, which they cook and give him to eat. Guttormr undergoes a psychological transformation and change of character, becoming exceedingly violent and fierce.²⁵² Similarly, in *Ynglinga saga*, Svipdagr eats a roasted wolf-heart and ‘þaðan af varð hann allra manna grimmastr ok verst skaplundaðr’ (‘thence he became of all men the most wrathful and worst-tempered’).²⁵³

Whereas the meat or blood of an elk or bear brings strength and courage, dragons, serpents, and wolves were all thought of as dangerous animals and the consumption of them had negative effects (with the exception of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, who matches an international tale-type of wisdom ingested from an animal’s heart, see chapter 5, section 2.2.1).²⁵⁴ People should not eat raw meat so it must be cooked, transforming the animal

²⁵² *Völsunga saga*, p. 58. See also *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu* (st. 4) and *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* (st. 20), though the wolf and serpent meat are not explicitly mentioned in the latter. *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu*, in *Eddukvæði II: Hetjukvæði*, ÍF, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík, 2014), pp. 324-325; *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*, in *Eddukvæði II: Hetjukvæði*, ÍF, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík, 2014), p. 339.

²⁵³ *Ynglinga saga*, p. 64. See further e.g. Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum: The History of the Danes*, pp. 50-51.

²⁵⁴ Once again, this clearly matches the type of animism described by Descola (2005; 2013) (as will be further discussed in the following chapter): ‘time and again one encounters the same idea that vitality, energy, and fecundity all circulate constantly between organisms thanks to the capture, exchange, and consumption of different kinds of flesh’ (p. 134). Consequently, ‘dietary prescriptions [sic] and prohibitions are less designed to favour or to prevent the mixing of reputedly heterogeneous substances ... than to favour or to prevent the transfer from the prescribed or the proscribed species of certain anatomical features or certain traits of behaviour reputedly derived from these features’. Descola (2005; 2006). On dietary proscriptions in medieval Scandinavia, see chapter 2, section 1.

from the natural into the cultural, but not every meat should be consumed – particularly the meat of taboo carnivores (see chapter 2, section 2).²⁵⁵

Böðvarr does not reveal his bear-nature until the end of *Hrólfs saga kraka*. When King Hrólfr enters his final battle, his hero Böðvarr is nowhere to be found, but there is a great bear advancing in front of Hrólfr's troop beside the king, killing more men with its paw than any five of the king's champions. Similar to a *berserkr*, no weapons can hurt the bear and it uses its weight to crush Hjörvarðr's men and their army, tearing everything within its reach. Hjalti seeks his companion Böðvarr in battle but does not see him, runs to the King's chamber, and finds Böðvarr sitting idle. He wakes Böðvarr from what must be some sort of shamanistic trance and the bear disappears from King Hrólfr's force.²⁵⁶ A different type of shapeshifting takes place while Böðvarr is resting – the bear is seemingly some form of supernatural spirit-animal that is sent forth to do his bidding – a magical

²⁵⁵ Re. the problematic consequences of consuming raw meat, see Carolyn Larrington, 'A Viking in Shining Armour? Vikings and Chivalry in the *Fornaldarsögur*', *VMS* 4 (2008), pp. 269-288, and further references therein.

²⁵⁶ Queen Skuld was unable to work her witchcraft while the bear was in Hrólfr's ranks, presumably because Böðvarr's magic was stronger, but then a massive and hideous boar appears in Hjörvarðr's army, like the cult animals examined in chapter 1 (section 4.2). *Hrólfs saga kraka*, pp. 101-102.

ability presumably inherited from his mother's taboo-breaking consumption of the bear-meat of his father.²⁵⁷

Böðvarr behaves like a *berserkr* when he enters battle: corpses were heaped high around him, his shoulders were covered with blood, and 'Lét hann líkt sem hann væri óðr' (he behaved as though he was mad).²⁵⁸ These episodes of bear-transformation in *Hrólfs saga kraka* reveal one of the symbolic functions of bears in medieval Scandinavia. As Hilda Ellis-Davidson suggests, 'The bear was the most powerful and dangerous animal in the Scandinavian north, likely to leave a vivid impression on those who hunted him for food'.²⁵⁹ Bears were symbolic of strength and are associated with great warriors, in stark contrast to the depiction of wolves and werewolves in Old Norse sources.

4. Wolves and Werewolves

4.1 *Úlfbeðnar*

The Old Norse word for werewolf – *vargúlf* – only appears in the *Strengleikar* text *Bisclaret*, where it is used to denote the title character, and was probably invented by the translator

²⁵⁷ Clive Tolley connects this episode to Sámi tradition: see '*Hrólfs saga kraka* and Sámi Bear Rites', *Saga-Book* XXXI (2007), pp. 5-21.

²⁵⁸ *Hrólfs saga kraka*, p. 102.

²⁵⁹ Ellis-Davidson (1978), p. 129.

from the French word *loup-garou*.²⁶⁰ The closest native Norse equivalent might be the word *úlfeðnar* (sing. *úlfeðinn*), ‘wolf-skins’. The late ninth-century (dated to ~900 AD) skaldic poem *Hrafnsmál* (also known as *Haraldskvæði* and *Haraldsmál*), analysed in detail in the following chapter (section 2.3.5), provides the earliest reference to both *berserkir* and *úlfeðnar*. The text features a conversation between a raven and an unnamed *valkyrja*, celebrating King Haraldr hárfagri’s final victorious battle in Hafsfjörðr, which famously resulted in the unification of Norway.²⁶¹ Intriguingly, the raven first speaks of the *berserkir* and the *úlfeðnar* as two separate divisions of beings, and then later as a single category. In stanza 8, the raven says:

Grenjuðu berserkir;
 guðr vas þeim á sinnum;
 emjuðu ulfheðnar
 ok ísörn dúðu.

²⁶⁰ The word *vargúlfr* is a compound of *vargr* and *úlfr*, and thus literally translates as ‘wolf-wolf’ (*An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 680); *Bisclaret*, in *Strengleikar: An Old Norse Translation of Twenty-One Old French Lais*, ed. and trans. Robert Cook and Mattias Tveitane (Oslo, 1979), pp. 86-87. Wolves do not physically appear in the sagas, which is perhaps indicative of their generally elusive nature and the fact that they are not native to Iceland. They do, however, appear in people’s dreams as animal *fylgjur* and *bugir* (see chapter 3) and they play a significant role in mythological texts (see chapter 6).

²⁶¹ The battle likely took place in 872 or 873 AD. See e.g. Nora Kershaw, *Anglo-Saxon and Norse Poems* (London, 1922), p. 76; Lee Hollander, *Old Norse Poems: The Most Important Non-Skaldic Verse Not Included in the Poetic Edda* (New York, 1936), p. 56.

(Berserks bellowed; battle was under way for them; wolf-skins [berserks] howled and brandished iron spears).²⁶²

Does the word *úlfheðnar* ('wolf-skins') actually imply 'berserks' as some translations suggest?

Stanzas 20 and 21 support this claim when the raven calls the *berserkir* by a different name:

At berserkja reiðu vil ek þik spyrja,
 bergir hræsævar:
 hversu es fengit,
 þeim es í folk vaða,
 vígdjǫrfum verum?
 Ulfheðnar heita,
 þeir es í orrostu
 blóðgar randir bera;
 vigrar rjóða,
 es til vígs koma;
 þeim es þar sist saman.

(I want to ask you about the equipment of berserks, {taster {of the corpse-sea}} [Blood > Raven]: what provision is made for war-daring men, those who surge into battle? / They are called wolf-skins, who bear bloody shields in combat; they redden spears when they come to war; there [at Haraldr's court] they are seated together).²⁶³

²⁶² *Hrafnsmál*, in '(Introduction to) Þorbjörn hornklofi, *Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)*', ed. and trans. R. D. Fulk, in *Skaldic Poetry from the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, Vol. I: Poetry from the Kings' Sagas, Part 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035, ed. Diana Whaley (Turnhout, 2012), pp. 101-102. This stanza is also attributed to (Þorbjörn) Hornklofi, and is repeated in *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, in *Heimskringla I*, ÍF XXVI, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (Reykjavík, 1941), p. 116.

²⁶³ *Hrafnsmál*, pp. 113-115.

In the latter stanzas, the description emphasises their savage and bloodthirsty warrior nature, but does not explicitly note animalistic features apart from their names. Stanza 8, however, applies verbs (*grenja* and *emja*) which, as seen above (section 3.1), imply a certain level of human-animal psychological transformation through the sounds made by the warriors as they enter battle. Moreover, their respective battle cries are distinct (though this may just be skaldic variation).

In the *Vatnsdæla saga* account of this battle, the *úlfheðnar* are described as a subset of the *berserkir* type, rather than an entirely separate category of warrior. Haraldr is said to be accompanied by ‘þeir berserkir, er Úlfheðnar váru kallaðir; þeir höfðu vargstakka fyrir brynjur og vörðu framstafn á konungs skipinu’ (‘those berserkers which were called wolf-skins. They had wolf-skin cloaks for armour and defended the bow of the king’s ship’).²⁶⁴

These fierce warriors were clearly understood to wear the pelts of wolves – rather than of bears – when they enter battle. They are similarly depicted as a *berserkir* subset in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*: ‘Þá hét konungr á berserki sína til framgöngu; þeir váru kallaðir

²⁶⁴ *Vatnsdæla saga*, pp. 24-25. Úlfhéðinn could also be used as a personal name: see e.g. the brave fighter who appears later in *Vatnsdæla saga* (pp. 127-129) and a woman named Úlfheiðr in *Grettis saga* (p. 116).

úlfheðnar’ (‘then the king called on his berserks to advance; they were called wolf-skins’).²⁶⁵

The evidence indicates that *berserkir* and *úlfheðnar* were considered to be two connected classifications, with *úlfheðnar* entailing a subset of the larger *berserkir* category, and one that was specifically linked with Haraldr hárfagri – and wolves.²⁶⁶ This apparently cultic warrior force befits a pagan king; it is significant that there are no later references to *úlfheðnar*, suggesting that they were not compatible with Christian leadership, revealing different types of animal-related paranormal assistance used in military campaigns.

There is parallel evidence from Aztec culture: the eagle warriors (*cuāuhcātlī*) and jaguar warriors (*ōcēlōtl*).²⁶⁷ These were special classes of warrior soldiers in Aztec armies, made up of elite members: brave soldiers of noble birth that had taken the most prisoners in battle. Eagle warriors wore the heads of eagles – including an open beak – and used eagle feathers for decoration; and jaguar warriors wore jaguar furs. Accordingly, Inca Clendinnen argues for an experiential approach to the human-animal warrior:

²⁶⁵ *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, p. 5. As with *berserkir*, iron could not pierce them, and nothing could stop them when they charged forward (p. 5).

²⁶⁶ Both Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir and Roderick Dale have also recently concluded that the *úlfheðnar* were understood to be a subset of the *berserkir*. Based on *Haraldskvæði*, Aðalheiður further suggests that the *úlfheðnar* were *berserkir* who had distinguished themselves in battle. Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, ‘The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature’, *JEGP* 106.3 (2007), pp. 277-303, at pp. 280-281; Dale (2014), pp. 57-60.

²⁶⁷ *A Nahuatl-English Dictionary and Concordance to the Cantares Mexicanos*, John Bierhost (Stanford, 1985), pp. 101-102, 247.

Eagle or jaguar warriors found powerful models for conduct, for battle styles, even for moral codes, in the behaviour of animals whose appearances they facsimilated [sic]. If warriors ‘were’ eagles, we (as they) must be attentive to the creature’s affectless yellow stare, its lordly stiff-winged flight, the sudden cresting of head feathers in rage, the scream, the dazzling stoop. The jaguar moved silently, softly, impenetrably aloof; then erupted in a rumble of thunder to transfix his victim with dread and make his kill.²⁶⁸

It is thus the human experience of nature – and careful observation of the behaviour of wild animals – that provides the inspiration for the symbolic power affiliated with different human-animal warrior groupings. Does this parallel the Scandinavian bear and wolf warriors who may have had their own warrior classes? A man would certainly act differently in battle if he was imitating the behaviour of either a wolf or a bear. Price suggests that as light and fast creatures who move in packs, wolves are linked with the *úlfheðnar*. Armed with spears and fighting in formations, these wolf-warriors may have been light skirmishers, like the Roman republic’s *velites* who also used spears and wore wolfskins. Connected to bears, the *berserkir* might have been heavier shock troops who broke through the enemy’s ranks through the strength of their assaults.²⁶⁹ Drawing upon more recent Sámi tradition, Ellis-Davidson provides a different interpretation. She argues that the bear

²⁶⁸ Inca Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1991; repr. 1995), p. 229.

²⁶⁹ Price (2002), p. 374.

was ‘a lone fighter, an independent champion of tremendous power, with a certain nobility in his behaviour’.²⁷⁰ The parallel with *Hrólf’s saga kraka* is clear, but this description does not match the *berserkir*, who are seemingly more similar to the wolf which ‘fights as one of a pack, closely linked with his companions, cunning and utterly ruthless, sparing none’.²⁷¹ While these may well have been two ways of doing battle in the Viking Age, it is the pack that is central to both *úlfheðnar* and *berserkir* (though there are individual *berserkr* warriors as well, see above, section 3.1). The group is of central importance: it entails a collective performance of animality, which is mutually reinforced through a ‘hive mind’ mentality. Unlike bears, which are solitary creatures, wolves travel in packs, and they are one of the species which provided the inspiration for Deleuze and Guattari’s *devenir-animal*: ‘A becoming-animal always involves a pack, a band, a population, a peopling, in short, a multiplicity. We sorcerers have always known that’.²⁷²

4.2 *Vǫlsunga saga*

²⁷⁰ Ellis-Davidson (1978), p. 133.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

²⁷² Deleuze and Guattari (1980; 2013), p. 279.

The most elaborate depiction of human-wolf transformation in Old Norse literature is in *Völsunga saga*.²⁷³ Sigmundr and Sinfjötli spend their summers in nature, travelling through the forests, killing men for their treasure. This behaviour resembles wild animals hunting for meat, indicating that they have already acquired a certain level of wildness and wolfishness through their physical movement in nature.²⁷⁴ One day they find a house in the forest with two men sleeping inside: ‘Þeir hófðu orðit fyrir ósköpum því at úlfahamir hengu í húsinu yfir þeim. It tíunda hvert dægr máttu þeir komask ór hǫmunum’ (‘They had become ill-fated, for wolf-skins hung in the house over them. Every tenth day they could come out of the skins’).²⁷⁵ The *úlfahamir* indicate a continued connection between the werewolf figure and the shapeshifters examined previously (section 2). In a supernatural enhancement of the *úlfheðnar* entering battle, Sigmundr and Sinfjötli then don the animal skins: ‘Þeir Sigmundr fóru í hamina ok máttu eigi ór komask, ok fylgði sú náttúra sem áðr var, létu ok vargsrǫddu. Þeir skildu báðir rǫddina’ (‘Sigmundr and Sinfjötli went into the

²⁷³ Re. the potential influence of romance on this episode (as well as discussion of werewolf appearances in Old Norse romance), see Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir (2007), pp. 277-307; Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ‘Keltnesk áhrif á íslenskar ýkjusögur’, *Skírnir* 106 (1932), pp. 100-123, at pp. 118-119.

²⁷⁴ They previously inhabited a *jarðhús í skóginum* (‘earth-hut in the woods’) – and were thus already situated within nature, though inside a space infused with cultural significance – and then they ‘Fara ... víða um skóga’ (‘Travel ... widely through the forest’). *Völsunga saga*, pp. 8, 10.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

skins and could not come out of them, and that supernatural power followed, as before, and they howled like wolves. They both understood the sounds’).²⁷⁶

Their ability to communicate with one another as wolves – both physically howling as a means of communication and then comprehending the sounds that are made – indicates that the becoming-animal process is not only physical, but also partially mental. It is the wolf-pelts that enable Sigmundr and Sinfjötli’s human-animal transformation; in this instance, the concept of *hamr* does not only constitute a physical object, but also channels a supernatural force that enforces the breaking of boundaries and the transition between mental states of being. As Price argues, ‘the *hamr* ... seems to have represented the body’s physical form – not just in terms of superficial appearance but as the shell which held all other aspects inside it ... the Old Norse verb for shape-shifting, *skipta hömum*, thus ... [implies] the fundamental restructuring of the self.’²⁷⁷ In the structural classificatory schema proposed by Descola, this type of clothing plays an extremely significant role in animistic systems of thought:

...humans and all the kinds of non-humans with which humans interact each have different physicalities, in that their identical internal essences are lodged in

²⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 11.

²⁷⁷ Price (2002), pp. 59-60.

different types of bodies, often described locally as clothing that can be donned or discarded, the better to underline their autonomy from the interiorities which inhabit them.²⁷⁸

This formulation is strikingly similar to the Old Norse context, but when *hamr* implies an animal pelt or physical form, there is the suggestion that the nature of the animal from whom the pelt came is contained within it: what Tolley terms ‘a particular inalienable disposition symbolized or contained within that skin’.²⁷⁹

Hans Peter Duerr usefully defines werewolves as people ‘who are able to *dissolve* “within themselves” the boundary between civilization and wilderness, who can step across the fence separating their “civilization side” from their “wilderness side”, their “wolf’s nature”’.²⁸⁰ Similarly, having physically transformed into animals, Sigmundr and Sinfjötli leave the house (culture) and enter the forest (nature): their new habitat, the wilderness – the proper place for wild animals, which they have now become. Wilderness and wildness are thus fundamentally opposed to control, domesticity, reason, order, and civilisation. As ecocritic Val Plumwood writes, wilderness ‘is the supposedly irrational and chaotic sphere

²⁷⁸ Descola (2005; 2006).

²⁷⁹ Tolley (2009), p. 195.

²⁸⁰ Consequently, they ‘can look their “animal nature” in the eye ... and in this way can develop a consciousness of their “cultural nature”’. Hans Peter Duerr, *Dreamtime: Concerning the Boundary between Wilderness and Civilization*, trans. Felicitas Goodman (Oxford, 1985), p. 87. [For the original German, see *Traumzeit: Über die Grenze zwischen Wildnis und Zivilisation*. Frankfurt: Syndikat, 1978.]

represented by the primeval forest, the dangerous shadow place on the other side of the boundary of order'.²⁸¹ The forest is indeed a dangerous place in *Völsunga saga*. Sigmundr calls for Sinfjötli's aid when fighting seven men, but Sinfjötli does not howl for Sigmundr's help while fighting eleven men. When Sinfjötli taunts Sigmundr for this supposed cowardice, Sigmundr leaps at him so hard that he stumbles and falls and 'Sigmundr bítr í barkann framan' ('Sigmundr bit his windpipe').²⁸² This clearly entails an animalistic attack, highlighting the ferocity and aggression of his wolf-nature, but the psychological transformation into a vicious animal appears short-lived and Sigmundr soon displays sympathy and regret. The text thus establishes a continued psychological oscillation between the categories of human and animal: 'Sigmundr leggur hann nú á bak sér ok berr heim í skálann, ok sat hann yfir honum, en það troll taka úlfhamina' ('Sigmundr laid him now on his back and bore him home to the hut, and he sat over him, and said the trolls should take the wolf-skins').²⁸³

²⁸¹ Val Plumwood, 'Wilderness Skepticism and Wilderness Dualism', in *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, ed. J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson (Athens, 1998), pp. 652-690, at p. 656. Re. the relationship between wolves and wilderness in medieval thought, see Aleksander Pluskowski, *Wolves and the Wilderness in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2006).

²⁸² *Völsunga saga*, p. 11.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Wolf transformation is clearly depicted in a very different light from bear transformation. Whereas human-bears are portrayed as strong and noble warriors, human-wolves emerge as evil-minded and vicious, which confirms the characterisations associated with the *fylgjur* and *hugir* of either animal species as discussed in chapter 3 (sections 4.1 and 4.2), an understanding that has its roots in human experience of the natural world and careful observation of its wild inhabitants. Thus when Sigmundr and Sinfjötli return to their *jarðhús* ('underground dwelling') – a demarcated space within nature, similar to Björn's cave in *Hrólfs saga kraka* – they remain inside until they are able to remove the wolfskins. They now avoid human company whilst still in their animal state, because of the harm that they might bring to others – the unknown consequences of human animality, the possibility of killing friends and family. When they are released they burn the skins so that they can bring no harm to anyone else. At the close of this episode, the evil nature of the wolf-skins – and thus of wolves in general – is repeated when the *úlfabamir* are referred to as *óskapar* ('curses').²⁸⁴

The evil nature of wolf transformation is also demonstrated in an earlier episode in the saga, when Signý's brothers are locked to a large tree-trunk and at midnight an *ylgr*

²⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 11.

(‘she-wolf’) came to them from out of the woods.²⁸⁵ They are placed ‘í skógi einshvers staðar’ (‘in a certain place in the forest’), which like the *jarðhús* allows for the extension of culture into nature; thus something unnatural can come out of nature to harm them in their cultural space.²⁸⁶ It is again in the forest – in nature – that the were-human can be found, and her emergence at midnight recalls Kveld-Úlfr in *Egils saga*, who grows bad-tempered towards evening (see above, section 2). When only Sigmundur is left, Signý sends a trusted man to smear honey on his face, and Sigmundur is able to kill the she-wolf when she sticks her tongue into his mouth. The she-wolf has seemingly lost human reason: she acts on pure animalistic instinct, greedily desiring the sweet taste of honey, and ignores the obvious possibility that this might be a trick. She is also presumably a shape-shifter who has used magic to enable human-animal transformation.²⁸⁷

5. Feathers and Flight

While travelling on snow-shoes and hunting wild animals in the prose introduction to *Vǫlundarkviða*, Vǫlundr and his two princely brothers come to a place called Úlfdalir

²⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

²⁸⁷ While there is a certain level of narratorial uncertainty regarding the she-wolf’s identity, she is understood to be King Siggeir’s mother and ‘hafi hon brugðit á sik þessu líki fyrir trollskaþar sakir ok fjolkynngi’ (‘she has changed her shape through troll-magic and witchcraft’) (ibid., p. 8).

(‘Wolf-dales’), beside a lake named Úlfsjár (‘Wolf-sea’), where they build themselves a house.²⁸⁸ They are the sons of the king of the *Finnar* (‘Finns’, ‘Sámi’) and their movement separates them from the civilised world and brings them closer to wild nature, the place of wild animals where the supernatural can be expected. They discover three women spinning linen on the lake-shore (who flew there from the south, according to v. 1); they had *álptarhamir* (swan *hamir*, i.e. feather garments, cloaks of swan feathers) with them and are labelled *valkyrjur*.²⁸⁹ The ‘swan-maiden’ motif, popular in European folklore, is usually not associated with *valkyrjur*, but ‘perhaps the two kinds of beings have been conflated here since both can fly, and both eschew domesticity’, a suggestion which further separates these figures from culture and civilisation and associates them with wild nature.²⁹⁰

Valkyrjur, however, are also capable of flight in a number of eddic poems, though this is enabled by riding horses that fly through the sky. In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, *bjálmvitr* (‘helmet-valkyries’) come down from heaven; ‘sárvitr *flugu*’ (‘wound-valkyries

²⁸⁸ Singular *Úlfdalr* (‘Wolf-dale’) in the prose introduction, but the plural (in the verse) is probably older (*Völundarkviða*, pp. 428-429).

²⁸⁹ Two of their nicknames - *Hlaðguðr svanhvít* (‘swan-white’) and *Hervör alvitr* (‘all-wise’, ‘strange creature’) further link them to swans and the supernatural (according to v. 2, *Svanhvít* also wore *svanfjaðrar* (‘swan-feathers’) (ibid., p. 429). These two are also sisters; the third is named *Qlrun Kjársdóttir*. On the symbolic relationship between women and swans, see further chapter 3, section 6.2.

²⁹⁰ *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Carolyne Larrington (Oxford, 1996; rev. ed. 2014), p. 296. Re. swan-maidens in Scandinavian folklore (a popular motif in circumpolar tales), see Karen Bek-Pedersen, ‘Black and White *Dísir*: From Þiðrandi to Michael Scot’, *Cosmos* 28 (2012), pp. 1-15.

flew’).²⁹¹ In a prose section of *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, Helgi sees nine *valkyrjur* and the verb *riða* indicates that they are riding horses, which may or may not be able to fly (on horses and transportation between worlds in myth, see chapter 6, section 1.3).²⁹² *Valkyrjur* also appear in a number of prose passages in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*. Sigrún (Sváva reborn) ‘var valkyrja ok reið lopt ok lög’ (‘was a valkyrie and rode through sky and over sea’) and she *reið* (‘rode’) to Helgi’s ships, reiterating the horse-riding motif.²⁹³ In these poems, *valkyrjur* are capable of flight, but this power is usually enabled by the horses that they ride rather than through magic or *hamr*-related feather-cloaks. In *Helreið Brynhildar*, however, Brynhildr tells how, when she was twelve, a king placed the *hamir* of the eight sisters under an oak tree.²⁹⁴ The *hamr* motif also appears in *Völsunga saga*: when Rerir marries but is unable to have child, Óðinn sends an *óskmey* (‘wish-maiden’, i.e. ‘valkyrie’) to take an apple

²⁹¹ *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, p. 257.

²⁹² *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, p. 261.

²⁹³ *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, in *Eddukvæði II: Hetjukvæði*, ÍF, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík, 2014), p. 271. Furthermore, when Hǫðbroddr betroths himself to her, ‘reið hon með valkyrjur um lopt ok um lög’ (‘she rode with valkyries through sky and over sea’) to find Helgi; and when Helgi encounters a terrible storm at sea, they see ‘í loptinu at valkyrjur níu riðu’ (‘that nine valkyries ride in the air’) (pp. 273-274).

²⁹⁴ *Helreið Brynhildar*, in *Eddukvæði II: Hetjukvæði*, ÍF, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík, 2014), p. 350. As Larrington (2014) notes, this otherwise-unknown episode probably borrows the motif from swan-maiden tales; either the king (perhaps Gunnarr or Atli) ends their life as *valkyrjur*, forcing them into marriage, or this might refer to the *valkyrja*’s early career in which magic *hamir* are acquired from beneath a tree (p. 307). In parallel, in *Úlfhams saga*, Úlfhamr and Atram follow two crane-maidens and discover their hiding-place under an old tree. *Úlfhams saga*, ed. Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir (Reykjavík, 2001), p. 56.

to Rerir; she ‘brá á sik krákuham’ (‘brought the crow-shape upon herself’) and flew to the king.²⁹⁵

Like Freyja and Frigg in Norse myth (see chapter 6, section 3.2), bird-*hamir* (*álptarhamir*, specifically) endow the *Völundarkviða* swan-maidens with the ability to fly: after living with Völundr and his brothers for nine winters, the women fly away to fight battles, never to return, according to the prose – and because they desired the dark wood, to fulfill fate, according to the verse (suggesting a powerful yearning for the wild).²⁹⁶

Regardless of the species of bird that provides the feathers, *hamr* in one form or another enable human-bird transformation in a variety of texts. In *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, Atli travels deep into nature – down a mountain and over a river – where he discovers a large bird sitting on a house, keeping watch but having fallen asleep. Atli hurls a spear at the bird, killing it, without knowing that it was actually earl Fránmarr, who has ‘hamazk í arnar líki’ (‘changed himself into the shape of an eagle’); he was protecting Sigrlinn and Álǫf with *ffólkynngi* (‘magic, sorcery’), which presumably also enabled his physical *hamr*-

²⁹⁵ *Völsunga saga*, pp. 2-3.

²⁹⁶ *Völundarkviða*, pp. 428-429.

transformation.²⁹⁷ In *Egils saga*, Gunnhildr, wisest of all women and *ffolkunnig mjök* ('very skilled in magic'), seemingly interrupts Egill's writing of poetry by turning into a swallow and twittering all night at an upper window; when Arinbjörn investigates, he sees a *hambleypa* ('shape-traveller') in the shape of a bird flying away.²⁹⁸ The female figure endowed with magical abilities and the ability to fly through *hamr* appears in the much later *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar*. The *ffölkynniskona* ('sorceress', 'witch') Lára is seen *í álptar ham* ('in a swan's shape'); she 'gólaði með svá miklum galdralátum' ('howled with so many magical songs') that no one in an opposing army notices her whilst she flies overhead, singing loudly.²⁹⁹ Significantly, Lára is also described as being *í álftarlíki* ('in a swan's form'), suggesting that *hamr* and *líki* could be used interchangeably to describe a person's magical transformation into an animal in this text.³⁰⁰

It is not always bird-*hamir* that enable human flight, however. Returning to *Völundarkviða*, when the smith Völundr is maimed and put on an island to make treasures for the king, he manages to fly away. It is unclear what enables his aerial escape and the

²⁹⁷ *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, p. 260. This episode will be discussed more substantively in the following chapter (section 2.3.2).

²⁹⁸ *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, pp. 94, 183.

²⁹⁹ *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar*, p. 416.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 417.

word *hamr* is never mentioned. Perhaps Bøðvildr's magic ring, which Vǫlundr recovers and repairs, has some kind of magical, transformative power; thus, *á fitjum* ('on webbed feet'), he *hófsk at lopti* ('lifts himself into the air') – to this end, it is significant that the ring was originally made for Vǫlundr's swan-maiden love, Hervör alvitr.³⁰¹ It is also possible that his elvish nature endowed him with supernatural, aerial abilities: he is referred to as *álfa ljóði* ('prince of the elves') once and *vísi álfa* ('lord of the elves') twice.³⁰² A third option – which Maria Elena Ruggerini considers the most likely – is that Vǫlundr's flight was mechanical rather than magical.³⁰³ *Þiðreks saga af Bern* provides instructive parallel evidence: Velent (i.e. Vǫlundr) asks his brother Egill to collect as many feathers as possible, both large and small, so that he can build a *flygil* ('flying apparatus'); the winged construction purportedly

³⁰¹ *Vǫlundarkviða*, p. 435. *Fitjar* usually refer to the webbed feet of water-birds specifically (hence *fit-fuglar* rather than *kló-fuglar*); these may come in handy for Vǫlundr, considering his island location (*An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 155).

³⁰² *Vǫlundarkviða*, pp. 431, 435 (vv. 11, 14, 31).

³⁰³ Maria Elena Ruggerini, 'Tales of Flight in Old Norse and Medieval English Texts', *VMS* 2 (2006), pp. 201-238. Regarding Vǫlundr/Velent as Weland/Welund in Anglo-Saxon tradition, see fn. 4 on pp. 201-202, and further textual references therein; see also for discussion of Wayland in current English place-names, specifically Wayland Smith's Cave and Wayland's Copse, and references to the character as Walander/Galand in medieval French epic poetry and as Wielant in Middle High German. Re. carved depictions of Wayland from the Viking Age in northern England (specifically Lancashire and Yorkshire), see e.g. Richard Hall, *Viking Age Archaeology in Britain and Ireland* (Princes Risborough, 1990), p. 40.

resembles a *fjaðrbamr* ('coat of feathers') flayed from a griffin, vulture, or ostrich.³⁰⁴ While the supernatural feather-*bamr* is native to Old Norse tradition, this notion of mechanical flight is likely a borrowed motif, possibly from the British Isles or Angevin empire.³⁰⁵

6. Conclusion

There is insufficient evidence to argue that the type of animism described by Philippe Descola is present in Old Norse sources. Nevertheless, his approach remains an instructive method of inquiry. There are intriguing parallels and traces of a similar worldview: humans and animals have separate physicalities which can be acquired by donning animal skin, fur, or feathers as clothing (typically in the form of *bamr*), highlighting 'the role that the body plays as an ontological differentiator'.³⁰⁶ Descola also argues that metamorphosis plays an extremely important function in animist systems:

Conversion from animal to human and from human to animal is a constant feature in animist ontologies: the former process reveals interiority, while the latter is an attribute of the power with which certain particular individuals ...

³⁰⁴ *Velents þáttr smiðs*, in *Þiðreks saga af Bern*, vol. I, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík, 1951), p. 125. Ruggerini (2006) demonstrates how three linguistic elements in the passage show that the Old Norse redactor was working with Low German source material, at least some of which was in verse (p. 218).

³⁰⁵ See further John McKinnell, 'Myth as Therapy: The Usefulness of Þrymskviða', *Medium Ævum* 69.1 (2000), pp. 1-20, at pp. 2, 14 (fns. 13, 14); John McKinnell, 'Eddic Poetry in Anglo-Scandinavian Northern England', in *Vikings and the Danelaw: Select Papers from the Thirteenth Viking Congress*, ed. James Graham-Campbell et al. (Oxford, 2001), pp. 327-444, at pp. 335-336.

³⁰⁶ Descola (2005; 2013), p. 133.

are credited, namely the power to transcend at will the discontinuity of forms and adopt as their vehicle the body of some animal species.³⁰⁷

The Old Norse context is distinctive: the *hamr* can preserve some of the animal's interiority within it, and consequently people who undertake physical transformations may partially assume the behavioural characteristics of the animal. The psychological alteration is brief, however, and these characters usually retain human intelligence and emotion. Consumption of an animal's flesh or blood, under certain circumstances, enables the adoption of that animal's behavioural characteristics. This is only the case for certain animal species, however: those that are the most wild, including bears, serpents, and in particular, wolves (the wildest of animals, which act in opposition to the most domesticated of animals and the wild wolf's closest relative: the dog).³⁰⁸

Old Norse textual evidence clearly supports the importance of physical movement in the *devenir-animal* process as described by Deleuze and Guattari. A number of animal species break the seemingly unequivocal dichotomies of wild/domestic and wild/tame when

³⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 136.

³⁰⁸ Animals that are the most domestic, namely dogs and horses, reveal features of human interiority, including human intelligence, wisdom, courage, and loyalty, as well as subjectivity and intentionality (see chapter 1, sections 1 and 2). Meanwhile, only birds (and dragons) are able to communicate with people through an articulated language, and these are the animals whose community select characters might be seen to figuratively join through the communion of communication (see chapters 5 and 6).

they undergo transformations; these binaries are better thought of as spectrums, with various animals situated at both ends, and in between, and many exhibiting movement between the two categories. Through physical movement – whether by land, sea, or air – numerous categories are simultaneously deconstructed, including human and animal, culture and nature, civilised and savage, and habitation and wilderness. These related binaries can also be productively mapped onto human characters who undergo similar processes, revealing yet another way in which animals and humans are interconnected in Old Norse literature.

Deleuze and Guattari further assert that ‘Becomings-animal are neither dreams nor phantasies. They are perfectly real. But which reality is at issue here?’³⁰⁹ It is consequently in the more fantastic genres of Old Norse literature that psychological alteration manifests itself as physical therianthropy and the porous boundaries between human and animal are challenged. Drawing upon myth, legend, and romance – and applying imaginative thinking and literary creativity – these texts allowed medieval Icelandic authors to ponder a thought experiment: what would it be like to become an animal?

³⁰⁹ Consequently, ‘The becoming-animal of the human being is real, even if the animal the human being becomes is not; and the becoming-other of the animal is real, even if that something other it becomes is not’. Deleuze and Guattari (1980; 2013), p. 278.

Chapter Five: Human-Animal Communication

Communication theorist Emily Plec writes that ‘the academic discipline of communication has long suffered from a practical anthropocentrism that privileges human interaction and relegates the communication efforts of the more-than-human world to the margins of the discipline’.¹ Certainly in the Old Norse context, human-animal communication is an understudied phenomenon. Communication between humans and animals in a medieval text challenges the binaries of nature and culture, human and non-human. Here I follow Lisa Kiser; in her ecocritical analysis of Chaucer’s *Parliament of Fowls*, she demonstrates that these distinctions are present, but are shown to be ‘human categories, not necessarily right and true ones and not inexorably stable as philosophical categories worthy of belief ... they are simultaneously elided and destabilized even as they form part of the poem’s essential framework’.² Through such communication, the human and the non-human are blended ‘into hybrids that bring pleasure to those who perceive the continually shifting

¹ Emily Plec, ‘Perspectives on Human-Animal Communication: An Introduction’, in *Perspectives on Human-Animal Communication: Internatural Communication*, ed. Emily Plec (New York and London, 2013), pp. 1-13, at p. 1.

² Lisa J. Kiser, ‘Chaucer and the Politics of Nature’, in *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, ed. Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace (Charlottesville and London, 2001), pp. 41-56, at p. 49 (and references therein).

boundaries between the animal and the human'.³ The natural world is thus granted cultural agency, reflecting the limitations of human knowledge and the yearning for worldly wisdom.

According to Philippe Descola's model in *Par delà nature et culture*, when humans and animals communicate via language, they still have different physical bodies, or 'exteriorities' as he terms them, but similar 'interiorities' in an animistic sense.⁴ This is especially true of the speaking birds analysed throughout this chapter, who communicate through an articulated language. To use Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, the human undergoes a process of *devenir-animal* ('becoming-animal') when comprehending an animal language, which 'makes it impossible to say where the boundary between the human and the animal lies'.⁵ When humans and animals communicate, the two categories are both established and disrupted; for by necessity, either the human becomes-animal, comprehending animal speech – sharing the animal mind, its interiority – or the animal becomes-human, understanding human language and expression, a process that I have

³ Ibid., pp. 50-51.

⁴ For further discussion of Descola's structural approach, and animism, see chapter 4.

⁵ Deleuze and Guattari (1980; 2013), p. 122. On the relationship between *devenir-animal* and human-animal communication, see further Plec (2013), pp. 4-5.

identified by the coinage *devenir-humain* ('becoming-human').⁶ The various examples explored in this chapter reveal how both operations can be in effect simultaneously. In this chapter, I will also specifically address *which* animals are able to communicate with people; *why* birds are predominant; *who* is able to understand animal languages; *how* this ability is achieved; and *what* all of this might signify. These are simple questions which lead to complex answers.

1. Human-Mammal Communication

In the more naturalistic *samtíðarsögur*, the only talking animals appear in people's dreams (see chapter 3, section 8). In the *Íslendingasögur* and *konungasögur*, there are relatively straightforward instances of the best, most intelligent, exemplary domestic animals, dogs and horses, understanding and following human instructions (see chapter 1, sections 1 and 2). These texts portray animals with remarkable intelligence and preternatural ability; the ideal domestic companion animals, they undergo processes of *devenir-humain* through their comprehension of human speech and instruction. The uncanny elements of these episodes are exemplified in *Hákonar saga góða*, when the people of Þrándheim use *seiðr* to endow the

⁶ The latter function is more common, since birds only comment on human affairs and do not discuss their own avian lives (with the possible exception of *Rígsþula*, see below, section 2.3.1). For further discussion of Deleuze and Guattari's *devenir-animal*, see chapter 4 in particular.

dog-king Saurr with the intelligence of three men and consequently the capacity of human speech – and thus human interiority, in a becoming-human process (see chapter 4, section 1.3).

1.1 *Finnboga saga*

The only wild mammal depicted as comprehending human speech in Old Norse literature is a bear in *Finnboga saga*.⁷ A bear in Hálogaland is slaughtering livestock – a common enough phenomenon, but uniquely, the bear is formally outlawed and a price is placed on its head.⁸ The bear is thus already situated in an ambiguous hybrid category between animal and human, since he is outlawed according to legal norms (the technical term *sekr* is used twice).⁹ Following his outlawry, people constantly attack the animal without success and he becomes even more vicious, killing men as well as their livestock. With animal-human hybridity comes monstrosity; when Finnbogi strives to slay the beast he finds it lying on top of a sheep and sucking its blood. The bear is depicted as grotesque: although he

⁷ Excluding Sigmundr and Sinfjötli's comprehension of one another whilst in wolf-shape in *Völsunga saga* and the *berserkir* and *úlfheðnar* who howl like wild animals (see chapter 4, sections 3.1 and 4.1).

⁸ This is probably a consequence of the lateness of the saga; *Finnboga saga* is one of the post-classical *Íslendingasögur*. This category is usually divided into two groups: 'one consisting of fictional reworkings of scraps of oral and written tradition ... the other consisting of pure inventions' – and *Finnboga saga* is placed in the latter category. Ralph O'Connor, 'History and Fiction', in *The Routledge Research Companion to The Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, ed. Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson (London and New York, 2017), pp. 88-110, at p. 93. Moreover, *Íslendingasögur* in general often allow for greater fantasy in their Norwegian preludes.

⁹ *Finnboga saga*, pp. 273, 275.

behaves in a way that is normal for a bear, it is framed as barbaric in human terms.

Finnbogi then speaks to the bear and the beast seemingly understands Finnbogi's words.

Finnbogi first demands 'Stattu upp, bersi, ok ráð móti mér' ('Stand up, bear, and attack me') and suggests that a fight would be more worthwhile than lying on a sheep's carcass.¹⁰

The bear sits up, looks at him, and flops back down. Thus the bear stands up when asked

to do so, but does not attack Finnbogi – he responds to requests but does not obey

commands. Finnbogi takes off his helmet, lays down his shield, and declares 'Stattu nú

upp, ef þú þorir' ('Now stand up, if you dare').¹¹ The bear clearly understands Finnbogi but

refuses: 'Björninn settist upp ok skók höfuðit, lagðist niðr aptr síðan' ('The bear sat up and shook its head, then lay down again').¹²

The bear thus communicates in turn through body language when asked to fight and displays an unexpected level of human interiority. Finnbogi comprehends: 'Þat skil ek, at þú villt, at vit sém jafnbúnir' ('I understand that you want us to be on equal terms').¹³

This episode involves *devenir-humain* and not *devenir-animal*, for the bear can be

understood to be quasi-human. But its communication via body language – rather than

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 274.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 274.

¹² Ibid., p. 274.

¹³ Ibid., p. 274.

animal speech – reflects how bears actually communicate in the wild through a language of dominance and submission – aggression or solicitation – to convey information and meaning. A bear’s posture communicates its mood: walking or running away, sitting or lying down (as the bear does here) conveys subordination; standing tall or approaching signals domination: these are tactics of intimidation.¹⁴ Bears do not wish to fight each other unless it is absolutely necessary, since fights risk injury and that is not the objective.

This all relates to the behaviour of the bear in *Finnboga saga*, demonstrating genuine cultural knowledge of bear behaviour and traditions preserved from Norway (though the text assimilates this behaviour to human communication norms, e.g. head-shaking).¹⁵

Finally, Finnbogi throws away his sword and questions the bear’s honour; this changes everything: ‘statt nú upp, ef þú hefir þat hjarta, sem líkligt væri, heldr en þess kvikendis, er ragast er’ (‘now sit up, if you have the heart one would expect, rather than that of the most

¹⁴ See John Maynard Smith and David Harper, *Animal Signals* (Oxford, 2003); Gisela Håkansson and Jennie Westander, *Communication in Humans and Other Animals* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2013), especially ‘Chapter 4: Human nonverbal communication’ and its discussion of visual communication through body postures, hand movements, eyes and gaze, etc.

¹⁵ Tolley (2009) has also argued for possible Sámi connections to this episode in *Finnboga saga*. He suggests that ‘It is possible that some familiarity with Sámi rites, in which the bear is humanised, has influenced the Norse picture of the bear as an almost human warrior, but it could well simply arise from a desire to personify one’s opponent’ (p. 565).

cowardly of animals’).¹⁶ Uncannily comprehending the significance of Finnbogi’s words, the bear then stands up, becomes angry, and attacks Finnbogi; after a long fight, Finnbogi kills the bear, forcing it onto its back and breaking its spine.¹⁷ The bear is thoroughly anthropomorphised: the saga conveys a realisation that bears communicate in their own particular way, but also that they are innately like people, and human interiority is projected onto the animal.

Finnbogi’s killing of the bear can be seen as an initiation into adulthood. Mary Danielli examines similar examples of noble young Icelanders killing bears or *berserkir* (which are seemingly interchangeable) in Norway in various *Íslendingasögur* – and she includes the bear-killing in *Víga-Glúms saga* and *Grettis saga* noted in the previous chapter (section 3.2) – but she does not discuss this example from *Finnboga saga*, which closely

¹⁶ *Finnboga saga*, p. 274. Finnbogi uses the shameful symbolism of *argr/ragr* to prompt an aggressive response. Which animal species might be thought of as the most unmanly/effeminate, and thus the most cowardly, is open to interpretation; the fox is a strong contender, since dream-foxes are affiliated with human characters associated with craftiness, magic, and witchcraft – and to conduct *seiðr* was considered *ergi* (see chapter 3, section 4.3).

¹⁷ In *Færeyinga saga*, Sigmundur similarly kills a bear and sets it up to still look alive: it is stood upright, bound to a tree, and a peg is stuck in its mouth so that it looks as though it is gaping. *Færeyinga saga*, in *Færeyinga saga—Ólaf’s saga Tryggvasonar eptir Odd Munk Snorrason*, ÍF XXVI, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson (Reykjavík, 2006), pp. 27-29. There are no bears in the Faroe Islands, however, supporting Peter Foote’s assertion that ‘there is no evidence to show that Icelanders were particularly well informed about the Faroese ... We shall not in consequence expect the *Saga of the Faroe Islanders* to contain much that is historically reliable in any detail’. Peter Foote, *On the Saga of the Faroe Islanders* (London, 1965), p. 13. For another similar example, see *Hrólf’s saga kraka*, p. 67.

matches the pattern that she establishes.¹⁸ The bear is representative of the antagonistic *berserkr* warrior which must be killed in the initiation-episode – but while *berserkr* are merely dressed in bear skins, Finnbogi slays a real beast. The bear thus symbolises the animalistic *berserkr* warrior in hyper-realised form: as Tolley suggests, ‘The degree of humanization of the bear ... is notable; it lifts the fight from the level of hunting out a wild animal to that of a contest between warriors’.¹⁹ The exchange with the bear might be further seen as an exercise in empathy: the bear does not want to fight until provoked, and is anti-*berserkr* in that respect, suggesting a moral lesson for the young Iclander about non-violent behaviour.

This form of initiation allows the sons of noble settlers in Iceland to enter their social responsibilities, and it had to be performed in the original Norwegian family home, where the heads of the family still lived (thus Finnbogi returns to Hálogaland to kill the

¹⁸ There are numerous parallels with the type of warrior initiation that Danielli (1945) describes: a young man from Iceland travels to Norway; stays in the house of the chief man in the district; takes cargo with him (ostensibly an account of his first ventures in trading); the youth is recognised and welcomed into the family once he has undertaken a battle and emerged victorious (i.e. a bear-killing or *berserker*-killing); after this exploit, the young man is honoured and feasted; and this always takes place at Yule, or at least in winter. Significantly, this is all true of Finnbogi in *Finnboga saga*.

¹⁹ Tolley (2009), p. 565.

bear).²⁰ The newcomer is now recognised as a full member of the Norwegian family group; the bear trial establishes this belonging, for the young man's courage is tested in a rite of passage. The end result of the initiation – with the consequent recognition by the Norwegian family – is that the noble youth may now enrol in royal service, and Finnbogi too stays with earl Hákon and later Emperor John of Byzantium. Unlike the other examples later explored in this chapter, the initiation does not seem necessary for the communication that takes place between human and animal, since it is the bear that understands human speech, and not vice-versa. The *devenir-animal* processes of characters who understand bird-language often require initiation of some kind, but with the bear's *devenir-humain*, it is a different type of initiation in *Finnboga saga*, and not one that is required for the communication to unfold. The majority of examples, and the most elaborate examples, of human-animal communication in Old Norse literature involve birds.

2. The Language of Birds

During the early travels of Oddr and Ásmundr in *Örvar-Odds saga*, these sworn-brothers come to a large and well-lit hall in Bjarmaland. They see many people enjoying themselves

²⁰ For discussion of Finnbogi's unique childhood as an unwanted but noble and precocious child prodigy, see Ármann Jakobsson, 'Troublesome Children in the Sagas of Icelanders', *Saga-Book 27* (2003), pp. 5-24, at pp. 19-20.

inside. Oddr asks, ‘Skilr þú hér nokkut mál manna?’ (‘Can you understand anything these people are saying?’).²¹ Ásmundr responds, ‘Eigi heldr en fuglaklið ... Eða þykkist þú nokkut af skilja?’ (‘No more than the twittering of birds ... Can you make anything out of it?’).²² Oddr answers, ‘Eigi er þat síðr’ (‘No more than you’).²³ Oddr and Ásmundr deem the language of birds incomprehensible; but for certain other characters in Old Norse tradition, bird-speech is not so foreign.

Select characters in Old Norse literature are able to comprehend the language of birds. Birds consistently offer important knowledge to individuals associated with royalty and wisdom. It is typically kingly figures – rulers, royalty, and nobility – who are able to understand bird-speech, and a person is considered to be particularly wise if they can understand bird-language; likewise, birds provide useful (and often plot-necessary) insights. The remainder of this chapter will focus on birds and the important narrative, religious, and symbolic purposes that they serve. Birds universally hold a special place in the human experience of nature. In the Old Norse context, this phenomenon has received surprisingly little academic attention and is deserving of detailed, extensive, and interdisciplinary study.

²¹ *Örvar-Odds saga*, p. 215.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 215.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

2.1 *Why Birds?*

Of all animal species in Old Norse literature, birds are the pre-eminent communicators of wisdom. As Jacob Grimm speculated long ago, ‘With *birds* the men of old lived on still more intimate terms, and their greater nimbleness seemed to bespeak more of the spiritual than was in quadrupeds’.²⁴ But *why birds?* What symbolic power do they hold? Although other animal species are occasionally able to communicate with people, only birds convey important information. As discussed in the Introduction and developed in chapter 3 (see especially section 8.1), for Lévi-Strauss, it is the perceptible reality of animals which provides the impetus for their embodiment of ideas, as conceived by speculative thought and based on empirical observation. Regarding birds in particular, it is their ability to fly that makes them distinct,²⁵ as well as their communication by complex acoustic means that recalls an articulated language.²⁶

²⁴ Jacob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, vol. 2, trans. James Steven Stallybrass, 1883 (New York, 2004), p. 669.

²⁵ According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, ‘The power of flight is the quintessential characteristic of birds, the central adaptation around which many of the most interesting aspects of avian anatomy, physiology, and behavior have been molded’. Cornell Lab of Ornithology, *Handbook of Bird Biology*, ed. Sandy Podulka, Ronald W. Rohrbaugh Jr., and Rick Bonney, 2nd edn (Ithaca, 2004), section 5-1. See further 5-2 through to 5-51.

²⁶ Vocalisation is a universal feature of bird species (ibid., sections 7-1 through to 7-92). The organ responsible for producing bird sounds is the syrinx, which consists of ‘a pair of chambers located along the trachea, where it splits to form the two bronchi heading to the lungs ... The muscles of the syrinx control the details of song production’ (7-38).

In the Prologue to his *Edda*, Snorri explains how God grants people the wisdom to understand all earthly things and all the distinctions that can be seen between the sky and the earth; then ‘Þat hugsuðu þeir ok undruðusk hverju þat mundi gegna at jörðin ok dýrin ok fuglarnir hǫfðu saman eðli í sumum hlutum ok var þó ólíkt at hætti’ (‘People thought about this and wondered what it might signify that the earth and the animals and the birds had the same nature in some respects and yet were dissimilar in others’).²⁷ There is a separation between birds and other animal species; *fuglar* (‘birds’) are not categorised as *dýr* (‘animals’) but as something else entirely in Snorri’s learned conception of the physical environment.²⁸

²⁷ Prologue, in *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, Snorri Sturluson, ed. Anthony Faulkes, 2nd edn (London, 2005; repr. 2011), p. 3.

²⁸ In this sense – considering their physical separation from humanity’s immediate surroundings – aquatic animals are probably the closest parallel to birds. Gísli Pálsson usefully explores the place of water-based animals in Icelandic thought, its evolution over time, and correspondence to human society. Gísli argues ‘that some animals, because of their anomalous position, are better to think with than others’ (Gísli Pálsson, ‘The Idea of Fish: Land and Sea in the Icelandic World-View’, in *Signifying Animals: Human Meaning in the Natural World*, ed. Roy Willis (London, 1990), pp. 119-133, at p. 119). Gísli’s interests lie in the aquatic realm and he further questions the extent to which the ‘fish world’ serves as a vehicle for symbolic thought. Applying ethnology and folklore, he convincingly argues against the assumptions of some anthropologists ‘that fish are rarely used as metaphors for human society because there are relatively few “obvious points of resemblance” with human beings’. Far less convincing is the notion that ‘the bird lore was quite limited’ and the suggestion that ‘birds were less “good to think”’ – a problematic proposition with which medieval and post-medieval Icelandic myth, legend, and folklore clearly contrasts (p. 120).

Birds are universally ‘good to think with’ and they also inhabit an anomalous position as far as landlocked humans are concerned. In *La Pensee sauvage* (‘The Savage Mind’), Lévi-Strauss argues that ‘bird society’ is often rendered as alternative, and yet parallel, to human society, and he suggests that the combination of difference and similarity is the root cause of the significance and universality of bird symbolism in myth and folklore. He writes that ‘everything objective conspires to make us think of the bird world as a metaphorical human society: is it not after all literally parallel to it on another level?’²⁹

There is no real ‘bird community’ in Old Norse sources and certainly none that communicate with people (except perhaps the group of seven nuthatches which speak to Sigurðr, see below, section 2.2.1). In Old Norse, birds serve a specific and important function: they are ubiquitous gatherers and providers of important information; their flight seemingly endows them with wide-ranging knowledge of worldly events; and their ability to sing presents them with the means to communicate this intelligence to select individuals. As Leigh A. Bernacchi argues, birds ‘represent an unparalleled freedom

²⁹ Lévi-Strauss (1966), p. 204. The features that Lévi-Strauss identifies as both separate to human society – in particular the ability to fly – and greatly similar to human society – such as language and home-building (i.e. nests) – are (not surprisingly) supported by biological research. Of particular note is vocalisation as a universal feature of all bird species, a method of language acquisition similar to that of humans: ‘this learning involves listening to a model sound, memorizing the model, and practising until the sound matches with great fidelity the young bird’s memory of the original sound’. Cornell Lab of Ornithology (2004), section 7-23.

combined with a cross-cultural aesthetic'.³⁰ Bird functions that appear to be culturally specific to the Old Norse context include sacred initiation, sacral kingship, and a consistent link with Óðinn.

2.2 *The Völsungs*

2.2.1 *Sigurðr Fáfnisbani*

In the Völsung cycle of eddic poetry and legendary literature, Sigurðr is urged by his foster-father Reginn to slay the dragon Fáfnir, the brother of Reginn and greedy guardian of great treasure. According to the prose of *Fáfnismál*, Sigurðr slays the serpent by digging a deep trench and stabbing his sword upwards; in *Völsunga saga*, this comes at the advice of Óðinn, from whom the noble hero is descended (links with Óðinn will be a continued theme throughout this chapter, and his own affiliation with bird-language will be studied in detail in chapter 6, section 2).³¹

Following a dialogue between hero and serpent, Sigurðr roasts Fáfnir's heart on a spit, and when the juice foams, he tastes it to see if it is ready. The act of cooking the meat is significant. Lévi-Strauss argues that cooking is a cultural process, a transformation of the

³⁰ Leigh A. Bernacchi, 'Flocking: Bird-Human Ritual Communication', in *Perspectives on Human-Animal Communication: Internatural Communication*, ed. Emily Plec (New York, 2013), pp. 142-161, at p. 142.

³¹ *Fáfnismál*, in *Eddukvæði II: Hetjukvæði*, ÍF, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík, 2014), p. 303; *Völsunga saga*, p. 30.

raw whereby nature becomes culture; natural essence becomes cultural knowledge.³² Thus, what happens next is telling: ‘En er hjartblóð kom á tungu honum, þá skilði hann fuglsrödd. Hann heyrði at igður klökuðu á hrisunum’ (‘and when the heartblood touched his tongue, then he understood the speech of birds. He heard nuthatches chirping in the bushes’).³³ The language of birds proves to be a source of great wisdom: in *Fáfnismál*, seven birds consecutively provide Sigurðr with important knowledge through verse: they suggest that he eats the heart himself so that he will be wiser than any man, warn him of Reginn’s intended betrayal, advise him to take the serpent’s treasure for himself, and direct him towards the *valkyrja*, Sigrdrífa (Brynhildr in *Völsunga saga*), where he acquires further numinosity through knowledge of the runes. These are animal speech acts: oracular words of wisdom and warning. They prophesy the direction of the plot in extradiegetic terms, since Sigurðr follows their suggested course of action. In the first bird-speech at verse 32, the poem’s metre changes from *ljóðabáttr* to *fornyrðislag*, signaling a change in register and

³² Lévi-Strauss attempted to reconstruct the logical structure underlying food and cooking myths through various binary pairings, including raw/cooked, fresh/decayed, and moistened/burned, which can ‘be used as conceptual tools with which to elaborate abstract ideas and combine them in the form of propositions’ (Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology: I*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman, first published as *Le Cru et le Cuit*, 1964 (London, 1970), p. 1). Cooking thus presents an anomalous category, since food constantly crosses the boundaries of the categories of nature and culture, hybridising them. Holding symbolic significance and conveying meaning, cooking is a language – and like any language, it has an unconscious structure constituted by multiple oppositions.

³³ *Fáfnismál*, p. 309.

the introduction of a new kind of voice.³⁴ As with every other example of bird-speech in Old Norse literature, birds exclusively speak in verse (even in a prose context), reflecting the lyrical elements of poetry, the musical nature of bird-song, and the high cultural valorisation of the wisdom they impart.³⁵

Sigurðr's dragon-slaying is the first stage in a complex, heroic, coming-of-age initiation process whereby a supernatural ability is acquired. Jens Peter Schjødt usefully defines initiation as 'a certain sequential structure – ritualistic or narrative – which makes use of a series of symbols that mark the difference and the transition between the initial and the final phases of the sequence'.³⁶ An essential element of the sequence is the supernatural knowledge or abilities gained by the acting figure – what Schjødt terms 'acquisition of numinous potential' – such as understanding bird-speech; while this capacity is numinous, the actual knowledge-content imparted tends to be quite practical in scope.³⁷

³⁴ See further Judy Quinn, 'Verseform and voice in eddic poems: the discourses of *Fáfnismál*', ANF 107 (1992), pp. 100-130.

³⁵ A hungry raven speaks to another (*brafn kvað at brafni*) about the birth of Helgi in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* (p. 248); also see *Rígsþula*, *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, *Morkinskinna*, and *Hrafnsmál* below – the only other Old Norse texts where the actual speech of birds is provided (outside of the *Völsung* cycle).

³⁶ Schjødt (2008), p. 12.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Sigurðr's adventures closely follow the structure and symbolism of initiation.³⁸ The pit that Sigurðr enters symbolises a journey to the underworld, where he kills a creature which has chthonic connotations, in contrast to the aerial symbolism of birds. Sigurðr symbolically enters the Other World to slay the dragon and achieves arcane knowledge as an indirect result. His victory over Fáfnir thus represents a symbolic conquest of death, the consequence of which is access to communication with birds (higher beings with connections to the gods). Initiation is not required to understand the language of the anthropomorphic serpent, Fáfnir, in Sigurðr's initial exchange with him; but with their exceptional wisdom, birds are another matter.

According to the prose introduction to *Guðrúnarkviða I*, Guðrún Gjúkadóttir acquires the ability to understand bird-speech after she eats some of Fáfnir's heart.³⁹ As with Sigurðr, consumption of serpent meat and the consequent tasting of its blood grants

³⁸ The hero's youth is important: Sigurðr is 'a man between childhood and adulthood' and the dragon-slaying 'is the climax of the hero's life' – Ármann Jakobsson, 'Why be afraid? On the practical uses of legends', in *Á austrvega. Saga and East Scandinavia. Preprint Papers of The 14th International Saga Conference Uppsala, 9th–15th August 2009*, ed. Agneta Ney, Henrik Williams, and Fredrik Charpentier Ljungqvist (Gävle, 2009), pp. 35–42, at p. 41; 'Enter the Dragon: Legendary Saga Courage and the Birth of the Hero', in *Making History: Essays on the Fornaldarsögur*, ed. Martin Arnold and Alison Finlay (London, 2010), pp. 33–52, at p. 46. While the chthonic serpent symbolises death, the hero in contrast is representative of life, and Sigurðr is thus at an appropriate age for initiation.

³⁹ *Guðrúnarkviða I*, in *Eddukvæði II: Hetjukvæði*, ÍF, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík, 2014), p. 329.

Guðrún this supernatural capability: one mode of *devenir-animal*. Transfer may also be hereditary, however, for Sigurðr's daughter Áslaug also possesses her father's talent.

2.2.2 Áslaug Sigurðardóttir

Völsunga saga recounts that the union of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and Brynhildr Buðladóttir in Hlymdalr produces an heir: Áslaug, who is raised by Brynhildr's foster-father, Heimir.⁴⁰

Áslaug has special importance; in *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri notes that Áslaug is the sole living descendant of the Völsung lineage, and that great families are descended from her.⁴¹

Áslaug's history is only told in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, which directly follows *Völsunga saga* in MS NKS 1824 b 4to (c. ~1400 AD).⁴² The two texts are closely related, and the continuation of the bird-speech motif is surely no coincidence. Áslaug's exceptional wisdom and extraordinary capabilities are described in detail and begin early in her life; as

⁴⁰ *Völsunga saga*, p. 50.

⁴¹ *Skáldskaparmál*, in *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri Sturluson, ed. Anthony Faulkes, vol. 1, 2nd edn (London, 1998; repr. 2007), p. 50.

⁴² Another MS, AM 147 4to, fragmentarily preserves the saga and can be dated to roughly 1250 AD; Rory McTurk argues for the existence of a third, and oldest, redaction that was perhaps completed by 1230 AD. See Rory McTurk, 'Ragnars saga loðbrókar', in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano et al. (New York, 1993), pp. 519-520, at p. 519. In *Gesta Danorum*, Saxo Grammaticus includes an older version of the story, but he excludes Áslaug, who emerges as the true protagonist of the Icelandic version. See Rory McTurk, *Studies in Ragnars saga loðbrókar and its Major Scandinavian Analogues* (Oxford, 1991), p. 91 (and further references therein).

the saga unfolds, she demonstrates subtle gender transformations, great leadership, prophetic powers, sound counsel, and the ability to understand bird-speech.

Áslaug displays her father's paranormal ability when she learns from three birds of her husband Ragnarr loðbrók's deceitful plan to wed another woman: the beautiful Ingibjörg, daughter of Eysteinn, King of Sweden. Áslaug (now under the name 'Kráka', 'Crow' – see below) reveals that she knows of his intended deception, which she learns from three birds who overhear Ragnarr speaking to his men in a forest clearing: 'Þer mundut sea, at fuglar III satu i trenu hia ydr. Þeir saughdu mer þesse tidendi' (You would have seen that three birds at in a tree near you. They told me these tidings').⁴³ Áslaug then reveals her true heritage as the daughter of Brynhildr and Sigurðr, which Ragnarr does not believe; and Áslaug proves her royal lineage by accurately foreseeing that their next son, Sigurðr, will have the mark of a serpent around his eye. She is thereby characterised as both knowledgeable and uncannily well-informed, as well as tolerant yet pragmatic and insistent on her rights.

Concerning the origin of Áslaug's supernatural ability to understand bird-speech, Larrington suggests that it is 'a trait presumably inherited from her father [Sigurðr

⁴³ *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, p. 134.

Fáfnisbani]’.⁴⁴ The argument for heredity is logical: Áslaug is also the descendant of Óðinn and like the gift of prophecy, comprehension of bird speech could be a heritable trait in the Völsung lineage.⁴⁵ Áslaug also has the mark of a snake on or near her eye in some variants of the story (e.g. later ballad tradition), an external genetic marker of her supernatural heritage as the daughter of Sigurðr the dragon-slayer.⁴⁶ While Áslaug does not have this feature in the medieval saga, it is present in her son Sigurðr ormr-í-auga. Rory McTurk, however, argues that she developed this ability like her father – via her own (perhaps ritualistic) initiation. Just as Sigurðr undergoes a heroic transition into the underworld to conquer the dragon, emerging with numinous abilities, Áslaug too undergoes a form of female initiation.⁴⁷ In this saga, dragon-slaying itself does not provide the power to understand bird-speech: Ragnarr also slays a dragon, but is unaware of the presence of birds

⁴⁴ Carolyne Larrington, ‘Þóra and Áslaug in *Ragnars saga Loðbrókar*: Women, Dragons and Destiny’, in *Making History: Essays on the Fornaldarsögur*, ed. Martin Arnold and Alison Finlay (London, 2010), pp. 53-68, at p. 56.

⁴⁵ In *Völsunga saga*, Signý (the daughter of King Völsung) makes the heredity of prophecy explicit when she tells her father that she does not wish to marry King Siggeir because it will bring them great misfortune, which she knows from their family’s prophetic ability (p. 5). Her prediction of future doom proves correct. Áslaug can also foresee the future: she accurately predicts that if Ragnarr sleeps with her on their first night of marriage, then she will give birth to a boneless son; Ragnarr ignores her counsel and forces himself upon her; she gives birth to Ívarr, who is born without bones. *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, p. 129.

⁴⁶ Larrington (2010), p. 60; McTurk (1991), p. 80.

⁴⁷ For extensive discussion, see Rory McTurk, ‘Male or Female Initiation? The Strange Case of *Ragnars saga*’, in *Reflections on Old Norse Myths*, ed. Pernille Hermann, Jens Peter Schjødt, and Rasmus Trandum Kristensen (Turnhout, 2007), pp. 53-73.

in the clearing when he speaks to his men.⁴⁸ McTurk argued in 1991 that Áslaug is ‘the “actual” hero of *Ragnars saga*, while Ragnarr is merely the “formal” hero’.⁴⁹ He later develops these ideas further; regarding comprehension of the language of birds, he suggests the following:

...while it should be recognized that the motif of her learning of Ragnarr’s plans from some birds is almost certainly a reduplication of the motif in VS of Sigurðr ... it may be very tentatively suggested that, during her time at Spangarheiðr, Áslaug, after being named Kráka, comes to partake of the nature of a crow to the extent of understanding bird language, and thus acquiring the knowledge she so startlingly reveals.⁵⁰

There is no evidence, however, that the naming endows her with the ability, but it could be a concomitant part of the process. Either explanation is possible and they should not be considered mutually exclusive.

Áslaug’s connections to royalty and wisdom (the two themes central to the following section) are clear. She is the sole living heir of the royal Vǫlsung lineage which traces its descent to Óðinn.⁵¹ Áslaug seemingly inherits the supernatural gift of her

⁴⁸ For Ragnarr’s dragon-slaying, see *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, p. 118.

⁴⁹ McTurk (1991), p. 91.

⁵⁰ McTurk (2007), p. 69.

⁵¹ Ármann Jakobsson’s (2010) statement regarding *Vǫlsunga saga* that ‘an important function of the legend [is] to sustain the charisma of leadership and the qualities of a noble ruler’ may also be true of *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* (p. 36).

ancestry, which helps to characterise her as the saga's true hero through associations with nobility and wisdom. The three birds that overhear Ragnarr in the forest are sources of knowledge for Áslaug; they give immediate strategic advantage and also confirm her particular wisdom. By providing such important information, the birds become essential characters in the plot with significant consequences for the saga's human protagonists. In accordance with other examples from Old Norse tradition, birds appear to favour the royal and the wise with their knowledge.

2.3 Kingship and Wisdom

Two themes that permeate the examples of human-bird communication in Old Norse are kingship and wisdom (both the wisdom of the human character concerned, and the knowledge of the avian communicators). Given the strong links between human rulers and the deity Óðinn – with birds acting as mediators – these themes may point to the concept of sacral kingship. With its methodological and theoretical difficulties, this model has a problematic history in Old Norse scholarship.⁵² I follow Schjødt in understanding the term

⁵² As Olof Sundqvist notes, however, 'Some scholars have rejected it for source-criticism reasons, while others have defended it. But few have questioned the category of sacral kingship as such, or its usefulness for interpreting pre-Christian culture and religion'. Olof Sundqvist, *Freyr's Offspring: Rulers and Religion in Ancient Svea Society*, *Historia Religionum* 21 (Stockholm, 2002), p. 14. For a useful bulleted list of important concerns in applying the idea of sacral kingship to medieval Scandinavia, see pp. 14-16. For a succinct list of

in a highly open sense. Contending that sacral kingship ‘is not (and perhaps should not be) defined in any precise way’,⁵³ he observes:

It may denote almost any kind of relation between a ruler and the gods of the society in question. At one end of a spectrum, we have the idea that the ruler *is* a god himself, and at the other, that the ruler merely has some special duties in the performing of rituals or is supposed to experience a certain attention from the gods which is different from that of other people.⁵⁴

For the kings and royal figures who understand bird-speech, it is only the latter end of this spectrum which is relevant: there is no evidence that these characters were actually viewed as deities themselves. Yet select literary sources suggest that they were thought to communicate with the divine through the medium of birds. Sacral kingship is particularly relevant to *Rígsþula*: here another kingly figure with divine descent receives ritual education and demonstrates numinous potential, understanding the speech of birds.

2.3.1 *Rígsþula*

common characteristics identified by scholars who apply the concept to medieval Scandinavia – many of which are relevant to the examples under study in this chapter – see p. 27.

⁵³ Jens Peter Schjødt, ‘Ideology of the Ruler in Pre-Christian Scandinavian: Mythic and Ritual Relations’, *VMS* 6 (2010), pp. 161-194, at p. 167.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

Under the name of Rígr (c.f. Gaelic *Rígh*, ‘a king’),⁵⁵ the god Heimdallr travels the countryside visiting, observing, and sleeping betwixt three separate couples. To each couple a child is born who is the progenitor of a social class (the slaves/serfs, the farmers/workers, and the nobility).⁵⁶ The third couple’s child is named Jarl (‘Highborn, Earl’), and it is their aptly named royal descendant, Konr (‘King’), who is able to understand bird-speech. Konr is the youngest of twelve sons in Jarl’s family lineage, but he is the one who originates the kingship, not his father or brothers. This contrasts with the thirteenth-century norm of primogeniture; it thus entails ‘a folkloric inversion of normal inheritance expectations’.⁵⁷ Accordingly, to compensate for his disadvantage under primogeniture, the youngest brother acquires the greatest fame through intellectual supremacy and feats of accomplishment. This is certainly the case for the precocious young Konr, who is endowed with a wide

⁵⁵ *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 499. Also Old Irish *rí* (‘a king’) – see *Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language*, ‘R’, arranged by Maud Joynt, published by the Royal Irish Academy, vol. IV, R–U (Dublin, 1944), pp. 52–53.

⁵⁶ The opening verse of *Völuspá* also suggests that there was once thought to be a relationship of descent between Heimdallr and different social ranks, though the details are now unknown: ‘Hljóðs bið ek allar / *helgar* kindir / meiri ok minni / mǫgu Heimdalar’ (‘Listening I ask from all / the holy races / greater and lesser / the offspring of Heimdallr’). *Völuspá*, in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ÍF, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík, 2014), p. 291.

⁵⁷ The same process is at work with Böðvarr bjarki in *Hrólfs saga kraka*. See Larrington (2015), p. 64, and Michael Jackson, ‘Ambivalence and the Last-Born: Birth-Order Position in Convention and Myth’, *Man* 13 (1978), pp. 341–361.

variety of natural and supernatural skills, and he *Klök nam fugla* ('Learned bird-speech').⁵⁸

Also significant is his knowledge of runes – *ævirúnar ok aldrúnar* ('life-runes and age-runes') – a feature shared by Sigurðr and Óðinn, two other wise figures who understand bird-speech.⁵⁹ Although knowledge of runes and knowledge of bird-language are not explicitly connected, they appear concomitantly in figures who are wise, royal, and initiated. Konr competes in rune-wisdom with lord Rígr – Heimdallr in disguise – and is victorious, gaining the right to 'Rígr at heita, / rúnar kenna' ('be named Rígr (i.e. King) / [and] know runes').⁶⁰

Konr next demonstrates his ability to understand bird-speech while riding through the woods one day:

Reið Konr ungr
kjör ok skóga,
kólfi fleygði,
kyrrði fugla.

Þá kvað þat kráka,

⁵⁸ *Rígsþula*, in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ÍF, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík, 2014), p. 456.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 456. In *Sigrdrífumál*, Sigrdrífa teaches Sigurðr to read the runes (*Sigrdrífumál*, in *Eddukvæði II: Hetjukvæði*, ÍF, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík, 2014), pp. 314-317); and in *Hávamál*, Óðinn sacrifices himself by hanging for nine nights on the world-tree Yggdrasill, after which he too 'takes up' the runes (p. 350).

⁶⁰ *Rígsþula*, p. 457.

sat kvisti ein:
 'Hvat skaltu, Konr ungr,
 kyrra fugla?
 Heldr mætti þér
 hestum ríða
 ok her fella.'⁶¹

(Young Konr rode
 through thickets and forests,
 let fly a bolt,
 calmed the birds.

Then a crow said,
 sat alone on a branch:
 'Young Konr, why do you
 charm birds?
 Instead you could
 ride horses
 and defeat an army.'

When Konr *kyrra* ('charms, calms, stills') the birds, the meaning is ambiguous; he is either somehow charming them with an arrow, or more likely, quieting them by killing them.⁶²

One of the crows encourages Konr to stop the slaughter and to find something more worthwhile to do with his time. To mature into a full adult, Konr must assume his kingly responsibilities and complete his ultimogeniture move to distinguish himself from his older

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 457.

⁶² *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 367. The word is not used elsewhere in relation to birds. See further Klaus von See et al., *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, vol. 3: Götterlieder (Heidelberg, 2000), pp. 655-657.

brothers (to become a successful king). In the poem's final extant stanza, the crow tells Konr about two other kings, Danr and Danpr, and advises Konr to go to battle to become their equal or that he makes them his target. Either way, knowledge of bird language becomes a means to an end. Following the crow's advice would bring Konr an improvement in social status through conquest: as a Jarl's son, he is not yet a king, but perhaps he will be if he defeats Danr and Danpr, who possess the following valuables:

dýrar hallir,
æðra óðal
en ér hafð.⁶³

(costly halls
a better patrimony
than [Konr] has.)

Unfortunately, the full meaning of this episode remains uncertain; the poem is incomplete.

According to Jere Fleck, the royal lineage of divine descent originating in *Rígsþula* is no dead end; rather, it 'seems logical that the poem was constructed to supply a tradition for that line's distinguished origin' – although we do not know which historical lineage is being referenced.⁶⁴ Fleck further argues that the figures Rígr, Jarl, and Konr constitute a

⁶³ *Rígsþula*, p. 457. Re. Danr and Danpr, see von See et al. (2000), pp. 661-664.

⁶⁴ Jere Fleck, 'Konr – Óttarr – Geirroðr: A Knowledge Criterion for Succession to the Germanic Sacred Kingship', *SS* 42.1 (1970), pp. 39-49, at pp. 39-40.

sacred kingship in which ‘ritual numinous education’ is ‘customary in the initiation of a sacred king’.⁶⁵ Fleck demonstrates that the basis of Konr’s ascent – in contrast to standard rules of primogeniture – lies in his possession of runic knowledge (and presumably knowledge of bird-language as well), which his brothers do not share.⁶⁶ Through comparison with *Hynduljóð* and *Grímnismál*, Fleck thus concludes that it is sacred, numinous knowledge that forms the basic criterion in deciding succession to the Germanic sacred kingship.⁶⁷ In the eddic ideology of kingship, understanding the language of birds is a knowledge criterion that is concomitant with great wisdom, divine descent, and holy favour, and this may have also been imagined to be true of kings in pre-Christian Scandinavia.

The themes of kingship and wisdom in relation to human comprehension of bird language are clear in this text. Konr, who is able to understand birds, is a descendant of the third couple that Rígr visits, thus associating him with the noble class; moreover, the name

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 40.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 41. Consequently, Fleck argues that there exists ‘a ritual education in numinous knowledge as a part of a younger/youngest son’s individual consecration to godly figures formed the decisive factor in the succession to a Germanic sacred kingship’ (p. 42).

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 46.

Konr literally attests to his royal heritage.⁶⁸ *Konr*'s story is thus an origin myth for the institution of kingship. He is also considered to be exceptionally wise, even surpassing *Heimdallr* in runic knowledge (*Heimdallr* has here apparently taken on an Odinic role in his interest surrounding human kingship and succession). Thus once again, a bird offers important advice to a young king. *Sigurðr*'s initiation and comprehension of bird-speech can now be seen in a new light: as a movement not only towards heroic adulthood, but towards kingship as well through training for a kingly role.⁶⁹

2.3.2 *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*

In *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, it is the son of an earl, *Atli*, who understands the speech of a wise-minded bird and desires its knowledge. According to the prose introduction, King *Hjörvarðr* swears an oath to marry the woman he considers fairest of all (even though he already has four wives). Hearing that *Sigrínn* is the most beautiful woman in the world, he sends *Atli*, the son of earl *Íðmundr*, to ask for *Sigrínn* on his behalf. *Atli* is unsuccessful and on his return journey, a bird overhears him and his men: '*Atli jarls sonr stóð einn dag*

⁶⁸ *Konr*: 'a man of gentle or noble birth'; *Konungr*: 'a king'. *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 350.

⁶⁹ Though as Carola Gottzmann argues, *Sigurðr*'s initiation into kingship in *Völsunga saga* ultimately fails through his entanglement with the *Gjúkungar* (unlike in *Das Nibelungenlied* where he does indeed rule in *Xanten*) – see '*Völsunga saga*: Legendary history and textual analysis', in *Preprints of the 4th International Saga Conference*, vol. I (Munich, 1979), pp. 1-18, and references therein.

við lund nökkurn, en fugl sat í limunum uppi yfir honum ok hafði heyrt til at hans menn kǫlluðu vænstar konur þær er Hjörvarðr átti’ (‘Atli the earl’s son stood one day in a certain grove, and a bird sat in the branches up above him and had heard that his men said the most beautiful women were those married to Hjörvarðr’).⁷⁰ The location is significant: *lund nökkurn* (‘a certain grove’), which is reminiscent of the birds that tell Áslaug of Ragnarr’s intended deceit ‘í eitt ríodr, er var í skoginum’ (‘in a clearing, which was in the woods’), as well as Konr ungr’s forest travels.⁷¹ Uncanny birds are to be found in separate and demarcated spaces which might have been considered sacred and therefore liminal between worlds – between human and animal and human and divine – spaces where communication with supernatural beings takes place.

The species of the bird is not identified, though it is gendered as male, and their speech commences: ‘Fuglinn kvakaði, en Atli hlýddi hvat hann sagði’ (‘The bird chirped and Atli listened to what he said’).⁷² Two speech verbs are here juxtaposed: *kvaka* might simply signify the making of a noise, but through Atli’s listening (*hlýða*), the sound is effectively communicated with the verb *segja* and thus spoken in a form of speech (and in

⁷⁰ *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, p. 259.

⁷¹ *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, p. 133; *Rígsþula*, p. 457. Sigurðr’s journey to Gnitahéið can also be seen as a movement towards a demarcated space in nature (*Fáfnismál*, p. 303; *Vǫlsunga saga*, p. 30).

⁷² *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, p. 259.

the same vein, when both the bird and Atli speak in verse, their lines are introduced with *kveða*).⁷³ The bird is able to understand the speech of Atli's companions, but only Atli seems capable of comprehending the speech of the bird. In the poem's first stanza, the bird apparently disagrees with Atli's companions, and he asks if they have seen Sigrlinn, who is the fairest woman in the world – even when compared to Hjörvarðr's wives. A bird is again offering important strategic information, this time seemingly correcting the false assumption of Atli's men that the wives of Hjörvarðr are more beautiful than Sigrlinn. Atli desires its knowledge and calls the bird *flugl fróðhugaðr* ('bird wise-minded'), making its affiliation with wisdom explicit.⁷⁴

In contrast to other instances, this bird desires *blót* ('sacrifice') in return for its advice (re. *blót*, see chapter 6, section 5.2). The two deliberate regarding the terms of their transaction and the bird makes a special request:

Hof mun ek kjósa,
 hǫrga marga,
 gullhrynðar kýr
 frá grams búí.⁷⁵

⁷³ Ibid., pp. 259-260.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 259.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 260. The *gullhrynðar kýr* are reminiscent of *Þrymskviða* when the *jötunn* Þrymr prepares for Freyja's arrival with 'gullhrynðar kýr, / øxn alsvartir' ('gold-horned cows, / all-black oxen'); while these beasts are

(I shall choose a temple,
 [with] many sanctuaries,
 [and] gold-horned cattle
 from the king's farm.)

This bird wants something in return; it demands to be the recipient of cultic worship and wishes to be treated as a god. The enigmatic bird is linked with the sacral in some special way, and while the text does not make its identity explicit, the bird might be earl Fránmarr (Sigrlinn's foster-father) in disguise (in which case it is unclear whether the eagle is speaking in bird-speech or human-speech; if the latter is true, then Atli possesses no special ability). When Atli returns to Svávaland, it is under attack from Sigrlinn's suitor, king Hróðmarr, who had killed her father. Atli finds a large bird sat on a house, keeping watch but asleep; Atli kills the bird and finds Sigrlinn inside. The bird was earl Fránmarr, who had 'hamazk í arnar líki' ('shape-shifted into an eagle').⁷⁶ This would provide a folkloric rationalisation for the behaviour of the bird: he promoted Sigrlinn to Atli and his men in a bid to find his foster-daughter a better suitor.

domestic and not sacrificial, the parallel suggests that they held high value. *Þrymskviða*, in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ÍF, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík, 2014), p. 423.

⁷⁶ *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, p. 260.

Unlike Konr in *Rígsþula*, Atli is not a king, but when the bird does speak with him he is acting as a king's representative and thus could be viewed as a metonymical extension of the king himself. He is also the son of an earl and would therefore definitively belong to the third social class described in *Rígsþula*. It is only Atli, and not the other men who are with him, who is able to receive the bird's wisdom. Atli is special and this tale describes the birth of a sacred hero.

2.3.3 *Ynglinga saga*

A number of texts in the *konungasögur* contain episodes of human-bird communication.

The *konungasögur* are unified by their focus on the ideology of kingship; Ármann Jakobsson writes that 'Kingship ideology is thus very relevant to all attempts to deal with the kings' sagas in generic terms ... the ideology of royal power is pivotal to the *raison d'être* of the genre'.⁷⁷ Of central importance are three substantial texts that relate the history of

Scandinavian kings composed by Icelanders in the 1220s: *Heimskringla*, *Morkinskinna*, and

Fagrskinna.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Ármann Jakobsson, 'Royal Biography', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford, 2005), pp. 388-402, at pp. 388-389. Most of these sagas were composed between 1180 and 1280 AD, concern the relatively recent past (850-1280 AD), and provide biographical histories of mainland Scandinavian kings.

⁷⁸ Ármann Jakobsson (2005), pp. 395-397: 'The Zenith of the Genre'.

In *Heimskringla*, *Ynglinga saga* provides an account of the mythical and legendary ancestors of a line of Swedish kings, the *Ynglingar* ('Descendants of Freyr/Yngvi'). One of the kings listed – King Dagr – is able to understand the language of birds. In addition to the obvious association with kingship, Snorri also makes the connection between understanding bird-language and wisdom explicit: 'Hann var maðr svá spakr, at hann skilði fugls rǫdd' ('He was so wise a man, that he understood the speech of birds').⁷⁹ The text then describes his beloved sparrow: 'Hann átti sporr einn, er honum sagði mǫrg tíðendi. Flaug hann á ýmsi lǫnd' ('He had a sparrow, which told him many things. He flew over various lands').⁸⁰ This is highly reminiscent of Óðinn and his ravens Huginn and Muninn, who fly over the world(s) every day to bring him knowledge of events (see chapter 6, section 2.2). The connection is made stronger by the inclusion of Óðinn's ravens earlier in the saga; thus the appearance of the motif in chapter 18 might be an anaphoric literary borrowing.⁸¹

⁷⁹ *Ynglinga saga*, p. 35.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁸¹ The parallels between the two episodes are clear: in both cases, birds travel widely (*á ýmsi lǫnd* / *víða um lǫnd*) and collect and deliver information (*er honum sagði mǫrg tíðendi* / *sögðu honum mǫrg tíðendi*) (*ibid.*, pp. 35, 19).

Dagr's relationship with his sparrow is an intimate one. When the sparrow flies to a farm called Vörvi in Reiðgotaland, it is killed by a farmer; then 'Dagr konungr varð illa við, er spórrinn kom eigi heim' ('King Dagr became greatly upset, when the sparrow did not come home').⁸² He sacrifices a boar to Freyr to discover its whereabouts, and learning of its death, he raids Gotland seeking vengeance, but is killed by a work-slave on the return journey. Snorri then quotes his source (the Norwegian skáld Þjóðólfr of Hvin, c. 855-930 AD) and cites two verses from *Ynglingatal*; neither stanza offers new insight into the relationship between Dagr and his sparrow and the communication between them, except by reiterating that Dagr sought vengeance for his sparrow's death by harrying in Gotland. The addition of their communication seems to be a later addition by Snorri; the enigmatic sparrow from *Ynglingatal* assimilated to the Odinic pattern. Its origins could also lie in another (now unknown) text, or Snorri could have learned this (perhaps folkloric) part of the tale during his first stay in mainland Scandinavia between 1218 and 1220 AD, after which he composed *Heimskringla*.⁸³ In any case, both the prose and poetry describe how Dagr is willing to go to great lengths to avenge its life. The tale may be playing on the idea

⁸² Ibid., p. 35.

⁸³ Scholars have detected local traditions from Norway and Sweden elsewhere in the text. See e.g. Diana Whaley, 'Heimskringla', in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano et al. (New York, 1993), pp. 276-277.

of falconry, but in a satirical sense (re. falconry, see chapter 4, section 1.2). Rather than a large and strong bird of prey, the king has a relationship with a far smaller bird, producing a parody of the human-hawk relationship. There may also be a parodic inflection in placing a sparrow in the same mythological function as a raven, but this humour is not definitive.

2.3.4 *Morkinskinna*

Some *Heimskringla* manuscripts offer another example of bird-human communication in the story of Óláfr Haraldsson's encounter with the Odinic Kráku-karl ('Crow-man') who understands crow-speech. The source of these stories, however, is to be found in the original *Morkinskinna* manuscript (GkS 1009 fol.).⁸⁴ When King Óláfr's men return to the king after collecting taxes, he wishes to know where they received the best hospitality; they tell him of an old and knowledgeable farmer who could answer all of their questions. The Kráku-karl is depicted in opposition to the king: Óláfr's friendly disposition, love for ale, and handsome appearance are described in detail in the previous chapter, but not his wisdom or eloquence; rather, he is said to be 'fámálugr optast ok lítt talaðr á þingum'

⁸⁴ The story is also in *Frísbók* and the y-variant of *Heimskringla*, but *Morkinskinna* is its earliest source. Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, 'Formáli', in *Morkinskinna II*, ÍF XXIV (Reykjavík, 2011), p. xii, fn. 2.

(‘usually taciturn and with few words to contribute’).⁸⁵ In contrast, the Kráku-karl’s wisdom and knowledge of worldly events is then made evident and his impressive skills with language are further described: ‘Ok þótti oss eigi meðalskemmtan við hann at tala, ok þat hyggjum vér at hann kunni fogls røddu’ (‘And we thought it a great delight to talk with him, and we think that he knows the language of birds’).⁸⁶ The king considers this last supernatural addition to be complete nonsense.

Óláfr is proven wrong in the following episode. After the king orders his men to kill the Kráku-karl’s horse – without letting him know what they have done – the king demands that the Kráku-karl guide his party around the coast. As they row, three crows fly past the ship, one after another, each squawking in succession. These crows seemingly speak to the farmer and the text increasingly emphasises the bird-speech’s negative connotations: (1) ‘flýgr kráka fram um skipit ok lætr illiliga’ (‘a crow flew past the ship and cawed ominously’); (2) ‘flýgr önnur kráka yfir skipit ok skræktir’ (‘another crow flew over the ship and screeched’); and (3) ‘Ok þá fló krákan þriðja sinni, ok lætr sú verst’ (‘And then a crow flew by for the third time, and its cry was the worst’).⁸⁷ As each crow passes and

⁸⁵ *Morkinskinna II*, ÍF XXIV, ed. Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson (Reykjavík, 2011), p. 3.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

communicates greater woe, the impact upon the farmer increases. First, he simply looks at the crow and tells the king that there is nothing unusual; second, the farmer briefly stops rowing and informs the king that his suspicions have been aroused; and with the third crow, the farmer stops rowing completely and stands to face the bird, which caws at him directly. The king insists that the farmer tell him its meaning, and like a bird, the Kráku-karl fittingly responds in verse:

Segr vetrgr[ul,
 ve]it ekki sú,
 ok tvévetr segr,
 trúik eigi at heldr,
 en þrévetr segr,
 þykkira mér glíkligt:
 Kveðr mik róa
 á merar hqfði,
 en þik, konungr,
 þjóf míns fear.⁸⁸

(What the one-year old [crow] says,
 I know not,
 and what the two-year old says,
 I do not believe either
 But what the three-year old says,
 seems unlikely to me:
 it claims I am rowing

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 13-14. The ‘mare’s head’ reference is obscure; it likely implies that the king has brought the horse’s head with him in the boat, and that the Kráku-karl is seated on top of it.

on a mare's head,
and you, king,
are the thief of my property.)

The farmer thus reveals that the birds told him the truth of Óláfr's slaying of his horse.

Although initially outraged, the king recognises the validity of the farmer's claim – the truth spoken by the birds – and rewards him generously.

Wisdom is once again linked to bird-language: the Kráku-karl is remarkably wise (in contrast to Óláfr) and the crows act as providers of worldly knowledge. The kingship motif is problematised, for it is the farmer, and not the king, who is exceptionally knowledgeable and understands bird-speech. The text may be offering cultural commentary on the king's lack of wisdom, for the farmer – with his acumen and the consequent respect he gains from the king's men – is endowed with a kingly characteristic that Óláfr lacks. Interpretive parallels can also be drawn between the Kráku-karl and medieval Icelandic literary depictions of Óðinn. He offers the king's men the greatest hospitality during their travels; in *Hávamál*, Óðinn provides gnomic advice on proper social conduct, and hospitality is consistently a hallmark of appropriate behaviour.⁸⁹ The Kráku-karl is said to

⁸⁹ *Hávamál*, pp. 322-355.

be eloquent of speech; Snorri says the same of Óðinn in *Ynglinga saga*.⁹⁰ When pressed by the king to reveal what the crows have told him, he speaks in poetry rather than prose, the form of speech supposedly used by Óðinn.⁹¹

The appearance of a mysterious stranger of exceptional wisdom and abilities is entirely in keeping with Óðinn's literary depictions, as is further demonstrated by his appearances in, for example, *Grímnismál*, *Volsunga saga*, and *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (where he transforms into a hawk, see chapter 6, section 2.3).⁹² Disguising himself as a farmer, specifically, is also within Óðinn's repertoire: in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, he appears a number of times as the mysterious farmer Hrani, who provides king Hrólfr and his men with gifts, hospitality, and advice.⁹³ In *Norna-Gests þátr*, a mysterious old man named Gestr visits Óláfr Tryggvason and entertains his court with his stories. He too understands

⁹⁰ In *Ynglinga saga*, 'hann talaði svá snjallt ok slétt, at ǫllum, er á heyrðu, þótti þat eina satt' ('he spoke so well and smoothly, that all who heard him thought that he only spoke the truth') (p. 17).

⁹¹ According to Snorri, 'Mælti hann allt hendingum, svá sem nú er þat kveðit, er skáldskapr heitir. Hann ok hofgoðar hans heita ljóðasmiðir, því at sú íþrótt hófst af þeim í Norðrlöndum' ('All he spoke was in rhymes, just as that which is now called skald-ship. He and his temple-priests are called song-smiths, because that art began with them in in the northern lands') (ibid., p. 17).

⁹² The same is true of many literary depictions of Óðinn, especially in the *fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*. See further e.g. Annette Lassen, 'Óðinn in Old Norse Texts', *VMS* 1 (2005), pp. 91-108; *Odin på kristent pergament: En teksthistorisk studie* (København, 2011), and references therein.

⁹³ *Hrólfs saga kraka*, pp. 74-76, 91.

the speech of birds;⁹⁴ he is implicitly understood to be Odinic.⁹⁵ It is not explicit in *Morkinskinna* that the mysterious farmer is Óðinn in disguise. Like Gestr in *Norna-Gests þáttr*, he presents Odinic characteristics and the association may have been obvious or assumed by *Morkinskinna*'s medieval Icelandic author and audience.

2.3.5 *Hrafnsmál*

Themes of wisdom and kingship in relation to bird-language are exhibited in the early poem *Hrafnsmál*, poorly preserved in *Fagrskinna*, when an unnamed *valkyrja* and a raven praise the life and deeds of the Norwegian king Haraldr hárfagri. The *valkyrja* 'Vitr þóttisk' ('thought herself wise') and *fugls rødd kunni* ('understood the bird's voice'); as the poem progresses, the raven answers her questions about Haraldr; thus once again a bird is the provider of information.⁹⁶ As an anthropomorphic mythical being, the *valkyrja* is reminiscent of the human figures who comprehend bird-speech. She is wise and thus able to converse with a bird; in turn, the raven offers knowledge about worldly people and

⁹⁴ The bird-language motif does not appear in the *þáttr* when Gestr describes Sigurðr's slaying of Fáfnir, but it is included when he describes Sigurðr's death. He tells the king that most people say Guttormr Gjúkason killed Sigurðr while he slept in bed with Guðrún; and that Germans say he was slain in a forest; but 'igðurnar sögðu svá' ('so said the birds') that he was killed at an assembly. *Norna-Gests þáttr*, FNS I, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Akureyri, 1954), p. 325.

⁹⁵ See e.g. Gísli Sigurðsson, who arrives at the same conclusion: 'Nornagestr is probably the god Óðinn in disguise'. Gísli Sigurðsson, 'Orality and Literacy in the Sagas of Icelanders', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford, 2005), pp. 285-301, at p. 289.

⁹⁶ *Hrafnsmál*, pp. 95-96.

events. The association with kingship is also clear: the entire poem is in praise of a king and his deeds. The poem also highlights the relationship between *valkyrjur* and birds – and birds and verse – and both the raven and the *valkyrja* are Odinic beings, providing a link between the human and the divine.⁹⁷ Ellis-Davidson suggests that the *valkyrja*'s description as *kverkhvíta* ('white-throated') and *glæ*hvarma* ('bright-eyed') 'suggests that she herself was in bird form'.⁹⁸ Perhaps as a consequence of her ability to understand bird-language, the *valkyrja* may have been understood to assume the physical characteristics of a bird; or *valkyrjur* and birds might have been seen as fundamentally interconnected through their connections to knowledge, flight, and Óðinn.⁹⁹

4. Conclusion

The various examples of human comprehension of bird-speech relay a pattern that associates this supernatural ability with kingship and wisdom. In the eddic ideology of kingship (which influenced sections of the *konungasögur* dealing with early kings), understanding the language of birds was imagined as a knowledge criterion that was

⁹⁷ In *Nafnaþulur*, for example, a kenning for *valkyrjur* is *Óðins meyjar* ('Óðinn's maids/girls') (*Skáldskaparmál*, p. 115).

⁹⁸ Hilda Ellis-Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions* (Syracuse, 1988), p. 87. Many female characters were thought capable of transforming into bird-shape (see chapter 4, section 5; chapter 6, section 3.2).

⁹⁹ Re. *valkyrjur* and flight, see chapter 4, section 5.

indicative of great wisdom, holy favour, and also divine descent – of paramount importance to the ruler’s legitimisation of his power. There is some historical evidence to support this idea. For example, Ragnarr’s marriage to Áslaug (a descendant of Óðinn, via Sigurðr) provided a divine progenitor for Hákon Hákonarson, a Norwegian king whose lineage can be traced to the historical Ragnarr.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, Þjóðólfr of Hvin composed *Ynglingatal*, which includes mention of King Dagr’s sparrow, in honour of Rögnvaldr heiðumhæri Ólafsson, the Norwegian king of Vestfold, and traced his genealogy to the legendary Ynglingar, who are also said to be descended from the god Freyr.¹⁰¹

The importance of descent from the gods should not be ignored; as Emily Lyle notes, ‘When we put the idea of descent in the centre, the family linkage becomes paramount’.¹⁰² Gro Steinsland argues that ‘Myths may explain how a certain dynasty could trace its descent to divine powers and therefore is entitled to hold important social

¹⁰⁰ Ronald Finch, ‘Volsunga saga’, in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano et al. (New York, 1993), p. 711.

¹⁰¹ Margaret Clunies Ross, ‘Þjóðólfr of Hvin’, in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano et al. (New York, 1993), pp. 665-666.

¹⁰² Emily Lyle, ‘Royal Descent from Odin’, in *Á austrvega. Saga and East Scandinavia. Preprint Papers of The 14th International Saga Conference Uppsala, 9th–15th August 2009*, ed. Agneta Ney, Henrik Williams, and Fredrik Charpentier Ljungqvist (Gävle, 2009), pp. 628-634, at p. 628.

positions'.¹⁰³ Descent then would have been of paramount importance to the ruler's attempt to legitimise his power. Endowed with supernatural abilities, the sacral king (*if* he existed) would be thought to provide a communicative link between 'this world' and the 'other world', humanity and the divine. In Olof Sundqvist's description, 'the king had a specific relationship with the divine world. He was regarded as divine or/and as an offspring of the gods, possessed supernatural powers and controlled the fate of the world'.¹⁰⁴ One such capability could certainly be comprehension of the language of birds, a skill that would further serve to link a ruler in this world with a ruler in another, namely Óðinn, and thus good relations between humanity and the divine would be maintained. Whether this idea was imagined to be true in pre-Christian Scandinavia must remain conjecture, but its repeated appearance in verse and prose at the very least represents a thirteenth-century ideology surrounding ancient kingship. Birds fly and therefore emblemise information-gathering and ubiquitous intelligence. In practical terms, understanding bird-language would be useful for a medieval king because birds can provide crucial knowledge of the

¹⁰³ Furthermore, 'With the help of myths and rituals a culture can produce a comprehensive system of ideas that may be labeled an ideology of rulership'; tales such as Sigurðr's slaying of Fáfnir may have served precisely this purpose. Gro Steinsland, 'Myth and Power in the Cultural Transformation of the Nordic Countries from Viking to Medieval Age', Centre for Advanced Study (CAS), Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters, Opening Ceremony. 4 Sep. 2007. Web. Accessed 15 May 2014.

¹⁰⁴ Sundqvist (2002), p. 13.

activities of one's enemies as well as one's subjects, since the established channels of advisors might not be trustworthy.

Returning to Sigurðr, the dragon-slaying may reflect how a young untried man becomes qualified to become a king through initiation (even though Sigurðr does not actually become a king, as noted above, section 2.2.1). Sigurðr is of noble birth and his descent can be traced to Óðinn. Schjødt accordingly suggests that Sigurðr may represent 'a prototype of a descent of Óðinn himself: a king or prototypical king who shares so many features with Óðinn that he can manage the royal power and its conditions'.¹⁰⁵ If Sigurðr's initiatory coming-of-age involves becoming an appropriate ruler, then the acquisition of supernatural abilities would be a part of this process, and his communion with birds may represent a form of divine communication that provides a link between the hero and Óðinn (the progenitor of his monarchical lineage). Following Schjødt, it should be noted that 'such contentions are ultimately unprovable', but the story of Sigurðr still reflects 'the mythology and the rituals which have surrounded the ideology of kingship'.¹⁰⁶ Birds are the

¹⁰⁵ Schjødt (2008), p. 298.

¹⁰⁶ Schjødt (2008), p. 289. For discussion of the relationship between Scandinavian sacral kingship and Christianity, see e.g. Steinsland (2007) and Schjødt (2010), specifically pp. 188-190. Schjødt concludes that 'not much changed concerning the relationship between ruler and religion from an ideological point of view: there was sacral kingship before Christianity, and there was sacral kingship afterwards' (p. 190).

mediators of this communication between realms. A number of texts suggest that the sacral king was responsible for maintaining a positive relationship between humanity and the divine – for communication with the Other World – and Óðinn was the god to whom rulers were initiated because of the numinous knowledge he possessed, and at least in Snorri's writings, his own status as a ruler amongst the gods.

Chapter Six: Animals in Myths

From Auðhumla to Níðhöggr, animals dominate the mythos of medieval Scandinavia. This final chapter will explore the connections between gods and animals, which are fundamental to the extant corpus of eddic poetry. The writings of Snorri Sturluson – especially *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál* – provide useful, albeit late and post-conversion, information and elaboration, and archaeological scholarship offers instructive historical context.

A question that is central to this chapter is: how are the connections between humans and animals in saga literature similar to – and divergent from – the relations between animals and divine figures in Old Norse mythology. This reveals the uniqueness of myth – as a type of literature and a mode of thought – and suggests how animals might have been thought about differently before and after the Christian conversion (or at least how the pagan past was conceived by later Christian authors).¹⁰⁷ There are numerous

¹⁰⁷ There are numerous methodological issues when working with extant Norse myth as historical source material, since the written record post-dates the Christian conversion. There is not space to discuss these issues at length in this thesis. For discussion of methods and sources, see e.g. Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society*, vol. I: The Myths (Odense, 1994a), pp. 11-41 (and extensive references therein) and John McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 1-49 (especially pp. 42-45 re. Snorri's writings). Regarding eddic poetry specifically, see *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry: Myths and Legends of Early Scandinavia*, ed. Carolyne Larrington, Judy Quinn

continuities, including the importance of meat and the supernatural effects of its consumption; transformation, enabled through the adoption of special clothing; avian communication; and relationships between certain gods and specific animals, reminiscent of the potentially totemic *fylgja*-motif. The theoretical approaches applied in chapters 1 to 5 will thus be echoed throughout chapter 6. Theories of hybridity are particularly at work in mythology, but there are also distinctions to be made. Tolley writes: ‘Imagination is central to myth. A myth conveys an unreality that is imagined as real’.¹⁰⁸ This thesis has already shown how saga literature challenges the division between human and animal; the connections become even more fantastic in mythological tales and lore through the fluid boundaries between animals and anthropomorphic gods: all categories simultaneously break free yet remain intimately intertwined.

and Brittany Schorn (Cambridge, 2016), particularly Schjødt’s ‘Eddic poetry and the religion of pre-Christian Scandinavia’ (pp. 132-146) concerning the relationship between eddic myth and historical religions, both pagan and Christian.

¹⁰⁸ Tolley (2009), p. 9; Tolley acknowledges and thanks Ursula Dronke for such a succinct description. Amongst others, I also follow Alan Dundes’s definition of myth as ‘a sacred narrative’ and Bruce Lincoln: myth is ‘ideology in narrative form’. Alan Dundes, *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth* (Berkeley, 1984), p. 1; Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago, 1999), p. 147. There are generic issues surrounding myth and its related genres, which can be viewed as ‘fluid’ (Schjødt 2008, p. 15); the delineation between myth and legend is tricky in eddic texts such as *Rígsþula* and *Völundarkviða* which feature both human and divine protagonists. In general, I view myths as occurring in sacred space and time – in the ‘other world’ – and legends (discussed in previous chapters) as taking place in ‘our world’ (but not *Miðgarðr*).

The first section – Cosmology – examines the centrality of animals to the functioning of the Norse mythic cosmos and the ways in which animals serve as mediators between realms. Animal hybridity is central to the next three sections: first Óðinn, then Loki – the two deities with the most animal features and stories attributed to them, by far – followed by the connections between animals and *jötnar* – another group of beings which can be seen as closer to animals and nature than the *Æsir*. The final section, Nourishment and Sacrifice, will bring these themes together, exploring how animals serve as mediators between humanity and the divine. If animal sacrifice brings humanity closer to the gods, then this chapter raises the question: when gods and animals become interconnected physically and psychologically, then what happens to the third category in the triad: the human?

1. Cosmology

1.1 Cosmogony

In Snorri's *Gylfaginning*, Gangleri questions what the proto-giant (*brímpurs*, 'frost-giant'), Ymir, lived on, and Hár tells of the primordial cow, which nourished the world's first life:

'þá er hrímit draup, at þar varð af kýr sú er Auðhumla hét, en fjórar mjólkár runnu ór

spenum hennar, ok fœddi hon Ymi' ('when the rime dripped, there came into being from it

a cow that is named Auðhumla, and four milk-rivers ran out from her teats, and she feeds Ymir’).¹⁰⁹ Auðhumla subsists by licking salty rime-stones, from which emerges Búri, Óðinn’s grandfather and the progenitor of the Æsir.¹¹⁰ Auðhumla thus helps to bring the two major opposing races into being: *jötnar* and the gods.¹¹¹ The connections between various figures in these communities and animals forms the central focus of this chapter.

1.2 Geography

The mythical world-tree, Yggdrasill, is the core that connects the nine distinct realms of the Norse mythic cosmos; the very geography of Norse mythology, therefore, is surrounded

¹⁰⁹ *Gylfaginning*, p. 11. The name ‘Auðhumla’ literally means ‘hornless cow rich in milk’ (John Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs* (Oxford, 2002), p. 63); it comes from *auðr* (‘riches, wealth’) and **humala* (‘hornless’) (Simek 1993b, p. 22). On this etymology, see further Adolf Noreen, ‘Urkon Audhumla och några hennes språkliga släktningar’, *Namn och bygd* 6 (1918), pp. 169-172. Auðhumla is only introduced by Snorri’s creation myth and is not included in eddic and skaldic poetry, but she is still usually considered to be a genuine component of the Norse mythos that was well-known in early Scandinavia.

Significantly, ‘his narrative is also the only one to address the question of how the first generation of animate beings were nurtured in the absence of natural mothers’. Clunies Ross (1994a), p. 157. ‘Auðhumbla’ is also included in *Nafnabulur*, where she is described as *æzt kúa* (‘the noblest of cows’) (*Skáldskaparmál*, p. 131).

¹¹⁰ *Gylfaginning*, p. 11.

¹¹¹ How unique is Auðhumla and where does she come from? Similar cows appear in creation stories from around the world. Ellis-Davidson notes that the primeval cow ‘was the symbol of the fruitful earth in Egypt and the near East from the time of the earliest religious records’ (*Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (London and New York, 1964; repr. 1990), p. 200). Turville-Petre (1964) notes Indo-European parallels (Persian and Vedic) and an analogue in the Egyptian goddess Hathor (pp. 276-277). In addition to Hathor, Simek (1993b) finds similarities with Hera and Isis, and for Germanic areas, with Nerthus (in Tacitus); he also suggests that the four milk-streams coming from Auðhumla’s udders, while comparable to the four rivers of paradise, are more likely a consequence of ‘Snorri’s clerical education rather than giving proof of common origins with Near-Eastern concepts of the magna-mater’ (p. 22). Auðhumla, however, is unique: as Lindow (2002) writes, ‘what is most striking about Audhumla is that she unites the two ... warring groups in the mythology, by nourishing Ymir, ancestor of all the giants, and bringing into the light Búri, progenitor of the æsir’ (p. 63).

by and structured within the symbolism of nature. The name *Yggdrasill* literally means ‘Yggr’s (= Óðinn’s) horse/steed’, demonstrating Óðinn’s symbolic centrality to the structure of the natural universe, as well as the ever-present significance of horses. A diverse array of animals range over this great ash-tree from top to bottom, as well as the sky above and the ground beneath. This divine tree represents the world and constitutes a microcosm of nature; all kinds of creation are provided a home in their positionally suitable place, with animals described in old, well-attested tradition through the poems *Grímnismál* and *Vafþrúðnismál*, and expounded by Snorri.

The hart Eikþyrnir eats from Yggdrasill’s branches; the source of all waters, Hvergelmir, is fed by the dripping from his antlers.¹¹² The squirrel Ratatoskr runs up and down the giant ash, bearing messages between an eagle sitting above and the serpent Níðhöggr lying below.¹¹³ Snorri adds that this eagle sits in the branches and, in accordance with Old Norse bird symbolism, *margs vitandi* (‘knows many things’); strangely, Snorri also

¹¹² *Grímnismál*, in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ÍF, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík, 2014), p. 373. According to Snorri, Hvergelmir is a spring in Niflheimr where Níðhöggr resides with countless other snakes and gnaws the bottom of one of Yggdrasill’s roots (*Gylfaginning*, p. 17).

¹¹³ *Grímnismál*, p. 374. In *Gylfaginning*, these messages are described as *ǫfundarorð* (‘slandrous words’) (p. 18).

adds that a hawk named *Veðrfölnir* sits betwixt his eyes.¹¹⁴ *Grímnismál* further describes how four harts gnaw on the tree and numerous serpents lie beneath *Yggdrasill*, which Óðinn thinks will maim its branches forever.¹¹⁵

Fauna also inhabit the skies above, with horses providing the work-force for cosmic operations: *Skinfaxi* (Shining-mane) draws Day over the world, and *Hrímfaxi* (‘Frost-mane’) draws Night from the east, with foam from his bit bringing dew to the valleys.¹¹⁶ The steeds *Árvakr* (‘Early-riser’) and *Alsviðr* (‘All-wise’) pull up the sun, and under their shoulders the *Æsir* placed iron-bellows.¹¹⁷ A wolf named *Sköll* (‘Mockery’) pursues the sun (*skírleita goði*) and another, named *Hati* (‘Hatred’), chases the moon (*heiða brúði himins*); according to Snorri, they will both be caught come *Ragnarök*.¹¹⁸ Continental Scandinavian mythological picture-stones depict the sun moving across the sky in a boat, representing an

¹¹⁴ *Gylfaginning*, p. 18.

¹¹⁵ *Grímnismál*, pp. 374-375. *Yggdrasill* suffers terrible pain: in addition, a hart eats it above, its sides are decaying, and *Níðhöggr* rends it beneath (p. 375).

¹¹⁶ *Vafþrúðnismál*, in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ÍF, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík, 2014), p. 358. Snorri adds that Day and Night ride chariots and that *Skinfaxi*’s mane illuminates the sky and the earth (*Gylfaginning*, p. 13). Furthermore, in *Gylfaginning*, the dew that falls from *Yggdrasill* onto the earth is called honeydew, which bees feed on; there are also two swans in *Urðar brunn* (‘Weird’s spring’), the progenitors of the species (p. 19).

¹¹⁷ *Grímnismál*, p. 375. Snorri interprets the *ísarnkol* (‘iron-bellows’) as *vindbelgir* (‘wind-bags’) which cool the horses, thus protecting them from the sun’s heat (*Gylfaginning*, p. 14).

¹¹⁸ *Grímnismál*, pp. 375-376 and *Gylfaginning*, pp. 14, 49. *Hati* is the son of *Hróðvitnir*, which might be another name for *Fenrir* (also *Þjóðvitnir* (‘Great wolf’) in *Grímnismál*, p. 372).

earlier Scandinavian model for the cosmic wolves.¹¹⁹ This cosmogony, however, is infused with terror; the heavenly bodies flee from wolves (for perhaps they would not move otherwise), aggressive alpha predators who chase their prey.

Animals thus provide insight into the conceptual worldview of Norse mythological cosmology, symbolising and explaining the forces and functions of the universe.

1.3 Horses

While some animals are scattered across the cosmos and contribute to its functioning, others are required for the Æsir to travel between worlds. Perhaps because of their inherently liminal status, especially between nature and culture, these animals are breakers of boundaries. The portrayal of horses in Norse myth closely resembles their depiction in saga literature: just as horses were essential sources of transportation in medieval Iceland (see chapter 1, section 1), the horse is also the most common animal of cosmic travel. This ability is imbued with supernatural significance. When Skírnir travels to Jötunheimar, he first makes a special request from Freyr:

Mar gefðu mér þá,
þann er mik um myrkvan beri

¹¹⁹ Anders Andrén, *Tracing Old Norse Cosmology: The world tree, middle earth, and the sun in archaeological perspectives* (Lund, 2014), p. 165.

vísan vafrloga.¹²⁰

(Give me the steed,
that which will bear me through the dark
wise flickering flame(s)).

Upon his departure, Skírnir then speaks to his horse, though there is no indication as to whether the horse comprehends human language. Skírnir seemingly emphasises the companionship that follows from a lengthy and difficult journey taken together by man and beast: *báðir vit komumk* ('we both will arrive'), or else be captured by the all-powerful

jötunn.¹²¹

Gná, the fourteenth goddess listed by Snorri in *Gylfaginning*, is sent by Frigg into various worlds to carry out her business; her exceptional horse, Hófvarfnir, gallops over *lopt ok lög* ('sky and sea').¹²² After being spotted riding in the air by some Vanir, there follows two eddic stanzas from longer poems that are otherwise unknown, which suggests that there was once much more to Gná and her horse than is now known.¹²³ One of the Vanir questions:

¹²⁰ *Skírnismál*, in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ÍF, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík, 2014), p. 381 (and repeated by Freyr in the next verse).

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 382.

¹²² *Gylfaginning*, p. 30.

¹²³ On Gná, see further Stephen Mitchell, 'Gudinnan Gná', *Saga och Sed* (2014), pp. 23–41.

Hvat þar flýgr?
 Hvat þar ferr
 eða at lopti líðr?¹²⁴

(What flies there?
 What travels there
 or glides aloft?)

This suggests a degree of uncertainty about how horses move through the air, and Gná's response provides obscure information about the horse's origins:

Ne ek flýg
 þó ek fer
 ok at lopti líðk
 á Hófvorni
 þeim er Hamskerpir
 gat við Garðrofu.¹²⁵

(I do not fly
 though I travel
 and glide aloft
 on Hófvarnir
 whom Hamskerpir
 begot with Garðrofu.)

Ulla Loumand suggests that Hófvarnir and Sleipnir are 'prime examples' of Norse mythological horses being able to 'mediate between earth and sky, between Ásgarðr,

¹²⁴ *Gylfaginning*, p. 30.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

Miðgarðr and Útgarðr and between the world of mortal men and the underworld'.¹²⁶ Like the steeds of *valkyrjur* (see chapter 4, section 5), Hófvarnir is endowed with supernatural speed and ability; it leaps far over land, rather than pounding its hooves on the earth – an action that is not only tiring for the horse, but for its rider as well.¹²⁷ This reflects the reality of human hardship when riding great distances and reveals a human fantasy: a horse that can quickly and easily arrive at a desired destination. Fantasy is what myth allows and accomplishes.

Horses not only travel high above ground, but also far below, and are essential travelling companions when embarking on a journey to underworld realms. In *Baldrsdraumar*, Óðinn lays a saddle on Sleipnir and rides *niðr þaðan* ('down from there') to Niflhel ('Mist-hell').¹²⁸ In *Gylfaginning*, it is Óðinn's son, Hermóðr, who mounts Sleipnir and *ríða á Helveg* ('rides on the way to Hel'); Sleipnir then demonstrates his exceptional

¹²⁶ Ulla Loumand, 'The Horse and its Role in Icelandic Burial Practices, Mythology, and Society', in *Old Norse Religion in Long-term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions*, ed. Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert and Catharina Raudvere (Lund, 2006), pp. 130-134, at p. 133.

¹²⁷ The commentary on the R rune in the eighth or ninth-century Old English *Rune Poem* describes this hardship: '(rād) byþ on recyde rinca gehwylcum / sēfte, and swiþhwæt ðam ðe sitteþ onufan / mēare mægenheardum ofer milpaþas' ('Riding is easy for warriors sitting in the hall, and very strenuous for one who bestrides / a powerful horse travelling the long roads'). *The Old English Rune Poem: a critical edition*, ed. and trans. Maureen Halsall, McMaster Old English Studies and Texts 2 (Toronto, 1981), pp. 86-87.

¹²⁸ *Baldrsdraumar*, in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ÍF, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík, 2014), p. 446.

abilities, riding for nine nights through dark and deep valleys and jumping high over the gate to Hel.¹²⁹ Meanwhile, Baldr's horse is burned with him at his funeral along with its entire harness – a travel partner for his passage to the next world and a marker of high social status.¹³⁰ The notion that horses were thought to accompany one's journey to the afterlife (as well as within the afterlife, perhaps), evidenced by the literature, is confirmed by archaeological evidence of horse burials throughout pre-Christian Scandinavia.¹³¹

As in the sagas, special horses are named, and each of the Æsir has his own equine companion.¹³² The verb *temja* (to tame, train) is used again (see chapter 4, section 1), but here it is for king-like figures and their horses: according to a verse attributed to Þórðr Sjárésson in *Skáldskaparmál*, Kjalarr (i.e. Óðinn) 'tamði ... heldr vel mara' ('trained ...

¹²⁹ *Gylfaginning*, pp. 46-47.

¹³⁰ *Gylfaginning*, p. 47.

¹³¹ Loumand (2006) writes that 'Archaeologists have so far agreed that the horse played an important role in the burial practice of the Vikings, because people believed they would travel to the next world, whether that would be to Hel, Valhöll or some other abstract place' (p. 130). See further Anne-Sofie Gräslund, *The burial customs. A study of the graves on Björkö, Birka IV* (Motala, 1980); Else Roesdahl, 'Fra vikingegrav til Valhal i 900-årenes Danmark', in *Beretning fra andet tværfaglige Vikingsymposium* (Århus, 1983), pp. 39-49; Gro Steinsland, 'Nordisk hedendom', in *Viking og Hvidekrist: Norden og Europa 800-1200*, ed. Else Roesdahl (Copenhagen, 1992), pp. 144-151.

¹³² Besides Sleipnir, ten horses are named in *Grímnismál* (p. 374) and *Gylfaginning* (p. 17). According to *Grímnismál*, the Æsir ride these stallions every day when they travel to Yggdrasil's ash to pass judgements (p. 374); Snorri adds that the Æsir hold court at a very holy spring called *Urðar brunnr* ('Weird's well') (p. 17); he also first lists the eight-legged Sleipnir, who is best, and adds that Baldr's horse was burned with him and that Þórr walks and wades rivers when attending court (p. 17), perhaps because he is too large to ride a horse, or he is less aristocratic due to his association with thralls (see *Hárbarðsljóð*, in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ÍF, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík, 2014), p. 393).

horses rather well’); and those born to Jarl in *Rígsþula* ‘hesta tǫmðu’ (‘tamed horses’).¹³³ As modelled by Óðinn, horse-taming is an essential aristocratic skill.¹³⁴ Horses are also frequently given in exchange for a service – e.g. from Freyr to Skírnir and Bragi to Loki¹³⁵ – or as gifts – e.g. when Rígr (Heimdallr in disguise) offers horses to all his people, and in *Skáldskaparmál*, when Þórr gives Gullfaxi to his son, Magni, much to Óðinn’s chagrin.¹³⁶ There are no examples of the horse-fighting saga type-scene in extant Norse mythological sources, but Gullfaxi, who belongs to the *jötunn* Hrungrnir, chases Óðinn from Jötunheimar to Ásgarðr.¹³⁷ This episode is analogous to horse-racing and repeats the metonymic relationship between horse-owner and steed.¹³⁸ Óðinn wagers his head that there is no better horse than Sleipnir in Jötunheimar, and while Hrungrnir considers Sleipnir to be a remarkably good steed, he declares that his horse, Gullfaxi, is longer-striding. Hrungrnir

¹³³ *Skáldskaparmál*, p. 18; *Rígsþula*, p. 456.

¹³⁴ Training and tending horses, hawks, and hounds is a marker of aristocracy in eddic poetry – see Carolyne Larrington, ‘Vafprúðnismál and Grímnismál: Cosmic History, Cosmic Geography’, in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, ed. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (New York and London, 2002), pp. 62–77, at p. 70, and references therein.

¹³⁵ *Skírnismál*, pp. 381–382; *Lokasenna*, in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ÍF, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík, 2014), pp. 410–411.

¹³⁶ *Rígsþula*, p. 455; *Skáldskaparmál*, p. 22.

¹³⁷ *Skáldskaparmál*, p. 20.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20. On horse-racing in medieval Scandinavia – and its pre-Christian connection to ritual sacrifice – see chapter 1 (section 1.3) and references therein.

becomes furious and races Óðinn to Ásgarðr, demonstrating how horses can be used as masculine ego-surrogates in competitive sport.

1.4 Transportation

The primary function of mythological horses in Old Norse is transportation between worlds. Other animal species, however, can also provide the means for cosmic travel. Snorri tells that Þórr's chariot is drawn by two goats named Tanngnjóstr ('Teeth-gnasher') and Tanngrisnir ('Teeth-grinder').¹³⁹ These names are not mentioned in eddic or skaldic verse, but Þórr is known in *Hymiskviða* by the zoological epithet *hafra dróttinn* ('lord of goats'), and they prove their effectiveness when he swiftly travels to Jötunheimar in *Þrymskviða*.¹⁴⁰ Njǫrðr's two Vanir children also ride unique animal-led carriages: Freyja drives two cats, writes Snorri, and when she rides to Baldr's funeral, her brother Freyr arrives in a chariot led by a boar named Gullinbursti or Slíðrugtanni.¹⁴¹ The boar is described as golden-bristled in Úlfr Uggason's *Húsdrápa* and, according to Snorri, is fashioned for Freyr by the

¹³⁹ *Gylfaginning*, p. 23. Hence the epithet *Okubórr* ('Þórr the Charioteer') – *Gylfaginning*, p. 22.

¹⁴⁰ *Hymiskviða*, in *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, ÍF, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík, 2014), v. 20 (p. 403); see further v. 7 (p. 400) and v. 37 (p. 406); *Þrymskviða*, p. 425.

¹⁴¹ *Gylfaginning*, pp. 25, 47. The association between Þórr and goats and Freyr and the boar appears in older poetry, but not the link between Freyja and cats. Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, however, identifies several ancient sources connecting goddesses and carriages (e.g. Tacitus) – see *Frigg og Freyja: kvenleg goðmöggn í heiðnum sið* (Reykjavík, 2007), especially 'Kettir og vagn', pp. 251-255, and further references therein.

dwarf-smith Brokkr.¹⁴² Brokkr tells Freyr that the boar can run faster than any horse both day and night, across sky and sea, and that it is never too dark that its bright bristles will fail to bring light.¹⁴³

There is no evidence that these interspecies relationships (including Geri/Freki and Huginn/Muninn, see below, sections 2.1 and 2.2) were conceived to have the same level of *fóstri*-depth as with some of the animals of the sagas (see chapter 1, sections 1 and 2), but they are surely more than mere ‘servants’ as labelled by Price.¹⁴⁴ It is likely that these chariot-animals are metonymic of the qualities of the gods who drive them.¹⁴⁵ The connections between certain animals and specific gods is also indicative of a thematic parallel with the dream-animal motif, which can be broadly described as totemic (see chapter 3, section 8.1).¹⁴⁶

1.5 Eschatology

¹⁴² *Skáldskaparmál*, pp. 19 and 42 (where it is named *Skíðblaðnir*). *Húsdrápa* also enigmatically alludes to Heimdallr’s ability to transform into a seal (p. 20).

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁴⁴ Price (2002), p. 56.

¹⁴⁵ Freyr with the boar and thus fertility; Freyja with cats and thus magic; Þórr with goats and thus, perhaps, farming and thralls. This hypothesis requires further research.

¹⁴⁶ The same might then be true of Óðinn and ravens and Loki and wolves (see sections 2 and 3 below).

No animals are mentioned in *Völuspá* until verse 37, when a different group of beasts begin to appear: those which dominate the eschatology of Norse mythology. The dragon Níðhoggr and his serpent-hall are described as well as an old woman who lives in the east in Járnsviði ('Iron-wood') and rears the kin of Fenrir (i.e. wolves), including one *í trolls hami* ('in troll-shape') (further discussed below, section 4.2).¹⁴⁷ This final wolf is Hati Hróðvitnisson, who will capture the moon, satiates himself on the lives of doomed men, and reddens the abode of the gods with blood.¹⁴⁸ With this horrifying imagery established, the poet next appeals to the sense of sound to express greater terror. First, three roosters crow: light-red Fjalarr in Gaglviði ('Gallows-wood'); then Gullinkambi ('Golden-comb') near the Æsir, waking the warriors of Valhøll; and another, beneath the earth, sooty-red in Hel's halls.¹⁴⁹ Next, the Hel-hound Garmr howls loudly before Gnipa-cave; the shackles break and *freki* (i.e. Fenrir) runs free.¹⁵⁰ *Ragna røk* has arrived, and amongst other things, it

¹⁴⁷ *Völuspá*, pp. 300-301. Somewhat human-like, Níðhoggr resides in or near a hall on Náströnd ('Corpse-strand'); it is woven of serpents' spines and poison-drops fall inside from openings in the roof; Níðhoggr sucks the corpses of the dead and an unnamed wolf tears men apart. According to Snorri, Níðhoggr resides in Hvergelmir (as discussed above (section 1); *Gylfaginning*, p. 53).

¹⁴⁸ *Völuspá*, p. 301.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 301-302.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 302 (and repeated in vv. 47 and 56 on pp. 303 and 306). Garmr and Fenrir were possibly once thought to be the same beast. See further Anne-Sofie Gräslund, 'Garm – den bäste bland hundar: Om hundar under forntiden i Skandinavien', in *Hunden i kult och religion: På gränsen mellan heligt och profant*, ed. Jenny Berglund and Ingvar Svanberg (Göteborg, 2009), pp. 29-47.

is a *vargöld* ('wolf-age').¹⁵¹ At this stage in *Gylfaginning*, the cosmic wolves swallow the sun and moon and Fenrir escapes from his shackles when the whole world shakes, causing all fetters and bonds to break and snap.¹⁵²

Symbolic of death and destruction, wolf imagery continues to permeate the doom of the gods, and other animals associated with death are also invoked: another of Loki's children, the great serpent Jormungandr twists in giant-rage, churning the waves, and an unnamed pale-beaked eagle screeches and tears at corpses – part of the beast of battle topos.¹⁵³ Snorri describes Fenrir and Jormungandr with terrifying detail: Fenrir advances with his mouth agape – the upper jaw against the sky and the lower jaw against the earth – and fire burning from his eyes and nose.¹⁵⁴ Meanwhile, beside him, the Miðgarðsormr blows so much poison that it bespatters all the sky and sea.¹⁵⁵ Snorri invokes the deadliest feature of both animals – a wolf's bite and a serpent's poison – and imbues them with apocalyptic horror.

¹⁵¹ *Völuspá*, p. 302.

¹⁵² *Gylfaginning*, pp. 49-50.

¹⁵³ *Völuspá*, p. 303. In *Gylfaginning*, the Miðgarðsormr's fury causes the ocean to surge up on land and he makes his way ashore (p. 50).

¹⁵⁴ *Gylfaginning*, p. 50.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

Beasts bring about the deaths of a number of Æsir in battle: Óðinn falls to the wolf Fenrir – one of Óðinn’s sons, Viðarr, avenges his father with a sword to the heart of the *valdýri* (‘carrion-beast’) – and Þórr and the *ormr* (*Miðgarðs véurr*, ‘Midgard’s protector’, i.e. Jormungandr) battle again and kill one another.¹⁵⁶ Snorri adds an additional beast-battle between Týr and Garmr, who was bound at Gnipa-cave but also escaped – he is described as the *mesta forað* (‘greatest monster’) and may have once been identical with Fenrir, considering the long-standing enmity between the two.¹⁵⁷ Viðarr also avenges Óðinn in *Gylfaginning*, but Snorri again adds further elaboration: Fenrir kills Óðinn by swallowing him and Viðarr steps on the wolf’s lower jaw with his foot, and with his hand on the wolf’s upper jaw, he tears his mouth apart.¹⁵⁸

Afterwards, there comes a time of peace and prosperity – the earth arises from the ocean, ever-green, waterfalls plunge, and an eagle soars over the mountain, hunting fish rather than eating corpses, representing a time of peace without warfare. Yet the final verse

¹⁵⁶ *Völuspá*, pp. 304-305. Þórr takes nine steps before falling; according to *Gylfaginning*, the serpent’s poison causes his death (p. 50). The R text has *úlf* rather than *orm* here (v. 54), an error imported from v. 52 (*Völuspá*, p. 305, fn. 54; *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Larrington, p. 285).

¹⁵⁷ *Gylfaginning*, p. 50.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51. This is an ancient motif, as attested by the Gosforth Cross – see Lilla Kopár, *Gods and Settlers: The Iconography of Norse Mythology in Anglo-Scandinavian Sculpture* (Turnhout, 2012) and further references therein.

ends on an ominous note: Níðhöggr – the dark dragon, the gleaming serpent – comes up from Niðafjöll and flies over the plain, carrying corpses in its wings (presumably the dead from the battlefield, its designated food).¹⁵⁹ The significance of Níðhöggr’s appearance at the end of the poem, just before the *vǫlva* sinks down, remains a subject for speculation and debate. Ursula Dronke suggests that ‘the battle of Ragnarök has been given the outline of a moral battle for mankind, borrowed from Christian teaching’ – Níðhöggr might then be related to the destructive dragon of Revelation 12 (who is also called the devil or Satan).¹⁶⁰ Larrington notes various theories about Níðhöggr: that its carrying of the corpses denotes a positive role, removing the remains from battle, or maybe the *vǫlva* returns to the present of her vision, witnessing the dragon’s flight as the prophecy comes to an end (perhaps then portending the proximate coming of Ragnarök).¹⁶¹ Níðhöggr suggests omnipresence and cyclical significance, returning in the next cycle, and perhaps all future cycles, of Norse mythological time. Larrington thus suggests that there is ‘no compelling reason to think that the new world will not go the same way as the old, that evil and corruption will not manifest themselves once again ... and that *ragna rökk*, the dark before the dawn, will fall

¹⁵⁹ *Vǫluspá*, pp. 306-307.

¹⁶⁰ *The Poetic Edda*, ed. and trans. Ursula Dronke, vol. II, Mythological Poems (Oxford, 1997), p. 61; Revelation, New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (available online).

¹⁶¹ Carolyne Larrington, *The Norse Myths: A Guide to the Gods and Heroes* (London, 2017), p. 199.

again – and again – through the cycle of the ages'.¹⁶² Níðhoggr's appearance has a number of possible significations that are not mutually exclusive, but it is surely meant to be menacing and foreboding, demonstrating the continued chthonic significance of dragons and serpents in saga and myth.

2. Óðinn

It is easy to recognise Óðinn's hall, according to *Grímnismál*, for a wolf hangs by the western doors and an eagle hovers above.¹⁶³ These are two of the animals most closely associated with Óðinn; the third is the raven. Together, they constitute the beasts of battle in Germanic tradition,¹⁶⁴ which closely connect Óðinn with warfare and the function of the warrior.¹⁶⁵ In this section, I will elucidate Óðinn's relationship with each of the beasts of battle: with wolves, it is a social connection; with the raven, the association is intellectual and psychological; and with the eagle, it is a physical affiliation, made manifest through

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 199.

¹⁶³ *Grímnismál*, p. 370.

¹⁶⁴ On the 'beasts of battle' motif in Germanic tradition – specifically in Old Norse and Old English literature – see e.g. Thomas Honegger, 'Form and function: The beasts of battle revisited', *English Studies* 79.4 (1998), pp. 289-298; Judith Jesch, 'Eagles, Ravens and Wolves: Beasts of Battle, Symbols of Victory and Death', in *The Scandinavians from the Vendel Period to the Tenth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective* (Woodbridge, 2002), pp. 251-280.

¹⁶⁵ Óðinn's affiliation with warfare is well-attested and the argument can be made that he is 'the god of war' (Simek 1993b, p. 241). For example, 'Valföðr' ('father of the slain') is one of his many epithets (see e.g. *Völuspá* vv. 1, 27, 28 (pp. 291, 298); *Grímnismál* v. 48 (p. 377)). This name might be a pun: *valr* also means 'hawk/falcon', one of the bird-shapes into which Óðinn is able to transform.

transformation. The other two animals with which Óðinn is connected are also linked with death: Óðinn's eight-legged steed, Sleipnir, which transports Óðinn throughout the mythic cosmos – to the underworld, in particular¹⁶⁶ – and the chthonic serpent, into which Óðinn transforms in the myth of the mead of poetry.

1.1 *Geri and Freki*

Óðinn's canine companions are the domesticated wolves Geri and Freki. Their names are the nominalised forms of the adjectives *frekr* and *gerr*, which can both be translated as 'greedy' or 'ravenous';¹⁶⁷ accordingly, in *Grímnismál*, Óðinn satiates his wolves, while he lives on wine alone.¹⁶⁸ Snorri completes the picture in *Gylfaginning*, where Óðinn feeds them food from his own table.¹⁶⁹ As with Björn and his dog in *Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa* (see chapter 1, section 2), this privileged act of feeding forges an intimate bond between Áss and animal. It domesticates the beasts and problematises the wolf's presumed wild nature; their taming is expressed through their elevated place and heightened status at the

¹⁶⁶ Óðinn also 'ríða lopt ok lög' ('rides sky and sea') with Sleipnir when he travels to Jötunheimar in *Skáldskaparmál* (p. 20).

¹⁶⁷ See e.g. Lindow (2002), pp. 120, 139. Regarding their etymology, which might be traced back to the Proto-Germanic adjectives *frekaz and *zeraz, see further Vladimir E. Orel, *A Handbook of Germanic Etymology* (Leiden and Boston, 2003), pp. 113, 132.

¹⁶⁸ *Grímnismál*, p. 371.

¹⁶⁹ *Gylfaginning*, p. 32. Both Geri and Freki are used as a kenning for 'wolf' in skaldic poetry, see e.g. *Skáldskaparmál* (p. 87) and *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* (p. 189).

side of the divine king. This is a case of magnification: whereas a king has hounds, a god has wolves; and while a king's dogs are tamed for hunting, Óðinn's companions are *gunntamiðr* ('battle-trained') and intended for war.¹⁷⁰ As opposed to Fenrir, Geri and Freki behave in a civilised manner like well-tamed dogs and are symbolic of Óðinn's magical power (similarly, while everyone else has horses with four legs, Óðinn's horse has eight legs; and while others go hunting with birds, Óðinn understands the speech of his ravens and transforms into bird-shape – see below, sections 2.2 and 2.3).¹⁷¹ In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, an allusion to the pair marks them as the opposite of peaceful, indicating a return to their wild, aggressive nature:

sleit Fróða frið
 fjánda á milli,
 fara Viðris grey
 valgjörn um ey.¹⁷²

(Fróði's peace was broken
 between the enemies,
 Viðrir's [Óðinn's] hounds went

¹⁷⁰ Assuming the word *gunntamiðr* refers to the wolves rather than Óðinn, even though it is grammatically singular (*Grímnismál*, p. 371).

¹⁷¹ While Freki is a term for Fenrir in a repeated stanza in *Völuspá* (vv. 44, 49, and 58), these wolves have little else in common (pp. 302-303, 306). Lindow (2002) suggests that this coincidence 'is more than a little ironic', for 'Odin feeds one ravenous one at his side in Valhøll and another – with his body – at Ragnarøk' (p. 120). Geri is also the name of one of the *jötunn* Fjolsviðr's hounds in *Fjolsvinnsmál* (see section 4.2).

¹⁷² *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, p. 249.

corpse-greedy about the island.)

Akin to the saga-dogs examined in chapter 1 (section 2), the dogs of the divine continue to be ‘good to live with’, serving important utilitarian functions as guardians and companions. To be able to tame and train particularly difficult animals was depicted as an impressive skill that was linked to the deity Óðinn and his magical powers. In the prose introduction to *Grímnismál*, Óðinn is said to be identifiable by the fact that ‘engi hundr var svá ólmr at á hann myndi hlaupa’ (‘no hound was so savage that it would jump on him’); consequently, King Geirrøðr arrests that man which no hound would attack.¹⁷³ Perhaps this is why Óðinn is able to ride past the bloody-chested whelp (possibly Garmr) that comes out from Niflhel to meet him in *Baldrsdraumar*.¹⁷⁴ The pup howls¹⁷⁵ at Óðinn for a long time, but the *galdrs fǫður* (‘father of magic’) seemingly pacifies the beast, perhaps through supernatural means, and carries on his way.¹⁷⁶ Óðinn may be able to tame all hounds, but not all wolves,

¹⁷³ *Grímnismál*, p. 368.

¹⁷⁴ Gräslund (2004) connects literary and archaeological evidence and suggests that the Old Norse mythological dog is ‘a border medium between the living and the dead’ (p. 173).

¹⁷⁵ The verb used is *gala*, which can also mean ‘to chant, sing’ and is usually associated with the noun *galdr*, suggesting that this canine is a magical adversary (*An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 187, and references therein).

¹⁷⁶ *Baldrsdraumar*, p. 446. Cerberus – the monstrous multi-headed hound of Hades in classical mythology – performs a similar function. In earlier literature, he guards the gates of the underworld to prevent the dead from leaving (rather than preventing the living from entering, as is the case in Old Norse) – e.g. in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, he ‘fawns on those that enter the house of Hades, but eats those who try to leave’. In later

despite his success with Geri and Freki: Egill Skallagrímsson's epithet for Óðinn, *úlfs bági* ('wolf's adversary'), is testimony to his death in Fenrir's jaws at Ragnarök.¹⁷⁷ It is fitting that Óðinn and Fenrir oppose one another: the alpha god and the alpha predator. As they chase the sun and moon across the sky, wolves are symbolic of the passing of time; concomitant with fate, time is the one thing that Óðinn is unable to contend against.

2.2 *Huginn and Muninn*

Óðinn's social relationship with wolves and hounds is also present in his connection to his ravens, but here the affiliation is psychological as well. Their names, Huginn and Muninn, provide literal testament to his intellectual capacities: they are most often translated as 'Thought' and 'Memory'.¹⁷⁸ According to *Grímnismál*:

Huginn ok Muninn
 fljúga hverjan dag
 jǫrmungrund yfir;
 óumk ek of Hugin

literature, such as *Pausanias* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, he defends the gates against heroes who attempt to enter. See e.g. Jenny March, *Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (Oxford, 1998; rev. ed. 2014), pp. 119-120, and references therein.

¹⁷⁷ *Skáldskaparmál*, p. 9.

¹⁷⁸ See e.g. Pernille Hermann, 'Key Aspects of Memory and Remembering in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature', in *Minni and Muninn: Memory in Medieval Nordic Culture*, ed. Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen A. Mitchell, *Acta Scandinavica*, vol. 4 (Turnhout, 2014), pp. 13-39; and Stephen Mitchell, 'Óðinn's Twin Ravens, Huginn and Muninn', in *Gemini and the Sacred: Twins and Twinship in Religion and Myth*, ed. Kimberley C. Patton (London, forthcoming 2018). On *bugr* and its meaning, see further chapter 3, section 2.

at hann aprtr né komit,
þó sjámk meirr um Munin.¹⁷⁹

(Huginn and Muninn
fly every day
over the wide world;
I fear for Huginn
that he will not return,
though I worry more for Muninn.)

It is unclear why Óðinn is more nervous about Muninn's return. Clunies Ross suggests that

'In an oral society, memory has a greater urgency than it does in literate cultures, where

things can be checked or looked up in the written record if they have been forgotten';

perhaps Muninn symbolises this urgency and the oral poet's consequent anxiety is

attributed to the patron-deity/tutelary of Old Norse skalds.¹⁸⁰

The feature of speech between Óðinn and the ravens does not appear in eddic or skaldic poetry, but only in later prose texts, where Snorri elaborates on his poetic source material. In *Gylfaginning*, Snorri explains that the ravens Huginn and Muninn fly far and wide over many lands each day to bring Óðinn knowledge; they sit on his shoulders and

¹⁷⁹ *Grímnismál*, p. 372.

¹⁸⁰ Margaret Clunies Ross, 'Authentication of Poetic Memory in Old Norse Skaldic Verse', in *Minni and Muninn: Memory in Medieval Nordic Culture*, ed. Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen A. Mitchell, *Acta Scandinavica*, vol. 4 (Turnhout, 2014), pp. 59-74, at p. 61. Also see Hermann (2014), who suggests that this passage 'hints at the relative superiority of memory over thought' (p. 17).

into his ears they tell him all tidings; in this way he becomes wise in his lore; and ‘því kalla menn hann hrafna guð’ (‘for this reason he is called the Raven God’), though this is probably part of Snorri’s rationalisation for Óðinn as a god of war. Snorri also adds an interesting detail in *Ynglinga saga*: their relationship is mutually beneficial. While the ravens are one of Óðinn’s primary sources of knowledge, he is the one who provides them with the gift of speech. Use of the verb *temja* – ‘tamit við mál’ (‘trained to speak’) – suggests a magnification of the kingly function of falconry as well as the numinous quality of avian communication (see chapter 4, section 1.2; chapter 5, section 2).

As a plethora of cross-cultural evidence indicates, the association of bird symbolism with transcendent wisdom is universal to the human imagination.¹⁸¹ In Carl Jung’s psychoanalytic scholarship on myths and dreams, birds are the most common symbol for what he terms the Transcendent Function, which entails the psychological transition from the conscious to the unconscious, whereby their contents merge and the separation

¹⁸¹ See e.g. ‘Symbolisms of Ascension’ in Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York, 1957), pp. 99–122. Eliade argues that regardless of historical and religious context, flight universally ‘expresses the abolition of the human condition, transcendence and freedom’ (p. 110).

between the two is transcended.¹⁸² The Transcendent Function represents the conscious mind's universal longing for freedom, release, and liberation from any state of being that is too fixed or final. When effected, it consists of release from – or transcendence of – any confining pattern of existence; the experience of a wider and more spacious sense of relation to the world at large; a sense of completeness is achieved; 'the full realization of the potential of [the] individual Self'.¹⁸³ According to Jung, as a mythic symbol for the Transcendent Function, birds represent flights of intuition and an individual's attainment of arcane knowledge through a trance-like state.¹⁸⁴ As we have seen, birds act as communicators of important worldly knowledge in Old Norse tradition; they presumably acquire their knowledge through flight – ascendance – and are thus perhaps symbolic of transcendence. Their ability to fly endows them with the symbolic power of the

¹⁸² See Jeffrey C. Miller, *The Transcendent Function: Jung's Model of Psychological Growth through Dialogue with the Unconscious* (Albany, 2004), and references therein. For brief but useful discussion on the application of Jungian archetypes to Old Norse sources, including possible concerns and important potential, see McKinnell (2005), pp. 29-32. Compared to Freud, McKinnell considers Jung 'A more useful psychological explicator of myth' (p. 29).

¹⁸³ Joseph Henderson, 'Ancient Myths and Modern Man', in *Man and His Symbols*, ed. Carl G. Jung (New York, 1968), pp. 95-156, at p. 146.

¹⁸⁴ See Jung (1968). As Henderson (1968) further explains, '...the bird is the most fitting symbol of transcendence. It represents the peculiar nature of intuition working through a "medium", that is, an individual who is capable of obtaining knowledge of distant events ... by going into a trancelike state' (p. 147). Also see Peter Homans, *Jung in Context (Modernity and the Making of a Psychology)* (Chicago, 1979), p. 107.

Transcendent Function, which may suggest a comparison with the psychic state of the shaman.

I use shamanism in the broad sense of the word: as a biological phenomenon that is cross-cultural in its diversity – a so-called *technique of ecstasy*.¹⁸⁵ The subject of shamanism within the Old Norse literary context remains contentious for good reason. I follow Tolley's conclusion on the issue:

My investigation has, over all, found little grounds for proposing the presence of shamanism in pre-Christian or later Scandinavia, if by that is meant the classic form of shamanism typical of much of Siberia. The evidence does, however, support the likelihood of *some* ritual and belief of a broadly (but not classically) shamanic nature as existing and being remembered in tradition.¹⁸⁶

There are shamanistic features that are universal to the human condition, and the scholar of comparative religions Mircea Eliade identifies one of these ubiquitous elements in his discussion of the Magical Flight. In essence, the Magical Flight is a universal mythological symbol for an ecstatic's psychic shift. Eliade argues that this 'flight' expresses 'intelligence,

¹⁸⁵ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton, 1951; repr. 2004), p. 4. I also follow Krish Kershaw's definition of ecstasy as 'the shaking up of the person's entire nervous system ... experienced as an intoxication; it is the source of powers far beyond the ordinary ... The mind, or consciousness, is raised to the point where it is cut off from the sensations of the body, and the real world, with its limitations'. Kris Kershaw, *The One-eyed God: Odin and the (Indo-) Germanic Männerbünde*, *Journal of Indo-European Studies Monograph No. 36* (Washington, 2000), p. x.

¹⁸⁶ Tolley (2009), p. 581 (also see p. 588).

understanding of secret things or metaphysical truths ... [it] is the expression both of the soul's autonomy and of ecstasy'.¹⁸⁷ The shamanistic experience of ecstasy invokes a change in consciousness; this is akin to the Transcendent Function, also best symbolised by the flight of birds. The notion of a soul's travel on a supernatural quest is strikingly similar to Óðinn's transformation into a bird after accessing the mead of poetry and, perhaps more so, the journeys that the ravens Huginn and Muninn daily undertake in search of wisdom.

Etymologically, Huginn is derived from *hugr* and Muninn from *munr*. Tolley argues that both *hugr* and *munr* are linked to Old Norse notions of 'souls': semi-independent, metaphysical entities that are part of, or reflections of, a human being or mythic deity and that are able to act outside of the body.¹⁸⁸ As metaphysical representations of Óðinn, Huginn and Muninn might symbolise a shaman's ecstatic trance, and through their flight,

¹⁸⁷ Eliade (1951; repr. 2004), p. 479.

¹⁸⁸ Tolley (2002), p. 192. Following the idea of shamanism leads to a possible connection with Sámi ideas about assistant animal spirits, including birds (*saiva leddie*, 'supernatural bird') which deliver messages from the other world, and into which shamans were sometimes thought to transform. See Bäckman and Hultkrantz (1978), pp. 17-18, 42, 67, 100. Significantly, there is 'an oscillation between the conception of spirits in animal guise and the conception of the shaman's own extra-corporeal form of appearance, his zoomorphic free-soul' (p. 18), which could also describe Óðinn's *hugr* and *munr* as ravens.

Óðinn might thus represent the shaman who is able to transcend his initial condition and access arcane knowledge.¹⁸⁹

The relationship between Óðinn and his ravens offers a thematic parallel between the mythic and human realms: as with the bird-human communication examined in chapter 5 (section 2), birds again serve as intelligence-gatherers who provide important information about the human world. Óðinn is able to understand the speech of birds, and akin to the human characters who understand bird-language, he is also associated with both kingship and wisdom. Óðinn is portrayed as a progenitor of kings and in Snorri's writings, he is a kingly figure amongst the gods, the highest and oldest and ruler in all matters. Óðinn is characterised in various sources by his sagacity and perspicacity, quests for knowledge, and clear association with magic and prophecy. He is also affiliated with poetry, and when cited directly, birds always speak in verse (see chapter 5, section 2). Óðinn may therefore provide the authorising source myth for depictions of human-avian communication in Old Norse poetry: an archetypal formula for a human-animal

¹⁸⁹ For further evidence linking Óðinn and shamanism, see e.g. Simek (1993b): 'parallels with shamanistic practices in which ecstatic states play an essential role may be assumed as a result both of Odin's acquisition of runic knowledge and poetic art and his particular kind of magic'. Simek suggests that 'ecstatic states are also an integral part of Odin's cult' and concludes that Óðinn has shamanistic origins (p. 242).

relationship which could supply a king or kingly candidate with the mental powers required to rule.

2.3 *The Mead of Poetry*

Human characters who understand bird-speech are linked with both sacred initiation and sacral kingship, and these themes can also be detected when Óðinn transforms into the physical forms of both a snake and an eagle in the myth of the mead of poetry. Recounted most fully in Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál*, this complex tale tells of an intoxicating drink that bestows the ability to create poetry and thus grants a type of wisdom.¹⁹⁰ Óðinn acquires the mead by entering a mountain through an auger-hole *í orms líki* ('in a serpent's form'); he sleeps with Gunnlǫð, daughter of the *jötunn* Suttungr, for three nights, and she grants him three drinks of the mead; then 'brásk hann í arnarham' ('he changed himself into eagle-shape') and flies away to bring the mead to Ásgarðr, with Suttungr chasing after him.¹⁹¹

The term *líki* is here associated with serpent-shape, and akin to most other examples, *hamr*

¹⁹⁰ Whoever drinks the mead turns into a *skáld eða fræðamaðr* ('skald or learned man/scholar').

Skáldskaparmál, p. 3. The mead is discussed in *Hávamál* (vv. 104-110), though Snorri provides more detail and elaboration, and the poem does not relate Óðinn's transformation into an eagle and the chase with Suttungr (pp. 343-344). The story is referenced in kennings for poetry, such as 'the seed of the eagle's beak' (*Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, p. 276). The Gotlandic picture-stone Stora Hammars III also depicts the scene, suggesting that the story was well-known and widespread, certainly existing as early as the 8th c. AD. See Erik Nylén and Jan Peder Lamm, *Stones, Ships, and Symbols: The Picture Stones of Gotland from the Viking Age and Before* (Stockholm, 1988), and references therein.

¹⁹¹ *Skáldskaparmál*, pp. 4-5.

is the word used for bird-transformation (see chapter 4).¹⁹² He then shares the mead and poetic wisdom with the gods and humankind.

It is fitting that Óðinn, the seeker of wisdom and god of poetry, is the bringer of poetic inspiration; and similarly, that it is in the shape of a bird, and from the bird's beak, that the mead should arrive.¹⁹³ Speech and poetry emerge from the mouth, where liquid mead is consumed, and in skaldic verse the mead serves as a metaphor for speech.¹⁹⁴ The bird-form is not only useful for escape purposes, but bird-song contains wisdom and like poetry, it is aesthetically pleasing. Considering the fact that birds in Old Norse literature offer significant knowledge and bird-speech equates with wisdom (see chapter 5, section 2), Óðinn's spitting the mead of poetry takes on new meaning as a form of bird-language in highly mythicised form.¹⁹⁵

Akin to the legend of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, the entire episode can be viewed as an initiation between two worlds whereby 'numinous knowledge' is acquired (see chapter 5,

¹⁹² The word *líki* is also used for Reginn's transformation into a serpent/dragon (see chapter 4, section 2), suggesting a link between this particular term and serpentine shapeshifting.

¹⁹³ It is also appropriate that the poetic mead should arrive in the form of spat saliva: Kvasir, from whose blood it was made, was created from the spittle of the two races of gods, the Æsir and Vanir (ibid., pp. 3, 5).

¹⁹⁴ See e.g. Christopher Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North: The Gods of the Norsemen* (London, 2011), p. 113.

¹⁹⁵ Óðinn also excretes the *skáldfífla blut* ('rhymesters' portion'), which is available to anyone (*Skáldskaparmál*, p. 5).

section 2.2.1).¹⁹⁶ Óðinn undergoes trials in Snorri's account: an intellectual challenge in using his cunning to trick nine slaves into killing each other, a physical challenge in doing their work for a summer, and he escapes an attempt on his life while travelling through the mountain. He sleeps with Gunnlǫð for three nights – a standard magical and traditional number and the same amount of time that Sigurðr sleeps with Brynhildr in *Vǫlsunga saga*.¹⁹⁷ Óðinn enters the mountain as a serpent, undergoes initiation, and leaves in a new form with the sacred mead. The two animals that Óðinn becomes – the binary of snake and eagle – symbolise the opposition of low and high, chthonic and celestial, death and life. This oppositional pairing is also represented by the cosmic world-tree Yggdrasill, for upon the top of the branches sits an eagle and underneath the roots lives the dragon Niðhǫggr and numerous other serpents (see above, section 1). According to the structure of initiation, mediation between the underworld and upperworld must take place in order to realise numinous potential.¹⁹⁸ The interior of the mountain represents the chthonic other

¹⁹⁶ Schjødt (2008), pp. 164-171. Poetry is not numinous knowledge in itself, but in order to become a skilled practitioner of Old Norse poetry, an exceptional knowledge of mythological arcana is required. Poetry thus mediates numinous knowledge and also constitutes numinous knowledge in itself.

¹⁹⁷ *Vǫlsunga saga*, p. 9.

¹⁹⁸ Specifically, this myth is about initiating Óðinn into kingship – see Svava Jakobsdóttir, 'Gunnlǫð and the Precious Mead', in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, ed. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (New York and London, 2002), pp. 30-57. See chapter 5 re. the relationship between kingship and bird-

world, and having overcome the trials of initiation, Óðinn attains ‘transcendence’ in his winged flight and returns to the upper world. He shares his newfound ‘numinosity’ through a symbolic form of speech when he spits the mead from his beak.

Óðinn is therefore not only able to understand bird-speech, but is also capable of transforming his physical shape into avian form. Following a riddle exchange with King Heiðrekr in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, Óðinn, disguised as Gestumblindi, eventually emerges victorious in the knowledge contest. Heiðrekr angrily draws his sword and strikes at Óðinn, ‘en Óðinn brásk í valslíki ok fló á brott; en konungr hjó eptir ok af honum vélifðrit aptan, ok því er valr svá vélistuttr ávallt síðan’ (‘but Óðinn changed himself into the shape of a hawk and flew away; and the king struck again and cut off the tail-feathers from behind, and this is why the hawk has always been so short-tailed ever since’).¹⁹⁹ The legend thus serves an aetiological function, describing the origins of the features which allow people on the ground to identify different bird species. For attacking and trying to kill him without just cause, Óðinn announces that the worst slaves will bring about Heiðrekr’s death. In making this pronouncement, the text gives no indication that Óðinn

language. Through birds, Óðinn is thus linked with a variety of functions: kingship, shamanism, and the role of the culture-hero who brings poetry to the world.

¹⁹⁹ *Saga Heiðreks konungs ins vitra*, p. 44.

transforms back from the *valslíki* ('hawk's shape') into an anthropomorphic form, thus communicating whilst still in bird-shape. King Heiðrekr may well understand bird-speech; as demonstrated in chapter 5 (section 2), the human figures who comprehend the language of birds are particularly wise figures associated with kingship (like Heiðrekr). Alternatively, Óðinn may be speaking a human language through a bird's beak, but this does not accord with other examples of Old Norse bird-human communication. The features of human-animal transformation common to the sagas examined in chapter 4 are also expressed in Norse myth: Óðinn's physical shape changes, but he maintains his interiority and psychology. He fittingly transforms into a fast, aristocratic bird to make his escape, and as with King Geirrøðr in *Grímnismál*, as a patron of kings, Óðinn finds Heiðrekr unworthy of the function of kingship.

Óðinn is the master of multiple types of animal shape-shifting; according to *Ynglinga saga*, he can change his 'litum ok líkjum' ('appearance and body') in any land, however he wishes.²⁰⁰ Snorri later lists specific animals into which Óðinn transforms: 'Óðinn skipti hǫmum. Lá þá búkrinn sem sofinn eða dauðr, en hann var þá fugl eða dýr, fiskr eða ormr ok fór á einni svipstund á fjarlæg lǫnd at sínum ørendum eða annarra manna'

²⁰⁰ *Ynglinga saga*, p. 17.

(Óðinn could shift shapes. Then his body lay as though he were sleeping or dead, but he was then a bird or beast, a fish or serpent and he travelled in the same moment to distant lands on his or other men's errands').²⁰¹ These animals allow a shape-shifted Óðinn to move freely through all kinds of spaces: aerial and over land, marine and chthonic (beast for land, bird for upperworld, serpent for underworld, fish for aquatic otherworld). For humans – including the *berserkir*, warriors of Óðinn according to *Ynglinga saga* – the most common function of animal transformation, whether psychological or physical, is to become a fierce beast to enter battle. For the gods, the primary purpose of animal transformation involves movement: from one realm to another, to a space that is otherwise inaccessible, or to make an escape.

Óðinn understands the language of his two ravens, Huginn and Muninn, but they can also be understood as aspects of his own psyche. And in the myth of the mead of poetry, Óðinn transforms into the bird which offers poetic inspiration to the gods and humanity. Óðinn is thus not only capable of understanding bird-language, he is also capable of becoming a bird both psychically and physically. Óðinn emerges as a (possibly

²⁰¹ Ibid., p. 18. Such a transformation is strikingly similar to the Sámi figures examined in chapter 4 (section 2) and is indicative of shamanistic activity; as Bäckman and Hultkrantz (1978) write about Lapp shamanism, 'the body lies dead, but the soul is wandering' (p. 99). See further Tolley (2009), pp. 507-513.

totemic) god of the birds. When birds speak to human characters in Old Norse literature, they present divine knowledge to Odinic figures: those whom he favours and resembles: royalty, his descendants, and the initiated (see chapter 5). Perhaps these birds were meant to represent the wisdom of Óðinn; or perhaps they were understood to be figurative representatives of Óðinn himself. In conclusion, the birds-of-speech can be seen as symbolising Óðinn's physical manifestation in Miðgarðr, and the advice they offer to select individuals might represent divine guidance and wisdom. Birds are the ideal animal for this symbolism because of their liminal habitation between the earth and whatever may be above.

3. Loki

Loki is often seen as the archetypal boundary-crossing trickster of the Norse mythic cosmos, but his role is far more sinister.²⁰² He does have trickster qualities, however, and he is well-versed in transformations of various kinds – animal, gender, and sexual.²⁰³ Loki

²⁰² Jan de Vries, for example, suggested that 'by far the greatest part of the myths of Loki are in perfect harmony with this conception' – of Loki as a trickster and culture-hero. *The Problem of Loki*, FF Communications 110 (Helsinki, 1933), p. 288; also 'Loki und kein Ende', in *Festschrift für Franz Rolf Schröder. Zu seinem 65. Geburtstage September 1958*, ed. Wolfdietrich Rasch (Heidelberg, 1959), pp. 1-10.

²⁰³ For cross-cultural studies of tricksters and their mythological significance as boundary-breakers of natural and social orders, see e.g. Suzanne E. Lundquist's *The Trickster: A Transformation Archetype* (San Francisco,

is thus subversive in all kinds of interesting ways, all of which are present in his adventure with the stallion Svaðilfari.

3.1 Zoophilia

Snorri's *Gylfaginning* contains the most extensive account of sexual intercourse with an animal in the extant corpus of Old Norse literature, though it is not necessarily bestiality, since the perpetrator – Loki – is in horse-form at the time.²⁰⁴ The Æsir decide that Loki is to blame for the master builder's success at building a fortification around Ásgarðr, for he persuaded them to grant the *jötunn*-in-disguise the use of his immensely strong stallion, Svaðilfari.²⁰⁵ The Æsir threaten to kill Loki if he is unable to reverse the situation, so he devises a truly unique solution: turning himself into a mare and distracting the horse so the building cannot be completed. Loki may not have anticipated the further consequences of

1991) and Lewis Hyde's *Trickster makes this world: how disruptive imagination creates culture* (Edinburgh, 1998; repr. 2008).

²⁰⁴ This encounter is also alluded to in the *Völuspá hinn skömmu* section of *Hyndluljóð* (p. 467). The fact that there is no actual sexual engagement between humans and animals in the extant saga corpus – only insults and allusions – demonstrates the uniqueness of this episode. Also see Joseph Harris, 'The Masterbuilder Tale in Snorri's *Edda* and Two Sagas', ANF 91 (1976), pp. 66-101.

²⁰⁵ The word *svaðilfari* enigmatically means something like 'the one making an unlucky journey' (Simek 1993b, p. 305); why this is the horse's name remains unknown.

his actions: ‘Loki hafði þá ferð haft til Svaðilfœra at nokkvoru síðar bar hann fyl’ (‘Loki had had such an encounter with Svaðilfari that somewhat later he gave birth to a foal’).²⁰⁶

The exchange between Loki and Svaðilfari is explicitly sexual, but does it violate the strict prohibition against bestiality in medieval Scandinavia (see chapter 2, section 2)? Loki has presumably retained his own psychology and solely undergone a corporeal transformation, so the act does not breach the taboo entirely. It is still extremely shaming and transgressive: he transforms into a female animal and is penetrated by another animal (and of a species that usually has a massive member, though this may not be so apparent to a mare). From a narrative point of view, the stallion must be stopped and the wily Loki is the one capable of tricking the Æsir out of trouble, since brute force is not an option with Þórr away in the east. The transgression demonstrates how gods can do things that people must not – breaching boundaries can be enormously positive when done by the gods – but these things are done for particular purposes: for the greater good of the community. Thus there is an upside to this encounter: Óðinn’s excellent steed Sleipnir, ‘Þat var grátt ok hafði

²⁰⁶ *Gylfaginning*, p. 35.

átta fœtr, ok er sá hestr beztr með goðum ok mǫnnum’ (‘It was grey and had eight legs, and that horse is the best amongst gods and men’).²⁰⁷

Loki breaches numerous taboos in this episode: he not only takes animal form, but also female form; he has sex with a male animal, and then gives birth, thus breaking down various boundaries and simultaneously violating multiple Christian laws.²⁰⁸ It is logical that Loki, who transgresses and defies so many norms and categories and conventions, would also break the ultimate taboo of sexual relations between different categories of beings.

There is an intersection at play: gender hybridity, animal hybridity, and queer sexuality become interlinked.²⁰⁹ It is about more than trivial mockery: this episode plays into predominant Old Norse ideas about *ergi*, *argr*, and *seiðr* – features shared by Óðinn.²¹⁰ The

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 35; also see *Grímnismál*, p. 376. There is a lineage of exceptional horses descending from Svaðilfari and Loki’s coupling. Sigurðr Fáfnisbani’s steed, Grani, is descended from Sleipnir, and like the dog Vígi (chapter 1, section 2.1.3), is both responsive and emotional in *Guðrúnarkviða II*: when Guðrún asks Grani for news, Grani drops his head, hiding it in the grass, for he knew that his master was gone (p. 353).

²⁰⁸ In medieval Iceland and Norway, laws against homosexuality and bestiality were always listed together (see chapter 2, section 2.2), indicating that these taboos were being broken in pre-Christian Scandinavia and/or Christian authors wished to portray the pagan past in an illicit light.

²⁰⁹ Following Mel Chen, ‘thinking critically about animality has important consequences for queered and racialized notions of animacy; for it is animality that has been treated as primary mediator, or crux (though not the only one), for the definition of “human,” and, at the same moment, of “animal”’. Mel Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, 2012), p. 90.

²¹⁰ See e.g. Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Óðinn as mother: The Old Norse deviant patriarch’, ANF 126 (2011), pp. 5–16. Significantly, however, Óðinn condemns animal and gender transformations when he accuses Loki of spending eight winters as a ‘kýr molkandi ok kona’ (‘milking cow and woman’), which he considers *args aðal* (‘perverted conduct’). *Lokasenna*, p. 413.

key difference between Loki and Óðinn in this regard is that Óðinn does not have to petition the goddesses for the power of *hamr* to transform into bird-shape. As Deleuze and Guattari suggest, ‘all becomings begin with and pass through becoming woman. It is the key to all the other becomings’.²¹¹ Loki’s sexual hybridity and lability is key to his protean forms and significations.

3.2 Metamorphosis

Loki transforms into a variety of animals. The choice of species is determined by his needs at any given moment: either to cause some mischief or, as is the case with his adventure with Svaðilfari, to remedy the trouble he has caused. The transformative words *hamr* and *liki* are used interchangeably for Loki and he always maintains his human-like divine interiority, regardless of the physical animal form into which he changes. In *Þrymskviða*, Loki borrows Freyja’s *fjaðrbamr* (‘feather-shape’, i.e. ‘feather-cloak’) in order to travel to Jötunheimar to retrieve Þórr’s missing hammer.²¹² Just as a good horse allows its rider to travel between worlds, the *fjaðrbamr* not only grants Loki the ability to fly, but also to

²¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari (1980; 2013), p. 306.

²¹² Regarding the potentially queer connotations of this episode – how did Loki acquire Þórr’s phallic hammer during the night? – see Jón Karl Helgason, “Þegi þú, Þórr!” Gender, Class and Discourse in *Þrymskviða*, in *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, ed. Sarah M. Anderson (New York, 2002), pp. 159-166. See further McKinnell (2000), pp. 1-20.

travel quickly and unobserved from *ása garða* to *jötna heima* and back again.²¹³ While presumably still in bird-form, Loki communicates with both Þrymr (v. 7) – and later, definitely in bird-form, with Þórr (v. 11).²¹⁴ Upon Loki's return to Ásgarðr, Þórr wishes to know Loki's tidings and makes an additional request:

Segðu á lopti
 lǫng tíðindi.
 Opt sitjanda
 sǫgur um fallask,
 ok liggjandi
 lygi um bellir.²¹⁵

(Tell all your tidings while still in the air. Those who are sitting often forget their tales. And those lying down bellow out lies.)

Communication in the air is thus explicitly associated with truth-telling, and for Loki, this entails remaining in his bird-form (compare the language of birds' association with wisdom in chapter 5, section 2). As Loki remains aloft, he is presumably still communicating in bird-speech rather than the anthropomorphic tongue used by most Æsir. Therefore, at the risk of anachronistically over-literalising the mythological scene, there are two distinct possibilities: either Þórr is able to understand bird-language, which would not be in keeping

²¹³ *Þrymskviða*, pp. 422-423. Regardless of the direction, the feathers whistle in the wind, causing a great din (the verb *dynja* is used in both stanzas 5 and 9, meaning 'to boom or resound').

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 423.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 423.

with his functions and characterisation, or an anthropomorphic speech emerges from the bird's beak, which is not the case in other episodes involving bird-speech in Old Norse literature (with the possible exception of *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* – see chapter 5, section 2.3.2).

A *ffaðrbamr* is Loki's preferred means of transformation and transportation. In *Skáldskaparmál*, it is Freyja's *valsbamr* ('falcon-shape') which Loki adopts to travel north to *Þrymheimr* (in *Jötunheimar*) in order to help *Iðunn* escape from the *jötunn* *Þjazi* – a situation caused by Loki's own trickery and deception. Loki transforms *Iðunn* *í hnotar líki* ('into the shape of a nut') and quickly flies away with her *í klóm sér* ('in his claws'), suggesting that the transformation enabled by the *valsbamr* entails his entire body – the *bamr* is not simply a set of mechanised wings, but something altogether more powerful and supernatural.²¹⁶ Loki is also not only able to transform himself into a wide variety of shapes (as will be further demonstrated below, section 3.2), but other characters as well. Freyja –

²¹⁶ *Skáldskaparmál*, p. 2 (there is some manuscript variation with *í klóm* and it could also be read as *á klóm*, though the basic meaning remains the same – see p. 135). At the close of this episode, Loki again demonstrates a propensity for sexual connections to animals. In order to make *Skaði* laugh, Loki 'batt um skegg geitar nokkvorrar ok qðrum enda um hreðjar sér ok létu þau ymsi eptir ok skrækti hvárttveggja við hátt' ('tied a rope around the beard of a certain she-goat and the other end around his testicles and they drew each other back and forth and both of them loudly shrieked') (*Skáldskaparmál*, p. 2). Significantly, Loki ties himself to a *geitr* ('female goat') rather than a *haftr* ('male goat'), but the *geitr* is also bearded, queering the animal and thus Loki through metonymy (though some female goats have beards, so this is not necessarily the case).

the owner of the *hamr* worn by Loki at this time – is also endowed with this ability: in *Hyndluljóð*, she disguises her protégé, the human hero Óttarr, by transforming him into a swift and shining hog named both Gullinbursti (‘Golden-bristles’) and Hildisvíni (‘Battle-boar’).²¹⁷ Animals again provide the means for transportation between worlds when Freyja rides the boar to visit the *jötunn* Hyndla. As with Óðinn and Loki, Freyja is associated with *seiðr*, further linking this specific form of magic with both the feminine and shape-shifting into animal form, and thus suggesting a correlated link between animalism and femininity in Old Norse mythology.²¹⁸

Later in *Skáldskaparmál*, however, it is Frigg who possesses the *valshamr* (‘falcon-shape’). This could be a scribal error, but it is also possible that they were both understood to possess bird-shapes which grant transformation and flight – or the two goddesses might be equated, though this suggestion is the least probable. Again using an animal shape to enter the lands of the *jötnar*, but without the intention to deceive or retrieve: Loki ‘flaug einun sinni at skemta sér með valsham Friggjar at hann flaug fyrir forvitni sakar í

²¹⁷ *Hyndluljóð*, p. 461. Freyja says that the boar was made for her by two dwarves, Dáinn and Nabbi, similar to the aforementioned boar named Gullinbursti forged by the dwarf Brokkr for Freyr in *Skáldskaparmál* (p. 42). Freyja is obviously lying to Hyndla and wants her to think that Hildisvíni is Gullinbursti and not Óttarr in disguise.

²¹⁸ According to *Ynglinga saga*, it was Freyja who first introduced *seiðr* (already well-known amongst the Vanir) to the Æsir (p. 13).

Geirrøðargarða' ('flew one time to amuse himself with Frigg's falcon-shape [and] he flew for curiosity's sake into Geirrøðr's courts').²¹⁹ When Loki looks through the window of his great hall, Geirrøðr spots him and orders his capture; and 'er hann sá auga hans þá grunaði hann at maðr mundi vera' ('when he saw his eyes then he suspected that he was a man').²²⁰ This is similar to the witches who shape-shift into seals in the sagas (see chapter 3, section 3.2): eyes both portray and betray a character's true interior identity, even when they have shape-shifted into animal form. Consequently, Geirrøðr demands that the bird answer him, but Loki remains silent; after three months of forced captivity in a chest, however, Loki answers to him – his taming is complete and the episode is analogous to the training of a falcon (see chapter 4, section 1.2).²²¹ Loki speaks a mutually-comprehensible language with Geirrøðr through a beak and with a bird's body (the close association between *jotnar* and birds will be fully examined in the following section).

It is unclear if there are any animals into which Loki cannot shift his shape, as seems to be the case with Óðinn (according to Snorri). Loki does demonstrate a greater range of animal transformations than Óðinn in extant textual sources. In the prose

²¹⁹ *Skáldskaparmál*, p. 24.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

conclusion to *Lokasenna*, having brought about the death of Baldr, Loki conceals himself in the waterfall *Fránangr í lax líki* ('in the shape of a salmon'), where he is caught by the Æsir.²²² In *Gylfaginning*, Loki ponders how the Æsir might catch him, then takes some linen-yarn and twists it into knots – just as nets have been made ever since.²²³ The Æsir construct a net resembling Loki's to catch him, which he leaps over whilst in salmon-form, and Þórr grabs him; Loki manages to squirm free, but Þórr catches hold of his tail – 'Ok er fyrir þá sök laxinn aptrmjór' ('And it is for this reason that the salmon tapers at the tail').²²⁴ In Snorri's mythology, the origins of different animal-related technologies and anatomical features serves a functional purpose, contributing aetiological significance to his version of mythological events.

Insects are rare in Old Norse literature but are part of Loki's transformative repertoire, perhaps because of their peculiarity and disruptive behaviour.²²⁵ To disturb the dwarf Brokkr's smithing in *Skáldskaparmál*, Loki thrice bites him as a fly: first on the arm,

²²² *Lokasenna*, p. 421.

²²³ *Gylfaginning*, p. 48.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²²⁵ The occasional appearance of insects in Old Norse literature is not examined in this thesis, but could be a profitable subject for future study. Spiders are not insects, but Anna Birgitta Rooth notably (and problematically) concludes that Loki is 'an anthropomorphisation and deification of the spider' – see *Loki in Scandinavian Mythology* (Lund, 1961), p. 248.

then twice as hard on the neck, and then the fly settles between Brokkr's eyes and bites the eyelids, causing blood to drip into the dwarf's eyes.²²⁶ Loki's insect forms are a source of great annoyance to other characters. In the late *Sörla þáttr*, when Óðinn sends Loki into Freyja's chamber to fetch the Brisingamen necklace, Loki 'varð þá at einni flugu' ('then became a fly') to sneak through a needle-hole, since it was locked.²²⁷ To prompt Freyja to turn over in bed, 'Loki verður þá at einni fló' ('Loki then becomes a flea') and bites her cheek, reflecting the reality of living with insects in the Middle Ages: flies can enter through the narrowest apertures and fleas bite people in bed, making them turn over whilst asleep.²²⁸ Presumably unable to carry the necklace as an insect, 'Þá dregr Loki af sér flóarhaminn' ('Then Loki drags the flea shape off himself'), takes the necklace, opens the door, and returns to Óðinn in anthropomorphic form.²²⁹ Loki transforms into whichever animal species is required of him in the moment, regardless of biological classification: mammal or bird, fish or insect.

3.3 *Loki's Children: Fenrir and the Miðgarðsormr*

²²⁶ *Skáldskaparmál*, p. 42.

²²⁷ *Sörla þáttr*, in *Flateyjarbók*, vol. I, ed. Sigurður Nordal (Akraness, 1944), p. 305. *Sörla þáttr* is only extant in the extended version of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* in the late-fourteenth century manuscript *Flateyjarbók*.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

Loki's transgressive traits and physical hybridity with animals are also present in his children, providing further evidence for Loki's own hybrid state. In addition to being the mother of Sleipnir, Loki is the father of two animal children with a *gýgr* ('giantess') who Snorri names Angrboða: the wolf Fenrir and the Miðgarðsormr (see above, section 1.5), as well as Hel.²³⁰ Loki acquires the epithet *úlfs faðir* ('wolf's father') in *Haustlǫng*, but he is also said to be the father of multiple wolves.²³¹ In the prose conclusion to *Lokasenna*, Loki's son Narfi *varð at vargi* ('became a wolf') and the guts of Loki's son Nari are used to bind him.²³²

This further confirms Loki's own wolfish nature. Larrington suggests that Snorri

²³⁰ In addition to eddic poetry and Snorri's *Edda*, Loki's children appear in some of the earliest skaldic poetry and archaeological picture-stones of the late Viking Age. On kennings, see Carolyne Larrington, 'Loki's children', in *The Fantastic in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature. Sagas and the British Isles. Preprint Papers of the 13th International Saga Conference. Durham and York, 6th-12th August, 2006*, ed. John McKinnell et al. (Durham, 2006b), pp. 541-550. Þórr's fishing encounter with the Miðgarðsormr is depicted on four early rock-carvings – see Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Þórr's Fishing Expedition', in *The Poetic Edda: A Casebook*, ed. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (New York and London, 2002), pp. 121-137, at pp. 124-130. Fenrir's swallowing of Óðinn is portrayed on the Ledberg runestone from Östergötland, Sweden, and the Thorwald's Cross (Andreas 128) from the Isle of Man. Jesch (2002), p. 263; Timothy J. S. Bourns, 'Mythological and Heroic Motifs in Manx Stone Sculpture', in *Viking Myths and Rituals on the Isle of Man*, ed. Leszek Gardela and Carolyne Larrington, *Languages, Myths and Finds*, vol. 1 (Nottingham, 2014), pp. 22-29, at pp. 23-24.

²³¹ *Skáldskaparmál*, p. 23.

²³² *Lokasenna*, p. 421. Moreover, a venomous snake is fastened over his face with its poison dripping down, and an aetiological detail is added: when Sigyn is unable to stop the drops, Loki shakes violently, which is purportedly the cause of earthquakes.

rationalises the tale: the Æsir turn Váli (i.e. Narfi) into a wolf and he kills Nari, whose guts are then ironically used to bind the wolf-father.²³³

Fenrir is the alpha wolf in eddic poetry: he swallows the sun come Ragnarøk (see above, section 1.5), as well as the alpha Áss, Óðinn, and his name is an epithet for his lupine species: wolves are *Fenris kindir* ('Fenrir's kindred').²³⁴ Fenrir is raised at home like a domestic dog in *Gylfaginning*, but the domestication is a failure.²³⁵ When the Æsir see how large the wolf is growing and prophesy that he is destined to harm them, they try to bind him using different fetters. In this tale, Fenrir communicates with the Æsir using speech and has an anthropomorphic interiority, deliberating available options and possible risks and benefits, and seeking fame and honour. Fenrir is eventually bound with the magically-powerful fetter Gleipnir; he is deceived by the gods, who promise to free him; and especially by Týr, whose hand Fenrir swallows – ironically the god most associated with oaths and legal justice, and the only one who was brave enough to approach the wolf and

²³³ Larrington (2006b), p. 545; *Gylfaginning*, p. 49.

²³⁴ *Völuspá*, p. 301.

²³⁵ Larrington (2006b) argues that Fenrir's depiction as a domestic dog reflects Snorri's Christian allegorisation; the Miðgarðsormr is similarly trivialised in the tale of Utgarða-Loki when it is assimilated to a seemingly harmless cat, thus comically domesticating these primeval monsters (pp. 547-548).

give him food.²³⁶ There is a sudden change in Fenrir's behaviour: he is previously communicative and cheerful, perhaps even playful like a good pet dog, but following the betrayal of his food-provider, Fenrir transforms into the wild wolf at the moment of constraint: he tries to bite the Æsir, howls horribly, and slavers so much that the river Ván ('Hope') is formed.²³⁷ Fenrir is bound far from Áss civilisation: the islet Lyngvi in the lake Ámsvartnir, according to Snorri – a wild place for a now wild beast – a movement from culture to nature.

The wolfishness of the children is also evident in the father. Skaði tells Loki that he will not play for long with his *lausum bala* ('tail free'), surely a deliberate allusion to (at least a metaphorical) hybridity.²³⁸ Loki's binding can also be seen as an attempted taming of a being that became too wild and thus threatens the domestic well-being of the Æsir community: father and son are paralleled and both will one day break free. Loki's other two children by Angrboða are similarly bound against their will. Óðinn casts Hel into Niflheim and the Miðgarðsormr into the deep sea which encircles all lands, where it grows so large

²³⁶ The items used to create Gleipnir are meant to be impossible to acquire, indicating the fetter's magical qualities, and it is mostly formed from animal parts: the sound of the cat's footfall, the bear's sinews, the fish's breath, and a bird's spittle (the other ingredients are the woman's beard and the mountain's roots).

Gylfaginning, p. 28.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²³⁸ *Lokasenna*, p. 418.

that it bites its own tail.²³⁹ All three children are restrained and confined to otherworlds in various ways; the taming that is forced upon them ultimately fails. Come Ragnarøk, the consequence of caging a wild animal against its wishes proves to be destruction and revenge. Whereas the gods have unfettered powers of movement, both Fenrir and the Miðgarðsormr are stuck and constrained – the opposite of the freedom of being able to shift one’s shape and travel between worlds.

There is also a typological correlation between the wolf and the serpent in Old Norse mythological thought. When Þórr strives to catch the serpent when fishing in *Hymiskviða*, the Miðgarðsormr is referenced in wolfish terms: not only through familial connection as the *úlfs hnitbróður* (‘wolf’s close-brother’), but also itself as a *breingálkn* (i.e.

²³⁹ Eddic poetry includes the feature of the Miðgarðsormr encircling all lands from beneath (e.g. *Hymiskviða*, p. 403), but Snorri’s addition that the serpent bites its own tail might have learned roots from classical tradition. The *Ouroboros* (Egyptian ‘Tail-in-mouth’) originated in ancient Egypt; an iconographic symbol of a serpent or dragon biting its tail that has a rich history in Graeco-Roman magic, Gnosticism, and even Hermeticism. See e.g. Erik Hornung, *The secret lore of Egypt: its impact on the West* (Ithaca, 2001), p. 13. Representing eternal return and re-creation, the Miðgarðsormr is thus symbolically analogous with Níðhöggr and the dragon’s return at the end of *Völuspá* (see above, section 1.5). Snorri doubts whether the Miðgarðsormr actually died fighting Þórr, as recorded in *Gylfaginning*; when the encounter is described in *Skáldskaparmál* through analogised human figures from the Trojan War, Snorri notes that ‘meir hröpuðu þeir frásögninni en satt var en þeir sögðu at Miðgarðsormr fengi þar bana’ (‘they greatly exaggerated the story beyond the truth when they said that the Miðgarðsormr suffered death there’) (*Skáldskaparmál*, p. 6).

braun-gáalkn, ‘wilderness-monster/wolf’).²⁴⁰ Loki and his children challenge the boundaries between god and animal; they are hybrids (of multiple categorisations). The family’s bestial tendencies may be linked to their *jötunn* heritage: their mother Angrboða is a *jötunn*, as is Loki’s father, Fárbaumi.²⁴¹ According to Snorri, Óðinn not only binds the children because the Æsir prophesy great harm and misfortune from them, but also because they learn that the three siblings are being raised in Jötunheimar and they expect great evil from their parentage: ‘fyrst af móðerni ok enn verra af faðerni’ (‘first from the mother and still worse from the father’).²⁴² This is category crisis: the consequence of mixing different types of being is animalistic, apocalyptic monstrosity.²⁴³

4. *Jötnar*

²⁴⁰ *Hymiskviða*, pp. 403-404. It is also termed *orm eitrfán* (‘poison-venomous serpent’) and *sá fiskr* (‘that fish’), further denoting its monstrous hybridity of the characteristics of multiple animal species (pp. 403-404).

²⁴¹ Loki’s mother Laufey, however, is probably one of the Æsir. See Clunies Ross (1994a), pp. 64-66, 220; Meulengracht Sørensen (2002), p. 132 and further references therein. As Larrington (2006b) notes, the pairing of god and giantess can elsewhere produce heroic figures such as Þórr and Fjölfnir, suggesting that the anomaly (of monstrous hybrids rather than anthropomorphic figures) may be due to ‘Loki’s own mixed heritage’ (p. 544).

²⁴² *Gylfaginning*, p. 27.

²⁴³ Following Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s third thesis of monstrosity, monsters are harbingers of category crisis – see ‘Monster Culture (Seven Theses)’, in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis, 1996), pp. 3-25, at pp. 6-7. Cohen argues that monsters ‘are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspected between forms that threatens to smash distinctions. Because of its ontological liminality, the monster notoriously appears at times of crisis’ (p. 6).

The Æsir always make use of animals when they travel to Jötunheimar ('Giantlands') or return to Ásgarðr, either through transportation or transformation. *Jöttnar* (typically translated as 'Giants') are an alternative and opposing race of beings in Norse mythology; infused with liminal significance, they occupy a place closer to nature than the Æsir.²⁴⁴

Clunies Ross has demonstrated how *jöttnar* are 'aligned with the natural whenever it is contrasted with the cultural'.²⁴⁵ *Jöttnar* are wealthy in 'natural resources'²⁴⁶ – specifically animal livestock – and are also capable of animal transformation; they are thus much closer to the animal domain than the average Áss.²⁴⁷

4.1 Pastoralism

²⁴⁴ I try to avoid the translation 'giant' because the term is misleading: there is scarce evidence that *jöttnar* were actually conceived as being massive in size.

²⁴⁵ Clunies Ross (1994a), p. 68. Thus, 'the system manages to have it both ways, saying in effect that the natural is unnatural and monstrous, while the cultural is the truly natural and superior' (p. 68). Like the category of female, Clunies Ross argues that *jötunn* is 'overdeterminedly natural' (p. 69). Multiple dichotomies can be mapped onto the Æsir and *jöttnar*: 'there is ample evidence in Norse myth, as in most cultural ideologies, that the natural was devalued in comparison with the cultural. Further, the natural was associated with the female and the cultural with the male' (p. 85).

²⁴⁶ Clunies Ross (1994a) defines 'natural resources' in broader terms: 'material or non-material resources that may be converted into culturally-useful goods' (p. 68).

²⁴⁷ Lotte Motz suggests that Germanic giants can be interpreted as figures of historical belief, a less anthropomorphic and more bestial race of gods who were seen as closer to nature. See 'Giants in Folklore and Mythology: A New Approach', *Folklore* 93.1 (1982), pp. 70-84. In late nineteenth-century German scholarship, giants were variously seen to 'symbolise meteorological phenomena', as 'powers of untamed wilderness', and as 'demons of nature' (p. 70 and references therein).

Jotnar keep animal livestock and rear them; unlike in other Indo-European mythologies, the *Æsir*, *Ásynjur*, and *Vanir* do not (though they do still eat meat, see section 5.1). The *Æsir* are the in-group, the dominant class in the mythological social order, and the *jotnar* are the outgroup, the subordinate Other; the *Áss* perspective is privileged above that of the *jotnar*, and one of the ways in which the *jotnar*'s alterity is established is through their closeness to the land and livestock.²⁴⁸ Meulengracht Sørensen accordingly argues that the gods are modelled upon aristocratic chieftains; thus the *Æsir*'s visit to *Ægir*'s hall can be seen as an expression of their dominance and the subordination of the *jotnar*.²⁴⁹

When Þórr wishes to go fishing, the *jotunn* Hymir instructs him to go to his herds to collect bait; Þórr finds an all-black ox and tears off its 'two-horned high meadow' (i.e.

²⁴⁸ The word *jotunn* was sometimes interchangeable with *finnr* ('Finn, Lapp'). In Þjóðólfr of Hvin's *Haustlǫng*, for example, *Finns fjalla* ('of the Finnr [Saami] of the mountains') is a kenning for *jotunn* (*Skáldskaparmál*, p. 33). See Else Mundal, 'Coexistence of Saami and Norse Culture – Reflected in and Interpreted by Old Norse Myths', in *Norse Myths, Literature and Society*, Papers of the 11th International Saga Conference, ed. Geraldine Barnes and Margaret Clunies Ross (Sydney, 2000), pp. 346-355, at pp. 348-350. McKinnell (2005) thus suggests that 'the Saami, a mysterious people inhabiting the frozen north, were being used by the dominant Norse population as the physically present representatives of imaginary giants' (p. 100).

²⁴⁹ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Loki's *Senna* in *Ægir*'s Hall', in *Idee, Gestalt, Geschichte. Festschrift Klaus von See. Studien zur europäischen Kulturtradition*, ed. G. W. Weber (Odense, 1988), pp. 239-259. Alternately (though continuing the power dynamic), Clunies Ross (1994a) suggests that the gods in *Hymiskviða* appear 'as a hunter-gatherer aristocracy exploiting the more sophisticated economy of a group of pastoralists who have mastered the skills of herding and brewing' (p. 217). See further Margaret Clunies Ross, 'Two of Þórr's great fights according to *Hymiskviða*', *Leeds Studies in English* 20 (1989), pp. 7-27, at p. 21.

‘head’).²⁵⁰ Oxen, and black oxen in particular, might have been thought to be specifically associated with *jöttnar* in a perceived connection to animal sacrifice in pre-Christian Scandinavia.²⁵¹ Þrymr also owns livestock – *gyllhrynðar kýr* (‘gold-horned cattle’) and *oxn alsvartir* (‘oxen all-black’) – which *jöttni at gamni* (‘delight a giant’).²⁵² When Gefjun travels to Jötunheimar in *Ynglinga saga*, she begets four sons with a *jötunn*; strangely, ‘Hon brá þeim í yxnalíki ok færði þá fyrir plóginn’ (‘She changed them into the shapes of oxen and put them to the plow’).²⁵³ It is unclear how this transformation is enabled.²⁵⁴ Oxen were not only thought to provide an important source of meat for the *jöttnar*, but also animal labour (as with *Svaðilfari*, discussed above, section 3.1). Gefjun’s children draw the land west into the sea, forming the island Selund, where she settles.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁰ *Hymiskviða*, pp. 402-403. Archaeological evidence indicates that this tale is very old and was known widely throughout the medieval North. See e.g. Meulengracht Sørensen (2002), pp. 121-137. He suggests that Hymir acts as a mediator between Þórr and the *Miðgarðsormr* – the *jöttnar* might then be seen as a separate class of being, liminal between the *Æsir* and animals, and closer to nature and beasts.

²⁵¹ There is not much evidence to support the suggestion that animals were sacrificed to *jöttnar* in pre-Christian Scandinavia, but the idea is explored by Gro Steinsland: ‘Giants as Recipients of Cult in the Viking Age?’, in *Words and Objects: Towards a Dialogue Between Archaeology and History of Religion*, ed. Gro Steinsland (Oslo, 1986), pp. 212-222.

²⁵² *Þrymskviða*, pp. 425-426.

²⁵³ *Ynglinga saga*, p. 15.

²⁵⁴ Snorri here references a stanza from *Bragi inn gamli* which mentions the oxen, but not the detail that they were Gefjun’s sons (ibid., p. 15). In *Gylfaginning*, the transformation is not made explicit: they are simply said to be four oxen, the sons that Gefjun has with an unnamed *jötunn* (p. 7).

²⁵⁵ *Ynglinga saga*, p. 15.

The homes of the Æsir and Vanir are more like chieftainly halls, clearly distinct from the Icelandic farmstead, but perhaps this is less the case for the *jǫtnar*, who inhabit marginal spaces – in Jǫtunheimar (‘Giant-lands, homes’) and Útgarðr (‘Outer-yards’) – removed from Áss culture, and closer to wild nature. *Jǫtnar* are anthropomorphised in a similar fashion to the gods, for they too hunt, fish, and feast – but they were also thought to be the pastoralists of the divine economy.

4.2 *Animal Companions*

As with both humans and gods, *jǫtnar* have their pet animals with whom they have seemingly developed relationships. This is true of Þrymr:

greyjum sínum
 gullbǫnd snøri
 ok mǫrum sínum
 mǫn jafnaði.²⁵⁶

(for his bitches
 [he] twisted golden collars
 and for his mares
 [he] trimmed [their] manes.)

His actions are indicative of sincere care and commitment to their wellbeing, as well as their high value and his own aristocratic pretensions. As in the sagas, dogs serve an

²⁵⁶ *Þrymskviða*, p. 423.

important function as guardians for the *jotnar*. In *Skírnismál*, Gymir keeps savage dogs (*bundar ólmir*) tied to the gate in the wooden fence that surrounds the hall of his daughter, Gerðr; Skírnir encounters them when he enters Jötunheimar and asks a herdsman how he might get past them, but Gerðr sends her bondswoman to bring him inside, so she must have pacified them.²⁵⁷

Jötunn-owned guard-dogs receive their greatest narrative elaboration in *Fjölsvinnsmál*, where they are probably a late pastiche of Gymir's canine companions. The *jötunn* Fjölsviðr ('Much-wise') tells the hero Svipdagr that his savage dogs Gífr and Geri will defend his hall for all eternity.²⁵⁸ Svipdagr questions whether any man could enter while the *sóknðjarfir* ('valiant ones') sleep and learns that the two guard-dogs were assigned strict shifts – one sleeps by night, the other by day – and the only way to enter is by feeding them two pieces of wing-meat from the rooster Víðófnir and then running inside whilst they are distracted.²⁵⁹ These supernatural dogs are immortal and uncannily capable at defense. As their single weakness reveals, like Cerberus (see section 2.1), there is a way to get around them, but within the poem the method is both circular and impossible. Yet

²⁵⁷ *Skírnismál*, p. 382.

²⁵⁸ *Fjölsvinnsmál*, in *Eddukvæði II: Hetjukvæði*, ÍF, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík, 2014), p. 444.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 444–445.

Svipdagr is joyfully welcomed by the beasts once he reveals his name and identity: ‘Hundar fagna, / hús hefir upp lokizk’ (‘The hounds rejoiced, / the house has opened itself up’).²⁶⁰

The dogs are trained to respond to him, and to him alone, for he is the only one worthy of Menglǫð. The right person is able to pass the otherworld barrier represented by guard-dogs, whether they are invited within, like Skírnir, or if they are fated to pass.

Wolves are the mount of choice for female *jötunar* (as with *tröll*-women, see chapter 3, section 4.2). When Hyrrokkin arrives at Baldr’s funeral, for example, she rides a wolf with vipers for reins.²⁶¹ Freyja even suggests that Hyndla take a wolf from her stable for a race.²⁶² Snorri describes a kinship connection between *jötunar* and wolves: Sköll and Hati (discussed above, section 1.2) are the children of a *gamla gýgr* (‘ancient giantess’), who lives east of Miðgarðr in those woods called Járnvíðr (‘Iron-wood’); she rears many *jötunn*-sons, ‘alla í vargs líkjum’ (‘all in wolf’s shapes’), and from which all wolves are descended.²⁶³

Jötunar sometimes inhabit natural spaces where wolves would be imagined as common.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 449.

²⁶¹ *Gylfaginning*, p. 46. Hyrrokkin has ancient roots in continental pre-Christian tradition: one of three picture-stones from the Hynnestad monument in Skåne (Sweden) depicts a female figure riding a wolf-like beast and using snakes for reins, herself with a snake-like tongue. Steinsland (1986), p. 220; Monica Rydbeck, *Skånes Stenmästare före 1200* (Lund, 1936).

²⁶² *Hyndluljóð*, pp. 460–461.

²⁶³ *Gylfaginning*, p. 14. Also see *Völuspá*, v. 39 (p. 301).

When Njörðr spends nine nights with his *jötunn*-wife Skaði in the mountains of Þrymheimr, he complains in otherwise unattested verse about the *úlfa þytr* ('howling of wolves'), further linking *jötnar* to wolves as well as wilderness.²⁶⁴

4.3 Animal Transformations

Just as bird-shape is the preferred animal transformation for Óðinn and Loki, the *jötnar* only change themselves into avian form, probably because of the travel function of birds.

Jötnar may have been viewed as masters of the type of magic affiliated with *hamr* and shape-shifting, for a number of *jötnar* have this ability (who are intriguingly all male, providing another contrast to the Æsir), and they can also recognise and control others who have adopted *hamr*-form. When Geirrøðr sends a messenger to capture Loki from the wall of his hall, the trickster (wearing Frigg's *valshamr*) flaps his wings and kicks off, but finds himself unable to move. His feet are stuck; Geirrøðr's magical handiwork is effective.²⁶⁵

Jötnar prefer eagle form, perhaps because they are the biggest and most powerful of Scandinavian birds. At the beginning of *Skáldskaparmál*, Óðinn, Loki, and Hœnir communicate with the *jötunn* Þjazi who is wearing his *arnarhamr*; it is unclear whether he

²⁶⁴ *Gylfaginning*, p. 24. There is also a gendered component: while male *jötnar* have splendid horses, females are linked with *tröll*-women whose wolf-mounts are a sign of monstrosity (see e.g. chapter 3, section 4.2).

²⁶⁵ *Skáldskaparmál*, p. 24. As in the tale of Þjazi (discussed next), this suggests some kind of magic liming.

speaks in an anthropomorphic *jötunn*/Æsir language through a bird's beak, or whether it is bird-chirping which the three gods are able to understand.²⁶⁶ While adopting *hamr*-form, Þjazi maintains his *jötunn* interiority, regardless of his newly adopted avian exteriority. In the mead of poetry myth (see above, section 2.3), Suttungr also uses an *arnarhamr* when he chases Óðinn back to Ásgarðr. How Suttungr's flight ends remains unknown – Þjazi's feathers are burnt by a fire prepared by the Æsir – but Óðinn only releases the *skáldfífla blut* because Suttungr is so close behind him, so perhaps it is Óðinn's excrement which ends the eagle's flight.

The *jötunn*'s *arnarhamr* – a popular motif in Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál* – has an antecedent in *Vafþrúðnismál*. Wind is caused by a 'jötunn í arnar ham' ('giant in eagle's shape') named Hræsvelgr ('Carion-swallower'), who sits at heaven's end; and the wind that blows over all men comes from his wings.²⁶⁷ Hræsvelgr is thus an essential fixture of the Norse mythological cosmos; with their special relationships with ancient knowledge, magic,

²⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 1-2. Most of these narrative features are included in Þjóðólfr of Hvin's *Haustlög*, Snorri's tenth-century poetic source for this myth which he later quotes (pp. 30-33).

²⁶⁷ *Vafþrúðnismál*, p. 362. In *Gylfaginning*, Snorri adds that Hræsvelgr is located 'Á norðanverðum himins enda' ('at the northernmost end of heaven') and, specifically, that winds emerge when *bann beinir flug* ('he stretches his wings for flight') (p. 20). Hræsvelgr is also included in Snorri's list of *jötnar* in *Skáldskaparmál* (p. 111). For extensive discussion, see Quinn (2012).

and nature, *jǫtnar* are the building blocks of the universe, originating with the primordial *jǫtunn* of Norse creation, Ymir.

5. Nourishment and Sacrifice

5.1 *Sitiogony*²⁶⁸

Extant mythological sources offer a mixed picture as to what types of food nourish the divine. In *Gylfaginning*, Gangleri rightly questions the confusing inconsistencies of the mythological realm; he wonders what food the *einherjar* are given to eat, if all those who have fallen in battle since the beginning of the world reside with Óðinn in Valhøll – a question that few supposedly know how to answer.²⁶⁹ According to *Grímnismál*, Andhrímnir (the cook) boils Sæhrímnir (the boar) in Eldhrímnir (the kettle); it is *fleska bezt* ('the best of pork').²⁷⁰ In *Gylfaginning*, Hár adds that there will always be enough meat for the *einherjar*, since Sæhrímnir is cooked each day and becomes whole again come evening.²⁷¹ Is this what the gods eat as well? Not Óðinn: the next verse in *Grímnismál* tells that he feeds his wolves Geri and Freki, since he always lives on wine alone; as Hár further

²⁶⁸ *Sitiogony* is an increasingly popular term in mythological scholarship; first coined by Bruce Lincoln, this neologism signifies the nature and origin of food in myths. Bruce Lincoln, *Myths, Cosmos, and Society: Indo-European Themes of Creation and Destruction* (Cambridge and London, 1986), p. 65.

²⁶⁹ *Gylfaginning*, p. 32.

²⁷⁰ *Grímnismál*, p. 371.

²⁷¹ *Gylfaginning*, p. 32.

explains in *Gylfaginning*, ‘*ønga vist þarf hann: vín er honum bæði drykkur ok matr*’ (‘he needs no food: wine for him is both drink and food’).²⁷²

Whether the other *Æsir* and *Ásynjur* consume wine is uncertain, but the *einberjar* definitely drink mead: the goat *Heiðrún*, who stands on *Valhöll* and eats from *Yggdrasill*’s branches, fills a vessel with mead that can never diminish (much like *Sæhrímnir*).²⁷³ The gods also eat *Iðunn*’s apples whenever they grow old, returning them to youth and thus providing them with ever-lasting life (until *Ragnarök*).²⁷⁴ The time that they almost lost access to *Iðunn*’s apples was a result of their hunger for oxen following a successful hunt whilst travelling in *Skáldskaparmál*.²⁷⁵ The *Æsir* were also thought to have sufficient knowledge of fishing and net-making (c.f. *Þórr*’s expedition in *Hymiskviða* and the catching

²⁷² *Grímnismál*, p. 371; *Gylfaginning*, p. 32.

²⁷³ *Grímnismál*, p. 373. Snorri adds that the never-ending supply of mead flows *ór spenum hennar* (‘from her teats’). *Gylfaginning*, p. 33. *Heiðrún* is also mentioned in *Skáldskaparmál* as an alternate term for *hefr* (‘he-goat, buck’) in skaldic poetry (p. 131); and in *Hyndluljóð* as an animal metaphor for female promiscuity: ‘*hleypr þú, Óðs vina, / úti á náttum, / sem með hofrum / Heiðrún fari*’ (‘you run about, frenzied lady, / out in the night, / as with he-goats / goes *Heiðrún*’) (pp. 468–469).

²⁷⁴ *Gylfaginning*, p. 25. *Iðunn* appears in *Lokasenna* (pp. 408, 411–412), but is not mentioned elsewhere in eddic poetry. All extant references to her apples of youth can only be found in *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál*.

²⁷⁵ *Skáldskaparmál*, p. 1.

of Loki in *Gylfaginning*, when the fishing-net is invented by Loki and identified by Kvasir, as discussed above in section 3.2).²⁷⁶

The absolute importance of animals as a source of meat in human society is reflected in the divine realms. Various eddic poems depict them hunting (e.g. *Hymiskviða*) and feasting (e.g. *Lokasenna*, *Þrymskviða*), but unlike *jǫtnar*, they are never shown to farm fields or tend to livestock. The *Æsir* were thus above the *jǫtnar* on a class level; as Larrington suggests, ‘The gods are too aristocratic to need to work’.²⁷⁷ In sum, there seems to be sufficient food (or at least bacon!) for the *Æsir* whilst they reside in *Ásgarðr*, but when they leave home then other forms of sustenance are required. Given the scarcity, sparsity, and contradictions of the textual evidence, therefore, it is unclear whether animal sacrifice was thought to actually feed the gods, or whether the act was solely seen as symbolic in pre-Christian Scandinavia.

5.2 *Blót*

²⁷⁶ *Hymiskviða*, pp. 402-404; *Gylfaginning*, p. 48.

²⁷⁷ Larrington (2002) here responds to Aron Ya Gurevich, who views the Norse mythological universe as ‘an aggregate of farmsteads’, but as Larrington notes about *Grímnismál* in particular, ‘there is no apprehension of agricultural work, crop-growing or animal-raising’ (p. 70). Aron Ya Gurevich, ‘Space and Time in the *Weltmodell* of the Old Scandinavian Peoples’, *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 2 (1969), pp. 42-53, at p. 45.

The Old Norse word for sacrifice, *blót*, always involves ritual action in the sagas, and I follow David Kertzer's definition: 'ritual as action wrapped in a web of symbolism'.²⁷⁸ Since the ritual involves the killing and offering of animals, it logically follows that these animals are symbolically significant. This chapter has already demonstrated how animals in Norse mythology act as mediators between worlds when the gods travel from one realm to another, either in transformed shape or by riding a beast. Animals also serve as mediators when they are sacrificed, bridging the divide between the profane and the sacred, the human and the divine.²⁷⁹ This phenomenon is cross-cultural in its diversity and is effectively summarised by Jack Glazier:

The ritual act of sacrifice transforms the animal or human victim into a sacred object as its life is given over to the spiritual world. In the terms of structural anthropology, its ritual elevation to a sacred plane from a prior profane and ordinary status effectively makes the animal/human victim a mediator between the human world and the unknown world of spiritual power. Human communities, to benefit from that power, must first gain access to it, and this

²⁷⁸ David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven and London, 1988), p. 9. For a thorough study of *blót* in pre-Christian Scandinavia, see Britt-Mari Näsström, *Blot: Tro og offer i det førkristne Norden* (Oslo, 2001) – especially for archaeological references and discussion of Latin authors, which offer parallel evidence (e.g. Bede, Boniface, Saxo Grammaticus, Thietmar of Merseberg, and Adam of Bremen).

²⁷⁹ On the sacred/profane dichotomy, see e.g. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1912, trans. Carol Cosman (Oxford, 2001; repr. 2008), especially pp. 35–41. For Durkheim, this universal 'division of the world into two comprehensive domains ... is the hallmark of religious thought' (p. 36) and 'There is no other example in the history of human thought of two categories of things so profoundly differentiated or so radically opposed to one another' (p. 38). Movement from one world to the other is possible, but 'the way this passage occurs highlights the essential duality of the two realms. It implies a true metamorphosis' (p. 38).

is accomplished by the mediating sacrificial victim serving as a symbolic bridge or channel of communication to these unseen forces.²⁸⁰

In the medieval Norse literary context, people sacrifice animals to garner divine favour from the gods, bringing the human and divine worlds into contact – the ritual act of sacrifice transforms the animal into something sacred as its life is offered to the gods. There are serious methodological problems involved in conflating myth and the history of religions, but the purpose and function of pre-Christian animal sacrifice – at least as it was perceived by Christian-age Icelanders, if not remembered through oral lore – is still worth investigating: was the sacrificed animal meant to feed the gods? Could its blood have been seen as a type of beverage? And was the animal's flesh and blood somehow involved in the provision and maintenance of divine power?

Some of the *Íslendingasögur* describe the ritual of *blót* during the period of Icelandic settlement; animal blood repeatedly plays an important role. While the historicity of these accounts is questionable, animals were certainly sacrificed in pre-Christian Iceland and blood was surely significant. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, Þórólfr Mostrarskegg has a large *hof* ('temple') built; on a pedestal inside there stood a *blautbolli* ('sacrificial bowl') and in it a

²⁸⁰ Jack Glazier, 'Sacrifice', in *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 4, ed. David Levinson and Melvin Ember (New York, 1996), pp. 1133-1136, at p. 1133.

blauttein ('sacrificial twig'), which was supposedly used to sprinkle blood from the bowl *sem stökkull væri* ('like a priest's aspergillum').²⁸¹ This blood is specifically termed *blaut* ('sacrificial blood'), which comes from live animals and was offered to the gods.²⁸² The food from the sacrificed animal is used for human consumption, since the *goði* ('temple chief, priest') is responsible for *blótveizlur* ('sacrificial feasts').²⁸³ Similarly, in *Kjalnesinga saga*, Þorgrímur goði – *blótmaðr mikill* ('a great sacrificer') – builds a large temple for sacrifices which is specifically dedicated to Þórr.²⁸⁴ Rather than pouring the blood as a libation, it is sprinkled over the people and livestock present; the worshippers thus symbolically move closer to the gods by literally covering their bodies with the fluid of the animals that mediate between the profane and the sacred. Then they consume the sacrificial livestock as banquet-fare at their sacrificial feasts, ingesting the animal's mediating power into their physical selves.

Feasting also plays a fundamental role in depictions of animal sacrifice in continental Scandinavia. In *Guta saga*, for example, pre-conversion Gotlanders supposedly

²⁸¹ *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 8-9. This is likely a purposeful parallel to holy water.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 9. On the altar stood a ring for oath-swearing; at a similar temple in *Víga-Glúms saga*, when a man takes the temple-oath, a silver ring is reddened *í nauts blóði* ('in cattle's blood') (p. 86).

²⁸⁴ *Kjalnesinga saga*, ÍF XIV, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson (Reykjavík, 1959), p. 7. In this description, it is a large copper bowl that sits on the altar and contains the sacrificial blood of men as well as livestock.

sacrificed their children and cattle and consumed food and drink; those present were called *supnautar* ('boiling-companions') since they all cooked together.²⁸⁵ The importance of blood is repeated in an elaborate description of a sacrificial feast in *Hákonar saga góða*: held in Þrændalög by Sigurðr Hlaðajarl – *inn mesti blótmaðr* ('the greatest sacrificer') – it is a *forn siðr* ('ancient custom') at which all kinds of livestock are killed, including horses – the sacrificial animal *par excellence* for the warrior and aristocratic class.²⁸⁶ The sacrificial twigs are again compared to a priest's aspergillum (*stokklar*) and they are not only used to cover the people present with blood, but also the altars and temple walls, both inside and outside, thus creating a sacred place from the profane.²⁸⁷ The intended results of the sacrificial ritual are made explicit by the leader of the ceremony: the first toast is for Óðinn, drunk to victory and the power of the king, then Njörðr, and finally Freyr for peace and prosperity.²⁸⁸

While *blót* was used by people in the sagas to access divine favour, the ritual could be performed by the gods as well. When the Æsir first assemble at Iðavöllr in *Völuspá*, they

²⁸⁵ *Guta Saga: The History of the Gotlanders*, ed. and trans. Christine Peel (London, 1999), p. 4.

²⁸⁶ *Hákonar saga góða*, pp. 167-168.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

build high *hørg ok hof* ('altars and temples').²⁸⁹ Freyja performs *blót* for Þórr in *Hyndluljóð*, and at the same time, her protégé, Óttarr, constructs an altar for her where he performs sacrifices with fresh ox blood.²⁹⁰ *Blót* is a continued theme throughout the early chapters of *Ynglinga saga*. Ásgarðr, ruled by Óðinn, is a *blótstaðr mikill* ('great place of sacrifice').²⁹¹ Twelve high-ranked *hofgoðar* ('temple priests') are responsible for sacrifices and judgements – they are also called *díar* ('high priests') or *dróttnar* ('lords').²⁹² Moreover, Njǫrðr and Freyr are appointed *blótgoðar* ('sacrificial priests') and Freyja is a *blótgyðja* ('sacrificial priestess').²⁹³ When Njǫrðr and Freyr rule Sweden after Óðinn, they both provide a prosperous harvest, indicating the anticipated result of sacrifice and connecting them to the fertility function. This saga is euhemeristic: sacrifice was first practiced by the gods, and then in order to placate them.

²⁸⁹ *Völuspá*, p. 293.

²⁹⁰ *Hyndluljóð*, pp. 460-462. The *Völuspá in skamma* section (at v. 38) refers to a god with nine mothers who is empowered with pig-blood, as well as the earth's strength and the coolness of the sea (p. 467). This surely refers to Heimdallr, who has nine mothers according to the otherwise unattested *Heimdalargaldr* in *Gylfaginning* (p. 26).

²⁹¹ *Ynglinga saga*, p. 11.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 11. The word *díar* is only used in the plural; it is a loanword from the O.Irish *día* (c.f. Latin *deus* and O.Icelandic *tívar*); while it normally means 'gods', the sense here is more likely 'high priests'. See *Heimskringla, Vol. I: The Beginnings to Óláfr Tryggvason*, Snorri Sturluson, trans. Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes (London, 2011), p. 8, fn. 12.

²⁹³ *Ynglinga saga*, p. 13.

These literary accounts of *blót*, based to an uncertain degree on cultural memory of pre-Christian animal sacrifice, repeatedly establish the importance of blood as a conduit between the sacred and the profane, and of the sacrificial meal as a means of not only establishing communion amongst the participants, but also between humanity and the divine. While the eating of animal meat and blood transforms people into animals in some sagas, whether physically or psychologically or both (see chapter 4), the act of consuming the meat of the sacrificed animal entails the physical consumption of the sacred, serving as another type of transformation for those involved in the ritual. The gods, in turn, desire meat – the most valuable food – and also the force of life itself through its vital essence: blood. Sacrifice can be thought of as a crucial concomitant of belief: if people no longer sacrifice, they no longer believe; and if they no longer believe then the gods are no longer sustained – gods are nourished by both sacrifice and belief, without which they would fade. In exchange, the gods give what people most require: to avert catastrophe, predict the future, confirm the ruler's power, secure success in war, and procure a prosperous harvest. Acting as a metonymic substitute for the human conveners of the sacrifice, domestic animals are better-suited than wild animals to act as symbolic mediators in ritual sacrifice

because they already inhabit a liminal place on the boundary between the human and non-human worlds, between the sacred and the profane, and between nature and culture.²⁹⁴

6. Conclusion

Margaret Atwood suggests that ‘myths lay out pretty clearly what’s on the human smorgasbord: what we want, what we fear, what we would like to have, what we would very much not like to have ... So we’ve always wanted to fly. In the myths, the gods fly. We don’t’.²⁹⁵ People have always had the same basic fears and desires and myth lays bare these human fantasies. Myth depicts the truths of human nature: who we are as people, how we behave, and why, and animals are fundamental to the ways in which we imaginatively seek answers to these questions.

In Norse mythology, select gods and *jotnar* not only fly by riding magical animals and transforming into birds, they can also shapeshift into a variety of different animal species (whichever form is required at the time); they use animals for transportation

²⁹⁴ Glazier (1996) takes this argument further. He suggests that domestic animals symbolise the people with whom they live and have daily contact; their prior relationship allows them to more effectively evoke people and human communities through metonymy. Wild animals, however, ‘exist in a separate conceptual domain, beyond human control and unconnected to human communities. Lacking social or physical contact with people, wild animals are bereft of the kind of symbolic value that can mediate the human and spirit worlds’ (p. 1135). Additionally, domestic animals would be more readily available and they also represent value (an investment of time and resources in raising them).

²⁹⁵ Margaret Atwood. Interview with Bill Moyers. *On Faith & Reason*. PBS. 28 July 2006.

between worlds and at supernatural speeds, tame animals that cannot usually be tamed, communicate with animals, and explore sexual taboos which humans are not permitted. Moreover, animals provide an endless supply of food and drink – specifically meat and alcohol – to bring health and pleasure without the difficulty and labour of acquiring such desirable things for themselves. The Norse myths also explore human fears about animals: beasts of destruction – wolves and serpents and dragons – bringing death and chaos to the Æsir community. Many of these themes and motifs are repeated in saga literature, as explored in previous chapters, but in myth the fantasy is magnified.

There are more similarities than differences when comparing the animal/human boundary of the more fantastic sagas with the animal/deity boundary of eddic literature. There are personal relationships (and taboos); transformations through *hamr* and *liki*; communication with birds, in particular; and certain animals are linked with specific gods, in a thematic and perhaps totemic parallel to the *fylgja*-motif. As Descola's idea of animism specifies, animals and the gods/*jǫtnar* are depicted with similar interiorities/mentalities but different exteriorities/physicalities. Movement remains central to the process of *devenir-animal* (c.f. Deleuze and Guattari), but in the mythology, the movement is not from domestic/tame to wild (or vice-versa), but rather entails travel between realms.

The gods transform into animals to magically transport themselves from one location to another; they have the capacity to do things that people cannot through metamorphosis, and also unlike humans, they can revert back to their divine form without issue. The animal shape is essential to this transportation; the other main method of travel for the gods is riding animals to take them somewhere. The primary role of animals is to extend the reach of the gods in a medieval spatial-political fantasy: the ability to swiftly navigate and subjugate vast areas through enhanced mobility. Animals further serve to mediate between cosmological worlds and, through sacrifice, they were perhaps once thought to act as a conduit to the divine.

Conclusion

Animals have proven themselves to be ‘good for’ many things in Old Norse literature and society. They are good to live with, as Haraway suggests, for they act as valuable companions; and they are good to care for and care about, since emotionally significant relationships can be developed with them (within physical and sexual limits). Some species are good for eating – as well as for using to make clothes and tools – while others, as Tambiah notes, are good to prohibit. Animals are always good to think with and think about, to contemplate and imagine with, developing metaphorical and symbolic significance which reflects various characteristics of human behaviour and thought. As more fantastic episodes in literary texts reveal, animals can also be good (or bad, depending on the species) to dream about, transform into, and communicate with, and in a pre-Christian setting, they can even be good for sacrifice and divine worship. Animals are also good for academic study; as this thesis has shown, analysing animals in the Old Norse literary and cultural context has also generated insights into a variety of related topics: politics, law, class, gender, emotions, psychology, ecology, religion, and worldview.

The primary research question of this thesis was how humans and animals are interconnected in Old Norse literature. Secondary questions explored throughout included

(i) how and why the animal-human connection differs by animal species; (ii) where medieval Icelandic authors portray animals in experiential terms, and when they rely on conventional continental symbolic associations; and (iii) whether the evidence suggests that the human/animal dichotomy was thought about differently before and after the Christian conversion.

Across the genres of Old Norse literature, animals and humans are depicted as fundamentally interconnected through shared characteristics. Animals act as symbolic vehicles, metaphorical representations for the diversity of human experiences and expressions of life as experienced through senses and felt through emotions. The symbolic meaning attached to various animal species, and the ways in which the key human/animal divide is breached, depends on that animal's specific position in nature. The relevant factors are multifarious: whether or not it is consumed as meat, the extent to which it is wild or domestic, and if it is a threat or benefit to human communities; its utilitarian functions, place in the food chain, strength and size, and passive or aggressive behaviour; and whether it can fly or if it lives in the sea. Animal metaphorical association is thus mostly based upon ecological observation, but many other influences are at work, especially with species that are not native to Iceland or Norway.

Variation by species is of course crucial in determining how different animals are portrayed and the form that the human-animal connection takes. Following Lévi-Strauss, I have shown how different animals embody ideas and cultural meanings based on their particular positionality in nature. This has its roots in human experience of the natural world and empirical observation of its inhabitants – based on perceptible reality and conceived through speculative thought. Medieval Icelandic authors usually portrayed animals in experiential terms, but they also drew upon native Germanic tradition and Scandinavian folklore (as well as Sámi tradition), and conventional symbolic associations from continental Europe could take precedence over quotidian experience. A confluence of influences is at work in Old Norse animal imagery, and especially in later, more fantastic literature set beyond Iceland, animal symbolism was shaped by continental material, including the bestiaries, learned writing, romance, and Christian tradition. Together these inform the ways in which the animal-human connection is depicted throughout Old Norse literature.

As this thesis is fundamentally interdisciplinary, different theoretical approaches have been explored in multiple chapters, providing fresh insight into the ways in which animals were thought about, lived with, and represented through poetry and prose in

medieval Scandinavia. Application of post-structuralist philosophy has expanded the bounds already established by the structural anthropology of scholars such as Lévi-Strauss and Tambiah. Following Deleuze and Guattari, I have demonstrated how multiple dichotomies simultaneously deconstruct when human and animal characters undergo physical and psychological transformations. Animals undergo a similar process both when they are tamed or domesticated and when they re-enter the wild; humans usually experience transformations through shapeshifting. This thesis has shown how physical movement is essential to these processes of *devenir-animal* and *devenir-humain*, thus establishing an interconnection between imaginings of the relationships between humans, animals, and environmental space. Animal and human, nature and culture: these dichotomies become mutually destabilised and are thus better thought of as parallel spectrums.

Following Descola, I have argued for the existence of traces of an ontological worldview that can be described as animistic: humans and animals are thought to possess similar interiorities (e.g. animals can possess human intelligence, display animal subjectivity, and effect human-animal communication), yet they have different physical exteriorities which can nevertheless be adopted to enable transformation (e.g. skin, fur, or feathers,

usually in the form of a *hamr*). Despite their literary nature and generic variability, the world(s) of the sagas present a quite concretely realised pre-Christian cultural tradition, incorporating various forms of human-animal relations that are recognisable from anthropology. They present features that can be broadly described as animistic as described by Descola, totemistic as adumbrated by Lévi-Strauss, and shamanistic in the qualified sense of shaman-type features as argued by Tolley. These elements consistently appear in post-conversion portrayals of the pre-Christian past: it is in imaginings of pagan history that the human/animal boundary most frequently and most strikingly breaks down. The extent to which saga authors are reliant upon genuine oral tradition, or deploy literary creativity to imagine history, remains unknown and certainly varies from one text to the next (and even within the same text). Although the reality of the sagas is not a historical reality, factual traces of cultural memory are surely present, hypothetically observable when supported by phenomena in other cultural traditions, attestations in older poetry, archaeological evidence, picture stones, legal texts, and historical sources.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁶ Amongst others (see the Introduction), I follow Meulengracht Sørensen (1992): 'The texts must be seen as a statement of the reality that becomes both historical and poetic when it is put down in writing. This might be called a *culturo-literary* or *anthropological-literary* approach' (p. 34).

While some texts contain traces of what can be hypothesised as pre-Christian totemic, animistic, and shamanistic thinking about animals, in which human-animal boundaries are porous, others reflect new learned influences from Christianity. The sagas indicate that animals were thought about differently before and after the conversion to Christianity in Scandinavia; boundaries between animal and human, nature and culture became more clearly delineated.²⁹⁷ Furthermore, the important role of animals in eddic poetry and, perhaps consequently, the prose writings of Snorri Sturluson in the functioning of mythological cosmology can be contrasted with humanity's separation from nature and assumed dominion over animals in Christian and learned thought.²⁹⁸

This thesis has demonstrated a variety of ways in which animals and humans are interconnected in Old Norse literature. The connection can be emotional or intellectual; behavioural or psychological; metaphorical or metonymical; physical or metaphysical. These

²⁹⁷ This assertion is supported by archaeological evidence. See Jennbert (2011) who argues that 'Attitudes to animals changed in connection with Christianization. The pre-Christian bodily metaphors ceased, and animals were not a part of the Christian burial ritual' (p. 216).

²⁹⁸ Similar conclusions have been reached regarding the ways in which animals were thought about before and after the conversion to Christianity in other European contexts. As a general rule, monotheistic Christian thought more closely demarcates between human and animal than polytheistic belief systems (consider e.g. Adam's dominion over all animals, as told in Genesis 1:26 (New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, available online)). See e.g. Amanda J. Green's *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth* (London and New York, 1998), especially Chapter 9: Changing Attitudes to the Animal World (pp. 239-242) and Ingvild Gilhus's *Animals, Gods and Humans: Changing Attitudes to Animals in Greek, Roman and Early Christian Thought* (London and New York, 2006), especially the final section, 'Consequences', pp. 262-270.

links can be realised through relationships, dream-imagery, transformations, and communication; and as in Descola, these connections can involve an animal or a human's interiority, physicality, or both. Disruption of the human-animal dichotomy primarily varies according to animal species and text-genre. Thus for domestic animals like dogs and horses, as seen in chapter 1, mental capacities are involved; for wild beasts like wolves and bears, physical and psychological transformation is entailed, as seen in chapter 4; and for birds, metamorphosis and communication with higher beings is imagined, as seen in chapter 5. As chapter 2 proved, there are also firmly established boundaries between human and animal, especially following the Christian conversion. As explored in chapter 3 in particular, it is in the more fantastic genres that animals which did not exist in medieval Iceland (or exist at all) are to be found, such as lions and dragons; here realistic experiences and encounters between humans and animals assume preternatural and supernatural dimensions.

The final chapter established how the connections between humans and animals in saga literature, in often creative depictions of pagan mentalities, parallel relations between animals and gods in Norse mythology through shared motifs in both saga and edda. However, in myth the fantasy is heightened through magnification and hyperbole,

unmasking basic human fears and desires. Imagining the pagan past is not the same as imagining mythological relations, for the imagined pagan past is imagined history, whereas imagined mythology and cosmology is metaphorical, yet animal motifs are shared between the two, regardless of date and purpose. Norse mythological animals defy categories and break boundaries – through supernatural travel, ubiquity, and speed – over the land, under the sea, through the air – and they unlock secrets contained within those particular spheres. Mythological animals deal in boundary-crossing into different dimensions, as do the frequently zoomorphic Æsir and their *jotnar* opponents. Given their potential for theriomorphic features, select divine figures – primarily Óðinn, Loki, and *jotnar* – could be seen as animal hybrids, metaphorically and metonymically (and perhaps totemically) embodying characteristics and elements of animals.

The application of animal studies to Old Norse literature and culture presents an extensive field, with potential for scholars to pursue productive scholarship from a variety of perspectives. With this thesis, I have established a multiplicity of approaches to the study of animals and human-animal relations in Old Norse literature and applied them to a wide range of texts. There is still a plethora of methods to be explored in relation to Old Norse animals and room for the incorporation of new and different texts and approaches. Next

steps for this study could include further incorporation of archaeological evidence, a thorough survey of skaldic kennings which include animals, and analysis of animals in explicitly Christian medieval Icelandic literature (e.g. *biskupasögur*, *heilagra manna sögur*) in comparison and contrast.²⁹⁹ Ecocriticism also offers promising room for academic exploration. My focus on animals could be integrated into a larger environmental perspective, taking into account inanimate nature, for example: trees and plants, stones and soil, bodies of water, the weather, the stars and sky, landscape, and the creation of place out of space³⁰⁰ – in essence, what Lawrence Buell describes as ‘cognizance of humanity’s ongoing interaction with the non-human forces in which our lives are embedded’.³⁰¹

This thesis has shown how Old Norse literature and culture challenges the human-animal dichotomy and, consequently, the boundaries between nature and culture. Greater

²⁹⁹ In this thesis, I focused on texts that seemed to foreground human-animal connections most compellingly; this resulted in a study generally focused on literary representations of the pre-conversion period.

³⁰⁰ I understand ‘place’ as ‘space to which meaning has been ascribed’. Erica Carter, James Donald and Judith Squires, ‘Introduction’, in *Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location*, ed. Erica Carter, James Donald, and Judith Squires (London, 1993), pp. vii-xv, at p. xii.

³⁰¹ Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Oxford, 2005), p. 16. Dream-trees might offer a promising start, which, like dream-animals, represent people’s lives in saga-dreams, taking a different shape according to an unborn child’s character and destiny. See e.g. *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, p. 104; *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, pp. 15 and 18; *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, p. 148; *Hálfðanar saga svarta*, in *Heimskringla I*, ÍF XXVI, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (Reykjavík, 1941), p. 90; *Magnússona saga*, in *Heimskringla III*, ÍF XXVIII, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (Reykjavík, 1979), p. 265.

understanding of how different cultures have lived on more intimate terms with animals and the environment provides insight into our own contemporary values and beliefs. As we look to the future, we should also look to the past, to better understand how different cultures from around the world, in different time periods, have lived with, and thought about, the natural world.³⁰² The social criticism and personal investigation entailed in literary study offers another means to comprehending this potential for change, as we must find new ways to imagine nature and our relation to the world around us.³⁰³ Myth and fantasy, inscribed in past worldviews in which the ‘open space’ between human and animal is breached, may provide inspiration to undercut false humanist hierarchies.³⁰⁴

We urgently require myths of the planet through which the earth and its biodiversity is respected and sustained. But these myths cannot remain literary

³⁰² Lévi-Strauss accordingly argues that the study of different cultural traditions can ‘encourage us to reject the divorce between the intelligible and the sensible declared by an outmoded empiricism and mechanism, and to discover a secret harmony between humanity’s everlasting quest for meaning and the world in which we appeared and where we continue to live’. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The View from Afar*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel and Phoebe Hoss (Chicago, 1985), p. 119.

³⁰³ Buell thus argues that ‘environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imagining nature and humanity’s relation to it’. Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 2.

³⁰⁴ The ‘open’ as described by Giorgio Agamben in *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford, 2004); originally published as *L’aperto: L’uomo e l’animale* (2002). This space is ‘the central emptiness, the hiatus that—within man—separates man and animal’ (p. 92). This would be the space in which the movement of *devenir-animal* takes place, offering a profitable text for future study.

constructions or figments of the imagination; they must become the global ethos of a multispecies society. We live in an age of environmental crisis and need to revise our relationship with our planet and all its living inhabitants; other species are facing the consequences of human anthropocentrism, as species extinction reaches unprecedented levels.³⁰⁵ Today's dominant human identity establishes itself in opposition to the animal other that we have so named, subjected, and claimed superiority over. We live on a more-than-human planet and yet are often too self-absorbed and obsessed with our own activities to recognise this simple fact. Our metaphysics and ethics need revision. We must strive to live in harmony with the earth, become attuned to the beauty that surrounds us, creatively engage our interactions with the non-human other, and become-animal as a consequence – *devenir-animal* as described by David Abram: 'Becoming earth. Becoming animal. Becoming, in this manner, fully human'.³⁰⁶

³⁰⁵ The current rate of biodiversity loss is between 1,000 and 10,000 times higher than the natural extinction rate; experts estimate that between 0.01 and 0.1% of all species become extinct every year. If the lower estimate of the total number of species is true (around 2 million species on our planet), then between 200 and 2,000 extinctions occur each year; but if the upper estimate is true (100 million species on our planet), then between 10,000 and 100,000 species are becoming extinct every year. World Wildlife Fund, 'How many species are we losing?'. Web. Accessed 13 Dec. 2017.

³⁰⁶ David Abram, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (New York, 2010), p. 3. See further *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York, 1996).

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